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## Reasonable Conversions: Susanna Rowson's *Mentoria* and Conversion Narratives for Young Readers

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By the time Susanna Rowson published *Mentoria; or, the Young Lady's Friend* in 1794, most literate British and American readers had encountered a plentiful supply of juvenile conversion narratives—stories that illustrate children's dedication to Christianity, often on the deathbed, the most striking example of which is the classic Calvinist text *A Token for Children: Being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children* (1671–1672; American edition 1700) penned by English Puritan minister James Janeway.<sup>1</sup> The work collects the stories of children who convert and ultimately die at an early age, all related with an explicit didactic goal of promoting readers' conversions as well.

A hundred years later a wave of seduction novels flooded the literary marketplace in Britain and America, some of which appropriated conventions of the sacred conversion form and secularized it for eighteenth-century audiences by merging the concept of moral transformation with Enlightenment-era models of rational education. Though not well known, Rowson's *Mentoria*—a curious conglomeration of thematically-related pieces from multiple genres, including the essay, epistolary novel, conduct book, and fairy tale—offers particularly fertile ground for thinking about the nexus between eighteenth-century didactic books and earlier works for young readers.<sup>2</sup> At the heart of *Mentoria* is a series of letters describing girls who yield, with dire and frequently deadly consequences, to the passionate pleas of male suitors.<sup>3</sup> Fallen women populate Rowson's world, and scholars have traditionally read *Mentoria* within the familiar bounds of the eighteenth-century seduction novel.<sup>4</sup> However, Rowson's creation transforms the older tradition of didactic,

child-centered conversion literature in response to the marked cultural shifts in the way adults viewed youth and education, particularly under the influence of John Locke.

An examination of *Mentoria* underscores the book's conversionary agenda even as Rowson disrupts the definition of "conversion" in juvenile texts. Where earlier works like Janeway's couch conversion within a religious framework, warn against the seduction of Satan, and urge readers to experience passion for Christ, Rowson's writing preaches a secularized sermon, embodies seduction in the male libertine, and situates conversion largely within the realm of eighteenth-century rationality. Its principal argument rests in its exhortation to convert from thoughtless passion to measured rationality. Rowson supplies vivid characters and intriguing plot lines to educate and transform—to convert, that is—youthful readers into children governed by reason. The world is full of dangers for the genteel eighteenth-century youngster, and *Mentoria* illustrates this point through characters who succumb to passion over rationality, a yielding that leads to ruin and death as surely as Janeway's characters face damnation should they ignore the lessons represented by his characters. However, reason—not passion for Christ—ultimately triumphs at the end point of this conversion.

Drawing upon the conventions of the conversion narrative and its imagery, I first contextualize *Mentoria* by tracing the role that books like *A Token for Children* played in teaching young readers about religious conversion before turning to my central concern: the manner in which Rowson redirects the conversion narrative as she emphasizes her own lessons about logical behavior and sound educational practice, values influenced by the writings of Locke. Rowson focuses on carnal instead of spiritual passion and makes the acquisition of reason the principal outcome of conversion. Placed within this broader framework of children's literature, *Mentoria* reads not merely as an eighteenth-century seduction narrative but as a work that positions conversion within a secularized context and strives to educate its juvenile readers about the salvation of rationality.

### **James Janeway and the Juvenile Conversion Narrative**

As members of the first consciously child-centered culture, seventeenth-century British and American Calvinists published a significant number of sermons and books that described youthful piety and conversion, as well as the dire consequences should a child reject these values and acts.<sup>5</sup> Around a central motif of death, such narratives reinforced the necessity of conversion, not only for the characters within the pages but for readers as well. Conversion narratives supplied astonishing numbers of dying children who exemplified the need for a passionate response to Christ. Indeed, the Calvinists, as Gillian

Avery sardonically remarks, "expressed more pleasure in their dead and dying children than in their living ones," a preoccupation that "was to have a great impact on children's books" well into the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Over two centuries of juvenile literature, pious children, remarkable for their dedication to God, suffer and die, and the process of dying served as a didactic call to the unconverted, urging readers to alter their behavior before death arrived for them as well. You, ungodly children, could be dead in a matter of days, the texts preach, and what will become of your souls if you continue along the path of unrighteousness? Convert now; do not neglect your future until you, too, lie on the deathbed.

No other work illustrates the icon of the dying child as vividly as Janeway's *A Token for Children*, and it serves as an exemplar of seventeenth-century juvenile conversion narratives as well as a representative against which we can read Rowson's own secularized conversion narrative. Phenomenally popular on both sides of the Atlantic, *A Token for Children* was among the first books to provide to young readers dramatic and entertaining stories of other children. Broadly speaking, suitable reading for juveniles had consisted of the Bible and religious treatises written principally for adults, along with John Foxe's rather horrific *Book of Martyrs* (1563).<sup>7</sup> Janeway's work was consistently popular through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, third in sales only to the Bible and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and *A Token for Children* remains the quintessential example of child-centered conversion narratives, a "macabre and curious literary convention."<sup>8</sup>

