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Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America

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6 Privileging the *Feme Covert*: The Sociology of Sentimental Fiction

In the new Code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particuliar care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.
—Abigail Adams to John Adams (March 31, 1776)

As to your extraordinary Code of laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their masters. But your letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented. . . . Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our masculine systems.
—John Adams to Abigail Adams (April 14, 1776).

The Sociology of the Female Reader

In centering his fictive universe on both seduction and female education, William Hill Brown dramatized one of the chief issues of his time and place—the status of women in the Republic. Seduction, of course, served as both metaphor and metonymy in summing up the society's contradictory views of women. The huge social interest vested in women's sexuality, which was fetishized into a necessary moral as well as a social and biological commodity, meant that women themselves had little voice in the matter. Female education was, then, in a number of the first sentimental novels, an education in the value of playing the proper sexual roles available to women who were thereby seduced by the sentimental plot as well as in it. Wife or mistress, woman's function was to be socially possessed or dispossessed. Taken either way, she constituted mostly one more proof of male prerogatives and privilege. In other words, it is no surprise that *The Power of Sympathy* posits the very premise, the essential powerlessness of the female, that any real problematics of seduction might be expected to question.

Even on the level of narration, the first American novel confirms female victimization in that women are seduced in the novel not by their own uncontrollable

desire but by the verbal chicanery of men. This masculine narrative superiority is part and parcel of the narrative method of *The Power of Sympathy*. Harrington can abandon his plan to "triumph over" Harriot, but he still dominates in all discourse between them. In the course of the novel, Harrington writes his friend Worthy twenty-six times; he writes Harriot only twice. Harrington's letters occupy almost half the entire narrative; Harriot's take up less than one tenth of the novel. Harrington's voice counts and is counted; it is *his* story he is telling, and that unequal distribution of story time tends to seduce the reader as well as the female protagonist whose tale has already been subsumed into Harrington's mastering narration. Who, after all, would want to identify with Harriot, who has no surplus of identity to lend to another?

The social and narrative problems that Hannah Webster Foster addresses are both similar to Brown's and a universe removed. While also concerned with the interrelationship between seduction and female education, Foster has significantly altered the plot structure of the sentimental novel by allowing her heroine some status and by relating the novel primarily from the female point of view. She thereby casts *The Coquette* as more a woman's story than a man's. Whereas Harrington relates his choice not to seduce Harriot but to marry her, Eliza Wharton must choose for herself between matrimony and coquetry, between one set of constraints and another. Still more to the point, by validating the capability of the finally fallen heroine, Foster affirms both the need to educate women and the uselessness of any such education in a society that has no place for educated women.

Eliza is a capable woman, yet she ultimately fails as miserably as any of the hapless victims in Brown's novel. I would suggest that this narrative bad end is not only crucial to *The Coquette* but is pointedly relevant to the whole debate on women's status carried on in diaries, letters, newspapers, magazines, and advice books of the time and, of course, in the early sentimental novel as well. The horns of women's impossible dilemma can be summed up in two opposing questions: If a woman is inferior (susceptible to flattery, easily cajoled, prone to seduction), is she really educable, and, more to the point, does she in any way deserve a voice and a vote in the Republic? On the other hand, if some women are as capable as any man (Abigail Adams, Mercy Otis Warren, and other exemplary women), then why all the fuss about needing better schools, better education, and what is all this Wollstonecraftism about? It is an impasse that every woman's movement has had to face. If women are inferior, they can hardly expect to be treated as equals; if women are equal, then why the clamor for special privileges?

The Coquette, countering received ideas on women's circumscribed power and authority, was an important voice in the debate on women's role in the Republic. But unless the sociology of the early reader is kept in mind, the novel is deprived of its chief narrative thrust. The book gives us, essentially, a portrait of the life,

loves, and death of a well-known woman of the new Republic sympathetically portrayed for this protagonist's unknown contemporaries. Elizabeth Whitman, Eliza Wharton's prototype, was much criticized and scorned in contemporaneous newspaper accounts. In the novel, however, she takes on a surprising dignity. And in the disjunctions between Eliza Wharton and "Elizabeth Whitman" (also a fiction in the sense that her scandalous life was thoroughly allegorized in dozens of sermons and editorials), we may catch some glimpses of an implied reader of early American fiction and read something of the dilemmas confronting her, too, in her society. Reading this reader, I would even maintain, is a necessary prerequisite to reading the novels she read.

The first step in that preliminary reading is to reconstruct the conditions under which she read.[1] We cannot simply reconstruct her, for she is no more a monolith than is "the female reader" today. However, her society tended to define her monolithically, as societies tend to define most members of low-prestige groups. Although the educated woman may well have enjoyed a more privileged life than her serving sister, by law vast differences in wealth, educational level, capability, class, or race were outweighed by one common feature. Both were "women," a social construct as much as a biological entity.

How was woman "written" in the society at large, and how did the early novel both contribute to and countermand that social text? To answer the first part of this contextual question, I will necessarily conduct various forays into the history of emerging America. In answering the second part, I will chart the ways in which numerous sentimental novels entered into the public debates on women and incorporated different arguments on women's status into their very structures. Only then will I return to *The Coquette* to examine how cogently and capably Foster gave voice to the "hidden woman" and dramatized her demise both as a personal tragedy and a social failure. Just as *The Power of Sympathy* can be seen as a counter-text to the Bowdoin/Adams proclamations, so can *The Coquette*, as I shall subsequently argue, be seen as a counter-text to the Elizabeth Whitman allegory of the fall of an intellectual woman.

WHO WERE THE IMPLIED readers of the early American sentimental novel? The novels themselves suggest a ready answer in that many of them are addressed, either prefatorially or in the text, to the "daughters of United Columbia," who are, implicitly or explicitly, young, white, of good New England stock, and for the most part unmarried. Their class, however, is rarely specified, and different novels give us female characters drawn from various social levels, ranging from the working poor to the relatively well-to-do. The very rich rarely appear in early novels except, occasionally, as seducer/villains or as wealthy women typically victimized by fortune hunters, which suggests that the wealthy were not paramount consumers of fiction. Similarly, although black women are sometimes in-

cluded in subplots (typically to demonstrate the inhumanity of slavery), they are never the focus of sentimental intrigue, nor is it likely that they read sentimental novels in any number. Finally, few of the novels focus significant attention on mature women, matrons. Sentiment seems to have been mostly a province of the young.

Young people constituted a ready audience. Because of the high mortality rate during the Revolutionary War and the population explosion in its aftermath, by the first decades of the nineteenth century, a full two-thirds of the white population of America was under the age of twenty-four.[2] Furthermore, because of the increasing attention to childhood education in the later part of the eighteenth century, young people, especially women, tended to be more literate than old people. The early American writer capitalized on this market of potential readers by featuring young people prominently in the plots of the majority of early American novels of all genres. In fact, the mean age of the hero and heroine in novels written in America before 1820 is under twenty-five, as was the national mean. Most of the plots of early American novels also center around issues of importance to young readers. In sentimental fiction, particularly, far more emphasis is placed on a young woman deciding whom to marry than on an older wife determining how best to raise her family.

An emphasis on marital decisions also reflects other demographic considerations. The average marriage age of the republican woman was between twenty-two and twenty-three years of age, and her average life expectancy in 1800 was only forty-two years of age.[3] Since no college in America admitted women until 1837, when Oberlin first opened its doors to women, and since female secondary education was rare, a significant portion of a woman's life (perhaps as much as one-fifth) passed in what might be called a premarital state—beyond childhood but not yet, to use the eighteenth-century term, "settled."[4] While virtually all young women, even the wealthiest, were occupied either inside or outside the home in some kind of labor (sometimes remunerated, sometimes not), a woman's chief social goal during these years was to find a suitable husband, either independently or with the aid of her friends and family. Diaries of young women describe how part of virtually every day was spent visiting with one's friends and otherwise circulating, very much as do the characters in numerous sentimental novels.[5] Assessing one's male companions or studying men in company or sounding out one's acquaintances about a certain man's reputation are all recorded again and again and with good reason. Because of eighteenth-century laws of coverture, a woman had to be particularly careful in her choice of a mate, for, after marriage, she became, for all practical purposes, totally dependent upon her husband. Her rights would be "covered" by his, and it was his legal and social prerogative to define what those rights would be.

For the large available audience of unmarried young women, sentimental novels fulfilled the social function of testing some of the possibilities of romance and

courtship—testing better conducted in the world of fiction than in the world of fact. Both Susanna Rowson and Hannah Foster demonstrated, for example, that a reformed rake did not make the best husband after all and that a womanizer was likely to also be a woman-hater. But by portraying dashing roués, sentimental novelists still allowed women to vicariously participate in a range of relationships with diverse suitors and to imagine what the aftermath of marriage to different men might be like. Most of these novels, however, did portray, at least on one level of discourse, the dangers of unsuitable relationships and, as I have shown with *The Power of Sympathy*, graphically described the heavy portion of blame and suffering that would necessarily fall on the shoulders of the sexually transgressing woman.

The concomitant unstated premise of sentimental fiction is that the woman must take greater control of her life and must make shrewd judgments of the men who come into her life. Implicitly and explicitly, the novels acknowledge that married life can be bitterly unhappy and encourage women to circumvent disaster by weighing any prospective suitors in the balance of good sense—society's and her own. A novel such as Sukey Vickery's *Emily Hamilton*, to cite but one example, considers little more than questions of matrimony. Women who choose wisely are briefly described, catalogued, and ranged against a contrasting catalogue of women who do not. The most pathetic of the latter, a Mrs. Henderson who is brought to the verge of death by a violent, alcoholic, profligate, and emotionally abusive husband, was based on the sad life of one Mrs. Anderson, a neighbor of Vickery (who was herself an unmarried young woman when she penned her first and only novel).[6]

Mary Beth Norton has suggested that young women in early America, particularly those in the higher classes, may well have enjoyed more leisure during their premarital years than at any other time. The daughters of well-to-do families were often free of some of the household tasks that occupied their mothers such as overseeing the ever-fluctuating household help or raising children.[7] But these young women were by no means perpetually idle and looking about for a good read. On the contrary, one of the chief arguments against novel reading in the eighteenth century held that such idle employment kept young women from contributing to the family economy. Linda K. Kerber has noted, in this regard, that household manufacture occupied a large percentage of even upper- and middle-class women's time in both cities and the country until well into the middle of the nineteenth century and that unmarried daughters participated in virtually all aspects of household production, including working the loom and the spinning wheel.[8]

During their premarital years young women even of the middle classes often worked outside the home, especially as teachers, while those lower on the social scale could seek work as domestics or, increasingly, in the new factories or mills. Or young women might engage in various given-out industries and thereby earn

a minimal income while working in the home (typically making straw bonnets or stitching boots or shoes).[9] Although officially "unsettled," women in their premarital years were very much a part of the domestic economy and even contributed to the beginnings of the industrial economy in early America.

