Perhaps Dorothy Veil put it best when she wrote that Susanna Rowson’s most important creation was her authorial persona—the voice of a gentle and teacherly mother who had learned from personal experience that the passions of youth often lead to catastrophic mistakes, and was weary of seeing those errors repeated by the young. The sincerity of Rowson’s voice in her fictional narratives is so striking and so apparently without artifice that even Rowson’s most sophisticated modern readers occasionally echo the nineteenth-century belief that Rowson wrote from her own life. Had she been unhappy in love? Was her husband a drunk? Did she narrowly escape a Montraville herself? This essay works against the grain of this line of inquiry, arguing instead that Rowson’s stage experience helps us to see that her greatest achievement was the simulacra of sincerity she achieved on the page, a performance augmented by her theatrical training. In this sense, even though her fiction ostensibly offers the advice that boys and girls should heed the wisdom of their elders, Rowson’s larger career as an educator and a writer relied on her manipulations of such repressive conventions—such as making theatrical modes of expression respectable as educational tools—to enlarge women’s professional opportunities and creative potential. As her promotion of oratorical training for schoolgirls illustrates, Rowson’s alleged conservatism is complicated by her innovative pedagogy. If Marion Rust has recently demonstrated the limitations of placing Rowson within a narrow definition of republican motherhood—the selfless and disinterested mother—by acknowledging Rowson’s commercial savvy, this essay seeks to examine the performative backgrounds of Rowson’s work to reconsider Rowson’s affiliation with didactic literature. Rowson was acting within fairly repressive confines of

early national patriarchal drama, but, like a good actress, she performed the script with significant innovations.

Many of the lively and subversive elements of Rowson’s literary style come from the performance culture of the theater, where Rowson was accustomed to playing secondary roles in humorous, dialogic interplay with other characters, and her career evolved in a progressive, post-Revolutionary context in which women briefly achieved many freedoms that were later forgotten, if not actively suppressed, by the end of the 1830s. This aspect of Rowson’s literary work is best seen alongside other early national female public speakers, such as Deborah Sampson Gannett and Fanny Newell, who also breached the general standards of women’s decorum at the same time admitting they had little right for their transgression. This self-effacing device for entering the public sphere is evident in female poets from Anne Bradstreet to Phillis Wheatley, but Rowson and several of her peers used it to validate women’s public speech during the 1790s and early 1800s. Even though the women of this period encountered strong prejudices against their novel conduct, they actually exploited the obstacles against them in creative ways to make a space for themselves. Rowson, in particular, became adept at using theatricalized modes of expression to enlarge the domain of the women’s sphere.

The Farce and Popular Literature

Rowson appeared in over one hundred plays over several years but the majority of modern scholarly interest still focuses on her bestselling novel, Charlotte Temple. Part of the reason for this bias is due to the text’s great popularity, but it is also partially due to mainstream beliefs about art and aesthetics in the twentieth century. Although pioneering cultural historians such as Constance Rourke have been making strong cases for the influence of the vernacular and popular arts since the 1930s, literature departments were generally hesitant to consider the aesthetic value of rigidly convention-bound or use-oriented literature (i.e., genre fiction, journalism, oratory, etc.). For example, it was not until the late 1980s that David Reynolds’s encyclopedic work, Beneath the American Renaissance, argued that popular literature—such as melodrama—shaped the creative imaginations of writers as diverse as Poe, Emerson, and Dickinson. Reynolds’s thesis was a revolution in seeing new aspects of belletristic authors generally thought to be above the influence of commercial Jacksonian society. Since the 1980s, it has become commonplace to discuss the power of subliterary genres, such as oratory, and non-literary performance practices on U.S. culture and letters. Indeed, Rowson’s fiction, now respectable for its popular-
ity, was formerly considered as a kind of cultural fertilizer for the purportedly superior literary forms that followed it.

One of the most exceptional recent contributions to Rowson studies is Jeffrey Richards’ essay on Rowson’s theater experience (in this collection), which brings invaluable research to bear on the generations of rumor that have surrounded Rowson’s work. One area where even Richards treads lightly, however, is Rowson’s participation in the farces and lighter drama of her day. As Richards and Vail have shown, participation in these plays formed a large staple of Rowson’s career, and yet scholarship has tended to pass over these works in favor of Rowson’s more serious dramatic work, such as *Slaves in Algiers* (1795), despite the fact that it was hardly representative of Rowson’s typical theater experience.7

