

Gender Relations in the American Experience
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**Sexual Revolution
in Early America**

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“A Hint to Young Ladies”
*Courtship, Sexual Danger, and Moral
 Agency in Revolutionary America*

ON 8 MARCH 1784 THE *Boston Gazette* included a poem entitled “The Forsaken Fair One.” This short but vivid piece featured a distraught young woman named Smiletta who confided to her friend Patty that she had been seduced and then cast aside by “a smart young fellow” with “charming face” and “persuasive tongue.” He had “promised fair” and she had “believed” him. However, once “the deceiver had [her] virtue strained,” he announced “flatly” that “all his ends were gained” and henceforth “shun[ne]d” her. Smiletta warned Patty to “trust not mankind: your ruin they pursue, smile to entrap, flatter to undo.” Patty agreed that caution was clearly in order:

Let us, from what is past, this lesson reap,
 That girls should always look before they leap.

Yet that was often easier said than done, given just how charming young men could be. In October 1785 the same newspaper featured another poem, entitled “The Inconstant Swain,” in which Silvia lamented her attraction to Dannon, “the brightest of all the gay swains.” This “bewitchingly sweet” fellow was notorious for his “falseness,” and she found herself torn between desire and distrust:

His speeches, like poison, thrill through all my veins,
 And much I’m inclined to believe.
 Ah, Silvia, beware, for thy lover but feigns,
 His pleasure is still to deceive.

Silvia felt that her situation was “wretched” whether or not she gave way: “refusing or granting I die.”¹

A HINT TO YOUNG LADIES

During the second half of the eighteenth century, scores of “moral tales” and didactic essays that appeared in magazines, newspapers, and almanacs dwelt upon the dangers facing young white women who became sexually active before marriage. According to these pieces, even seemingly devoted suitors could turn out to be cads of the deepest dye who took their pleasure and then deserted their lovers, leaving them to bear the consequences. Moralists warned that an unwed mother whose lover abandoned her faced social ruin, her reputation and marital prospects shattered. Short stories, melodramatic poems, and more expansive narratives in contemporary novels depicted pregnant women fleeing their homes and communities in shame, sometimes forced to leave by parents who condemned and disowned them; outcast and destitute, they ended their broken lives as penniless vagrants, sometimes completing their degradation by turning to prostitution. “Every town and village,” declared an essay in the *Massachusetts Magazine* for November 1791, “affords some instance of a ruined female, who has fallen from the heights of purity to the lowest grade of humanity.”²

In chapter 7 we observed New England communities seeking to ensure that pregnant women were not deserted by irresponsible or unscrupulous lovers. As young people availed themselves of greater sexual freedom, eighteenth-century parents developed strategies for preventing the abuse of that liberty. Indeed, the relatives and neighbors of unwed mothers often succeeded in pressuring young men to take responsibility for children that they sired during courtship, whether by marriage or financial provision. But there were no guarantees that surveillance and stewardship of physical intimacy between young people would always protect women from abandonment; some men simply disappeared once they had had their way with women who believed that their suitors were committed to them. It is extremely difficult to tell how many young women were in fact “ruined” because they surrendered their chastity to men who then deserted them. But it is clear that the possibility of abandonment had given rise to profound and widespread anxiety that was not limited to New England.³ Seduction literature reflected and responded to that anxiety. As rising literacy rates among both women and men in eighteenth-century North America created a much broader reading public, and as the proliferation of lending libraries enabled less affluent readers to obtain publications that they could not have afforded to purchase, the wide-ranging discussion of courtship, sexual danger, and moral responsibility that now took place in printed matter could reach out and

engage a new social class of readers, including a much enlarged constituency of women.⁴

Most contributors to seduction literature were avowedly sympathetic toward deserted women, launching vitriolic tirades against the villainous men who took advantage of trusting young innocents. However, they also sent out a clear message that women should take responsibility for their own safety. Didactic essays on the subject were mostly addressed to women, offering warnings and advice on how to conduct oneself during courtship. Since society could not always protect them, women should gauge carefully the characters of men with whom they consorted and beware sexual temptation. Women were apparently much better equipped than men to withstand such temptations. It was their allotted task, these writers opined, not only to defend their own sexual honor but also to inspire in their suitors a moral rectitude of which men were often incapable if left to their own instincts. By the late 1700s, moralists regularly portrayed women as the guardians of sexual virtue.

That apparently affirmative role had insidious implications. However skillful and dastardly the seducers who tricked and ruined young women, their victims were portrayed as having failed themselves in giving way. Writers rarely went so far as to exculpate men for their seduction and abandonment of women, but the assumption that women had a greater capacity for moral resilience did, at least implicitly, deflect moral responsibility away from men. Furthermore, the obligations that accompanied moral guardianship restricted the freedom of women to act as they pleased, if they intended to remain socially respectable. The danger posed by rakish irresponsibility was not the only consequence of a less restrictive sexual environment: young women as well as men now enjoyed greater personal freedom. The etiquette espoused by didactic literature sought to replace external restraints that were no longer effective with new internal inhibitors that did not apply to men; it contained women's agency even as it placed moral authority in female hands.⁵

Yet the notion of moral guardianship did represent a dramatic shift away from earlier representations of women as lewd and morally untrustworthy. The tone of publications discussing sexual relations changed dramatically over the course of the century: characteristics previously associated with women, especially lust and deceit, were transposed onto men. Seduction literature sought to regulate courtship by operating from within rather than upon women and men who were tempted to have sex outside marriage. It sought nothing less than the moral reconstruction of

the individual, especially of women, in order to meet the challenges of an increasingly permissive society. This chapter investigates the transformation in sexual images of women during the course of the eighteenth century. It examines the huge body of ephemeral literature on seduction and abandonment in which writers offered strategies for self-stewardship in an environment that they viewed as fraught with sexual danger. And it considers the political implications of concern about seduction. Just as revolutionary ideology and the disruptive impact of the War for Independence encouraged an increasingly permissive sexual climate, so the widespread occurrence of sexual assault during the war and the use of rape as a rhetorical motif in patriot propaganda intensified public concern about the sexual safety of young women. Given widespread emphasis upon virtue as the cement that would hold the new republic together and the clear association of women with the guardianship of virtue, both personal and political, the threat of sexual degradation had significance above and beyond the personal welfare of victims and their families: seduction and abandonment debased those who represented and guaranteed the fledgling nation's moral integrity.

PRUDERY IS NOT THE WORD that first comes to mind when contemplating the tone of English society in the early eighteenth century. The predominant mood both within and outside the social elite was crude and scurrilous. Much of Restoration society had embraced an exuberantly bawdy spirit, in part a reaction to the rather dour atmosphere fostered by the Cromwellian regime of the 1650s. The ribald tone that now prevailed had a distinctly misogynist ring to it. Satire of the late 1600s and early 1700s often targeted women, especially in terms of their sexual power over men. According to this literature, women were lustful, insatiable, and deceitful: they would stop at nothing in their relentless quest for sexual pleasure, deploying with irresistible cunning an array of seductive stratagems that lured men into debauchery. Men were often depicted as helpless against feminine wiles: their moral and rational instincts overpowered, they found themselves plunged into an exhausting and degrading servitude, emasculated by an unquenchable female lust. Medical and marital handbooks portrayed women's sexual appetites as debilitating both for men and for themselves. One such guide, *The Mysteries of Conjugal Love Revealed*, claimed that "neither hell-fire nor the earth" were "so devouring as the privy parts of a lascivious woman." It averred that women had a shorter life span than men because

they were "much more amorous": their "heat . . . consume[d] them by degrees."⁶

Bawdy and misogynist humor was also commonplace in eighteenth-century colonial society. Consider the experience of Alexander Hamilton, a rather straitlaced Scottish physician who emigrated to Maryland in 1739. Hamilton traveled northward five years later, hoping to escape the summer heat and so alleviate his tuberculosis symptoms. The good doctor was dismayed by the lewd conversation to which he was subjected on his journey. In New York City, his host one rainy September day claimed to know "an infallible cure" for "hysterics and vapours in women." The appropriately named Mr. Hog went on to explain "that a good mowing was a cure for such complaints," which piece of "bawdy" he spoke "before his wife, who did not seem to be much surprised at it." Hamilton was appalled. That evening, he went out for a quiet meal with a friend, hoping no doubt to put the "inexcusable piece of rudeness" that he had witnessed at the Hog residence out of his mind. The two men were "expecting to sup and have some chat snugly by [them]selves" but "were interrupted by three young rakes who bounced in upon us, and then the conversation turned from a grave to a wanton strain." The young men wanted to talk of nothing "but ladies and lovers," including along the way "a good deal of polite smut." The threesome eventually departed to go "awhoring." A week or so later in Philadelphia, even an "agreeable" gathering that included the governor "and several other gentlemen of note" was somewhat marred in Hamilton's view by the "particular fondness" of some people present "for introducing gross, smutty expressions."⁷

