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# ‘Not Essentially Different From [Her] Sex:’ A Literary Reading of the Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters

Natalie Burke  
*University of Pennsylvania*

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# ‘Not Essentially Different From [Her] Sex:’ A Literary Reading of the Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters

## Description

The Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters, a collection of letters at the University of Pennsylvania’s Kislak Center for Rare Books & Manuscripts, detail an important eighteenth century correspondence between a young woman in Philadelphia and her family members at home and abroad. Spanning seventy-two years (1747-1819) and multiple cities, the letters provide important insight into the lives of eighteenth century American women and the slaves they held. The letters discuss major life events within the Buckley family, including births, marriages, and deaths, life on the plantation in British Guinea in the eighteenth century, exchanges and interactions among family slaves, and revolutionary sentiments, especially surrounding the ratification of the constitution in 1788. The letters also hold an especial significance at the University of Pennsylvania for their geographical situation as a part of Philadelphia cultural heritage.

This project constitutes a critical re-reading of the letters, applying techniques from comparative literature to these historical documents in order to see what might be gleaned if they were creatively re-read as if they were an American womens’ epistolary novel. The effort draws inspiration from M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* and R. Mac Jones and Ray McManus’s *Found Anew*, hoping to build upon their suggestions of the powers of creative writing – and reading – to reinvigorate difficult historical materials. It responds to recent criticisms of the epistolary genre by Julie Gilbert, Anna Hulseberg, and Jeff Jenson, who argue for the “imagination ... of the reader” as scholarly lens. Sharon Harris and Theresa Gaul have also influenced the project; they write a “[rejection of] the view of letters as historical documents valuable only for revealing information about famous people or events,” rather “[according] letters an independent literary status.”

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Natalie Burke

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Professor Evelyn Soto

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‘Not Essentially Different From [Her] Sex:’<sup>1</sup> A Literary Reading of the Rebecca Buckley  
Ferguson Letters

The Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters of the University of Pennsylvania preserve the 1747-1819 correspondences collected by Rebecca Buckley Ferguson over the course of her lifetime, starting with inclusions from her father’s papers and concluding with a letter addressed to her from her youngest son. Recent digital transcription of the complete letter collection has permitted it to be reordered into chronological order, and thus read from start to finish, for the first time.<sup>2</sup> This essay generates an initial critical response to the Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters as a comprehensive narrative collection, creatively reimagining them along epistolary fictional lines.<sup>3</sup> The literary reading reveals an epistolary novel in three parts: first, Rebecca’s disastrous unmarried youth, second, her period of estrangement as a travelling spinster, and third, her joyous marriage to James Ferguson. In each case, the reader is asked to consume the letters intended for Rebecca as if the reader themselves *is* Rebecca; the letters, then, embroil the reader in a competition for control of the direction of

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Jonathan Hicks, Letter to Rebecca Buckley, January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1784, in *The Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters: 1747-1819*, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Formerly, the letters could only be read in the order in which they are organized within the Kislak Center archives: alphabetically by sender’s last name.

<sup>3</sup> The literary reading exempts documents of a non-epistolary nature, including checks, wills, and genealogy.

Rebecca's choices.<sup>4</sup> The three stages map the projected social value of Rebecca's role – from bachelorette, to spinster, to wife – onto the nature of the events that affect her friends and family. Read as epistolary novel, the Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters ultimately reinforce standard eighteenth century views of women's obligation to marry and raise families.<sup>5</sup> Its central invention is the compelling way in which the alignment of the reader with Rebecca generates the reader's genuine desire for Rebecca to give up her freedoms and marry in exchange for social status, making the social pressures that affect her register as personal choices the reader makes alongside her.

The first part of the Rebecca Buckley Ferguson story – the period in which Rebecca is a young, single woman – spans the letters from April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1747 through January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1784. The story begins with a letter from Rebecca's father, William Buckley, to his mother, Elizabeth Hugg Williams, concerning the illness with smallpox that has stricken his wife and children (presumably including the young Rebecca).<sup>6</sup> Smallpox are only the first among several disastrous events intimated within the first section, which also refers to Rebecca's broken arm in 1781, the death of her mother in 1781, and two subsequent illnesses in 1782 and 1784.<sup>7</sup> The section records a letter of condolence from Rebecca's friend Susanna Cheesman, who notes that the cold weather has made her life in Bristol incredibly difficult, and also alludes to an intrigue between Rebecca and her "Friend G," who is engaged to a Miss Brotherson but who Susanna

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<sup>4</sup> The notion of the 'competition for control' in the epistolary genre comes from David McCracken, "Eliza Wharton as Psyche in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*," *The Explicator* 74 (2016): 251.

