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*"Peculiar Quavers, Fearful Pleasures": Reading toward a Queer(er) Crane and a Queer(er) Canon*

Emily Toler '08

A nation's literature documents its self-imaginings, its self-definitions. Taken as a whole, the body of American literary texts, encompassing both the most arcane chapbook of poetry and the most wildly popular novel of the day, dialectically reflects and influences the broad range of American experiences. Any modern-day Tocqueville wanting to assay the range of ideas and values of the American people would do well to survey its literature, including its most revered and most reviled, its most canonized and most marginalized texts. American literature provides a lens nonpareil through which one can begin to understand America.

David S. Goldstein

Goldstein's observations about the American canon are accurate, and initially, they paint a pleasant picture of American's literary tradition. It is comforting to imagine that our canon represents the incredible diversity of American experiences. It is comforting to imagine that recent reevaluations of the canon have prompted the inclusion of writers previously been denied their places in literary history. It is comforting to imagine that we have adequately expanded and complicated the canon. This, however, is not the case.

In its infancy, the American canon accurately reflected the population it purported to represent: it was limited almost exclusively to white, wealthy males who were

largely preoccupied with establishing a credible, distinctive national literature. One of the most important voices to emerge from this budding literary chorus was that of Washington Irving, whose *The Sketch Book* has long been recognized as one of the most important early canonical texts. Because his work played such an important role in legitimating American authors and their works, and because his thematic and technical influence has been so profound, Irving's position in the canon is virtually uncontested. Therefore, the stories of *The Sketch Book*—especially its most famous, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"—are a useful lens through which to identify and analyze the characteristics of the canon.

Studying American literature today, however, is a wholly different enterprise than studying American literature two centuries ago. The community of American authors is far more diverse than ever before, populated by writers of multitudinous ethnicities, genders, religions, social classes, and sexualities. But even as the literary field has expanded, the canon has remained strangely unchanged. The voices of minorities and the marginalized continue to be tragically underrepresented, and many anthologies of American literature are still conspicuously devoid of these groups. It seems grossly hypocritical to continue affirming a homogenous canon in a nation so indisputably diverse, so many critics have challenged this intellectual stagnation.

For example, in her essay "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," Nina Baym addresses the problem of canon formation, observing that American authors have long been subjected to "a standard of Americanness" (589) that establishes certain criteria by which their work will be judged. These authors must focus on "America as a nation," highlighting the experiences and characters that are unique to America and form the mythologized "American experience" (591). Although her essay argues for the inclusion of women writers in the canon, its principles can be applied with equal legitimacy to queer criticism. The canon determines what texts can be studied and in what contexts that study can take place, and because it has given priority to white male writers and their concomitant ideological agendas and biases, it has



left little room for “subversive” readings. Such restrictions prevent us from illuminating the feminist, homosexual, or otherwise “atypical” characteristics of our canonical literature, and as a result, our understanding of “Americanness” has been dreadfully limited. But as postmodern theories have complicated how we understand our position in and relate to the world, the canon has been opened to a variety of new perspectives. One of the most valuable possibilities that this nascent expansion has enabled is to find evidence of the subversive in conventional American texts.

In this essay, I will do precisely that, arguing for the recognition of the queer in Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” First, I illuminate the textual and contextual evidence that Ichabod Crane is a queer character. I propose that he is not merely inadequately masculine, as many critics have already observed, but that he is also undeniably feminine, and that this double identity problematizes traditional interpretations of the text. Next, I consider the implications of Ichabod’s queerness for contemporary American literature and criticism, ultimately suggesting that the story’s position in the canon compels us to reimagine that canon in radical new ways.