The principle anxiety of evaluating light drama—for example, the farces of John O’Keefe, which are rife with disguise, bawdy humor, lies, song, and ridiculously improbable misrecognitions—is establishing the kinds of literary value it sustains. As capital-L Literature, it generally does not make the grade, and it is rarely read anymore without a wince. No snob herself, even Constance Rourke expressed her dismay that early American plays can only be regarded with a sort of “pious horror.”8 They are formula-driven, freely borrowed from earlier play-plots, and often hastily put together. For example, the published text of O’Keefe’s *Modern Antiques* does not even bother to unite the two lovers it promises to marry.9 However, the very informality of these plays actually depended on an important carnivalesque interaction with audiences that readers of Rowson’s fiction tend to miss in their assessments of the audience reception of Rowson’s career. These dramas flaunt their gross impostures and demand that the audience appreciate them with ironic pleasure. At best, the novel-oriented critic is inclined to treat low drama as a kind of forest-floor argot from which superior literatures define themselves, as has been the case with Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple and Slaves*. In contrast, these boisterous farces and comic plays employ a topsy-turvy aesthetic where audiences of all social classes are asked to suspend their ordinary sense of judgment for the duration of the play. Conventions of sincerity and propriety and taste—the cornerstones of Rowson’s fictional narrators and pedagogical personae—are often the principal casualties of such comedy.

Richards argues that Rowson’s family greatly benefited from her ability to play the second- and third-tier parts from the plays in which she performed. Her practice in those light roles, however, had additional and long-lasting effects on her pedagogical style as a teacher and a writer. On the most obvious level, Rowson’s experience with stock characters and types are often reflected in her fiction, evident in various types of selfish women she...
exelled at drawing, such as Madame La Rue (Charlotte Temple) or Theresa Brenton (Lucy Temple). But experience with the dialogue of secondary characters in eighteenth-century drama also exposed Rowson to the creative possibilities of an entertaining pedagogy. To draw on one of the proverbs of creative writing, these dramas show more than they tell. For example, one of Rowson’s most successful roles was as ditzy Betty Blackberry in O’Keefe’s The Farmer in which Betty is simultaneously wooed by Valentine, an unscrupulous rake, and Jemmy Jumps, a bumpkin. Although Betty herself serves as a kind of symbol of desire around which the banter revolves, the play is a satire about people who claim to be something that they are not. In another O’Keefe play, The Agreeable Surprise, Rowson appears as Mrs. Cheshire, a portly cheese-seller who sings that she does not want a “bear or a monkey, a clown or a fop” —what she really wants is a young man who can “bustle and stir inside my shop.” Although both these theatrical examples contain racy content far from Rowson’s style as an author for children (particularly the bawdy talk), the characters speak for themselves and let the audience make up their minds about the meaning of the scene. These dramas are carnivalesque entertainment, not dogmatic preaching, and their lessons are open ended—one of the reasons why exposure to the theater was regarded as potentially dangerous for young people.

Because of the theater’s reputation for immorality, Rowson’s early biographers have interpreted her shift from drama to education as a wise career move, but she continued to use the theater explicitly in her pedagogy. For example, the repartee in the comedies in which she performed is very similar to those found in Rowson’s Present for Young Ladies, in which she scripts dramatic dialogues for her students to act out in class. In one dialogue, several girls discuss having seen Hook’s Tokelli, a wartime romance, and even though the dialogue concludes with the girls deciding they are better off staying at home, the dialogue nonetheless emphasizes the pleasures of going to plays. The didactic lesson warns the girls away from empty entertainment, but the girls’ obvious pleasure in theater is nonetheless a force the moral cannot contain. This interpretive surplus, in a psychoanalytic sense, where the lively content of the educational tableau exceeds pedagogical closure (i.e., where the ego and superego are unable to fully subdue the energy of the id), is one of Rowson’s characteristic narrative strengths, and she explicitly points to the theater as its typical medium. In another dialogue, three girls are planning whether to go shopping or to read novels, and the smartest girl, Ellen, proposes a middle ground of reading instructive fiction. At first, Ellen boasts of the benefits of reading the history of Greek and Roman heroes and concludes with a paean to republican virtue:
... and none [of the leaders] would brave death but to profit the nation.

Caroline: Brave death, what is death for the good of the state?

Lucy: Dear me, ain't it better to live and be great?