The private writings of eighteenth-century elite men often included "expressions" relating to sex and womanhood that were explicitly hostile and derogatory. Given the determination of southern planters to emulate English fashions, it is hardly surprising that at least some of them adopted the misogynistic tone that was in vogue across the Atlantic. "I don't think," wrote Landon Carter, "there can be a more treacherous, enterprising, perverse, and hellish genius than is to be met with in a woman." Eve, he lamented, had "suffered the devil to tempt her," though "at the very hazard of paradise," and "of such a tendency ha[d] her sex been" ever since. There was nothing idiosyncratic about Carter's mordant perspective. Robert Bolling portrayed Adam as the first henpecked husband, seduced into thralldom by a guileful Eve and thereafter "trunkling to a haughty scold." He referred to womankind as "that inconstant, faithless sex, ordained to rule, betray, [and] perplex." They might appear "guilt-

less," but so did "adders" that lay "reposit[ing], 'till something comes in reach." Beauty made women "powerful," wrote Charles Carroll Jr. in a letter to his father: "I would defy an ugly woman endowed with the sagacity of a sphinx ever to entrap me." Bearing this information in mind no doubt, Charles Carroll Sr. urged his son to avoid "intimacy or familiarity with the fair sex" (other than to "soften and polish" his manners). The "power of that sex," wrote a Yorktown merchant, could prove fatal to men drawn by its allure. Though "a virtuous woman" was "ever a blessing," others were "nothing better than moth in a garment, for they no only ruin[ed] fortune but [also] constitutions, that great blessing."⁸

Striking though these remarks may be, William Byrd's voluminous writings exhibit most clearly the influence of contemporary English attitudes upon southern planters. Byrd, who spent almost half of his life in England, was well versed in the tone of London's polite (or rather, impolite) society, including its bawdy humor and far-from-graceful sentiment regarding womankind. His letters and his commonplace book reveal a deep-seated distrust of women and their sexual power. Byrd's attitude toward marriage was profoundly cynical: he described it as a "galling yoke," a "contagion," a "distemper," and "a troublesome sea," "making every body sick that comes near it." That matrimony so often became miserable and embittered owed a great deal, in his view, to sexual disillusionment. Byrd remained convinced throughout his life that a marriage could not work without personal compatibility based on physical attraction. The promise of sexual gratification was for him a crucial factor in the choice of a spouse: he referred in a 1740 letter to the marrying off of young women as "put[ting] them to bed to agreeable husbands." Yet Byrd also believed that the physical allure used by women to attract men was more often than not a carefully prepared artifice, the exposure of which after marriage generally led to disappointment and alienation.⁹

Byrd defined love as "a longing desire to enjoy any person, whom we imagine to have more perfections than she really has." Once men fell in love, they became "idolaters" and "fondly fanc[ie]d a kind of divinity in their mistresses." According to an entry in Byrd's commonplace book, women understood and exploited this tendency: "When a mistress wishes her gallant every thing that is good, she excepts always good sense, which might open his eyes and make him despise charms which owe their being to imagination only." Byrd portrayed courtship as a game of deception, even fraud, in which women held the trump cards. Women, he wrote, were more skilled than men in "the arts of dress and disguise." They knew

"how to place their perfections in the fairest light, and cast all their blemishes in shade, so that the poor men who know no better take them to be cherubins and gems without flaw." But once the male victim of a woman's skillful deception gained "better acquaintance" as a husband and began "to judge a little by sense and not altogether by fancy," the woman's physical "irregularities" and "failings" became clear. The man's "vast expectations" were dashed, and disappointment led him to seek satisfaction elsewhere: "the appetite will naturally pall, and after we have missed of paradise in one place, we are apt to look for it in another."¹⁰

The ultimate responsibility for this pattern of behavior, Byrd wrote, lay with wives, not their errant husbands: "the inconsistency of our sex is owing to the disappointments it meets from yours, who are too solicitous to hide their blemishes before they throw themselves into a man's arms and too little afterwards." In a 1729 letter, Byrd suggested in jest that when a couple was contemplating marriage, "the parties should view each other stark naked through an iron gate for the space of half an hour." This would prevent them from "concealing their personal defects" and so would "hinder their being surprised after marriage with any deformities and disproportions which they did by no means expect." Beneath the superficial playfulness of this passage lurked a distrust of women's apparent beauty that pervades Byrd's writings. In his mind, male naïveté and yearning for an idealized female body combined with feminine deceit to make a heady but dangerous potion with which men were drugged and duped into unsatisfactory marriages.¹¹

Byrd's distrust of women was usually camouflaged in his correspondence by a coating of humor and counterbalanced in his letters to women by a tone of solicitous gentility. In the privacy of his commonplace book, however, he allowed himself to express more overtly and maliciously his fear of female beauty and sexual power; the humor deployed in these passages was more spiteful and so deepened instead of lightening the overall vituperative tone. Byrd entered into this volume a series of anecdotes and aphorisms that together constitute a bitter and paranoid commentary on sex and marriage. One extract drew a parallel between "the bite of a deadly serpent" that would "putrify your body" and "the kisses of a beautiful woman" that would "imprison your soul." Entries described in lurid detail the insatiable nature of female lust, so potent that one woman in love with a social inferior could overcome her incommensurate "concupiscence" only by "drinking the blood of her beloved," and so unrelenting in its demands that male victims faced utter prostration and sometimes

actual annihilation. One extract related how a man, "finding his vigour begin to abate," had one of his legs cut off "so that the blood and spirits which used to nourish that limb might add strength to those which remained, and increase his abilities with the alluring sex." Some women dispensed with men altogether, either by becoming pregnant "without losing their maidenhead" or by rejecting sex with men in favor of "Lesbian pleasures. In entry after entry and page after page, Byrd built up a nightmarish collage of women, their voracious appetites, and the predatory wives that trapped men in a destructive and debilitating cycle of helpless desire and humiliation.¹²

Byrd's expressions of anxiety and distrust regarding women were exceptional only in their volume. The tone of his comments was consistent with that of other early-eighteenth-century American writers, especially those in the South and elsewhere who evinced a modish cosmopolitan sensibility. Consider this passage from a satiric history of New York politics, written in the late 1720s by Lewis Morris. A local resident is showing a visitor to the colony a picture on the wall of the assembly's chamber that shows "a creature of the imagination whose upper part is a woman and whose lower part is a rapacious beast." Our guide rejects an interpretation claiming "the upper part to be reason which is to guide and govern the passions and brutal appetites," arguing that "the female figure doth not signify reason for if that had been intended the representation had been by a male figure." Instead, "being by a woman joined to a rapacious beast it shows that inveterate rancour, implacable hatred, and irreconcilable resentment is to be concealed under the appearance of a smooth front and smiling countenance and that our enemies are to be lured by the female arts of flattery and dissimulation till brought within reach of the lion's paw and then no mercy to be shown."¹³

Misogynist satire and bawdy humor circulated not only within the elite but also among less privileged early Americans through the medium of ephemeral print. Almanacs and newspapers featured a wealth of salacious material that was often hostile toward women. These two kinds of publications had somewhat different audiences: newspapers targeted primarily an urban, educated, and commercially minded constituency, whereas almanacs catered to a less sophisticated sensibility and rural households as well as town-dwellers. But together they reached a remarkably broad-based readership. That eighteenth-century printers, deferential as they were to the tastes of their audience, included bawdy and misogynist items in these publications suggests that an extensive audience

existed for this kind of material. We have already seen that the testimony submitted to colonial courts was often extremely earthy, reflecting the ribald tone of everyday gossip in towns and villages throughout British America. During the early decades of the eighteenth century, there emerged a culture of ephemeral print that gratified and encouraged an appetite for lewd and often hateful fare that transcended social rank and occupation.¹⁴

Yet the colonists' initial experiments with ephemeral print had been decidedly prim. British America had no regular newspaper until 1704, but the printing press in Cambridge, Massachusetts, had been producing almanacs throughout the seventeenth century. These publications evinced neither the salacious tone nor the vitriolic attitude toward women that would characterize their eighteenth-century descendants. This is not surprising, given that the press was owned by Harvard College, a bastion of Puritan sensibility. Ministerial exaltation of family life as the basis for godly society and of women as "helpmeets" within the household precluded attacks upon either in the almanacs coming out of Cambridge. Harvard's monopoly came to an end in 1675, when John Foster set up the first Boston printing press, but official censorship prevented the publication of bawdy and otherwise questionable material.¹⁵ In the more permissive atmosphere of the early eighteenth century, the tone of New England almanacs depended to a significant degree upon the attitude of individual printers. James Franklin, for example, was by nature an irreverent fellow; his *Rhode Island Almanac* series of the late twenties and early thirties regularly included bawdy material. Nathaniel Ames, in sharp contrast, produced unimpeachably respectable almanacs that doubtless appealed to a quite different segment of the population; in a 1758 almanac, Franklin's son and namesake lampooned the Ames style as "starched."¹⁶

Meanwhile, Philadelphia readers who were so inclined could purchase almanacs containing material that was both lewd and frankly hostile toward women. Benjamin Franklin included in his *Poor Richard* series a steady stream of verses and aphorisms casting doubt upon the sexual propriety of women both before and after marriage. The following are typical of his barbed style:

Neither a fortress nor a maidenhead will hold out long after they begin to parley.

Three things are men most liable to be cheated in,
A horse, a wig, and a wife.

