

Narratives of Seduction and Abandonment
(What makes American Seduction and Sex so very American?)
September 25, 2007

Our reading for this week focuses on the transition of the laws and morals surrounding sex during the settlement of the American colonies by the English. As the colonies formed English laws were adapted to suit the needs of the budding colonial communities and courts, while the English culture was still embraced. Often, improvised colonial law collided with English morals and tradition, creating gray areas for colonial litigation as seen in *Anne Orthwood's Bastard*.

Lust, desire, and morals merged as generations of English women were seduced by the promise of America, most often coming to find a reality much more harsh than their lives at home. Without family or husbands, yet frequently with children, poor English immigrant women worked to forge lives for themselves reproducing the English family ideology, employing their experiences to create a better future for their young.

On page 4 of the Tennenhouse essay, he explains Cathy Davidson's answer to the question regarding the post-Revolutionary war popularity of Seduction novels. He states, "As Davidson sees it, seduction novels made the institution of marriage as arbitrarily abusive as pre-Revolutionary Americans believed their domination by the English monarchs had. Thus she inverts Fliegelman's allegorical priorities, puts monarchy in the metaphorical register, and reads the patriarchal family as the historical referent and object of fiction's critique."

What relation does Davidson's understanding of Seduction novels as a critique of the patriarchal structure have to Susanna Rowson's own experiences upon the creation of *Charlotte Temple*?

Was Rowson critiquing the patriarchal control within England and early America? Or was she, with Charlotte's demise, submissively placing the female body under the gender-biased morals of patriarchal guidance?

Tennenhouse addresses the differences in American and British readership, noting how the literary critical tradition has referred to *Charlotte Temple* as "a bad version of an English Richardson" (11-12). He then goes on to detail the differences between American and English novels, with special consideration to the abridgment of Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*.

What do these abridgments and shorter novels tell us about the development of an American value/moral system?

The central themes of seduction and abandonment seem to develop out of a fear for the unknown and the absence of the family's watchful eyes. If the sustenance of the old British identity was desirous in the new world, do these novels become a warning against

Cite as: Allison Lakomski, course materials for WGS.640 Studies in Women's Life Narratives: Interrogating Marriage: Case Studies in American Law and Culture, Fall 2007. MIT OpenCourseWare (<http://ocw.mit.edu/>), Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Downloaded on [DD Month YYYY].

the female's absence from her family, in that the rights to English heritage (and thus civility and privilege) could be lost?

Does a short plot-driven novel like *Charlotte Temple* really address the Americanization of marriage, sex, and family, or does it in fact reinforce traditional British ideals of women's need to be pure or perish?

Both Tennenhouse and Armstrong assert that it was not pure English bloodline (female purity and marriage to an English man) that reproduced the English model of family/household, it was the woman's experience that led to her ability to enforce rules of good conduct that would then be carried on by future generations.

In this notion that the English family does not necessarily require one to be English, Armstrong illustrates how the English-American assimilation of the African Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suggests the possibility of the reproduction of English homes in Africa upon Topsy's return.

Considering our reading over the past three weeks, how is this idea of the English home in the African or African-American community problematized?

If the desirability of the English family and English culture in America is, at least in some ways, in maintenance of the hierarchal social categories that exist within the English model, then the African-America, either within or outside of America, is only able to reproduce a reproduction of an ideology that is already bastardized. How does this assimilation fail to reconcile the freedom of the American colonies and the cultural conservatism of English cultural traditions?

On page 9 of the introduction to *Anne Orthwood's Bastard* Pagan states that there will be two reoccurring themes in the book, (1) "the particular structure of Virginia's economy and labor system accounts for many of the differences between colonial and English law, and (2) "although less sophisticated technically than English law, the jurisprudence of early Virginia reflects the colonial leaders' skillful manipulation of legal doctrines and institutions to enhance their social status and strengthen their political position."

How do these two themes, though in *Anne Orthwood's Bastard* specific to Virginia, become central to the shaping of a specifically American form of sex and seduction?

How does Anne Orthwood's case illustrate Tennenhouse's assertion that the need for the American colonies political, not cultural independence from Britain?

It seems as early as the Orthwood cases the colonies were having trouble reconciling new colonial power with old British rule. Because of this, the monarchy served as a political figurehead, modeling hierarchal power within Virginia, though it was ultimately negotiated in the courthouse.

Cite as: Allison Lakomski, course materials for WGS.640 Studies in Women's Life Narratives: Interrogating Marriage: Case Studies in American Law and Culture, Fall 2007. MIT OpenCourseWare (<http://ocw.mit.edu/>), Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Downloaded on [DD Month YYYY].

How did the growth of William Kendall from ex-servant to wealthy senior justice facilitate the evolution of Virginian law from the old British model? How does this relate to Charlotte's father accepting her baby into his family after her death?

The myth of the promise of the colonies seems to have led many young women astray. The lure of America rarely turned out as promised leaving these women poor and alone with bastard children who were doomed to repeat their fate.

The punishment of women seems a charge against their visible lawlessness where as the child support payments by men are an economic exchange, a making good with the community. This perpetuates women's need to marry upon arrival in the colonies and solidifies the colonies strong stance against premarital sex.

How or why did this type of extramarital sex continue after the considerable public attention given to the shame of bastard bearing?

Why did women continue to play into acts of seduction?

With the withering of female credibility in the late 1600s did women have any other choice then to give themselves to men in the hopes that they would be supported?

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

WGS.640 Studies in Women's Life Narratives: Interrogating Marriage: Case Studies in American
Law and Culture
Fall 2007

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.