

DEATH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM: THE REVOLUTIONARY MEANING
OF INFANT MORTALITY AND MOURNING
IN HANNAH WEBSTER FOSTER'S
THE COQUETTE

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

May 2007

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my gratitude to each member of the academic team that has supported and motivated me throughout my educational career, including undergraduate instructors, fellow graduate students, and teaching assistants. I am especially grateful for Dr. Desirée Henderson, my director, for her patience, grace, and skillful guidance in helping this project to take shape. Dr. Henderson has an unbounded sense of enthusiasm for research and discovery that inspires others to join her on a myriad of textual explorations. I am also indebted to Dr. Timothy Morris for his quiet presence. He is the calm amid the chaos: a sage whose economy of words makes each utterance more meaningful. Thanks also to Dr. Neill Matheson for introducing me to a new literary world despite my stubborn resistance.

I must also thank all my family and friends for unselfishly supporting my academic and professional pursuits. I am truly indebted to my parents whose love and guidance nurtured me through many difficult moments. Deserving individual recognition are my children, who have endured and triumphed. My son Joshua C. Clough, whose commitment to his own academic, artistic, and athletic careers, inspires me always; and whose ability to make others laugh despite their hardships is a miracle. My daughter Bailey L. Clough, whose rebellious spirit and warm heart, educates, challenges, and charms so many. My youngest son, Spencer D. Rian, whose cheerful

kindness and generosity, is a beacon for all. My sincerest thanks also to Russell S. Rian for his enduring friendship and moral support throughout even the most difficult ordeals. And my deepest gratitude to Matthew L. Lerberg for his passionate belief in all things impossible. And finally, to the memories of Jack and Dan who always made me feel safe.

April 16, 2007

ABSTRACT

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Publication No. _____

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The University of Texas at Arlington, 2007

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This thesis explores the broader implications of Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton* through an acknowledgment and assessment of a male audience. *The Coquette* is a seduction narrative that is linked through form and tradition to Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* and William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*. However, this project examines the unique strategies Foster employs to make literary meaning outside the space of domesticity. *The Coquette's* social and political aims can be located in the textual divergences from similar texts of the period. Foster refuses to make narrative apologies, shifts the point of

view, and appears determined to more directly comment on the role of masculine production in the new republic through a sort of literary castration of the male figures in the text. Foster strips the male figures of their reproductive efforts and denies them a future stake in the creation of the new Republic. In the end, Foster's novel subjugates men to a mere silent existence, giving way to the highly sympathetic language of mourning for the "lost" woman, her bastard infant, and all the other lost children sacrificed in the name of patriarchal traditions.

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 Introduction

*“There are two or three human stories and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely
as if they had never been told before,”*
Willa Cather

Hannah W. Foster’s *The Coquette* is a fiercely moving narrative that captivated a broad American audience when it was published nearly a decade after the tragic death of Elizabeth Whitman, the real-life heroine upon whose life the epistolary novel is based.¹ In the span of one decade Whitman’s story had been recounted and retold, appearing in newspaper accounts and in ministerial admonitions targeting young women, and also those who cared for and were charged with protecting them, during Sunday sermons.² Yet Foster presumably felt the need to wrest Whitman’s story from the hands of these male-dominated public discourses—to retell the story of one woman’s search for freedom and identity in the New Republic, to retrieve her from disgrace, and to give a new account of a familiar piece of titillating gossip. Foster’s

¹ For a concise description of the scandalous incident that led to the death of Elizabeth Whitman and a more detailed account of the parallels between the real-life Elizabeth Whitman and Foster’s fictional Elizabeth Wharton see also Bontatibus’ “Foster’s *The Coquette*.”

² A fuller history of the print and pulpit circulation of the Elizabeth Whitman story appears in Davidson, *Revolution*.

retelling of one woman's familiar tragedy, published in 1797, apparently garnered a wide readership, becoming an extremely popular novel that remained in print for nearly a century. *The Coquette* was reintroduced generation of readers following the important feminist literary recovery project in the 1970-80s. Since that time, two critical editions of *The Coquette* have appeared and the novel has become a popular text among literary scholars because it so aptly explicates the concerns of post-revolutionary Americans and provides historians and literary scholars a fuller understanding of the concerns of women forging new identities in the late eighteenth century. However, much of the recent literary analysis has focused on the novel's exploration of the private lives of women predominantly through a reading of the female characters. Much of the scholarship centers on Foster's engagement with a growing female audience in a tacit feminine political discourse argued among and expressly to women. I propose to extend the already rich feminist critique of *The Coquette* to develop a more substantial focus on Foster's intended male audience by providing an extensive examination of the male characters.

I will explore the revolutionary implication of the novel's symbolic castration of male characters through the denial of the procreative imperative of the founding fathers. Implicit in the rhetoric of the founding fathers is an intimate relationship between the private act of procreation and the public act of nation building. "A link between fatherhood and politics was apparent in early American consciousness," as historian Mark E. Kann argues, "[f]atherhood was the source of government" (207). Kann's account of the historical paradigm following the American Revolution critiques widely

held beliefs about the structure of the private and public lives of men during this period. A significant body of scholarship relies on the doctrine of separate spheres³ to describe the masculine interest in the public realm as compared to the feminine influence in the domestic space. However, Kann and many other scholars, suggest that the two spaces influenced one another in significant and meaningful ways; that neither men nor women operated exclusively in one sphere. Men were at once private and public selves: patriots and father. I will investigate the ways in which Foster dislocates the public and private boundaries by publicly incriminating men in the private suffering of women. Foster deftly uses the novel not merely as a tool to complicate widely accepted ideas of females and their ascribed roles as wives, mothers, and friends, but to interrogate the interconnected relationships of husbands, fathers and patriarchs in the domestic sphere. “When courtship and marriage are infused with political meaning, women inevitably and inescapably become political beings” as well (Lewis 698). Foster problematizes the imagined boundaries of the private and public spheres through the novelistic disruptions of death and mourning. Deaths provide intense moments of private sadness and intimacy, but also allow for the immediate transformation in the way in which the fallen woman and her innocent infant become the objects of public compassion and praise, not merely because their deaths provide a cleansing of their sins, but also because their deaths are intimately connected to the deaths of the other infants in the novel. Death finally allows the dead woman to become a fully constituted public subject.

³ See Kerber, “*Separate Spheres*.”

A brief survey of important historical accounts of the genre of the novel allows the reader to more fully appreciate the dramatic effect of Foster's open rebellion in *The Coquette*. As literary scholars have noted, seduction narratives were a familiar feature of the late eighteenth-century literary landscape and Foster's text follows many of the standard textual landmarks attributed to such fictional tales of feminine virtue in distress: a young woman unwisely leaves the protection of her family, finds herself duped by an unscrupulous male, often a European interloper, becomes pregnant, and dies alone. However, scholars have also identified the subversive nature of the early novel, which in a powerful and immediate fashion allowed the author to enter into a dialogue with the reader absent a carefully spoken intermediary. In a private space, without guidance, readers read for pleasure. "[T]he act of reading a novel is [...] an anti-social act" (Hunter 42). Reading was potentially dangerous to social and political traditions because those who read alone no longer passively "serve[d] as the consumers of meanings articulated by others," (Davidson, *Revolution* 45). Patriarchal authorities recognized the seditious potential of the early novel, which led to the well-documented "censure of the novel" (Davidson, *Revolution* 45). Because of the reading public's eagerness to find new meaning, and the patriarchal fears of the impact of the new, subversive genre, even minor departures from the standard formula could have extraordinary implications for authors, critics, publishers, and readers. In fictionalizing a real woman who appeared to reject patriarchal norms, Foster rewrites a primarily masculine narrative that appropriated the corrupt and decaying body of the coquette as a tool for reinforcing female adherence to patriarchal codes by placing it in opposition to

the bountiful body of the republican mother. Foster removes the masculine intermediary and makes the coquette available to her audience without the narrative presence of the minister standing at the pulpit in judgment. The subtle deviations in *The Coquette* from the acceptable prescriptions of the seduction narrative, which typically “promise[d] to discourage licentiousness” are neither unimportant nor accidental (Davidson, *Revolution* 46). The differences, which were highly invested with the potential to create meaning for eighteenth-century readers, should be read as important signals that Foster intends to challenge the standard authorial conventions, and therefore, by extension, implicitly intends to challenge standard patriarchal traditions. The novel in early America obliterated a multiplicity of rigid social boundaries. Traditional and feminist literary scholarship has focused primarily on an intended female audience; however, some historians have argued that such strict gendered boundaries did not exist. “Americans drew no clear distinctions between that which was fiction and that which was not, between works addressed to men and works addressed to women” (Lewis 692). Foster dramatically draws her narrative from fact, and provided the fictional Eliza a public voice to speak to a growing readership of men and women in a way that the real Eliza was never granted. Additionally, the early novel as a literary device invites a broad readership to participate in the celebration of important individuals whose lives merit representation, argues J. Paul Hunter in his weighty tome *Before Novels*. In doing so, Foster’s narrative implicitly signals to the reader that Eliza is a woman worth representing as she is the central figure whose life is of great enough public import to warrant celebration through print, which would certainly serve a larger audience than

the sermon and outlast the disposability of the news medium. Eliza's worthiness, her thoughtfulness and kindness, are often explicated throughout the text. She often warrants praise for her thoughtfulness, kindness, and reason throughout the text. But, more importantly, Eliza deserves an extended farewell in the final scenes—a ceremonial praise that is denied to the male characters that die within the novel.

