Chapter Two

A NOVELIST'S PRACTICES: MRS. ROWSON

AMERICANS, then, had high ambitions for their national literature and were therefore either too eager to claim distinction for individual works and writers, or more frequently, too prone to despair of seeing American writing rise to the level of English and European literature. Before turning to their concern over the moral problems raised by prose fiction and by the practices of contemporary novelists, it may be useful to have a look at the work of an average writer of the age. For this purpose Mrs. Rowson's fiction has been selected; it may illustrate the characteristic quality of the mass of late eighteenth-century novels and show what were the stock devices employed by their authors in their effort to satisfy their readers' appetites.

The choice of the person of Susanna Haswell Rowson (c.1762-1824) appears propitious for various reasons. Mrs. Rowson herself was a representative of the westward migration of people, ideas, and fashions at the end of the eighteenth century. Born in England of British-born parents, she came to America when still a child and spent some ten years or so in Massachusetts. At the end of this period her father returned to England with his second, American-born wife and his family. But in 1793 Mrs. Rowson settled permanently in America. In the same year she began republishing some of the books that had appeared under her name in London. This reissuing of her works illustrates the usual way in which the Americans were then furnished with fiction: England was their main source, and the American booksellers were the mediators who either imported British editions or published one of their own that was generally unauthorized.

Mrs. Rowson's tales and sketches, apart from being an individual author's work, are also an index to the fiction then popular in America. Her work can be looked upon as a deliberate
collection of the ingredients that went into the making of an average novel designed to be fashionably successful and derived from earlier successes. The patterns of Mrs. Rowson’s stories owe much to popular models, just as the manner used in The Inquisitor is borrowed from Sterne and the character named Mentoria from Fénélon’s widely read Télémaque. From Charlotte to its sequel, Charlotte’s Daughter, Mrs. Rowson adopted with more or less discretion and skill the conventional plot elements of contemporary fiction, both English and American. That fiction was largely imitative, harking back to the examples of Richardson, Fielding, Goldsmith, and Sterne. But it was not just in her novels that Mrs. Rowson made use of the situations and characters that the writers of the time so glibly manipulated. The Inquisitor and Mentoria, which cannot be termed novels, are themselves marked more distinctly by such interchangeable elements than by the manner or plan adopted. Plainly the conventional elements of plot and characterization exercised an irresistible attraction upon a host of minor writers, including Mrs. Rowson, who lacked the imagination and inventiveness needed to inform other material. There is a simple reason why Charlotte was so much more successful and still reads better than the rest of Mrs. Rowson’s work: in writing that book she was using material which could to some extent be called her own, and she withstood the temptation of elaborating it with borrowed additions. This is a commendable restraint considering how easily available were a large number of predictable events or clichés of behavior.

Two further contributions of Mrs. Rowson are revealing to the student of the novel: her explicit remarks on some aspects of the writing of fiction and her definitions of, and distinction between, two kinds of novels. Her views of the novel as a genre and of some of its practical problems can be briefly outlined.

Mrs. Rowson insisted on the moral purpose prompting her to write. Thus she justified a three-page digression addressed to the “flutterers in the fantastic round of dissipation” by saying: “I confess I have rambled strangely from my story: but what of that? if I have been so lucky as to find the road to happiness, why should I be such a niggard as to omit so good an opportunity
of pointing out the way to others.” A solemn apostrophe identified Mrs. Rowson’s audience: “My dear girls—for to such only am I writing.” She felt she could defy any criticism for indulging in novel-writing, since she made it an instrument of conscientious teaching and praised “meek-eyed virtue,” “that all may behold her transcendent beauties, and, with a degree of glorious enthusiasm, follow her faithful votaries.” She watchfully distributed rewards and punishments, explaining that her heroine Sarah, who suffered in life, would be amply compensated after death, and offering a sort of epitaph on the treacherous Mademoiselle La Rue: “…She died, a striking example that vice, however prosperous in the beginning, in the end leads only to misery and shame.” Mrs. Rowson seemed certain, too, that her lessons would be all the more attended to as she related facts; thus she gave a distressful tale of filial disobedience the following conclusion: “The author cannot help here remarking, that as this story is authentic and not the offspring of fancy, she hopes it will make a lasting impression on the minds of her fair readers.” Fiction, she said on another occasion, entered only slightly into her books, as a “slight veil” and in the substitution of places and names.

When she named a few lady writers who would “snatch the British novel from oblivion,” she implied that there were not many novels worth reading. Mrs. Rowson consequently deplored the popularity of the novel: in the mass of them that were consumed, the good novels were liable to pass unnoticed, whereas, on the other hand, there was sure to be an audience for

... 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 judgment.

Mrs. Rowson especially regretted the appeal exercised on inexperienced and “volatile” young girls by the romantically colored love stories so much in vogue. A girl who had been led by novel-reading into imagining herself in love made this point when she thought of the affected love letters she had composed:
Wrote, as they were, at a time when my imagination was so strongly tinctured with the style of the books I had been reading, that I almost involuntarily wrote the very sentiments which I had just embibed with all the enthusiasm of romantic affection. Ah! Celia, those books drew very deceitful pictures of human life, their false colouring had raised my expectations and exalted my ideas of love and friendship, far above any thing I can find in the little circle of acquaintance I have formed. Perhaps those elevated sentiments and actions may be confined to people of an elevated sphere of life, for I never remember meeting with any hero or heroine of a story, but either were at first, or afterwards proved to be persons of rank and fortune.¹⁰

