

## Susanna Rowson's Periodical Career

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Those who came of age as early Americanists in the 1980s are forever indebted to Cathy Davidson for rescuing from critical neglect Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791, 1794). When she published her edition of the novel with Oxford in 1986, there had not been a new edition in over twenty years. Today, there are ten editions of the novel in print or development. The good news is that Rowson is now central to the literary history of the early republic. The bad news, of course, is that twenty-odd years later we are able to provide our students with only the thinnest glimpse of a career which, alongside that of Charles Brockden Brown, surpasses that of any other early American writer for its diversity, its productivity, and its importance to literary history.

The parallels between Rowson's and Brown's careers are worth considering: in addition to some obvious similarities in their work—both were interested in transatlantic themes, both saw their writings as serving a vital pedagogical function—they also shared many concerns about the novel form itself, an ambivalence that is lost to history when we focus exclusively on their novel writing (and in each case primarily on only *one* novel). Both wrote in a variety of forms: poems, essays, dialogues, geographies, histories, and political economy. Even within their novels themselves, there is a remarkable range of formal and generic approaches. Brown experimented famously with gothic and psychological fiction, but he was equally interested in working with epistolary forms and seduction plots. Rowson's generic and formal experimentation in the novel is even more striking: while she is associated most closely with *Charlotte Temple*, with its unified narrative voice and didactic address, in some ways *Charlotte* is an exception in an exceptional career. It is indeed hard to find two books from among her many productions that closely resemble each other formally, from the Byzantine wanderings

of *The Inquisitor* (1788, 1793), the anti-novelistic structure of *Mentoria* (1791, 1794), the sweeping historicism of *Reuben and Rachel* (1798), or the epistolary sufferings of *Sarah* (1813). Happily, Broadview has recently published *Reuben and Rachel*, but the fact that it has taken twenty years to bring a second Rowson text into print is not encouraging, especially at a time when we need to be working to recover a more accurate portrait of the literary culture of the early republic—one that does not revolve entirely around the story of the novel's inevitable triumph. *Reuben and Rachel* will certainly help illuminate the origins of the historical romance, found in the United States in Rowson's multiethnic epic a full generation before the melodramatic cliff-divings of Cooper's *Mohicans* (1826). But, precisely because of its relevance to important threads in the history of the novel, *Reuben and Rachel* will not do much to complicate our sense of Rowson's early career or of the literary culture of the period.

In fact, looking at Rowson's career as a whole, we could plausibly label only a handful of her many books as "novels." The majority are in other miscellaneous forms. Here, I refer not only to her school books (*Youth's First Step in Geography* [1818] or *Spelling Dictionary* [1807]) or anthologies (*A Present for Young Ladies* [1811]), but also to many of the books often considered among her novels, including *The Inquisitor* and *Mentoria*. *The Inquisitor* is narrated by a man who acquires a ring that allows him to invisibly visit his fellow citizens, visits he recounts in a series of "rambles, excursion, characters, and tales."<sup>1</sup> *Mentoria* even more aggressively refuses any novelistic plotting. The book begins with a series of letters from a governess of a boarding school to her former charges and then moves into a series of short stories. Like *The Inquisitor*, *Mentoria's* structure bears at least as close a relation to the periodical form of the late eighteenth century as it does to the novel. *Mentoria* writes letters to her former charges upon various subjects—filial duty, proper society—and highlights each one with an anecdote, a story designed to give force to the moral lesson. One story leads to another, stories within stories, letters within letters, until the conceit of *Mentoria* as letter writer gives way completely after a long epistolary story of Agnes, whose story, Rowson tells us in a footnote, is "authentic and not the offspring of fancy."<sup>2</sup> Rowson then immediately moves into a story of "Marian and Lydia," which itself is compromised of stories within stories. The book concludes with an "Essay on Female Education," followed by two stories, an oriental tale about vanity entitled "Urganda & Fatima" and a moral essay on envy and gossip entitled "The Incendiary," both of which, Rowson tells us, have "formerly appeared in a Magazine."<sup>3</sup> While the original source is not known, both appeared in the British periodical, *The Polite Repository or, amusing companion* in 1791. In addition to these two (unattributed) tales, the first volume of *The Polite Repository* also featured Rowson's poem "Lydia," a selection from

her first novel *Victoria* (1786), and a sketch from *The Inquisitor*, suggesting Rowson had some close connection with the periodical community during her final years in Britain before moving to the U.S. two years later.<sup>4</sup> *The Inquisitor* and *Mentoria*, meanwhile, soon became part of the great textual commons in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, excerpted frequently on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>5</sup>