A broader interpretation of Foster's literary objectives may provide an intriguing opportunity to recast Foster's audience, her literary choices, and her political goals. In this project I will argue that Foster takes aim not only at the coquettish woman as many other seduction novelists did, but also at other women who labored, without complaint or question, under the patriarchal mantle, and the men who had the power to make political changes. The founding fathers fought vigorously to shake off the yoke of a tyrannical English authority, but did not dismantle the legacy of that yoke in their new homeland: they merely transformed its weight and shape to fit the form of the fairer sex.⁴ After years of fighting against the unrestrained authority of an unwanted patriarch in the English Monarch, the founding fathers continued to enforce a patriarchal system of paternal control in the new world. The Republican family, it appears by the accounts of outside observers, does not stray from the English model. The Marquis de Barbé-Barbois, a French statesman visiting Boston in 1779, writing of his observations of the American Republican family in his diary and letters home, noted that the fledgling

⁴ The term "fair sex" here is meant as a broad interpretation of the principal gender differences that mark the male and female during the period being described. Pauline Schloesser, in *The Fair Sex*, provides a more specific definition that begins to be ascribed to white, middle class women during the eighteenth century. Schloesser argues that the stratification of the fair sex not only informed women of their proper roles, but also distinguished them by class and race. See esp. Chpt.3 for a more detailed explanation of the fair sex as an American ideology.

country “compared to a large family ruled by the authority of a wise and stern father” (qtd. in Chase 73). The Marquis’ initial impression then is one not of tyranny, but of a form of deferential paternalism that embraces and guides its subordinate family members. But his lengthier descriptions of the relationships between husbands and wives seem to belie the kindness with which he ascribed the nature of the republican family. He describes the “extreme docility, the obedience and the submissiveness of American women to their husbands” and explains that he is aghast that America is the only “country in the world where a husband could talk to his wife in so imperative a manner” as to command her in public to obey his orders (qtd. in Chase 167-68). Furthermore, while recounting the wonderful traits of this new breed of people, the Americans, de Barbé-Marbois also noted that a “man may beat his wife if he will pay a fine of ten pounds” (qtd. in Chase 74). De Barbé-Marbois’ letters and observations provide a unique perspective on the enthusiasm of American men for their hard fought emancipation from England, but also the strange contradiction of their equally effusive joy in their control over their female counterparts. Following the revolution, the fear over an unrestrained tyranny was replaced by an equally torturous anxiety over an unrestrained feminine sexuality in the American psyche. Masculine control was justified by the overwhelming threat of an unbound female sexuality. Foster’s novel might be read as her attempt to beat back the oppressive patriarchy which so proudly boasted of the man’s ability to rule and woman’s willing submission to his authority. In addition to redefining women’s roles, Foster’s text exposes the post-revolutionary American attitudes that did not officially recognize the role of woman in the political

realm. Contrary to the belief that unrestrained feminine sexuality posed the greatest threat to the stability of the family, as many seduction narratives imply, Foster's text focuses on the greater threat of unrestrained tyranny. "The anti-patriarchalism of Revolutionary ideology dictated that tyranny presented the most immediate and obvious threat to American happiness, and patriarchal domination the chief obstacle to happy and virtuous marriage" (Lewis 693). Foster deploys the conventions of sentimental language in the seduction novel not only to awaken a revolutionary spirit among women, but to implore men to finish the revolution they started on the behalf of all Americans. In this subtle way, Foster makes use of the platform of print culture to reach out to a male audience on political matters of freedom and choice. *The Coquette* provides Foster a political podium to redefine the connection between female subjugation, the political institution of marriage, and a healthy, flourishing Republic. Historian Catherine Scholten argues that despite scholarship that draws distinct lines between the sphere of the family and the sphere of the polis, the two spaces and places commingled and fused following the revolution. "The family, we read is the model of the commonwealth" (57). Foster uses the novel to place the private, feminine sphere on public display. She vividly engages her male readers in a public discussion about their roles and in doing so dismantles the boundaries between the private and public spheres. Foster shifts the mandate for reform from the fallen woman and her private virtue, to the Republican man and his virtue, which was intimately tied to civic duty in the early national period. Male virtue then is as important, and therefore as corruptible, and as damaging to the welfare of the community, as female chastity. The relocation of interest

from feminine virtue to masculine virtue allows scholars to read Foster's text as attempting to engage with two audiences at once—male and female.

Women, in the aftermath of the American Revolution, lacked direct political representation; however, as Foster reveals through her novel, women were not without voice or participation in more discreet ways. *The Coquette* highlights the inherent conflict of male sovereignty and female suppression. Eliza becomes the central figure in the battle between two sovereign males, but as she is not sovereign, she has no right to choose a mate, despite the urging of those around her to make the right choice. Foster, through her text, takes control of the one function man cannot fully possess: reproduction. Some scholars have noted that literary infant death is ultimately a denial of motherhood, but Foster does not single out the fallen mother—a punishment that would be in keeping with patriarchal views and practices. Foster follows the standard tropes of the eighteenth-century seduction narrative which ends in the death of the sinful coquette following her own disavowal of her licentious behavior. The death performs the dual objectives of extinguishing all signs of female sin and transgression, and serves as an unambiguous warning to other young females who might also seek to gain their independence. However, Foster's ending diverges dramatically from contemporary seduction novels. Eliza's innocent offspring dies with her. The tragic death of the babe is a powerful departure from Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*. Charlotte slips into death having repented for her sins. She utters a final prayer that her daughter should not be judged like her mother. The little survivor will presumably gain dominion over her sexuality and refrain from repeating her mother's error. In this way Rowson

provides her female readers an opportunity to rewrite an ending in which Charlotte's daughter secures the happy ending. In *The Coquette*, however, Foster's ending denies the imaginative reconstitution of the next generation, because she denies the possibility of a next generation.

Foster's literary infanticide has dramatic and sweeping implications because no child survives. Foster targets all infants. The seducer's legitimate offspring, a son conceived following his marriage, is stillborn. Even the daughter of the idealized Republican union suffers the same fate according to Foster's recasting of the story of the fallen woman. Because fatherhood was so closely associated with manhood and nation building, the sweeping deaths cannot be seen as strictly punishing women. Foster reaches beyond traditional female readers and intimately engages with her censors—her male readership—by taking symbolic possession of the lives of Republican infants in her novel. Foster draws no distinction between legitimate and illegitimate offspring. None is safe from the stain of sin. Foster performs a sort of literary castration on the male figures in *The Coquette* by denying them the distinction and honor of fatherhood, which was “considered men's highest calling” during the early national period (Kann 195). In the early republic, the denial of fatherhood equated to a denial of participation in the creation of the “city on the hill.”⁵ Particularly for those attempting to establish a new America, the continuation of the family line was regarded as part of their sacred duty. During the eighteenth century “[c]hildren [were] important and valued because

⁵ Puritan John Winthrop used the phrase in his famous 1630 sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” both as a warning and an inspiration to the first American settlers to recognize that they had been chosen by God for their holy mission and to remember that the world would be watching them.

they perpetuate the lineage” (Norton, *Daughters* 86). Infant deaths deny men their progeny, their bloodline, their future. Although children were an integral part of the masculine transmission of sacred right, they were also subject to masculine possession. “[C]hildren of the marriage fell entirely within the custody of the father” (Norton, *Daughters* 46). It is therefore extremely and symbolically meaningful that Foster condemns the bloodline not only of Major Peter Sanford, the rake—the man deemed the greatest threat to the creation of a healthy Republic—but even of General Richman, the idealized Republican example of an egalitarian husband. Emasculation acts as a powerful form of public silencing. Neither man’s seed is allowed to flourish in the rich soil of the new Republic. Richman is no less condemned to a barren existence than Sanford. The true Republican is no more lauded than the rake. Neither man in Foster’s novel deserves a claim in the future of America. All men, rather than a particular type of man, are the threat in the new world of *The Coquette*. Foster’s account is dramatically different from those of her contemporaries. Rowson and Hill wrote novels that distinctly privileged the Republican man of reason and honor and sanctioned only those who did not live by the recognized code. Foster’s novel complicates the value of the code by applying a sweeping condemnation. In the end, Foster’s novel subjugates men to a mere silent existence, giving them but a few plaintive pages with which to share their experiences while allowing the women to “speak” in the highly sympathetic language of mourning for the “lost” woman, her bastard infant, and the Republic’s legitimate children as well. Because the loss is intimately tied to the project of the new republic, it must be viewed as a masculine loss as well.

1.2 Literary Review of the Scholarship

“The answers you get from literature depend on the questions you pose,”
Margaret Atwood

The Coquette has garnered a fair amount of attention from literary scholars, traditional and feminist, particularly in the past few decades, both because of its popularity among readership when it was initially published in 1797 and its engagement with important social and political discussions of the early American period. However, traditional, and sometimes new feminist, critiques of *The Coquette* perpetuate its original political and social displacement by confining the literary analysis to the context of highly patriarchal notions of femininity and female roles—placing its discourse squarely in the gendered sphere of domestic concerns. The text is often read as a didactic⁶ moral lecture for women readers as explicated through the female characters, while the male characters and potential male readership is often ignored. The significance of these female-centered texts to American literary studies was once

⁶ Didactic fiction and conduct fiction often served as thinly veiled moral lectures in much the same way as religious sermons served to enlighten and educate. The text provides a mentor, usually an older female instructor, who gently but purposefully guides and instructs the young ladies in her care. The reader is expected to gain insight and wisdom through the surrogate caretaker and her young charges. Associated with the education of young readers, the texts are presumed to have been written solely for the purpose of guiding and instructing young American readers in appropriate conduct. For young female readers lessons would most often focus on virtuous conduct, proper mate selection, and the dangers of reading. Rhetorical lessons of virtue and reason assured that young women would not stray from the appropriately assigned female path from the father’s home to the protection of a suitable husband. Conduct fiction was presumed to be written for the “soul” benefit of young women with explicit examples of proper female behavior meant to reinforce the recursive inscription of virtuous “gentlewoman.” See Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen, “Gender and Writing Instruction in Early America: Lessons from Didactic Fiction.”

dismissed or limited because they were seen as too narrowly focused on female concerns and did not merit the attention given to novels deemed to be more aesthetically appealing, artistically complex, or politically exigent. Popular seduction narratives, particularly those penned by women, were believed to have little significance beyond female morality. In many cases the texts were presumed to have been written primarily for the purpose of guiding and instructing young American girls in virtuous conduct and proper mate selection as defined by the patriarchal ideals. Lessons of virtue and reason assured that the young women would not stray from the appropriately assigned female path from the father's home to the protection of a suitable husband.

The broader relevance of seduction narratives was often overlooked by traditional scholars prior to the second half of the twentieth century. For instance, *Charlotte Temple*, Rowson's popular seduction narrative published in 1794, and a text closely associated with *The Coquette* in theme and content, "was commonly perceived in its day and later as a morality tale" (Scheick 131). Once a text received the diminutive label of female-authored seduction narrative, it was often neglected in lieu of the texts penned by male writers. *American Literacy: Fifty Books that Define our Culture and Ourselves* is but one example of the favoritism that traditional scholars have consistently paid to male authored texts. J. North Conway, in his introduction contends "books and writers have played an important role in shaping the world we live in." Conway admits the compilation is not an exhaustive sampling, but relies on the results of a 1992 survey of "distinguished Americans" in selecting the readings for his book. He does not provide a full list of those included in the survey, but Supreme Court

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor is the only female he names. Of the fifty texts identified, only 11 were written by women. The earliest female author is Margaret Fuller for her 1845 *Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Conway, like many other literary scholars, often diminishes the relative importance of Foster, Rowson and other female writers in shaping the dialogue about American cultural identity in favor of male authors. Charles Brockden Brown, for instance, is recognized for creating the “foundation of American literature” (55). Furthermore, Conway credits Brown as writing “one of the earliest American works to advocate women’s rights” (56). Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn; or Memoirs from the Year 1793*, published in 1799 is included in Conway’s collection because Brown “proposed to make new American fiction serve some social end” (56). Much of the description of Brown’s text could be applied to both Rowson and Foster. Conway acknowledges that Brown’s writing was “not altogether original,” but rather than aligning Brown with female writers of the same period, he likens Brown to British novelists.

