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Rose Terry Cook: An Introduction

ALTHOUGH DURING HER LIFETIME Rose Terry Cooke (1827-1892) was a successful, respected author whose work was published in prominent literary magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and *Putnam's*, her fiction remains relatively obscure to twentieth-century audiences and is only recently finding its place in American literary history. Her fiction revolves around a small cross-section of American culture (rural New England) as well as the lives of ordinary women, making her, according to Elizabeth Ammons, "one type of nineteenth-century American woman writer that most twentieth-century literary criticism and history have been eager to dismiss as unimportant" (xx). Feminist revisions of American literary history, however, have begun recovering Cooke's significance, both in terms of nineteenth-century local color realism and women's writing.

Regional fiction like Cooke's was wildly popular in the second half of the nineteenth-century. While many critics trace the origins of the local color tradition to Bret Harte's story, "The Luck of Roaring Camp" (1868), Perry Westbrook points out that Cooke was publishing her local color work more than ten years earlier. In 1857, *The Atlantic Monthly*—a magazine that came to be central in the development of local color realism—selected her story, "Sally Parson's Duty," for the magazine's inaugural issue. This choice demonstrates that her contemporaries, at least, recognized the significance of her contribution to American and regional fiction. Cooke published four stories in the first volume of *The Atlantic*, and her sketch "Love" (1857) initiated what came to be a characteristic feature of regionalist fiction: a group of characters joined by a common task reminisce to pass the time until one speaker begins to tell the story that becomes the main tale.

Rose Terry Cooke's role in the development of nineteenth-century local color realism is perhaps less important than her role as a realist woman writer claiming ordinary women's lives as legitimate subjects for fiction. As opposed to the sentimental novels of the 1840s and 50s, Rose Terry Cooke eschewed the traditional romantic heroine, and unapologetically grounded her fiction in ordinary events and everyday characters. Her fiction focused on "[w]omen's anger, dreams, fears, repres-

sions, small pleasures, occasional triumphs, and countless defeats" (Ammons xi), and she is best known for her stories about fiercely independent and self-sufficient women enduring difficult lives in the harsh New England countryside. In her stories she claims a voice for women who were traditionally overlooked—overworked farmers' wives, old maids—and underscores the literary value of their experience. In the prelude to "Miss Lucinda" (1861), she tells the reader, "I have a reverence for poor old maids as great as for the nine Muses . . . I offer to you no tragedy in high life, no sentimental history of fashion and wealth, but only a little story about a woman who could not be a heroine." In other words, her protagonists will be drawn from everyday life rather than romance.

Of her almost 200 published short stories, only a handful appear in anthologies of American Literature alongside the work of her fellow women regionalists, Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman. Cooke mainly published her stories and poems in periodicals, although during her lifetime she published 41 of her stories in three short story collections—*Somebody's Neighbors* (1881), *The Sphinx's Children and Other People's* (1886), and *Huckleberries Gathered from New England Hills* (1891)—all three of which were re-printed in the late 1960s. While those collections are ostensibly still in print, they are extremely difficult to locate. *How Celia Changed Her Mind and Selected Stories* (1986), edited by Elizabeth Ammons, offers the largest and most readily available sample of Cooke's work still in print and includes several stories not included in the three collections. Cornell University's *Making of America* website has also made available many of her previously uncollected stories and poems.

Born in 1827 in rural Connecticut, Rose Terry came from an old and respected New England family with a strong puritan ancestry. Rose Terry was educated at Catherine Beecher's Hartford Female Seminary where she learned a more liberal Christianity than was espoused by her puritan forbears. After graduating at 16, Rose Terry underwent the religious conversion necessary for joining the Congregationalist church. While she remained devoutly religious throughout her life, she was extremely critical of the harsh Calvinism encouraged by puritan religious doctrine. Many of her stories highlight the contrast between the hypocrisy of a rigid adherence to doctrine and a Christianity focused on good works and forgiveness. After leaving school, Rose Terry began teaching in order to support herself, but she soon inherited a small amount of money that allowed her to focus on her writing. She began her literary career by writing poetry, but after her family had a financial setback, she turned to writing fiction because it was more lucrative.

