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Teaching Charlotte Lennox's Harriot Stuart: Romance, the Eighteenth-Century Novel, and Transatlantic Fictions

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Teaching Charlotte Lennox's *Harriot Stuart*: Romance, the Eighteenth-Century Novel, and Transatlantic Fictions

Abstract

Harriot Stuart is well worth teaching because it offers rich possibilities both for discussing literary forms such as heroic romance, epistolary form, and women's narrative voices, and for investigating topics such as the transatlantic experience, colonialism, and representations of Native Americans. Whether in a course focused specifically on Charlotte Lennox's works or in a more broadly focused course in eighteenth-century fiction, *Harriot Stuart* can help students learn about the possibilities for women's empowerment and about transatlantic and racial ideas during the period.

Keywords

Teaching, Literature, Novel, Charlotte Lennox; Harriot Stuart

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Charlotte Lennox's first novel, *The Life of Harriot Stuart, Written by Herself* (1750), is among the least taught of Lennox's works. Although eighteenth-century scholars know it as the novel that brought Lennox enough fame to be fêted and crowned with laurel by Samuel Johnson, the Open Syllabus Explorer (opensyllabus.org) finds no syllabi that include it.¹ No syllabi including *Harriot Stuart* turned up in a wider internet search, either.² One obvious reason is that the novel is not available in an affordable annotated edition.³ I must admit that this lack of availability has kept me from assigning the novel, much as I would like to. A novel that launched Lennox's forty-some-year writing career would be valuable on that ground alone, of course, but this novel has much more to offer. Students will enjoy its adventure-packed plot, featuring five captivities and multiple voyages, and faculty will appreciate the rich variety of discussions it can open up. *Harriot Stuart* is well worth teaching because it offers rich possibilities both for discussing literary forms such as heroic romance, epistolary form, and women's narrative voices, and for investigating topics such as the transatlantic experience, colonialism, and representations of Native Americans. Whether in a course focused specifically on Charlotte Lennox's works or in a more broadly focused course in eighteenth-century fiction, *Harriot Stuart* can help students learn about the possibilities for women's empowerment and about transatlantic and racial ideas during the period.

Since many may not have read this novel, a short summary will help ground my discussion. Harriot Stuart narrates her story in a single letter to her friend Amanda, describing herself as a coquet, a reader of heroic romance, and a writer of poetry. Her story begins with her rescue from a burning London theater by the handsome Lord S—. Almost immediately thereafter, Harriot's father, an army officer, is posted to colonial New York and takes his family with him. On the sea journey, Harriot flirts with Dumont, a Catholic, while her mother encourages the unpleasant suitor, Maynard. In New York, Captain Belmein courts Harriot, but his father, the governor, forbids the match; her family insists that she marry Maynard. Shortly before the wedding, Belmein disguises himself as a Native American and abducts Harriot. She escapes and returns to her family, who then cancel the wedding to Maynard. When Harriot's father dies, her mother sends her back to her aunt in England; at parting with Dumont, Harriot realizes she loves him but cannot marry him because she promised her father not to marry a Catholic. On the voyage back to England, a Spanish privateer captures Harriot's ship but is then captured by an English ship, whose captain attempts to rape her. She stabs him. In London, Harriot discovers that her aunt has been declared mad, leaving Harriot unprotected. A court lady takes her in but promptly turns her out on a false accusation. Dumont, newly converted to Protestantism, shows up in London, and he and Harriot plan to marry. Dumont's family prevents the marriage by

imprisoning Harriot in a Paris convent. A French count steals her from the convent and keeps her prisoner until she escapes dressed as a man. Harriot finally returns to England, all confusions are cleared up, and she marries Dumont.

Harriot Stuart, Lennox, and romance

Harriot Stuart would obviously work well in an author-focused course on Charlotte Lennox, in no small part because it foregrounds the important role of romance in fiction by and about women during the eighteenth century. The long tradition of romance made its presence felt in eighteenth-century Anglophone literature via translations of Greek romances, like Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, and translations of seventeenth-century French heroic romances.⁴ Romance was becoming a contested term, however, as some authors and critics began to use it to claim the "novel" as a newly serious genre by distinguishing it from supposedly frivolous and feminine romances. Lennox's use of romance demonstrates some of the possibilities this protean genre can offer women. Harriot unashamedly proclaims herself "nothing less than a Clelia or a Statira" (Lennox, *Life* 66), and while she critiques her own coquetry, she never apologizes for emulating the women of heroic romances. In fact, that emulation of active romance heroines ensures her survival through five captivities. Intelligence and the ability to survive distinguish all of Lennox's female protagonists, but Harriot Stuart stands out because her survival depends on activity, mobility, and occasional violence in addition to wit and virtue.