<sup>5</sup> Merrill D. Smith, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century America* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing, 2010), 2.

<sup>6</sup> *The Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 7, 8, 10, and 12, respectively.

suggests is very attractive.<sup>8</sup> The central drama of the section emerges when it is revealed that Dr. Jonathan Hicks, a married, older man with children tasked with caring for Rebecca during each of her illnesses in 1782 and 1784, has become sexually obsessed with her. In his January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1784 letter, he provides a provocative description of himself for Rebecca, referring to his “mouth, truly formed for kissing” and his “Arms as if fit to encircle [her],” concluding with a request that Rebecca either answer Dr. Hicks’s affections or throw the letter into the fire.<sup>9</sup> The scandal destroys a friendship between Rebecca and Mrs. Polly Hicks: in 1782, there was discussion of Rebecca’s comforting Polly during Polly’s difficult pregnancy, but by 1784, even Dr. Hicks acknowledges that their friendship remains only a “great pretended Affection.”<sup>10</sup>

The opening section of the Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters, read as opening section of an epistolary novel, charts the disastrous effects of a single woman living independently and travelling about at will in eighteenth century America and its colonies. As if prophesied from the earliest moments of her childhood, when she is stricken with smallpox, the bachelorette Rebecca becomes a plague whose effects mark her dearest friends and family. Her father distresses over her, her mother dies, she breaks her arm, she endures multiple illnesses, her friend experiences a freezing winter, and another friend grows to hate her, all in ways that seem to directly result from Rebecca’s romantic tensions with various men, including her ‘Friend G’ and Dr. Hicks. Rebecca’s travel during this section – from Leguan, to Esequibo, to Leguan again, to Philadelphia – reinforce the social danger of her position. Since Rebecca travelled on her own, most would have assumed “that she was not respectable or, worse, that she was sexually

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 10 and 12, respectively.

available.”<sup>11</sup> This latter suggestion is certainly reflected in Dr. Hicks’s advances. That Dr. Hicks is married and is also Rebecca’s doctor only worsens the perception of this inappropriate relation, since it presents the transgression as not just “the loss of virtue and innocence on the woman’s part, and the aggression of unnatural sexual appetite on the man’s part,” but also as “a breach of contract” between the two.<sup>12</sup> The section also sets up an apt metaphor related to cold and hot. Susanna Cheesman seems a figure very much like Rebecca, who is single, travels by herself, enjoys men, noting that “had [she] not known [‘Friend G’] was Engagd to Miss Brotherson [she] cant tell what woud have become of [her] Heart,” and has ill effects on her family, mentioning her “Poor Sister quite unwell” in addition to the difficulties of her winter in Bristol.<sup>13</sup> Dr. Hick’s later suggestion of the hearth echoes back to Susanna’s tortured discussion of “Eleven Oclock at night in [her] Chamber without a Fire,” but in an obviously problematic way since the heat of Dr. Hick’s letter comes of his inappropriate sexual advances. The resonance between these letters clarifies that independence in women does not elicit the virtuous, romantic warmth of a hearth but rather the burning heat of sexual scandal. Even Susanna’s suggestion of “[her] Chamber” becomes loaded with debased connotations. Since the storytelling format places the reader in the role of Rebecca, the section causes the reader to feel shame and regret alongside her – for causing the pain of her loved ones, for developing a public reputation as an unrespectable woman, and for having anything in common with Susanna, who becomes a contemptible character – and to desire change.

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<sup>11</sup> Smith, 86.

<sup>12</sup> W. M. Verhoeven, “‘Persuasive Rhetorick’: Representation and Resistance in Early American Epistolary Fiction,” in *Literary Criticism from 1400 to 1800* 93 (2003): 135.

<sup>13</sup> *The Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters*, 9.