Later books appropriated Janeway's form, and religious conversion narratives continued to thrive in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A 1736 broadside, to cite one example, warned unconverted children that "though you are young, yet you must die and hasten to the pit."<sup>9</sup> Sunday School fiction of the nineteenth century supplied countless more examples of dying children who, through their own conversions, lead others to Christ, even in the last gasp of life. *Lights on Little Graves* (1848), for instance, collected poems that emphasized early death and the need for conversion, and organizations like the American Tract Society and the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society produced a plethora of similar books and pamphlets in the early-nineteenth century, which served in turn to influence mainstream fiction. "It must have been Janeway at several removes," Avery speculates, "who was responsible for the mawkish and by now purposeless deaths that clogged . . . English" and American "fiction in the later Victorian period, written by people who had experienced in childhood a heady emotion from identifying with little dying evangelizers" like Dickens's Little Nell and Stowe's Little Eva.<sup>10</sup>

Janeway's influential book established conventions for these later texts. Opening with an address to "all Parents, School Masters and School Mistresses, or any that have

any hand in the *Education of Children*," Janeway encourages adults "to shew your love to Christ" and to "stock the next generation with Noble Plants."<sup>11</sup> Parents and educators alike find instructions to "let" their children "read this Book over an hundred times."<sup>12</sup> Reading questions provide discussion pointers for adults—"Ask [young readers] what they think of those Children, and whether they would not be such," Janeway suggests.<sup>13</sup> He also addresses the young readers ("my dear Lambs") directly in a "Preface Containing Directions to Children."<sup>14</sup> Where do all bad children go when they die, Janeway asks before providing the answer himself: "Why, I will tell you, they which Lie, must to their Father the Devil into everlasting burning; they which never pray, God will pour out his wrath upon them; and when they beg and pray in Hell Fire, God will not forgive them; but there they must lie for ever."<sup>15</sup> Where do you want to be, he queries. "How do you know but that you may be the next Child that may die?"<sup>16</sup> This fear-invoking preface sets the stage for the thirteen sketches that follow across the two-volume work, all detailing converted children who range in age from an astonishing two years old to fourteen.<sup>17</sup> Janeway's book presents, in essence, the same story thirteen times. In each case, a juvenile grows passionately "preoccupied with his or her soul and salvation, undergoes a conversion, and then dies," Diana Pasulka succinctly summarizes.<sup>18</sup> The godly child contrasts starkly with the damned children lurking in the backdrop, who spend their time playing, lying to their elders, praying too boastfully and publicly, and "speaking grievous words."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the good children embrace the temporality of their lives; as one dying girl enthuses, "Albeit the worms eat up my flesh, yet with these eyes shall I behold God."<sup>20</sup>

The opening story, with its focus on religious passion, sets the pattern which subsequent episodes echo. Sarah Howley, converted at age "eight or nine" into a life of marked piety, rejects all frivolous reading in order to peruse only Scripture and theological works, obeys her parents dutifully, and abhors lying and idleness. Yet she falls ill at age fourteen and doubts her own salvation, seductive thoughts that have been placed into her dying mind under the influence of Satan. "O the piteous moan that she would make! O the Agonies that her Soul was in!" Janeway cries.<sup>21</sup> Sarah eventually recommits herself to Christ—"her Soul was [...] ravished with the love of Christ"—and even converts her brother and the household servants before she dies, resting in the assurance of her own salvation.<sup>22</sup> Passion for Christ, or submission to spiritual "ravishing," figures prominently in Sarah's conversion experience. Denying the seductive lure of Satan-sent doubts, the young girl finds an almost erotically-charged satisfaction in the loving embrace of death and Christ.

Similar degrees of passion appear in each of the twelve tales that follow, and raw emotion infuses nearly every page of *A Token for Children*. One young boy reads Scripture "with great Reverence, Tenderness and Groans, [...] till tears and sobs were ready to hinder him," and he subsequently weeps "bitterly" at thoughts of his own depravity.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, ten-year-old Mary "was not a little pleased when she could go into a corner to pray and weep."<sup>24</sup> Another boy, age six, cries with such "extraordinary meltings, that his eyes have looked red and sore, with weeping by himself for his sin."<sup>25</sup> Tears flow more freely through the pages of *A Token for Children* than they do in even the most lachrymose novel of Rowson's day. Textual emotion serves as constant reminder for young readers that they, too, should experience a similar passion—indeed, in his reading instructions for children, Janeway encourages his young audience to experience the text bodily. He shares the vivid stories of converted children with hopes that readers will "get by [themselves] and weep for Sin, and pray for grace and pardon."<sup>26</sup> Well before the rise of eighteenth-century sensibility and sympathy, Janeway draws upon the didactic power of affect. Children, he suggests, have not engaged the text fully unless they react in a sensory, emotional fashion: "How art thou now affected, poor Child, in the Reading of this Book? Have you shed ever a tear since you begun reading? Have you been by your self upon your knees; and begging that God would make you like these blessed Children?"<sup>27</sup> Janeway thus employs a specific pedagogical strategy in his work. By repeating an essential plotline and emotional arc, Janeway hopes that readers will more likely digest the lesson he seeks to convey. That lesson is unmistakable, as one would expect in a book explicitly designed to teach children: refusal of Satan's seductive voice and passionate commitment to Christ are central features of conversion.

At points, Janeway does complicate the emotion of conversion by appealing to the rationality of adults and children, reminding both audiences that even babies "are not too little to go to Hell" and asking readers to consider the logical response to that reality.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, however, Janeway's appeals to reason rest upon the presumption of innate human depravity, a notion that would meet with much more skepticism by Rowson's time. The stories of dying children in *A Token for Children* require a willingness to move from intellectual consideration of the wages of sin to the emotionally charged—the passionate—acceptance of God's grace.