Men did not emerge unscathed from these barbs, destined as they often were in Franklin's satiric mind's eye to be cuckolded, but women figured in his almanacs as by far the less meritorious of the sexes. Franklin was more daring than most of his competitors. Titan Leeds's Philadelphia almanacs were generally much less ribald, though he also cast aspersions upon women:

In marriage are two happy days allowed,
A wife in wedding-sheets and in a shroud,
How can the marriage state then be accur'd,
Since the last day's as happy as the first?

Regard not woman's passions, nor her smiles;
With passion she ensnares, with tears beguiles.

Leeds did occasionally include moral homilies aimed primarily at men. "If thou desire to be chaste in wedlock," he advised in the 1721 issue, "keep thyself chaste before thou weddest; he that hath known pleasure unlawfully will hardly be restrained from unlawful pleasure." But more typical was an item in the 1728 issue that focused attention upon female infidelity, averring that venereal disease was "fit sauce for the drab, that from her good husband does stray."¹⁷

By the mid-eighteenth century, almanacs published in the northern, middle, and southern colonies regularly included bawdy material that characterized women as lustful and manipulative. A 1754 almanac warned that "young females" were "sly and mischievous," forever "contriving tricks to tempt" potential mates. Just as William Byrd had claimed that men were duped by "the arts of dress and disguise," a 1761 almanac claimed that "gay appareled women" used their physical appearance as "bait to catch" their prey. Far from embracing sexual restraint once married, the wives depicted in almanac doggerel were habitually adulterous and, moreover, taunted their husbands with the possibility that they had cuckolded them. According to one such item that appeared in 1767, "a certain gentleman" declared, "The Devil take all the cuckolds, I wish they were all in the river," to which his wife replied, "O, dear husband, how can you make such a wish, when you know you cannot swim." Women apparently remained sexually voracious throughout their lives. A 1762 almanac included a mock petition from "the Ma ds of Philadelphia" complaining that widows, "more subtle than a fox," purloined the choicest "young fellows," leaving "no lovers to adore us."¹⁸

Items relating to women and sex ran the gamut from light-hearted wordplay to snide insinuation to blatant misogyny. Consider these literary gems from the *Virginia Almanack* for 1764:

Mary, a chambermaid, a brown-eyed lass,
Complained that she all day in labour was;
I laughed at her simplicity, and said,
Surely at night then you'll be brought to bed.

If you a sweetheart go about,
Valentine's Day may help you out;
But mind your hand, and still take care,
You be not drawn into a snare.

This world's a prison in every respect,
Whose walls are the heavens in common;
The gaoler is sin, and the prisoners men,
And the fetters are nothing but women.

Many items vilified marriage, recommending bachelorhood as far preferable to a scolding and all too often cuckolding wife. "To wed, or not to wed," a parody of Hamlet's famous soliloquy, replaced the uncertainties and horrors of death invoked by the Danish prince with "the dark perplexed ways of wedlock." Given "the dread of something after honeymoon (that gaily-fleeting period, whose sweet joys few loves, alas! survive)," bachelors might well conclude that the tribulations of a single life ("the harlot's impudence, the prude's disdain, the pangs of love despised") were by comparison quite trivial (see fig. 4).¹⁹

Whereas most of the bawdy items included in almanacs were brief and generic, colonial newspapers featured a much broader range of sexually related material that was designed to inform, entertain, and titillate readers. Some items were only a few lines long, but others were lengthy and detailed. Like almanacs, newspapers were increasingly prone to include material that portrayed women in a negative light. But men were much more likely to be condemned for illicit behavior in newspapers than in almanacs, largely because they often figured as criminals in news reports. Though women did not always receive sympathetic coverage in such articles, journalists readily cast men as malefactors. This relatively equitable approach spilled over into bawdy stories that appeared in newspapers: though sometimes demeaning to women, these regularly poked fun at men and most often were evenhandedly satirical.

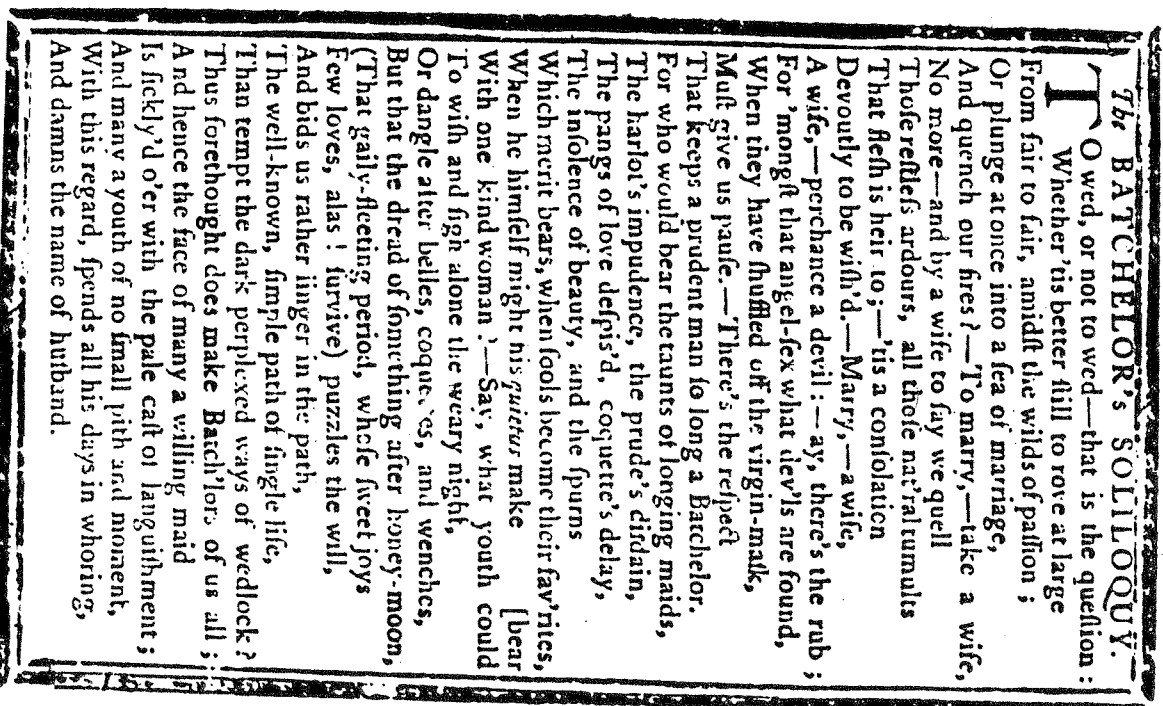


FIG. 4. "The Bachelor's Soliloquy," from *The American Calendar of 1765*, An Almanack for the Year of Our Lord 1768 (*Philadelphia, 1767*). Courtesy Library of Congress.

From the early decades of the eighteenth century, newspapers printed in New England, mid-Atlantic, and southern colonies reported the occurrence and punishment of sexual crimes on both sides of the Atlantic. The *Boston Gazette* for 9 January 1727 reported the trial of John and Mary Harwood for "keeping a disorderly house" in London and for "entering sodomites," which included "willingly permitting them to commit . . . divers sodomitical obscenities." The *South Carolina Gazette* for 11 November 1732 informed readers that "a negro man" had just been convicted in Springfield, Massachusetts, of rape "committed on the body of a white woman about eighteen years old, belonging to Suffolk, of a good reputation." And the *Pennsylvania Gazette* for 11 November 1762 told of an unintentionally incestuous marriage between a tradesman in London and a woman who turned out to be the daughter of his estranged wife by a subsequent relationship; this "so afflicted him, that he took to his bed, and is since dead." Most of this news coverage was highly sensationalist. It invited voyeuristic readers to envisage pirates running amok and ravishing maidens to "gratify their brutish passion" (though according to the *Boston Gazette* for 25 March 1734, one "damsel" committed suicide "to preserve her chastity"). It recounted the scandalous lecheries of wanton priests and lascivious nuns, mostly in France. And the *Boston Gazette* for 20 September 1725 described the flight from a burning London brothel of the establishment's "lady governess, together with her doxies and their companions," making sure to let readers know that they had "just time enough to escape in their shifts." Laconically but effectively, the report invoked an image of nubile wenches silhouetted in flimsy undergarments against the flames that licked the brothel walls. This doubtless titillated more than a few readers.

