

Introduction by Paul Downes, University of Toronto

Articles published in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* since the turn of the twenty-first century inform two distinct ways of studying "America." One approach privileges the uncertainty many Americans felt about the social and psychological consequences of the successful revolutionary break with England and the subsequent emergence of a domestic political split between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans. Essays that explore this period often invoke a broadly Habermasian notion of the public sphere (particularly as filtered through the work of Michael Warner) in order to register the political power of novels by Charles Brockden Brown, Susanna Rowson, Tabitha Tenney, and Hannah Webster Foster. In "Falling into Fiction": Reading *Female Quixotism*" (ECF 14.2, January 2002), for example, Stephen Carl Arch reads Tenney's 1801 novel in relation to its mid-century English precursors. Arch demonstrates how the popular motif of the female reader led astray by fiction served Tenney's Federalist determination to denounce the seductive appeal of democratic or "Jacobinical" radicalism. Dorcasina, the "heroine" of Tenney's novel, is derided, in quite conventional terms, for her naive attachment to fictional romance, and the American reader is warned about the "demoralizing and atheistical principles of that corrupt people" [the French], whose recent revolution threatened to undermine the virtue of "Lady liberty" (194, 198). "Everywhere," Arch writes, "*Female Quixotism* promotes the idea that the wealthy and cultured are socially superior, that men should control their wives, that laws and social mores are objectively true and that to disobey them wilfully leads to madness or hypocrisy" (192). Indeed, Tenney's allegory is so blunt and the condemnation so rote, that we might begin to wonder if *Female Quixotism* actually lampoons the kind of Federalist moral education it so predictably rehearses. This cat-and-mouse game between the fictional condemnation of fiction and the parodic imitation of those same fictions goes some way towards describing the contentious discursive atmosphere of the late eighteenth-century American political and literary world.

In "Periodical Visitations": Yellow Fever as Yellow Journalism in Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn*" (ECF 19.3, Spring 2007), the growing antagonism between pro-French Republicans and British-leaning Federalists (and the culminating election battle between Adams and Jefferson) provides Louis Kirk McAuley with a context in which to read Brockden Brown's novelistic account of the 1793 yellow fever outbreak in Philadelphia. The hyperactive print public sphere threatens to turn writing into a social disease as schemes of deception and fraud work to undermine the easy association of press freedom with civic enlightenment. Once again, the critical reading detects conservative sympathies behind the novel's allegorical (if decidedly more realist) depiction of the spread of radical democracy. McAuley focuses on Brown's anxiety about the destabilizing effects of the kind of impersonal, disembodied authority that print culture enabled and encouraged. The titular hero of Brown's novel laments that books, "because of their impersonality, threaten the very social fabric of human intercourse" (331), and McAuley argues that this lament is Brown's too, despite his apparent embrace of republican print culture. Associating Jeffersonians with what Thomas Gustafson calls the "doublespeak" of a new, highly mediated political discourse (quoted in McAuley, 334), Brown, according to McAuley, used his novels to dramatize the threat posed by a seditious and alien radicalism that thrived on print's irresponsible anonymity and its viral reach. "Jefferson's successful, duplicitous campaign for the presidency," writes McAuley, "is, from a metaphorical standpoint, the plague that Brown's novel engages" (329).

Daniel E. Williams also detects conservative political anxiety in Brockden Brown's fictional representation of psychopathically murderous fathers in "Writing under the Influence: An Examination of *Wieland's* 'Well Authenticated Facts' and the Deception of Murderous Fathers in Post-Revolutionary Print Culture" (ECF 15.3-4, April-July 2003). Drawing heavily on written accounts of actual murders that circulated in the 1790s (and which undoubtedly influenced Brown's novel), Williams notes that, at the time, the horror was denounced as the fruit of Deist infidelity. And where Deism is being

condemned, France and Jefferson cannot be far behind. The powerfully persuasive voice of disembodied authority (figuratively associated with disease in *Arthur Mervyn*) is hyperbolized in *Wieland* as the voice of madness that would drive a man to murder his wife and children. Williams, like McAuley, confirms Jane Tompkins's influential contention that Brown's story "offers a direct refutation of the Republican faith in men's capacity to govern themselves without the supports and constraints of an established social order" (quoted in Williams, 646n7). *Wieland*, Williams concludes, "warns readers, citizens of an experimental democracy, not only to question voices of authority commanding blind obedience but also the human capacity to interpret the words of such voices" (666).