Reading *Harriot Stuart* first casts a different light on the way the better-known *The Female Quixote* (1752) depicts Arabella's romance predilections. Harriot's success contrasts strikingly with Arabella's eventual submission: students could consider why Harriot can be active, often escaping confinement under her own power, while Arabella appears passive, generally screaming or running away from presumed dangers. In particular, students might compare Arabella's leap into the Thames to escape an imaginary threat (Lennox, *Female* 404-5) to the English captain's insistence "he would possess [Harriot] or die" (Lennox, *Life* 154). Arabella must be dragged from the river and falls dangerously ill; Harriot grabs the captain's dagger, shouts, "Die then!" and "thrust[s] it with all [her] force into his body" (Lennox, *Life* 154). Students will recognize that Harriot faces real threats and can defeat a man with his own weapon, but Arabella almost never faces an actual danger and often appears ridiculous in trying to get away from the ones she imagines. Students will realize, too, that Arabella's insistence on romance conventions trains Glanville to behave like Harriot's Dumont in respecting her wishes and feelings. Why, students will want to discuss, are these

heroines' contexts so different? What factors (such as family situation, status, or even geography) allow one heroine to control her own life while the other looks foolish for attempting the same thing? Why is Harriot's world still full of abductions and attempted rapes while Arabella's is not? Why must Arabella fight to convince Glanville to treat her with respect, while Dumont does not need to be taught? How does the shift from first-person to third-person narration shape the way readers respond to these fictions?

These two scenes could also lead to an analysis of how romance conventions also empower Harriot in ways unavailable to other women protagonists. Students will need some background information about seventeenth-century French heroic romances to guide them. Mark Bannister's *Privileged Mortals*, on the seventeenth-century French texts, can generate a helpful list of genre conventions: strong, active female characters who are moral and intellectual equals of men; love presented as the driving force of history; courtship as a time of women's absolute power; frequent abductions; characters recounting their histories to each other; and a transhistorical, international ideal of courtesy and generosity uniting even opponents in battle. Armed with this background, students can be asked to look for instances of each and will readily begin to pick up on the many elements of this romance tradition in *Harriot Stuart*.

Harriot exemplifies the active romance heroine's ability to escape physical danger and seize control of her own story; calling herself "a Clelia or Statira" (Lennox, *Life* 66) explicitly calls attention to her place in that tradition. Her five captivities amply fit another romance characteristic; the frequent abductions noted by Bannister. Other women share their stories with Harriot, in romance fashion: Lady Louisa (188-9), Mrs. Dormer (200-11), and Mrs. Belville (225-41). When asked to compare them, students will recognize the similarity of these stories, which all recount men's perfidy and women's suffering, and will grasp that the romance convention of sharing stories constructs a community of women supporting each other against men's abuses.⁵ The romance convention of women's power during courtship, combined with Harriot's activity and ingenuity, helps protect her from forced marriage to a hated man. Students might be asked to read closely Harriot's plan to avoid marrying Mr. Maynard by "declar[ing] (before all that were present) [her] aversion to this marriage" (Lennox, *Life* 101) – using a public voice to assert her will. Students can also then study her family's response after she escapes Belmein: her father releases her from marrying Maynard "since you know so well how to maintain the honour of your family," and her brother proclaims himself "almost ready to worship that noble pride in you" (Lennox, *Life* 119) that motivated her escape. Essentially, Harriot's strength convinces her family to respect her wishes.