Something about Ichabod Crane is simply queer. Even the first descriptions Irving gives of the schoolmaster indicate that Ichabod is by no means the “ideal” American male:

He was tall, but exceedingly lank, with narrow shoulders, long arms and legs, hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves, feet that might have served for shovels, and his whole frame most loosely hung together. His head was small, and flat at top, with huge ears, large green glassy eyes, and a long snipe nose, so that it looked like a weather-cock perched upon his spindle neck to tell which way the wind blew. (1356)

Certainly, this description is comical, but it is also quite important. Irving makes it clear that Ichabod looks odd—that is, queer—and his subsequent narrative technique suggests that appearance is an appropriate lens through which to analyze a character. Consider, for example, Katrina Van

Tassel. She is “a blooming lass of fresh eighteen; plump as a partridge; ripe and melting and rosy-cheeked as one of her father’s peaches” (1359). This food imagery evokes her youth, her femininity, and her fertility; Katrina is clearly ripe for the picking. More importantly, Irving indicates that we might accurately evaluate her by her appearance, writing that “she was withal a little of a coquette, as might be perceived even in her dress [which included] a provokingly short petticoat, to display the prettiest foot and ankle in the country round” (1359). The association of physical attributes with fundamental character traits is thus established—an important connection that prepares us to distinguish Ichabod Crane from his hypermasculine antithesis, Brom Bones.

Brom embodies virtually every quality typically associated with masculinity and power. Even his given name, Abraham, connotes male authority and tradition; the biblical Abraham, of course, is the paradigmatic patriarch, the root of the 12 tribes of Israel, and Brom seems more than capable of fulfilling a similar role. He is “a burly, roaring, roistering blade... [a] hero of the country round,” and these attributes are manifested in his appearance: “he was broad-shouldered, and double-jointed... [with a] Herculean frame and great powers of limb” (1361). Sleepy Hollow “[rings] with his feats of strength and hardihood” (1361), suggesting that its inhabitants assign great value to masculinity and, therefore, may be suspicious of a male as slight as Ichabod Crane.

Aware that the town will judge him by the same criteria applied to Brom Bones, and that the resulting assessment will likely determine his fate in Sleepy Hollow, Ichabod attempts to highlight the few “manly” traits he possesses. To command respect from his students, Ichabod speaks in an “authoritative voice of the master, in the tone of menace or command” (1356) and is hardly averse to doling out punishment. His particular style of justice, however, is skewed in favor of the frail: “your mere puny stripling, that winced at the least flourish of the rod, was passed by with indulgence; but the claims of justice were satisfied by inflicting a double portion on some little, tough, wrong-headed, broad-skirted Dutch urchin” (1361). Ichabod clearly empathizes with the feeble—an affinity rooted in his



identification with the weaker students. Moreover, the fact that he does not simply spare the weak but doubly punishes the strong indicates that he may be hostile to the images of masculinity with which he is unceasingly besieged. That Ichabod's desire for justice is "satisfied" by this distinctively unjust punishment further underscores his queerness: both Ichabod's desires and the ways he realizes them are somehow peculiar.

These attempts to demonstrate his manhood are at least marginally successful, insofar as the townspeople do not ostracize Ichabod for failing to meet their standards of masculinity. This mere acceptance, however, never rivals the reverence the town feels for Brom Bones, and it is largely contingent on Ichabod's contributions to society. Because his salary as a teacher is insufficient to feed his enormous appetite, Ichabod lives as an itinerant lodger among the people of Sleepy Hollow. (It is worth noting that this inability to support himself undermines his pretensions to masculinity: instead of assuming the (male) role of provider, Ichabod must become the (female) one who is provided for.) To repay the debts he owes to the agrarian families who house and feed him, he "assists [them] occasionally in the lighter labors of their farms" (1357). The tasks that he performs, however, are hardly those befitting a man. Instead, he "[becomes] wonderfully gentle and ingratiating... petting the children, particularly the youngest; and... [sits] with a child on one knee, [rocking] a cradle with his foot for whole hours together" (1357). That the townspeople consistently appropriate these particular chores to Ichabod—and, more importantly, that he actually agrees to fulfill them—suggests that something in his nature is distinctly feminine.

This latent femininity is apparent in Ichabod's other interests, most notably his vocation as the "singing-master of the neighborhood" (1357). Ichabod's sensibilities certainly befit such a feminine profession: singing "[is] a matter of no little vanity to him" (1357). Because vanity is a charge traditionally leveled against women, it is not difficult to interpret Ichabod's vain interest in singing as a feminine one. Even more tellingly, the "peculiar quavers" (1357) of his voice still linger in the church at Sleepy Hollow. Irving's

explicit identification of something "peculiar" about Ichabod is significant because it suggests that interpreting this character in a queer framework is a valid—and necessary—critical enterprise.