By the end of the section, it seems this change has already begun, since Dr. Hicks's final letter to Rebecca is addressed to "Miss Rebecca Buckley, Housekeeper."<sup>14</sup>

The second part begins with a lengthy letter from Sarah Parkinson Buckley, wife of Rebecca's brother William. It seems that Rebecca is still living in Philadelphia, by this point also caring for Elizabeth and Sarah Buckley, her two young nieces. Sarah Parkinson Buckley encloses letters to each of the three women all in one document. She describes William Buckley's helpful role in handling the affairs following a death on the Parkinson side of the family, and the state of the Demerara plantation, where the slaves have experienced two tragedies: first, Jack's head injury following a midnight horse racing competition, and second, the death of a newborn slave infant, named Sally after the younger Sarah Buckley. Sarah Parkinson Buckley also refers to the much younger brother of the two girls, Anthony Buckley, whom she has given a "Coppo Booke" in which "he has made a few strokes & hopes soon to write [them;]" that is, Anthony hopes he will soon learn to read and write so that he can send letters of his own.<sup>15</sup> Then, the sisters travel to New Jersey where they stay with their father while Rebecca moves to Demerara to live on the Parkinson family plantation. In this, she fulfills the role of the 'respectable' single [woman]," who "generally lived in the households of others," thus suitably removed from the public sphere although still lacking in the "respect and authority accorded a wife in her own household."<sup>16</sup> Rebecca receives well wishes from her nieces and nephews: from Elizabeth and Sarah in New Jersey, from Anthony Buckley, just learning to write, in Demerara, and from T. Buckley, son of her brother Phineas Buckley, living in far away Bristol. The section closes T. Buckley's beautiful

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, xvii.

description of the “Trees again adorned, with Blossoms and promise fair” for the coming summer, wondering, “has my Dear Aunt to add to our Delights and partake of the Blessings, kind Providence has bestowed on America—”?<sup>17</sup> At the very last letter from William Buckley to Rebecca, it is revealed that Rebecca will be leaving Demerara and returning to America. The year is 1789. The constitution has just been ratified.<sup>18</sup>

By this second section of the story, Rebecca has conformed to an acceptable, if not ideal, role within eighteenth century America. She is essentially a spinster, travelling about from one household to the next, taking housekeeping jobs or living with family members. While the role remains problematic – Rebecca might be viewed as a burden to her family, especially her sister in law Sarah Parkinson Buckley, and the housekeeping occupation certainly doesn’t afford her much social status – the section reflects a significantly happier period in Rebecca’s life. Her relationships with her siblings improve, reflected in William’s three letters to her and the assumed renewed connection between herself and her brother Phineas. She develops friendships with new, more respectable women, most especially Sarah Parkinson Buckley. Her family entrusts her with the care of her nieces. However, the section is still uneasy, reflecting the precarity of Rebecca’s spinster role. It seems potentially problematic that Elizabeth and Sarah, two young women, should be sent away during the precisely the period when their mother raises a significantly younger sibling. The slightly unusual circumstances instill a fear in the reader’s mind that Anthony could be the illegitimate son of either Elizabeth or Sarah. The letter collection, read as epistolary novel, never answers this fear. Tragedy still strikes in the section, although now problematically displaced from Rebecca’s own

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<sup>17</sup> *The Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 25.



experience to the experience of the family slaves, as if this is intended to mediate the effect. The section also foreshadows Rebecca's marriage in two ways: first, through her genuine adoration by her nieces and nephews, which suggests Rebecca in a mother role, and second, through T. Buckley's language. His 1788 letter, sent exactly two months before the ratification of the constitution, creates a parallelism between the promise of America's coming summer and the promise of Rebecca's coming summer. Something may also be said of the parallelism between the constitution's rhetoric and T. Buckley's rhetoric since "American political rhetoric ... masks the essential contradictions between power and liberty, between compulsion and consent" in a way essentially similar to the rhetoric of the epistolary genre.<sup>19</sup>In Rebecca's case, the inevitability of marriage emerges as a contradiction between 'compulsion and consent' functioning alongside larger national projects. The section leaves the reader genuinely desirous of the impending marriage, seeing it as a promising mode of social climbing as well as a mode of quelling some of the uneasiness that still remains during this period.