Caroline: Yes, all would be great I am sure if they could;

Ellen: But 'tis not a word very well understood

Lucy: Oh! I comprehend it—It is to be gay,
To have money to trifle and squander away:
To wear finer clothes than the rest of our neighbors;

Ellen: To laugh at the being who reasons and labours;
To turn all religion and virtue to jest,
To game, run in debt—

Lucy: cousin now I protest You are dreadfully hard—

Ellen: yet these I believe are the principal virtues your novelists give.15

Rowson’s Ellen surprisingly goes on to defend novel reading as long as it celebrates true disinterested virtue and, in another dialogue, one of the girls cautions the others by saying that if they do like reading novels, they must not admit it aloud: “Hush child if you do / You must not confess it; your wisdom to shew; / You must rail and look grave, say they’re meant to mislead.”16 Here, the passage’s playfulness makes the education more enjoyable but, like moments in a theatrical farce, it also makes stronger demands on an audience’s thought and discretion than simple dogma. Rowson’s dialogue asserts that some novels are entertaining and often instructive. It too, however, validates theatrical educational dialogue on the same terms with a wink and a chuckle. If Rowson’s didactic message is that young women should avoid a literary diet of simple escapism, she delivers it as a kind of in-joke shared between the characters and between student and pedagogical text. The greatest appeal of Rowson’s brand of dialogic instruction is the dynamic unruliness of material that cannot be completely chaperoned by its moral.

Rowson’s use of dramatic personae insulates her from directly advising America’s daughters to dissemble in public—certainly unsound advice for those familiar with her novels—but these dialogues demonstrate Rowson poking fun at the stoical ideals of womanhood she herself dramatized in Slaves in Algiers: heroic women whose primary mission is to die for a free state? How antiquarian! Rowson had acted in O’Keefe’s Modern Antiques, which makes fun simultaneously of Mrs. Cocklestop’s love for theater and her husband’s blind worship of antiques of the past. And when Rowson stepped out to perform the parting lines of Slaves, her controversial declaration about women’s right to “supreme domination” begs a smile from the audience for its effect:
Well, Ladies tell me—how d’ye like my play?
‘The creature has some sense,’ methinks you say;
‘She says that we should have supreme domination,
And in good truth, we’re all of her opinion.
Women were born for universal sway,
Men to adore, be silent, and obey.”

Although this passage was famously cited by William Cobbett as an example of Rowson’s brassy feminism, the passage’s strongest feminist appeal comes from its sly irony, not from its rote Wollstonecraftism, and it would be a mistake to read these lines as genuinely advocating simple gynocracy. First, although readers can not reconstitute the delivery that Rowson gave these lines in performance, the text’s familiar address to the women in the audience (“how d’ye like . . .”) suggests that Rowson had stepped out from the pseudo-heroic mode of the play, reflecting on the drama with ironic distance and humor.

In the epilogue of another play in which Rowson had performed, George Coleman’s The Jealous Wife, one of the female characters disputes the stereotypical elements of her character in the play, asking the playwright to apologize (he does not). When, at the end of Slaves, Rowson briefly impersonates her audience’s reaction to the play (“methinks you say. . .”), she even draws her audience’s sense of judgment into a field of theatrical indeterminacy—the play thus avoids didactic closure at the end by pointing out that the “moral” is not so easy to summarize. In this sense, Rowson’s epilogue allows female audiences to claim social prestige in two apparently contradictory ways: first, by identifying with the heroic agents of the play and, second, by wryly observing the limits of those antiquated republican roles.

A second reason to read the final lines of Slaves with irony is the precedent of other female playwrights of this period. As Susan Branson has noted in her study of women’s public conduct in early national Philadelphia, Elizabeth Inchbald and Hannah Cowley were well known for such playfully subversive moments in their plays, many of which Rowson acted in (111–118). The prologue of Cowley’s comedy, Who’s the Dupe?, saucily proclaims that a woman is now in control of a farce about an educated man, instead of the other way around. At the beginning of Inchbald’s Every One Has His Fault (1794), the prologue playfully defends the female author of the play:

The Rights of Woman, says a female pen,
Are, to do every thing as well as Men [. . .]
For Females march to war, like brave Commanders,
Not in old Authors only—but in Flanders [. . .]
But since the Sex at length has been inclin'd
To cultivate that useful part—the mind;—[. . .]
Let us not force them back with brow severe,
Confined entirely to the domestic arts,
Producing only children, pies and tarts, [. . .]
'Tis time then to enlarge the plan,
And let all those write Comedies—that can. 21

Rowson's epilogue of Slaves is written in this sportive theatrical mode. Beyond the conventions of the upstart female playwright, however, in the minds of the theatergoers of that period, Rowson would be performing with the residue of a hundred comic parts on her person. In Thomas Holcroft's Road to Ruin, she plays Mrs. Warren, a stock sourpuss, who closes the play by announcing her dissatisfaction with her part. She consoles herself with the idea that plays are not about instruction, but pleasure: "Folks don't come here to learn, they come to laugh / And [. . .] You must provide them with what they please to eat." 21 Like Cowley and Inchbald, Rowson asserts the idea of women's equality with an urbane acknowledgement that the theater is not a place for pedantry.