It is the Rowson who wrote around and outside the novel form, who resisted and even explicitly critiqued the novel, that we need to recover—not just for a fuller sense of Rowson's own career, but for a more accurate picture of the literary culture of the period, one that was far less invested in the novel than our literary history might suggest. If many of Rowson's books look somewhat motley and even formally unrecognizable to us today, it is because many of them were working out of models that bore only indirect relationship to the rising novel (even *Reuben and Rachel*—with its multiple plotlines, documents, stories within stories, and blend of history, travelogue and fiction—shows influence from the periodical anthology as much as any novelistic model). As with Brown, a fuller recovery of Rowson more accurately contextualizes her work in a literary history that does not revolve entirely around the novel—or at least not around the definition of the novel that would be enshrined in the nineteenth century. Work is underway to bring back into print the “other half” of Brown's career, one that has remained almost entirely invisible—his voluminous periodical work as writer and editor in the last ten years of his life. This magazine work complicates in important ways the familiar stories we tell about the rise of the novel, and for this reason critics have historically, until quite recently, worked to marginalize and even ridicule his turn to the periodical form. For Brown, the turn to anonymous periodical work in the first decade of the nineteenth century was at least in part due to his increasing doubts about the politics of the novel form. His periodical writings and projects help us understand some of these concerns and the possibilities of another model for a national literature that the magazine form sought to provide.

Throughout her career, Rowson expressed her own related concerns regarding novels. In *The Inquisitor*, for example, she ridicules the conventions of “the modern novel”: “It is indeed shocking [...] to see so many reams of paper expended in ushering to the world pernicious pages, which tend to vitiate the taste and corrupt the heart.”<sup>6</sup> And, novels are repeatedly a cause of corruption in Rowson's tales. In *Mentoria*, for example, “The History of Dorcas” has at its core the revelation that she had been allowed in her youth to read novels freely: “these books served only to soften my mind and encrease my passion, so that by never attempting to repel it in its first approach, it in time gained an entire ascendancy over my heart, formed a part of my existence, twined round the chords of my life, and can be extinguished only by the hand of death.”<sup>7</sup> In *Miscellaneous Poems* (1804), “Women as They Are” describes a similar tragedy:

Poor LINDAMIRA, deep in novels read,  
When married, keeps the path she taught to tread.  
And while the novel's page she's eager turning,  
The pot boils over, and the meat is burning;  
And while she is weeping o'er ideal woes,  
Her poor neglected little infant goes  
With uncomb'd hair, torn frock, and naked toes.  
Her husband disappointed, quits his home,  
At clubs to loiter, or with bucks to roam;  
While LINDAMIRA still the tale pursues,  
And in each heroine, her own sorrow views.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, these cautionary tales about the dangers of uninhibited novel reading were relatively conventional at the time. For the most part, contemporary critics have understood those who criticized the early American novel as conservative voices speaking from a position of class and gender privilege, worrying over the ways in which the new media form of the novel threatened stable class and gender roles by encouraging readers to imagine themselves outside of their proper station. And when novelists themselves regularly decried imaginative fiction, often advertising their own productions as tales "founded on fact," as Rowson did in *Charlotte Temple*, the tendency has for some time now been to see this as a sly mimicry of the critique to get subversive novels past censorious guardians. So prevalent has this reading become that today we hardly hesitate over critiques of the novel such as those Rowson herself raised repeatedly, dismissing them as a sign of the savvy of the writer or, if the critic is less forgiving, of her cowardice.

Yet, I would argue, the critique of the early novel is ultimately not so easily dismissed in its entirety as either latter-day Puritanism or strategic imitations of the same. While moralistic concerns of a more simplistic and predictable form certainly existed, some of those criticizing the novel in the early years of the nineteenth century were genuinely concerned about the potential dangers novels posed to readers in the new republic in terms of agency, reason, addiction, and self-knowledge. For example, far from worrying about the potential for novels giving readers agency, many critics of the novel worried about the potential for authorial *tyranny*. Another repeated concern focused on the anxiety that novel readers would lose all interest in things as they are, in the mixed world of everyday life, and would become either delusional or depressed as a result. As the *Mirror of Taste* put it in 1811, "to the deep novel reader, this world and its uses 'seem weary, flat, stale and unprofitable.'"<sup>9</sup> Or, as Dorcasina, the heroine of Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (1801), writes at the end of her long humiliating career as a novel

junkie, "I now find that I have passed my life in a dream, or rather a delirium; and have grown grey in chasing a shadow, which has always been fleeing from me, in pursuit of imaginary happiness, which, in this life, can never be realized."<sup>10</sup> As she advises her correspondent, instead of novels one should present their children with life "as it really is, [...] chequered with good and evil."<sup>11</sup>

The critique of the novel especially found favor in the pages of early American magazines, a fact that initially seems confusing considering that many of these magazines published fiction, including serialized novels, and regularly reviewed novels. However, periodicals had good reason to foment suspicion of the novel, precisely because the critique favored the formal properties of the magazine. If the novel was prone to authorial tyranny over the imagination of the reader, the periodical offered multiple texts and authors, overseen by a judicious editor. If the novel presented, in the frequently-cited admonition of Goldsmith, a "delusive" vision of a "happiness which never existed," the periodical was devoted to the mixture of pleasure and pains, novelty and mundanity that was life "as it really is."<sup>12</sup> And, if the primary risk of novels was in their indiscriminate consumption, then, as Patricia Okker has demonstrated, "with an editor's guidance could people read novels safely."<sup>13</sup> After all, few argued that the novel was itself *inherently* corrupting: instead the dangers lay in the fact naïve readers were incapable of telling the profitable from the dangerous novels. The only solution, then, is "to mark out those novels, as they come from the press, which appear least noxious, and most conducive to such advantages, as can be derived from that species of composition."<sup>14</sup>