If Janeway litters his text with the dying and dead bodies of converted children in order to frighten young readers into heaven, *Mentoria* targets dying and dead female characters more specifically, aiming for an act of conversion that ultimately trades the passionate, emotional response to Christ for an ethos of rationality. Where Janeway persuades readers by using the appeal of good children who meet with eternal bliss

and convert other sinners while on their deathbeds, Rowson secularizes the narrative dichotomy of the good child and bad child, constructing a new variety of conversion narrative in keeping with views about childhood that had evolved considerably from Janeway's time. She merges the format of the children's conversion narrative—particularly the repetitive images of death—with a vision of reason as the "religion" to which young readers should commit themselves and directs her didactic end toward those girls who are seduced by thoughtless passion, not Satan per se.

### **Passionate Seduction: *Mentoria*, Locke, and Conversion Narratives**

The impetus behind Rowson's refashioning of conversion lay in the influence of late-seventeenth-century and early-eighteenth-century educational theorists, particularly John Locke, whose work helped to popularize changing views about the requirements of childhood education and the nature of childhood itself.<sup>29</sup> Locke laid out his ideas in various works, but *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693)—whose "influence on eighteenth-century English" and, I would add, American "culture can hardly be over-emphasized," as Jay Fliegelman remarks—was the text that enjoyed the most fame.<sup>30</sup> Locke, whose ideas on education were not particularly novel, nevertheless found a huge audience and "widespread dissemination" where similar writings of earlier educators had not.<sup>31</sup> Building on the influence of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), *Some Thoughts* "was one of the most important influences in changing attitudes toward childhood and child-rearing practices in the eighteenth century."<sup>32</sup>

At the core of Locke's philosophy is rejection of innate childhood depravity. For Locke, the child comes into the world as a blank slate, the *tabula rasa* ready for inscription. Never straying far from the ideal of moral education, Locke nevertheless shifts attention from religiosity to reason. His central pedagogical effort privileges rationality as the cornerstone of a proper education, which instructs children in the logic they need to function as good citizens. The pathway to this rationality lies not, however, in rote memorization or authoritative lecturing. Instead, Locke places a premium on sensory experience, or the acquisition of knowledge through bodily apprehension, an experience that should both instruct and delight. Sometimes that process might involve manipulation of actual physical objects, but it also includes the use of textual examples:

The plainest, easiest, and most efficacious [method for instruction] is to set before their eyes the *examples* of those things you would have them do or avoid. [...] Virtues and vices can by no words be so plainly set before their understanding as the actions of other men

will show them, when you direct their observation and bid them view this or that good or bad quality in their practice.<sup>33</sup>

Adults serve as mediators for these experiences—their role is to act as *mentors*. Without gentle guidance, after all, children might end up reaching incorrect conclusions or developing faulty reasoning skills. Worse still, they might not develop reason at all, and instead, as Locke worries, “put passion in the place of reason and [...] neither use their own nor harken to other people’s reason, any farther than it suits their humor, interest, or party.”<sup>34</sup> Reading about other children’s journeys toward rationality, then, is fundamental to Enlightenment-era pedagogy.<sup>35</sup>

As ideologies about childhood and children’s reading shifted in the eighteenth century, tensions inevitably arose between Calvinist conversion narratives and literature that spoke of virtue in a more secularized manner. When Rowson published *Mentoria*, the literary marketplace for children offered a mixture of traditional child-based conversion narratives alongside texts that dramatized secularized visions of civic virtue, built on rationality. Rowson’s work reflects this mixture and offers a “conversion narrative” privileging rationality as the end product.

In her preface to *Mentoria*, Rowson instructs parents, educators, and readers on the proper use of the book. Rowson’s preface emphasizes the pedagogical value of the work and defends against potential critics who would accuse it of harmful effect. Even the epigraph to *Mentoria* insists:

Detested be the pen whose baneful influence  
Could to the youthful docile mind convey  
Pernicious precepts, tell loose tales,  
And paint illicit passion in such colours,  
As might mislead the unsuspecting heart,  
And vitiate the young unsettled judgment.<sup>36</sup>

Refuting possible charges that the episodes in the book—some of which verge on the risqué—may over-excite young minds into a passionate state, or that they are *overly* sensory by Lockean standards, Rowson assures her audience that she would never “sink my Genius to such prostitution.”<sup>37</sup> Rowson thus establishes her role as teacher, a mentor to young readers and preceptress not unlike the character of *Mentoria* herself. Her job is to present examples of how characters that convert to reason find happiness and then explicate those examples so that the correct lesson emerges with each one. Rowson further declares that *Mentoria* stems from “an anxious desire to see all my dear country-women as



truly amiable as they are universally acknowledged beautiful; it was a wish to convince them that true happiness can never be met with in the temple of dissipation and folly."<sup>38</sup> Happiness exists in hearts that "cultivate [...] amiable virtues which will render them at once beloved, admired and esteemed, by all who know them."<sup>39</sup> Out of those "amiable virtues" will arise the "good girls" who parallel the godly children of Janeway's book, in contrast to girls who lack reason and are therefore easily seduced by libertines and their materialistic trappings of wealth.