Conway’s results should not be altogether surprising. Female authored seduction narratives and conduct novels are traditionally viewed as not merely a single genre, but a single text rewritten *ad infinitum*. Scholars of the early twentieth century ignored them completely or dismissed their importance because literary historians complained that one text simply mimicked the others. “It is a body of fiction for the most part trite, undistinguished, conventionalized, ridden with formula, thematically uninspired” Terrance Martin wrote in his 1957 article, “Social Institutions in the American Novel.” (72). Martin owned that the value of such texts is that they offer

moments for cultural study, but primarily because authors of this period were “eager to please” and not because they sought to change the political landscape or improve women’s lives (72). Early American novelists, and particularly women, who were under the threat of severe censure, understood exactly what they could and could not write, and therefore presented only those ideas that were acceptable, according to the traditionalist perspective. Martin and other traditional literary theorists do not give weight to the texts as opportunities for inspiring revolutionary debate, reaching the broader and much privileged male audience, or engaging in political discourses about the limits of traditional gender roles, but rather as moments for codifying conventional cultural standards among their mostly female readers. Important feminist theorists sometimes seem to support this traditional view that female authored texts, like *The Coquette*, are merely reinscriptions of the patriarchal norms of early America. Linda Kerber, a progressive feminist literary historian who has done much work to improve the understanding of women’s experience during the early American period, at times dismisses the rhetorical effectiveness in *The Coquette*. She contends that Foster’s text “only masquerades as a history” when “in fact it is a novel that attempts to teach the reader not to read novels” (249). While Foster’s novel does contain a rather mild admonishment against frivolous reading, to recognize more powerful rhetorical aims weakens our understanding of the confrontational possibilities of the text in a highly structured and masculine privileged political system.

Conduct fiction and seduction narratives are not always thought to be unimportant; however those authored by women were often viewed by traditional

scholars as existing outside the framework of the political debate that occurred among and between male writers. For example, *The Coquette* is ignored and *Charlotte Temple* garners only a brief mention in Emory Elliot's *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic 1725-1810*. In the same text however, an entire chapter is dedicated to Brockden Brown and provides a thorough analysis of the importance of his novel *Weiland; or, The Transformation: An American Tale*, despite Elliot's acknowledgement of the limitations of the text. "On the surface, Brown's first novel would not seem to have taxed the intellect of the average eighteenth-century reader of fiction" (225). Notwithstanding Elliot's criticism of Brown's novel, he regards the text as meaningful because it explicates political ideals that had important implications for the American future. *Revolutionary Writers* was published in 1982 and shows how persistent notions of male authorial superiority are in literary scholarship. The inclusion of Brown to the exclusion of Foster and Rowson typifies the traditional partiality for male writers over women.

Feminist scholars dedicated themselves to gaining the canonical inclusion of the much overlooked female writers. They worked to find meaning in female authored novels and bring them out from the shadows of male authored texts. The mission of the feminist literary project of the 1970s and 80s was threefold. They were determined to refute traditional readings of female authored and female centered texts and to "expose the misogynistic stereotyping of women" in male authored texts, to "rescue female writers from oblivion," and to prove that women were never "content" with their limited social political space (Register 268). Noted feminist scholars like Nina Baym, Sandra

M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Cathy Davidson did much to inspire a fresh examination of female-authored texts. Judith Fetterly's efforts to reread male authored texts through a feminist lens, inspired feminist scholars to further challenge traditional ideas about the meaning of female authored texts and their female characters. Provocative, powerful female voices emerged.

Feminist scholarship of the rarely canonized, but relatively recently "recovered" early American novels written by women discusses the subversive nature of the novel, but again the readings spotlight the relationship between female author and female audience. The difference is significant to revising the canon—one of the important goals of the feminist literary project. The arguments used by traditional scholars to exclude early American texts, condemning them to obscurity, becomes precisely the terms by which they become recovered by feminist scholars. Feminist re-readings cite eighteenth-century male-authored criticism, which focused on the fears that novels would unduly influence young female readers and lead them to engage in dangerous fantasies. Authors, male and female, whose novels were regarded with a great sense of trepidation among the republican elite, often make extravagant apologies for their literary subjects, concentrating on the republican struggle for control of the female body. Feminist scholars claim that sentimental novels were "written for a predominantly female audience," but because they were also "viewed as dangerous and capable of raising woman's passions," they were also strongly scrutinized by male authorities (Newton 140). These authorities are an accepted entity among feminist scholars, but the

prevailing scholarship tends to accept that the texts are written *around* rather than *to* this particular group.

Recent scholarship centers on the examination of the political struggle between individual feminine desires and the need for a strong national—frequently equated with masculine—identity. Female writers enter the public discussion of the domestic, often equated with the female, sphere. Women were not allowed to engage in public debates, but the novel exposed the unique richness of the domestic sphere and granted women a public forum for quietly revealing patriarchal edicts that silenced them. Female friendships and feminine activities became the center focus for feminist scholars interested in carving out an important space for female writers. I do not wish to argue that these interpretations are incorrect, nor do I claim that they are irrelevant; however, such analysis continues to consider the subversive acts of novelistic discourse primarily in its relationship and relevance to *other women*. Such feminist interpretations of these eighteenth-century novels focus on the way female authors like Foster, Rowson and Tabitha Tenney attempted to negotiate and subvert the public debates surrounding the constraints and limitations placed on women, and the perils women faced if they failed to obey the social prescriptions of the republican ideals. While these arguments are compelling, they focus on a tacit, feminine discourse. Furthermore, these readings tend to frame these novels as purely feminine dialogues that are argued among and expressly to women as part of a great Republican moral fable that adopts and reinforces the patriarchal warnings to women on the perils of promiscuity and the desire for too much independence. Female readers are expected to integrate the ideals of the Republican

marriage and to strive to join the mini-polis of family. Women authors of the early American period certainly may have felt constrained to write in ways that appeared to reinforce and support the stringent patriarchal notions of proper woman, but many of these texts, and particularly *The Coquette*, directly attack the social order and therefore target a male reader who might be persuaded to align himself with the female heroine. Both traditional and feminist interpretations of *The Coquette* contemplate the text in its relationship to a young female readership; however, such readings fail to fully appreciate the rhetorical underpinnings of *The Coquette* or the depth of its engagement in relevant public discourses of the early republic. Foster's expansive aims, and her efforts to address a broader male readership, cannot and should not be minimized in an effort to awaken the long silent female author.

While feminist readings of *The Coquette* and similar texts finally grant female authors voice and agency—something traditional scholarship failed to fully appreciate or recognize—they continue to focus most significantly on the “female chorus”⁷ and *feme covert*⁸ and the impact these female bodies have on a largely female readership.

The most often explored characters in the novel are those belonging to the female chorus_ a group of women, who have expertly traversed the treacherous path from

⁷ Feminist scholar Julia Stern first applied the term “female chorus” to her examination of the Republican woman in early American novels. The chorus, which speaks as one voice, has been interpreted as the narrative authority, which serves as the social, political and moral authority for viewers. See Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel*, esp. Chapter 3 for a more thorough review of the chorus.

⁸ The legal term describes the financial status of married women, who lost all property rights and privileges upon entering the marital relationship. Married women, by law, became legally hidden by their husbands. Kerber examines the legal fate of married women in “The Paradox of Women's Citizenship in the Early Republic: The Case of *Martin vs. Massachusetts*, 1805.”

child to young woman, from the protection of father to the protection of spouse, to mother, and finally the dutifully grieving widow_ which attempts to constitutively reinscribe Republican virtues onto Eliza, according to Stern. Literary scholars have thoroughly explored the novel's feminine dialogue which seems centered on "a self-conscious debate not only about their roles as fiancée's, wives and mothers, but also about their relationships to one another" (Pettengill 186). The chorus, as articulated by most feminist scholars, highlights "the ideal of rational marriage [and] the importance of filial obedience" (Newton 150) and extols the new Republican model of "the loving partnership of man and wife" (Lewis 689). The text ultimately remains constrained by the rhetoric of domesticity, thus furthering the chasm between male and female authors and a male and female audience. The text is never allowed to fully enter the highly prized discourse of public political rhetoric. I argue that the chorus in Foster's novel serves much the same rhetorical function as the chorus in classical Greek literature, which explained significant moments or commented on the action, but remained outside of the main events. The Greek chorus also provided narrative authority by expressing the established social, political, and moral authority for viewers. Foster's chorus of female voices seems always on the fringes of Eliza's life, rarely bringing her into their domestic space or entering hers. Their friendship is always tenuous and uneasy, fraught with the ever-present anxiety that Eliza will refuse her obligation to be suitably domesticated. In this way, Foster portrays the women of the chorus as most closely aligned with the male rhetoric of domination, rather than the bonds of friendship,

nurturance and guidance as they have been most often contemplated by feminist scholarship.

I hope to reengage *The Coquette* not only with its traditionally recognized female audience, but its often ignored male audience. If this novel were an examination of feminine roles and feminine virtue alone, prior scholarship would be sufficient to explain the epistolary novel's highly polarized debate that ends in tragedy not only for those who disregard the constraints of the community, but also for those who are in compliance. The American political system did not discriminate against the coquette, but against all women. Through her novel, Foster endeavors to situate the space of political speech within the printed pages of her novel by breaking free of the gendered identification that "disqualif[e]d all women from political participation in the public sphere (Schloesser 16). Foster enters the public sphere in the only method available to her: through her revolutionary text. For Foster, there are no winners, and the inequalities that exist in eighteenth-century America are a threat to the national stability. *The Coquette* draws no clear distinction between that which is feminine and that which is masculine and works to disrupt "[c]onventional conceptions of politics, whether instrumental or institutional, [which] have presumed that politics is distinguishable from, and stands in opposition to, the personal" (Squires 23). The private is linked to the public in Foster's narrative and therefore attempts to reach a male audience as well as a female one. Unless scholars acknowledge the importance of Foster's male audience, the significance of the multitude of deaths at the end of the novel cannot be fully understood or appreciated.

In many ways the novel does follow the conventions of the seduction plot and sentimental novels of the time, however, the ways in which Foster deviates from the conventions of the genre are extraordinarily important in seeing the novel as political warfare against the patriarchy, and not merely another conduct novel targeting vulnerable women. The conduct fiction and sentimental novels of the eighteenth century served a dual purpose: they became signposts for women readers, an opportunity to safely and honestly discuss the problem of their subjection, but also very public opportunities for female authors to reach a broad male audience in the examination of the problem of female oppression. As other novelists of this period, Foster would have been acutely aware that men would carefully read her novel and evaluate its propriety for “the topic of marriage was not reserved to women [. . .] it was an issue of public, indeed political import” (Lewis 692). The awareness of the potential for harsh criticism and skepticism led most authors of this genre to make careful apologies and defenses for their writings. Foster must have known that she was parting, in many important ways, from the expected conventions of the genre of conduct fiction and seduction novels, yet she does so fearlessly. In *The Coquette*, Foster neither apologizes for its content, nor claims that it is an effort to educate young girls. She simply begins a frank discussion of the life of one woman who refused to be burdened with the male notions of femininity. I hope to expand the reading of *The Coquette*, not by removing it from the boundaries of conduct or seduction narratives, but by exploring the moments of divergence from the strict conventions of the genre and by refocusing the critical gaze on the male characters and Foster’s important male audience.