Students can be guided to see how romance's ideal universal civility among heroes allows this novel to distinguish between worthy men and villains. Close reading of Harriot's suitors with attention to terms related to politeness and courtesy will help students identify these differences. Harriot's first abduction furnishes an excellent example: she first thinks her captor is "an Indian" because Belmein has disguised himself as such and enlisted some "Mohocks" to row (Lennox, *Life* 104).⁶ Recognizing Belmein, she immediately describes him as "brutal" (Lennox, *Life* 102) and realizes that the Indigenous men treat her courteously and generously: "they made me some compliments" and she remembers that "this nation [is] frequently celebrated for its politeness" (Lennox, *Life* 104). This contrast forthrightly inverts a conventional eighteenth-century narrative presumption that the English are to be read as civilized and the Indigenous peoples they encounter are to be understood as foundationally not civilized; in linking Natives explicitly to the ideal of romance civility, the text also highlights a problem with Belmein. Unlike a proper romance hero, he is disrespectful of his beloved's wishes. His actions here, students will see, destroy Harriot's feelings for him. Once alerted to this inversion, students will readily identify a similar reversal when Harriot's voyage back to England is interrupted first by a Spanish pirate and then an English ship. Despite her initial fears, the Spanish captain pays her "romantic compliments," orders that she be "treated with the greatest respect," and says that she will always be "absolute where-ever [she] was" (Lennox, *Life* 138). This behavior marks him as a romance hero, respectful of women and adhering to the romance code of courtesy. The English captain's failure to follow that code identifies him as a villain. Students may even observe that the villains tend to be English, associated with the imperial military and that they tend to treat women as property whose will they need not respect.

Assigning this novel first, in a Lennox course, brings the significance of the romance genre in the eighteenth century and in the novel genre into sharp relief. It is this novel, after all, that prompted Samuel Johnson to host a celebration of Lennox during which he crowned her with laurel to signify her achievement of literary greatness (Carlile 74). That celebration casts Johnson's well-known condemnation of romance in *Rambler* 4 in a different light, indicating that he did value some instances of the genre and that the binary he sets up in that essay should not be taken as absolute. To facilitate the novel's inclusion in this kind of course, teachers could provide excerpts that highlight its romance elements, such as the opening section in which Harriot describes herself (Lennox, *Life* 63-67), the five abductions (Lennox, *Life* 101-19; 138-9; 140-56; 217-24; 246-61), and scenes in which Harriot (or another character) explicitly follows romance's conventions of behavior (76-8; 123; 138; 200-11). Even selections from the novel will help

students trace the ways in which the romance genre's capacity to enable women's agency shows up throughout Lennox's long career as a writer.

***Harriot Stuart* and the eighteenth-century novel**

Lennox's first novel would also enrich more broadly defined courses on the eighteenth-century novel. A largely canonical syllabus would benefit from placing *Harriot Stuart* alongside Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1724), Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), and Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742), for example: Harriot presents a very different kind of female protagonist than Moll or Pamela and a very different kind of travel narrative than Joseph, and the comparison could get students thinking about how assumptions about gender roles have shaped the old canon. A less canonical syllabus could more fully trace versions of women's stories, including novels by Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, Jane Barker, Eliza Haywood, Richardson, Sarah Fielding, Sarah Robinson Scott, Frances Brooke, Charlotte Smith, and Ann Radcliffe. Many of us already teach similar classes, of course, but *Harriot Stuart* would enrich them by challenging students' expectations that eighteenth-century women characters must be either quiet good girls or active bad girls and by explicitly placing romance in the novel tradition. Harriot is undomesticated, fierce, and virtuous. She is not a dangerously mobile woman like Moll Flanders or Sylvia, a domestic or imprisoned virtuous woman like Pamela or Clarissa, nor an itinerant sentimental woman driven from house and home, as in so many novels of the period with female protagonists.⁷ Romance conventions contribute to this difference in a significant way by setting up a paradigm that links mobility and activity to virtue. Sentimentalism links passive suffering to female virtue, and Harriot will have none of that.

One way of illustrating these differences in the classroom would be to ask students to find textual examples of the emotions Harriot describes during her abductions. She repeatedly describes her rage at the men who attempt to abuse her: she is "enraged" when Belmein abducts her (Lennox, *Life* 109), speaks out in a "sally of rage" (Lennox, *Life* 153) against the English captain, and expresses her "rage . . . at being thus hindered from procuring [her] liberty" (Lennox, *Life* 251) during her fifth captivity. And these are only a few of the many instances of Harriot's rage. This fury contributes to her active escapes. She refuses to accept the patriarchal restrictions that would render her a mere possession, repossessing herself through her enraged activity. Including analysis of romance conventions here, just as in a Lennox-focused course, would enhance these conversations. Assigning this novel in a class on novels about women will give students an

instance of a “successful female life” in which a woman achieves “mastery” (Carlile 67).