In keeping with the epigraph and the preface, the pages that follow illustrate both admirable and detestable behaviors, intending to convert readers to the gospel of Lockean rationality. The structure and contents of the book are curious. Published in two parts, the first volume of *Mentoria* includes a preface, poetic verses "Addressed to a Young Lady on her Leaving School," and a "History of Mentoria," an exposition of the title character. From there, the central conceit of the text begins, letters written by the character Mentoria, a former governess, describing various stories of seduction. Some of these stories include within them their own exchanges of letters, resulting in a layered epistolary textuality. This section of *Mentoria* ends with a note about the work's authenticity, akin to the "true story" label affixed to many early novels: "The author cannot help her remarking, that as [the] story is authentic and not the offspring of fancy, she hopes it will make a lasting impression on the minds of her fair readers."<sup>40</sup> The first volume closes as one more seduction story begins (this one not introduced by Mentoria's narrative voice), entitled "Marian and Lydia," which includes within it "The History of Dorcas," yet another seduction tale complete with its own epistolary subtext (a more complex section of *Mentoria* I examine in more detail below). The second volume of the book continues the tale of Marian and Lydia before returning abruptly to additional letters from Mentoria, though her role appears finished in Volume 1. Rowson then moves to an "Essay on Female Education" before concluding with two cautionary pieces about the dangers of envy and materialism, "Urganda and Fatima: An Eastern Tale" and "The Incendiary," which had, a footnote explains, "formerly appeared in a magazine."<sup>41</sup>

Supposedly inspired by Rowson's work as a governess in England, the bulk of *Mentoria* involves Mentoria and the letters she addresses to the girls who had once been under her educational care. Vowing never to abandon her job as preceptress, Mentoria repeatedly urges the girls to avoid the follies of idleness and vanity and the attendant dangers of the libertine. She emphatically warns against the siren call of youthful passion and emphasizes the risk to happiness and life itself should the readers of the letters—both the girls in the book and the external audience—ignore the path of righteousness epitomized by rational characters. Through the voice of Mentoria, Rowson herself acts

as mentor. As the lurking narrator, offstage but directing the flow of her story, she "can clarify the moral direction" and "cajole and direct her reader to the right point of view. She becomes a friend and model for reader."<sup>42</sup> *Mentoria's* (and Rowson's) goal is to expose the evils of the world and convert her charges so that they, too, can embrace reason and deny pleasure-seeking passion—so that they can, in other words, avoid the "damnation" of the unconverted.

Through her letters, *Mentoria* provides numerous examples of what happens when girls choose passion over reason. *Mentoria's* rational, virtuous characters serve as models "by which every young woman who wishes to promote her own felicity, will regulate her conduct."<sup>43</sup> If Janeway understood, based on emerging educational theories of his own time, that vivid, emotionally-charged examples serve as powerful didactic and conversionary tools, Rowson draws even more explicitly on a Lockean epistemology of direct observation and sensory experience (mediated through the printed word) as she labors to transform her readers' lives.

Rational self-regulation thus emerges as the central theme in *Mentoria's* letters. When a character maintains control and refuses the flatteries of the libertine or the pull of frivolous material goods, she, too, finds reward, not explicitly with a place in heaven, but with a "contented happy mind" and "serenity [...] in her heart."<sup>44</sup> When death finally arrives for this girl, she heads to the grave having "lived beloved by all and died universally regretted."<sup>45</sup> By contrast, a girl who favors entertainment and male attention over self-restraint risks social damnation and even death. "Love, my dear children," *Mentoria* confides, "is a noble, generous passion, and when kept under the guidance of reason, exalts and elevates the human soul."<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, "the juvenile mind is apt to mistake a transient liking, or a sudden impulse of gratified vanity, for love."<sup>47</sup> Do not allow fleeting passion to seduce you, *Mentoria* warns, for the consequences may be dire.

Every story within the work serves as proof for this warning. *Mentoria*, for instance, cautions the girls about their friend Matilda, whom the preceptress suspects of leading them astray, and she shares the story of Harriet Harding to demonstrate the dangers of befriending the wrong people. Harriet forms a friendship with Amelia, a "public woman" who is known to be "kept by a man of fashion."<sup>48</sup> "Giddy, thoughtless, and fond of pleasure," Harriet disregards her father's steady advice to avoid Amelia and subsequently slips toward iniquity herself until a man, escorting her home after a late party, follows her to her bedroom, where she scarcely fends off his amorous advances: "He proceeded to take liberties she had ever been used to think of with abhorrence."<sup>49</sup> Just as the man is about to overcome Harriet's defenses, her father bursts into the room and rescues her from moral downfall. A close call, indeed, and it would seem that Harriet

has at last converted to a life of virtue. Alas, Harriet's is a false conversion. Despite her father's intervention, she loses the respect of her friends and the hand of a gentleman "who had for some time addressed her on an honourable score," leaving the unfortunate girl abandoned and alone after her father's death.<sup>50</sup> Harriet takes up with Amelia again and fully embraces vice until "she sunk to any grave, a victim to her own folly."<sup>51</sup> Harriet enjoys only temporary conversion to morality, prompted by the sage instruction of her father, and her ultimate sad fate figures as a kind of negative image to the untimely deaths Janeway depicts in *A Token for Children*. The lesson is clear: reason ensures life itself while carnal passion leads to death.