The statement made above concerning Mrs. Rowson’s didactic motive seems to require qualifying, for in her preface to The Inquisitor the author asserted that she was writing for fun, and even went so far as to pretend being indifferent about her success: while amusing herself she could not help it if others were not amused.¹⁷ Yet, in a more careful appraisal, this very book is found to be, like Mentor, mainly a didactic appeal, whereas Mrs. Rowson’s novels are stories first and lessons last. The novels rely less on the writer’s moral commitment than on her sense of narrative control; but Mentor and The Inquisitor depend on the didactic continuity underlying and linking up the various episodes that constitute their story content.¹⁸ Though there is this difference in degree, Mrs. Rowson’s didactic bent is genuinely at work in all her books. From Victoria¹⁹ to Charlotte’s Daughter she seemed to increase her enjoyment of storytelling by the satisfaction of carrying a lesson to her readers. Significantly the ring which renders the Inquisitor invisible first permits him to witness events and instances of human behavior—that is, it functions as an element in the service of the narrative—and furthermore allows him to use this sort of omniscience to give moral rewards and retributions.²⁰ We are inclined to believe Mrs. Rowson when she writes about her aim to instruct, which is not the case with many other contemporary writers. Considering her inclination, it is quite possible that she meant all her tales to turn out somewhat like Mentor, with its character sketches and fable-like stories and their moral, but she was carried away while writing them. What ran away with her pen was not an
exceptional narrative talent but rather the sheer pervading mass influence of the fashions of novel-writing. Only in Charlotte does Mrs. Rowson seem to have hit upon a subject matter particularly appealing to her and, at the same time, congenial to the contemporary conceptions of the novel.

*Mentoria* is a collection of variations on the theme of filial obedience and dutifulness; the majority of the stories gathered in it are about victims of disobedience to the wishes of parents in matters of love and marriage. In the context of a discussion of novel material the stories are more important and relevant than the book as a whole, for they belong to the moralizing narrative tradition exploited by novelists, who knew only too well what was popular with the middle-class majority of their readers. Something similar can be said of the plot material used in *The Inquisitor*; yet it has a higher degree of independent narrative relevance. If *Mentoria* teaches the necessity of submissive behavior in young people and of respect for their parents’ superior experience and wisdom, *The Inquisitor* is an advocate of sensibility or, to speak more specifically, of the practical applications of that sensibility, an advocate of compassion, pity, understanding, toleration, and forgiveness.

To call forth the reader’s sensitive reaction, Mrs. Rowson used in *The Inquisitor* three chief narrative means: the motifs of (1) actual or attempted seduction and adultery, (2) social prejudice and oppression, and (3) cupidity. Whether introduced separately or in conjunction, these three motifs form the main pegs upon which the novelists of Mrs. Rowson’s day hung their plots. The three motifs of *The Inquisitor* and the central topic of *Mentoria* could conveniently be combined: obedient or disobedient children often had an important role to play in stories of seduction, social prejudice, and cupidity. Mrs. Rowson’s novels give several instances in which girls disregard their parents’ wishes and become the victims of seducers, and young men and girls brave their parents’ wrath by defying the barriers between the noble and the humble, the rich and the poor.

One other point may yet be made by going back to Mrs. Rowson’s theorizing about the novel. In *The Inquisitor* an author outlines one of his works of fiction:
It is called ‘Annabella’; or ‘Suffering Innocence’—my heroine is beautiful, accomplished and rich; an only child, and surrounded by admirers—she contracts an attachment for a man, her inferior in point of birth and fortune; but honourable, handsome, &c.—She has a female friend, to whom she relates all that passes in her breast—her hopes, fears, meetings, partings, &c.—She is treated hardly by her friends—combats innumerable difficulties in the sentimental way, but at last overcomes them all, and is made the bride of the man of her heart.

At this point the novelist is ridiculed and offered a “Sketch of a Modern Novel,” which presumably embodies, in ironically exaggerated form, the demands made upon the writer by the tyranny of fashion:

In the first place, your heroine must fall violently in love with an all-accomplished youth at a very early age—keep her passion concealed from her parents or guardians; but bind herself in her own mind to wed no other than this dear, first conqueror of her heart—ill-natured, proud, ambitious fathers are very necessary to be introduced—kind, affectionate, amiable mothers. The superlative beauty and accomplishments of your heroine, or perhaps the splendor of her fortune, must attract the attention of a man diametrically opposite in person and disposition to her first lover—the father must threaten—the mother entreat—and the lover be very urgent for the completion of his felicity—remember to mix a sufficient quantity of sighs, tears, swooning, hysterics, and all the moving expressions of heart-rending woe—her filial duty must triumph over inclination; and she must be led like a victim to the altar.—

So much for the first part.

The second volume displays her angelic, her exemplary conduct in the character of a wife—the husband must be jealous, brutal, fond of gaming, keep a mistress, lavish all his fortune on sharpers and lewd women—the wife pious, obedient and resigned—

Be sure you contrive a duel; and, if convenient, a suicide might not be amiss—lead your heroine through wonderful trials—let her have the fortitude of an anchorite; the patience of an angel—but in the end, send her first husband to the other world, and unite her to the first possessor of her heart—join a few other incidents; such as the history of her bosom friend, and a confidant—Manage your plot in such a manner as to have some surprising discovery made—wind up with two or three marriages; and the superlative felicity of all the ‘dramatis personae’.
The two synopses are apparently juxtaposed to reveal that the fashionable modern novel is more complex in plot and relies much more than the "Annabella" type on conventional devices meant to heighten the interest of the story. The first story is about a girl who fashions as best she can an existence according to her legitimate wishes; the second is that of mishaps, coincidences, retarding events, misunderstandings, hardships, and a host of vices opposed to lonely and single-minded virtue. Mrs. Rowson's diagnosis of the average novel of her time is shrewd and to the point; she might have profitably applied it to her own fiction. Her analysis does not probe deeply enough, though. The root of the trouble was that a great many writers who evidently subordinated characterization to plot, were in fact unable to create convincing characters. They would, for example, have found it difficult to conceive an Annabella strong enough to sustain the role assigned to her in Mrs. Rowson's outline.

This does not mean that the novelists were really much better at fashioning plausible plots; but at least they had some variety of materials at hand, thanks to the efforts of their forerunners. Therefore they concentrated on the machinery of the events to be used, giving only little thought to the intimate relation between character and behavior—and ultimately action—in a novel. They found it sufficient to hint at the acknowledged respective attributes of a villain and of a hero or heroine. Instead of imagining human beings derived from their own experience and observation, they resorted to secondhand stereotypes. Consequently, human motives were replaced by literary motifs.