In 1803, the *Boston Weekly Magazine* serial essayist, "The Gossip," published an editorial against the dangers of novel reading. After telling in previous installments the story of an inveterate reader of novels whose education left her woefully unprepared for the challenges real life had to offer, the Gossip pauses to reflect at length on the dangers of indiscriminate novel reading. The critique here is a familiar one, as is the solution: the Gossip calls for a "literary Censor" (precisely the role the *Weekly Magazine* set out for itself) to do the work of helping readers make decisions as to which novels are worth reading and which will "serve[] only to confuse and weaken" the understanding.<sup>15</sup> To prove that not *all* novels vitiate the understanding, the Gossip offers important exceptions, including the novels of Burney, Lee and Brooke, then going on to offer somewhat more muted approval for some of the novels of Rowson:

There are some Novels also from the pen of a lady, whom I know not how to term with propriety either European or American, (Mrs. Rowson,) which might be read with advantage, especially by females; but even her works are not without their dangerous tendency,

and perhaps of all her numerous productions, there are not more than three which could be an impartial Censor be recommended. *Reuben and Rachel*, an historical romance is the best; *Charlotte*, and the *Inquisitor*, have a considerable degree of merit.<sup>16</sup>

What makes this essay particularly striking is not the nature of the critique of the novel, or the call for a "literary Censor," but the fact that it was quite likely written by Rowson herself.

There are today doubts articulated as to how much of a role Rowson actually played in the *Boston Weekly Magazine* and in the production of the long-running "Gossip" series in particular. Nineteenth-century biographers and contemporaries routinely credited Rowson as a contributing editor to the *Weekly Magazine* and as the primary author of "The Gossip." For example, her 1824 obituary in the *Boston Gazette* lists her as "the conductor, at one time, of the 'Boston Weekly Magazine,' in which she wrote many valuable essays on various moral and interesting subjects."<sup>17</sup> Samuel L. Knapp's "Memoir," attached to the posthumously published *Charlotte's Daughter* (1828), similarly credits her with having "conducted the Boston Weekly Magazine, and contributed largely to the success of that popular periodical, by her ability as an editor and writer."<sup>18</sup> The first book-length biography of Rowson in 1870, Elias Nason's *A Memoir of Mrs. Susanna Rowson*, describes at some length her periodical work, including her work both as "editor" for the *Weekly Magazine* and as contributor of "a series of light and graceful papers, after the manner of the *Spectator*, [...] called the Gossip."<sup>19</sup>

Rowson's twentieth-century biographers, on the other hand, have largely ignored or diminished her periodical work. While Davidson did identify her in passing as a contributing editor to the *Boston Weekly Magazine*, that same year Patricia L. Parker's critical biography of Rowson went to some length to challenge the supposition that Rowson had served in any extensive capacity at the periodical.<sup>20</sup> Among the reasons for her doubts are a claim by the magazine's publishers that *they* were in fact the primary editors of the journal; the conceit that the serialization of Rowson's novel, *Sincerity* (1803–04), was anonymously submitted as any other contribution; and the unlikelihood that anyone as overcommitted as Rowson (managing as she was a successful and demanding boarding school and an unsuccessful, demanding husband) would consider taking on anonymous and largely profitless periodical work at the same time. Ten years earlier, Dorothy Weil laid the groundwork for challenging Rowson's contributions as "The Gossip," arguing that it was extremely unlikely that any author would write so dismissively of their own productions as "The Gossip" does in discussing the novels of "Mrs. Rowson."<sup>21</sup> In more recent biographical treatments of Rowson's career, there is almost no mention of any

contribution to periodicals to be found whatsoever. The fact of her periodical career, once celebrated by her contemporaries, has become a critical grey area, a minefield of ambiguities anathema to the critical biographer.

While I will confess myself inclined to trust the judgment of Rowson's contemporaries, especially that of Knapp—a periodical editor (*Boston Monthly Magazine* from 1825–26), literary biographer, and a devoted collector of periodical works—my goal in raising these issues is not to seek out a definitive answer to what is ultimately an unanswerable question when working with early American periodicals.<sup>22</sup> The magazines of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were largely anonymous, collaborative, cacophonous affairs. They were a place where authors came explicitly to escape fame or notoriety: they offered neither fame (most were anonymous) nor profits (most were financial disasters), and thus to the eyes of modern literary historians, they seem perverse and frustrating spaces. When Brockden Brown left the novel behind for the periodical, he expressed his own grave concerns about the consequences of book readers “chained to the triumphal car of an author of great celebrity.”<sup>23</sup> It is in these terms, as I have argued elsewhere, that we need to understand his turn away from the “prodigious and singular” plots of the novel (and from his own celebrity) and toward increasingly anonymous work in periodicals devoted to “daily incidents.”<sup>24</sup> It is in these terms that we need to make sense of his declaration, in 1803, that “I should enjoy a larger share of my own respect [...] if nothing had ever flowed from my pen, the production of which could be traced to me.”<sup>25</sup> This is precisely the alternative to the novel that the early American magazine offered to writers like Brown and Rowson who harbored deep concerns as to whether the novel was, in fact, the proper cornerstone for the new nation's literary culture. It is precisely why American literary history today, erected on the bedrock of the Novel, often finds the early magazine so maddening in its refusal to surrender names, celebrity, and profits.