Harriot Stuart and transatlantic fictions

Perhaps one of the most fruitful possibilities for *Harriot Stuart* could be including it in a course on transatlantic fiction in the eighteenth century. Other texts could include, for example, Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* (1688), Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Penelope Aubin’s *The Noble Slaves* (1722), Eliza Haywood’s *The Rash Resolve* (1724), *The Female American* (1767), Frances Brooke’s *The History of Emily Montague* (1769), and Lennox’s *Euphemia* (1790). Each of these novels features characters who cross the Atlantic, and many of them include representations of Native Americans. Such a course would allow for similar conversations about women’s voices and stories with comparison to a paradigmatic male narrative like *Robinson Crusoe*. The transatlantic components would provoke class discussions through the novels’ varying representations of crossings by traders, enslaved people, colonizers, and soldiers of empire, as well as women (often accompanying husbands or fathers).

To facilitate access to the novel in a transatlantic course, teachers could provide a long excerpt including the novel’s beginning, Harriot’s first Atlantic crossing, and all her time in New York (Lennox, *Life* 66-131) or a shorter excerpt focused only on her arrival in the colony through her first abduction and escape (Lennox, *Life* 82- 119). Students may observe that Harriot becomes tougher after her first crossing: comparing the novel’s two earliest dangerous situations can help them understand the importance of place and landscape to Harriot’s story. When Lord S— sets the London theatre on fire, she waits to be rescued: she “drowned in tears, sat motionless” (65) until Lord S— carries her out of the building. In London, she remains passive when faced with danger created by men, following the gendered conventions developing in the English novel. But when endangered in North America –abducted and kept prisoner in Belmein’s brother’s house – she protests vociferously against his actions, resists his attempts to manipulate her, and escapes through her own ingenuity and physical efforts. Far from the imperial center, she can not only act for herself, but she can also escape the constraints men seek to impose on her. The North American frontier landscape plays a transformative role here. As Belmein takes her down a river, Harriot calls it “one of the finest in the world” with a “beautiful variety of greens” on the shores and “so romantic a wildness . . . as forcibly attracted my observation” (104). During her escape, she evades pursuit by “striking into a path that led into the woods” (114), choosing the wilderness as a temporary haven. The wildness of the North

American landscape, its lack of domestication, helps Harriot resist the English military man who tries to conquer her much as the English tried to conquer the land they colonized.

After reading these two contrasting scenes closely, students will understand that Harriot's wilderness experience generates lasting change. When physically endangered, she resists successfully, often escaping under her own power. Stabbing the English captain plainly shows she can wield force when needed, and students will enjoy the humor of her verbal retort (quoted above) as well. Her escape from the French count is less violent but equally impressive. In this passage, students will see that Harriot expresses no hesitation about dressing as a man; rather, she worries that the count's "valet would never mistake [her] for his lady" (Lennox, *Life* 256), the count's cast-off mistress who disguised herself as a man to see her rival. In other words, Harriot does not worry about passing as a man but about passing as a standard European feminine woman. By working through this sequence of scenes, students will recognize how Harriot's North American experience empowers her in ways that challenge eighteenth-century gender norms and later get appropriated for male heroes of the Western.⁸

Some of these passages will also prompt discussions of this novel's representations of Native Americans, especially if *The Female American* is included in the course. Robbie Richardson's *The Savage and Modern Self* provides an excellent study of British depictions of Native Americans and will be useful not only for Lennox's novel but throughout a transatlantic course. Richardson shows how representations of Native Americans changed over the century in complex ways and can help students see the nuances of these representations. In *Harriot Stuart*, two brief passages (in addition to the first abduction) depict Native Americans. Shortly after arriving in New York, Harriot briefly visits "one of the Indian nations," and although initially fearful, she is won over by the "chiefs, who paid me a great many honours" (85) and "loaded me with presents" (85-6). Students will see here more echoes of the romance tradition of generous civility. Just before the first abduction, "the five Indian nations" arrive to "renew a treaty of peace" with the English (101). Harriot expresses wonder at the Native Americans' ability to build "a new sort of city . . . in the compass of a few hours" (101), which creates "a very new and beautiful prospect" (102). Along with the abduction scene in which Belmein disguises himself, these scenes combine an image of the "rational Indian" whose culture and innate reason make him a positive model with the strong sense that, as Richardson notes of the "Mohock" phenomenon in London, "the performance of an Indian or 'savage' subjectivity . . . meant degeneration into savagery" for British subjects (Richardson 29). Assigning Richardson's first chapter as secondary reading can

help students see how Lennox uses her depiction of Native American characters and community to suggest a critique of English empire-building and treatment of women.