Mrs. Rowson herself usually submitted to the dictates of fashion and followed the line of least resistance, choosing to put her novels together out of the parts provided ready-made for the novelist. Compare Charlotte, her best work, to Trial of the Human Heart and Sarah. The first is a simple and straightforward tale, with some sentimental ballast, about a young girl and her seducer, and is moving in a way because the protagonists achieve a measure of plausibility and consistency. The second has as its heroine a girl whose extreme naïveté is made the cause of, or rather the pretext for, humiliating experiences repeated again and again in constantly changing forms. The last of these
books begins with a situation that, even within the limits of eighteenth-century fiction, might have been treated as adequately as the theme of *Charlotte*; but the girl who marries not for love but protection becomes simply another victim of combined wickedness, malevolence, and thoughtless victimizing, just as do many of her long-suffering contemporaries. Both the four-volume *Trials* and the comparatively short *Sarah* depend for their interest chiefly on the cumulation of adverse experiences, with rare intervals of more pleasant meetings and adventures for their heroines. Like Sarah, Meriel Howard is hardly ever in a position to act instead of merely reacting or truly to be herself instead of thinking and existing mainly in terms of flight and sacrifice. She belongs to a tradition of novel-writing whose heroines were just feeble echoes of Richardson’s Pamela or Fielding’s Amelia, far too retiring and resigned to assume the individual character of an Elizabeth Bennet or even Miss Burney’s Evelina. They were in fact not characters but stereotypes, whose few facets could be seen only in stock situations.

The novel as exercised by Mrs. Rowson might be called the novel of victimization. It is a novel that relies for its success on the contrast between the readers’ cozy comfort and the heroine’s sorrows and insecurity. The reader of the tale of “doleful disasters” and “interesting intricacies” is at home, as it were, enjoying the cheering warmth of the fire, while outside, in the sleet and cold blasts of winter, the heroine is looking for some hovel as a temporary shelter. Whether the reader truly sympathizes with the heroine’s plight or not depends not only on the writer’s skill but also to a considerable extent upon the reader’s familiarity with situations similar to hers—perhaps through his own experience, but more probably because of their current use in fiction. One source of the reader’s gratification may well be his resentment at the heroine’s humiliations, for such indignation gives him the assurance that he knows right from wrong and stands uncompromisingly on the side of what is right. In this sense the happy endings, though they grant a relief long yearned for, frequently are an anticlimax: confirming the reader’s self-righteous verdict, they also put an end to a situation in which he was called upon to take sides.
Within the group of the novels of victimization, a distinction can be made between the novel of personal struggles and suffering on the one hand and the novel of impersonal vicissitudes on the other. *Charlotte* belongs to the first class; so does its sequel, *Charlotte's Daughter*, though it does not lend itself to classification so easily.\(^{31}\) The other class includes *The Fille de Chambre*, *Trials of the Human Heart*, *Reuben and Rachel*, and *Sarah*. This group may be dealt with collectively, for their chief interest here is the way in which the plot elements are made to function.

The heroines of these books must generally fend for themselves,\(^ {32}\) since they are deprived at a comparatively early age and at critical moments of their life, of whatever protection they relied upon. In *The Fille de Chambre*, Rebecca, living in poverty and with a mother inimical to her, loses first her father and then her benefactress Lady Mary, and finds herself at the mercy of proud Lady Ossiter and her concupiscent husband.\(^ {33}\) Before becoming an orphan the heroine of *Trials* has long been estranged from her parents, and at their death is no longer in possession of her inheritance; later in her life, such assistance as she receives is suddenly discontinued because of her protector's illness.\(^ {34}\) In the case of Rebecca it is a misunderstanding that precipitates a similar crisis.\(^ {35}\) Sarah, motherless at an early age, marries for the very reason that she wants a sheltering home, but finds her husband Darnley to be as improvident as her own father, as well as incorrigibly flighty and irresponsible. During her brother Reuben's absence, Rachel loses her last near relation, her aunt. Entirely destitute, she finds happiness in the love of Hamden only to have it withheld again when circumstances mislead her husband.\(^ {36}\)

Once a Rowson heroine is left without the support of parents or benefactors and the means to keep body and soul together, anything can happen to her.\(^ {37}\) She finds herself, like Rebecca in the Ossiter household, an object of envy and contempt, and therefore humiliated.\(^ {38}\) Inexperienced and naïve, she attributes to others only her own engaging qualities and lays herself open to such cruel deceptions as Meriel suffers through Clara's duplicity.\(^ {39}\) She is often obliged to consort with people like Mrs. Littleton or the Mossops, who are capable only of the basest interpretation of her actions. The faults she is accused of may
be assigned to her because of the limited understanding of human nature among her acquaintances; more frequently and sinsterly, she is malignantly slandered, as Meriel and Rebecca are slandered by jealous Hester and wicked Mrs. Varnice. And since the friends and lovers of the late eighteenth-century novels are inclined to be taken in by the slightest appearance of faithlessness and hypocrisy, the effect of such calumny can be catastrophic; witness Kingly and Hamden. The heroine is often made the scapegoat for someone else's misbehavior, such as Lady Winterton's affair with Mr. Savage in *The Fille de Chambre.* She finds help and pity only among those as poor and lonely as herself, like the old woman in Dublin who spends the night on the floor so that the homeless Sarah can sleep in her bed. As often as not the heroine shares other people's misfortunes, as does Rebecca in America. She sacrifices her chances for improvement and gives up her hopes of personal fulfillment in order to undertake the salvation of others; thus Meriel marries Rooksby to please his mother and rescue him from the evil influence of his mistress. She falls seriously ill when she has no money left; or she is thrown into the debtors' prison, without hope of communicating with anyone she knows (except possibly those she has pledged herself not to trouble under any circumstances) or securing the means of release.