Mentoria's letters feature several additional characters who meet similar fates when they discover the truth too late. The governess tells of her own classmate, Belinda, for example, who was seduced by the promise of wealth and fell passionately in love with an "artful, ambitious man," eventually finding herself a miserable widow with eight children.<sup>52</sup> Another story describes a young woman who eventually dies of starvation, the direct result of having married against her father's wishes. Janeway's images of "marriage" are, by contrast, distinctly spiritual in nature even though some of his subjects are already of marriageable age. Little Tabitha Alder, notably, declares as she withers away, "I shall be with Jesus, I am Married to Him, He is my Husband, I am His Bride, I have given my self to Him, and He hath given Himself to me, and I shall live with Him for ever."<sup>53</sup> Clearly the stakes have shifted in Rowson's story. An early marriage to the wrong type of man and a relationship based solely on a passionate betrothal contrasts with the everlasting union with Christ featured in *A Token for Children*. Mentoria makes passion literal and secular, but the risk of damnation—or something close to it—still hangs over the unconverted "sinner." Mentoria once more and quite deliberately preaches to her young readers: beware this path of passion, lest you become one of the young women delivered to penury and an early grave.

By far the richest story within *Mentoria* is that of "Marian and Lydia," in which Rowson complicates her ideas about passion and reason. If the rest of *Mentoria* seems somewhat binary in its approach to these two qualities, proposing a conversion process that moves neatly from passion to reason, the Marian and Lydia section troubles this dichotomy by infusing emotional sensibility—or compassion—into her definition of reason. Here, Rowson demonstrates a more nuanced view of rationality, one in which sympathy, as opposed to thoughtless passion, becomes an essential part of a character's growth and maturity.

The story opens at the home of a mother Dorcas and her twin daughters Lydia and Marian, who lead simple and joyful lives despite the mysterious absence of the girls'

father. Rowson situates their cottage home within a veritable Garden of Eden, seemingly untouched by sin and carnal knowledge: "The sun was sunk beneath the western hills, his parting beams made the horizon flame with burnished gold, and darted on the top-most branches of the lofty trees of a neighbouring forest. [...] The ground was strewn with leaves of various hues, the ripened fruit hung on the bending trees, and fields of waving golden grain rendered the scene delightful."<sup>54</sup> Within this idyllic space, Lydia and Marian wander about in nature, "rambling over [...] fields and meadows" and shunning luxury and artfulness.<sup>55</sup> They are, Rowson writes, "innocent and sprightly as the young fawn that lightly bounds over the verdant lawn; smiling youth and rosy health glowed upon their cheeks, and sparkled in their eyes. [...] Innocence presided over all their pleasures, and meek-eyed content on downy pinions hovered over their homely couch, sweetening their quiet slumbers."<sup>56</sup> Far from the picture of childhood depravity around which Janeway builds his stories, Rowson sketches an Eden before the Fall, with children who have entered the world without the burden of Original Sin and who stand ready for proper instruction.

But every Eden has its serpent, a figure represented in this case by Sir George Lovemore, who spies Marian and likens her to "a wood nymph."<sup>57</sup> A veritable wolf in gentleman's clothing, Sir George threatens to unseat Marian's innocence by playing upon her obvious attraction to his finery. Almost allegorically, he becomes the kindling that inflames the immaturity of the naïve girl. The rational Lydia is not so easily fooled and attempts to reason with her sister. Marian, however, possesses "sparks of vanity" that have been "blown into a flame" by Sir Lovemore.<sup>58</sup> At this point of the story, the sisters embody the central tension of *Mentoria* as a whole by placing juvenile reason in sharp relief against thoughtless passion. Like Lydia, Dorcas observes Marian falling from the grace of common sense, and she attempts to save her daughter by sharing her own experience with seduction and exhorting her daughters to "listen not to the voice of adulation, stifle every rising ambitious thought, be humble, be innocent, and be happy."<sup>59</sup> In true Lockean fashion, she provides a concrete sensory example and draws out the proper, logical conclusion.

But all is in vain. Sir George has already set his ill-intentioned sights on the passionate Marian, who soon succumbs to his serpentine flattery and accepts the rake's illicit notes of passion. Marian ensures her own female damnation by this act, and Rowson's narrator gravely intones, "Alas, simple maid, you there fostered a serpent, whose subtle poison tainted your very heart."<sup>60</sup> By detailing Marian's fall and employing obvious Edenic shades to the setting, Rowson provides not only a chronicle of seduction, but something of a conversion narrative in reverse. At this point of her tale she portrays the

process by which paradise is lost and the manner through which the passion of a young mind leads to a most unfortunate fall from innocence.

The story continues, though, and Marian's banishment from the idyllic garden of her youth becomes only a portion of the lesson Rowson wishes to convey. Instead of continuing to present reason and emotional intensity in strict opposition, Rowson pictures rational characters as emotionally compassionate as well. The remainder of "Marian and Lydia," in other words, is as much a story of sensibility as it is of sense. As she tells the story of her own girlhood, for example, Dorcas "sighed profoundly, while a tear fell as she reverted in her thoughts" to her seduction years ago (a seduction that led to the birth of her daughters).<sup>61</sup> "Listen attentively," she tutors Marian and Lydia, "and while you weep over my misfortunes, let the errors which brought them on me sink deep in your hearts; remember they were the cause of your mother's ruin, and shun them through the course of your own lives as you would any poisonous or obnoxious reptile."<sup>62</sup> Ironically echoing Janeway's instruction to readers that they should weep as they read about other children's passion-infused conversions, Dorcas alters the transformative lesson by several degrees. Listen and weep, she exhorts her audience, but let compassion and reason both be guards against sinful passions. Dorcas's account of her own youthful folly also contrasts feeling and unfeeling characters, and compassion ultimately registers as a hallmark of reason while, paradoxically, lack of feeling—or selfish emotion alone—marks the worst kind of passion. Lydia readily absorbs her mother's message and models it neatly for readers: "every syllable sunk deep into the heart of Lydia. I will daily think of your distresses, my dear mother, said she, and they will serve as a shield to my heart, and render it invulnerable to the attacks of vanity or the illusion of passion."<sup>63</sup>

