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Susan Manning

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SUSAN MANNING

## Characterless Women and Representative Men: a Transatlantic Perspective

Nothing so true as what you once let fall,  
'Most Women have no Characters at all.'

Alexander Pope. 'On the Characters of Women,' 1735

[As] the American has, in fact, yet no character; neither the clown, nor the gentleman ... I could not take one from our country, which I would much rather have done as the scene lay there.

Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Preface (1805) to *Modern Chivalry*

Every man's nature is a sufficient advertisement to him of the character of his fellows.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Politics' (1844)

Was there, or might there be, a specifically American 'national character'? A century before this question enlivened post-Revolutionary debates on cultural independence, a highly developed discourse of 'character' and its alternatives was being explored in British literature in relation to gender and class. At the interface of literary and political representation, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century observers of America such as Hector St John de Crèvecoeur and Alexis de Tocqueville argued that mobility or even rejection of 'character' had become an ideologically sanctioned option for self-representation in America, a means of turning away from the mirror of British identity. Their views and those of American advocates of 'national difference' have been recruited by more recent contemporary cultural critics such as Larzar Ziff and Michael Warner who claim that nineteenth-century American writing displays a special

politically-motivated concern with the relationship between representation and representativeness. The case, as I shall argue in this essay, looks less clear if representation as defined by a Habermasian public sphere focused on the interaction of print and political cultures is situated in a wider Anglo-American *literary* history of character in which representation as an ethical and aesthetic issue cannot be separated from gender.<sup>1</sup> Questions of a different type present themselves: for example, if representation of character invites affective engagement, whether of identification, amusement or repulsion, what are the functions and the affective results of representing character *lessness*? Or, how do genre, gender, and class inflect the expressive possibilities of character? Attending to a series of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglo-American works involving focal figures whose 'character' is to be characterless, or which discuss the opportunities of character-denial, the essay will consider some continuities and transformations involved between texts across time and space. Introducing the multiple interactive variables of gender, class, time, place and genre offers, I shall argue, some critical purchase on the exceptionalist reading above. The larger purpose will be to argue that transatlantic critical comparison benefits from the reintroduction of rhetoric to the practices of literary history.

Literary history cannot begin without acknowledging the inseparability of 'representation' from 'character.' They are semantically linked in English; the OED's examples, which date back to Shoreham around 1315, to Wyclif and to Caxton, make it clear that discussion of one almost necessarily implicates the other. Of eight primary definitions of the word 'character' in Samuel Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, four—all those not about personhood—refer specifically to letters, marks, writing or forms of impression / inscription. The relevant ones are 'a representation of any man as to his personal qualities' and 'an account of anything as good or bad: the description one gives of another to get them a job, for example. Additionally, attribution of character to another implied a proprietorial relationship.'<sup>2</sup> There is nothing, therefore, in semantics to suggest a peculiarly American association of character with representation, either pre- or post-'print culture.'

The dominant mode of character *writing* at the beginning of the eighteenth century was the Theophrastan type: character as rhetorically construed for exemplary purposes, of classical origin and long pre-dating print culture. Theophrastus, a student of Aristotle, wrote short studies of Greek personalities: his figures included typologies of the Boor, the Logacious Man, the Social Parasite, the Miser. A sixteenth-century text of Theophrastan fragments prompted a revival in Samuel Butler's satiri-