

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 1

Article 8

1999

Mordecai Manuel Noah's She Would Be a Soldier: An American Expression of Personal Identity

Jamie Smith
Mercyhurst College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Jamie (1999) "Mordecai Manuel Noah's She Would Be a Soldier: An American Expression of Personal Identity," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol1/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Mordecai Manuel Noah's *She Would Be a Soldier*: An American Expression of Personal Identity



Mordecai Manuel Noah's
*She Would Be a Soldier: An American
Expression of Personal Identity*

Jamie Smith
Mercyhurst College

Books which imitate or represent the thoughts and life of Europe do not constitute an American literature. Before such can exist, an original idea must animate this nation and fresh currents of life must call into life fresh thoughts along its shores

Margaret Fuller
Woman in the Nineteenth Century

Throughout the nineteenth century, Americans struggled to find a national identity separate from that of Great Britain. Expressing different thoughts, beliefs and values through the venue of literature was one way that the nation tried to gain its independence. Mordecai Manuel Noah, a Jewish playwright of the 1800s, created his "American" drama by writing plays that reflect and critique public notions about human conduct and society in order to both counter and confirm incipient American stereotypes. Instead of merely imitating the European, and specifically, the British styles and subject matters of literature, Noah brought "fresh thoughts" to the "new" nation by writing some "of the earliest dramatic presentations of an American theme [with] no foreign model to guide [him]" (Friedman 156). Openly confronting the societal boundaries set forth by white, middle-class men, Noah sought to expose the tensions that existed throughout an America composed of different cultural traditions, identities, and ideologies. In his play, *She Would Be a Soldier*, Noah critiques American society through the portrayal of four "type" characters: Jerry Mayflower, the American farmer; Captain Pendragon, the Englishman; Christine, the nineteenth century woman; and the Indian chief, a noble savage. As Noah presents the stereotypes embodied in these characters through satirizing descriptions and actions, the audience discovers that one's personal and national identity do not necessarily parallel the "normal" standards of culture and society.

Through his depiction of Jerry Mayflower as a drunken pig farmer, Noah mocks the idealization of an “authentic” American farmer. As an admirable citizen and a decent, hard-working man, the ideal American farmer is someone who is best educated by both books and nature. Because of his broad intelligence and knowledge of the land and animals he is thought to be a more well-rounded person. In the age of a Jeffersonian democracy and agrarian society, the ideal American is defined in *Letters From an American Farmer* by Crèvecoeur:

He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. . . . The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions. (857)

It seems as if this farmer realizes the diversity that exists in the “new” nation and understands that all men, farmers included, must work together to create an America that its citizens can be proud of. The farmer goes on to explain,

Here (in America) individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the East The American ought therefore to love this country much better than that wherein either he or his forefathers were born. (Crèvecoeur 857)

Respecting the ideas and opinions of all people, Crèvecoeur’s farmer implies that people of all nationalities and races are valuable to America’s national identity. As a man who is dedicated to his people, land, and country, the ideal American farmer is held up as a good role model to all those who wish to be respectable American citizens.

By creating Jerry Mayflower, Noah portrays a man who is exactly the opposite of the ideal American farmer. Because he is not well-educated, Jerry is depicted as a “country bumpkin” who does not seem to work very hard. As a farmer, he must understand the land and the laws of nature; because of his limited education this seems to be all that he understands. Unlike the ideal American farmer, Jerry is narrow-minded and does not respect everyone around him. One indication of Mayflower’s level of education is shown when he is told how smart Christine is. He remarks, “O, fiddle-de-dee, I don’t mind how larned she is, so much the better—she can teach me to parlyvoo, and dance solos and duets, and such elegant things,

when I've done ploughing" (Noah 1381). Furthermore, proving that he does not accept all people as equal, Mayflower protests when he hears that Christine is able to shoot a deer from any distance—

Bring down a buck? I don't like that—can't say as how I like my wife to meddle with bucks. Can she mend—knit garters—make apple butter and maple sugar—dance a reel after midnight, and ride behind her husband on a pony, to see the trainings of our sogers—that's the wife for my money. (Noah 1382)

Believing that females and other minorities are lesser individuals, Mayflower thinks that women do not contribute as much to society as white men such as himself do. This assumption serves as a direct contrast with the beliefs and actions of the ideal American farmer who is willing to let everyone participate in the creation of the "new" America. Thus, while Jerry Mayflower is a farmer, and also an American, his character fully contradicts the so-called ideal as well as the typical American farmer.