Yet they still made time for novel reading, either as a respite from other work or often as an accompaniment to it. For example, young Julia Cowles of Connecticut squeezed in a full syllabus of novel reading (*The Unfortunate Lovers, Adventures of Innocence, The Boarding School, Sir Charles Grandison, Amelia, Memoirs of the Bloomsgrove Family*) amidst her round of household duties—washing, cleaning, quilting, spinning, ironing, sewing: "Been so much engaged in read[ing] 'Grandison,' " she apologized to her diary, "that other things have been neglected, especially my journal." Or in Pennsylvania Molly Drinker read aloud from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* while her mother, Elizabeth, plied her needle—much the way Miss Granby reads aloud to Eliza Wharton and her mother in *The Coquette*. On another day, Mrs. Drinker herself read *The Haunted Priory* but then concluded her diary entry with a long list of the various household chores she had also accomplished "to shew that I have not spent the day reading."[10]

Women often met together to engage jointly in such tasks as sewing or quilting; while the others worked, one member of the group would read aloud—typically from a sentimental novel. Such group reading was often followed by discussions on topics ranging from national politics to local gossip. Not only was the novel thus made a part of the daily life of republican women, but the discourse of fiction was itself made contiguous with or incorporated into their discourse. In effect, then, just as a local scandal was easily fictionalized (a common source for sentimental novels), so, too, might the fiction be readily "scandalized" (that is, transformed by oral discourse and circulated as story). And through the grammar of these simple transformations, the news of the day—fictional, factual—could make its rounds.

Important social matters are reflected in sentimental plots, including the preoccupation with extramarital sex and the social and biological consequences of sexual transgressions. That preoccupation no doubt did not cause, as the critics of the early novel regularly asserted, a sharp rise in illegitimacy. But it is correlated with it. During the revolutionary and postrevolutionary era as many as 30 percent of all first births occurred less than nine months after marriage; the percentage of conceptions prior to or without benefit of matrimony was not equaled again until the present permissive era.[11] Many social authorities were alarmed by that new laxity, and the emerging novel provided them with a convenient scapegoat. I would suggest, however, that the novelist, as much as the professed moralist, simply perceived and addressed an issue of the time. The main difference was that the novelist's critique of illicit sexual behavior often had a feminist import and emphasized the unfortunate consequences of seduction for

the individual woman, not the social mores (although these were in the novel, too) against which she had offended.

The sentimental novel also portrayed, frequently in graphic terms, the deaths of many characters in childbirth. Although, then as now, the overall life expectancy for women was higher than for men, every young woman facing marriage also faced the prospect of death in childbirth, which did increase women's mortality rate above men's during prime childbearing years.[12] Julia Cowles was not too busy with her novels and her spinning to note that in 1802, in her small community of Farmington, Connecticut, four women between the ages of twenty and twenty-four had died, and she could not help but identify with them: "Shall I, who am now 17 years of age, live to see that time and leave, as 3 of them did, families? Ah! methinks I shall . . . be cut off[f] in the bloom of my life. . . . And time shall be no longer."[13] Cowles's diction and description come straight from the sentimental novels we retrospectively criticize for their lack of realism.

The lurid portrayal of death in childbirth allegorized what every early American woman already knew. Intercourse begot children, and having to bear a child was a mixed blessing. In postrevolutionary America, birth control was still considered immoral, so even though earlier sanctions against premarital sex had waned to a certain extent, the biological realities of pregnancy, then as now, burdened only the newly "liberated" woman and not the long-liberated man, a fact virtually every sentimental novel emphasized (without ever mentioning birth control).[14] And, of course, death in childbirth could come to married and unmarried women alike.

Demographic studies indicate that the *average* number of children born to an American woman in 1800 was an extraordinary 7.04, a number which does not include pregnancies that ended in miscarriage or stillbirth.[15] A typical American woman could thus count on spending virtually all of her mature years bearing and raising children. Fertility was higher in America than in most European countries at the same time, and many a European visitor noted the remarkable change in New World women after marriage. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, "in America the independence of women is irrecoverably lost in the bonds of marriage."[16] But it did not take de Tocqueville to tell them so. Norton has documented how some of these women described their own condition. One Molly Tilghman wrote of her sister, Henny, in 1788: "She is decidedly *gone* [pregnant] to my great grief, and to her own too." Or Abigail Adams employed another apt metaphor when she noted of a young woman in her family, "it is a sad slavery to have children as fast as she has."[17]

The high fertility rate of the postrevolutionary period is striking, but what is even more striking is the precipitous fall in the rate during the next century. The fertility rate declined by 23 percent before 1850, by 50 percent before 1900.[18] Since no new technologies for preventing births (such as the recent birth control pill) were widely distributed in those years and since prophylactics were certainly

known in late-eighteenth-century America (and used widely in other countries, notably France), this striking decline in the birthrate reveals a massive change in American social attitudes even within a generation or two. Equally interesting is the fact that relatively few written documents survive to chart the changing social attitude except, perhaps, novels in which a small, intimate family of only three or four children is more and more often posited as an ideal. It seems, then, that there was a dramatic shift from an abhorrence of contraception to a widespread but discreet and private reliance on methods of reducing family size. Carl N. Degler further argues that women were primarily responsible for this shift in attitude and that their increasingly asserted control over family size paved the way for greater reform movements at the end of the century. But whatever the causes and consequences, the unprecedented, rapid decline in fertility rates in the nineteenth century was one of the chief indices of women's changing role in family and society.[19]

Another index was the rising literacy and education levels of women. Nor does it seem merely coincidental that fertility rates fell almost 25 percent during the same period in which women's sign literacy rate (according to Kenneth A. Lockridge's data) more than doubled. Demographers chart a surprising correlation between the levels of education and fertility. Better-educated parents (the mother's education level being especially pertinent) tend to have fewer children.[20] The high correlation between increased female literacy and decreased fertility suggests that education brought with it a sense of control over one's body, over one's role in the reproductive process, and even some control over one's husband. I am not being entirely facetious, therefore, when I suggest that, with its double focus on improving female literacy and controlling sexuality, the sentimental novel may well have been the most effective means of birth control of the time.

By its emphasis on improved female education and its sensationalizing of the dangers of childbearing, the sentimental novel seems intimately linked—as mirror or catalyst or both—to larger social forces at work in the lives of women readers. But what was woman's status in the early years of the Republic, from 1789 to 1820? In almost all the sentimental novels, we see women dominated by larger social and economic forces, controlled by selfish parents, sadistic husbands, or strong-willed seducers. Viewing the typical sentimental novel as a reflection of the society, one must conclude that women were powerless and that the primary relationship between men and women entailed domination, exploitation, appropriation, and abandonment on the one hand and submission, appeasement, and other such defensive strategies on the other. Yet just how accurately did these novels reflect the lives of women readers and their relationships to the men in their lives?

As Perry Miller noted, the Revolution gave American legal thinkers a unique opportunity to invent new systems of law and new standards of justice.[21] For the most part, however, the new Republic modestly revised British principles and

procedures and did so essentially to maintain the existing power structures of class, race, and gender in America. Marylynn Salmon has shown that most of the legal changes that occurred in America between 1775 and 1800, especially those bearing on women's rights, were "gradual, conservative, and frequently based upon English developments."[22] As the American jurist St. George Tucker indicated in his 1803 annotations of *Blackstone's Commentaries,* a cornerstone of English law, American judicial practices preserved the inequities between men and women, particularly the idea that a married women is a *feme covert* [*sic*], a hidden woman, whose rights are both absorbed by her husband and subject to her husband's will. Tucker also observed that American women were, de facto and de jure, victims of "taxation without representation; for they pay taxes without having the liberty of voting for representatives." As his very phrasing emphasizes, the Revolution freed America from an oppressive Colonial status, but it had not freed American women from their subservient status. As Tucker summed up the matter, "I fear that there is little reason for a compliment to our laws for their respect and favour to the female sex."[23]

Although the situation varied from state to state and sometimes from case to case, one can make a few generalizations about women's legal status in the new Republic. Before marriage, a young woman was typically considered the property of her father. Sometimes, as Kerber has pointed out, this concept of property could take grotesque forms. For example, in the Connecticut court case of *Samuel Mott v. Calvin Goddard* (September 1792), a father was able to sue his daughter's rapist for damages on the grounds that "the plaintiff's daughter and servant," by being made pregnant, had been rendered "unfit for service."[24] Kerber also notes that St. George Tucker was particularly offended by the terms of the proceedings whereby the rapist could be prosecuted only through the legal fiction that the victim's father's property had been irreparably damaged—a holdover from British law and a clear testimony to the woman's primary status as property not as person. In sentimental fiction, too, the unmarried young woman was, for all practical purposes, the property of her father. The common *Clarissa* theme of the avaricious parents who essentially sell their daughter into an economically advantageous marriage was not just an extravagant borrowing from earlier British fiction but was also an apt metaphor for the legal status of the postrevolutionary American girl.