One last reason to recognize irony in the final lines of Slaves is that Rowson herself expressed discomfort with the concept of women's "universal sway" in her own books. In Rowson's first explicitly pedagogical work, Mentoria—published in the same year as Slaves—she scripts the cautionary tale of Celia Markam, a vain and selfish girl who decides to block her father's wish to remarry. Celia arrogantly decides that she is to have "universal sway" in her father's household, and is amply punished for her impudence by the end of the tale. 24 The ostensible lesson is clear: Celia's belief in her universal sway is unhealthy, but her petulant excess is what makes the story entertaining. The narrative mixes elements of farce with a moralistic tale. Like the audience's reaction to Mrs. Cheshire, who hungers for a young man to make a "bustle" in her shop, Celia's convictions may strike some readers as small truths but, in the end, the lesson Celia represents is up to readers to decide. Thus, Rowson's comfort with putting large interpretive burdens on the audience comes from her practice with the conventions of stage comedy and farce.

Light drama thus provides two elements that unsettle didactic readings of Rowson's work: on the simplest level, Rowson herself excelled in comedy that took aim at the staid conventions of propriety that she later (apparently) advertised in works like Charlotte Temple or Slaves in Algiers. Rowson was experienced acting in plays that satirized the excesses of virtue. On a more sophisticated level, these farcical plays also encouraged boisterous interaction with literature itself where audiences are charged with discerning
the interplay of characters, genres, topical events, and ideas in an unruly mix. In Bakhtinian fashion, the voice of the parson (metaphorically speaking) does not have undisputed dominance, and the audience itself is to decide where to find value in entertainment. At the end of the essay, I will return to Rowson’s connection to late-eighteenth-century carnivalesque drama, where the new revolutionary politics of Europe and America briefly celebrated the voice and social claims of the disenfranchised.

**Elocution and Dialogue**

Also derived from the theater, another expressive tradition that shaped Rowson’s fiction and pedagogical work was the elocutionary movement, which helped to legitimate a performative literary ethos in the American classroom. Rowson’s use of dialogues in her pedagogical pieces was part of a broader, progressive revolution in education that began with the popularity of Thomas Sheridan’s elocutionary advice in the mid-1700s, and which resisted conservative political containment on several levels. Sheridan, a popular Irish actor, advocated that the expressive protocols for theater would greatly aid the education of children. Early American schoolbook authors such as Noah Webster and Caleb Bingham turned to dramatic dialogues for rhetorical education, rather than rhetorical theory. Following the advice of influential authorities such as Charles Rollin, Rousseau, and Sheridan, both English and American progressive educators believed that the puerile rules of Quintilian were too dry and complicated for young readers. Instead, actual dramatic pieces obliged students to develop a visceral body-knowledge of rhetoric that would be more effective than memorizing abstract rules.25 On the one hand, these practices potentially constitute the ultimate Foucauldian disciplinary system—the naturalization and internalization of speech and deportment that implicitly suggests the universal principles of western literary and rhetorical traditions. But the potential tyranny of the advice to “follow nature” in this elocutionary tradition was coupled with a Romantic prejudice against the excessive rules of classicism, and relied fundamentally on the cultivation of the unique gifts of individual performers. Indeed, although some practitioners of the elocutionary movement developed an unfortunately stilted taxonomy to capture natural expression, elocutionary models of the period demonstrated that different speakers excelled in different modes and techniques.26

The Americanization of the elocutionary movement in the context of Revolutionary radicalism also had a strong effect on the pedagogical environment in which Rowson developed her school. Both Webster’s *Grammaratical Institutes* (beginning in 1785) and Bingham’s anthologies of the 1790s chose speeches from American sources to give their
work a nationalistic appeal. Bingham and his Frenchified republican collaborator, David Everett, were particularly insistent on native literary models, in both the homegrown and aboriginal senses of the term. Bingham's widely popular texts, *The American Preceptor* (1794) and *The Columbian Orator* (1797), are filled with genuinely subversive dialogues arguing for freedom from slavery, the dignity of Native American and non-Christian religious practices, and Irish liberty.27

Although Rowson's texts for women are often not as fiery or consistently political as Bingham's, they occasionally model very strong language and let students take their own moral lessons from the dialogues they present. As a schoolteacher, Rowson also adapted the male-coded practice of *exhibition night* for student oratory and performance, a precedent she apparently took from John Poor's well-respected female academy in Philadelphia.28 In an account of the women's speeches at Rowson's school exhibition appearing in the *Boston Weekly Magazine* of 1803, one of Rowson's students defended "The Influence of Female Character on Society." In very colorful language, closely resembling the kind of speeches scripted by David Everett in Bingham's *Columbian Orator*, she argued that women in past ages and different countries were poorly treated:

