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Despite the steady pressure on the category of the nation in US literary history in recent decades and some recent attention to loyalism by literary historians (e.g. a recent special issue of *Early American Literature* on the subject), the principle of to-the-victor-the-spoils still largely prevails in the field and in the broader cultural imagination. In Kacy Tillman’s book on the textual productions of relatively unknown loyalist women, she thus faces challenges on several fronts. Her subjects—elite class white women in the Delaware Valley, mostly married, many (but not) of them Quakers—wrote primarily for manuscript circulation; the works Tillman analyzes are thus primarily in the genres of the letter, the journal, and the petition. I have studied and taught early American fiction, but because of this focus I faced the book with some trepidation.

I soon discovered that Tillman’s study is lively and engaging partly because she puts herself and her search of the homes of loyalist women at the beginning of every chapter, where, time and again, she encounters erasure of or revision to loyalist legacies. At Graeme Park, the home of Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson in Montgomery County, outside Philadelphia, as Tillman and her tour guide examine a miniature replica of Fergusson’s house, which, paradoxically, is on display inside the house itself, the tour guide leans in and whispers confidentially, “Do you think that Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson was a loyalist?” The implication is that an affirmative answer would be scandalous. In each chapter, Tillman moves from such an anecdote to an overview of the historical situation in which each woman (or women) found herself (or themselves), before launching into readings of each woman’s (or women’s) textual productions and her rhetorical aims in adopting particular genres and writing to particular audiences.

Fergusson occupies Tillman’s fifth chapter, and what comes before enables readers to understand both Fergusson’s complex life situation and textual maneuverings. All of these loyalist women were of the property-owning class, and although being “stripped” could entail stripping a loyalist woman of her clothes to humiliate her (and the threat of rape behind such stripping), confiscation of real estate for the benefit of the rebel forces loomed large for most of Tillman’s subjects. Grace Growden Galloway’s husband was accused of treason and fled to England, while she stayed behind in Bensalem Township to protect Trevose. This estate was, despite the principles of coverture, solely her property, not her husband’s, because she had inherited it from her father. Throughout, Tillman emphasizes that “loyalism” did not mean one thing but rather encompassed a variety of positions on a sliding scale—Galloway was disaffected, rhetorically cutting ties
to both the American and the British side. Likewise, genres and ideas of publicity versus privacy are unstable and mixed. In Galloway’s case, her journal of her trials at Trevose was not strictly private or addressed only to herself but was, at times, addressed to members of her family, like a letter. As a woman who owned substantial real estate in Pennsylvania and who was married to an exiled man loyal to the crown, she did not have access to political power, yet the rebels sought to confiscate her property because of her husband’s political actions. She lost the fight, but in her letter-journal, she justified herself and her property claims for her family and posterity. She also “rhetorically divorced her husband” (38), with whom she never reunited, staying in the new republic while living as a disaffected recluse.

The rebels did not approve Quaker pacifism, and a fabricated letter from the nonexistent Spanktown Friends meeting got a group of Philadelphia-area Quaker men exiled to Virginia. Sarah Logan Fisher and Elizabeth Drinker, as Tillman argues, were “proxies for their imprisoned spouses and fellow Quakers,” although they “refused to suffer silently” (50). Fisher and Drinker both used their journals to question the legitimacy of the revolutionary project that saw their husbands banished. Furthermore, a group of Quaker women collectively addressed a letter to George Washington (which both Fisher and Drinker signed) that pled for the release of the Virginia exiles. Put another way, they responded to the consequences of a fake letter with a real letter, in which they strategically deployed sentiment and represented themselves as helpless female dependents. Their appeals achieved their desired end. Even though Margaret Hill Morris was a Quaker, she used her letter-journal to “script” neutrality rather than pacifism. Rebecca Shoemaker and her daughter Anna Rawle, who were not Quakers, are the straight-up loyalists of Tillman’s book that the term loyalty more narrowly defined would suggest. Even though Shoemaker inherited Laurel Hill from her first husband and her second husband was only tenant by curtesy—a common law giving a husband ownership of his deceased wife’s property—the estate was nevertheless confiscated as a result of the exiled Samuel Shoemaker’s treason. In response, the disbursed family used coded letters and letter-journals to maneuver around barriers erected by the rebels.

Fergusson, probably one of the better known of Tillman’s subjects because she wrote poetry and sometimes wrote for publication, is arguably the most complicated case of the book, both because of her independent role as a sort of courier in public scandals about treasonous letters and because of the variety of genres she took up and audiences for which she wrote. Fergusson also wrote these texts over an extended period of time. I can’t hope to replicate Tillman’s subtle reading of these texts (or Tillman’s wry analysis in her epilogue of how Deborah Logan Fisher became an important historian of the American revolution by revising out her own loyalist history). Nevertheless, I was thoroughly engrossed by Tillman’s account, and, as in Tillman’s other case studies, felt compelled by
the complex role that coverture played. Like Galloway, Fergusson had her property confiscated for her husband’s actions and never reunited with him. In the end, however, Fergusson scripted for herself a form of patriotism that was not nationalistic.

Tillman smartly keeps a tight focus on the (mostly) manuscript genres in which her subjects wrote rather than generalizing beyond them, and, as she cogently argues, loyalist women could access the public sphere of print only with great difficulty. Yet Tillman’s study has the potential to spur new thinking on women’s novels in the late eighteenth century. In Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (1986), Cathy Davidson influentially argued that the novel in the early republic privileged the feme covert, the legal term in the common law for a woman “covered” in marriage. Nevertheless, the seduction novel and thus victimized unmarried women are at the center of the novelistic tradition Davidson first analyzed some 35 years ago. What might result from thinking of the life and novels of Susanna Haswell Rowson through Tillman’s work, for example? As a child, Susanna Haswell was in Massachusetts with her family when the revolution broke out. Because her British Naval officer father refused to abandon his allegiance to the crown, their property was confiscated, and they were placed under house arrest until a prisoner exchange allowed them to leave. Years later, the novelist fictionalized these events in The Fille de Chambre, first published in London in 1792 and then reprinted in Philadelphia in 1794 with Rowson’s cooperation and with her excoriation of the rebels intact. Rowson is a central figure in Revolution and the Word, even as Tillman’s book has returned me to Rowson (and to the first half of the American literature survey) with fresh eyes.