It was an apt metaphor for the legal status of republican wives as well. Marriage, for the women involved, was mostly a change in masters. The new bride, admittedly, was to be protected by her husband, and she was protected, so far as the law was concerned, because her rights were subsumed in his. Yet as many legal historians have shown, a wife's status as *feme covert* effectively rendered her legally invisible. With some notable exceptions, the married woman typically lost her property upon marriage. She lost her legal right to make a will or to inherit property beyond the one-third widow's rights that, by common law, fell to her

upon her husband's death. For the most part, in 1800, by law and by legal precedent, a married woman's signature had no weight on legal documents and she had no individual legal identity.[25]

As with many key historical issues, there is substantial debate over just how much coverture "actually" limited women's lives. The pioneering women's legal historian Mary Beard disputed nineteenth-century feminist reformers who described marriage, in Harriet Martineau's memorable phrase, as the "political nonexistence of women."[26] Beard argued that both the equity courts and common law gave married women far more legal rights than those allowed by Blackstone or codified into the statutes of the different states. Relatively speaking, Beard was right in stressing that equity and common law tended to extend to women some measure of power and control. But one can easily romanticize the degree of equality granted here, and recent studies of equity rulings by Salmon and Norma Basch suggest that Beard may well have been too optimistic in her estimates.[27] For the most part, the nineteenth-century reformers accurately perceived the injustices of coverture. In Basch's summation, "the law created an equation in which one plus one equaled one by erasing the female one." The married women's property acts passed in New York in the mid–nineteenth century (and the result of considerable reformist activity) not only improved women's prospects but provided the locus of further feminist protest by emphasizing that the traditional concept of coverture was a "source of crippling sexual discrimination." The antebellum feminists, Basch continues, were "neither naive nor misguided" in focusing their attack on coverture, for that focus "was essential to an exploration of the conflict between motherhood and citizenship [and] the critical first stage in bridging the world of domesticity and the world of politics."[28]

Various commentators of the time emphasized women's legal powerlessness. One of the most eloquent assessments is that of Judge Hertell of New York, who in 1837 argued on behalf of a married woman's rights to retain her own property. Hertell noted that the current marriage laws gave a husband "uncontrolled, indefinite, irresponsible and arbitrary power" over every aspect of his wife's life and subjected her to an "abject state of surveillance to the will, commands, caprices, ill humours, angry passions, and mercenary, avaricious and selfish disposition, conduct and views of her husband." For Judge Hertell, a wife's situation, at least metaphorically and often literally, was comparable to slavery or imprisonment.[29] Cott, Norton, and Kerber have all found repeated statements in private papers of late-eighteenth-century women about the privations of marriage; women such as Abigail Adams, the diarist Eliza Southgate, Judith Sargent Murray, Susanna Rowson, Mercy Otis Warren, and others all noted that women suffered in life proportionate to the rights they surrendered by law.[30] Even Abigail Adams's request that her husband "Remember the Ladies" in the new Constitution was primarily addressed to the legal and social inequities of married women (rather than a more direct plea for political rights). "Do not put such unlimited power into the hands

of the Husbands," she wrote, because "all Men would be tyrants if they could." She counseled her husband to "put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity."[31] Abigail Adams's prediction is starkly substantiated by a private complaint in verse by Grace Growden Galloway, the wife of the politician Joseph Galloway:

> . . . I am Dead
> Dead to each pleasing thought each Joy of Life
> Turn'd to that heavy lifeless lump a wife.[32]

The flat despair of that declaration of dependence and defeat anticipates writers such as Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton and emphasizes the debilitating potentialities inherent in the system of coverture.

Mrs. Galloway's private complaint remained private in her lifetime. It is now more acceptable for a woman to speak the woe that is marriage, especially her own, but it is now also more acceptable for a woman to remove herself from that same marriage. In the late-eighteenth-century colonies, however, and also in the new Republic, divorce, for most women, was simply not an option. As a result of a British ruling, Colonial divorce bills were effectively rescinded in the decade preceding the Revolution. Pennsylvania and New York, for example, granted no divorces during the prerevolutionary era. Not until 1785 in Pennsylvania and 1787 in New York could any foundering marriage be officially dissolved. Maryland granted its first absolute divorce in 1790. There was, furthermore, a good deal of variation from state to state. In South Carolina, absolute divorces were not allowed until 1949 (although legal separations could be granted there by Courts of Chancery).[33] What was universal, however, was a declared, public, official abhorrence for divorce, and both social pressures and legal practice insisted on the sanctity of marriage. For example, until well into the next century, women were granted divorces only if they could prove extreme physical abuse and their own total innocence. Consequently, a "guilty" woman, whether confirmed adulteress or occasional shrew, was often denied a court hearing. The impasse was early dramatized in Gilbert Imlay's sentimental novel *The Emigrants* (1793), which was apparently written with some help from his lover, Mary Wollstonecraft, and is essentially a fictionalized tract in favor of divorce. As Imlay notes in his preface, "I have no doubt but the main misfortunes which daily happen in domestic life, and which too often precipitate women of the most virtuous inclinations into the gulf of ruin, proceed from the great difficulty there is . . . of obtaining a divorce."[34]

Women's restricted status within marriage (and the corresponding restrictions on divorce) presumed a patriarchal domestic order often breached during the Revolutionary War years when many American women were suddenly forced to survive without the economic assistance or legal protection of a husband. As numerous historians have demonstrated, the war ambiguously emphasized to

women both their private capability and their public powerlessness. Thousands of women during the war suddenly became responsible for running a family business or for continuing the operations of a family farm. Those women, of course, were still also responsible for the array of household manufacture essential for survival in the rural market economy. Extant letters indicate that sometimes a conscientious husband might write home giving his wife advice on how to manage complex business or agricultural operations, but there was little he could actually do while he was away fighting, and there was always the possibility of his death. Women managed, as they have managed during all wars, to keep the economy going, surreptitiously circumventing their lack of legal rights, often to their financial detriment. Many learned firsthand the shackles law placed upon them, as wives and also as widows. In most states, women could not legally inherit property or businesses. The assumption that they could not manage, at odds with the fact that they did, was rendered even more ridiculous when destitution at home followed the husband's death in the war. Only through extralegal maneuverings by widowed women and their male kin could the law's clear intent—property was to be controlled by men—sometimes be subverted.[35]

Having demonstrated their capability in the face of a national emergency, many women in the postwar years felt that they had fully earned those new rights and responsibilities that they had exercised, de facto, already. The new Constitution, however, did nothing to acknowledge women's contribution to the war effort. In only one state, New Jersey, and only briefly, were propertied women (black and white) granted the vote. That enfranchisement was unusual enough that newspapers as far away as Boston reported on women voting in local New Jersey elections.[36] Equal pay was not even an issue; it was assumed that women would earn less. Technically, a woman factory worker could not even collect her earnings without a man's signature (although this restriction may not have been widely enforced). Not until the end of the nineteenth century could a woman serve on a jury or, concomitantly, be tried by a jury at least partly of her peers. Married or single, she had virtually no rights within society and no visibility within the political operations of government, except as a symbol of that government—Columbia or Minerva or Liberty.

As one immediate consequence of the Revolution, the family and, more particularly, woman's role in the family became a matter of considerable social concern. There is almost a natural tendency, after any war, to seek within domesticity some release from what might be termed a postmarital letdown. The comfort and safety of hearth and home are welcomed, by women as well as men, after the dangers of battle, the chaos of war. There is something comforting in seeing that much of the old order has survived. Consequently, Sally the Shopkeeper, like her latter-day daughter Rosie the Riveter, soon found her new occupation gone and was obliged to return to her old one—tending house and husband and raising children to repeople the Republic.

Typically, too, after the War of Independence, some women were reluctant to relinquish the freedoms that they had gained while men were occupied elsewhere and otherwise. As a poem published in the *Massachusetts Magazine, or Monthly Museum*, in 1794 proclaims:

> No ties shall perplex me, no fetters shall bind,
> That innocent freedom that dwells in my mind.
> At liberty's spring such draughts I've imbib'd,
> That I hate all the doctrines of wedlock prescrib'd.[37]

Or as another anonymous poem published the following year in the *Philadelphia Minerva* declares:

> Man boasts the noble cause
> Nor yields supine to laws
> Tyrants ordain;
> Let Woman have a share
> Nor yield to slavish fear,
> Her equal rights declare,
> And Well Maintain[38]

The diction has gone from post-Freneau to pre-Emerson, but the sentiments remain the same. A spirit of "woman's rights" was felt throughout postrevolutionary America, celebrated by some, derided by others.

Certain demographies of the time contributed to this strain of female independence. Studies of Massachusetts and Pennsylvania suggest that the number of unmarried and never-married women increased, as would be expected, in the postwar era. Many men had died in the war, leaving widows behind. Records show that a number of these widows (perhaps at least partly to circumvent legal problems arising from not being able to inherit their husband's land or business) quickly remarried, sometimes to relatives of the deceased husband, sometimes to men considerably younger than themselves, thus further depleting the pool of men available to a young woman reaching marriageable age.[39] But despite the surplus of unmarried women in the late eighteenth century, spinsterhood hardly embodied a respectable option in the society of the time. On the contrary, the spinster was an object of pervasive cultural ridicule. As we see in the plots of numerous sentimental novels, the specter of spinsterhood drove more than one sentimental heroine into the arms of a seducer. Eliza Wharton is merely one case in point, a case that I will subsequently consider in some detail. For the present, suffice to say that when, at the age of thirty-seven, she finally yielded to her seducer's blandishments, she knew exactly what she was doing, and so did many readers of the time who obviously sympathized with her plight.

The sentimental novel as a form mediated between (and fluctuated between) the hopes of a young woman who knew that her future would be largely deter-

mined by her marriage and her all-too-well-founded fears as to what her new status might entail—the legal liabilities of the *feme covert,* the threat of abandonment, the physical realities of repetitive pregnancy, and the danger of an early death during childbirth. Many republican women expressed deep reservations about marriage. "I keep my name still," Betsey Mayhew wrote to her good friend Pamela Dwight Sedgwick in 1782, "I think it is a good one and am determined not to change it without a prospect of some great advantage." Somewhat less hard-headed but no less ambivalent was Sarah Hanschurst: "I often Run over in my mind, the many Disadvantages that Accrue to our Sex from an Alliance with the other," she wrote to her friend Sally Forbes, but "the thought of being Do[o]med to live alone I cant yet Reconcile . . . [T]he Appeallation of old Made . . . I don't believe one our Sex would voluntarily Bare."[40] Or in the literature of the time, Mrs. Carter, in Charles Brockden Brown's *Alcuin,* can paraphrase Mary Wollstonecraft and insist that marriage is a vital institution "founded on free and mutual consent" and one that "cannot exist without friendship" or "without personal fidelity." For her, "as soon as the union ceases to be spontaneous it ceases to be just." Yet that idealistic portrait must be set against her own earlier description not of marriage as it should be but marriage as it too often was in America. The married woman "will be most applauded when she smiles with the most perseverance on her oppressor, and when, with the undistinguishing attachment of a dog, no caprice or cruelty shall be able to estrange her affection." Carter's final pronouncement on the role of women in marriage anticipates that of Judge Hertell: "Females are slaves."[41]

As any number of public and private documents attest, marriage was a crucial matter for women of the time. Just as they knew and differently adumbrated the central question in their lives, so, too, did the authors of the fictions they read, fictions that were primarily sentimental. That last literary adjective carries, in contemporary discourse, a heavy load of negative connotations and suggests self-indulgent fantasies bearing little relationship to real life. Yet the private and nonfictional commentaries of the time suggest a contiguity between the sociology of the early American family and the plots of the sentimental novel that is easily overlooked by the contemporary reader. Indeed, the seemingly melodramatic death with which so many of the sentimental novels end both fictionalizes and thematicizes the seriousness of the women's questions raised in the plot. Given the political and legal realities of the time, the lack of birth control, the high fertility rate, and the substantial chances of death at an early age, many of the readers fared no better than did their most unfortunate fictional sisters.