Like Jerry Mayflower, Captain Pendragon, another of Noah's characters, counters the stereotype that society has imposed upon him. As a very proper and snobbish man, this ideal British character appears as a foppish "foreigner whose exaggerated opinions, dress, and soldierly mannerisms serve to mark [him] out for ridicule" (Gallagher 138). Since the typical Englishman benefits financially from the colonies in America, he looks down upon those who are not as "well off" as he. Clearly, he does not wish to associate with Americans or visit their "back woods" country.

Although Captain Pendragon seems to fit the stereotype of the foppish Englishman, his character develops into one who kindly and thoughtfully accepts the beliefs and ideas of the people around him. When he is introduced, Pendragon, dressed in the "extreme" of fashion, is complaining about the lack of food and resources in America. Revealing his great sense of pride and British nationalism, he refers to himself as "the honourable Captain Pendragon, of his majesty's guards, formerly of the bluffs" (Noah 1389). By bestowing this title upon himself, the captain implies that he ranks higher in society than his American counterparts. Appearing very snobbish, he looks down upon Americans because they do not have such delicacies as anchovies or hyson and souchong tea. When the tavern waiter offers him bear meat for dinner, Pendragon exclaims,

Bear meat! Why, what the devil, fellow do you take me for a Chickasaw, or an Esquimau? Bear meat! the honourable captain Pendragon, who never ate anything more gross than a cutlet at Molly's chop-house, and who lived on pigeons' livers at Very's, in Paris, offered bear meat in North America! I'll put that down in my travels. (Noah 1388)

Thinking that only savages and uncivilized people eat bear meat, Pendragon's refusal of American food implies that he believes himself to be better than a savage. Later, when the Indian chief arrives and informs him that he is to be under Indian leadership, the audience learns that Pendragon is not as superficial as he first seemed. After the Indian chief explains the military situation, the captain speaks of him, stating, "A very clever spoken fellow, pon honour; I'll patronise him" (Noah 1389). By calling the Indian "clever spoken" and being sincere in this compliment, Pendragon demonstrates the fact that he cares about more than just his own appearance and well-being. As the play progresses, the captain reveals that he is even more open-minded by agreeing to dress like an Indian during battle and by acting benevolently towards the Americans when he is captured. Taking up the philosophy, "Enemies in war—in peace, friends," the captain addresses his American captor with the words, "Sir, you speak very like a gentleman, and I shall be happy to taste Burgundy with you at the Horse Guards" (Noah 1397). In this friendly statement, Pendragon exhibits qualities of courtesy and respect for the American soldier; qualities that are not found in the "type" character of the Englishman. Creating Pendragon to be fairly similar to the typical Englishman, Noah also depicts the captain as a kind, fair man who has learned to accept the customs and views of other races and nationalities.

The third character that Noah portrays in his play is Christine, a strong-willed woman whose character completely counters the stereotype of the nineteenth century woman. During the 1800s, females were stereotypically fragile, helpless creatures who were happy and content being subservient to their husbands. Placed in the "appropriate sphere" of the home and family, women did not need education because they would never amount to anything more than a house wife. The dialogue that follows is taken from *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* by Sarah Margaret Fuller (1717) and reveals the overall attitude that men had towards any attempt to remove women from their assigned "sphere" in the nineteenth century:

'Is it not enough,' cries the irritated trader, 'that you have done all you could to break up the national union. . . but now you must be trying to break up family union, to take my wife away from the cradle and the kitchen hearth to vote at polls, and preach from a pulpit? Of course, if she does such things, she cannot attend to those of her own sphere. She is happy enough as she is. She has more leisure than I have, every means of improvement, every indulgence.'