Some of the sexual items included in colonial newspapers were designed exclusively to entertain. There were bedroom farces, one involving a lecherous constable who had agreed to a nocturnal tryst with "a neighboring female" but "unluckily mistook the window" and joined another woman whose husband was "lying on a couch not far distant." This "good woman, perceiving presently by the extraordinary fondness of her bedfellow that it could not possibly be her husband, made so much disturbance as to wake the good man," who then "lay about him unmercifully." In another tale of mistaken identity, two young gentlemen, "strongly united in friendship" and "married about the same time," had each been trying without success to produce an heir. They underwent medical examinations to assess the relevant "faculties" and embarked with their wives on

a series of trips to health spas, "but without effect." One night the two couples arrived late at their destination and could find only one vacant room with two beds; the men went out for an evening walk. On returning to the room, they climbed into the wrong beds; each gamely made another attempt to solve their problem, and the next morning the four awoke to find themselves in considerable embarrassment. Nine months later, "each lady presented her husband with a son." Since the two men wanted their own sons to inherit from them and neither mother wanted to be parted from her child, "an exchange was made" whereby the inadvertent wife swap became a permanent arrangement. And then there were shorter anecdotes, one featuring a young lady who omitted the first syllable of *obey* when reciting her wedding vows, hoping that "she was bound to perform no more than she said." The parson objected, but her groom recommended that he "let it pass," assuring the reverend, "Ere the business is done, I'll make her cry, O!"²⁰

These crimes and comedic misadventures took place in North America, England, Ireland, various European countries, and more exotic locations. But by far the most frequent source for sexual items was London, a characteristic entirely consistent with the overall composition of these publications. Decade by decade, colonial newspapers devoted more and more space to English news and the advertisement of manufactured goods imported from England as early Americans increasingly saw themselves as part of a larger English culture.²¹ More specifically, imported snippets detailing adulterous affairs, elopements, and other scandals within the metropolitan beau monde gave colonists access to a libertine sensibility with which some clearly identified and to which others aspired.²² It is no coincidence that newspapers, which served a more affluent and self-consciously cosmopolitan constituency than did almanacs, were much more inclined to feature sexual license in a transatlantic context. When members of the colonial elite waxed libertine, they liked to think that they did so in good company. Almanac readers, it would seem, were less affected in their bawdiness.

But during the second half of the century, as Americans became increasingly troubled by the implications of a more permissive sexual culture, especially as it affected young women, the tone and content of ephemeral print underwent a transformation. Humorous bawdry was counterbalanced and increasingly overshadowed by earnest discussion of predatory libertinism and its consequences; hostile portraits of women as lustful seducers were displaced to a considerable degree by sympathetic

images of innocents who fell victim to male seduction. Instead of presenting womankind in general as sexually voracious and deceitful, magazines, newspapers, and almanacs increasingly distinguished between respectable women who embodied moral rectitude and those who either embraced depravity or were ruined by seductive rakes.²³ A similar shift had taken place in English publications by the mid-eighteenth century, which doubtless influenced colonial printers and their audiences. But the changing tone of ephemeral print in the British colonies of North America was not merely mimetic: the seduction genre appealed to Americans because it spoke to troubling issues with which they were all too familiar.²⁴

STORIES, POEMS, AND ESSAYS that addressed the potentially tragic consequences of male infidelity became increasingly commonplace in ephemeral literature of the late 1700s. Two extracts from Philadelphia almanacs printed in the early 1760s exemplify the sympathetic attitude and monitory tone of this emerging genre:

Hard is the fortune that your sex attends;
Women, like princes, find few real friends;
All who approach them their own ends pursue;
Lovers and ministers are seldom true.

Therefore guide each step with caution,
For just like glass is reputation;
Both broke to pieces in once falling.
For ever lost, and past recalling.²⁵

Earnest items such as these did not immediately gain ascendance over bawdy and sometimes callous humor. In 1774 an almanac from the same series that featured these two poems included a joke at the expense of abandoned women:

Says Dolly, "Me, Thomas, you promised to wed,
And I, silly girl, believed all that you said."
"That I promised to wed you, and love you, 'tis true,
But I've tried you, my Doll, and I find you won't do."

Yet those Philadelphians who used a competing almanac for that year would have read a much more melancholic ditty on the subject:

My daughter, once the comfort of my age,
Lured by a villain left her native home,

Is now abandoned on the world's wide stage;
And doomed in scanty poverty to roam.²⁶

During the 1780s, material dealing with courtship, marriage, and sex became predominantly serious and sympathetic toward women. Smutty humor did not disappear from the pages of ephemeral print even then, but it was overshadowed in the late eighties and nineties by the sheer mass of didactic stories and essays devoted to the perils of premarital sex.²⁷ Widespread rape during the Revolutionary War had exacerbated public anxiety about the sexual dangers facing young women, while the emphasis within republican ideology upon women's role as moral exemplars reaffirmed the need to protect female virtue. As we will see, the sustenance of public and private virtue became tightly interwoven during the closing decades of the century, which in turn gave new significance to discussion of courtship and sexual politics.

Score upon score of cautionary tales and essays appeared in newspapers, almanacs, and especially the magazines that proliferated during the second half of the eighteenth century, discussing the difficulties that faced women as they decided whether or not to trust suitors who would have sex with them. Although short stories and poems addressing this issue were obviously intended to entertain, their primary purpose was didactic. As one author put it, "morality shall be my guide, and utility my object."²⁸ Not all of the suitors who figured in didactic tales turned out to be incorrigible villains. But most of the stories that appeared in ephemeral publications featured "ruined" maidens who had to endure unmarried pregnancy alone, having been seduced by bewitching young rakes who then absconded to ply their charms elsewhere. Through these morality tales, women could experience vicariously the possibilities and perils of sexual freedom; they could learn without risk and then conduct themselves in real life with due regard to their own safety. Doomed heroines learned "by sad experience" what "happier females" would "only know by report, that an ingenious soul is ever in danger from the machinations of a designing world."²⁹ Seduction literature cast doubt upon the probability of mankind in general and advocated premarital chastity over trust as a young woman's best bet. "A Hint to Young Ladies" warned "imprudent young maids who grant favours to deceitful lovers, upon their swearing they will marry you," that such men "despised" those whom they seduced and cared nothing for their "honour" or "future happiness." Women could not afford to be trusting, given "how inconceivably base"

some men turned out to be. They should "learn a lesson of prudence" from the tragic fate of duped heroines.³⁰

Many seduction tales were set in exotic locations and involved melodramatic twists of fate that were far removed from ordinary experience. Yet the fundamental issues that they addressed would have been familiar to most readers in the late eighteenth century. The authors of didactic essays and short stories often used words associated with "the fashionable world" such as "libertine" and "rake" to describe men who seduced and then betrayed the trust of young innocents. As one author pointed out, however, even "the little retired village" had been "contaminated" by "the volatile salt of perfidious refinement." All too often, "the young, infatuated, and thoughtless" confused "an incessant round of pleasure" with true "happiness." Young women who grew up in the countryside were now notorious for "levity bordering on licentiousness." Even worse, their male contemporaries were driven by "an unbounded thirst in the pursuit of interest and pleasure." Floretta, the heroine of this particular morality tale, "saw through the misleading glare of lawless pleasures and shuddered at the danger she was daily exposed to." The "village swains" found her "impenetrable".

They sung, they danced, and they piped in vain. She saw that they assailed her virtue, not her heart. They did not seek for connubial delights in her society, but for momentary gratifications in her seduction. Aware of their ends, she had strength and virtue enough to defeat them.

Floretta's reward came in the form of Florio, a virtuous fellow whose "ardour" was matched by "the sincerity of his heart." But Florio, alas, was not your average "swain": even a village lass was likely to find herself surrounded by "volatile" and "perfidious" lovers; she had best take care.³¹

Authors warned repeatedly against the specious pleasures of immediate gratification. In a lush and gothic piece that appeared in the *Massachusetts Magazine* for September 1791, "the young and beauteous Cleanthe," who was taking a walk at sunset, "strayed into a thick forest that reared its awful shade behind the stately castle of the baron her father." She fell into a reverie, from which she was roused by the sound of a lute, which then faded away into "deep silence." Cleanthe realized that she had wandered "out of her knowledge" and had no idea how to find her way back to "the peaceful parental asylum she had unwarily quitted." She now heard "mournful and piercing shrieks," along with "the howl-

ings of savage beasts" that "resounded on every side." She fled in terror and soon found herself in "the ruins of an ancient abbey." There, "at the foot of an altar half destroyed by time," a woman lay "as if expiring, with eyes fixed, and features pale and ghastly." Blood was trickling from her bosom, where "her hand convulsively grasped a rusty and leaden hilted poniard." The "miserable wretch" opened her eyes, fixed her gaze upon the petrified Cleanthe, and in a "hollow tone of voice" declared, "Whoever thou art, behold in me the fatal effects of heedlessness, vice, and criminal despair!" She then expired. The earth trembled; the sound of thunderbolts and rushing water filled the air; and Cleanthe "sunk lifeless on the ground."