The sentimental novel spoke far more directly to the fears and expectations of its original readers than our retrospective readings generally acknowledge. Conveniently divorcing the novel from the social milieu in which it was originally written and read, recent critics easily condemn as clichéd and overdone the plight of the assailed, sentimental heroine hovering momentously between what seems

a mechanical fall (seduction) on the one hand and an automatic salvation (marriage) on the other. Yet for her and her reader the choice was desperate. Moreover, if the right decision would not necessarily assure her happiness, the wrong one would guarantee suffering in abundance. So the contemporary critic literalizes and thereby trivializes what the contemporaneous reader took symbolically and thus seriously.

Style, too, has changed since the late eighteenth century, and the language of sentiment interposes itself between the modern reader and the eighteenth-century text. In our lean and antirhetorical time, the very excesses of the novel's sentimental "effusions" (a term derogatory in our vocabulary, not theirs) call the sentiments thereby expressed into question. Yet other discourse of the time employs much the same language as does the early American novel. Consider, for example, the courtship correspondence of John and Abigail Adams as represented by the following excerpt from a 1764 letter from John (signing himself Lysander) to Abigail (Diana):

> You who have always softened and warmed my Heart, shall restore my Benevolence as well as my Health and Tranquility of mind. You shall polish and refine my sentiments of Life and manners, banish all the unsocial and ill-natured particles in my Composition, and form me to that happy Temper, that can reconcile a quick Discernment with a perfect Candour.[42]

Harrington himself could not have said it more sentimentally. As Jane Tompkins has recently reminded us, contemporary tastes and values applied indiscriminately to older literature may illuminate contemporary tastes and values but say little about the literature itself.[43]

Addressed to young female readers, the first novels performed vital functions within their society and did so more than parallel vehicles such as sermons or advice books. The most important of these functions in my view was the reappropriating of choice. "Seduction," at first glance, implies female powerlessness; nevertheless, by reading about a female character's good or bad decisions in sexual and marital matters, the early American woman could vicariously enact her own courtship and marriage fantasies. She could, at least in those fantasies, view her life as largely the consequence of her own choices and not merely as the product of the power of others in her life—the father's authority, the suitor's (honorable or dishonorable) guile, the husband's control. Thematicizing, then, the necessity of informed choice, these fictions championed the cause of female education that they typically proclaimed in their prefaces. Weighed in that balance, many of the novels of the time are not the frothy fictions that we commonly take them to be but evince, instead, a solid social realism that also constitutes a critique (even if sometimes covert) of the patriarchal structure of that society. Thus, if many early novels end unhappily, it may be because they acknowledge the sad reality of marriage for many women. As Catherine Maria Sedgwick wryly notes in her

story "Old Maids" (1835), it is best to conclude a story with the wedding if one wants to end on a happy day, for "it is not probable another will succeed it."[44]

Other forms of literature in the new Republic also specifically addressed the woman reader, most notably a wealth of advice literature often penned by clergymen. But this literature usually referred women more to the kitchen and the nursery than to the study or the library. Only in fiction would the average early woman reader encounter a version of her world existing for her sake, and, more important, only in the sentimental novel would her reading about this world be itself validated. As an added bonus, in not a few of these novels, women readers encountered women characters whose opinions mattered. Numerous sentimental novels, beginning with the first one, took time out from the main seduction plot to show women discussing politics, law, philosophy, and history—those same arenas of discourse from which the woman reader was often excluded. As Rachael Rachel M. Brownstein has recently observed, such reading, for women, serves crucial functions:

> Recognizing the problems and the conventions of a woman-centered novel, the reader feels part of a community and tradition of women who talk well about their lives and link them, by language, to larger subjects. Looking up from a novel about a girl's settling on a husband and a destiny so as to assert higher moral and aesthetic laws and her own alliance with them, the reader can feel the weight of her woman's life as serious, can see her own self as shapely and significant.[45]

A *feme covert*, a hidden woman, the early American reader had even greater motivation than the contemporary woman reader to find books that rendered her life, in fiction if not in fact, significant.

Sentimental Fiction as Social Commentary

Given a married woman's status as *feme covert*, many late-eighteenth-century readers (particularly women readers) were, understandably, vitally concerned with marriage and strove to educate or otherwise prepare themselves to make a good choice in marriage. Questions of the importance and nature of the family and woman's role within the family were widely debated. As recent historians such as Degler, Kerber, and Norton as well as Jay Fliegelman, Philip Greven, and Michael Zuckerman have pointed out, with considerable differences in emphasis or interpretation, there was in the eighteenth century at least a theoretical concern with reforming patriarchal structures. It has also been argued that some substantial changes did occur in the daily family life of Americans in the new Republic. Amorphous psychosociological shifts such as an emerging ideal of affectional marriage (rather than patriarchal authority and wifely subordination), a relaxing of parental control over one's offspring (especially in the matter of choosing marriage partners), an increased substitution of affection for authority in the

contemptuous of the women he seduces, often inversely mirrors the values of the moralist. The one, to prove his reputation, would despoil what the other, to prove his, would preserve. For each, the heroine is almost incidental. For the heroine, both are equally unappealing. She is caught in a double bind, and, in the best sentimental novels, her predicament demonstrates that the postulated dichotomy of the clearly virtuous and the clearly vicious central to this fiction is itself a fiction.

Virtue (writ large) does not always save the heroine. Bombarded with pompous precepts, on the one hand, and assailed by promising temptations, on the other, the perceptive female protagonist merits the reader's attention and sympathy. Prefatory assurances to the contrary, hers is no easy choice. Chaste, she is rewarded by a limiting marriage, often to a limited man. Should she fall, her death is hardly triumphant proof that the social norms are just, that vice has been rightly punished. Anticipating the later Romantic tradition, these protagonists seek to establish their own destinies.[83] Given the mores of late-eighteenth-century American society and the biological reality of pregnancy, they cannot succeed. But often we wish they could.

Reading *The Coquette*

William Godwin's 1798 publication of the *Memoirs* of Mary Wollstonecraft had the unexpected effect of immediately translating her life into an allegory of feminine crime and punishment, and American public opinion was quick to draw the reactionary moral. When a thirty-seven-year-old woman came to the Bell Tavern in Danvers (now Peabody), Massachusetts, to give birth to a stillborn child, and then followed that child to her own death on July 25, 1788, a similar fictionalizing was at once set in motion, as can be seen in even the first published account of the event, which appeared in the *Salem Mercury* for July 29, 1788. Purportedly written by one Captain Goodhue, the landlord of the Bell Tavern, this first notice effectively balances asserted propriety (she was waiting for her husband) and suggested scandal (did she really have one?):

> Last Friday, a female stranger died at the Bell Tavern, in Danvers; and on Sunday her remains were decently interred. The circumstances relative to this woman are such as excite curiosity, and interest our feelings. She was brought to the Bell in a chaise . . . by a young man whom she had engaged for that purpose. . . . She remained at this inn till her death, in expectation of the arrival of her husband, whom she expected to come for her, and appeared anxious at his delay. She was averse to being interrogated concerning herself or connexions; and kept much retired to her chamber, employed in needlework, writing, etc. . . . Her conversation, her writings and her manners, bespoke the advantage of a respectable family and good education. Her person was agreeable; her deportment, amiable and engaging; and, though in a state of anxiety and suspense,

she preserved a cheerfulness which seemed to be not the effect of insensibility, but of a firm and patient temper.[84]

Within days the account was picked up and reprinted by the *Massachusetts Centinel* and then in dozens of other newspapers throughout New England. It was the stuff of good rumor, of gossip, of sentimental novels.

What led to the Elizabeth Whitman mystery? Surely many other woman had borne a child out of wedlock and died of puerperal fever. But, as even the foregoing report suggests, the essential appeal of this story was its contradictory nature. To start with, what was a nice woman like Elizabeth Whitman doing in a tavern like that and in that condition? Miss Whitman was the daughter of a highly respected minister, the Reverend Elnathan Whitman. On her mother's side, she was descended from the Stanley family, which had governed Connecticut almost from its Colonial beginnings. She was also related to the Edwards family, to Aaron Burr, and to the poet John Trumbull. Two of her suitors had been Yale preceptors. She had corresponded regularly with Joel Barlow. Hartford's highest society knew and respected her for her wit, her intelligence, and her charm. Yet she died in a tavern, seduced and abandoned, a fate right out of the novels that vociferously warned against just that fate. Nor were the novels the only texts bearing on the matter of her demise. Once Whitman's identity was revealed, ministers, journalists, and free-lance moralists industriously made *meaning*—their meaning—of her otherwise incomprehensible life. In the redaction of an anonymous essayist in the *Boston Independent Chronicle* of September 11, 1788, for example, Elizabeth Whitman's life and death becomes, simply, "a good moral lecture to young ladies."[85]

Readers in the early Republic were well versed in the process whereby the complexities of a disordered life could be reduced to a simply ordered moral allegory. Virtually every condemned crook, con man, or other criminal recorded the outlines of his or her life before ascending to the gallows. Published in inexpensive chapbook form, republished in newspaper columns throughout America, these confessions straddled the line between truth and fiction as much as did the Elizabeth Whitman allegories that were reprinted all over New England. Most readers of *The Coquette* would have already known the outlines of Whitman's life either from the newspapers or from sermons of ministers who regularly mined gossip for material. These readers would also have known the lacunae in Whitman's story that have continued to intrigue biographers down to the present day. Although Whitman left a cache of poems and letters at her death, none refers to her lover by name—and the ironic pseudonym she used to refer to him, Fidelio, provides no clue to his identity either. Pierrepont Edwards, by the middle of the nineteenth century, was generally assumed to be the model for Major Peter Sanford, but other candidates for the honor have also been proposed: Aaron Burr, the New York state senator James Watson, Joel Barlow, and an unnamed French

nobleman whose parents objected to his secret marriage to a Protestant minister's daughter from Connecticut. The secret marriage theme, incidentally, at one point had considerable currency. Caroline W. Dall (in 1875) and Charles Knowles Bolton (in 1912) both tried, a century after the events, to salvage the reputation of the lady by proposing a secret wedding.[86] In different ages, the historical record differently fabricates the story of Elizabeth Whitman—seduced woman or suffering wife, smirched or sacrificed or sanctified—mostly to confirm its story of itself. But in Victorian hagiography or eighteenth-century moral tracts, the histories of Elizabeth Whitman all share the governing assumption that lost virginity signifies, for a woman, lost worth; that the sexual fall proves the social one, so much so that in this case the signifier and its significance are one and the same.