1.3 The Man Question

“Only when manhood is dead - and it will perish when ravaged femininity no longer sustains it - only then will we know what it is to be free,” Andrea Dworkin

In re-reading Foster’s *The Coquette*, I would like to imagine her male readers. Foster did not declare an audience in *The Coquette*: a stunning omission that has thus far garnered little scholarly attention. Foster’s lack of an explicit audience has not prevented literary scholars, both traditional and feminist, from imagining the intimate relationship between the text and a female audience. Traditional scholarship identified an exclusively female audience, concluded that conduct and seduction narratives centered on private lives, and quickly moved to male-authored texts considered more publicly significant. Feminist scholars reimagined the dialogue between female authors and their female audience and thereby provided an alternative reading that brought greater recognition to the experience of American women that often were neglected by other textual portrayals. In both cases, the audience is believed to be predominantly, and sometimes almost exclusively female. However, educational practices, increasing literacy rates, a male dominated print culture, and conventions of late eighteenth-century novels may assist literary theorists in extending Foster’s targeted audience from exclusively or even primarily women to include men.

American schools have always been a place where students learn “what to read and how to interpret it” (Brower 22). American schools, however, were created to

educate young males in order to better prepare them for the apprenticeships and civic duties that were required of males. Initially, American schools did not endeavor to educate young American girls. Colonial laws often required reading, but formal educational practices for teaching young girls to read and write was limited. Schools were almost exclusively provided for the education of young boys, even as the eighteenth century came to a close, according to literary scholar Jennifer Monaghan. Noted physician and friend of Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, did not articulate the need for female education until 1787, and then only for its limited, useful purposes, which he articulated to be the “stewards and guardians of their husband’s property” and “instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government” (qtd. in Woloch 138-9). Female education did not become a priority until the patriarchal authorities began to recognize the benefit of such an education to the national mission. The duties of the Republican wife and mother required that the patriarchy provide a method of instructing her appropriately to fulfill her new duties.

Literary historians are in disagreement about the literacy rates in the eighteenth century, but based on signing (using public records that required individual signatures and an assumption that writing and reading are intimately related) some have estimated that the literacy rates were increasing rapidly for both sexes during the eighteenth century. Male literacy rates jumped to nearly 90 percent by the time Foster’s text was published and female literacy rates had reached 46 percent, according to Monaghan’s research. She suggests that the numbers of female readers may be deceiving because of the methods used to identify readers. Monaghan acknowledges that the numbers are

difficult to quantify. However, she relies on other proofs to conclude that more women were capable of reading than the signing method used to determine literacy rates allows researchers to extrapolate. Even if reading rates were higher among women than the research demonstrates, most English and American literacy scholarship concludes that literacy rates among men were much higher than those of women. Men would have made up a significantly larger number of readers than women and that trend continued to be true through the turn of the century. Given literacy rates and the popularity of *The Coquette*, scholars should not exclude a male readership. In fact, the explosion in male literacy rates created great anxiety among eighteenth-century literary critics. A great number of the newly literate males belonged to a burgeoning middle class. The Republican elite considered novel reading as dangerous to this class of reader. It appears that the critics recognized the potential for inciting not just female readers, but male readers as well. Davidson describes the patriarchal concern as existing along class boundaries, rather than simply gender as is typically assumed. The critics “voiced a particular concern for a different class of readers” whom they worried would be “highly susceptible to its dubious charms” (Davidson, *Revolution* 49). In describing the potential problems of the novel, these early critics were concerned with any reader from a lower socio-economic class. Critics regarded a particular class of reader as incapable of differentiating between fantasy and reality and as highly susceptible to reenacting the dramas of the novel. Literary historian David Hall also recognizes significant changes in readership and resists notions of a single-gendered reading population. “It remains to be pointed out that a category designated ‘women’ is an oversimplification that pays

little heed to social and cultural contexts, be these economic, religious, regional, racial, or the like” (Hall 183-4). Both Davidson and Hall acknowledge that male critics were not only concerned about the effects of novel reading on women, but also on men.

The emergent print culture of the eighteenth century was primarily a masculine endeavor and remained a predominately male enterprise throughout the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth century. The initial target of the printed word was a male audience and publications were scrutinized for their appropriate content by male readers. Publishers, concerned about the fledgling print culture and the potential for offending readers and thereby jeopardizing their revenues, may have felt more inclined to publish texts that included the moral preambles. And authors seeking to protect their reputations and perhaps further their publishing opportunities may have felt pressed to write apologies for any potentially offensive or scandalous material. The anxiety about readers and the potential for public dissention is exemplified in the prefatory letter included with Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*. Members of the Minerva Printing Office, reassured their readers that they were concerned with establishing a circulating library for the benefit of public improvement (Rowson ii-iii). The letter further assures readers that the publishing company will only publish those that are suitable. In the letter the publishing company linked itself to one of the most important altruistic endeavors undertaken by Benjamin Franklin, who noted in his autobiography that his “first Project of a public nature” was to create a subscription library. “These Libraries have improv’d the general Conversation of the Americans [...] and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the Stand so generally made throughout the Colonies in Defense of their

Privileges” (Franklin 57). Men, especially educated men with a mind toward civic duty, were encouraged to read. Franklin imagined the readership of these libraries to be “gentlemen” rather than women, according to Hall, who contends that the early American male writers sought both political and social freedoms, through “free inquiry” (183). Women writers, while given less direct access, might also have been engaging in the same strategies through their literary production.

The novel as a genre was believed to have a great influence over readers, and was therefore a considerable threat, as Davidson highlights in her extensive research on the revolutionary texts. Novels threatened the established order, the hierarchy of knowledge that was almost exclusively a masculine endeavor. “[T]he novel, more than any other literary genre, was seen as the sign of a time when [masculine] authority was being called into question” (Davidson, *Revolution* 39). It would be difficult to imagine that men so concerned with maintaining their authority would not be important readers to be considered in a close examination of early American novels, including *The Coquette*. It is not unimportant to recognize that many female writers would acknowledge their critics and perhaps write to them. A brief survey of conduct and seduction narratives of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries appears to indicate that authors of this time were indeed aware of the criticism lodged against their genre. The awareness of the potential for harsh criticism and skepticism led most authors of this period to make careful apologies and explanations in defense of their writings. The prefaces of early American conduct and seduction narratives were often filled with apologetic language and assurances that the texts were being written for the

benefit of a particular audience. Many writers of conduct fiction and seduction novels of the eighteenth century presumed a young female audience that was expected to participate in reading the novels as a measure of improving their understanding of the moral imperatives of the Republic. Authors, supposedly motivated by the intense criticism about the influence of reading materials on a growing, often impressionable audience, were quick to justify their publications as efforts to improve the feminine mind and save it from ruin by providing explicit examples of the horrors of unchaste behavior in young women.

Truth was the first and greatest self-defense for American authors, male or female, writing the much-maligned novels at the end of the eighteenth century—a tradition that carried into the early nineteenth century. Authors often claimed to base their fictionalized accounts on facts so that they would not be accused of corrupting the minds of young female readers. Foster, and other early American authors including Tenney, Rowson, William Hill Brown and Brockden Brown, all claim their novels are based in some measure on factual accounts. Literary historians have, in many cases, found obvious connections between the fictional texts and published accounts of real life men and women scrutinized, often after death, for their behavior in life. Most wrote exhaustive preambles explaining the need for such frank discussion on the delicate matters of female sexuality and female virtue. Their second, and often most well articulated, defense was a desire to educate their young female readers, lest they be led into a life of sin and coquetry unwittingly.

The Power of Sympathy, Hill Brown's epistolary novel published in 1789, is considered the first American novel among many important scholars.⁹ It explores "the fatal consequences of seduction" through the framework of the grand narrative of Harrington and Harriet and numerous petite narratives of ruin that explore tales of seduction, incest, and suicide. The titillating subject matter was an appropriate example of the "threat to ministerial authority" that garnered early American novels, not just Brown's, broad patriarchal condemnation (Davidson, *Revolution* 42). Likely in an effort to stave off the criticism, Brown attempted to further preserve the imperative of his didactic tale by noting that his novel was "founded in truth" and dedicated "To the Young Ladies of United Columbia." Brown's preface warned young women against reading novels that "*expose* no particular Vice and which *recommend* no particular Virtue" and declared that his novel "avoided" both because "the dangerous Consequences of SEDUCATION are exposed, and the Advantages of FEMALE Education set forth and recommended" (7). Finally, Brown concludes his prefatory letter by identifying himself not merely as a detached author, but as a "Friend and Humble Servant" to his proclaimed young female readers. Brown, as did many early American writers, appears fervently self-conscious in responding to the patriarchal concerns about the novel. Among the heated debates in *Sympathy*, a republican father is quoted as saying "Novels, not regulated on the chaste principles of true friendship,

⁹ Criteria for selecting the first American novel are problematic for many literary scholars. The first obstacle that is difficult to overcome is the definition of America in the context of an early national period. Davidson devotes Chapter 5 of her *Revolution and the Word* to an understanding of the debate and concludes that William Hill Brown's text most fully meets the standard.

rational love, and connubial duty, appear to me totally unfit to form the minds of women, of friends, or of wives” (Brown 21). Hill Brown, in declaring his concern for young female readers and in containing an argument of vindication within the fictional text, at once aligns himself with the patriarchy and attempts to resist the prevalent criticism of the novel.

Tenney also appears to connect with a particularly female audience in her 1801 novel *Female Quixotism*. She wrote an open letter “TO ALL *Columbian Young Ladies, Who read Novels and Romances*.” In her letter, Tenney again uses “truth” as her defense and claims she was given permission to print the letters of “a true country girl, whose head had been turned by the unrestrained perusal of Novels and Romances,” so that those who might read the story would “avoid the disgraces and disasters that so long rendered her despicable and miserable” (3).

Even Brockden Brown prefaces one of his popular novels with an “Advertisement” that elucidates his desire to illustrate “some important branches of the moral constitution of man” (3). His classic gothic novel, *Wieland; or The Transformation*, contains an account that is reminiscent of both Rowson and Tenney: the story is true as related by a woman some time ago and the narrator can now share these tales as all the principal characters are dead and will not be embarrassed or harmed by the retelling. Published in 1798, Brown included an advertisement in which he wrote that his “narrative is addressed, in an epistolary form, by the Lady whose story it contains, to a small number of friends.” Lest his readers find themselves in disbelief about the strange occurrences within his text, he contends “most readers will probably

recollect an authentic case, remarkably similar to that of Wieland.” He further assures readers that “His purpose is neither selfish nor temporary” (3).