Having sunk to the bottom of human misery, the heroine may find some measure of tranquillity in resignation and in the expectation of death; she may depart this life like Sarah, leaving it to a faithful and admiring friend to extol "her angelic, her exemplary conduct." She may, however, fare quite differently. In the preface to *Sarah,* Mrs. Rowson asked, "Who of common reflection but would prefer the death of Sarah, resigned as she was, and upheld by faith and hope, to all the splendors, wealth and honors that were ever heaped upon the heroine in the last pages of a novel?" The answer is that many readers are all in favor of the "splendors, wealth and honors"; this was so when Mrs. Rowson was writing, and she knew it as well as her fellow novelists. Meriel is therefore finally transformed into the Harcourt heiress and marries Frederic Kingly; Rebecca's Sir George turns out to be her still unmarried and loving cousin; and Reuben
and Rachel, though showing a republican contempt of titles, do
not complain about the fortune they inherit from their English
relatives.

The reversal of the heroine's fate is a near miraculous achieve­
ment. It depends in the main on (1) the villains running out
of luck and being finally unmasked as the deceivers, embezzlers,
forgers, and the like (which the reader has known them to be all
along); and (2) "some surprising discovery,\(^{44}\) such as that of a
case of mistaken identity. As the result of the ubiquitous gypsies'
having exchanged the babies, it is Rebecca's cousin who is brought
up as Sir George Worthy; the real Sir George is found under an
oak (and therefore named Oakley) by his own uncle. The
proverbial birthmark eventually makes it possible to identify him:

"...Should he ever be found, he has on his right arm, just
below the shoulder, the mark of a mulberry."

"Saddle my horses—send off all my servants... Rejoice, re­
joice, my girl, for upon my soul the young dog had that mark on
his arm when I found him sprawling under the oak.\(^{45}\)

The set of coincidences operating in the case of Sir George is
one instance among many of the ways in which the novelists
contrived their solutions. To begin with, Sir George's mother
agrees to her brother's proposal that their two children, Lady
Eleanor and Sir George, should marry. By the time the wedding
is being discussed, however, Lady Eleanor finds herself in love
with Oakley, and Sir George loves Rebecca. At that critical
moment, when the parental planning threatens to cause un­
happiness one way or another—through either the children's
obedience or disobedience—the convenient discoveries of Oak­
ley's and Sir George's true identity are made. Oakley, being
the real Sir George, must marry Lady Eleanor, a necessity that
could not be more pleasing to either of them. In addition,
Rebecca becomes free to marry "Sir" George without breaking
what she considers a promise to her former mistress.

Meriel is as lucky as Rebecca when she is suddenly turned
from a miserable orphan into the child of loving and wealthy
parents, and then becomes Kingsley's wife after his first wife
conveniently dies. No wonder she writes on her wedding day,
"Where! where! is there a human being as superlatively happy as myself? happier they cannot be." In assuming her real parents' name, Meriel is relieved of a particularly distressing burden. Twice when she was living with the Howards (who she thought were her parents), Mr. Howard had come to her bedroom at night, and only with difficulty had the poor girl managed to resist him. Meriel is now no longer haunted by the idea of having been the object of an incestuous passion, "one thought . . . too dreadful, too shocking to human nature, to wear even the face of probability." Yet this horrible idea is mentioned a second time in Trials: only a timely revelation prevents Richard Howard from marrying his half-sister. In Charlotte's Daughter Lucy's prospects of happiness are shattered when Franklin turns out to be the son of Montraville, whose illegitimate daughter she is. In Mentoria there is a similar instance: Marian nearly becomes the mistress of her own father, Major Renfew.

The near-incest, one of the more sensational elements occurring in the fiction of Mrs. Rowson's day, seems to attest the force of fashions in storytelling rather than a writer's didactic dispositions. Another indication of that force is to be seen in the very accumulation of sufferings undergone by the heroines. Miss Loshe was undoubtedly right when she said that the very number of Meriel's vicissitudes made them incredible. Coincidences and retarding elements also belong to the arsenal of devices handed down and copied by the novelists. Though Mrs. Rowson refrained from having her heroine's life saved by the opportune appearance of the stranger who is to become her husband, she contrived, for example, the meeting of Rebecca and Lady Eleanor at the jeweler's. The birthday charity drive leads Lady Eleanor to Rebecca, who has been overlooked by the chaplain in charge, only because the designated recipient of her bounty points the girl out as a more deserving object. Then there are the discoveries made by jealous wives and husbands. Mr. Lacour is found at Meriel's feet, Mr. Penure is seen slipping Rebecca some money, and Jenny's husband enters a room just in time to witness a scene definitely not played for his sake: "She sunk on a seat beside him, her head fell on his shoulder, and they both wept.—What a moment was this for the husband to enter,—he
If the jeweler’s story had not been interrupted by the arrival of new customers, Rebecca would have learned that she could honorably apply for help to Sir George, and thus be spared some further worries. Retardation is also achieved through the various narrative digressions in Mrs. Rowson’s books. Though these digressions tend to have a more legitimate connection with the main plot than is the case with many other novels, the temptation to make them too long frequently proved irresistible to Mrs. Rowson, and thus the tying together of main plot and subsidiary episodes leaves much to be desired. In *The Fille de Chambre* Uncle Littleton’s story is to some extent relevant to the central action, but the one about Jenny has a merely sentimental connection with Rebecca’s experiences. The story of Harriet Venables in *Trials* contributes to exposing Rooksby’s villainy. The story invented by Clara is taken for a true confession (in spite of some reservations) by Meriel, who has been prone to overestimate fiction. She is to learn at the end of her trials that Clara’s tale was entirely fabricated: like the sketches included in *The Inquisitor* but contrary to Mrs. Rowson’s intention, Clara’s story functions as a burlesque of the novel of victimization, more particularly of Mrs. Rowson’s novels and quite specifically of Meriel’s own vicissitudes. It might also have served as an example of irresponsible fiction, passing off as truth the mere product of the imagination, which critics of the novel frequently attacked. And, of course, it also shows how easy it was to amalgamate the prefabricated parts of romantic fiction into a narrative of some consistency.