On "returning to life and recollection," Cleanthe found herself in "the most delicious garden, surrounded with all that could charm and delight the sense." As she arose, a "beauteous" young man "for whom thy gentle bosom had long sighed in secret" approached, knelt at her feet, and "poured out vows of tenderness and ardour." He then "conducted her to a temple sacred to the loves," where "a train of young beauties crowded around, and with siren voices hailed her fairest of the throng." One of these nymphs presented Cleanthe with "a bowl of an intoxicating mixture" and bade her drink. Her admirer took the bowl, "drank deep of its contents," and passed it back to Cleanthe, who was about to imbibe herself when "a low and mournful voice sounded in her ear": "Fortbear! Call to remembrance the ghastly figure, the pavement dyed with blood, the convulsive pangs, the dying groans! Heedlessness has already betrayed thee into danger—temptation is now plunging thee into vice! Despair, death, destruction follow!" Cleanthe flung the bowl and its "fatal beverage" away from her. She heard "a loud shriek," followed by "a hideous crash," and then "the whole vision faded away." Cleanthe was once again on the edge of the forest at the rear of her father's castle. She rushed in-doors "and in the soothing of parental affection sought consolation and repose for her agitated spirits."³²

It was no coincidence that Cleanthe had strayed "unwarily" from "the peaceful parental asylum" before undergoing this unnerving experience. Cautionary tales often drew attention to the dangers of personal autonomy and also the ambiguities inherent in a parent's relationship with adult but as yet unmarried children, especially daughters. On the one hand, illicit affairs and elopements were sometimes prompted by disagreement between parents and children over the choice of a marriage partner. Fathers who privileged considerations of wealth or status over the

romantic attachments of their offspring were roundly condemned in these tales and essays. Authors warned parents that "thwarting the affections" of children might drive Lovelorn sons and daughters to ruinous expedients.³³ On the other hand, many of the seductions that took place in these stories were made possible by unsupervised courtship. An unscrupulous suitor named Orlando, for example, was "with little ceremony permitted to visit" Narcissa "as a candidate for her affections." He enjoyed frequent and private access to the young woman, during which meetings he deployed his "wiles" to seduce her.³⁴

Seduced and abandoned heroines were mostly consigned to a life of shame, grief, and sickness. She who "gave too soon her virgin-heart" and submitted to the "flame" of a "cruel despoiler" became "the sport of every babbling tongue." As "all her joy and all her hopes" disappeared, "the roses that adorned her face" faded away, "the fire that sparkled in her eyes" grew dim, and "her form no more retain[ed] its wonted grace."³⁵ Some of these deserted and pregnant young heroines fled their homes rather than face their parents, but others were forced to leave by families who condemned and disowned them.³⁶ Now doubly abandoned, the heroine found herself homeless and destitute. In the standard scenario, she turned to prostitution, a measure of her desperation and also of her moral degradation. An elegy entitled "The Dying Prostitute" invoked "the miseries of a wretched maid" whose "health and fame" had been "sacrificed" to the "brutal passion" of an "unfeeling man." She now wandered the streets "wan and sallow, changed with sin and care," forced "by pining want" to proposition "each hideous form" that passed her by. Even those disowned women whose lovers did not abandon them nonetheless faced a grim future: the "amiable and virtuous female" who had "sacrificed the sublime delights of parental approbation to gratify the volatile passion of youth" now "trim[med] the almost expiring taper, and wait[ed] in torturing suspense for her beloved partner, while he, callous to every tender feeling of humanity, [was] squandering away the future prospects of an infant family at the destructive and ever detested gambling table."³⁷

Seduction literature inveighed bitterly against rakes for exploiting the innocence and credulity of their victims. Denunciations of male artifice and treachery were as colorful as they were commonplace: "The man who lays a snare to entrap innocence, however shielded by the specious names of gallantry or gaiety of disposition, is a fiend and a monster that should be shunned and detested by society." Those outraged by such depredations could take comfort in the knowledge that a rake's life of pleasure

was built upon a "tottering base," its "joys" a "delusive show." Debt, disgrace, and disgrace would soon enough supplant the seeming glories of the moment. The seducer's "unfeeling triumph" would eventually give way to repentance as he lay "writhing on death's gloomy bed." "Rest assured," wrote one commentator, "that the burden of misery which awaits yourself is heavier far than any you have heaped on another." Another hoped that "no sweet forgiveness" would then "descend from heaven" and that the "wretch" would instead be consigned "to the rigor of relentless fate."³⁸

Yet some authors gave the impression that libertines could be inspired to repent and reform long before they lay on their deathbeds. The catalyst was almost always feminine virtue. One rakish fellow apparently promised to mend his ways after receiving a letter from a female friend in which she chastised him gently and outlined an appropriate course of conduct for the future. Another was redeemed by his introduction to "the lovely Olivia" during a visit to his father's country estate. Dorcas now "looked back with horror at his former debaucheries, and was convinced that there was no real felicity but when a mutual passion prevailed." They married and lived happily ever after. According to a poem purportedly written "by a lady in New England," "the rake" was a man of "open heart" and "generous mind" who had temporarily lost his way, "a thousand virtues misapplied" as "reason floats on passion's tide." His ability to "judge of right" may have been "banished from its practice quite," but neither "his nobler wit" nor his conscience had deserted him entirely:

He knows his fault, he feels, he views,
 Detesting what he most pursues.
 His judgment tells him, all his gains
 For fleeting joys, are lasting pains.

This type of young man, "a wretched, self-condemning creature," would welcome the redemptive ministrations of a virtuous woman.³⁹

Mistreated women could apparently inspire their lovers to reform by means of their very suffering. One tale featured "a fashionable voluptuary" who seduced and eloped with a trusting young maiden. As Sir Edward observed "anguish" and "guilt" cast their shadow over his lover's spirits and demeanor, he came to feel "the deepest remorse" and "curse those false ideas of pleasure which had led him to consider the ruin of an artless girl." He accordingly married her and settled into virtuous domesticity.⁴⁰ Magazine articles and stories trumpeted the ability of virtuous wives "to reform the disposition" of unfaithful husbands. One adul-

terous libertine was moved to repentance and reformation by his long-suffering wife's tender ministrations after he received a wound in a duel with "another gentleman of fashion" who had insulted his mistress. "To suffer with patience," the author declared, "to rise superior to mistfortune, and to repay unmerited ill-treatment with benevolence, are virtues which not only promote the happiness of those who can exercise them, but frequently recall the licentious to the paths of their duty."⁴¹

Implicit in these accounts of redemption was the notion that women could seduce men into virtue, a reversal of earlier writings that portrayed womankind as luring male victims into vice. Consider the case of Louisa, a young widow who was abducted from the coast of England by Algerian privateers and consigned as a slave to the harem of a Turk named Osmen. Louisa proved more than equal to the challenge of her new surroundings. She "wrought such a change in Osmen's bosom" by means of her "virtues" and enlightened "conversation" (much of it concerning the sterling qualities of George Washington) that he decided to free his slaves, including Louisa.⁴² By the early nineteenth century, the idealized virtuous woman was also a desexualized, passionless woman. But images of virtuous femininity in the late 1700s still allowed that women's sex appeal could prove an effective tool in controlling men. An essay about Amazonian women claimed that on one occasion these formidable warriors averted imminent defeat at the hands of a neighboring tribe by "laying aside all measures of resistance" and "rush[ing] out with naked breasts to meet the enemy." When the advancing army responded "with enthusiasm" to this provocative gesture and ended hostilities, the Amazon women "relinquished their bows and their spears, and resolved in future to trust more to their weakness than their strength."⁴³

Wives who wished to ensure or recover their husband's loyalty must seduce them literally as well as metaphorically. One piece advised that a wife must not only "be strictly virtuous" but also adorn herself beguilingly if she was to retain her husband's love. Though "indispensably necessary" before marriage, a pleasing appearance was "still more so" afterward: "nothing can be more fatal to conjugal happiness than that carelessness of dress, that loose and disorderly attire, to which too many married ladies give themselves up," since "indifference, if not disgust," would "undoubtedly ensue," prompting the husband to "rove abroad, like the bee, in search of new sweets." In "The School for Husbands and Wives," a man sought "affection which he imagined himself unable to

obtain from his wife" in "a celebrated courtesan" named Nina. The distraught wife determined "to rekindle the flame of her husband's conjugal affection" and so visited Nina in disguise to ask her advice. The courtesan suggested that she watch from a closet while she entertained a client who turned out to be the husband in question. Having to watch their tryst was, of course, a mortifying experience, but the new skills with which she plied her husband on his return "astonished and delighted him." He stopped visiting the courtesan, and the couple "continued to live in love and harmony to the end of their days."⁴⁴

But just how strong were the twin weapons of inspiring virtue and beguiling beauty when pitted against male depravity? Although some writers enthused about women's redemptive power, others averred that most libertines were incapable of reform. Skeptics questioned the "common" adage that "a reformed rake" made "the best husband," pointing out that such individuals had "little left to boast but a shattered constitution, empty pocket, tradesmen's bills, bad habits, and a taste for dress and vices of every denomination." Men of this stripe needed wives to replenish their coffers and had most likely feigned reformation for that purpose. Once "the poor wife's fortune" had been squandered, she would find herself "despised by her friends" and most likely neglected by her husband. Even the rake who had sought with some degree of sincerity to reform would be "tempted by the power of long habit to return to his old ways." His "insatiable love of variety" would "lead him astray from the finest woman in the world."⁴⁵

Authors who doubted the possibility of a "reformed rake" justified their pessimism in terms of male infirmity. When it came to pleasures of the flesh, they argued, men were constitutionally incapable of either self-restraint or fidelity: "so frail" was their sense of loyalty, "so addicted" were they to change, "so transitory" were their affections, "that the greatest of blessings, when once enjoyed, beclame matters of mere neutral concern"; thus "sated," the lover was easily distracted by new "objects of pursuit."⁴⁶ In theory, man's rational capacity should enable him to quell his passionate urges. But these writers suggested that neither reason nor morality could be relied upon to triumph in practice. When given "an occasion of gratifying his wishes," the typical man might "fancy he will go to such and such lengths, and no further," but "passion" would "hurry him imperceptibly from liberty to liberty." Young men in particular were "slaves to the irregular motions of passion": rational and vir-

tuus instincts had little chance against the "extravagant desires, tumultuous thoughts, and amorous fires" that "rag[e]d" within the youthful male bosom.⁴⁷