Perhaps the most obvious manifestations of Ichabod's queerness are his interactions with women. The other male characters of the story are largely wary of the fairer sex and view them only as possessions, constantly "keeping a watchful and angry eye on each other, ready to fly out... against any new competitor" (1361), but Ichabod cultivates intimate, if ironically nonsexual, relationships with women. He is

*peculiarly* [emphasis mine] happy in the smiles of all the country damsels... gathering grapes for them... or reciting for their amusement all the epitaphs on the tombstones; or sauntering with a whole bevy of them, along the banks of the adjacent mill-pond. (1358)

Ichabod's behavior is peculiar because it is so dramatically different from the behavior of the other men, who "[hang] sheepishly back, envying his superior elegance and address" (1358). Instead of fraternizing with the men, Ichabod has become *one of the girls*.

Indeed, Ichabod spends most of his time engaging in traditionally feminine activities with women. He is the town's "traveling gazette, carrying the whole budget of local gossip from house to house" (1358). This penchant for idle chatter hardly seems appropriate for a man, but it helps Ichabod to solidify his position in the community: he is "esteemed by the women" not only because he is a source of news, but also because he "most firmly and potently [believes]" (1359) the stories of witchcraft that his female companions discuss. Irving clearly indicates that this behavior is atypical of a man, describing Ichabod's hobby of "[passing] long winter evenings with the old Dutch wives" as a "fearful pleasure" (1359). These pleasures are "fearful" because they are associated with femininity: women, not men, are traditionally depicted as susceptible to superstition and romance, and the fact that



Ichabod enjoys these activities clearly indicates that he is more than marginally feminine.

This quality helps to explain why Ichabod's dealings with women are completely devoid of sexual desire. In his description of the anxieties present in Irving's text, Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky is right to observe that Ichabod "makes no gestures that would indicate his fitness as Katrina Van Tassel's mate... [because] his sexuality is severely in doubt; the pedagogue channels all his erotic energy into the act of eating" (517). Although Irving never explicitly states that Ichabod's interests are gastric rather than sexual, the implication is clear. Ichabod characterizes Katrina as a "tempting morsel" who attracts his interest only "after he had visited her in her paternal mansion" (1359). That she should *arouse* the schoolmaster's interest is not surprising; Van Tassel's farm is productive, and his home is full of the sumptuous food that Ichabod perpetually craves.

In fact, Ichabod's desire for sustenance completely replaces his desire for sex. He thinks of Katrina only in conjunction with food: "his busy fancy already realized his hopes, and presented to him the blooming Katrina, with a whole family of children, mounted on the top of a wagon loaded household trumpery, with pots and kettles dangling beneath" (1360). Ichabod may be dreaming of his progeny, but he does so only in a context that emphasizes "pots and kettles" over "a whole family of children." Moreover, Katrina's subsequent rejection of Ichabod proves that his domestic reveries can be no more than unrealized fantasies.

The failure of Ichabod's relationship with Katrina is the definitive example of his queerness. Because he knows that he must compete with Brom Bones for the affections of the elusive coquette, he realizes that he cannot possibly win her heart if he pursues her through traditional methods of masculine courtship. Therefore, he "makes his advances in a quiet and gently insinuating manner" (1362); that is, he pursues Katrina in the way a woman might pursue a lover (at least according to androcentric constructions of femininity). Additionally, when he hears of the dance that Van Tassel will be hosting, Ichabod uses distinctly feminine tactics in his attempts to woo the heiress, spending "at least an extra half-

hour at his toilet, brushing and furbishing up his best and indeed only suit of rusty black, and arranging his looks by a bit of broken looking-glass, that hung up in the school-house" (1364). It is acceptable—even expected—for the women of Sleepy Hollow to devote such attention to their appearances when engaged in romantic pursuits, but this is intolerable behavior for a man. Thus, because Ichabod's attempts at courtship are insufficiently masculine, they fail: Katrina rejects his advances, and the über-manly, decidedly *Bromlike*, Headless Horseman drives him out of Sleepy Hollow.