In these terms, the cases Weil and Parker make against Rowson's periodical career are instructive. They raise, after all, very good points, not just against Rowson's editorial work at the *Weekly Magazine* or her authorship of the “Gossip” series, but against the early magazine as an alternative site of literary culture. For example, let us take Parker's point that the magazine's publishers, Thomas Dean and Samuel Gilbert, claimed they were in fact responsible for the magazine's contents. There runs throughout early magazine publishing in the United States something of a tension between publishers and contributing editors, especially those who provided the contents for ongoing serial essays like “The Gossip.” A good example of this tension might be found in an earlier Boston magazine, the *Massachusetts Monthly* (1789–1795), founded by Isaiah Thomas. While Thomas certainly played a large role in organizing and soliciting content for the magazine, in many

ways he served as something closer to manager of a joint stock company of contributing editors. Chief among these was Judith Sargent Murray, who contributed the extremely successful series "The Gleaner" (1792–94) to this journal. While from the perspective of Thomas, Murray remained a "contributor," "The Gleaner" itself functioned as a kind of magazine-within-the-magazine, soliciting letters, contributions, editorial decisions independent of the larger periodical. In fact, "The Gleaner" is just one such sub-editor within the *Massachusetts Magazine*. It is in precisely these terms, no doubt, that Rowson served at *The Boston Weekly Magazine* a decade later: as editor of "The Gossip" and of related contributions, along with her collaborator and fellow-contributor, Judith Sargent Murray. In most early magazines, while the publishers (in this case Dean and Gilbert) might retroactively identify themselves as "editors," in truth, the real editorial work was happening within the columns and series that made up the magazine.

However, this is cold comfort to the literary historian, searching for clear authorial fingerprints (and the possibility that "The Gossip" was produced by Rowson in collaboration with Murray and anonymous others only makes the whole project messier still). Similarly, while Weil's and Parker's other concerns can also be addressed, it is not in ways that are likely to satisfy our desire for historical clarity. That Rowson in the "Gossip" treats her earlier books fairly dismissively (even ranking the miscellaneous production *The Inquisitor* alongside of *Charlotte Temple*) seems less surprising when placed side by side with Brown's expressed desire, at almost the exact same time, to be disconnected from *all* of his earlier works. At precisely the same time Brown was undergoing a radical sea-change in his literary career, Susanna Rowson was herself reorienting her own career away from the novel and the stage and toward her new career in education and in periodicals.

Although we talk increasingly today of the role of periodical culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, we are still a long way from taking it as seriously as did the literary culture of the time. Part of the problem for our contemporary readings of early magazines lies in the fact that almost all of these early magazines were by all accountings financial failures, and, therefore, the work of their contributors smacks of dilettantism, a hobby taken up after more "serious" work as novelists was largely behind them. After all, what would make fiercely intelligent and ambitious individuals devote themselves to an enterprise with which, as Noah Webster wrote in launching his own magazine in 1787, "the expectation of failure is connected" in everyone's mind?<sup>26</sup> Despite (and in some way, because of) the all-but inevitable failure of periodical ventures, there is strong evidence that for the editors and contributors to these early magazines, whose ranks included some of the most talented and rational minds of their generation, periodical work was serious indeed.

Why did the two most important writers of the early republic end their careers working primarily in periodicals? The usual story told is that they left the novel because it was unprofitable, but compared to magazine work novel-writing, even in those days of rampant piracy, was a veritable gold mine. In the long run, we know that the novel "triumphed." By the 1820s, it was sufficiently profitable that Cooper could make a career writing novels. For the professional literary critic who emerged in the decades to follow, the novel provided a necessary foundation on which to build a national literary history of great books and authors, ultimately traced back to a point of "origins" in the 1780s and 90s. Nonetheless, there is little evidence that many of our pioneering "novelists" of the period shared this dedication to the form. Brown's dedication to the novel form lasted only four years (and since most scholars too easily dismiss his final two novels of 1801, only three years of novel writing are at the heart of his oeuvre); his dedication to the periodical form, however, extended over the full range of his career and dominated his last decade of literary work. Hannah Webster Foster, author of *The Coquette* (which is today probably the most taught of the early American novels), is the author of precisely one novel, her other major work, *The Boarding School or, Lessons of a Preceptress to Her Pupils* being something else entirely: a collection of anecdotes, lessons, pedagogical meditations, and letters between the alumni of a board school—something, that is, like *Mentoria* (which it closely resembles) more a magazine than a novel. William Hill Brown, the author of the "first American novel" devoted much of his energy following the publication of *The Power of Sympathy* to periodical writing, including "The Reformer" series for Isaiah Thomas's *Massachusetts Magazine* and "The Yankee" series for the *Columbian Centinel*. Yet while, along with Rowson, these remain the most widely taught and reprinted authors of the early republican period, only their novels remain in print in accessible editions today.