The necessity to quell patriarchal fears and temper public anxieties about the potential corrosive effects of the novel appears even more critical for the publication of female authored texts. Rowson’s seduction narrative, *Charlotte Temple*, included a letter of assurance and support from her American publishers when it was introduced in 1794. It is important to note that the prefatory letter was written to both “Ladies and *Gentlemen*” (emphasis is mine). Rowson’s letter explicitly acknowledges her expectation that the text will be read by men as well as women. The letter assures readers that the publishers “have never introduced any subjects but such as are founded on the basis of Virtue, and have tended to improve the understanding and to amend the heart.” The letter speaks to the virtuous ambition of creating a circulating library complete with a variety of materials meant for the education and entertainment of the public.

The letter is followed by an equally interesting preface written by Rowson. In it she maintains that her novel is “For the perusal of the young and thoughtless of the fair sex” (Rowson “Preface”). Like Hill Brown, she insists that the novel is “not merely the effusion of Fancy.” Factual frameworks offered early American authors their greatest defense against censure, and Rowson appears to understand the need to claim authenticity. Rowson claims that her epistolary novel is based on the reminiscences of an elderly woman who refused to share the true identities of those involved, or their origins. Rowson claimed to write the story “with a mind anxious for the happiness of

that sex whose morals and conduct have so powerful an influence on mankind in general” and in so doing appears to establish a connection with a primarily female audience, despite the publisher’s letter. Rowson, however, appears to contradict her initial claims of writing for the “dear girls” who might be led astray without proper guidance. Rowson’s narrative has several breaks in which the narrator intrudes to warn the readers of the importance of the lesson being extolled through the story. For example, “Gracious heaven! When I think on the miseries that must rend the heart of a doating parent, when he sees the darling of his age at first seduced from his protection” (Rowson 28-9). One could read such passages as moments of direct dialogue with a male audience.

Foster’s subtitle does indicate that *The Coquette*—like many other early American novels—is founded on truth: a truth that had already been shared through the mediated rhetoric of the male authority. However, Foster’s justifications end there. She provides no claims that her text is written for the improvement or education of young female readers. The omission is striking when placed in context with the other seduction narratives of the time. I do not mean to suggest that Foster had no concern for the betterment of young females, but I do wish to suggest that she had a much broader audience in mind and makes no pretensions or apologies about the subject of *The Coquette*. It is a politically motivated text that seeks social change and attempts to justify itself through the telling of the story, rather than through apologetic preambles. It is revolutionary in that it does not engage in the predominantly didactic language of female writers who target a young female audience for the sake of improving them.

Foster does not abandon her young female readers, however. Her interest in the education of young women is clearly evident in *The Boarding School; or, Lessons of a Preceptress to Her Pupils*, a didactic novel published one year after *The Coquette*. Foster's second novel includes a lengthy discussion about the benefit of a proper education for young ladies. *The Boarding School* argues, quite forcefully, that only through formal education can young women become fully educated. *The Boarding School* more traditionally fits within the genre of conduct fiction and more precisely targets a young female audience. In keeping with other contemporary didactic literature for young female readers, the book criticizes the reading of novels, because they entertain rather than educate, and because they have the power to incite fanciful visions. Writing, rather than reading, becomes the best measure of an educated woman according to arguments in *The Boarding School*. "The frequent use of the pen is calculated to refine and enlarge your understandings" (Foster qtd. in *Critics* 282). *The Boarding School* provides an examination of the intellectual needs of young women, and Foster locates the solution in formal education and writing, which continued to be "largely a male domain" (Monaghan 60). *The Coquette* explores the social and political needs of women and therefore must be read as something other than a didactic novel written for the purposes of steering and educating young women. *The Coquette* is something else, something far more interesting and revolutionary. It is an examination of the problem of feminine consent that attempts to provide an opportunity for the political discourse on the place of women in the American political sphere. Foster's first novel does not aim at a significantly female audience, but rather eliminates the

boundary of the supposed separate spheres and constitutively aims for a male audience capable of making political changes that would include women in the democratic process in both the private and public spheres.

1.4 Re-Reading *The Coquette*

“Things that are not at all, are never lost,”
Christopher Marlowe

The Revolutionary war changed the American political and social topography in sometimes contradictory and uneasy ways. America emerged victorious against British rule, but in the wake of the pressure to secure freedom, the country’s confidence faltered. The transition from a protected, if dominated, nation to a vulnerable sovereign republic did not come without significant residual anxiety. As American men took on the duties of battle, American women emerged in unexpected ways. Women had proven themselves worthy as independent actors in the absence of their masculine authorities. They often “served as ‘deputy husbands,’ conducting business as heads-of-household, while their husbands were away” (Schlosser 57). As the war concluded, however, female independence was no longer deemed a service to the male efforts of freedom, but a danger to accepted male control. “Virtues of female patriotism that were useful to win the war—like fortitude, bravery, intelligence, assertiveness, independence, and even aggression—were increasingly viewed as a threat to propriety and civilized manners” (Schlosser 58). The founders attempted to invest control within the private

sphere of the family. The father became the new civic deputy. Using the “language of sentiment and sympathy” that garnered support for the massive undertaking of the war, founders encouraged republican fathers to keep close vigil over their mini-republics (Burstein 601). A loving man who appropriately guided his family would ensure its health and longevity and would thereby contribute to the health and longevity of his new homeland. In the new narrative of American life, the father remained the head of the family, but he served in partnership with his wife. Virtuous women who followed the natural path from obedient daughter, to loving wife and mother served the Republic admirably and were embraced. “Motherhood became a civic calling” nearly equal to that of men (Kann 252). Conversely women who resisted their assigned undertaking were identified as the new threat. Women who did not submit to patriarchal authority endangered the republic and were subject to increased suspicion and censure. Founders deemed “the control of women’s bodies would be a crucial step toward the development of a nation free of moral degradation” (Mulford xii). The patriarchy fixated on the potential sexual transgressions of the coquette. Young women needed to be watched and their sexual proclivities curtailed. The necessity for control transformed the American family into the central, stabilizing unit of the new republic. Men were responsible for the mechanisms of control over the female body, but women were almost exclusively punished for transgressive failures. Women were considered singularly responsible for sexual transgressions, while men were seen to be incapable of resisting—a strange notion for men who deemed themselves to be more intelligent, and more capable of making decisions that effected the nation.

The other principal actor in the much-feared narrative of sexual transgression, the libertine, is all but forgotten in the tragic aftermath. Foster's text disputes the post-revolutionary solution to the female problem, which was mastered through male domination, even if through a kinder form of control. Foster's text highlights the contradiction that occurs when one seeks balance from an inherently imbalanced social stratum. In many ways, Foster's novel works against the traditional belief that "the duty of restraint was hers rather than his, and that the primary burden of guilt for transcending the bounds of propriety would also be hers" (Norton, *Daughters* 53). Foster's novel examines the broader implications of "the huge social interest vested in women's sexuality, which was fetishized into a necessary moral as well as a social and biological commodity" (Davidson 110). In fact, literary critic Gillian Brown argues that the problem of female sexuality rests on the philosophical problem of consent. Because women had no right to consent, they had no means to resist male advances. "For eighteenth-century advocates of women's rights, coquetry is an aberration, a negative form of womanhood arising from the inequality of the female situation" and not because of the coquette's predilection for promiscuous behavior (Brown 632). Unless women have an equal opportunity to consent, to choose, then they have no right to resist even an improper male authority. Women can seek redress only from those who deny them the right to consent—few would argue that this would necessitate a dialogue with men. *The Coquette* can be read as one woman's attempt to defend women against an unreasonable authority cloaked in paternal kindness. Foster's novel forcefully argues

that the burden of transgression would be shared by all. The seducer, the coquette, the ideal Republican father and his wife, and all the offspring are punished.

Death marks both the beginning and the end of *The Coquette*. The first passes almost without comment, becoming significant only because it symbolizes both the earthly salvation and eternal damnation of the novel's young female heroine. Mr. Haly's death provides Eliza with her only means of escape from the bonds of an unwanted, but unavoidable marriage that she had no opportunity to reject. "He was chosen to be a future guardian, a companion" the young heroine writes with little emotion (5). The marriage, as eighteenth-century American custom dictated, had been agreed upon between Mr. Haly and Eliza's parents, without the consultation or approval of the bride-to-be. She is a possession and object—a tradable commodity to be passed among men. She is the complete *feme covert*—hidden socially and politically even before her marriage renders her legally invisible. Her consent is neither sought nor necessary for the completion of the transaction. Eliza's predicament would not be unfamiliar to Foster's readers. In fact the "choice of a marital partner for an eighteenth-century American daughter was normally a collective, rather than individual, decision" (Norton, *Daughters* 58). One of the many lessons of the traditional seduction narrative plot is that the daughter's refusal to accept parental choice leads to her bitter downfall. However, Eliza does not resist her parents' efforts. She submits to their will with little objection although she fears the marriage will bring her no happiness. Eliza's submission to parental authority complicates the standard readings of coquetry as a "sin of filial disobedience" that necessarily leads to death (Fliegelman 85). Foster's text

immediately challenges the American practice of the marriage negotiation between father and husband. The denial of female choice dooms Eliza even though she is an obedient daughter. Female emancipation comes only through death—of either those who would possess, or those who would be possessed.

Foster, who broke with tradition when she failed to include an apology in her prelude to the text as other authors of seduction narratives did, appears to anticipate a broad post-war readership that had grown accustomed to “the political force” of sympathetic language (Burstein 607). She does not establish an exclusively female audience, nor does she indicate an anxiety about a youthful, highly susceptible female audience. She makes another critical novelistic decision in *The Coquette* that may allow for a better understanding of her subversive intent and her larger audience. Eliza “speaks” first. As Hunter argues, many early novels relied on many of the features of autobiographical narratives and in doing so began to erode the traditional understanding of the public versus the private (38). Eliza, much in keeping with the efforts of America's two most prominent founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson and Franklin, picks up the pen to articulate her attempts at independence for those “yet unacquainted” with the events of the writer's life. Indeed, both Eliza and Franklin begin their narrative accounts with “pleasure.” Franklin and Eliza begin their narratives with the pleasure of their present circumstances and the pleasure in their ability to share it with their reader. The strength of the coquette's voice demands a closer examination because she seems to appropriately articulate what Eve Sedgwick describes as the “mutilating effects of th[e] masculine civil war on women” that continued well into the nineteenth century

(182). Foster employs the language of sympathetic identification commonly used by the male founders to inspire support. “[S]entiment was a critical tool (heretofore marginalized or feminized) in defining the cause of Independence in opposition to the political parent” (Burstein 602). Foster draws on sympathetic language much as the founders did in an effort to “constitute a national response to a sense of powerlessness and insult” that women faced in the wake of the nation’s newfound independence (Burstein 618). Eliza is a worthy subject not for public censure, but for public recognition—an act reserved almost exclusively for important male leaders during the early national period. In skillful and subtle ways, Foster complicates the relationship between the coquette and the audience from the very beginning of the novel as she places the pen directly in Eliza’s hands and delays the entry of any other character. In doing so, I believe Foster recognized a male audience and their response to the questions and concerns posed by a young woman who, except through the fictional narrative, would not be free to voice such complaints.