> Different nations, and various characters of men in those different nations, have given to Women different degrees in the scale of intellectual being; some sink her to a grade scarce a remove from the peacock, the parrot, of the macaw; others still more degrading, class her with that stupid drudge, the ass, and some with the patient camel, kneeling to receive its allotted load, or the favning spaniel, fondly kissing the hand by which it has been cruelly, and perhaps unjustly chastised.29

Few auditors would mistake this charged language for anything other than high literary oratory, verging on masculine indignation, but it passed without making a sensation. Because of the radical precedent set for young men by Webster, Bingham, and other early American educators, Rowson occasionally would allow her female students to express remarkably modern feminist thought under the sign of patriotism and national pride.

More typical of Rowson's technique as an educator, however, is the type of self-effacing language that appears in the introductory and concluding pieces in her 1811 *Present for Young Ladies*. In the introductory address that prefaced the school exhibition of 1810, a young girl shyly asks the exhibition audience to forgive her public speech, but her governess (i.e., Mrs. Rowson) asked her to do so. She goes on to say that the following dialogues, speeches and poems are to show what the students have learned, and if the audience likes them, they should show their approval by cheering them at the end.30
Although this introduction has a charming innocence to it, Rowson introduced the motifs of a theatrical prologue into her school manual without ever having to defend the use of drama for educational purposes.

Rowson’s rechartering of the culturally legitimate elements of the elocutionary movement as a new vehicle for women’s expression mirrors her appropriation of the farce. Just as she adopted the light humor and enjoyable character types of farce for her fiction, she also employed elocutionary dialogues (mini-plays, in disguise) and masculinist oratorical motifs. Her female students humbly beg their audiences to patronize their behavior, but their humility is a bow to convention that audiences may or may not feel is entirely sincere; rather it is a performance validated by its entertainment value as much as by its moral content. Young women’s oratorical practice was, after all, unconventional, and permission for that behavior, if not admiration, is precisely what Rowson was able to achieve. Despite the prohibitions against women’s public speech, Rowson’s theatrical dialogues for women’s education were followed for decades into the nineteenth century.

**Saving Face with Deborah Sampson and Fanny Newell**

As Rowson’s schoolgirl exhibition speeches indicate, one of the central motifs of women’s public performance in early national culture is the apology for public speech. This exploitation of the doctrine of the separate spheres is one of the central ironies of women’s public performance during this period. As long as women went through rituals of feminine modesty as they took the podium, they were usually met with applause. Linda Kerber’s insight that the doctrine of “separate spheres” is best understood as a rhetoric of women’s historiography—a malleable species of discourse, rather than a hard fact—is crucial.  

Although Kerber was discussing the utility of rhetoric of the spheres among feminist historians, her claim is even more valuable in understanding the function of the tool among historical agents as well. In fact, a declaration of the importance of separate spheres for men and women is frequently the leading claim of most of the women who sought to influence the public sphere in the first half of the nineteenth century. For example, Rowson’s Miscellaneous Poems (1804) contains an eloquent abdication of women’s right to speak on law, religion, and politics; instead, the poem celebrates women’s role in the domestic sphere. The same collection of poems, however, begins with openly political, declamatory odes written on behalf of the Federalist fathers like Adams and Washington and concludes with several popular drinking songs. In her writing, Rowson’s declaration of women’s proper place actually allows her greater liberty to push the boundaries of that sphere.
These paradoxes in Rowson’s work are also evident in the public statements of other women of this period who pleaded female humility at the same time they transgressed the boundaries of social convention. Probably one of the most sensational was Deborah Sampson Gannett, the cross-dressing Massachusetts women who enlisted as a Continental soldier in the final months of the Revolutionary War. Born Deborah Sampson (but known to posterity as Deborah Sampson, or by her married name of Deborah Gannett), she joined the colonial army after Cornwallis’s defeat in 1783 by disguising herself as a man. Assisted in her subterfuge by her unusual height and farm-hardened physique, she fought with distinction for several months against De Lancey’s Loyalists in New York’s Westchester and Putnam counties. She was apparently wounded with a musket ball in the thigh, and successfully filed for military back pay owed her in 1792. In 1797, her memoir appeared, *The Female Review*, a several-hundred-page mythography written by an enterprising local writer, Herman Mann. In 1802, feeling pinched for cash to support her children, she embarked on a lecture tour of Massachusetts and New York with a twenty-page speech also written by Mann. Although Gannett did not become rich as an orator, she was well received, and supported herself for a year on her performance receipts. Most of her private journal during her tour dwells rather morosely on the misery of travel and taverns, but in her account of her four-night run in Boston, she writes, “I think I may with much candor aplaud [sic] the people for their serious attention and peculiar respect, especially [sic] the Ladies.”