In the early years of the new century, for all of these pioneers of the novel, the anonymous, collaborative periodical was where they dedicated much of their literary energies. Following her work at the *Weekly Magazine*, Rowson served as contributor to the magazine's successor and then, finally, as a contributor (largely of poetry) to the *New-England Galaxy* toward the very end of her life. While she, unlike Brown, never entirely abandoned the novel, it is interesting to note that the only nineteenth-century novel published in her lifetime was *Sarah; or, the Exemplary Wife* (1813), a novel that was originally serialized anonymously as *Sincerity* in the *Boston Weekly Magazine* in 1803–04.

*Sincerity* is an odd novel in many respects among Rowson's work. In addition to being her only serialized novel, it is also entirely epistolary, a structure Rowson had used sparingly in her earlier books, primarily in the largely unsuccessful *Trials of the Human Heart* (1795). It is interesting that Rowson turns to the epistolary form in 1803 at the

same time that she was contributing to the "Gossip" series in *The Boston Weekly*, a series which, as was convention at the time, was comprised in substantial measure of letters (real and fictional) from readers.<sup>27</sup>

It is an unconventional novel in other regards as well, most strikingly in beginning where most novels of the period end: "the die is cast—I am a wife."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, *Sincerity* stands as something of a refusal of one convention of the novel, telling the story of an unhappy marriage and of the costs of maintaining that marriage against all obstacles and despite myriad cruelties—and the many reasons why a seemingly strong and intelligent woman continues to do so. The novel almost willfully refuses sentimentality, but it also eschews the didacticism of *Charlotte Temple*, denying us the alternately comforting and chastising schoolmistress/narrator through its choice of an epistolary format. Instead, we have here the torturous and ultimately tragic history of a bad marriage in a "novel" written not, as were most of Rowson's earlier novels, "for the perusal of the young and thoughtless of the fair sex," but for the more mature reader of the early magazine.<sup>29</sup>

Who these readers were is evidenced, at least in part, by letters to "The Gossip." One such letter was printed the week after the Gossip's diatribe against novels—a reminder that the creation of a space for readerly interaction was an essential feature that differentiated the magazine from the novel. The letter is from "A Sorrowful Brother" who writes to express his deep concerns about his sister's unhappy marriage to a morose and dissolute man. "How it will terminate or end," he laments, "God only knows."<sup>30</sup> The next four installments of the column are devoted to meditations on the subject of unhappy marriages, especially in cases such as that which the "Sorrowful Brother" describes, between a loving and devoted wife and a violent and dissipated husband. As the Gossip insists: "Women, from their retired situations, from their education and habits, have not the opportunity of investigating characters, and forming opinions on men and manners, with that discriminating accuracy, which the opposite sex enjoy; they should therefore be extremely cautious how they choose their partners, and suffer not a pleasing exterior to blind them to the errors, of either head or heart."<sup>31</sup> Yet, once the tragic poor choice is made, the Gossip warns, "there is no hope of being extricated, but by death."<sup>32</sup>

The tragedy of unhappy marriages is decidedly not the stuff of most novels at the time. As one of the correspondents in *Sincerity* wryly notes, "Don't you know when a heroine is married, the Novel always ends—there is nothing worth relating in the every day incidents of a family circle."<sup>33</sup> Of course, by the time Anne writes this, she has already spent many letters recounting the sad story of Sarah, a "novel" (or an "anti-novel") which *began*, not ended, with marriage. A couple of installments later Anne is dead, depriving Sarah of her primary support in her hardships. As the Gossip had predicted, for Sarah, the story of her unhappy marriage to a vile husband can end only one way: "by death."

The Gossip's extended meditations on "the subject of matrimonial unhappiness" appeared in January–February 1803, just a couple of months before the serialization of *Sincerity* began in the pages of the same periodical.<sup>34</sup> As The Gossip declared, the subject "has awakened every feeling of my soul [...] I have now twenty stories apropos to the subject, which I could tell, but I have just heard some news which I am on tenter hooks till I promulgate, so I cannot stay to write another syllable at present."<sup>35</sup> In the winking style of the early magazine, such a gesture to the "stories" inspired by the subject and the "news" which must be circulated are clearly designed to indicate to the active reader (and annotations and commentary in surviving copies show how attentive these readers were) that the Gossip and the author of *Sincerity*—a novel about an unhappy marriage which explicitly extends upon the theme suggested by the "Sorrowful Brother"—were, in fact, one and the same.<sup>36</sup>