While Marian is not utterly immune to Dorcas's tears, she nevertheless ignores the point behind them and follows the tempting voice of thoughtless passion. Unsurprisingly, she finds only fleeting happiness with Sir George, who "hurrie[s]" her "from one scene of dissipation to another" and "introduce[s]" her to a large circle of "those unhappy women, who purchase ease and luxury at the price of honor."<sup>64</sup> Inevitably, Sir George abandons Marian, and she in turn meets her long-lost father (and narrowly avoids committing incest with him, which must have been a titillating scene for young readers) before stumbling back to her mother's humble abode, a prodigal daughter now painfully converted to a life of reason. "Grant me but pardon and let me die at your feet," Marian begs her mother as Dorcas "wept over her, blessed and forgave her."<sup>65</sup> Marian dies while raising "her hands and eyes in a fervent though inarticulate ejaculation to heaven, and uttering a piercing groan," and Rowson drives home the didactic conclusion to young

readers in epitaph form: "Daughter of Vanity repair, / Look on this silent Monitor / AND REMEMBER / MARIAN!"<sup>66</sup> Similar emotional death scenes figure prominently in most eighteenth-century seduction stories, of course, but the scene also resonates with the earlier pictures of death present in conversion narratives, as exemplified by the thirteen deaths in *A Token for Children*. As with the repetition of deathbed scenes in Janeway's book, Rowson uses death here and throughout *Mentoria* for a transformative end, imprinting her educational objective upon the reader's mind.

Despite such guidance, the danger of narrative (a danger pointed out by critics of the eighteenth-century novel) is that readers might find the examples of sordid behavior so entertaining that they overlook the intended lessons. Janeway's godly children do not, as a general rule, lend themselves to scintillating amusement. But in illustrating seduction vividly, Rowson risks exciting a level of emotion that undermines the didactic sentiment of the novel, given that she depicts the passion of the seduced and dying female body even as she promotes rationality. The irony here, evident in seduction novels more generally, is that young readers vicariously experience passion even as they consume texts that condemn frivolous reading, including novels, as seductive and a poor use of time.<sup>67</sup> Rowson heads off condemnation of her own book by insisting that it is far from frivolous or seductive. Rather, she affirms, *Mentoria* serves as a moral textbook, providing didactic sketches that guide adolescents toward the right kinds of feelings, those policed by reason, just as Janeway guides readers toward the right kind of reason, that which leads to passion for Christ.

### **Rowson and Young Ladies' Education**

Rowson situates a Lockean voice within the character of *Mentoria* herself and through the mother's voice in the "Marian and Lydia" section. Both figures serve as teachers for the young ladies in the text as well as for the reading audience. Adopting the role of educator, *Mentoria* and Dorcas simultaneously describe proper growth into rational womanhood—and entertain readers with stories of unconverted girls along the way. Rowson even devotes a section chapter of *Mentoria* to an "Essay on Female Education." Here, she condemns schools that teach girls how to "jabber bad French and worse English" alongside other "fashionable" pursuits like "jingling the keys of the harpsichord, with great velocity, though perhaps out of time and out of tune."<sup>68</sup> Rejecting an education that favors merely "ornamental and superficial accomplishments" and criticizing indiscriminate reading that fills the mind with passionate images, she emphasizes the danger of a frivolous education, one not based on reasonable and useful pursuits.<sup>69</sup>

In 1797, Rowson built on the ethos of her written work and opened “Mrs. Rowson’s Young Ladies’ Academy.” First in Boston and then in Medford and Newton, Massachusetts, the academy was the culmination of Rowson’s life-long interest in female education. It operated under her leadership until 1822, ultimately locating a balance between “the ornamental skills that characterized early republican education and the pragmatic skills emphasized by theorists such as [Benjamin] Rush” and Locke.<sup>70</sup> Following *Mentoria*’s example, Rowson centered her academy on emerging notions about the educational needs of young women. The academy taught genteel ornamental arts, but the curriculum also insisted on practical knowledge that would aid women well in the new republic. Once she had established her school, Rowson returned to writing, publishing the textbook *An Abridgement of Universal Geography* in 1805. Five additional textbooks followed, including *A Spelling Dictionary* (1807), *A Present for Young Ladies* (1811), *Youth’s First Step in Geography* (1818), *Exercises in History, Chronology, and Biography* (1822), and *Biblical Dialogues* (1822). With their mission both to entertain and to instruct, the academy and textbooks were financially successful ventures for Rowson—and utterly Lockean in nature, as is *Mentoria* itself.<sup>71</sup>