Mrs. Rowson’s two epistolary novels *Trials of the Human Heart* and *Sarah* handle the form too clumsily to gain anything from it. The former book is a diary rather than an exchange of letters; significantly, some of the few letters not written by Meriel can be laid before the reader only by being included in one of Meriel’s. Occasionally the author tried to make the epistolary form serve the creation of suspense by ending a letter at a critical point; in one case Meriel apologizes because her story must be delayed by other duties, in another she cannot stand recollecting a harrowing experience: “...I found myself alone on the wreck, slightly fastened to it by a small cord, that was passed round my
waist and tied to a ring on the remaining part of the deck. The terrors which at that moment took possession of my mind, are still too fresh in my memory to suffer me to proceed.\textsuperscript{54} The various correspondents of Trials hardly ever refer to the same incident from their different points of view, so as to heighten its importance or bring out its diverse meanings. In Sarah the different letter-writers are given still less of a chance to offer their own interpretation of some occurrence. Their letters do not convey additional information and become tediously repetitive.

Whatever Mrs. Rowson was trying to do when she wrote Reuben and Rachel, the result is not brilliant.\textsuperscript{55} Nevertheless the book must be briefly considered here, for it is not only a novel of victimization. It deserves notice because of its attempt at including historical and American material. Reuben and Rachel are its heroes, but they appear only at the end of the first volume. Rachel’s adventures are very much those of the victimized young lady unable to vindicate herself in the face of the impersonal evils that beset her. Her happiness is restored when she goes to America.\textsuperscript{56}

The New World plays an important part in this book of Mrs. Rowson. Much of the first volume describes the settlement of some parts of South and North America. Reuben’s adventures take him to Philadelphia first, and later into a campaign against the Indians. When he succeeds in regaining the family fortune, he can use it to establish himself permanently in the New World with his wife, as well as Rachel and her husband. The Indian background used by Mrs. Rowson is in itself almost an innovation in American fiction.\textsuperscript{57} Mrs. Bleecker’s History of Maria Kittle was the only earlier work of fiction that employed Indians. Unlike Mrs. Bleecker, who used some autobiographical material in Maria Kittle, Mrs. Rowson had to rely on secondhand knowledge exclusively. She may have acquired it from the “captivities,” from which, of course, Mrs. Bleecker also profited.\textsuperscript{58} The Pocahontas legend, too, seems to have influenced Mrs. Rowson. Her Indian chapters are insufficiently coordinated with the more usual parts of her novel; they read like an element deliberately introduced to give the story a dash of the uncommon and are not

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so much part of the narrative as a picturesque feature, rather like
the Columbus material in the opening chapters. *Reuben and
Rachel* is clearly not a historical novel but a poorly organized
book, setting fashionable plots against a sketchy background of
historical fact. Yet it may have contributed to awaken a sense of
the American past and its various ante-national roots: Italian,
Spanish, English; Catholic, Protestant, Quaker; native, colonial,
immigrant.

Mrs. Rowson adopted one pattern to begin her novels. *The
Fille de Chambre* may serve as an example. It opens with a
short dialogue, pathetically intimating the situation of the Little-
tons; this is followed by some explanation concerning their
past, their individual characters, and their mutual relations,
after which the story is carried on to its completion in short
chapters. The comparative freshness of the story of Rebecca
owes much to its incorporating Mrs. Rowson's autobiographical
relation of her first voyage across the Atlantic and stay in
America, though that passage, too, is tinged with pathetic and
moralizing tones. Yet if *The Fille de Chambre* is a better book
than either *Trials* or *Sarah*, it cannot compare with *Charlotte*;
in its latter part it becomes increasingly flat.

Like the rest of Mrs. Rowson's novels, both *Charlotte* and
*Charlotte's Daughter* go back, after an opening scene, to earlier
events, and then recount the stories of two young girls, Charlotte
and Lucy. Charlotte is made to pay for her own transgression;
Lucy, her daughter, suffers as a result of her parents' sin. Since
*Charlotte's Daughter* is designated as a sequel to *Charlotte*, it is
difficult to ignore either of the novels when speaking of the other.
In the moral sense, indeed, they complement each other, but as
stories they adopt different plans. *Charlotte* has something
tragic about it, whereas *Charlotte's Daughter* begins as a kind
of fable, only to have the balance between its three main figures
upset by an extraneous element. *Charlotte's Daughter* cannot
stand by itself either as a narrative or as a didactic entity, *Char-
lotte* definitely can—the popularity which it enjoyed is sufficient
proof of it.

Unlike Mrs. Rowson's other novels, *Charlotte* is, or just fails
to be, a unified entity. This coherence expresses itself in the
simplicity of its plot, which is especially striking to the reader who turns to *Charlotte* after reading Mrs. Rowson's other novels. In writing it Mrs. Rowson found herself treating a tale that was moving enough and had just the right attributes to be successfully turned into a novel of victimization and sentiment. She felt no need, however, to introduce into the book and the heroine's life a spectacular variety of events and characters. Charlotte is seduced, Montraville begins to tire of her, and Belcour uses his influence to separate them completely: there is a fair degree of plausibility and consistency both in the way in which the characters act and in the linking up of their actions. Granted that the note of sentiment and pathos is forced, especially in the over-proportioned story of the Temples and in the account of the heroine's final hours, yet thanks to Charlotte and Montraville the novel has more to recommend it than the average fiction of the time. The girl, who is otherwise perfect, commits one serious error, which is accounted for by her lack of experience and proper guidance. She becomes pitiable and at times almost moving as she gradually realizes Montraville's disengagement during the successive stages of his desertion. The concessions which she makes to her passion and her lover begin early, so that she cannot strike us as a "faultless monster" before she falls; nor does she become one in her long-suffering readiness to atone for her error. She retains to the end enough humanity not to tire the reader following the account of her trials. Judged by the standards of the age, Mrs. Rowson was rather reticent in her use of sentimental appeals during much of that account.