Until the 1990s, Gannett had been rarely mentioned in the annals of U.S. oratorical women because her 1802 speech, as well as her 1797 memoir, were physically written by Herman Mann. But, in a more abstract sense, one might ask whether Gannett took up a role that had been drafted for many years in English ballads that sang about women who dressed up to go to war. In a formidable series of articles, Judith Hiltner has demonstrated that Mann freely shaped Gannett’s biography to fit the generic expectations readers had for both the female-amazon type and the republican mother. Hiltner shows that Mann cribbed liberally from earlier novels and low-end chapbooks, fabricating huge portions of Gannett’s life and, in particular, most of her war experiences. Hiltner convincingly argues that Mann’s biography owes more to literary history than it does to Gannett herself. When Gannett spoke at the Federal Theater in Boston, preceded and followed by light drama and farces, she was parroting Mann’s text—a dramatic simulacrum. Audiences were prepared to receive her performance as a kind of theater, not simple oratory. By shifting the interpretive frame of Gannett’s show from “unoriginal oratory” to “performance piece,” the aesthetic codes of women’s public performance come into view.
Gannett’s significance is important precisely because her role was scripted with social approval. She played a socially transgressive woman, and her audiences loved her for it. Her ability to sell between 1500 and 2000 tickets on her northeast tour of 1802–3 suggests that her audience had already made a tacit contract to forgive her for public speech.38 They wanted to see her speak and the entire rhetorical occasion was built upon the successful transgression of a supposedly uncrossable boundary.

From this perspective, Gannett’s speech is less about transgression, control, or radicalism than it is a type of cooperative ritual between speaker and audience. Sociologist Erving Goffman has hypothesized that in these moments of social confrontation, both the audience and the speaker are taking a “line,” and both seek to “save face.” There is an obligation on the speaker to give her audiences the excuse they need to sit quietly (an adequate apology), and an obligation on the audience members to have enough patience to give the speaker an opportunity to please them.39 In a successful public interaction, both desires get fulfilled. Although Goffman admits that sometimes audiences seek conflict with a speaker rather than successful interaction, it is clear that Gannett’s audiences paid to participate in the resolution of social transgression. As Gannett begins her speech, she admits to her “uncouth” wartime drag and confesses to unladylike conduct. But as she concludes, she begs for the audience’s help restoring her to the traditional path of womanhood, even as she speaks from the podium!40

A cynical interpretation of Gannett’s performance—and of Rowson’s career at this same period in American history—would conclude that their potential radicalism is successfully contained by their bows to convention. Gannett is simply mouthing a patriarchal script, which, in the end, constitutes the very boundaries of cultural performance. A more radical interpretation might claim the opposite, however: that Gannett’s conduct is obviously subversive of convention. As any actress would know, script is always re-framed in performance in the endlessly creative possibilities of linguistic parole. Using apology as an excuse to speak, Gannett is exploiting the value systems of her audience (their respect for patriotism, for example) to support new forms of public conduct and identity. Similarly, when Rowson’s schoolgirls stood up and apologized for their novelty at exhibition night during the same years when Gannett performed military drills in the Federal Theater, they were performing a kind of theater where their right to speak in public was actually inaugurated for the next century.

Another once-famous early national speaker who framed the history of her public speech by virtue of her social transgression was Fanny Newell (1793–1824), a Methodist exhorter who toured Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont between 1810 and 1824 with her husband, a licensed Methodist preacher. Her memoirs, published in several editions
toward the end of Rowson’s life, provide a spirited apology for her career as a public speaker, even though Methodists had fielded hundreds of female preachers and exhorters in England and America between 1740 and 1800. Born in Sidney, Maine, in 1793, Newell confessed to being a thoughtful child who brooded often on death and judgment. Following her parents’ religious awakening just after 1800, Newell heard a Quaker women speak at a Friends meeting. After the Friend said to her, “little children, a new commandment I give unto you, that you should love one another,” Newell began to cry. Following the traditional up-and-down trials of the conversion experience, Newell finally experienced grace in 1808 and decided “to be a poor despised Methodist.” Just before the reverend was to speak at a camp meeting in June of 1809, she jumped up and declared, “I speak the truth in Christ, I lie not—my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost.”