In both her academic entrepreneurship and in her published works, Rowson embraced Locke’s principles of information and entertainment, signaling her belief in a modern education that would prepare juveniles for the dangers of the world. That belief must be read within the context of evolving views of childhood and education as well as evolving applications of the conversion narrative. *Mentoria* emerges finally as a text that vividly demonstrates the wages of sin and seeks the transformation of girls into products of emotional self-restraint in a way that secularizes the Christian passion that Janeway and other Calvinist authors in the seventeenth century (and beyond) lauded. Appropriating and altering the popular form of the conversion narrative, Rowson mentors young women and guides them toward a virtue that lay outside strict theological lines. She directs her readers to observe and learn from her novel’s passionate characters, much as *Mentoria* calls upon her own pupils to observe and learn. By vicariously observing other girls’ disasters and downfalls, young readers witness social damnation while avoiding the consequences of similar sins themselves. *Mentoria* is significant, ultimately, not only as seduction story for young readers, but as a didactic work that builds on evolving educational models and older literary conventions. Situating *Mentoria* within the children’s literary culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries grants fresh complexity to Rowson’s work and enriches our understanding of children’s literature and seduction narratives alike.

## Notes

This essay benefitted from the thoughtful readings and helpful suggestions of Desiree Henderson, Jennifer Desiderio, and Susan Stewart as well as the anonymous readers for *Studies in American Fiction*.

1. James Janeway, *A Token for Children, Being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children* (1671–1672; repr., Boston, 1700). The American edition of *A Token for Children* included a supplement entitled “A Token for the Children of New-England” written by Cotton Mather and relating the conversion and death stories of seven colonial children, along with “Some Scriptural Hymns for Children.”
2. Susanna Rowson, *Mentoria; or the Young Lady's Friend* (Philadelphia: Campbell, 1794).
3. Widespread definition and segmentation of the pre-adult years did not find firmer articulation until the late-nineteenth century, and the label “adolescence” was not used in a widespread fashion until the twentieth century (though psychologist G. Stanley Hall coined the word “adolescence” in 1898). As a result, writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth century did not as a rule distinguish between what we would now call “child” and “adolescent.” Further discussion on the rise of “adolescent literature” and adolescence as a distinct phase in life appears in Jane H. Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Twain, Alcott, and the Birth of the Adolescent Reform Novel* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007); Anja Müller, ed., *Fashioning Childhood in the Eighteenth Century: Age and Identity* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006); and Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* (New York: Viking, 2007). I use such terms as “juvenile,” “children,” “girl,” and “young reader” to convey a wide range of ages without resorting to more modern terms like adolescent and their contemporary connotations. Furthermore, scholars of children's literature generally view a continuum between “childhood” and “adolescence” and often include seamless analysis of works directed toward young children as well as those directed toward people on the cusp of adulthood. Hence, I classify both *A Token for Children* and *Mentoria* as children's literature, despite the presumed (and arguably *only* presumed) difference in the ages of their ideal reading audiences.
4. See, for instance, Marion Rust, *Prodigal Daughters: Susanna Rowson's Early American Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).
5. For discussion of seventeenth-century Calvinists as the forebears of our modern conceptions of childhood, see Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Vintage, 1965); Gillian Avery, *Behold the Child: American Children and their Books, 1621–1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); and Seth Lerer, *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
6. Avery, *Behold the Child*, 20–21.
7. See, for instance, Warren W. Wooden, “John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and the Child Reader,” in *The Child and the Story: An Exploration of Narrative Forms*, ed. Priscilla Ord (Boston: Children's Literature Association, 1983), 147–156.



8. Diana Pasulka, "A Somber Pedagogy: A History of the Child Death Bed Scene in Early American Children's Religious Literature, 1674–1840," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 2.2 (Spring 2009), 173.
9. Quoted in Avery, *Behold the Child*, 94.
10. *Ibid.*, 34.
11. Janeway, *Token for Children*, n.p. Janeway here presages one of Locke's metaphors, that of the adult as the "gardener" who must cultivate his plot of land (the child) and remove any noxious "weeds," or bad habits. Locke remarks in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* that "the Plough and the Harrow, the Spade and the Pick-ax must go deep to come at the Roots; and all the Force, Skill, and Diligence we can use, is scarce enough to cleanse the vitiated Seed-Plot overgrown with Weeds, and restore us the Fruits, to reward our Pains in its season." John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1880), 63. See also Margaret J. M. Ezell, "John Locke's Images of Childhood: Early Eighteenth-Century Response to *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17.2 (Winter 1983–84): 151–52 and Kristen Leigh Hague, "John Locke and Eighteenth-Century Education for Women: The Didactic Novel as Lockean Education in the Fiction of Sarah Fielding and Charlotte Lennox," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Mexico, 2001).
12. Janeway, *Token for Children*, n.p.
13. *Ibid.*, n.p.
14. *Ibid.*, n.p.
15. Janeway, *Token for Children*, n.p.
16. *Ibid.*, n.p.
17. Janeway's description in Volume 1 of a converted two-year-old brought skepticism from some readers, and he devoted several introductory pages in Volume 2 supporting the veracity of his claims that such a young child could experience true, conscious conversion.
18. Pasulka, "Somber Pedagogy," 179.
19. Janeway, *Token for Children*, 29.
20. *Ibid.*, 102–03.
21. *Ibid.*, 7.
22. *Ibid.*, 10.
23. *Ibid.*, 15–16.
24. *Ibid.*, 26.
25. *Ibid.*, 39.
26. *Ibid.*, n.p.
27. *Ibid.*, n.p.
28. *Ibid.*, n.p.
29. Before Locke, such writers as Francis Bacon and John Amos Comenius had articulated some of the same core ideas that Locke would make famous. Furthermore, even Janeway in the mid-seventeenth century incorporated some of the same pedagogical tools associated with eighteenth-century

pedagogy, including the use of vivid sensory examples and direct appeals to logic. Additionally, scholars should not overlook the fact that just as Rowson drew upon established, religiously-inspired narrative conventions and ideas, so did Locke himself. Jay Fliegelman observes that while readers associate Locke with rationality, his "emphasis on the dangers of a fallen world of false appearances betrays the Puritan character he himself had received." Indeed, his writing betrays "an almost theological anxiety about being corrupted by 'worldliness.'" Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 15.