At the age of 46, Rose Terry married Rollin H. Cooke who was sixteen years her junior. The match displeased her family because they doubted his ability to support himself, much less a wife. Her family's fears proved justified, and Cooke was soon installed as the main breadwinner in the family, a situation that became desperate after she lost her entire inheritance through one of her father-in-law's business schemes. In order to support herself and her family, Cooke needed to produce new fiction almost continuously. As in the case of her contemporary, Margaret Oliphant, several critics have wondered what she might have produced if she had not been writing under pressure. In her final years, desperate for money, Cooke sent her work to less prestigious journals because, unlike prominent magazines such as *The Atlantic*, they generally paid out royalties almost immediately after accepting a piece. Much of her later work has been ignored because her desperation over money caused, many editors clearly believed, her work to deteriorate. In the last few years of her life she pleaded for loans from her editors as she found her hastily written work harder and harder to place. Nevertheless, she produced some of her most famous stories, such as "A Town Mouse and a Country Mouse" (1891) and "How Celia Changed Her Mind" (1892), during this period. "The Converting of Obed Saltus (A True Tory Story)" (1891), written shortly before her death, is not included in any of her collected works, nor has it been anthologized since its original publication in *The New England Magazine*.

Although feminist recovery work is largely responsible for reintroducing readers to Cooke's work, her life and writing had an uneasy relationship to late nineteenth-century feminism. Cooke took pride in supporting herself throughout her life, created memorable independent and self-sufficient female characters who, according to Josephine Donovan, were some of the first realistic women characters in American literature. Stories such as "How Celia Changed Her Mind" and "Mrs. Flint's Married Experience" (1880) suggest that women are happier and more fulfilled if they remain unmarried. In her essay, "The Real Rights of Women" (1899), Cooke lists what she considers women's natural rights, i.e., those that they should not have to fight for: the right to control their own property (whether earned or inherited), the right to their own religious opinions and preferences, and the right to a say in their own children's education.

While many of her stories feature strong female characters, as Stephanie Fitz points out, feminist literary critics like Elizabeth Ammons have foregrounded Cooke's stories that seem to argue for women's independence while ignoring the stories, essays, and poems that clearly state her opposition to feminism. In "The Real

Rights of Women," while she argues for women's "natural" rights, she is also harshly critical of women's rights advocates for making "'Rights of Women'... to some women a terror and disgust." She dismisses the feminist movement as really asking for "the rights of women to be men." She further argues that women should stay at home and care for their families, unlike the "'freedom-shriekers' who forget their position and their womanhood, who leave their families neglected and their homes forsaken to rant on platforms and usurp pulpits." In another essay, "Are Women to Blame?", Cooke places the blame for failed marriages on the woman who refuses to recognize and accept that "[t]he primitive intent of marriage was not a 'partnership' or a state of 'equality,' but a headship vested in the stronger party to the contract, under which the weaker party should receive affection, protection, and care; yielding due respect and obedience to this God-given authority." Westbrook quotes her as complaining of being "hustled and bustled by the Rights Women" while "weakly and meekly protesting against their ways and works." In these essays, Cooke clearly lays out her opposition to the women's movement on the grounds that it encouraged women to abandon their domestic duties in favor of what she saw as a mythical equality.

Cooke's concern with what she considered moral bigotry, whether that of Calvinism or overzealous feminism, plays a central role in "The Converting of Obed Saltus." Whether Obed Saltus's oppressors represent militant feminists or zealous religious reformers is less important than her critique of righteousness and the violence that it can engender. In many ways this is a shocking story because she disrupts the reader's—or at least an American reader's—sense of our nation's heroic past by attacking the very patriots whom we revere as America's heroes. Unlike the Patrick Henrys of history books, the patriots in Obed's town pervert the cry for liberty and independence by suppressing anyone who disagrees with them, thus revealing that their idea of independence applies only to those who share their political point of view. Obed reveals his awareness of this hypocrisy when he asks his tormentors, "Nobody's goin' to be free; only you rebels, eh?" This revisionist story forces the reader to reimagine American history from the point of view of people whose interests were harmed rather than helped by the Revolution of 1776. Cooke ultimately seems to ask what value a fight for libertry has if detractors are silenced and stripped of their rights.

This problematization of the revolutionary moment at the end of the eighteenth century mirrors Cooke's view of the battle over women's rights at the end of the nineteenth century. While I am unwilling to read this story as purely biographical, the

image of someone fighting for the status quo surrounded by hostile zealots does echo Cooke's personal reflections on being drafted into a political movement. Cooke's story further suggests that the zealot's inability to accept or respect the alternative point of view prevents compromise and leads only to violence.