Two essays on late eighteenth-century American fiction take a different tack by highlighting novelistic resistance to federalist conservative discourse of the 1790s. In "A Mob of Lusty Villagers: Operations of Domestic Desires in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*" (*ECF* 15.2, January 2003), Elizabeth Dill notes the standard mapping of female desire onto national politics and civic well-being in the period, but argues that women writers like Foster worked to reconfigure such discourse by associating autonomous female sexuality with progressive social and democratic aspiration. Eliza Wharton's pre- and extra-marital relations, precisely insofar as she pursues them within traditionally domestic spaces, effect a transgression against and a rewriting of patriarchal boundaries between the private and the public. Challenging Gillian Brown's earlier work on the novel, Dill argues that we read "female desire as the central mode of political agency for women in *The Coquette*," and that this desire "challenges individual will as the best performance of communal and national identity" (265n10). If Brockden Brown's novels appear to be full of (male?) panic about the relationship between authority and social circulation in post-revolutionary United States, Foster's novel picks up on some of the critical potential lurking in Tenney's satire by turning a target of sexual policing into "an icon of communitarian virtue" (278). The very instability of desire as a mode of relation, Dill insightfully points out, "insists on community as an ever changing, and ever changeable social construction" (279). In this way, *The Coquette* emerges as a more decidedly disruptive and utopian text than, for example, Susanna Rowson's *Trials of the Human Heart* (1795), which Joseph Fichtelberg discusses in "Uncivil Tongues: Slander and Honour in Susanna Rowson's *Trials of the Human Heart*" (*ECF* 18.4, Summer 2006). Fichtelberg reads Rowson's seventh novel as a subtle rejoinder to William Cobbett's conservative attack on her "conversion" to republicanism in the 1790s. Cobbett, whose own political allegiances fluctuated over the course of a long career in politics and journalism, touched on all the keynotes of conservative misogyny in the period, and equated Rowson's move to the left (and hence, towards France) with promiscuity, fiction, and anarchy. Fichtelberg argues that fiction (and, by extension, other proliferating forms of print culture in the post-revolutionary era) offered Rowson (and other women) a new means of countering slander and renegotiating wounded honour in the public sphere. Here again, the discursive transformations that seem to have provoked inflated male anxiety about the displacement of authority in the new republic are embraced by women who find something both liberating and empowering in print's prosthetic possibilities. Rowson's "slandered heroine," writes Fichtelberg, "vividly expresses performative anxieties and responses that few of her male readers could allow themselves to disclose" (435). At the same time, Rowson expresses more concern than Foster about the destruction of "purely private virtue," a destruction that becomes "increasingly improbable in a polity dependent on public exposure" (445). Fichtelberg's Rowson is a somewhat ambivalent champion of the Habermasian public sphere, who nevertheless "reveals a keen sense of how honour is conditioned by a public opinion that women might turn to their advantage" (451).

Another way of approaching America from an eighteenth-century perspective (and one that might, at first blush, seem to address an entirely different set of concerns) would be to look at the specifically British novelistic fascination with the figure of the "Native American." In "'About savages and the awfulness of America': Colonial Corruptions in *Humphry Clinker*" (*ECF* 18.2, Winter 2005-6), Tara Ghoshal Wallace reads Tobias Smollett's 1771 novel as a critique of colonialism from the perspective of a conservative investment in British culture and a defence of traditional aspects of

British social stability. If late eighteenth-century revolutionary transformation generated allegories of psychopathic violence, raging epidemic, or female sexual impropriety in the United States, some of those same transformations registered in the British imagination via the more-or-less fantastic figure of the American "savage." For Smollett, writing in the wake of an alarming exodus from Scotland to the colonies following the Seven Years' War, "America represents a double danger: it siphons off manpower that could otherwise help build a strong post-Union Scotland, and it distributes wealth in the home country in a destructively egalitarian way" (230). The Native American plays a curiously doubled role in this drama of British identity: on the one hand, Indigenous resistance to French missionary efforts seems to imply a latent protestant rationality (in Smollett's representation, these peoples have no time for the creed of transubstantiation); on the other hand, Native violence is played for full effect in an effort to link the cultural threats of colonial commercialism with the immediate horror of ritualized torture practices. "In the end," writes Wallace, "America's contribution to Britain consists of trinkets and carcasses ... and ultimately, the degradation of the nation itself" (250).