30. *Ibid.*, 12.
31. Ezell, "John Locke's Images," 154.
32. *Ibid.*, 154–55.
33. Locke, *Some Thoughts*, 61. For discussion of how eighteenth-century texts used physical objects in the conveyance of Lockean educational models, see Heather Klemann, "The Matter of Moral Education: Locke, Newbery, and the Didactic Book-Toy Hybrid," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 44.2 (Winter 2011): 223–44.
34. Locke, John, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (1706; repr., Oxford: Clarendon, 1881), 6.
35. Lerer, *Children's Literature*, 104. Locke's theories quickly and explicitly worked their way into mid-eighteenth-century books for children, perhaps most notably *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, published by Englishman John Newbery in 1744 and adapted and reprinted in America by Isaiah Thomas in 1787. A book "intended for the instruction and amusement" of young readers, *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* counsels parents to "subdue . . . your Children's Passions" by means of "Reasoning and mild Discipline" and by calmly pointing out to the disobedient child "the Evils that attend passionate Men." John Newbery, *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744; repr., Bedford, Mass.: Applewood, 2006), 10, 12.
36. Rowson, *Mentoria*, n.p.
37. *Ibid.*, n.p.
38. *Ibid.*, I:ii–iii.
39. *Ibid.*, I:iii.
40. *Ibid.*, I:75.
41. *Ibid.*, II:116. Melissa Homestead and Camryn Hansen provide a useful context for thinking about the publication of *Mentoria* in "Susanna Rowson's Transatlantic Career," *Early American Literature* 45.3 (2010), 619–54.
42. Dorothy Weil, *In Defense of Women: Susanna Rowson, 1762–1824* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 147.
43. Rowson, *Mentoria*, I:23. We can also read *Mentoria* in the company of other "governess" novels of the eighteenth century, which picture similar moral lessons imparted by an authoritative female educator, such as Sarah Fielding's *The Governess, or, Little Female Academy* (1749). Julia Briggs discusses this novel in terms of the feminization and "domestication of education" in the eighteenth century. Julia Briggs, "'Delightful Task!' Women, Children, and Reading in the Mid-Eighteenth

Century," in *Cultivating the Child, 1690–1914: Essays in Memory of Mitzi Myers*, ed. Donelle Rae Ruwe (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2005), 71.

44. Rowson, *Mentoria*, I:28.
45. *Ibid.*, I:29.
46. *Ibid.*, I:39.
47. *Ibid.*, I:39.
48. *Ibid.*, I:33.
49. *Ibid.*, I:35.
50. *Ibid.*, I:36.
51. *Ibid.*, I:37.
52. *Ibid.*, I:42.
53. Janeway, *Token for Children*, 77. Tabitha Alder's words of course echo the "Bride of Christ" images of Ephesians 5:22–25.
54. Rowson, *Mentoria*, I:76.
55. *Ibid.*, I:76.
56. *Ibid.*, I:77. Rowson's description draws in obvious fashion from Romantic ideals of the virtuous poor, wandering about in natural settings. It also points toward the development of yet another branch of ideologies about childhood, those influenced by Rousseau and his own version of Romanticism, which pictured children not merely as blank slates, but as innocents who would best express their moral purity when close to nature.
57. *Ibid.*, I:79.
58. *Ibid.*, I:82.
59. *Ibid.*, I:106.
60. *Ibid.*, II:5.
61. *Ibid.*, I:83.
62. *Ibid.*, I:83.
63. *Ibid.*, I:78.
64. *Ibid.*, II:17.
65. *Ibid.*, II:35.
66. *Ibid.*, II:36, II:38.
67. Cathy Davidson discusses the dangers of this seduction thoroughly in *Revolution and the Word*. Additionally, Blythe Forcey examines the dangers of textual seduction in *Charlotte Temple* specifically, arguing that in that novel Rowson takes pains to deliver "specific moral lessons" that will negate any potentially titillating scenes. Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986; rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 119–120; Blythe Forcey, "Charlotte Temple and the End of Epistolarity," *American Literature* 63.2 (June 1991): 225–241, quote at 233.
68. *Ibid.*, II:86, 87.
69. *Ibid.*, II:86.

70. Rust, *Prodigal Daughters*, 261.
71. Taking a page out of her "Essay on Female Education," Rowson's textbooks underscore her dedication to nourishing and filling young minds with something more than ornamentation and pleasure. Her *Abridgement of Universal Geography*, for instance, offers 256 pages of questions and answers, through which Rowson quizzes her students and other readers about location, industry, climate, religion, gender conditions, and similar topics. For further description of the textbooks, see Patricia Parker, *Susanna Rowson* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 103–115.

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