Many of these writers claimed that the typical young libertine was "vicious contrary to his inclination" and despite his "natural love for virtue." According to an essay in the *American Magazine*, "a hundred good qualities" were "rendered useless" by his "impotence of mind." He was compelled not only by the inner workings of passion but also by social pressure and fear of "ridicule" by friends who themselves "seduce[d]" and "ensnare[d]" him into "the stream of vice." The *South Carolina Gazette* lamented that many a young "buck" was "dazzled" by "men of pleasure" and so became a "servile imitator." In other words, he was "disso-lute rather from fashion than inclination." The *Massachusetts Magazine* lamented that it had become "in some measure necessary for a young fellow to give in to the fashionable follies, and practise vices to which he ha[d] a real abhorrence, if he would establish the character of a man of taste, or show himself tolerably well acquainted with the world." Some authors complained that virtuous men had to pose as rakes if they were to attract young ladies with redemptive impulses. A piece entitled "Thoughts on Gallantry, Love, and Marriage" lamented that "the lady of merit" actually encouraged libertines to court her because she thought herself "possessed of charms sufficient" to "reclaim the wanderer, and fix him unalterably hers." This contributor claimed to "have known a fellow whose behavior was really virtuous" and yet who was "very solicitous to be thought a libertine by the girl to whom he paid his addresses." The lesson was clear: "a man can take no more effectual method to secure himself the esteem of our modern ladies, in general, than by appearing a rake, at least in practice, if not in principle."⁴⁸

Whether driven by "fashion" or "impotence of mind," men evidently could not be relied upon to exercise self-restraint. Even those authors who had faith in women's ability to reform rakish suitors warned that they must take care when dealing with potential recruits to the cause of virtue. If it was true that most men were enslaved to their lusts, then it followed that "young ladies" must fill the moral vacuum: the "only remedy," opined a piece in the *American Museum*, was for women "to act in their own defense" by exercising "their unquestionable capacity to judge what is amiable and virtuous, and their indefeasible right in all matters of moral conduct to follow their own judgment." Essays discussing seduction and abandonment routinely denounced those men who "imposed on the hon-

est and obliging credibility of the virtuous fair." But they focused most of their attention on the implications for female comportment.⁴⁹

A steady stream of articles addressed to "young unmarried ladies" offered "friendly hints" about appropriate conduct in the presence of men. "Caution and circumspection," warned one such piece, "ought ever to be on the watch, and externally pleasing appearances examined with an eagle's eye." Those who gave way to "wild passion" and "suffer[ed] unbridled desire to warp the true bent of the soul," ignoring "the voice of calm reason," would soon repent of their folly. However tempting it might be to consort with rakes in the hope of reforming them, young women should shun indiscreet and corrupting persons of either sex, limiting themselves as far as possible to intercourse with those from whom they were "least liable to receive any taint or infection." To do otherwise was "the height of folly and stupidity." After all, men were unlikely to "regard the honour and happiness of a woman" who "shew[ed] but little regard to her own."⁵⁰

Eschewing company and behavior that might compromise one's moral integrity, reputation, or personal safety did not necessitate prudery or self-isolation. Conduct manuals appearing in the late eighteenth century advised young women to steer a middle course between undue familiarity, which was dangerous, and cold reserve, which made them undesirable. Magazine and newspaper articles gave similar advice. As one author put it, a young woman's conduct should be "free and unconstrained so far as is consistent with modesty." She who wished to maintain a lover's interest without surrendering her virtue should avoid "too easy complacence" without "run[ning] into the opposite extreme." She should avoid either "reprehensible" or "outrageously virtuous" manners.⁵¹

Emphasis upon a young lady's "unquestionable capacity to judge what is amiable and virtuous," a capacity that was not to be expected of male suitors, placed a heavy burden of responsibility upon her shoulders. It also imposed strict limits upon her freedom of action, without placing any such restrictions upon the men with whom she interacted. Conduct books warned women not to do anything that might encourage men to take liberties with them, but they rarely lectured young men about the need for self-control. Likewise, essayists in magazines and newspapers seldom addressed advice concerning courtship etiquette specifically to men.⁵² Whereas seduction literature often portrayed libertine behavior as compulsive and even involuntary, women were presented as much more fully in control of themselves. Most contributions to that genre insisted

that women must assume responsibility for appropriate behavior during courtship, protecting themselves and inspiring men to virtuous behavior. A letter from "Adolescents" to the *Philadelphia Minerva* in 1795 urged women not to associate with libertine men on the grounds that they could best reform rakes by discountenancing them. "Ladies," he wrote, "much depends on you, towards a reformation in the morals of our sex." A response the following week from "Dorothy Gilbrongue" declared that women must admit rakes into their company so as to exert their influence over them. Both perspectives vested power in women.⁵³

Ephemeral publications had become increasingly committed to the notion that women were by temperament more virtuous than men and better able to withstand temptation. Whereas earlier satiric writings had portrayed men as the helpless victims of female manipulation and lust, late-eighteenth-century literature tended more and more to present men as enslaved to their passions and thus dangerous to women. These depictions seem quite different, and in some respects they were, but the assertion of male helplessness remained constant. Consider Joseph Shippen's effusively admiring poem about the "striking charm," "pleasing excellence," and "various graces" of Philadelphia ladies gathered in an assembly room. Shippen described the women whom he encountered there as "commanding all" through their charms, "enchanted," "conquering," and inspiring "awe" as they "pleas[e]d," so that men such as himself "must soon submit to love." An almanac essay entitled "Love and Acquaintance with the Fair Sex" averred that men were incapable of "resistance" against "the attractive charms of an enchanting outside in the sprightly bloom of happy nature; against the graces of wit and politeness; against the lure of modesty and sweetness." Thus, even as the heroines of seduction tales fell victim to overpowering male predators, they held the key to their own salvation. "Let the fair ever remember," warned one author, "that their peace, dignity, and character chiefly depend on themselves." "It will then," declared another, "be your own fault if you are not happy."⁵⁴

THE NUMEROUS DIDACTIC STORIES and essays that appeared in magazines, newspapers, and almanacs were, for the most part, limited by considerations of space to a laconic treatment of their subject matter. Two of the first novels published in the United States, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797), examined the etiquette of courtship and the threat posed by seductive, rapacious suitors in much greater detail. In common with the "moral

tales" that appeared in ephemeral print, their message was complex and ultimately ambiguous: both novels sympathized with the plight of young women, condemned men who mistreated them, and yet suggested that women who fell victim to rakes should have taken better care of themselves. Their heroines bore a significant and insidious moral burden.

Eighteenth-century novels from across the Atlantic had found an enthusiastic audience throughout the British colonies. A striking proportion of these volumes placed women center stage, focusing on their experience of love and the tribulations of sexual temptation. It is surely no coincidence that two of the most popular novels among early Americans were Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-48): each presented an epic struggle between a virtuous young woman and an unscrupulous admirer who had determined to buy each her chastity. *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded* concerns an attractive and self-possessed fifteen-year-old maidservant who is preyed upon by Mr. B., her master. Pamela's stubborn refusal to surrender her chastity eventually vanquishes and redeems Mr. B., who repents of his past behavior and commits himself to reformation. Once Pamela becomes convinced of his sincerity, she agrees to marry him, and the couple settle into virtuous domesticity. *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady* has a much less cheerful ending. The heroine is being wooed by a captivating young rake named Lovelace. Clarissa is charmed, but her family insists that she marry a wealthy gentleman named Solmes, whom she loathes. When Clarissa proves intransigent, they lock her up. Lovelace persuades Clarissa to escape with him, promising to broker a reconciliation with her relatives. But instead he deposits the fugitive in a brothel and attempts to debauch her. Clarissa repudiates his advances repeatedly, and Lovelace becomes increasingly obsessed by the challenge of overcoming her scruples. He eventually drugs and rapes her. Clarissa is devastated by the loss of her chastity. She escapes from the clutches of Lovelace and is cared for by the virtuous Belford, but her constitution has been hopelessly compromised by her ordeal, and her condition slowly deteriorates. Following Clarissa's death, one of her cousins challenges Lovelace to a duel and kills him.