The earliest accounts of Whitman's decline and fall served the dual purpose of criticizing any intellectual pretensions that a woman might possess and of condemning the novel as a new form that fostered such pretensions. Whitman became, in effect, a case study, a woman first misled by her education into a taste for novels and then corrupted through indulging that unwholesome appetite. The first American novel argues, ironically, against novels by promulgating just this interpretation of this character's fate: "She was a great reader of novels and romances and having imbibed her ideas of *the characters of men*, from those fallacious sources, became vain and coquetish [*sic*], and rejected several offers of marriage, in expectation of receiving one more agreeable to her fanciful idea." It was the official view. In fact, William Hill Brown practically plagiarizes the verdict delivered in the *Massachusetts Centinel* on September 20, 1788: "She was *a great reader of romances*, and having formed her notions of happiness from that corrupt source, became vain and coquetish."[87] Thus was one of the most learned American women of her generation translated into a poor, pathetic victim of fiction whose dishonor and death could be partly redeemed only by serving to save others from a similar end.

To turn that well-known scandal and accepted story into one of the most reprinted early American novels, Hannah Webster Foster had to reread this protagonist and her plight, had to deconstruct the entrenched interpretation so that a novel one might be advanced. One of the more striking changes in Foster's different account is the deletion of the charge of an addiction to fiction. *The Power of Sympathy*, it will be recalled, did not even refer to itself as a novel on its title page, whereas in 1797, when *Charlotte Temple* was well on its way to becoming a steady seller, Ebenezer Larkin published a book that he hoped might be similarly successful under the title *The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton: A NOVEL*.[88] In the intervening decade, the novel had come of age in America and no longer needed the protective coloration provided by an occasional sermon against novel reading. In *The Coquette*, fiction is valorized. When Eliza is at her most rejected and depressed, her friends and moral advisors send her novels to read. More pointedly, Eliza's seducer, Major Sanford, numbers among

his manifest faults a singular unfamiliarity with fiction, especially with the works of Richardson.[89]

Other alterations in the Whitman story were more subtle. Several historical characters, for example, underwent name changes while retaining the same initials, which suggests an intentional blurring of the division between fiction and fact and an invitation to the reader to enjoy that same blurring. Eliza Wharton both is and is not Elizabeth Whitman. Similarly, two of Whitman's historical suitors, the Reverend Joseph Howe (whom her parents originally chose for their daughter but who died before the marriage could take place) and the Reverend Joseph Buckminster (who subsequently sought her hand) are lightly fictionalized into the reverends Haly and Boyer. Historical personages have also been advanced as the originals for the protagonist's women friends as well. But Peter Sanford (by initials or occupation) does not figure forth a historical personage but remains a literary one. A "second Lovelace," Elizabeth/Eliza's seducer becomes allegorized in Foster's novel very much as Whitman had been allegorized in the newspaper accounts. Conversely, the heroine gained in fiction the complexity of which she had been deprived in the early allegories of her life and death.

None of the early accounts of Whitman's life, for example, credit her with a rational weighing of a prospective husband's qualifications, despite the fact that her second suitor, the Reverend Buckminster, was well known in his day as a man subject to prolonged fits of depression and outbursts of uncontrolled temper. "She refused two as good offers of marriage as she deserved," avers the *Boston Independent Chronicle*, "because she aspired higher than to be a clergyman's wife; and having coquetted till past her prime, fell into criminal indulgences."[90] Foster, however, transforms this reductionist account. Elizabeth's anticlericalism and social climbing become Eliza's determination that her marriage must be an egalitarian match based on mutual affection. A clergyman's wife herself, Foster well knew just what that employment entailed (as is shown even more clearly in her second novel, *The Boarding School*), and, more to the point, her fictional Eliza, the daughter of a minister's wife, also knows the prerequisites for the position and knows, too, that she does not fit the bill. As she admits to her mother, "My disposition is not calculated for that sphere. There are duties arising from the station which I fear I should not be able to fulfill, cares and restraints to which I could not submit" (p. 162). Having narrowly escaped one loveless marriage—through the fortuitous death of the fiancé—imposed upon her by the "shackles" of "parental authority" (p. 140), she is determined to marry in the future only if reason and fancy, her mind and her heart, are both engaged.

Socially conservative readers may well have intimated the seeds of Eliza's downfall in this daughter's belated declaration of independence and her egalitarian concept of marriage. Foster, however, takes considerable pains to affirm her protagonist's ideals. When, early in the novel, she leaves her mother's home, in which she was immured with her dying clergyman fiancé, she goes to visit her

friends, the Richmans, whose marriage exemplifies the Wollstonecraftian ideal of a partnership of equals. That relationship is Eliza's ideal too. Her "heart approved and applauded" (p. 181) this couple's happiness. Her tragedy is not that she set her sights too high but that she encounters no equivalent of a General Richman. What she is offered, instead, is a difficult choice between unsatisfactory alternatives, a common quandary in early American sentimental novels and a dilemma, no doubt, faced by many American young women.

The Coquette, then, is not simply an allegory of seduction. The generic shift from sermon to novel in the Whitman/Wharton narrative entails a concomitant transformation of focus and philosophy. Set within a specific context of limiting marriage laws and restrictive social mores, the novel is less a story of the wages of sin than a study of the wages of marriage. In the realistic world of this fictional account, virtue and virtuous women are not always rewarded. Sanford's lawfully wedded wife, for example, a woman shown to be intelligent, kind, honest, and attractive, fares almost as disastrously as Eliza. She is ruined financially by her marriage to Sanford, and her child, too, is still-born. Furthermore, even Mrs. Richman, the epitome of republican motherhood in the novel, cannot be permanently happy within her familial sphere. "I grudge every moment that calls me from the pleasing scenes of domestic life" (p. 210), she writes, soon after the birth of her daughter—who soon afterward dies, a realistic tempering of the proclaimed joys of domesticity.

By fictionalizing the lives of the women who surround Eliza, Foster provided her early readers with an opportunity to see, privileged in print, women very much like themselves. As the community of women within the novel exchange views and ideas on such crucial subjects as friendship, marriage, and economic security, their letters constitute a dialogical discourse in which the reader was also invited to participate, if only vicariously. For its first audience particularly, *The Coquette* set forth a remarkably detailed assessment of the marital possibilities facing late-eighteenth-century women of the middle or upper-middle classes. Crucial questions for just such women are asked and dramatized in the text. What were her choices? What kinds of behavior would promote or prevent certain matches? How do men view the whole matter of courtship and marriage? On that last score, the twelve letters that Sanford sends his friend, Charles Deighton, provide a telling example of male discourse in contrast to female discourse, and Sanford effectively voices the self-justifying evasions, the hypocrisy, and the overt misogyny of the seducer. Similarly, the nine letters exchanged between the Reverend Boyer and his friend Selby attest to how much respectable men assume the subordinate status of women and thereby validate Eliza's apprehensions about the restricted life that would be hers if she were to marry Boyer and become a clergyman's wife.

The bulk of the novel is "woman-talk": women confiding, advising, chiding, warning, disagreeing, deceiving, and then confronting each other. A full two-

thirds of the seventy-five letters that constitute *The Coquette* are written by women to women, and not always about the men in their lives. Eliza, especially, exhibits in her discourse the ideas and aspirations of a *feme sole*—the independent, unmarried woman. In contrast to that state is the status of Eliza's close friend and most regular correspondent, Lucy Freeman, who, in the course of the novel, marries to become Mrs. Sumner. As a married woman, she can no longer be so free as she formerly was with her time or attention. To quote Eliza: "Marriage is the tomb of friendship. It appears to me a very selfish state. Why do people in general, as soon as they are married, center all their cares, their concerns, and pleasures in their own families? Former acquaintances are neglected or forgotten; the tenderest ties between friends are weakened or dissolved; benevolence itself moves in a very limited sphere" (p. 150). "Women's sphere" is here aptly portrayed as "a very limited sphere"—a closed and enclosing concern for a husband's well-being—which gives us one of the earliest fictional critiques of the "cult of domesticity."

The Coquette, however, does not openly challenge the basic structure of patriarchal culture but, instead, exposes its fundamental injustices through the details and disasters of the plot. Consider, for example, how, after the Reverend Haly's death, Eliza's mother, along with the young woman's female friends, worries constantly about her marital prospects, for she does not have an inheritance of her own. They do not advise (much less prepare) her to earn a wage; they only urge her to obtain a husband who does. Yet her manifest talents—her beauty, her charm, her intelligence—constitute no negotiable capital in any matrimonial transaction. "Forgive my plainness," Eliza's friend, Lucy Freeman, writes of the Reverend Boyer. "His situation in life is, perhaps, as elevated as you have a right to claim" (p. 152). Neither does a fortune of one's own substantially alter one's case, as the example of Nancy Sanford amply attests. The wealthy woman, as much as the poor, is still dependent upon a husband's good sense and good will. All women are thus potential paupers and married women especially so. But without a husband to provide for her and lacking the skills to earn her own living, a woman's situation can be as desperate as was the historical Elizabeth Whitman's at the Bell Tavern. Dying, the abandoned woman left "2 ginneys, 1 crown, 2–4 pistoreens dollars," and a few other paltry possessions (six silver spoons, a few rings, a couple of dresses, handkerchiefs, ribbons, and caps; an "ink case with Sealing wax, wafers, etc."; and "Sundry Babe cloths").[91] That sad inventory, in actual and symbolic measure, movingly sums up the unmarried woman's social worth and her final estate.

Other features of the society are also summed up in the novel. As Eliza fully realizes, when a woman marries a man, she must marry not only into his class but into his occupation too. She anticipates being "completely miserable" (p. 153) as a minister's wife, and Sanford effectively reiterates those all-too-well-founded fears: "You are aware, I suppose, when you form a connection with that man,

you must content yourself with a confinement to the tedious round of domestic duties, the pedantic conversation of scholars, and the invidious criticisms of the whole town" (p. 171). Boyer is a pompous, self-satisfied clergyman who attempts (the choice of words here is most appropriate) to "seduce [Eliza] into matrimony" (p. 184) by soberly expatiating on the advantages of being joined to such an admirable man as himself. "He is," Eliza writes, "very eloquent upon the subject; and his manners are so solemn that I am strongly tempted . . . to laugh" (p. 184). And so is the reader. But Major Sanford is hardly an alternative. Witty and charming as he may be, he is also a thoroughgoing misogynist, and a thoroughly dishonest one at that. His letters to Deighton are filled with stupid and shallow remarks about the stupidity and shallowness of women. He insists, for example, that he can be "severe upon the sex" because he has "found so many frail ones among them" (p. 234)—as if he were a latter-day Diogenes searching for an honest woman. He also insists that if he seduces Eliza, the fault will be entirely hers. "She knows my character and has no reason to wonder if I act consistently with it" (p. 176). Yet he has just implored her to "let the kind and lenient hand of friendship assist in directing my future steps" (p. 160), which is hardly the open avowal of his intentions that he subsequently and quite hypocritically pretends he has made.