Part of our patience with the seduced heroine is due to Mrs. Rowson's treatment of Montraville. Her refusal to paint him as an out-and-out villain does much to encourage in the reader a sane approach to Charlotte. In the case of the ordinary seducer in fiction, the act of seduction is frequently the mere confirmation of his villainous nature; or it starts him for good on a career of crime because he becomes the victim of his own action, unable to free himself of its influence on his character and behavior. But Montraville is shown as a young man temporarily stifling his scruples, the better to obey an impulse dictated by his senses and vanity, yet without losing his conscience and his sensibility.
He therefore shares many of the sorrows which he causes Charlotte and suffers his own as well in the dilemma of his relations with Julia. This girl is herself a useful figure in the conflict and an index to Montraville's standards. The young officer does not give up Charlotte for an unworthy rival, mean of character and desirable only for her fortune; on the contrary, Julia is a competitor whom Charlotte might have had to acknowledge under any circumstances.

If Mrs. Rowson avoided the cruder temptations of the stereotype in the central couple of *Charlotte*, she was not so fortunate with her two villains. Both Mademoiselle La Rue and Montraville's false friend Belcour perform as all seducers and calculating, immoral females should in the climate of the novel of seduction, yet neither achieves any degree of lifelike credibility. As do other female characters of Mrs. Rowson, Mademoiselle La Rue incurs the author's particular blame for assisting in the corruption of young girls.

The characters of *Charlotte's Daughter*, the heroine included, are fragmentary and sketchy. Franklin in particular suffers from not being a more conspicuous personage than the two orphans with whom Lucy is contrasted. As to Lucy and her companions, they remain remote because of what they were designed to be: three different types of girls facing the same situation at the beginning of their adult life. Lady Mary's fate is that of the heroine of *Female Quixotism*, transposed from the satirical to the tragic, to show the possible serious consequences of immoderate novel-reading. Aura Melville is the lucky one to whom happiness comes as a matter of course—almost, because after all she appears to deserve her happiness by living up to the high principles of the Reverend Mr. Matthews. Lucy is reserved for a fate more cruel than Lady Mary's, since the frustration of her legitimate hopes is caused by no fault of her own. After her separation from Franklin she dedicates herself to making up for her parents' error; the self-denial of her charitable and public-spirited activities is matched by Franklin's death during the wars in Spain, a death worthy of an officer and gentleman.

The best that can be said of Mrs. Rowson's style is that it is generally free of the self-conscious over-writing which many
contemporary novelists indulged in. In occasional scenes of
dramatic revelations and confrontations, though, she did use
pathetic and melodramatic tricks of emphasis, and in some rare
instances she introduced touches of the Gothic. Otherwise, she
wrote rather straightforwardly. At the same time, her reticence
in embellishing her pages appears to be not so much a quality
as a defect, inasmuch as it prevented her writing from achieving
anything like a recognizable individuality. Take, for example,
this description of a heroine: "... She is rather below the middle
size, and inclined to 'en bon point'; her face is not regularly
pretty, but she has a lovely pair of hazel eyes, through which
you may read every emotion of her soul. She is fair, a fine glow
of health animates her face, and a smile of good humour plays
about her mouth; a luxuriant quantity of chestnut hair hangs
in ringlets down her neck and shades a forehead that is orna­
mented with the most beautiful eye-brows I ever beheld." Some of the elements of the heroine's physical appearance studi­ously stress that she is far from being a great beauty, which is
not unoriginal; yet the diction is so much the customary one that
the reader must make an effort to realize he is not being intro­
duced to another girl of superlative charms. This sort of stylistic
conformism is at its most exasperating in the presentation of a
villain:

Perfect master of the art of deception; he conceals under the
mask of integrity and honour every vice which can disgrace
human nature: With that versatility of temper which makes him
appear every thing to every body; with the religious he is grave
and solemn; with the gay cheerful and affable, with the splenetic
he can rail at the vices and follies of mankind, and with the
libertine practice those vices himself: though where it is his inter­
est he can appear devout, yet no man ever conceived a more
contemptuous opinion of religion, or strove with more diabolical
earnestness to corrupt the young and inexperienced heart.

The limited range of Mrs. Rowson's art is also clearly evidenced
by a passage like the following description of a landscape:

It was a charming evening in the beginning of June; the ruddy
streaks of the parting sun-beams had given place to sober grey;
the moon with silver crescent shed a feeble light, and the stars, by imperceptible degrees, appeared in the blue expanse of heaven, till all was one continued scene of radiant glory. A nightingale perched on a thorn, was tuning her melancholy pipe, and the zephyrs passed gently over a long canal wafting on their wings the distant sound of the tinkling sheep bell, and the rustic shepherd’s whistle.  

Here are all the hackneyed properties of such a setting, and the appropriate diction, affixing some epithet to almost every noun without even attempting to avoid the threadbare associations of “nightingale” and “melancholy,” “crescent” and “silver.” Just as obvious are the phrases “the zephyrs passed gently” and “wafting on their wings.”

This, then, may be concluded from reading a conventional late eighteenth-century novelist. Plot elements were found readymade and in profusion, and offered a starting point as well as the main substance of the narrative. The novelist tended to prefer stereotypes to characters because they fitted the existing plot elements. Together, the situations and personages, as well as the devices of digression and embellishment, strongly suggested to the writer the structural pattern and fashionable style which could conveniently be adopted. Except in the cases of Charlotte and Reuben and Rachel, Mrs. Rowson remained strictly within the limits of such novel-writing. In Charlotte she managed to infuse into a stock situation an ingredient of personal and moral vitality, giving her tale a degree of human warmth which saved it from the obvious literariness of the rest of her work. In Reuben and Rachel she drew attention to historical and Indian material, though her experiment did not result in an improved form of the novel.