'Have you asked her whether she was satisfied with these indulgences?'

'No, but I know she is. She is too amiable to wish what would make me unhappy, and too judicious to wish to step beyond the sphere of her sex. I will never consent to have our peace disturbed by any such discussions.' (1717)

Along with the idea that women happily belonged in the home and were content to serve their husbands came the belief that girls should get married while they were young. Any female who was not married or did not at least have plans to marry was called a spinster and was thought to be unattractive or undesirable. Likewise, any woman who did not comply with the idea of subservience was seen as a stubborn, insensible girl who would never "catch" a husband.

Rebelling against the stereotype of the nineteenth-century woman, Noah characterizes Christine as a brave, strong-willed woman. Because she was raised differently from other females and she was given a military education by her father, Christine is able to "crack a bottle at twelve paces with a pistol" and "bring down a buck, at any distance" (Noah 1382). Her education and intelligence is more than one would expect to find in a woman living in the 1800s. When her father expects her to marry a distasteful man that she does not even like, Christine develops a plan to disguise herself as a male soldier and follow her true love to an army camp. Proving her courage and resourcefulness, she disobeys her father, dons a frock coat, pantaloons, and a hat, and runs away before anyone notices. Because of her military education and the survival skills that she has been taught, Christine is able to pass herself off as a male soldier when she arrives at the camp. Throughout the play, she never exhibits the qualities of the female "type" character. Instead, she reveals to the audience that she *is not* happy conforming to society's standard ideas of how women should behave; Christine never appears in a kitchen or a house and is never seen taking care of her family. She bravely escapes an unwanted marriage and pursues her own happiness.

Like Mayflower, Pendragon, and Christine, the character of the Indian chief does not fit the standards that society places upon him. Throughout early history, American Indians have been denigrated as ignorant savages who do not know how to behave in a civilized world. Immigrants to America did not understand the customs and cultures of these native people. Thus, they labeled them dirty, uneducated, and many times, inhuman. Furthermore, many people thought that Indians were immoral and corrupt because they did not worship the same God that the white people believed in. This stereotype comes, in part, from the literature of the colonial period in America. Because most writers at this time were very religious Puritans or Quakers, texts "supported the colonists' negative representation of Native Americans as 'savages' who inhabited Satan's domain" (Harris 342). People who encountered Indians described them as "murtherous wretches," "ravenous

Beasts," and "Barbarous Creatures" (Rowlandson 343-45).

Instead of the "type" character of the typical ignorant native, Noah portrays the Indian chief as the ideal "noble savage." As illustrated in the following passage taken from Benjamin Franklin's "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America," there were a few people who understood the Indians to be dignified, polite, and noble:

The Indian Men, when young, are Hunters and Warriors; when old, Counsellors. . . there is no Force, there are no Prisons, no Officers to compel Obedience, or inflict Punishment. Hence they generally study Oratory, the best Speaker having the most Influence. The Indian Women till the Ground, dress the Food, nurse and bring up the Children, and preserve and hand down to Posterity the Memory of public Transaction. These Employments of Men and Women are accounted natural and honourable. (754)

Franklin goes on to compliment the Indians' order and decency in conducting public councils and their excessive use of politeness in both their conversations and actions. Like Franklin's idea of the ideal Indian, the Indian chief in *She Would Be a Soldier* is remarkably well-spoken, well-educated, and extremely benevolent and polite. Brave enough to protest the white man's encroachments, the Indian chief is also sensible enough to realize that not all white men are enemies. When he and Pendragon are captured and brought to the American camp, the chief exhibits courage and great forgiveness by accepting a wampum belt as a peace token from the American General. Expressing his gratitude to the General, he declares, "I accept the token (of friendship); forgive my rage, and pardon my unjust anger. Protect our warriors and wives. . . soften their prejudices and remove their jealousies. Do this, and the red man is your friend. . . we are no longer foes" (Noah 1399). In no way does Noah's Indian chief resemble the "type" character of the ignorant native. Educated, well-spoken, brave, honorable, and polite, the chief is the epitome of the "noble savage."