What seemed to Eliza to be choices, alternative men and alternative lifestyles, do not constitute, then, a dialectic that will yield a final synthesis such as the egalitarian marriage of the Richmans. We have, instead, oppositions that cancel one another out to emphasize that the choices Boyer and Sanford embodied were not ultimately so different after all. For each, she was mostly a prize and a proof of his own prowess. In each case, more could be proved by discarding the prize than by claiming it. As will be remembered, Eliza does decide to marry the minister but "was entangled by a promise" (p. 208) to tell Sanford first. When Boyer discovers his prospective bride in conversation with that rival, he storms from the scene. He will not hear Eliza's explanation, for his dashed hopes (he thinks) and offended vanity (we see) provide all the explanation he needs. Soon he is writing to renounce his love and to catalogue her various faults and failings and all from pure "benevolence." Sanford, delighted by his success in destroying Eliza's chances with Boyer, also soon leaves town. He goes away "on business" promising to return in a few months, but a year later he is still gone, and in that whole time he has not once written to the woman he claimed to love. Eliza, faced not with a freedom of choice but an absence of suitors, begins to realize that she has been played for a fool, a truth brought home even more forcefully when Boyer announces his engagement to a suitably appreciative, suitably proper woman and when Sanford finally returns, having acquired, while away, both a wife and that wife's fortune. Eliza naively sought to exercise her freedom only to learn that she had none.[92]

The course of that learning is crucial to the novel and must be examined in

some detail, for the genesis of Eliza's fall lies at least as much in the virtues of Boyer as in the vices of Sanford. When that clergyman first goes off in his terminal huff, Eliza well can wonder "whether [she] had sustained a real loss in Mr. Boyer's departure?" (p. 207). But Sanford's subsequent departure, along with the continuing absence of any other official suitors, soon casts a different light on her first loss, from which the second has followed. She must remain in the fishbowl of Hartford, scorned by those who knew all along that her flirtations—her decision to "sow all my wild oats" (p. 186) (very tame wild oats) before settling into the restricted role of the clergyman's wife—could only lead to disaster. Publicly humiliated by the way in which the town so obviously relishes and affirms her discomfiture, she is brought, partly through her failing spirits and partly through Mrs. Richman's counsel, to reevaluate the Reverend's dubious charms. Her letter to him is all humility and self-abnegation, but perhaps the most poignant detail in this pathetic missive is her hope that even if his "affections are entirely alienated or otherwise engaged," he still might consent to consider himself her friend. That last hope is as vain as all her others. Again Boyer writes to shower her with accusations before announcing his betrothal to "the virtuous, the amiable, the accomplished Maria Selby" and finally counseling Eliza to "adhere with undeviating exactness to the paths of rectitude and innocence" (p. 216).

"O my friend, I am undone" (p. 217), Eliza writes upon receiving Boyer's letter, using the precise word that in seduction novels typically signals a woman's fall. "His conduct," she continues with an even more loaded term, assures her "ruin." "By confessing my faults and by avowing my partiality to him, I have given him the power of triumphing in my distress; of returning to my tortured heart all the pangs of slighted love. And what have I now to console me?" (pp. 217–18). Three times Eliza voices the plaintive cry of the seduced woman. Soon thereafter, she falls more conventionally into the affair with Sanford and, concomitant with that fall, into physical infirmity, mental instability, and narrative invisibility. Increasingly, others must recount the story that was once her own but that in the very mode of its telling has been taken from her.

This negation of the female self—her freedoms, her possibilities—forms the basis of the sentimental plot, just as it informed the lives of a vast majority of the sentimental novel's readers. One effective method Foster employs to convey this demeaning of her central character is to have her literally render herself as she has been symbolically rendered by her society. At crucial junctures in the novel, Eliza *chooses* silence, but that narrative silence, a depotentizing in the novel as a whole, provides the subtext from which we can best read the protagonist's fall. How, Foster in effect asks, can a woman denied voice and will be seduced? Simply put, she has no say in the matter. Succumbing to Sanford merely confirms and symbolizes what rejection by Boyer has already proved. We have sex as an

only half-sublimated suicide and as a decline into a figurative death (a horrific rendition of "the little death") that will soon slide into the real thing.

"How to write a novel about a person to whom nothing happens? A person to whom nothing but a love story is *supposed* to happen? A person inhabiting a world in which the only reality is frustration or endurance—or these plus an unbearably mystifying confusion?" These questions, rhetorical and very real, raised by Joanna Russ in her classic essay "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write," perfectly epitomize the narrative problems Foster faces in rewriting Elizabeth Whitman's story.[93] The same general problem is inherent in the entire sentimental subgenre. How does one privilege the voice of a woman who, given the society in which the novel is written and read, enjoys neither voice nor privilege?

More specifically, how can the life and death of Elizabeth Whitman emphasize meanings other than those already overencoded in the society and overexpounded in innumerable sermons, newspaper accounts, and didactic essays of the time? Russ suggests that one form women have evolved for writing the essentially unwritable is, in her term, the "lyric mode"—that is, a fiction that organizes "discrete elements (images, events, scenes, passages, words, what-have-you) *around an unspoken thematic or emotional center.*" In circling around that unspoken, invisible center, the lyric novel necessarily repeats itself (which is also a quintessential feature of the epistolary form). That circling is the meaning; the novel is *about* this silent center because "there is no action possible to the central character and no series of events which will embody in clear, unequivocal, immediately graspable terms what the artist means" since the society precludes all the symbols and "myths of male culture" (like lighting out for the territories or signing on for a whaling voyage) that could serve to express—or to elude—the woman's situation for the woman reader. "There is nothing the female character can *do*—except exist, except think, except feel."[94] Eliza Wharton's long protracted fall and the silence that surrounds it constitute the invisible center around which this sentimental novel turns.

The Coquette and other sentimental novels in the new Republic are ultimately about silence, subservience, stasis (the accepted attributes of women as traditionally defined) in contradistinction to conflicting impulses toward independence, action, and self-expression (the ideals of the new American nation). But what is the resolution of that central conflict? If the sentimental novel, as I am suggesting, entered fully into the current debates on the status of women, then what do we make of a novel, such as *The Coquette*, that jumbles all the terms? Mrs. Richman, like Judith Sargent Murray, argues that women must join men in articulating the political concerns of the nation—lest the emerging consensus be ludicrously one-sided—a position antithetical to that enunciated by writers from Rousseau to Chesterfield to Gregory. Yet Mrs. Richman advocates Eliza's marriage to Boyer.

Is marriage to a Boyer the best that an intelligent, well-educated woman can do, particularly when the alternative, Major Sanford, is no alternative at all? "What a pity," Eliza confides to her friend Lucy, "that the graces and virtues are not oftener united! They must, however, meet in the man of my choice; and till I find such a one, I shall continue to subscribe my name Eliza Wharton" (p. 148). She does, of course, precisely that. As Eliza Wharton she departs initially from her mother's house, and as Eliza Wharton still she departs finally and through death from the text of the novel, from the tragedy of her life, which hardly constitutes a vindication of the rights of women.

Eliza Wharton sins and dies. Her death can convey the conservative moral that many critics of the time demanded. Yet the circumstances of that death seem designed to tease the reader into thought. It is in precisely these interstices—the disjunctions between the conventional and the radical readings of the plot—that the early American sentimental novel flourishes. It is in the irresolution of Eliza Wharton's dilemma that the novel, as a genre, differentiates itself from the tract stories of Elizabeth Whitman in which the novel is grounded and which it ultimately transcends. Tracts readily prescribe how a young woman should lead her life and make her marriage. But in the fullness of *The Coquette*, we see just how the governing equation that innocence and virtue are to be rewarded must break down in a society in which women have no power to procure their own rewards but depend, in marriages or affairs, on the luck of the draw. Thus the novel's surplus of socially unsanctioned significance calls the more conventionally grounded stories of Elizabeth Whitman into question. It is easy, of course, to avoid too much novel reading. It is also easy to avoid social climbing and an anticlerical cast of mind. But how does one escape the social parameters of female powerlessness and female constraint?

That rhetorical question is left pointedly unanswered in the novel by the juxtaposition of the independent Miss Wharton, *feme sole*, and Mrs. Wharton, the quintessential *feme covert*, who, as a virtuous widow, has been ironically deprived of her covering. If virtue is to be rewarded, then surely Mrs. Wharton's life should be rich, an example to both her daughter and the reader. Yet the mother is exactly what the daughter does not want to be, and the novel validates the daughter's judgment. Observing the older woman in conversation with Boyer, Eliza wryly recognizes that her mother would "make him a [better] wife than I" (p. 186). And Eliza is right. The mother is precisely the kind of woman whom Boyer should marry. Desiring little or nothing for herself, she is a cipher in search of an integer, an empty sign seeking for another's (a husband's) excess of significance to provide her own meaning. Quite characteristically, her endeavors to dispel her daughter's doubts about matrimony never address the substance of those doubts but slide into an extended encomium on the clergyman himself, his worth to the community, his friends, the rewards that will accrue from selfless devotion to such an unselfish man. For Mrs. Wharton, the worth of his wife, of

any wife, is immaterial; her duties go without saying. As even that advice suggests, for this conventional woman, female being, by her own definition and her culture's definition, is nothingness.

As that advice also suggests, Mrs. Wharton's philosophy of wifehood considerably compromises her performance as a mother. The nullity at the core of the older woman's existence renders her utterly ineffectual as a moral guide, as a concerned advisor, and even as a sympathetic confidante of her daughter. Four times in the novel Eliza, on the verge of a mental breakdown, writes to a friend about how she must feign happiness so as not to perturb her poor mother. Her mother, in turn, confides to a friend that she suspects something might be bothering her daughter, but she lacks the will to inquire what it might be. Instead, she stands silently by, a mute witness to her daughter's progressive physical and mental debilitation. Even more obvious, Eliza yields herself to Sanford virtually before her mother's eyes—first in her mother's garden and then, after the weather turns cold and Eliza's health deteriorates, in her mother's parlor. It is a harrowing denouement: Eliza, physically emaciated and mentally deranged, allowing herself to be repeatedly "seduced" in her mother's house; Sanford triumphing over both women; Eliza presently dying; Mrs. Wharton wringing her hands but living on as a continuing testimony to her daughter's tragic death and her own ineffectual life.