In keeping with the epistolary form of many early seduction and conduct novels, the characters communicate through the private exchange of letters. However, Eliza is the first to articulate her position for the reader through her own writing. Her appearance is not mediated through a male voice, nor is she viewed through the male gaze as most seduction heroines of the late eighteenth-century novel were initially introduced. She is present in a way that is immediate and resistant to objectification. Eliza is a subject. Scholars have noted Eliza’s silencing in the final sections of Foster’s novel, which I will explore more thoroughly later, but little has been written about the

immediacy of Eliza's presence in the opening letters of the novel and how important her voice is to understanding the goals of Foster's text in boldly confronting the American "negation of the female" (Davidson, *The Coquette* xviii). Foster wrests the point of view from male witnesses and storytellers. In the end, Eliza may have no choice but surrender to their will, but not before she has her say.

In Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, the first three letters are male authored. The object of the seduction narrative, a young woman, is witnessed through the observations and language of her male pursuer and his confidant. The male voice is privileged first. Harrington interprets, both for his friend Jack Worthy and the reader, the response of his "beautiful *Harriot*" to the "warmth of [his] affection" (9). Worthy's response is immediate. It is infused with the language of caution and restraint. He warns Harrington to consider his affections carefully so that he might "form a right judgment" about this new object of his declarations (10). Harrington's second letter describes his growing affections for Harriot, but also the limits of his duty to treat her with honor. He outlines the poor girl's situation—she is an orphan—and his designs to assist her. He does not propose marriage because he is "not so much of a republican as formally to wed any person of this class" (11). Instead, Harrington wishes to "transplant" the "beautiful sprig" to a place where she will be happier and where he will presumably have better access (11-12). *Sympathy*, as the traditional seduction narrative did, provided female audience with a secret vision into the cunning of the male mind and the dangerous designs his lustful mind could conjure against innocent, unprotected females. Not until the fourth letter does the reader "hear"—albeit quite briefly—from Harriot,

who expresses her concern that she has “somehow bewitched a new lover” (12). She, too, is unaware of the part she will play in the betrayal of her own virtue.

Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* is not an epistolary novel, but Chapter I: ‘A Boarding School,’ begins with a somewhat sinister discussion between two males who are off “to take a survey of the Chichester ladies as they returned from their devotions” (9). Charlotte is realized only through the decidedly masculine rendering these two questionable males provide. Rowson, much like Brown, presents a view of Charlotte Temple through the gaze of the male pursuer. Montraville, like Harrington, imagines that the woman he is pursuing not only recognizes, but desires, his advances. Charlotte blushed as she passed Montraville on the street. “Vanity led him to think that pleasure at again beholding him might have occasioned the emotion he had witnessed” (10). The next three chapters provide a brief genealogical history of Charlotte Temple’s parents, but she does not speak until Chapter VII “Natural Sense of Propriety Inherent in the Female Bosom.”

Foster does not begin her epistolary account with the voices of men. She begins her textual version of the seduction narrative with a report from the women at the center of the controversy. Eliza is not introduced through her male pursuer. She speaks first. The shift in the point of view from a male centered dialogue to a female narrative in the opening pages is important in imagining a new audience and Foster’s broader narrative imperative. Women who resisted authority were considered an immediate threat to the social order and the political mandates of the new republic. Both Hill and Rowson open their tales of seduction with the supposed villains—the males who posed the greatest

threat to the foolish and thoughtless coquettes. Seduction authors were concerned first with providing their young female readership insight into the malicious character of the male toward his future victim. The social shorthand would have been quite familiar to eighteenth-century readers. Young female readers would come to know and recognize the danger of the rake through vivid textual portrayals, which would then allow them to recognize and avoid such men when they encountered them in their real lives. The female reader is expected to be aghast at the calculating nature of the male. The hatred for the rake is imbued through the treachery noted in the opening pages. Hill and Rowson, and other authors, may have done so because they envisioned a female audience that they anticipated would be unfamiliar with the guile and cunning of the male.

In an effort to educate, as well as titillate, traditional seduction narratives provided insight into the villainous plots of the seducers by making them the primary voices early in the texts. Based on the claims of seduction writers in their preludes and letters, the authors believed vivid portrayals of the betrayal of feminine virtue by the shrewd and crafty rake might awaken young women to the dangers that awaited them should they resist their parents' and the community's efforts to assist and guide their loving attachments. The paternalistic view that women must be protected is supported in these texts. "Unsuspecting of deceit, she is easily deceived—from the purity of her own thoughts, she trusts the faith of mankind," the good Republican father, Mr. Holmes, warns his female companions in *Sympathy* (23). Mr. Holmes uses the often told tale of Miss Eliza Whitman as "an emphatical illustration of the truth of these

observations” (Brown 23-24). Foster illustrates a very different truth through the observations of the woman who previously was merely the stuff of gossip and admonitions. Foster does not provide a vision of the villainous fiend waiting to take the young heroine. She does not rely solely on the reader’s repugnance for the monstrous male. Instead, Foster privileges the heroine, who speaks for herself and describes for the reader and her friends her insights and motivations. The radical shift from the masculine voice of the rake to the feminine voice of the coquette would have caused Foster’s readers to pause for they were “increasingly eager to participate in the *creation* of meaning, of public opinion, of culture” (Davidson, *Revolution* 45). Foster’s novel, in a dramatic and immediate way, places the reader with the coquette as a participant in her life, rather than as a mere observer.

Eliza’s first letter bemoans her initial willingness to surrender her own dreams of happiness for her parents’ choice in a mate. As she re-enters the world of feminine sexual availability, Eliza is quite clear about her future plans: she does not wish to enter into another arrangement. Foster provides clear textual evidence that her lead female character has thoughtfully considered her circumstances and made a choice. “Calm, placid, and serene; thoughtful of my duty, and benevolent to all around me, I wish for no other connection than that of friendship,” Eliza writes to her friend (6). Lucy’s critical response is implied in Eliza’s second letter, apparently a reply to Eliza’s initial epistle. Lucy is silenced: her letter is not permitted to enter the public space of the novel. Foster forestalls the immediacy of Lucy’s criticism by refusing to let her participate in the dialogue. Foster’s silencing of Eliza’s critics here is another important

authorial omission that allows the scholar to examine Foster's audience and intent more closely. Patriarchs were the critics in post-revolutionary culture and refusing to acknowledge the critic might be read as meaningful. Foster refuses to give voice to Lucy's objections. Instead, she allows her reader to fill the void and in doing so allows Eliza's response to become a direct reply to the reader's admonitions.

Foster does not endeavor to replicate the standard reprimands, for she anticipates that her readers will be well-versed in the traditional scolding. "I have received your letter; your moral lecture rather; and be assured, my dear, your monitorial lessons and advice shall be attended to," Eliza reassures in her response (7). In the absence of a letter from Lucy, the reader becomes the surrogate "you." Eliza politely accepts her reader's reproach, but immediately rejects the descriptions of her behavior as untenable, thereby resisting patriarchal limitations on the definition of femininity. Eliza does not believe that she will "resume those airs, which you term *coquettish*" (Foster's emphasis 7). However, as quick as she is to reassure that she shall not return to the objectionable behaviors, Eliza seeks to redefine the actions of youth that "deserve a softer appellation; as they proceed from an innocent heart" (7). Eliza refrains from calling Lucy by name, again preferring instead the personal pronoun "you." Eliza's friendly omission stands in sharp contrast to Harriot's first letter in *Sympathy*. Harriot includes the phrase "my dear Myra" in the body of the text, thereby establishing the sympathetic bond of female friendship between the two women. Mrs. Holmes repeats the phrase in a later letter to Myra. In *The Coquette*, Eliza's second and third letters remain intimate and expressive, but are written "To The Same," which further separates

Eliza from a personal, singular female reader. Foster refuses to give voice to Lucy in the opening pages, choosing instead to allow the reader to insert themselves in the role of the disembodied, impersonal critic. The reader becomes one with Lucy in these passages as they too become Eliza's surrogate critics, yet by doing so the reader also must identify themselves as Eliza's friend and confidante. Eliza's confessions are not made simply to a stranger: they are made to a close friend in an effort to gain understanding and sympathy. Foster's use of highly sympathetic language has often used to confine it to a domestic sphere of influence in which she is reaching out to other females. However historian Andrew Burnstein argues that scholars have incorrectly defined the realm of sympathetic language as belonging to women. "[T]he power of sympathy was long relegated by scholars to discussions of the domesticated, sentimental literature" (607). Burnstein argues that the scope of sentimental fiction like Rowson's and Foster's was no less broad than contemporary political speeches and political treatises penned by both men and women during and following the revolution. In fact, Eliza's first-person narrative transforms the powerfully motivating oratory tradition used by men and women in the political tradition that gained the sympathy and support of those who listened.

Foster not only shifts the point of view, placing the opening scenes of her novel in the hands of a young woman, she grants her young female protagonist thoughtful introspection and an opportunity to sanction those who would confine her. In her third letter she writes, "You are not so morose, as to wish me to become a nun" (8). While Rowson and Brown allow other characters to question the behavior of the unsuspecting

young women, who do not recognize the peril, Foster allows Eliza to comment on those who fail to acknowledge the strange rituals of courtship in the post Revolutionary republic. In reframing her narrative, Foster resists the traditional seduction plot's proscription to inspire fear in a predominantly female readership, and seeks to inspire sponsorship from a male audience, much as the founders did in their pursuit of freedom in the decades that preceded the revolution. In Foster's account, Wharton is not the object of a lesson about victimization; she is the worthy example of the great effort of one woman to resist victimization in a society that grants her few choices. Foster deliberately introduces her readers first to a young, thoughtful woman, who appropriately and wisely assess her circumstances. She is not unaware of her parents love for her; neither does she immediately reject their rules. In fact, the reader becomes familiar with an intelligent woman who dedicates herself to making the right choices. In spectacular fashion, Foster seeks to gain the allegiance of a male reader to show that Eliza is not at fault and does not deserve punishment. She is doomed by a flawed socio-political circumstance, rather than her own personal failures.

