



Topics in American Literature: Seduction in the Age of Revolution
G41.3802
W 3:30-6:10
Prof. Bryan Waterman

The late-eighteenth-century Atlantic world was awash in seduction narratives. Often imposed on actual events—from local sex scandals to the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions—seduction plots, though invariably reductive and clichéd, carried extraordinary explanatory and interpretive force. Libertines and coquettes—staple figures of traditional seduction novels, plays, and poetry—took on new political significance in revolutionary contexts, written and rewritten with many variations in a variety of genres. In this seminar we will explore this narrative proliferation, including such contexts as the history of the novel, the laws of marriage, the politics of revolution, the fear of conspiracy, the culture of sensibility, the allegorization of female and male sexuality, the circum-Atlantic circulation of feminist thought, the dangers and seductive pleasures of reading, and the relationship between literary writing, broader print and knowledge cultures, and the public sphere. With seduction tropes drawn so readily from a variety of discursive contexts, understating “seduction” as a cluster of images and ideas demands a peculiarly *literary* history: novels, plays, and poetry throughout the eighteenth century not only represent seduction scenarios with extraordinary redundancy, but also stand accused of rendering audiences—especially female readers—vulnerable to seducers’ arts.

Through a theoretical orientation toward book history and reception study, the seminar will be primarily concerned with American readers from 1788 to 1807, but the texts and contexts will be trans- and circum-Atlantic. Two primary case studies will provide occasion for extended consideration of the ways in which contemporaries used seduction narratives: In 1788, Elizabeth Whitman, a Hartford poet in the era of the American Revolution, fled to rural Massachusetts to hide a premarital pregnancy; dying there, she wound up with a cameo appearance in the first American novel, William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), and as the prototype for one of America’s first

bestsellers, Hannah Foster's *The Coquette* (1798). Across the Atlantic, Mary Wollstonecraft aimed to usher in a revolution in female manners; after two illicit pregnancies, a controversial marriage to a fellow radical philosopher, and an early death following the birth of her second child, Wollstonecraft figured in multiple texts in England and America as both a seducer and a sentimental victim of seduction, a pattern she set in her *Letters from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) and William Godwin sealed in *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798). In addition to in-depth consideration of Whitman, Wollstonecraft, their various literary incarnations, and the ways they speak to one another across oceans and across the 1790s, we will consider a series of English and American texts, many of which were read on both sides of the Atlantic: Ann Radcliffe's 1791 novel *The Romance of the Forest* (an adaptation of which was staged in New York in the mid-90s), Thomas Holcroft's *Anna St. Ives* (1792), Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond, or the Secret Witness* (1799), and Leonora Sansay's *Secret History, or the Horrors of St. Domingo* (1807). We will also read an American edition of Richardson's *Clarissa* from the 1790s and consider that novel's ongoing popularity and permutations in a post-Revolutionary American context.

In spite of a recent spate of criticism on seduction novels from this period, some of which we will consider together, much remains to be explained about the broad appeal of the seduction scenario at the intersection of gender, state, and literary politics: what relationships do figures of seduced heroines and seduced publics, libertines and coquettes, have to the age's revolutions in politics and manners? In public discourse throughout the Atlantic world at the turn of the nineteenth century, sexual libertines become political conspirators, and Jacobins scheme to seduce the wives and daughters of the virtuous political leaders they aim to subvert. We will aim together to understand the reasons why.

Requirements include active participation, two presentations, and a 20-page term paper.

Students with field interests in early America, British Romanticism, and Atlantic Studies are particularly encouraged to register.