Another meaningful link between the two is provided in the name of Sarah's unfortunate choice of husband. In the first installment of *Sincerity*, Rowson had experimented with the name "Darnby," but by the second she settled on "Darnley." A couple of months later, in "The Gossip," Rowson spelled out the significance of that name in discussing her meditations on Mary Queen of Scots during a visit to Edinburgh, a city Rowson knew well:

One evening as I was returning from my usual ramble, musing on the beauty, sensibility, and weakness of Mary; lamenting that folly and precipitancy, which led her to unite herself with a man so little capable of appreciating her merit as lord Darnley was; for it ever appeared to me, had she been married to a man of discernment, tender, delicate, yet of unshaken resolution [...]—Mary would, under the guidance of such a man, have transmitted her name to posterity as a pattern and honour to her sex. [...] It was Mary's fate, to meet a man of this disposition in her second husband: her youthful fancy had been caught by his graceful exterior; but their minds did not assimilate. Mary's soul was capacious, and eagerly sought knowledge; Darnley's was narrow, and content to dwell in ignorance.<sup>37</sup>

Thus we are told that Sarah's husband received his name from Queen Mary's ill-matched second husband, Lord Darnley. (Sarah herself might have been named after the Queen had not Rowson published *Mary, or, A Test of Honour* in 1789.) What follows from the Gossip's meditation on Mary's unhappy marriage is yet another story of matrimonial unhappiness. Indeed, even as *Sincerity's* story unfolds toward its tragic ending, "The Gossip" continues to be punctuated by stories of unhappy unions, a repeated rending of the veil from the "happily ever after" of fairy tale romance.<sup>38</sup>

*Sincerity* (or *Sarah*) has rightly interested Rowson scholars for its bleak portrait of a marriage that clearly resembled the author's own in many ways, and for its detailed explanation of the forces that kept a smart and resourceful woman in such matrimonial bonds long after any pretense of love had been dispelled. Yet, placed back in its original periodical context and in dialogue with "The Gossip" and the active correspondence circulated within the *Weekly Magazine*, we can also see that for Rowson the story of "matrimonial unhappiness" was in many ways borne of hearing from other adult readers stories of what happened after "the Novel ... ends." These were stories that resonated with Rowson's own and which, in sharing with her readers, provided at least the promise that they were not alone. When Sarah begins her story by declaring "I am a wife," her "novel" is, as Anne later says, already over. But the "every day incidents of a family circle" are just beginning, and nothing in Sarah's earlier uninhibited novel reading prepared her for what lay ahead. As Anne, our primary epistolary narrator throughout the story to follow, declares in her first letter about Sarah's story, "do not expect any romantic scenes, flaming lovers, or cruel false friends." Instead, she continues, "what I have to relate, are incidents, perhaps, frequently to be met with in the common life."<sup>39</sup>

As the text works towards its conclusion, the format, initially told primarily in letters from Anne to a friend, often enclosing letters from Sarah, becomes more varied, including a wider range of correspondents and texts. For several installments, we get direct transcriptions from Sarah's journal, followed by notes from an "Editor" (explicitly not Anne, as she dies well before the conclusion of the tale) offering an "abstract" of "suppress[ed]" documents, the letters from Sarah to her adopted brother, from Rev. Hayley to the brother, and finally an editorial note which struggles to come up with a moral to what is ultimately a year long serialization about an unhappy marriage that ends in the long-suffering heroine's death.<sup>40</sup> "From this account of our Heroine's sufferings," the Editor writes, "let no one say, where then is the reward of virtue, if such a woman is not happy?"<sup>41</sup> Such questions of rewards and punishments are, after all, the stuff of "novels," which, despite the labeling of *Sarah* as such, Rowson clearly does not intend it to be. Instead, the "novel" ends by dissolving itself back into the magazine, the larger periodical form with its own enveloping collection of letters, anecdotes, and every day observations.<sup>42</sup>

Part of the frustration of working with early American magazines for scholars of course lies in precisely such dissolves: the anonymity of the author's voice as one among many, writing (as Rowson described her periodical career in the preface to *Sarah* in 1813) "in snatches of time, and under the pressure of much care and business."<sup>43</sup> We are inclined to see the repeated turn of the first generation of American novelists to the