Such a conclusion might suggest that Ichabod is banished because he is queer, but that does not seem to be the case. In an article discussing Irving's critique of American culture, Donald Ringe observes that the author "[affirms] a stable society that places its emphasis on order, tradition, and the family values that accompany social stability" (459). It seems that a character like Ichabod Crane directly threatens this sort of order; he does exhibit more feminine qualities than masculine ones, complicating traditional gender roles and distinctions. But instead of ostracizing him, the people of Sleepy Hollow embrace their queer neighbor. He has "ways of rendering himself both useful and agreeable... [getting] on tolerably enough [with] all" (1357, 1358) and is "a man of some importance in the female circle of a rural neighborhood... esteemed by the women as a man of great erudition" (1358). He is openly embraced by the female citizenry, and because he poses no amorous or physical threat to the men of the town, they too accept his presence. Ichabod's queerness does not endanger the "order, tradition, [or] family values" (Ringe 459) of Sleepy Hollow, so a socio-ethical threat cannot be the reason he is ultimately banished. Indeed, there is another explanation: Ichabod's materialism.

Ichabod is undoubtedly preoccupied with wealth; even his love for food does not transcend his love for material possessions. As he "[rolls] his great green eyes over [Van Tassel's] fat meadow-lands, the rich fields of wheat, of rye, of buckwheat, and Indian corn, and the orchard burdened with ruddy fruit" (1360), he cannot help but consider the fiscal benefits that marrying the farmer's daughter will entail:



His heart yearned after the damsel who was to inherit these domains, and his imagination expanded with the idea how they might be readily turned into cash, and the money invested in immense tracts of wild land, and shingle palaces in the wilderness. (1360)

It is this desire for material gain that ultimately compels the townspeople to drive Ichabod away. At Van Tassel's dance, he makes his final attempt to win Katrina, but, distracted by the farmer's spread, he cannot conceal his selfishness and indulges himself in "[doing] ample justice to every dainty" (1366). These selfish aspirations mark him as anathema to Katrina and Sleepy Hollow, and the community exiles him for his materialism. This punishment "pleads in effect for the values of the settler and conserver over those of the speculator" (Ringe 463) and suggests that it is Ichabod's acquisitiveness—not his queerness—that the town fears most.

Ichabod's eventual fate further supports this contention: he is "admitted to the bar, turn[s] politician, electioneer[s], writ[es] for the newspapers, and [is] finally made a justice of the Ten Pound Court" (1372). Ichabod manages all of these things without marrying, achieving social respectability without acquiescing to normative constructions. Moreover, his legacy in Sleepy Hollow is not negative; instead, he is remembered primarily as an amusing local myth.

Indeed, after the Headless Horseman drives Ichabod away, he becomes insignificant to the town: "As he was a bachelor, and in nobody's debt, nobody troubled his head any more about him" (1372). That Irving equates Ichabod's bachelorhood with his finances is intriguing. The people of Sleepy Hollow are clearly anxious about the potential introduction of materialism into their society, but ironically, they are guilty of the same sin for which they condemn Ichabod. If the townspeople were truly not materialistic, then Ichabod's debts would be inconsequential, but they are only willing to dismiss the schoolmaster after they ensure that he has not negatively impacted their own livelihoods. The members of the community actually *are* materialistic, and to maintain the illusion that they are *not*, they must eradicate all traces of that characteristic from their society. Ichabod's

eagerness to pursue material gain threatens the people of Sleepy Hollow primarily because it forces them to acknowledge the same quality in themselves.

The community must eliminate the "undesirable" characteristics they embody before resuming the routines of their illusorily sanctimonious lives. This is intriguing, given that the people of Sleepy Hollow use Ichabod's marital status as a criterion for forgetting him. They must confirm his bachelorhood, a necessary function of his queerness, before his exile is complete; therefore, they implicitly acknowledge their possession of the qualities that led to it. That is, the people of Sleepy Hollow concede that they are—at least a little—queer.