Obed's physical defeat at the hands of the "Vigilance Committee" forces him to take a false oath of allegiance to the Continental Congress. Although Obed leaves "a broken and wretched man," the patriots have only won a token public display of compliance. Obed retreats into domesticity and finds a protected space in which to reconcile his forced public actions with his private feelings. Rather than having had his spirit killed, Obed safeguards his "Tory" identity through his children's names,"History" and "Mystory," and conveys his spirit and ideals to his children. He thus transforms the physical battle over words in the public sphere into a verbal exchange—storytelling—within the home.

While "Obed Saltus" is atypical of Cooke's work because it has a male protagonist, it is typical because it is set at the close of the eighteenth century (a period that clearly fascinated Cooke), uses authentic regional dialect, and shows intractable "ideals" in conflict with real people's interests. Writing during a period of intense xenophobia in America, Cooke's story asks her reader to question the ideals of American patriotism—a position that is extremely timely during our current embattled political moment.

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Rose Terry Cooke

The Converting of Obed Saltus: A True Story—1776

"Well! I said it afore and I'll say it ag'in! Hooray for King George!"

And Obed Saltus swung his old coon-skin cap round his head with a great flourish.

"You *con*-sarned old Tory! Don't you durst holler that treason here."

Samuel Steel's eyes blazed and his great fist clinched tightly in Obed's face.

"It's you't holler treason, you durn Whig! Treason ag'inst your lawful king. I was fetched up a loyal subject. *I* don't go around talkin' and kickin' against powers that be, and authorities, and them that rule over us!"

"Well, well, Obed! take it easy," put in Father Steel, who was fat and easy-going. "Never brusk up at Sam so quick, man alife. He's allers goin' off at half cock, takes after his mother's folks; the Terrys always did go snap and bang—but it's only powder."

"I guess powder burns if it don't shoot!" muttered Sam.

"Well, ye see," resumed Obed, "my folks was always fetched up to fear God and honor the king. Kings is a Scriptural institution. Bible's chuck full of 'em; there ain't nothing whatever about Continental Congresses nor no other kind o' Congress, nor no presidents nor nothing into the Bible, and I can't go whifflin' round like the tin rooster on your barn with every wind these young fellers blows."

"There *is* suthin' in fetchin' up, to be sure," answered Father Steel.

"It's kind of onnateral to go agin what you've allus did, but then you don't feel to blame a boy if he turns round on his dad when he's onjustly treated."

"I do, too! I don't believe in turnin' ag'inst constitooted authorities of no sort! and moreover I don't believe the king can do onjustly by any man: ain't he got a divine right to rule? And what if we ain't sooted with what he's did, do you expext we poor short-sighted critters know what's good for us? I s'pose you'd fault the Lord 'cause you've got rheumatiz, wouldn't ye?"

"Well, I can't deny but what I do feel amazin' like it, some spells, Obed. But King George ain't the Lord, not by no manner o' means."

"But he's ordained, or 'pinted, or whatever, *by* the Lord. Ye won't deny that?"

"I will too!" roared Sam. "He's nothin' but an old Dutchman; hasn't no right to be King of England no how; and sartin none to be tie-rannirin' and orderin' over us. What'd our folks come over here for, anyway?"

"Why, to have their own way, as far as I see," replied Obed dryly.

"No, *sir:* they come over for to be free!"

"What's the differ'nce?" retorted the incorrigible Obed.

"An' free we're a goin' to be, now I tell ye!" shouted Sam, regardless of Obed's sarcasm.

"Yes, we be! Freedom we're a goin' to hev' at any price; there'll be blood and bones a lyin' round 'fore we've done, quite a little, but we ain't goin' to have no Kings rewlin over us three thousand odd miles off; nor no folks round here that talks for 'em!"

"Nobody's goin' to be free; only you rebels, eh?" grimly inquired Saltus, but Sam was too furious to be logical.

"Go ahead, Sam, bust your windpipes, and get shot, and baggonetted, and rode over with them calvary troops, they'll send after ye, but you won't never beat. King's army'll mow ye down just like grass in a medder, and make hay on ye, and then where'll ye be?"