Eliza laments the patriarchal expectation of attachment that places young American women in jeopardy. In this way Foster does not immediately allow the reader to accept the easy theory that young women are placed in peril by the sinister and uncaring rake. The young coquette is compromised by those who supposedly care for the young ladies, but do very little except through lecture or sermon. Eliza had been willing to submit to the pre-arranged marriage despite her belief that the marriage would be unhappy. She writes that "no one acquainted with the disparity of our tempers

and dispositions, our views and designs, can suppose my heart much engaged in the alliance” (5). Eliza’s parents are not described as uncaring. Both her father and mother apparently loved her and wished to make an adequate arrangement for her future. The rake openly wishes to do her harm, yet she is doomed not merely by his actions, but by those who claim to have her best interests in mind. Foster’s novel invites her readers to question the cultural convention of parental choice for a mate and the larger social expectation that female management is mandated through masculine control. Foster’s text complicates the tradition by showing that even caring fathers do not necessarily make suitable choices for their offspring. Foster’s text openly questions the patriarchal authority that requires daughters to submit to a father’s choice in marriage. The text negates even a benevolent paternal authority. Eliza’s father “invited [Mr. Haly] to reside at his house” (Foster 11). Eliza’s father dies a few months before her fiancée. The dual deaths provide her freedom: the often discussed, much-coveted ideal of the New Republic and perhaps the single most important desire of the American revolutionaries who argued for America’s independence. Freedom, however, was not an ideal Eliza had a right to expect in the same way that it had been granted to American men. Eliza fails to accept the constraints of femininity as defined by the patriarchy. She is expected to marry and appropriate the roles of wife and mother: no other social space existed from which to participate in the republican way of life. “Revolution freed America from an oppressive Colonial status, but it had not freed American women from their subservient status” (Davidson 118). The female body continued to be a tradable commodity: the transactions were negotiated and completed between father and future-husband. Haly’s

death grants Eliza a temporary pardon—it is only following Haly’s death that the young woman describes her “*pleasure*” (emphasis is Foster’s 5). Unlike *The Power Sympathy* and *Charlotte Temple*, *The Coquette* does not begin with the excitement of the chase, but rather highlights a harrowing escape. As the novel opens, Eliza effusively describes her evasion from the shackles of an unwanted marriage. Eliza is about to embark on a marvelous journey of self-discovery and fulfillment. The excitement of the masculine hunt for his quarry, gives way to the exhilaration of the feminine exploration for choice. Freedom, not fancy, takes center stage in Foster’s novel. However, just as Mr. Haly’s death is a reprieve, it also foreshadows Eliza’s doom because, while the chase may be man’s natural proclivity, freedom is not woman’s natural right.

The disparity between the rights of men and women is ironically inculcated in the first three words of the text: “Miss Lucy Freeman.” Eliza excitedly anticipates her newfound freedom in a letter to her dearest friend, whose name is not coincidentally Miss Lucy Freeman, a woman who is free only in the sense that she is young and therefore not yet expected to be attached to a man. Lucy’s surname will be lost—along with her freedom—when she marries. This choice performs an important function and deserves attention. Eliza writes first to a free man. It is not impossible to believe that Foster chose the name quite carefully with the intention of naming not only Eliza’s foil but also her foes—which are often entwined in the story of Foster’s novel. Lucy does serve as the appropriate model of youthful feminine behavior that transforms wonderfully into the dutiful bride; however, she also acts against Eliza’s interests in concert with the male patriarchy. In her first letter, she warns Eliza to give up her

“coquettish airs” (27). Lucy warns Eliza, as a duty of friendship, that Mr. Boyer may be “as elevated” as Eliza has a “right to claim” (27). Miss Freeman is subsumed later in the text when she fittingly completes her transition from daughter to wife. Miss Lucy Freeman becomes Mrs. Lucy Sumner: the free man is lost forever. She does not become Mrs. Lucy Freeman Sumner as Stern and other scholars are prone to renaming her in their analysis of the text (Stern 73).

Foster, in keeping with the traditional structure of the epistolary seduction novel, does locate her discourse primarily within the letters of females; however, I would argue that it is because Foster recognizes that the chorus of female voices is in fact speaking by proxy for the patriarchy. Foster uses these characters to undermine, rather than support, prevailing beliefs about the nature of female friendships. Pettengill relies on the historical account of the importance of letters in understanding the way they “shaped female friendships” and allowed women to maintain a “network of friends” at differing points of development (186-7). Pettengill argues that letters allowed young women to maintain their intimate bonds with childhood friends and female relations despite being separated from them by marriage. However, Foster’s rendition appears to make the women, through the letters of Eliza much more disturbing. Even Eliza’s dearest friend, Lucy, provides admonishments rather than encouragement and support. Eliza typically finds herself in greater conflict with the female characters than she does with the male characters. Eliza proclaims that her “heart rose against” another woman for reminding her of Mr. Haly’s death. Eliza criticizes the woman for her insensitivity. In Foster’s account, Mrs. Laiton is the thoughtless woman,

not the coquette. Eliza describes the woman as “unthinking” and her words as “empty compliments” spoken only in “compliance with fashions” (9). Eliza’s compulsion to resist the constraints of her female censures renders her more susceptible to a masculine interloper, for it is a reprieve to her to take the arm of Mr. Boyer simply as a gesture of escape from one of the members of the chorus. Eliza was “happy to be relieved from the impertinence of my female companion” (9). In this passage emerges a different understanding of the perils of female friendship. Eliza’s depictions of both her dear friend and Mrs. Laiton appear to reject scholarly interpretations of the group of women who surround the coquette as reliable, nurturing guides whose goal is to assist her in easing the transition from one stage of femininity to the next, while embracing her in the intimate sisterhood. The women appear to foster a menacing, meddling nature that does not respond individually, but rather in unison.

Eliza comprehends that the chorus of women mimics the male patriarchy and she therefore rejects their ardent guidance. In Eliza’s third letter, she describes the wonder of the festive day that could not be improved even by the wand of Morpheus. In Greek mythology, Morpheus was the God of Dreams and a mimic of men. He appears, briefly but vividly, in Book 12 of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* in the shape of a man so convincing that the woman who sees him believes he is her dead husband. The reference to the Greek God of dreams demonstrates Foster’s familiarity with classical texts. It might also be an allusion to the ways in which Republican women counterfeit men and might be imagined to be menacing rather than sisterly. Eliza’s reference to Morpheus comes but a few sentences after the young woman demonstrates her

displeasure with Mrs. Laiton. If the chorus of women is not engaged in creating a sisterly bond with Eliza, their other possible motives deserve consideration. In the context of Eliza's letter, the appearance of Morpheus is significant for, in rejecting Morpheus, she is ultimately rejecting the implication that a man could have improved the day, which all women's dreams must begin and end with a man. What is most significant is the way in which other women, rather than the coquette, get implicated in the seductive promise of Morpheus' dreams. Stern aptly describes the assemblage of Foster's women as determined to reinscribe, rather than refute, patriarchal ideas of womanhood. Mrs. Laiton and those who support the traditional rules of courtship and female restrictions are ultimately united with the self-interested masculine privilege and "dedicated to crushing one woman's resistance from within" (Stern 15). Eliza is severely censured by the chorus of women—again as agents for the men because she wants to "enjoy that freedom which [she] so highly prize[s]" (Foster 13). The chorus perpetuates the masculine notion that Eliza has no right to freedom, telling her repeatedly to accept the invitation of marriage from Mr. Boyer, not because he is the man she loves or desires, but because he is the most suitable republican choice. Like the members of the Greek chorus, Foster's group of women comment, ridicule and warn, but they do not intervene in the action when she is most at risk and they never attempt to disrupt the masculine competition for Eliza's body. Instead they try to indoctrinate her into the patriarchal modes of womanhood. Mrs. Richman, the happy Republican wife, first seems to be appropriately concerned with Eliza's happiness and seeks her input about a new suitor. Mrs. Richman's interest in Eliza's felicity is momentary and

predicated on the understanding that Eliza comprehends her place. Mrs. Richman's allegiance with the patriarchal traditions becomes evident when Eliza indicates her resistance to the societal demands of marriage. Eliza makes it clear she has no serious interest in Mr. Boyer or any other suitor for that matter. Her resistance is mitigated by women as much as by men, for it is Mrs. Richman who quickly reminds Eliza of her place. "Your friends, my dear, solicitous for your welfare, wish to see you suitably and agreeably connected" (13).

In the absence of a father to barter and complete the necessary transaction of young woman to wife, it is the women of the chorus who step in to perform this function: to move the action, to negotiate and fulfill the social and political contract. The women of the chorus are quick to remind Eliza that she should expect no better than an offer from Mr. Boyer; others appear to participate in the rake's seduction even after Eliza has resolved to resist his. Upon hearing that Sanford has returned with a new bride, Eliza proclaims that she shall not accept a visit from him because "his presence may open the wounds which time is closing" (Foster 117). Eliza recognizes that she may not have the power to resist Sanford's advances; however, rather than support her convictions, "the impulses of the female community prove as sadistic and destructive to Eliza's equanimity as the physical incursions of the libertine" (Stern 140). Indeed Julia Granby suggests that a meeting should produce no harm and might result in the resolution of hurt feelings. In this crucial moment, when Eliza attempts her final resistance against the , "Julia metaphorically identifies with the libertine" and spurs Eliza's failure (Stern 141). Such advice, of course, is absurd because the chorus has

again and again vocalized their displeasure with Sanford, claiming he has a horrible reputation, that he prides himself on the ruin of young woman, and warning Eliza to resist his “arts” and yet they do not move to support and protect this vulnerable woman from him when it becomes most obvious that his intentions are dangerous. The chorus neither censures nor sanctions Sanford for his promiscuity. They speak ill of him, and yet they do not ostracize him. The chorus was designed to keep young women from falling for the “dazzling deceiver” or “wicked seducer” (Stearns 428). However, Foster demonstrates that the members of the chorus act as the ineffective gatekeepers in *The Coquette* because they are no more trustworthy than the men with whom they align themselves, either by words or deeds. They admit he is an entertaining acquaintance, as Mrs. Richman tells Eliza, “He is a gay man, my dear, to say no more, and such are the companions we wish, when we join a party avowedly formed for pleasure” (Foster 14). However, he is also the rake, and thereby “a threat to stable family life and thus, by extension, to national well being” (Evans 43). Even Boyer recognizes the danger and demands the Richmans explain why they would allow Eliza to leave with such an immoral man. “The rank and fortune of Major Sanford [...] procure him respect,” Mrs. Richman responds (Foster 17). Eliza’s community of friends appears more concerned with treating Sanford with respect and dignity than protecting and guiding the young woman for whom they know a reputation is far more valuable and corruptible. Foster repeatedly describes the failure of the community, of men and women, to guide rather than condemn Eliza.