In explaining her conduct she compares herself to an Old Testament prophet, Isaiah:

I have a constant cry in my heart to feel the weight of the cause of truth, and the worth of souls—to be employed in the work of God—in striving to win souls to Christ my Lord; and in obedience to my Divine Instructor, who bids me warn the wicked of their danger, I, like Isaiah, cry aloud, and spare not my voice or lungs.

Newell’s claim manifests one of the central tensions of post-Revolutionary virtue. She works on behalf of God and the “worth” of her companion souls of the planet, an act of unselfishness and duty. She embodies the “active benevolence” of Lucy Temple in Rowson’s posthumous novel. Unlike Temple, however, she is loud and assertive, and the sin of pride always threatens the righteous patriot or Christian prophet. Newell apologizes for her conduct, however, because she works on behalf of a stronger force:

Whatever may be said against a female speaking or praying in public, I care not; for when I feel confident, that the Lord calls me to speak, I dare not refuse;—thanks be to God for the consolation it gives me, to find that God and man have a controversy on this subject. […] I see no cause why prophecy in this text does not favor the daughter equally with the son.

Although Newell’s defiant apology shares some aspects of those offered by Rowson’s young students, Newell’s rhetorical strategy differs from Rowson’s (and Gannett’s) means of saving face in public. Newell justifies herself by saying that, when the Lord calls, she dares not refuse. Obeying God is her principal warrant. In contrast, Rowson’s pious schoolgirls and narrators tend to appeal simultaneously to their audiences’ patience and goodwill.
Rowson's defenses of women's speech and education in the early 1800s ally themselves with Gannett's and Newell's techniques of absolving themselves from social transgression at the same time that they admitted to it. Gannett turned to ideals of patriotism to excuse her controversial behavior and Newell framed her conduct as that of an Old Testament prophet, while Rowson pushed herself and her young students into the public sphere with the justification that it was educationally beneficial for the country as a whole. All three framed their transgression as a public duty, even though their means of "facing" their audiences were different. Although the innovative achievements of all three of these women were largely forgotten within a very few years of their deaths, they pioneered changes in women's identity that later generations found hard to explain, much less acknowledge. As Rosemary Zagarri has compellingly argued, the Victorian backlash against the radicalism of the Revolution caused nearly a century-long amnesia about the freedoms that women began to broach in the early national period. Rowson's unique and lasting achievement was a subtle and entertaining pedagogy encouraging women's speech in ways that later generations found completely normal.

**Masquerade and Surrogation**

Because Rowson was often doing something other than what she claimed, reading her as a didactic author has limitations.\(^7\) Despite her claims that she was *only* educating women to be better domestics, she was actually enlarging the sphere of their professional opportunities far beyond the household as teachers, writers, journalists, or a variety of other public identities affiliated with benevolent causes or domestic care. Like the moral of her student dramas and dialogues, however, the potential radicalism of this education is implicit, rather than explicit, and up to her students to enact in their own lives. Rather than framing her as a writer of conservative conduct material (which is the persona she typically took in public), it is perhaps more useful to contextualize her work within the larger performance culture of the early national period, which included activities ranging from parade rituals, toasting ceremonies, political oratory, and the theater. As Deborah Cannett's most recent biographer, Alfred Young, has remarked, "disguise was in the air in the Revolutionary era."\(^8\) Early national culture, noteworthy for its turbulent and uncertain rearrangement of social relations, was alternatively fascinated and repelled by spectacle, masque, and imposture and Rowson's theatrical ethos developed in this context.

One explanation for the popularity of role-playing in this period has been proposed by theater historian Joseph Roach, who argues that the social upheavals of the late eighteenth-century produced habits of dramatic "surrogation," where people inhabited
the guises of lost figures of the past to refurbish and rebuild societies that had undergone radical transformation. Roach writes, "Circum-Atlantic societies, confronted with revolutionary circumstances for which few precedents existed, have invented themselves by performing their pasts in the presence of others." For Roach, these popular surrogations of earlier generations (of slaves and aboriginal peoples) appear principally in parade, carnival, drama, and public speech. In Euro-American tradition, street theater is one of the crucial venues where the disenfranchized, whose social agency is hampered by illiteracy as well as lack of patronage, can tell their stories.