Comparing *Harriot Stuart* to *The Female American* in a transatlantic course can further expand students' understanding of eighteenth-century British attitudes about race. Here, too, students might find Richardson's book helpful, especially its reading of *The Female American*. *The Female American*'s half British, half Native American protagonist, Unca Eliza Winkfield, critiques English imperialism rather differently than does *Harriot Stuart*. Although *The Female American* depicts Native Americans inaccurately, it still presents an active heroine empowered by her Indigenous heritage and voices the idea that Native peoples have the right to reject European colonization. Students will be struck by the king's address to the British: "why then have you taken possession of our lands, ate our fruits, and made our countrymen prisoners? Had you no lands of your own?" (*Female American* 48). Unca Eliza's power to refuse unwanted marriage partners by drawing on a skill set honed in her Indigenous community will be valuable to compare to Harriot's rejection of Maynard. Students will also identify some similarities between Harriot's Atlantic crossings and Unca Eliza's: both women are threatened with sexual violence at sea. Their trajectories diverge here, however: Harriot makes her way back to England as a white woman empowered to protect herself from male violence, while Unca Eliza is deposited on an island where she chooses Native identity over English and cuts off contact with England to protect her people from imperial violence. Despite its conflation of Native Americans with other cultural traditions,⁹ *The Female American* can provide grounds for students to recognize how limited the representation of Native Americans is in *Harriot Stuart* and other novels of the time.

This short essay by no means exhausts the possibilities of teaching Charlotte Lennox's first novel; rather, I have attempted here to suggest some of the ways in which *Harriot Stuart* can open up valuable conversations with students in a wide variety of courses. This novel has the potential to challenge students' assumptions about the agency available to women during the eighteenth century, about the relationship between romance and the novel, and about attitudes toward the developing British empire. Susan K. Howard's edition has made this fascinating, engaging novel more available for scholars, and Susan Carlile's excellent biography of Lennox has helped draw greater attention to her significance as an eighteenth-century writer. Surely a publisher like Broadview might be willing to produce a usable, affordable classroom edition that will give students a chance to read and discuss it as well, but *Harriot Stuart* is entirely teachable even now using

excerpts and licensed copies and course materials. It is very much worth the effort.

Notes

¹ The site lists two hundred fourteen syllabus appearances for *The Female Quixote*, ten for *Euphemia*, four for *Old City Manners*, and one each for *Henrietta*, *Sophia*, and *Shakespear Illustrated*.

² It may, of course, appear on syllabi that aren't indexed by the Open Syllabus Explorer or available online. But if it's difficult to find any instances of it being taught, that does suggest it is not much assigned to students.

³ Susan K. Howard's 1995 scholarly edition, published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, costs \$114, well beyond a reasonable price for most students. Print-on-demand and unannotated online editions are available but are often error-riddled. Hardy students might tackle a scanned version from Eighteenth Century Collections Online or HathiTrust, but neither database includes the text.

⁴ The *Aethiopica* was first translated into English in 1569 and was retranslated in 1717 and again in 1753 just after *The Female Quixote* was published; it was an important influence on early English fiction. The seventeenth-century French heroic romances were translated into English almost immediately and remained popular and available into the eighteenth century, with editions of Madeleine de Scudery's texts appearing in 1702, 1708, 1714, 1728, 1744, and 1768.

⁵ Lady Louisa turns against Harriot because her beloved transfers his affections to Harriot, but Harriot herself rejects him and tries to maintain the female community.

⁶ Robbie Richardson's *The Savage and Modern Self: North American Indians in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture*, discussed later in this essay, will also help with this class discussion.

⁷ I take the term "itinerant sentimentalism" from Marion Rust's work; she applies it to early American fiction, but it clearly applies to many eighteenth-century novels by women.

⁸ For the argument that *Harriot Stuart* is the first Western, see Kvande and Spurgeon.

⁹ *The Female American*'s hollow statue of the sun on top of a complex subterranean building, for instance, has no link to any Native American tradition. Strikingly, it is surprisingly similar to a building "founded upon vaults" in Aubin's *The Noble Slaves* housing an image of the sun and a mysterious speaking statue (23-25).

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