"A sight better off than listenin' to a old chuckle-head like you, Obe Saltus! You'd better put your hand on your mouth, and your mouth in the dirt, if you don't want to be chawed up by them rebels as you call 'em. There's other things a hangin' on some o' our trees besides apples."

Obed knew this was true. Very well he knew what fate Tories had met with here and there in New England for avowing their opinions. They had been hunted like wild animals into dens and caves of the hills, they had been whipped at the post, and shut into the stocks to be taunted and pelted by the populace. It was too true, what he said, that freedom of speech or opinion, the proud boast and desire of the Puritan fathers, was not allowed by them or their descendants to those who differed from them; it was human nature, the same then as today, unjust, uncharitable, cruel, and remorseless in the majority, for whom a minority, however honest in their belief, had no rights.

But Obed was a stout-hearted fellow, brought up by fervently loyal parents; he was not to be daunted by this mistaken rebel; he had just as much for Sam's political opinions as Sam had for his; they were both men, and angry men at that. He went on with his irritating words.

"Well, go 'long, do. If by some interp'sition of Satan you do beat and set up your own government, what'll become of ye? First one man and then another to the top, for there'll always and forever *be* a top and somebody gittin' there. Say they get there by bein' voted in—what's that? Don't it give ye a thousand to rewl over ye, yes, maybe hundreds of thousands 'stead of one, and poor lot too, prob'bly? I'd jest as lieves er take my chance o' one born to't and eddicated for it as to hev' a rabble a trampin' over my head and hollerin' 'Why do ye so?' at me the hull individooal time. I swan, I'd ruther! And 'tisin't always a goin' to be our folks that'll do the governin'. Just tell the universe that 'Here's a free country, you come over and see,' and you'll have all the scum runnin' for ye—Hivites, and Hittites, and Jebusites, and Lord knows who, all a puttin' their dirty fingers in our pie and stirrin' of it up, till it's a hog-mess. And why shouldn't it be? Won't your way make a swill-pail of the hull country? And won't it come to a bad end? You think you're a goin' to make a kind of Par'dise of this new part o' the world, but I tell ye the devil'll come in where the door's open, same as he did to the beginnin', and it'll be thorns and briars and flamin' swords for ye, jest as 'twas for them two. Just as Scripture says, 'There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.'"

"Ain't you lookin' a leetle too far beyond the end o' your nose, Obed?" gravely asked Father Steel.

"The end o' his nose'll be considerable longer if he talks like that," said Sam, shaking his fist. "You shut up, Obed Saltus, or it'll be the wuss for ye. The Vigilance C'mmittee's got an eye on you, and you'd better b'lieve it."

"I an't afraid o' your onlawful c'mittee—not a mite! I'm free to throw up my cap for King George, and I'm a-goin' to;" and whistling "God Save the King" as loud and clearly as he knew how, Obed thrust his hands into his pockets and walked off homeward with defiance expressed in every crease of his old coat.

Obed lived alone in a small frame house out on a hillside beyond Madox Street. he had never been married. Perhaps the softening influence of a wife and children, the responsibilities of a family, might have made him less earnest in his unpopular Toryism, or at least more cautious about obtruding it; but he had grown up in comparative colitude, an only child, and had always been used to saying what he thought plainly and forcibly.

"Now Sam," said Father Steel, when Obed was well out of hearing, "why do ye want to stir up that feller so? You know he's always one to speak in meetin', and his idees is tougher'n moosewood. I'd let him alone."

"Let him alone! I'm sculped if I do! He's a sneakin' Tory, 'n furst you know he'll

be spyin' 'round and a givin' information to the enemy, and upsettin' of plans. Besides I don't fellership folks around that's on t'other side. he's got to be snaked out o' Madox and sent off to join his sort, or he's got to holler for our side, now I tell ye!"

Sam was possessed of his "idees," too, and Father steel knew it by long experience; so he said no more, but strolled away to the little country tavern, from whose tall signpost hung a picture of a gaunt red lion, a beast unknown to zoological collections, but evidently imitated from the "lion and the unicorn" of Britain. It was rather a treasonable sign just now, and the landlord had been notified to remove it. He was a slow man and "hadn't got to't yet," but it was just as well he waited. For that same afternoon, as the result of Sam's excited conference with various men in and about the village, there suddenly appeared in the street a crowd of between twenty and thirty rough, determined-looking fellows surrounding a man who was firmly held by two captors, but bore as undaunted a face as any of the crowd. It was Obed Saltus and the Vigilance Committee of Madox.