magazine as apostasies, martyrdoms, or personal tragedies. That Brown might have *chosen* anonymous periodical editing over the novel almost never occurs to scholars, except as a sign of a failure of will or a flagging of creative energy. That Rowson might have *chosen* to devote herself to non-novelistic writing is almost unimaginable to her contemporary biographers, who often read her turn away from the novel form after *Reuben and Rachel* as a sign of the financial pressures she struggled with due to her constitutionally insolvent husband. A common narrative of Rowson's career looks strikingly similar to that used to describe the case of Brown: after a period of progressive republicanism and proto-feminism, Rowson retreats into increasingly diminished claims for the role of women, a retreat that is coincident with her withdrawal from the public stage and from full-time novel writing. Thus, Eve Kornfeld finds in *Sincerity* an example of Rowson "resign[ing] her ideal American woman to a sort of martyrdom."<sup>44</sup> Here "Passive domestic virtue overshadows active choice in Rowson's new ideal woman."<sup>45</sup> However, Rowson clearly did not envision *Sincerity* as a retreat, but as a culmination of a career of meditating about the limitations of the novel, as the bleak but moving preface to the book edition of 1813 makes clear. Repeating the concerns about novels raised in her earlier "Gossip" column, Rowson writes in the preface of *Sarah*, that while "every sublunary good, are to be found abundantly in every novel, but alas! where shall we find them in real life? Such examples [...], instead of stimulating the young or inexperienced mind to emulate the virtues represented, misleads it by fallacious hopes and expectations which can never be realized."<sup>46</sup> This, the last novel published during her lifetime, is in many ways then explicitly a response to her own long-standing reservations about the novel, reservations articulated throughout the early American magazine at the time. And its subject emerges directly from the correspondences and "every day life" stories that these magazines circulated.

Toward the end of her life, the *New England Galaxy*, where Rowson was a regular poetry contributor, published a brief account of the direction of her career after the early fame *Charlotte Temple* brought her:

With powers to make herself distinguished, she has been content to be useful. If she has lost a portion of the world of fame which was within her reach, it has not been by reclining in idleness, or running after golden apples; but in tarrying to cultivate the delicate flowers and savory herbs in the garden of youthful intellect; in teaching that the highest knowledge is goodness and the purest fame is virtue.<sup>47</sup>

For contemporary critics, any attempt to describe Rowson's turn away from her earlier celebrity to a relatively anonymous life as an educator and periodical editor and con-

tributor is likely to appear, at best, forced and, at worst, as laden with the backhanded patriarchal “compliments” with which women writers have long been burdened (“usefulness” and “virtue” as opposed to public “fame”). Yet, given her known involvement in the magazine, it is entirely possible that Rowson herself wrote this essay for the *Galaxy* (and even written by one of the editors, it was most certainly with her approval). And thus the account of her ambitions for her late career must be read as an articulation of her deliberate choices and a vindication of the trajectory of her career.

The fame offered by the early novel was not the fame some of its earliest practitioners sought. It is only by taking seriously the doubts about the rising novel offered by its most important pioneers and by rediscovering the anonymous and cacophonous pleasures of the early American magazine into which so many of those pioneers immersed themselves later in their career that we can finally make sense of the big question that for so many continues to make the fact of Rowson’s deep involvement in the *Weekly Magazine* and other periodicals so difficult to fathom. Why would a woman charged with one hundred students at her school and mounting familial and professional responsibilities take on responsibilities at a magazine that was surely, like all those that came before, doomed to failure? Why would a woman by this time associated with the novel and without question the most famous American novelist of her day, have taken on anonymous work for a weekly magazine? The answer to these and related questions, I would argue, lies in bringing to light Rowson’s career beyond *Charlotte Temple*, such that the early experiments with periodical forms from *Inquisitor* and *Mentoria* to her later nineteenth-century periodical career might allow us to more fully understand not only the full range of her remarkable career but the full range of possibilities beyond the “great American novel” on which Rowson and other literary pioneers of the early Republic sought to imagine a literary culture for the new nation.

## Notes

This essay grew out of an invitation from Jennifer Desiderio and Desirée Henderson to participate in a roundtable on Rowson at the 2007 Society of Early Americanists conference in Williamsburg, an invitation for which I am immensely grateful—not last because thinking about Rowson’s “periodical career” would go on to serve as a missing piece in the story I was trying to tell about the early American magazine, allowing me at last to bring that book project to completion (*The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture* is currently forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press).

1. Susanna Rowson, *The Inquisitor; or, The Invisible Rambler*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: William Gibbons, 1793), I:52.