The third and final part renders Rebecca's happily married life through the words of Sylvia, a Parkinson family slave who ultimately learns to write and temporarily runs the Parkinson plantation on her own. Sylvia reveals that Rebecca has married James Ferguson and now lives with him and their four sons in New York. Sarah Parkinson Buckley has apparently joined her husband and daughters in New Jersey, leaving Sylvia to run the plantation with the help of her own four children. The relationship between Sylvia and Rebecca appears to be a genuinely loving one. Sylvia writes that she hopes to "end the Remanider of [her] days with [Rebecca]" as a servant, and also sends money to

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Hewitt, *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 13.

Rebecca's children as a gift.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, this money is stolen. They exchange sentimental gifts, including lockets and earrings. The section includes a letter to Rebecca from a Mrs. Parkinson, presumably the wife of Sarah Parkinson Buckley's brother, requesting the Rebecca bring some cream to her husband – who is travelling through New York – for her. The section concludes with a letter from Rebecca's son Samuel B. Ferguson, which, written in 1819, reads as a future projection. Samuel has travelled to Bridgeport and describes his thorough enjoyment in meeting all kinds of friends and relations of the family, noting, "it is quite pleasant to meet with those you were acquainted when you go to a strange place."<sup>21</sup>

The final section reflects the joys of marriage, figuring Rebecca's marriage to James Ferguson as the fulfillment of the reader's desires. Rebecca obtains a secure social position wherein she is afforded respect and power within her own household. The letter from Mrs. Parkinson asking Rebecca for cream reveals that she is a dutiful wife, one who other women trust with the care of their husbands – a relation set in direct opposition to Rebecca's previous falling out with Polly Hicks following Dr. Hicks's obsession with her. It also initiates Rebecca into a broader scope of wifely homemaking: her service in the role of wife to another woman's husband, when convenient, "quietly [conscripts] [her] into national service."<sup>22</sup> It seems possible, though, that Rebecca's social network has narrowed: though the section spans twenty years, it lacks the same variety and frequency of letters from sisters in law, friends, nieces, and nephews that Rebecca received in the previous section. That this section is rendered primarily in the voice of

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<sup>20</sup> *The Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas J. Joudrey, "Maintaining Stability: Fancy and Passion in *The Coquette*," in *The New England Quarterly* 86 (2013): 86.

Sylvia seems to reinforce this reading: whereas before Rebecca's friendships came from outside the private sphere, now, her dearest friend is the slave Sylvia, who comes from within Rebecca's household although the two are separated during part of the story. Sylvia's remarkable success in learning to write, read, and running the Demerara plantation, then, is rendered as a result of Rebecca's excellent management of the Buckley Ferguson household, an obviously problematic construction from a twenty-first century perspective. Sylvia's voice additionally performs the same sort of mitigating effect as the transfer of trauma from Rebecca's direct relatives to the slaves did in the previous section: it softens the blow of Rebecca's narrowing social network by transferring its effects onto another person. The final letter from Rebecca's son Samuel resonates with the very first letter: while the story began by registering a father's parental concern, it ends by instilling parental joy in the reader.

The Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters, read as fictional production, reveal an epistolary novel in three parts: first, Rebecca's life as bachelorette, second, her period as a spinster, and third, her marriage. The central invention of the work is that, since only letters sent to Rebecca and no letters authored by her survive, the story aligns the readers themselves with Rebecca. Thus, as the story compels the reader to genuinely desire for Rebecca to give up her freedoms in marry in exchange for social status. The reader feels shame and discomfort alongside Rebecca in the first section, creating a desire for change. Circumstances improve in the second section, although the reader remains uneasy. The marriage in the third section, then, fulfills the reader's genuine desires after its foreshadowing at the end of the second section. In this way, the work succeeds in making the social pressures that affect Rebecca register as personal, independent choices the

reader makes alongside her. Though the notion that “the choice for white women was ... marriage or a marginal existence”<sup>23</sup> was widely held in eighteenth century America, the work makes this concept appear novel and individually determined. Ultimately, the Rebecca Buckley Ferguson Letters, read as epistolary novel, use an inventive format to reinforce standard eighteenth century views of womens’ obligation to marry and raise families.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, xvii.

<sup>24</sup> Merrill D. Smith, *Women’s Roles in Eighteenth-Century America* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing, 2010), 2.

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