The full tragedy of the novel, however, is that ultimately there was no tragedy at all—only the banal predictability of a fall that was precisely what the most conservative proponents of the status quo labored to prevent. Or perhaps the tragedy is that it can readily be reduced to this formulation and is thus reduced even in the telling. Consider how Eliza's desire for freedom devolves into sexual acquiescence, accomplished with an appalling lack of desire. Eliza Wharton, vividly rendered in Foster's fiction, still cannot be separated from her story, which is necessarily conjoined with Elizabeth Whitman's different but finally unknowable story, so much so that the historical personage and the fictional person shared a common tombstone. It is as if the tragic and the trivial, the real character's puzzling death and the fictional character's problematic one, had all been interred together, leaving the survivors—within the text and without—to puzzle out the meaning of it all.

The female mourners at the end of the novel articulate their sense of having lost through Eliza's death not only a friend and a relative but also a part of themselves and their own desires. I would also suggest that many readers of the time, turning over a story they already knew and did not know at all, must have felt a similar shock of recognition, which might partly explain the great popularity of the novel. Writing a preface to the 1855 edition of *The Coquette*, Jane E. Locke referred to the extraordinary appeal of Foster's Eliza Wharton, who had become, by that time, virtually a cult heroine in both her novelistic form and as dramatized in a popular 1802 play based on the novel, *The New England Coquette*.[95] Readers,

according to Locke, read Eliza's story as their own and cherished her story, their story, the story of an "actual" American woman who had loved badly and lost. Here was a New England Clarissa who had lived in Hartford, who had attended the theater in Boston, who had died and was buried in Danvers—real places, places that one could visit. And the readers did, like pilgrims to a sacred shrine. Some nineteenth-century editions of *The Coquette* included engravings of the Bell Tavern in Danvers. Even after The Bell was torn down, its doorstep, upon which, according to legend, Whitman had written her initials as a signal to Fidelio, was removed to the Peabody Historical Society, where, into the twentieth century, lovers would come to look upon it and to touch it. Whitman's gravestone, in the Main Street Burial Ground and bearing essentially the same inscription reported in the novel, became a favorite trysting place for nineteenth-century sentimental lovers, who during the century carried away portions of the gravestone to keep as talismans—like pieces of the One True Cross. By the twentieth century, the whole engraved name had been chipped away from the stone, its absence a tribute to Eliza's continuing cultural presence.

Mostly, however, Eliza/Elizabeth was honored by those who bought or borrowed *The Coquette* and read and reread it virtually into oblivion. Like such popular books as the *New England Primer*, of which very few early copies remain today, less than a dozen copies of the first edition of this novel survive and equally few of the second edition of 1802. Yet editions of the book remained steadily in print until 1874. It enjoyed its greatest popularity between 1824 and 1828, when it was reissued eight times. And in 1866, it was still important enough to be added to the Peterson and Brothers "Dollar Series" of popular fiction—"The best, the largest, the handsomest, and the cheapest books in the world," according to the Peterson advertisements.[96] But most noteworthy for my purposes is the popularity of this text to late-eighteenth-century readers. At a time when American novels were not plentiful (nor, for that matter, other books), *The Coquette* occupied a special place. As Locke notes:

> It is not surprising that it thus took precedence in interest . . . of all American novels, at least throughout New England, and was found, in every cottage within its borders, beside the family Bible, and, though pitifully, yet almost as carefully treasured.[97]

Our retrospective reading, I have argued throughout this chapter, must somehow recover and make sense of that sense of treasuring lost.

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Series of Letters (Johnstown, N.Y.: W. and A. Child, 1807). The 1810 edition published in Ballston Spa, N.Y., by William Child was the first to include the defense of the magistrates, a defense reprinted in most editions up until 1852.

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Chapter 6

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2. J. Potter, "Growth of Population in the United States, 1700–1860," in *Population in History*, ed. David Glass and D. Eversley (London: Arnold, 1965), p. 271.

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44. Catherine Maria Sedgwick, "Old Maids," in *Old Maids: Short Stories by Nineteenth-Century U.S. Women Writers*, ed. Susan Koppelman (New York: Pandora, 1984).

45. Rachel M. Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine: Reading About Women in Novels* (New York: Viking, 1982), p. 24.

46. The historiography of changing family patterns is controversial, and the picture tends to look different depending on what factors one includes. Class, regional, and racial factors all influence the interpretation in different ways. Degler, Kerber, and Norton, for example, all tend to see a changing family pattern with more options for women by the end of the eighteenth century, although Kerber, perhaps, views the situation less optimistically than the other historians. Lawrence Stone has charted a change in family structure in England during the eighteenth century, especially an increase in affectional marriages and affectional modes of child rearing. See his *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). A similar pattern is described in the United States by Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982); Daniel B. Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980); and Ronald G. Walters, "The Family and Ante-Bellum Reform: An Interpretation," *Societas*, 3 (Summer 1973), 221–32. But Philip J. Greven, in *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York: Knopf, 1978), argues for different methods of child rearing occurring simultaneously rather than evolving. Michael Zuckerman, in "Penmanship Exercises for Saucy Sons: Some Thoughts on the Colonial Southern Family," *South Carolina History Review*, 84 (1983), 152–66, finds family patterns changing in the South by the end of the eighteenth century, while Jan Lewis, in *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family Values in Jefferson's Virginia* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), finds change occurring more gradually and much later. For a brief overview of the different arguments, see Thomas P. Slaughter, "Family Politics in Revolutionary America," *American Quarterly*, 36 (Fall 1984), 598–606. My own focus is not on how the family "actually" changed but how selected social commentators of the late eighteenth century presented dialectical views of the family and woman's role in the family and society.

47. Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, p. 202.

48. David Lundberg and Henry F. May, "The Enlightened Reader in America," *American Quarterly*, 28 (Summer 1976), 262–71; app. Lundberg and May conclude that 40 percent of all the booksellers and libraries in their sample made *Emile* available to the American reading public. See also Paul M. Spurlin, *Rosseau in America, 1760–1809* (University: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1969).

49. Jean-Jacques R
by "A Citizen of Ge

50. *Boston Weekly*

51. Helena Wells,
for T. Caddell, 1800

52. S.S.B.K. Woo
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53. Helena Wells,
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54. S.S.B.K. Wo
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55. When publis
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56. Judith Sarger
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57. "On the Equ
2 (March 1798), 13

58. Murray, *The*

59. For the Briti
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1935); and Wilson,
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60. See Charles
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Alcuin. For a deta
Matter and Man
on Charles Brocka
pp. 71–86.

61. James Butle
Matters of Fact . .

49. Jean-Jacques Rosseau, *Emilius and Sophia; or, A New System of Education*, trans. by "A Citizen of Geneva" (London: T. Becket and R. Baldwin, 1783).

50. *Boston Weekly Magazine*, 2 (May 5, 1804), 110; 2 (March 24, 1804), 36.

51. Helena Wells, *Constantia Neville; or, The West Indian* (London: C. Whittingham for T. Caddell, 1800).

52. S.S.B.K. Wood, *Amelia; or, The Influence of Virtue. An Old Man's Story* (Portsmouth, N.H.: William Treadwell, 1802), p. 103.

53. Helena Wells, *The Step-Mother; a Domestic Tale, from Real Life*, 2 vols. (London: T. N. Longman and O. Rees, 1799), 2:21–22.

54. S.S.B.K. Wood, *Dorval, or the Speculator* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Nutting and Whitelock, 1801), p. 78, and *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Charles Peirce, 1800), pp. 81–82.

55. When published serially in the *Massachusetts Magazine, or Monthly Museum* from 1792 to 1794, Murray's *Gleaner* essays were signed with a male pseudonym, "Mentor." Reprinted in three volumes in Boston in 1798, however, they were signed Constantia, and earlier references suggest that, even before the collected edition, readers were aware that the Gleaner was a woman.

56. Judith Sargent Murray, *The Gleaner: A Miscellaneous Production. In Three Volumes. By Constantia* (Boston: I. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, 1798), 1:167–68, 3:220.

57. "On the Equality of the Sexes," *Massachusetts Magazine, or Monthly Museum*, 2 (March 1798), 132.

58. Murray, *The Gleaner*, 3:189.

59. For the British connection, see Dale Spender's indispensable *Women of Ideas (And What Men Have Done to Suppress Them)* (London: Ark, 1982). For a discussion of the most prominent of the American feminists of the time, see Mary Sumner Benson, *Women in Eighteenth-Century America* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1935); and Wilson, "The Illusion of Change," pp. 386–93, 426–31. The "Female Advocate" became a subject of some controversy in the magazines of the time owing to an anonymous pamphlet published in New Haven, Conn., in 1801 called, simply, *The Female Advocate*. This pamphlet especially emphasized the importance of a thorough female education and suggested, whimsically, that the doors of all institutions of higher learning be shut to men and opened to women for a period of time and then it be seen just which was the smarter sex. See also Eliza Southgate Bowne, *A Girl's Life Eighty Years Ago* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887).

60. See Charles Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (1748; repr., Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977); and Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, *Outline of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1796), esp. pp. 24–50. Condorcet's arguments on behalf of women are alluded to in Charles Brockden Brown's *Alcuin*. For a detailed discussion of Brown's feminist dialogue, see my essay, "The Matter and Manner of Charles Brockden Brown's *Alcuin*," in *Critical Essays on Charles Brockden Brown*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), pp. 71–86.

61. James Butler, *Fortune's Foot-ball; or, The Adventures of Mercutio. Founded on Matters of Fact . . .*, 2 vols. in 1 (Harrisburgh, Pa.: John Wyeth, 1797), 1:145–46.

(The title page indicates this novel was printed in 1797, although copyright was not secured until 1798.)

62. Imlay, *The Emigrants*, pp. ii, 22–23, 66.

63. Sukey Vickery, *Emily Hamilton, a Novel. Founded on Incidents in Real Life. By a Young Lady of Worcester County* (Worcester, Mass.: Isaiah Thomas, Jr., 1803), pp. 97–98, 108.

64. Three essays perceptively discuss the American reaction to Wollstonecraft and Wollstonecraftism. See R. M. Janes, "On the Reception of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 39 (April–June 1978), 293–302; Patricia Jewell McAlexander, "The Creation of the American Eve: The Cultural Dialogue on the Nature and Role of Women in Late-Eighteenth-Century America," *Early American Literature*, 9 (1975), 252–66; and Marcelle Thiebaux, "Mary Wollstonecraft in Federalist America: 1791–1802," in *The Evidence of the Imagination: Studies of Interactions Between Life and Art in English Romantic Literature*, ed. Donald H. Reiman et al. (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 195–245.

65. Lundberg and May, "Enlightened Reader," app.

66. *New England Palladium*, 19 (March 2, 1802), 1.

