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Prodigal Daughters: Susanna Rowson's Early American Women
(review)

Charlene Boyer Lewis

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of the book, which made it seem as though the interpretive theme would be much more explicit and forceful than it actually was, and the rather subdued argument in the text itself.

Both Ray Raphael and Paul Gilje have written books that fit nicely into their respective niches. Raphael's *Founders* will undoubtedly broaden the horizons of the general reader with an interest in the American Revolution, but it manages to offer something for historians and political scientists as well. Gilje provides instructors with an accessible, thorough, and remarkably concise narrative of early American history that also promotes critical thinking—certainly desirable features in any undergraduate text.

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Prodigal Daughters: Susanna Rowson's Early American Women. By Marion Rust. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. Pp. 328. Cloth, \$59.95; Paper, \$24.95.)

Reviewed by Charlene Boyer Lewis

Those of us who examine women or literature in the early republic think we know Susanna Rowson and insufficiently distinguish the novelist from her most popular fictional heroine, Charlotte Temple, who perfectly exemplified female passivity and oppression. As Marion Rust persuasively shows, however, Rowson was not the proponent of female submission that many scholars have presented. Indeed, Rust argues, Rowson wanted women to move beyond their gender limitations, but cautiously. Through her myriad works and in her own life, Rowson sought to instruct women in the ways in which they could find a successful balance between “domestic constraints” and “intellectual expansiveness” (7). Rust stresses that we need to understand not only the popularity of *Charlotte Temple* and Rowson's other works but also Rowson's own life in the context of the changes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially in the lives of American women.

Rowson enjoyed popularity not because women found the message of female submission attractive in an increasingly hostile public environment (as some scholars have argued), but, as Rust explains, because she “made sense to literate, female Anglo-American inhabitants of the new

Republic for precisely the reasons that she now strikes us as slightly distasteful—her profound relativism and corresponding facility at adaptation” (15). No one, Rust argues, “talked about the effects” of how the new nation “failed its female inhabitants” and “the need to carry on nonetheless, as thoroughly as its best-loved female author” (22). In her novels, plays, and songs, and even at her female academy, Rowson highlighted the tensions between submission and autonomy for women and repeatedly demonstrated the means in which “female submission . . . could be manipulated to achieve social stature and wide public influence” (25). This is why, Rust concludes, so many women read her works and extolled her as a teacher—and why Rowson is so valuable to understanding women’s lives in the early republic.

Rowson lived a life far different from many of her female characters, especially Charlotte Temple. Needing to provide for first her father and siblings and then her husband and adopted children, Rowson over the course of her life performed as an actress; wrote plays, poems, novels, and songs; and founded a school for young women. She was an expert at improvising and crafting her own public identity, skills she would emphasize as crucial to success as a woman in the new republic. While she may have presented female characters who dutifully remained at home and listened to their husbands or fathers, Rowson herself rarely lived that life; Rust believes that her sense of independence also shaped the fictional females she created, except Charlotte (the character we rarely go beyond).

In chapters that explore and offer new analyses of *Charlotte Temple*, some of Rowson’s lesser known works—such as the novel *Trials of the Human Heart*, the play *Slaves of Algiers*, and *Lucy Temple*, the sequel to *Charlotte Temple*—and some published verse, Rust shows how all of these public works reveal Rowson’s sincere belief that women’s “attempt to influence, rather than merely emblemize the processes of national self-determination” was “essential” to “the national well-being” (197). Breaking with those who regard Rowson as the first proponent of female domesticity and passivity, Rust convincingly argues that Rowson preferred women to have a public, political voice over simply possessing “moral authority.” Rust focuses on the rise of an early version of American sentimentalism in her attempts to explain Rowson’s work, impact, and life. Sentimentalism idealized women and their emotions, and the new nation did as well. But the nation also denied women their political rights. So, Rust argues, sentimentalism offered a way for women to have

real influence in society. Through carefully crafting a public identity or, as Rust terms it, “self-presentation” that relied on sentimental gender norms, women could subtly transgress those gender boundaries. Indeed, Rust stresses not only the independence that Rowson’s female characters often portrayed, but the important role that female sexuality played in her works as well. While never including explicitly sexual scenes in any of her writings, she often highlighted sexuality as a problematic female trait and linked it with women’s political status. Rust states that Rowson believed that women would have to sacrifice “their sexual capacities for the sake of their political enfranchisement” (201).

It would be in her schoolrooms that Rowson found the greatest fulfillment, characterizing them, as she did in the novel *Lucy Temple*, as the places where sentimentalism and female agency happily coexisted. For Rowson, female education required emotional ties between a teacher and her students, but also a sense of equality. More importantly, her academy, like her published works, taught young women “to exert influence from within the domestic realm,” but “also enabled other, more direct forms of entrance in to the public sphere” (261). Schooled in such an environment, Rowson knew her pupils would succeed in the roles the nation had assigned them.

While Rust’s arguments about the messages in and meanings of Rowson’s works and life are quite persuasive, as is her new way of understanding the significance of Rowson to early republican literature, I am left wondering how much impact Rowson really had not only on her readers but on American society. Rust wants to claim that Rowson was incredibly influential for young women in this era, but I would like to see more evidence. She barely mines the impact that Rowson had on her students, let alone on her readers. While she discusses four of Rowson’s critics, including Mathew Carey and William Cobbett, there is little sense of Rowson’s reception by the reading public. In the first chapter, there is a brief discussion of the marginal notes one woman added to her copy of *Charlotte Temple*. I wanted more such insights, from newspapers, letters, or marginalia, into what readers thought about Rowson and what impact she may have had on their views. Catherine Kerrison and others have shown that it is possible, if tedious, to discover readers’ opinions on popular works; Rust’s arguments about Rowson’s larger historical significance would have been more persuasive with such evidence. Nevertheless, Rust’s work, which draws on some excellent research, especially Rowson’s papers at the University of Virginia, is a nice example of

a successful interdisciplinary work and provides us with crucial insights into the life and writings of one of the most important female authors of the new nation.

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Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans. By Judith Kelleher Schafer. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. Pp. 221. Cloth, \$32.50.)

Reviewed by Jennifer M. Spear

From *Manon Lescaut*, Abbé Prévost's 1731 novel about a French prostitute exiled to Louisiana, through turn-of-the-twentieth-century Storyville, to today's Bourbon Street, New Orleans has had a long association with prostitution and other forms of sexualized commerce. Using the First District Court's pre-Civil War years of operation (1846–1862) as her timeframe, Judith Schafer's *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women* focuses on an understudied era in this history, revealing the dynamics of the sex trade, as well as the lives of some of its more notorious practitioners and clients, during the middle of the nineteenth century.

Once again, Schafer has proven herself an indefatigable researcher in the city's court records. As with her earlier book, *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans, 1846–1862* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2003), Schafer immerses herself in the trial transcripts from the First District Court, which opened its doors for the first time in 1846 and closed in 1862 during the Union Army occupation of the city. Because it was a trial rather than appellate court, there are no case reports for the First District, nor have these transcripts been indexed. Even with a subject index, Schafer's task would have been demanding, as prostitution itself was not illegal during this era (brothel-keeping, however, was). In order to uncover evidence of "illegal sex," Schafer read through more than two thousand trial transcripts, looking for women who were arrested for a variety of crimes, including being "lewd and abandoned," vagrancy, assault, larceny, and cross-dressing.