Both of these novels were explicitly didactic in tone. Their championing of virtuous young women who resisted sexual temptation even under extreme pressure was hugely popular with early American readers.⁵⁵ But the way Richardson resolved the two plots and the general tone of his novels proved controversial. New Englander Esther Edwards Burr complained in her journal that Richardson had "degraded our sex most

horridly, to go and represent such virtue as Pamela falling in love with Mr. B. in the midst of such foul and abominable actions." That Pamela could "forgive Mr. B. all his devilish conduct so as to consent to marry him" did "not well agree with so much virtue and piety." She considered this "a very great defect in the performance."⁵⁶ A 1784 magazine essay bemoaned that Richardson portrayed "some of his wicked characters as more agreeable than was necessary to his plan, which may make the example dangerous." Lovelace was so "adorned with youth, beauty, eloquence, wit, and every other intellectual and bodily accomplishment" that "thoughtless young men may be tempted to imitate, even while they disapprove him." The reviewer also objected to Lovelace's honorable death by the sword. He would have preferred "a series of mortifications, leading him down gradually to infamy, ruin, and despair, or producing by probable means an exemplary repentance." That "would have been more useful in a moral view, and perhaps more interesting." Another assessment, published in 1790, warned that *Clarissa* should be "read with caution, and under the direction of a guide," since it "laid open scenes which it would have been safer to have kept concealed" and "excited sentiments which it would have been more advantageous to early virtue not to have admitted." Though "written with the purest intentions of promoting virtue," it inadvertently encouraged readers to lose sight of "the moral view" by presenting "love scenes which interest the passions more than the understanding."⁵⁷

Novels in general became increasingly controversial among Americans during the postrevolutionary period. Critics warned that although some volumes had "moral merit" and included "lessons of prudence and virtue," many more were dangerous because of their "immoral tendency" or "romantic turn." A steady stream of essays published during the 1790s lamented "the sorrowful effects of reading novels and romances" upon young women. Because vices were often "painted in captivating colors" and "intrigues as genteel gallantries," readers might be corrupted by "such a course of reading" and then fall "an easy prey to the first boy who assum[e]d [the] languishing lover." Any seducer with a flair for histrionics could achieve his object simply by imitating the heroic type familiar to those "much conversant with sentimental novels."⁵⁸ One writer went so far as to argue that novels had democratized libertinism: "fashionable depravity" was no longer "confined to the higher circles of life" but had now become common "in the middling orders of society." The underlying message of these attacks was that women would be less instead of more

capable of defending themselves against seduction as a result of reading novels. When a woman was seduced and abandoned, declared a contributor to the *Massachusetts Magazine*, blame did not rest solely with "the arts of the seducer." Many "a ruined female" had herself "open[ed] the broad gate that leads to destruction," her moral scruples having been dulled by reading novels, "the literary opium that lulls every sense in delicious rapture." Novels, then, impelled female readers to "act improperly, owing to the romantic turn of thinking [that] they imbibe[d] from their favourite studies."⁵⁹

Both Brown and Foster were well aware of such concerns. They sought to preempt criticism of their own novels by giving especial prominence to didactic passages that discussed appropriate behavior during courtship and the need for women to protect themselves against unscrupulous suitors. Brown conceded in his preface to *The Power of Sympathy* that novels had "not been received with universal approbation." He even had one of his characters declare that "many fine girls" had been "ruined by reading novels" that were "not regulated on the chaste principles of true friendship, rational love, and conjugal duty." Only those volumes dedicated to "strict morality" were "fit to form the minds of women." Brown and Foster clearly intended that their volumes should combine the thrill of a novel with the instructive tone of a conduct book. Their work was as much indebted to the etiquette manual genre as to authors such as Richardson.⁶⁰

Both *The Power of Sympathy* and *The Coquette* condemned predatory men who seduced and ruined young women, but they also insisted that women be held accountable as accomplices in their own downfall. Like many of the short stories published in the late eighteenth century, Brown described his male despoilers in language reminiscent of the serpent's victory over Eve in the Garden of Eden. In one of the novel's subplots, Ophelia kills herself after being seduced and abandoned by her brother-in-law, Mr. Martin. "By a series of the most artful suggestions, suggested by a diabolical appetite," Martin "insinuated himself into her affection," "prevalled upon the heart of the unsuspecting Ophelia, and triumphed over her innocence and virtue." In another passage, Brown wrote of "the fell seducer's wiles." But just as theologians had often insisted that Eve was partly to blame for her own misfortunes (and those of her husband), one of the characters entrusted with the delivery of moral lessons throughout the novel points out that "a woman may be accessory to her own ruin": "when a woman, by her imprudence, exposes herself, she is acces-

sory; for though her heart may be pure, her conduct is a tacit invitation to the seducer." "It is hardly worth while," the moralist insists, "to contend about the difference between the meaning of the terms 'accessory' and 'principal.' The difference, in fact, is very small."⁶¹

The theme of female responsibility is much more prominent in *The Coquette*. The flawed heroine, Eliza Wharton, writes that she is "the victim of her own indiscretion" as well as of "a designing libertine." The novel begins soon after the death of two men, Eliza's father and the man whom he has selected as her "future guardian and companion." Eliza has deferred to "the will and desire of [her] parents" in the choice of a husband but now finds herself altogether freed from the "shackles" of male authority. As she sets out from Hartford to stay in New Haven with a married friend, Mrs. Richman, Eliza revels in leaving behind, figuratively as well as literally, the "paternal roof" and in the "egotism" that she can now indulge: "Let me then enjoy that freedom which I so highly prize. Let me have opportunity, unbiased by opinion, to gratify my natural disposition in a participation of those pleasures which youth and innocence afford." But reconciling "pleasure" with "innocence" proves to be more difficult than Eliza has anticipated. Granted "independence" as a result of these two deaths, she fails to exercise that "freedom" responsibly and considers herself at least partly to blame for what ensues. "I am sensible that the power is in my hands," she acknowledges, "but the disposition (shall I confess it) is wanting!"⁶²

Eliza experienced "freedom" and "independence" to an unusual degree, but her situation was emblematic of social change in the eighteenth century: parental authority may not have died, but it had weakened; young people were freer to court as they wished and must accordingly assume a greater share of responsibility for their own safety.⁶³ Negotiating freedom was no easy matter, especially if male suitors were often too weak to resist corrupt inclinations. In *The Coquette* as in other moral tales of the period, this meant that women must take the moral initiative. The novel's concluding message was addressed explicitly to women: "From the melancholy story of Eliza Wharton, let the American fair learn to reject with disdain every insinuation derogatory to their true dignity and honor. Let them despise, and for ever banish the man, who can glory in the seduction of innocence and the ruin of reputation. To associate is to approve; to approve is to be betrayed." In other words, she who was betrayed must first betray herself. Eliza's misuse of her freedom, pursuit of

pleasure, and lack of self-control resulted in her loss of virtue, which in turn destroyed her happiness and ended her life.⁶⁴

WORRIED DISCUSSION OF women's sexual and moral endangerment reached its height in the years following the War of Independence. This was not a coincidence. Two facets of the revolutionary experience gave additional resonance to images of female defilement and moral degradation. The first was rape, both literal and metaphorical. Official reports, newspapers, and diaries from the period contain numerous accounts of women "ravished" and "shamefully abused" by the British.⁶⁵ Whether or not all such accounts were true, they became common currency. Like seduction literature, these reports stressed the youth and innocence of the victims, along with the cruel and callous depravity of those who attacked them. Both sets of women lost their chastity to men who had no intention of marrying them or acknowledging paternal responsibility in the event of pregnancy. Most tales of seduction and abandonment differed from rape accounts in that they featured women who consented, at least nominally, to have sex. Yet late-eighteenth-century literature characterized seduction as a form of predatory violation; its victims were usually described as having been overwhelmed in some way, albeit by false words rather than physical force. And just as libertines deceived the objects of their lust, reports of wartime rape sometimes claimed that British soldiers lured women into situations where they could be assaulted more easily, using "vile artifices for the delusion and ruin of the virtuous and innocent."⁶⁶

As magazine stories and newspaper articles often associated rakish seducers with metropolitan degeneracy, so rape served as a potent metaphor for British decadence, brutality, and tyranny during the revolutionary period. Patriots claimed that their way of life was being violated by the imperial government's repressive policies. They conflated attacks on political freedom with sexual degradation in visual and rhetorical images that served to dramatize their cause. Consider "The Able Doctor, or, America Swallowing the Bitter Draught," a 1774 print that portrayed the British response to the Boston Tea Party in terms of assault: Lord North forced the spout of a teapot into the mouth of a scantily clad woman representing America, grasping her throat in a demonstration of force while another man lifted her skirt and peered lasciviously up toward her thighs and genitalia (see fig. 5). As it indicted the abusive depravity that



FIG. 5. "The Able Doctor, or, America Swallowing the Bitter Draught," 1774. Reproduced by permission of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. This pro-colonial print first appeared in the *London Magazine*, April 1774, and then was reproduced for Americans by Paul Revere in the June issue of the *Royal American Magazine* (Boston).

allegedly characterized British government, this cartoon insisted upon a tight link between sexual, moral, and political integrity. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* claimed that "the domestic tranquility of a nation depend[ed] greatly on the *chastity* of what may properly be called national matters." Paine urged the impossibility of reconciliation between Britain and its American colonies in terms of sexual degradation and its irreversibility: "Can ye give to prostitution its former innocence? Neither can ye reconcile Britain and America. The last cord now is broken, the people of England are presenting addresses against us. There are injuries which nature cannot forgive; she would cease to be nature if she did. As well can the lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress, as the continent forgive the murders of Britain." The British government was not the only political force accused of preying upon innocents during this period. John Adams drew a direct parallel between the "artful villain" in seduction novels who "pursue[d] the innocent lovely girl to her ruin and her death" and the corrupting, manipulative influence of populists. "Democracy is Lovelace," he wrote, "and the people are Clarissa."⁶⁷