In combination with contemporary literary theories, these insights provide new ways of thinking about American literature. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in *Epistemology of the Closet*, these new ways of reading and the evidence that supports them can challenge "the canon regimentation that effaces... the intertext and the intersexed" (49). This critical insurrection has given rise to new—and significant—methodological and ideological questions. How can we open discussions of gender, which have so long relied on a binary division, to include a negotiable spectrum of possibilities? How can we open texts to more mutinous theories, reading them as investigations of the queer? Perhaps, even more fundamentally, we are forced to ask: *can we?* As traditional understandings of identification are complicated, however, an encouraging answer emerges: we not only *can*; we *must*!

This potential to reread texts is particularly significant when we apply it to "major" works of American literature. Irving's contribution to developing the canon can hardly be disputed. His writing played an instrumental role in legitimating the voices of American authors, simultaneously self-conscious and eager to prove their worth, to the rest of the literary world. This conflicted consciousness clearly weighed heavily on Irving. As Rubin-Dorsky observes, Irving had "the misfortune to be publishing *The Sketch Book* at a time of escalating demands on American authors to produce recognizably 'American' works" (508). This preoccupation profoundly affected the canon, requiring textual candidates to



reproduce, in Baym's words, "melodramas of beset manhood." In some ways, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is no exception; the story is largely driven by Ichabod's tenuous masculinity. But Irving does not seem to have been content with a character who simply fails to fulfill his role as Man. Instead, he created Ichabod, whose decidedly feminine traits complicate dualistic models of identification and introduce an undeniable queerness to the story and to the canon.

Irving's distinguished position in the American literary tradition lends tremendous weight to this observation. His techniques, tropes, and themes have become prototypical, adopted and adapted by writers of every era—and rightfully so. But the salience of his contributions does not insulate them against careful scrutiny; instead, contemporary writers are free to subject his techniques to reevaluation and modification. The same must be said about critical approaches to Irving's work. To continue using the same restrictive perspectives to analyze canonical texts is to be complicit in perpetuating the distorted ideologies that these texts and analytical methods implicitly espouse. This acquiescence renders us incapable of challenging obsolete socio-critical dogmata and precludes any reinterpretation of the canon.

Thus, a new understanding of the canon "by necessity involves [its] expansion... and a deliberate revision of traditional perspectives" (Ruoff and Ward 4). It requires an abolition of the "Eurocentric, male biases" that permeate American texts and a conscious effort to create "explanatory models that account for the multiple voices and experiences" (4) that have shaped the history of the United States—even if those voices have so far been silenced. This interpretive model is not innocent or devoid of its own particular motivations, but neither is it guilty of improperly imposing postmodern ideas on premodern texts. Such a condemnation assumes "one overarching master-canon of literature" and implicitly excludes the idea of "a plurality of canons... [or] an interaction between models of the canon" (Sedgwick 50). Therefore, it is not relevant to an investigation that seeks to correct those very misconceptions.

It is important to remember that these critical perspectives do not create texts; they only uncover what is already present in them. The abundant evidence that supports a queer interpretation of Ichabod Crane demonstrates that new ways of reading are not only valid but vital if we are to come to a more complicated, more complete, understanding of our literary and cultural heritage. If Goldstein is correct to observe that "a nation's literature documents its self-imaginings, its self-definitions... [and] dialectically reflects and influences the broad range of American experiences," then it follows that Ichabod is as much a paradigmatic figure as Brom. If we are obsessed with Brom's masculinity, we are obsessed with Ichabod's ambiguity; if we can believe in headless horsemen, we can believe in sexless schoolteachers; if we are willing to acknowledge the materialistic, we are willing to acknowledge the queer.

"The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" undoubtedly deserves its traditional inclusion in the canon, but understanding Ichabod Crane's queerness ironically necessitates a radical reinterpretation of that canon. We must no longer imagine American literature as a homogenous monolith; we must acknowledge its syncretism and complexity, its masculine and feminine and interstitial possibilities, its spoken and unspoken, its pastiness and vivid color, its normative and its queer. Because Ichabod, one of the most famous characters in the American literary tradition, is clearly queer, it seems almost redundant to argue for a queering of the canon. The canon is already queer; we have only to illuminate the evidence. So as we move toward a more complex canonicity, we must listen for voices like Ichabod Crane's, speaking in "peculiar quavers" and helping us to recognize the queer in our literature, in our society, and in all of us.

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