Wallace's arguments are extended by Robbie Richardson in an essay on the anonymously authored 1763 novel, *Memoirs of the Life and Adventures of Tsonnonthouan*. In "Consuming Indians: Tsonnonthouan, Colonialism, and the Commodification of Culture" (*ECF* 22.4, Summer 2010), Richardson argues that the novel, with its depiction of an Indian chief as an avid consumer of European goods and brandy and as an enthusiastic convert to various religions and sects, "both mocks British colonial endeavours and projects some of the fears and fantasies associated with the newly emergent cultural force of capitalism onto the Indigenous people of British North America" (694). The novel does not, however, "offer a way out of these cycles, since it highlights its own participation in crass consumerism as a commodity" (715). In both *Humphry Clinker* and the *Memoirs*, we can recognize a version of the same problematic at work in conservative American fiction of the 1790s, whereby a thoroughly modern and commodified form (the novel) struggles to articulate resistance to the incoherent yet forceful emergence of both democracy and capitalism. That the figure of the American "Native" might be called upon to play a peculiarly resonant role in this English drama is also confirmed by Kristianne Kalata Vaccaro in "Recollection ... sets my busy imagination to work': Transatlantic Self-Narration, Performance and Reception in *The Female American*" (*ECF* 20.2, Winter 2007-8). Vaccaro, inspired by Broadview's invaluable reissue of the pseudonymously authored 1767 novel, highlights the narrator's transatlantic, hybrid identity as the daughter of an English colonizer and a Native "princess." Vaccaro concurs with Betty Joseph's suggestion that, "in its use of hybrid narrative strategies to probe the sociocultural roles shaping the vexed identity of mixed-race women in colonial America," *The Female American* is "neither completely British nor American but speaks to the impossibility of being either fully" (quoted in Vaccaro, 141). Utilizing fiction, anonymous mass mediation, and multilingual communication skills to effect a political intervention that is at once feminist and egalitarian as well as religiously and commercially exploitative, Unca Eliza Winkfield (the heroine and putative author of the novel) condenses many of the ideological anxieties structuring the second half of the eighteenth century in America and England. But its refusal to find solace in satire and its lingering suggestion of revolution interrupted and identity unmoored gives it a chance of continuing to be read as a source of insight into what has been and might yet be meant by "America."

©McMaster University, 2018.

## Further Reading

- Cahill, Edward and Edward Larkin, eds. *Aesthetics, Feeling, and Form in Early American Literature*, a special issue of *Early American Literature* 51.2 (2016).
- Dillon, Elizabeth Maddock. *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Downes, Paul. "Fiction and Democracy." *A Companion to American Fiction, 1780-1865*. Shirley Samuels, ed. Blackwell, 2004. 20-30.
- Elmer, Jonathan. *On Lingering and Being Last: Race and Sovereignty in the New World*. Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Gustafson, Thomas. *Representative Words: Politics, Literature, and the American Language, 1776-1865*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Joseph, Betty. "Re(playing) Crusoe/Pocahontas: Circum-Atlantic Stagings in *The Female American*" *Criticism* 42.3 (2000): 317-335.
- Roberts, Sian Silyn. *Gothic Subjects: The Transformation of Individualism in American Fiction, 1790-1855*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.
- Rust, Marion. "Charles Brockden Brown and Susanna Rowson." *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*. Gen. Ed. Patrick Parrinder. Volume 5: The American Novel to 1870, ed. Gerald Kennedy and Leland S. Person. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Sayre, Gordon. *Les Sauvages Américains: Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature*. University of North Carolina Press, 1997.
- Slauter, Eric Thomas. "History, Literature, and the Atlantic World." *Early American Literature* 43.1 (2008): 153-86.
- Tennenhouse, Leonard. *The Importance of Feeling English: American Literature and the British Diaspora, 1750-1850*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Warner, Michael. *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Weinstein, Cindy and Christopher Looby. *American Literature's Aesthetic Dimensions*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.