1. Mrs. Rowson herself furnished some data concerning her life, but left the year of her birth unmentioned; her introduction to Trials of the Human Heart and her obituary of her father contain contradictory information. She was perhaps trying to make herself appear a few years younger than she was, and she may well have been eight years old when she came to America in 1767, like Mariana in The Inquisitor (p. 113), whose story is perhaps the story which Susanna Haswell told the Duchess of Devonshire when applying for a post in her household. If she was born in 1759, Mrs. Rowson would have been sixteen in 1775; the heroine of The Fille de Chambre is about that age when she experiences difficulties which obviously reflect the Loyalist Has-
wells' troubles in Massachusetts. It may be significant that the novels *Trials* and *Sarah* both start off in the spring of 1775, as if the agitated years then beginning for their heroines were a parallel to the American war years (which in *The Fille de Chambre* end an era of happiness). Incidentally, Charlotte, too, was born in 1759, since she is 15 in the year 1774.

2. To Kendall B. Taft, Mrs. Rowson is "an Englishwoman who spent most of her life in America" (Minor Knickerbockers, p. xxxvii n.). A letter of Mrs. Rowson to a former pupil (1808) reveals her divided loyalties and her awareness of the problems of America; see Elias Nason, *A Memoir of Mrs. Susanna Rowson* (Albany, N.Y., 1870), pp. 151-52.

3. The following books by Mrs. Rowson were reprinted and are going to be referred to in the following pages: *The Inquisitor* (1788); *Mentoria* (1791); *Charlotte* (1791), entitled *Charlotte Temple* with the appearance of Matthew Carey's edition of 1797; *The Fille de Chambre* (called *Rebecca, or the Fille de Chambre*) (1792); Mrs. Rowson first published in America *Trials of the Human Heart* (1795) (the last of her books to be published in Philadelphia in their first American editions; later titles bear Boston imprints); *Reuben and Rachel* (1798); and *Sarah* (1813) (serialized in the Boston Weekly Magazine, 1802-3). *Charlotte's Daughter* appeared posthumously in 1828. Mrs. Rowson's first novel, *Victoria* (London, 1786), not reissued in the United States, is not considered here; it may have been available to American readers (see R. W. G. Vail, *Susanna Haswell Rowson, the Author of "Charlotte Temple": A Bibliographical Study*. Reprinted from PAAS [Worcester, Mass., 1933]).

4. Gothic devices are, however, almost totally absent from her pages.

5. The Colonel Montréal (DAB 13:101-2) who is supposed to have been the model for Montraville was a cousin of Mrs. Rowson. If the events related in *Charlotte* took place in 1774, they happened during Mrs. Rowson's first stay in America, and she may have first heard about them at that time, perhaps through some gossip among the military circles to which both her father and Montréal belonged.

13. In *Trials of the Human Heart*, 4:74, Mrs. Rowson praises Mrs. Bennet, Miss Sophia Lee, and Miss Burney. The author of *Evelina* is named again, together with Miss More and Mrs. Inchbald, and included among the Muses' favorites, in *The Inquisitor*, p. 89.
18. Charles Angoff deplores the didactic restriction imposed on Mrs. Rowson's and other writers' works, "mainly sermons in fiction form addressed to virgins, drunks, and wife-beaters" (A Literary History, 2:315). Terence Martin takes a more positive view of the didactic spirit of Mrs. Rowson's novels, pronouncing it a novelist's method of self-discipline ("The Emergence of the Novel in America. A Study in the Cultural History of an Art Form.

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DA 20:3:299-301); his judgment seems fair, especially if we compare Mrs Rowson's work to that of her didactic contemporaries Angoff mentions by name: Miss Warren and Miss Wells.

19. *Victoria*. "A novel. In two volumes. The characters taken from real life, and calculated to improve the morals of the female sex, by impressing them with a just sense of the merits of filial piety."


21. *Mentoria* and *The Inquisitor* are also briefly discussed below, in the context of "Didactic Fiction," Chapter 4.


23. The two hundred pages of *The Inquisitor* tell a dozen tales with some sort of coherence and conclusiveness (apart from merely anecdotal episodes). In these tales there occur eleven instances of seduction, elopement, and adultery, accomplished in most cases, proposed and prevented in extremis in four of them. Cupidity is a motivating factor in seven, social prejudice in five, of these stories.

24. Charlotte acts against the principles taught by her parents, Lady Mary in *Charlotte's Daughter*, against the advice of her former guardian. Charlotte's father refuses the wealthy girl chosen for him by his father (who thereupon marries her himself), preferring love in a cottage with Lucy Eldridge. Hamden in *Reuben and Rachel* marries the heroine secretly: he does not want to lose either the girl or the favor of an aunt who disapproves of marriages with poor girls.


27. In a review of *Charlotte's Daughter* Whittier applied what is more strictly true of *Charlotte* to the whole of Mrs. Rowson's fiction: "She has indeed little to do with the imagination. Her pictures, simple and unadorned as they really are, doubtless appear tame and spiritless to those who are satisfied with nothing which approaches the bounds of probability. But there is a truth—a moral truth in her writings,... a language which appeals to the heart, not in the studied pomp of affectation, but in the simple eloquence of Nature" (*The Uncollected Critical Writings of John Greenleaf Whittier*, ed. E. H. Cady and H. H. Clark [1950], p. 17).

28. The resourcefulness of Meriel Howard and Rebecca Littleton, which is commended by Quinn, *Fiction* (p. 19), is mostly a gratuitous exercise of the girls' spirits, for they depend after all on the intervention of some *deus ex machina* device to achieve happiness. Their resilience is nonetheless striking and exemplary, and Constance Rourke's calling the Rowson novels "feminist" is understandable (*The Roots of American Culture* [1942], p. 79). Although the feminist tendency is discernible in other novels beside Mrs. Rowson's, the personal experience of the author of *Charlotte* may have given her an extra right to speak out.

29. Quinn attributed the vogue of *Charlotte* "to that quality which delights in reading of the misery of others which by contrast makes us satisfied with our own lot" (*Fiction*, p. 15).

31. *Charlotte’s Daughter* has an essentially didactic, contrast-built, structure, within which different elements of the novel of victimization play a part.

32. The novel of victimization is essentially the story of a heroine, for the world as depicted in eighteenth-century fiction is a man’s world in which the active roles are assigned to male heroes and villains. Thus Reuben, who nominally should play a part parallel to his twin sister’s, starts out with all the advantages of his sex: fending for himself means for him to assert his rights. But a girl like Rachel must first submit to the existing rights: she can discover what her own claims are only because they are restricted on all sides through prerogatives and customs.