Through his portrayal of Mayflower, Pendragon, Christine, and the Indian chief, Mordecai Manuel Noah "calls into question the construction of 'race,' 'nation,' and identity that were being established as a founding ideology while the colonies were becoming the so-called 'United' States" (Mulford 968). As an American-Jewish citizen, Noah used his drama to present the idea that one can find the traits of a particular stereotype or ideal in any person, not just in the race or nationality that is stereotyped by the dominant culture. One critic claims, "When [the theatre audience of the time] saw a Jew on the stage [they] expected to view a stereotype, and Noah was not prepared to satisfy this expectation" (Harap 266). Instead of placing a Jewish character on the stage, Noah exhibited so-called "Jewish" qualities in the

character of Jerry Mayflower. At this time, Jews were associated with kosher foods, large amounts of money, and patriarchal attitudes. By attributing these qualities to Jerry, the most undesirable character in the play, Noah demonstrates that almost anyone in society can display a Jewish stereotype. Likewise, he questions the characteristics of the other "type" characters, Christine, Pendragon, and the Indian chief, by letting the audience know that one's personal identity does not have to be based upon race, nationality, or gender.

Because of its themes of cultural diversity and its confrontation of ideologies and societal norms, Noah's drama is considered to be specifically American. During the 19th century, America was different from European countries in that many different nationalities and races were mixed together within its boundaries. People from different countries around the world immigrated to the "new" nation to form a new nationality of Americans. Since Noah's play uses "fresh thoughts" to reflect the societal tensions that existed throughout America due to the conflicting opinions and prejudices of the people. It is classified as an uniquely "American" drama. This American drama, and many others like it, contributes to the venue of literature that the nation used to express its national identity. Each race and culture that makes up the United States is essential to the national identity of the country. Noah's play helps the audience realize that without the personal identities that are unique to the people of each community and culture, the national identity of America would not be as varied and as distinctive as it is today.

Works Cited

- Crèvecoeur, J. Hector St. John. "Letters From an American Farmer." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 3rd ed. Eds. Paul Lauter et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 851-881.
- Franklin, Benjamin. "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 3rd ed. Eds. Paul Lauter et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 754-758.
- Friedman, Lee M. "Mordecai Manuel Noah As Playwright." *Historia Judaica*. 4.2. Oct. 1942. 154-161.
- Fuller, Sarah Margaret. "American Literature." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 3rd ed. Eds. Paul Lauter et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 1735-1742.
- . "Woman in the Nineteenth Century." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 3rd ed. Eds. Paul Lauter et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 1714-1735.
- Gallagher, Kent G. *The Foreigner in Early American Drama*. Paris: Mouton & Co., 1966.
- Harap, Louis. *The Image of the Jew in American Literature: From Early Republic to Mass Migration*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974.
- Harris, Sharon M. "Mary White Rowlandson." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 3rd ed. Eds. Paul Lauter et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 340-342.
- Lauter, Paul. "Explorations on an 'American' Self." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 3rd ed. Eds. Paul Lauter et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 1561-1562.
- Mulford, Carla. "Contented Boundaries, National Visions: Writings on 'Race,' Identity, and 'Nation.'" *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 3rd ed. Eds. Paul Lauter et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 968-972.

Noah, Mordecai Manuel. "She Would Be a Soldier." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 3rd ed. Eds. Paul Lauter et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 1377-1402.

Rowlandson, Mary White. "A Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 3rd ed. Eds. Paul Lauter et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 343-366.