They halted right under the tavern signpost, and the oldest man of the number said in a stern voice:

"Obed Saltus, you're accused and convicted of bein' a Tory, and Madox folks ha'n't got no use for that kind of critter amongst 'em. Now you'll jest holler for the Continental Congress or be hung by the neck to that there signpost till you can't holler for nobody."

Obed snatched his right arm from the grasp of the man who held it, and swung his old cap high.

"Hooray for King George," he shouted with all his strength.

In one moment the running noose of a new rope that one of the men brought forward was round his neck and he dangled high in the air, for the other end of that rope was already reeved over the bar that held the sign.

It was well for Obed that from his youth he had been used to climb the tall and slender trees of the forest after squirrels and birds' nests. His captors had forgotten to tie his hands, which involuntarily flew upward, and one grasped the rope above his head; this relieved the tension on his throat, and with the other hand he helped himself further; but as he struck out, both hand and foot hit the sign with convulsive energy; its wires were already rusted by the weather, and it fell to the ground, knocking Sam Steel flat, and making a wound on his temple that scarred it for his lifetime. Who shall say justice is not sometimes dealt out in this world! Very promptly the men in charge of the ceremony let their victim down; he was purple from even this short strangulation, panting, red-eyed, but furious and unsubdued.

"Now will ye holler for Congress?" said the irate leader.

"No! Hang and be darned to ye! While I've got a breath left I'll say, 'Hooroar for King George,' if I do hang for it!"

"Tie his hands this time," said Caleb Dibble grimly.

So they made him helpless in the proper hangman's way, and hauled him up til his starting eyes and blackened visage, his limp limbs that were no longer convulsed, and the agonizing heaving of his chest indicated near death.

"Let him down," said Caleb Dibble. "Mebbe he's had enough to change his mind this time!"

It seemed for a few moments as if the poor creature had had too much to allow of any change whatever in this world. They fetched brandy from the tavern and dripped it slowly into the relaxed lips, they burned feathers under his nose, poured water on his head, and vigorously slapped him; but it was at least half an hour before he could sit up, swallow the hot dram they brought him, or speak an audible word. One would have thought that his deplorable condition and his manful adherence to his principles would have compelled the men about him to spare further torture; but they were fanatics for the time being; like a tiger who had tasted blood they had taken a draught of irresponsible power and reckless tyranny, a draught that develops the lurking fiend in all men.

As soon as he held up his head and looked about him with the eyes of a hunted animal, and the pitiful aspect of terror that has broken down at once courage and self-respect, they put the noose about his neck once more and again bound his unresisting hands. Caleb Dibble faced him, too, once more.

"Now ye know how good it is, will ye try it again? It'll be wuss next time; you'll hang there till you're dead, sure!"

Obed looked up at the face before him; those strong features worked with savage cruelty, the eyes burned with gloomy flames; he felt again the horrid pangs of strangulation, the bursting blood-vessel, the flashes of vivid light across his eyes, the dreadful impossibility of resistance, all the agonies of death without its final release. Not one kind face solaced him with pity, not one comrade inspired his sinking soul with strength or courage; he was alone in every sense, and his stout spirit gave way; the brave man became a spiritless creature to whom but one chance of life was left. Dear life, sweet life, that we all cling to desperately, even when its ways are dark and its streams bitter!

He gave a great sob; feebly his weary arm stole up to his coonskin cap and lifted it from his head. "Hooray for—the Continental Congress," he cried, in the feeble

voice of a child. "Hooray! hooray!" echoed all the men about, and lifting him from the grass they carried him into the tavern, a limp, listless rag of humanity, hard to be restored to consecutive speech even by freely administered toddy and much hand-shaking. At last he rallied enough to stammer drunkenly, "Gentlemen, this is rather a rough way to convert a man into a—well—out o' bein' a Tory; but, by thunder, it'll do it."

Hours after, he slunk away to his lonely cabin in the woods, a broken and wretched man; it is only recorded of him that years after he married a creature as wretched as himself, the daughter of a Canadian coal-burner, and having two children, a son and a daughter, called them respectively History and Mystory, giving for reason:

"I'll be danged if there shan't be a Tory Saltus of some nature that can't be hanged for it."