37. Herbert Ross Brown speaks of Mrs. Rowson’s “deft manipulation of the might-have-beens” (*The Sentimental Novel*, p. 173). With Mrs. Rowson and other authors, such might-have-beens result from mere coincidences, or from some villain’s evil influence, or the heroine’s change of mind (owing, for example, to some fresh moral scruple).

38. The first part of Rebecca’s adventures is reminiscent of *Pamela*: the humble heroine is unexpectedly befriended by a lady, then loses her protectress and is humiliated by her proud daughter, who quarrels with her brother when he defends the girl. In *Trials* Clara’s faked confession derives inspiration from Pamela’s account of her temptation to commit suicide (3:99).

39. Cf. also: “Humane, generous, and credulous in the extreme, she felt that every human being had a claim upon her affection; and willingly allowing that claim to others, she readily believed every profession of friendship made to herself” (*Reuben and Rachel*, 2:230).


43. *Sarah*, p. iii.


48. She is the daughter of Richard’s father and the Mrs. Talbot who stayed under the Howards’ roof under the guise of a distant relative.

49. “Marian and Lydia, Part V,” *Mentoria*, 2:19-27. Since *Mentoria* was written previous to Mrs. Rowson’s settling in the United States it is unnecessary to assume that Mrs. Rowson was influenced by the example of *The Power of Sympathy* in her use of the near-incest motif (*DAB* 16:204).

50. Fashion could make its influence felt in two ways: (1) either a popular device was taken over from other writers, or (2) in order to escape using the same elements as a host of fellow novelists, the writer could rack his brain to devise some spectacularly unheard-of feature.


52. *The Fille de Chambre*, p. 95.
53. In *Charlotte’s Daughter* the old sergeant’s story (chap. 7), if concluded, would not of course have materially altered the fate of Lucy and her half-brother, but it might have spared Montraville his agonizing confession. This, however, would have robbed the story of a didactic climax, too.

54. *Trials*, 3:154. Pity the reader who could not immediately procure volume 4 for the passage occurs at the very end of volume 3!

55. Contrary to most critical estimates of Mrs. Rowson’s fiction, the *Boston Weekly Magazine* ranked *Reuben and Rachel* above *Charlotte* (1, no. 13 [1803]: 53; Mrs. Rowson was then editor of the magazine, so the opinion might be her own).

56. Mrs. Rowson seems to have been happiest during the years which she spent in America, both before the Revolution and from 1793 to her death in 1824.


58. As a narrative exercise and popular tradition, the captivities certainly deserve attention. See below, in the chapter entitled “Strands of History.”

59. “But who knows, my dear father,” cried Rebecca Littleton, laying her hand on that of her father, “who knows something yet may be done to reward a veteran grown grey in his country’s service” (p. 7).

60. Charles F. Richardson (*American Literature*, 1886-88 [Reprinted ed., New York, 1896], 2:285) and Leslie Fiedler (*Love and Death in the American Novel* [1960], pp. 68-69) have spoken scathingly of *Charlotte*. At least they have taken the book seriously long enough to do so, which Charles Angoff thought only Rowson’s nineteenth-century biographer Elias Nason could do. *Charlotte* was, however, taken seriously in another sense, which Angoff readily admits: it was a bestseller, and influenced the reading habits of generations of Americans (*A Literary History*, 2:204-6). Mathew Carey wrote to Mrs. Rowson in 1812: “Charlotte Temple is by far the most popular and in my opinion the most useful novel ever published in this country and probably not inferior to any published in England... It may afford you great gratification to know that the sales of Charlotte Temple exceed those of any of the most celebrated novels that ever appeared in England. I think the number disposed of must far exceed 50,000 copies; and the sale still continues...” (quoted in Earl Bradsher, *Mathew Carey* [1912], p. 50). William Charvat suggested that Carey’s publishing of the “misery novel of the *Charlotte Temple* type” prepared a market that responded to Scott and later to Cooper (*Literary Publishing*, p. 24). Leslie Fiedler tries to account for the success of *Charlotte* by making it “the myth or archetype of seduction as adapted to the needs of the American female audience,” and its message “a ritual assurance that Good (the simple, the female, the American) triumphs, while Evil (the sophisticated, the male, the European) goes down in defeat”; it is not quite clear why the English girl whose story was written for an English-reading public should have been thus identified in the United States. The latest editors of *Charlotte Temple*, Clara M. and Rudolf Kirk (1964), think that the book “is still interesting to American readers,” suggesting that its survival may derive from its “air of truth,” Mrs. Rowson’s “ardent temperament,” or from her training as an actress with an eye on the immediately effective; they have also traced Mrs. Rowson’s first use of the *Charlotte* material in a poem of hers, “Maria, Not a Fiction” (Intro., esp. pp. 12, 22, 16 f.).

61. The remark that “the distance impedes rescue and thus facilitates Mrs. Rowson’s reaching a lachrymose ending” (R. B. Heilman, *America in English*
Fiction, 1760-1800 [1937], p. 76) must be qualified by remembering the factual source of the story.

62. Sarah, p. iii.

63. The manuscript title was, "Lucy Temple, or the Three Orphans. A Sequel to Charlotte Temple."

64. See the following chapter of this study.

65. There is, for example, the following Gothic description in Reuben and Rachel: "It was now near midnight. The moon, which had shone so bright on the beginning of the evening, was now enveloped in black clouds. The wind whistled hollow through the branches of the half-naked trees, and the turrets of the old Castle echoed its melancholy notes. A cold rain beat against the casements, that shook in their frames from the violence of the rising tempest, and every thing wore a dreary, sombre appearance" (1:74).


68. The Fille de Chambre, p. 160.

69. The stock characters and stock situations, of course, implied certain moral standards which the writer could easily choose to emphasize, according to the bent of his nature, or merely his ostensible purpose.