2. Susanna Rowson, *Mentoria; or the Young Lady's Friend*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Samuel Harrison Smith, 1794), I:75.
3. *Ibid.*, II:116.
4. It is extremely unlikely that this was the first publication of these stories, as the *Polite Repository* focused on publishing "a selection [...] from the best modern publications."
5. See "The Midnight Hour. From Mrs. Rowson's 'Inquisitor,'" *Weekly Museum* 12 (March 22, 1800): 2. This selection was reprinted several times in newspapers and magazines around the country. Other popular excerpts were "The Lounger" and "The Methodist," both from *The Inquisitor*.
6. Rowson, *The Inquisitor*, III:115.
7. Rowson, *Mentoria*, I:90.
8. Susanna Rowson, *Miscellaneous Poems* (Boston: Gilbert & Dean, 1804), 112.
9. "On Novels and Novel Reading," *Mirror of Taste and Dramatic Censor* 3 (February 1811): 87.
10. Tabitha Gilman Tenney, *Female Quixotism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 323.
11. *Ibid.*, 325.
12. Quoted in "On Romance and Novel Reading," *The Gleaner; or, Monthly Magazine* 1 (1809): 453.
13. Patricia Okker, *Social Stories: The Magazine Novel in Nineteenth-Century America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 36.
14. "On Novels and Novel Reading," 93.
15. "The Gossip—No. XIII," *Boston Weekly Magazine* 1 (January 22, 1803): 53.
16. "The Gossip—No. XIII," 53. In *Trials of the Human Heart* (Philadelphia: Wrigley & Berriman, 1795), Rowson celebrated both Burney and Lee as novelists who would "snatch the British novel from oblivion," IV:74.
17. "Female Literature," *Daily National Intelligencer* (October 6, 1824).
18. Samuel L. Knapp, "Memoir of the Author" in Susanna Rowson, *Charlotte's Daughter Or the Three Orphans* (Boston: J. H. A. Frost, 1828), 10.
19. Elias Nason, *A Memoir of Mrs. Susanna Rowson* (Albany, NY: J. Munsell, 1870), 114, 117.
20. See Cathy N. Davidson, "Introduction" in Susanna Rowson, *Charlotte Temple*, by Susanna Rowson (1791, reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), xl.
21. See Dorothy Weil, *In Defense of Women: Susanna Rowson (1762–1824)* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1976), 171.
22. For example, in 1816 Knapp took out ads in the *Newburyport Herald*: "The Subscriber finds by looking over his Periodical Collection, that several numbers are missing, from different Works, and forgetting to whom he loaned them, would thank the person who may have any volume belonging to him to return it" ("Books Missing," *Newburyport Herald* [April 12, 1816], 4).
23. "Remarks on Reading" *Literary Magazine* 5 (March 1806): 163.
24. See letter to his brother James, quoted in William Dunlap, *The Life of Charles Brockden Brown*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: James P. Parke, 1815), 2:100. See also Jared Gardner, "The Literary Museum and the Unsettling of the Early American Novel" *English Literary History* 67 (2000): 743–771.
25. "Editors' Address to the Public" *Literary Magazine* 1 (1803): 4.

26. Noah Webster "Introduction" *American Magazine* 1 (1787–88): 3–4.
27. Brown, who had never worked in a strictly epistolary form in his earlier works, himself used epistolary structure for his last two novels, both published in 1801 after he had begun to devote himself primarily to periodical editing and writing.
28. "Sincerity—A Novel," Letter I, *Boston Weekly Magazine* 1 (June 4 1803): 132.
29. See Susanna Rowson's "Preface" in Rowson, *Charlotte Temple*, 5.
30. "The Gossip—No. XIV," *Boston Weekly Magazine* 1 (January 29, 1803): 57.
31. "The Gossip—No. XV," *Boston Weekly Magazine* 1 (February 5, 1803): 61.
32. "The Gossip—No. XIV," 57.
33. "Sincerity—A Novel. Letter XXX," *Boston Weekly Magazine* 2 (April 28, 1804): 108.
34. "The Gossip—No. XV," 61.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Other puns offered even more cagey clues for readers inclined to guess after the identity of "The Gossip," as was fairly conventional at the time, despite the familiar protest in the first installment of the series that "conjecture as you please, I will not unmask. Whether male or female, young or old... are secrets which I shall not unravel" (*Boston Weekly Magazine* 1 [October 30, 1802]: 1). In the third installment, a fictional correspondent, "Vaticinator," writes in a letter threatening to expose the identity of the author if "he" exposes any of the "Row's, or Goe's, to which you cannot help sometimes be a witness" (*Boston Weekly Magazine* 1 [November 13, 1802]: 9). The wink at "Rows" seems obviously placed for Rowson's closest and most devoted readers, including her students at her academy, whose achievements were regularly reported in the *Weekly Magazine*.
37. "The Gossip—No. XXXVII," *Boston Weekly Magazine* 1 (August 13, 1803): 169.
38. The final story told in "The Gossip" is the tragic story of Lucy Belmont, yet another woman forced to marry the wrong man, with tragic results.
39. "Sincerity—A Novel. Letter II," *Boston Weekly Magazine* 1 (June 11, 1803): 136.
40. "Sincerity—A Novel. Note by the Editor," *Boston Weekly Magazine* 1 (May 12, 1804): 116.
41. "Sincerity—A Novel. Letter XXXIII," *Boston Weekly Magazine* 1 (June 30, 1804): 144.
42. In fact, although "The Gossip" will continue to run occasionally for the next several months, it becomes increasingly infrequent as Rowson pulls back from her commitments to the periodical at the end of 1804.
43. Susanna Rowson, *Sarah, or The Exemplary Wife* (Boston: Charles Williams, 1813), i.
44. Eve Kornfeld, "Women in Post-Revolutionary American Culture: Susanna Haswell Rowson's American Career, 1795–1824," *Journal of American Culture* 6 (Winter 1983): 56–62, quotation at 59.
45. *Ibid.*, 59.
46. Susanna Rowson, *Sarah, or The Exemplary Wife*, ii.
47. "Remarks on Novels," *New-England Galaxy* (February 6, 1818): 3.