67. For a fuller discussion, see also Linda K. Kerber, "Daughters of Columbia: Educating Women for the Republic, 1787–1805," in *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial*, ed. Eric L. McKitrick and Stanley M. Elkins (New York: Knopf, 1974), pp. 36–59. It must be emphasized that Godwin did not expect the *Memoirs* to in any way cast his deceased wife in a negative light. Utterly bereft at her death, Godwin moved his books and papers into her study and, until his own death forty years later, continued to work in Mary's room, among her belongings, beneath the magnificent portrait of her by John Opie. For an excellent discussion of the relationship between Godwin and Wollstonecraft and a sampling of early reviews of the *Memoirs* (including those quoted here), see Peter H. Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 189–94.

68. Samuel Miller, "The Appropriate Duty and Ornament of the Female Sex," in *The Columbian Preacher; or, A Collection of Original Sermons, from Preachers of Eminence in the United States. Embracing the Distinguishing Doctrines of Grace* (Catskill: Nathan Elliott, 1808), p. 253.

69. For an extended critique of Wollstonecraft's life and her ideas, see Benjamin Silliman, *Letters of Shahcoolen, a Hindu Philosopher, Residing in Philadelphia . . .* (Boston: Russell & Cutler, 1802), 29–32, 48. Two other novels denounced Wollstonecraft in the years immediately following the publication of the *Memoirs*, Wells's *Constantia Neville* and Wood's *Dorval*.

70. The complex and heated debate over the limits of possibilities of domesticity in the nineteenth century is outside the focus of the present study. For a survey of the basic positions, however, the reader should consult the conclusion (pp. 197–206) of Nancy F. Cott's *Bonds of Womanhood*.

71. Ruth H. Block, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785–1815," *Feminist Studies*, 4 (1978), 101–26. See also Mary Maples Dunn, "Saints and Sisters: Congregational and Quaker Women in the Early Co-

lonial Period," in
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ven: Yale Univ.
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Mind: In Death a
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72. William Ly
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73. *Parents' Ma*

74. Helen Wait
pp. 31–32.

75. There were,
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Russel B. Nye, "Tl
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76. Charles Broc
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77. Samuel Relf,
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78. By viewing M
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79. For an excelle
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pp. 31–64. The quotat
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novel, it must be emph
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80. *Critical Review* (
delphia: Mathew Carey,

lonial Period," in *Women in American Religion*, ed. Janet Wilson James (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), pp. 30–35; Linda K. Kerber, "Can a Woman Be an Individual? The Limits of Puritan Tradition in the Early Republic," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, 25 (Spring 1983), esp. 161–65; Anne L. Kuhn, *The Mother's Role in Childhood Education: New England Concepts, 1830–1860* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1947); Gerald Moran and Maris Vinovskis, "The Puritan Family and Religion: A Critical Reappraisal," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 39 (January 1982), 29–63; and Peter Gregg Slater, *Children in the New England Mind: In Death and In Life* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1977), esp. chaps. 3, 4.

72. William Lyman, *A Virtuous Woman, the Bond of Domestic Union and the Source of Domestic Happiness* (New London, Conn.: S. Green, 1802), pp. 22–23.

73. *Parents' Magazine* (October 1840).

74. Helen Waite Papashivly, *All the Happy Endings* (New York: Harper, 1956), pp. 31–32.

75. There were, of course, exceptions to this rule, such as Cigarette, an adventurous young woman who finds her way through several complicated adventures. See Russel B. Nye, "The Novel as Dream and Weapon: Women's Popular Novels in the Nineteenth Century," *Historical Society of Michigan Chronicle*, 11 (4th qr. 1975), 2–18.

76. Charles Brockden Brown, "Female Learning," *Literary Magazine and American Register*, 1 (January 1804), 245.

77. Samuel Relf, *Infidelity, or the Victims of Sentiment* (Philadelphia: W. W. Woodward, 1797), title page, pp. 36–37.

78. By viewing Montraville as the stock seducer and overlooking the problematic role played by Belcour, William C. Spengemann, in *The Adventurous Muse: The Poetics of American Fiction, 1789–1900* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), can dismiss *Charlotte* as possibly "the most rigidly programmatic sentimental novel ever written" (p. 92). But he also concedes that "certain fictive energies seem to be at work, threatening to compromise the conservative values" of this novel (p. 90).

79. For an excellent assessment of Rowson's feminism and a discussion of her fictional strengths and weaknesses, see Patricia L. Parker's *Susanna Haswell Rowson* (Boston: Twayne, 1986). I am grateful to Professor Parker for making her manuscript available to me. See also, Eve Kornfeld, "Women in Post-Revolutionary American Culture: Susanna Haswell Rowson's American Career, 1792–1824," *Journal of American Culture*, 6 (Winter 1983), 56–62; Wendy Martin, "Profile: Susanna Rowson, Early American Novelist," *Women's Studies*, 2 (1974), 1–8; and Dorothy Weil, *In Defense of Women: Susanna Rowson* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1976), esp. pp. 31–64. The quotations are from the paperback edition of the novel "edited for modern readers" by Clara M. Kirk and Rudolf Kirk (New Haven: College & University Press, 1964), p. 121. Although this is the only readily available edition of the novel, it must be emphasized that it is neither a reprint of the original edition nor a scholarly modern edition of the work.

80. *Critical Review* (London) for April 1791, repr. in Rowson's *Charlotte* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1794), n.p. For other sympathetic critical assessments, see the

Boston Weekly Magazine, 1 (January 22, 1803), 53; and Samuel L. Knapp's "Memoir," in Rowson's posthumously published *Charlotte's Daughter; or, The Three Orphans. A Sequel to Charlotte Temple* . . . (Boston: Richardson & Lord, 1828). pp. 3–20.

81. Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789–1860* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1940), p. 176.

82. *Margaretta; or, The Intricacies of the Heart* (Philadelphia: Samuel F. Bradford, 1807), p. 80. The anonymous author of this novel well may be alluding to Judith Sargent Murray's earlier "Story of Margaretta." Both on the level of plot and characterization there are definite similarities between the two works.

83. See Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, rev. ed. (1960; repr., New York: Dell, 1966), p. 93, and Walter P. Wenska, Jr., "*The Coquette* and the American Dream of Freedom," *Early American Literature*, 12 (1977–78), 243–55.

84. The documents pertaining to Elizabeth Whitman's life and death (right down to an inventory of all she had with her at Bell Tavern when she died) have been included in Charles Knowles Bolton, *The Elizabeth Whitman Mystery* (Peabody, Mass.: Peabody Historical Society, 1912); Herbert Ross Brown, introduction to *The Coquette* (New York: Facsimile Text Society, 1939), pp. v–xix; Caroline W. Dall, *The Romance of the Association; or, One Last Glimpse of Charlotte Temple and Eliza Wharton* (Cambridge, Mass.: Press of John Wilson, 1875); and Jane E. Locke, "Historical Preface, Including a Memoir of the Author" in *The Coquette* (Boston: Samuel Etheridge for E. Larkin, 1855), pp. 3–30. The article quoted from the *Salem Mercury* for July 29, 1788, is reprinted in Bolton, pp. 33–37.

85. Anonymous essayist quoted in Bolton, *Elizabeth Whitman Mystery*, p. 59.

86. Almost all discussions of *The Coquette* sooner or later raise the question of the real identity of Major Sanford. See Bolton, *Elizabeth Whitman Mystery*, pp. 109–32, for a summary of the early choices; and Alexander Cowie, *The Rise of the American Novel* (New York: American Book Co., 1948), p. 16; Dall, *Romance of the Association*, pp. 101–15; and James Woodress, *A Yankee's Odyssey: The Life of Joel Barlow* (New York: Lippincott, 1958), pp. 60–64.

87. Quoted in Herbert Ross Brown's introduction to *The Coquette*, p. xii.

88. Despite its being generally acknowledged as the best of the early American sentimental novels, *The Coquette* has never been published in a modern edition using modern standards of textual accuracy. The only widely available edition of *The Coquette* is that edited by William S. Osborne with punctuation and spellings silently (and not always carefully) "edited for the modern reader." But because it is available in paperback, I have taken all my references from this edition (New Haven: College & University Press, 1970), and hereafter references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text. Lillie Deming Loshe, *The Early American Novel, 1789–1830* (1907; repr., New York; Frederick Ungar, 1966), was one of the first critics to note that *The Coquette* "is superior to its predecessors in interest and especially in character-drawing" (p. 14).

89. Sanford does, however, allude to Laurence Sterne in the letter in which he announces his triumph over Eliza—a fitting allusion considering Foster's comments about Sterne in *The Boarding School; or, Lessons of a Perceptress to Her Pupils* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and E. T. Andrews, 1798), warning her readers against the "licentious

wit" that is "concealed under the artful blandishments of sympathetic sensibility" in Sterne's fiction (p. 205).

90. Bolton, *Elizabeth Whitman Mystery*, pp. 39–41.

91. Ibid., pp. 59–60.

92. I have elsewhere assessed at length the inadequacy of the choices presented to Eliza. See my article "Flirting with Destiny: Ambivalence and Form in the Early American Sentimental Novel," *Studies in American Fiction*, 10 (Spring 1982), esp. 27–34.

93. Joanna Russ, "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write," in *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972), p. 13.

94. Ibid., pp. 12–13.

95. Jane E. Locke, "Historical Preface," to her edition of *The Coquette*, pp. 3–30. The novel was dramatized by J. Horatio Nichols, *The New England Coquette: From the History of The Celebrated Eliza Wharton. A Tragic Drama, in Three Acts* (Salem: N. Coverly, 1802).

96. Herbert Ross Brown, "Introduction," *The Coquette*, p. ix.

97. Locke, "Historical Preface," p. 4.

Chapter 7

1. John Cosens Ogden, *The Female Guide* (Concord, N.H.: George Hough, 1793), p. 26.

2. Thomas Paine quoted by John Fiske, *The Critical Period in American History, 1783–1789* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1888), pp. 55–56.

3. Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 70.

4. For different analyses of Revolutionary and postrevolutionary crowd actions, see Dirk Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1765–1780* (New York: Academic, 1977); Pauline Maier, "Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America," in *Colonial America: Essays in Politics and Social Development*, ed. Stanley N. Katz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), pp. 432–452, and *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1756–1776* (New York: Knopf, 1972); Peter Shaw, *American Patriots and the Rituals of Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980); and Alfred F. Young, "English Plebeian Culture and Eighteenth-Century American Radicalism," in *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1984).

5. For a discussion of the aristocratic assumptions about the necessity for enlightened leadership, see Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967). For a somewhat different focus, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1969), and "The Democratization of Mind in the American Revolution," in *The Moral Foundations of the American Republic*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert H. Horwitz (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1979), pp. 102–28.

6. The denunciations by the Anti-Federalists, as well as Hamilton's opposing