But women figured in revolutionary and postrevolutionary rhetoric as much more than victims. They also assumed a crucial role in the forging

of a new republican sensibility. That role depended upon exactly the same qualities that enabled women to protect themselves against seduction and inspire men to set aside their baser sexual instincts. In the absence of a monarchy and the loyalty that it inspired, political writers insisted that Americans must find a new sentiment that would bind them together and propel them to place the interests of the whole before their own selfish concerns. Eighteenth-century political philosophers generally held that a republic could not survive without civic virtue, a benevolent and disinterested concern for the common good.⁶⁸ Two fundamental aspects of civic virtue and its place in late-eighteenth-century American politics concern us here. First, postrevolutionary writers argued that private and public virtue were closely intertwined: the former sustained the latter. A society in which people fixated upon their own gratification, regardless of ethical or altruistic considerations, could not sustain political freedom, which required a high-minded citizenry.⁶⁹ Second, since women were now generally perceived as better equipped than men to withstand moral corruption and promote virtue, they became a crucial component in the republican vision: as women had to nurture men's more honorable instincts in private life, so now they must encourage their husbands and sons to embrace and exercise public virtue.⁷⁰

During the early decades of the republic, political writings emphasized women's role as guardians of public as well as private virtue. Tangible forms of power would remain in male hands, but moral authority was now vested in the sweethearts, wives, and mothers who would inspire men to public-spirited behavior. A young woman could apparently "mould the taste, the manners, and the conduct of her admirers, according to her pleasure." She could "even to a great degree change their tempers and dispositions, and superinduce habits entirely new." Once married, the republican wife must ensure that her husband's conduct as a public and private citizen met the highest ethical standards. "It rests with her," the *New York Magazine* pointed out, "not only to confirm those virtuous habits which he has already acquired, but also to excite his perseverance in the paths of rectitude." Women thus bore a mighty and onerous burden: they should always bear in mind "their high importance in society" and "reflect how much the virtue and happiness of mankind depend[ed] upon them." One essay quoted Milton's famous line, "The world lies all before them," and applied it specifically to women, declaring that the world was "theirs to mould into what shape they please."⁷¹

But if republican wives were to appeal successfully to men's higher in-

stricts, they must be properly equipped to do so. A host of postrevolutionary writers argued that greater attention to female education would make women more effective not only as household mistresses but also as informed and astute companions to politically engaged and responsible male citizens. The need to expand and improve formal schooling for girls and young women became an important component in discussions of women's role in the sustenance of republican virtue.⁷² Contemporaries recognized, though, that informal education through reading was also crucial if women were to realize their full potential as the moral lodestars of the nation. And that brings us back to the seduction literature that flooded American households in the 1790s. The education of a good republican woman involved the acquisition of skills related not only to literacy and numeracy but also to social interaction and moral self-preservation. As we have seen, seduction literature was avowedly didactic: it sought to prepare young women for the challenges of personal freedom and sexual temptation. That enterprise had clear political implications in the climate of the 1780s and 1790s, given the central roles allotted to virtue and to women in sustaining a healthy republic.⁷³

The trials and temptations undergone by ingenue heroines in late-eighteenth-century moral tales paralleled closely those of the new nation. As young women should recognize the dangers that accompanied greater personal independence and eschew licentious behavior, so the citizens of the United States must grapple with the challenges of exercising political freedom and protect civic virtue from corruption. Male villains who stalked the pages of novels and short stories embodied the forces of corruption and depravity that might overwhelm the republic if civic virtue faltered; the fate of young women such as Eliza Wharton dramatized the grim consequences of giving in to dishonorable impulses. A carefully designed governmental structure could minimize the dangers, just as familial and community surveillance could protect young women to some degree from male abuse of sexual freedom. But safety in both contexts depended in large part upon individual virtue and perspicacity. Given the frequency with which Americans of this period insisted upon the interdependence of personal and public virtue, these parallels would have been obvious to readers. John Adams's equation of politicians whom he considered corrupt with Lovelace and of novice citizens with the much abused Clarissa was neither obscure nor far-fetched in the cultural context of the new republic.⁷⁴

But men could not be expected to learn these lessons without the assis-

tance of their womenfolk. In both personal and political realms, responsibility for awakening and sustaining virtue lay primarily with women. The redemption of initially ill-fated relationships such as that between Pamela and Mr. B. came to serve as a model for the virtuous republican marriage in which wives saved their husbands from corruption and inspired them to disinterested feats of which they might otherwise have been incapable. Stories that placed moral authority in the hands of women became so popular in the 1790s because they played out in the most intimate of contexts the grandiose redemptive and inspirational role that women were expected to perform in the republic: an experiment now unfolding. Women could and must ensure moral order by using their hold over men to shape their conduct as suitors, husbands, fathers, and citizens. Heightened concern for the physical safety and moral welfare of women in the new republic was bound up with widespread discussion of their mission to guide men away from corrupt political impulses; women had to be kept inviolate because so much rested upon their integrity.

GIVEN THE EMPHASIS in postrevolutionary political discourse upon the inspirational role that republican wives and mothers were to play in the creation of a virtuous new republic, it is hardly surprising that celebrations of matrimonial and familial bliss became a staple of ephemeral print in the 1790s. Whereas a poem printed in 1763 and sardonically entitled "The Happy Pair" had regaled readers of *Father Abraham's Almanack* with the mutual and multiple adulteries of a married couple, a piece carrying the same but now more literally appropriate title in an almanac at the end of the century described the joyful reunion of a family at the end of each day with cloying sentimentality: "Their imaginations could picture nothing softer, nothing happier than themselves."⁷⁵ But we should not exaggerate the degree to which the tone of available printed matter had changed by the late eighteenth century. Abner Sanger, the young New England farmer whom we met in chapter 7, had reading habits that exemplify the heterogeneity of items in circulation. On the one hand, he read and transcribed from a borrowed copy of *The Ladies Library*, a didactic three-volume set that adopted an affirmative and respectful attitude toward women. On the other, he owned and lent out *Female Policy Detected*, a crudely misogynistic tract that promised to educate young men in the "allurements, inconstancy, love, revenge, pride, and ingratitude" of women, so as to provide "armour" against "the attracting sorcery of these bewitching load-stones." This latter volume, originally published in 1695

by a London printer, appeared in several American editions during the second half of the eighteenth century.⁷⁶

The overall shift in emphasis is unmistakable, yet the varied tone of publications available in the new republic reflected the ambiguity of its sexual culture. Celebrations of chaste courtship and of marital fidelity emphasized the safety that these afforded to all concerned, responding to the dangers and anxieties that accompanied a less restrictive sexual climate:

No husband wronged, no virgin's honour spoiled,
No tender parent weeps his ruined child.
No bad disease, nor false embrace is here,
The joys are safe, the raptures are sincere.⁷⁷

Didactic literature sought to reform sexual mores, yet many contributors to that genre proceeded on the assumption that it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to refashion the attitudes of young men toward white women with whom they had unmarried sex. Indeed, the continued availability and popularity of bawdy and misogynist material doubtless fed the widespread concern that underlay more high-minded discussions of sex and gender relations. It is also surely no accident that most of the publications discussed in this chapter were printed in major cities, where the sexual climate left much to be desired from the perspective of moralists. Cities were notorious as dens of debauchery and exemplified in particularly grim fashion the perils of sexual freedom, especially for women. Monitor literature was prompted not only by a generally more permissive atmosphere but also by the specific sexual climate that prevailed in cities, to which we now turn our attention.

9

“Martyrdom to Venus”

Sexual Freedom in Post-Independence

Philadelphia

SALLY DAWSON was “determined and did go to a play this evening.” Thus wrote Elizabeth Drinker, the chagrined wife of an affluent Philadelphia merchant, on 12 March 1803. Dawson, a servant in the Drinker household, “did not come home till midnight” and, moreover, “ha[ad] a beaux after her.” From the viewpoint of a respectable Quaker mistress such as Drinker, the combination of staying out late, attending a theatrical entertainment, and having a “beaux” was ample cause for distress. Drinker was not alone in worrying about her servants’ nighttime activities and the possibility of untoward intimacies while away on such jaunts. Lewis Farmer complained to the vagrancy court in June 1792 that his servant Philippina Deitrick had “frequently gone out of the house after the family had retired to rest, remaining out during the night in company with disorderly men.” The nocturnal seaport culture into which Dawson and Deitrick disappeared was boisterous and bawdy: sailors, servants of both sexes, laborers, apprentices, and journeymen drank, sang, and brawled; single, married, widowed, deserted, and runaway denizens flirted, groped, and fornicated. The merrymaking often got out of hand: in March 1799 a young man was arrested after being “stripped naked” in the street. Highly visible among these carousing pleasure-seekers were women working as prostitutes. Readily available in taverns and brothels or outside in thoroughfares and byways, these “ladies of pleasure” were “so numerous,” observed a visitor to the city, “that they flood[ed] the streets at night.” This was hardly the kind of company in which employers such as Drinker wanted servants to spend their free time.¹

Dawson’s and Deitrick’s worrisome absences testified not only to the opportunities for recreation afforded by an urban environment but also