The value of Roach’s thesis for understanding Rowson’s literary performances for women, a different sort of underclass, is in his recognition of the agency of actors to appropriate and transform their pasts to meet the exigencies of the present in a creative moment of self-definition. Rowson employed artistic surrogation in a variety of forms. As a teacher, she often represented herself through her students, such as in their opening and concluding addresses in A Present for Young Ladies in which she advocated the synthesis of higher learning, the arts, and useful industry. Even readers of Rowson’s generation knew that these voices were both Rowson’s, and not, at the same time. Similarly, Rowson took on a variety of dramatis personae in her poetry, where she would simultaneously advocate in one poem that women have no right to interfere in men’s public business (such as "Rights of Woman"), and in others she raised the Federalist standard. Rowson’s final work, Lucy Temple, distributes its narrative among three main characters (the comfort-loving Mary, the romantic Aura, and the dutiful Lucy), each of whom represent a legitimate desire. But the key to understanding these voicings, dramatic masks, or surrogations, is not to identify them as an aggregate personality index of the author, but rather as performances. Even though the character of Lucy may come closest to Rowson’s idealization of a teacher, as an author, teacher, and former actress, Rowson conducted herself with far more publicity than the characters of her fiction. That disjunction is Rowson’s performance. In her own time, Rowson’s most convincing creation was the portrait of the “sensible, virtuous, well-informed female” who “exalt[s] and ennable[s] the thoughts of all who converse with her”—a character whose radical contributions to the public sphere were hardly noticed.

Notes
2. Marion Rust, Prodigal Daughters: Susanna Rowson’s Early American Women (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute & University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 46, 144; see also Davidson, ed., xxiii.


13. Susanna Rowson, A Present for Young Ladies; Containing Poems, Dialogues, Addresses &c. &c. &c. As Recited by the Pupils of Mrs. Rowson's Academy, at the Annual Exhibitions (Boston: John West & Co, 1811); Theodore Thomas Hook, Tekeli; or The Siege of Montgat. A Melodrama in Three Acts (New York: D. Longworth, 1807 [1806]).

14. I am borrowing the trope of “surplus” from Marxist psychoanalytic approaches to the fetish character of a commodity, where excesses of energy around manifest content signify latent emotional states that seek expression.


16. Ibid., 33.

17. Rowson, Slaves, 94.

22. Elizabeth Inchbald, Every One Has His Fault (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1794), not pagged.
23. Thomas Holcroft, The Road to Ruin (New York: Berry and Rogers, 1792), 79.
26. For elaborate systems for teaching natural expression, see Gilbert Austin, Chironomia, or, A Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery Comprehending Many Precepts, Both Ancient and Modern, for the Proper Regulation of the Voice, the Countenance, and Gesture (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1806), and Jonathan Barber, Exercises in Reading and Recitations, Reduced to the System of Notation, as Explained in his Lectures on the Science and Practice of Elocution (York, PA: J. Barber and C. Mason, 1825). For more liberal approaches to human difference, see Caleb Bingham’s native and slave oratorical selections in The Columbian Orator: Containing a Variety of Original and Selected Pieces, Together with Rules Calculated to Improve Youth and Others in the Ornamental and Useful Art of Eloquence (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1797).
27. See Webster, Grammatical; Bingham, American Preceptor. Also, Granville Ganter, “The Active Virtue of The Columbian Orator,” New England Quarterly 70.3 (Sept 1997): 463–76. 
28. See The Rise and Progress of The Young Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia: Containing an Account of a Number of Public Examinations & Commencements; the Charter and Bye-laws; Likewise a Number of Orations Delivered by the Young Ladies, and Several by the Trustees of Said Institution (Philadelphia: Stewart & Cochran, 1794).
33. Rowson, Miscellaneous, 103, 32–39, 44–45. See also Branson, whose book focuses on such examples of women’s contributions to political rhetoric.
37. See Judith R. Hiltner, “Like a Bewildered Star: Deborah Sampson, Herman Mann, and Address, Delivered with Applause,” Rhetoric Society Quarterly 29, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 5–24; and also Hiltner’s “The Example of our Heroine: Deborah Sampson and the Legacy of Herman Mann’s The Female Review,” American Studies 41.1 (Spring 2000): 93–114; also Young, 197.
38. Young, 209.
40. Deborah Sampson Gannett, Address Delivered with Applause, at the Federal Street Theatre, Boston, Four Successive Nights . . . by Mrs. Deborah Gannett (Dedham: H. Mann, 1802), 8, 25.
43. Ibid., 35, 57.
44. Ibid., 59.
45. Rowson, Lucy Temple, 88.
46. Newell, 135.
48. Young, 90.
50. Examples of Rowson’s Federalist poems include “Ode on the Birthday of John Adams,” “Eulogy to the Memory of George Washington,” and “Song, written for the ... Birthday of George Washington.” All poems are included in Rowson’s Miscellaneous Poems.
51. Rowson, Mentor, vol 2, 93.