If the coquette is a central concern to a public drama about the welfare of a nation, then the male characters cannot be overlooked, for they have a greater stake in its success. The chorus of women speaks and behaves as if aligned with the men, but not to the exclusion of male voices. The female characters tend to garner more attention from literary critics because the genre is presumed to be targeting a female audience due to the sympathetic language and domestic concerns articulated within the text. However, very little of the text revolves around traditional domestic centers of activity. Cooking, cleaning, sewing, child-care and other primarily domestic activities are noticeably absent in this text. The central concern articulated throughout is the proper place for Eliza. Burstein argues that literary scholars have largely ignored the political motivations of sympathy and thereby relegated discussions to the domestic, feminine concerns (604). In a letter Mr. Selby writes to Boyer, he begins with a discussion of Eliza in which he states that she “possess both the virtues and graces” which are presumably required of a young woman (43). These are the very words Eliza uses when she laments that she does not find either Boyer or Sanford satisfactory choices because neither man engenders both qualities in sufficient measure. In this way, Foster unites the feminine and masculine qualities that are desirable in the new republic. Boyer further describes the evening party he attended. He moves from a discussion of Eliza’s traits to the more important topic of politics. Selby allows that Eliza and Mrs. Richman “judiciously, yet modestly” participated in the political exchange. Selby mocks the other women who rather than participate in the political discussion busied themselves with Sanford’s meaningless prattle. Gen. Richman observes that the festivities have

broken “into parties” (44). Men and women participate in each of the groups, but the double meaning of sociability and politics is unmistakable. Mrs. Lawrence, whose party coalesced for entertainment only, declares that she “never meddled in politics” which she does not believe belong to the concerns of ladies (44). Mrs. Lawrence clearly belongs to the old traditions, which Foster’s novel exposes as antiquated and invalid. Although Eliza and Mrs. Richman often find themselves at odds over the younger woman’s flirtatious behavior, the two women are united in this single moment of the text. “We think ourselves interested in the welfare and prosperity of our country,” Mrs. Richman states (44).

Mrs. Richman acts as the bridge between the old traditions that are no longer useful and Eliza’s progressive notions of female political participation that are not yet fixed. Mrs. Richman delivers an oratory that demonstrates the value of cohesive gender relations to the welfare of the new republic: “If the community flourish and enjoy health and freedom, shall we not share in the happy effects? if it be oppressed and disturbed, shall we not endure our proportion of the evil? Why then should the love of our country be a masculine passion only?” (44). Mrs. Richman’s impassioned speech foreshadows the fate of the entire community as Foster envisions it. The community insists on defining Eliza’s place and in the end shares in her fate. The debate demonstrates that while the “politicization of domesticity was still quite crude,” as Kann argues, it was nonetheless beginning to take shape in the new republic (252). Foster, through her text, recognizes the intimate connection that exists between the two spheres. As Mrs. Richman asks, “Why should government, which involves the peace and order of the

society, of which we are a part, be wholly excluded from our observations?" (44). Foster's male readers then are invited to recognize the requirement of female participation in the creation of a healthy, stable and viable new republic.

However, Foster's novel explores the conduct of the male characters as intensely as that of the female characters. Eliza's other would-be mate, Mr. Boyer, and the recognized patriarch, Mr. Richman, is all but ignored and the rake garners only a little attention from literary scholars. However, Foster's novel cannot be fully appreciated without a significant examination of each of the male characters—even those who are textually absent. I begin with Boyer, who provides the second direct voice in *The Coquette*. He writes to his friend, Mr. Selby, shortly after his first encounter with Eliza. In response to his friend's earlier letter, he writes "You ask me, my friend, whether I am in pursuit of truth, or a lady?" (10). Implicit in the question is the assumption that the two are not normally aligned. Like Eliza's first suitor, Boyer is a respected clergyman who quickly gains the support of the chorus despite Eliza's reticence. Boyer does not initially concede to Eliza's attempts to hold him at bay. The problem with Boyer is that he is aligned with the old traditions that the coquette argues are no longer viable.

Boyer recognizes Eliza's reluctance to enter into a connection with him, but he refuses to acknowledge her agency. He writes to his friend, Mr. Selby, that he is perplexed by Eliza's evasion of the "the favorite subject of [his] heart" (11). Yet, he comprehends that her efforts to forestall the conversation of mutual affection is purposeful. "[S]he seems studiously to avoid noticing any expression which leads

towards” a romantic intercourse (11). Foster chooses nearly the exact words for her female heroine and the appropriate male suitor in their separate accounts of their first encounter. In her fourth letter to Lucy, presumably written contemporaneously to Boyer’s initial letter to Selby, she bemoans her “bewitching charms” that draw so much attention from undesired admirers. She complains that she is “pestered” by their persistence. Foster describes a knowing, reasoned woman who is attempting to carefully negotiate a dangerous mating ritual. Eliza identifies Boyer as the greatest threat to her independence. The reader learns that while Eliza may fail to acknowledge Boyer’s advances, she does not fail to recognize them. Furthermore, his assessment of her attempt to circumvent his advances is accurate. She concurs that she “studiously avoided every kind of discourse” that might have lead to a declaration from Boyer (12). This textual doubling, in which both male and female characters utter the same words, is important because it signifies that Foster is attempting to dismantle the distinction between the language of men and the language of women, which is the first step in disassembling other accepted social and political distinctions used to separate the two.

Foster also blurs the distinction between Boyer and the disreputable rake: the one heretofore identified as the single greatest threat to the stability of the American family. Eliza is the only character who recognizes that neither Sanford nor Boyer is a suitable mate. “What a pity, my dear Lucy, that the graces and virtues are not oftener united! They must, however, meet in the man of my choice,” she writes after a second visit with each man (22). Boyer is virtuous, but without grace. Sanford has grace, but lacks virtue. Boyer romanticizes his relationship with Eliza, which is heightened by the

rivalry with Sanford and Boyer's belief that he must save Eliza from the type of man that Sanford represents. Sanford's pursuit is intensified by the rivalry with Boyer and the society he represents. Each man spurs the other in the competition for Eliza's company and attention. Boyer is besought by obsession rather than love or kindness. In his second letter to Selby, he declares he was filled with "jealousy and suspicion" when he discovered his plans were foiled by the presence of Sanford (16). The greatest share of his letter is engaged in a discussion about Sanford, yet Boyer declares himself a vigilant and cautious lover. Although Boyer claims he is motivated by love and desire for Eliza, Foster more often depicts a man driven by competition. Initially Boyer uses his arts to gain her attention. His "every word, every action and every look" was measured to succeed in impressing the young woman (12). He undermines her resistance by disputing her authority to refuse him. At the outset, Boyer does not attempt to negotiate his courtship with Eliza: he attempts to negotiate the exchange with others. "I am sure of the favor and interest of the friends with whom she resides" (11). Boyer conspires with Mr. and Mrs. Richman to "accidentally" arrive at their residence at a time when they are scheduled to leave. The idealized Republican couple will then provide the necessary consent that will allow Eliza to remain behind to entertain him. The Richmans take on the role of Eliza's parents: they act as the failed surrogate agents for the barter of Eliza's bodily commodity. The Richmans do not complete the transaction and no contract between Boyer and Eliza is negotiated. In some ways the scheme between the Richmans and Boyer is reminiscent of the scene of betrayal and

seduction in Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* in which Montraville, the acknowledged rake, conspires with Charlotte's caretaker to arrange the fatal meeting between the two.

Foster's text works to eliminate the distinctions between the legitimate and illegitimate transactions, which systematically moved women from one masculine domain to the next through the marriage contract without the consent of the female. In both cases the virginal woman is subject to exchange between two outside forces. The text highlights the "problematic role of other persons in consent: the credibility of the witnesses who corroborate consent" come under as much scrutiny as the coquette herself (Brown 639). Only after Boyer recognizes that the Richmans lack the authority to extract Eliza's consent does he attempt to bargain with her directly. Boyer, in a final act of folly, rushes to Eliza's mother's home to secure the young woman's promise of marriage. During their deliberations, Eliza seeks Boyer's "consent" in allowing her to enjoy longer the "pleasures of the fashionable world" and suggests that she would be less interested in Major Sanford if Boyer "would attend" her more frequently (76). Instead, he frequently misinterprets Eliza's relationship with Sanford and succumbs to his own jealousy and rage after finding the two in close conversation. He abandons Eliza and disavows his affections for her. Eliza "fainted" only after she realizes that Boyer has "forsaken" her (93). Fainting is the standard seduction narrative trope that signals a woman's fall from grace and typically follows the moment that she relinquishes her chastity outside of the bonds of marriage.

Eliza, however, does not faint while she is with Sanford. Eliza is lost in the moment that Boyer rejects her. Only after Boyer deserts her and Sanford goes abroad

does Eliza have the freedom to contemplate them both. Eliza, when no longer torn by the contest between her two suitors, discovers that Mr. Boyer “imprinted [...] sentiments of esteem and love in [her] heart” (100). Even before Eliza learns of Sanford’s marriage to another woman, she determines that Boyer is the appropriate man and she writes him a letter of apology. Boyer’s embittered response is harsh and unforgiving. He reminds her of his determination to vanquish her from his thoughts. Although Eliza has not relinquished her chastity, she declares that she is “shipwrecked on the shoals of despair” (105). Foster’s narrative imagines Boyer as complicit in Eliza’s undoing. The aborted exchange in *The Coquette* implicates the unifying practices of traditional republican marital strategies in the immoral customs that deny a single woman the right to choose.

Of course the most damning male presence in the text appears to be Major Peter Sanford. He declares that if he “cannot possess her wholly [himself, he] will not tamely see [Eliza] the property of another” (35). Sanford never truly gains Eliza’s consent. Even his efforts to gain Eliza’s endorsement are ineffective. Sanford’s egregious behavior has received limited examination from literary scholars. “While much critical attention has been paid to the plight of the young woman and her negotiation of the period’s sex-gender system, little has been focused on the seduction plot’s other principal actor: the libertine” (Traister 6). The libertine in this case is Major Peter Sanford. In his first letter to Mr. Charles Deighton, Sanford writes of Eliza’s fine traits and grumbles over Mrs. Richman’s prudish behavior. Sanford, as Boyer had in previous letters, recounts Eliza’s dedication to Haly. In many ways, Foster’s retelling of Eliza’s

faithfulness to Haly through multiple characters, and especially the male characters, establishes Eliza's worth, particularly in comparison to her male counterparts. *The Coquette's* characters repeatedly share the details of Eliza's attachment to Haly, her absolute commitment to him, nursing and assisting him until his death. Sanford is compelled to relate Eliza's faithfulness, and yet he fancies "this young lady a coquette; and if so, I shall avenge my sex" (18). Sanford is determined not to be undermined by the constraints of the community. Sanford is deliberate and calculating in his pursuit of Eliza. In many ways, at least initially, he seems less interested in his prey than in taunting the community which declares him unfit. Eliza declares when she determines to see Sanford no more, "My friends shall be gratified [. . .] General Richman and lady have labored abundantly to prove that my ruin was inevitable if I did not immediately break all intercourse with Major Sanford" (Foster 59). Eliza, as property, becomes the battleground between Sanford and the community and neither views her as an independent actor, but as an extension of their proprietary ownership.

Sanford describes Eliza as "the *summum bonum*" in his life. She is indeed the greatest good, but in the same breath he declares that he "must have her in some way or other. No body else shall, I am resolved" (96). Sanford is determined to keep Eliza for himself although he has no intention of marrying her because she does not have enough money to cover his debts. He later declares his true affections for Eliza, but because he is determined to marry for money rather than love, he cannot truly consider a union with her. Instead, with equal deliberation and calculation, he seeks a wife of good fortune and marries her, using her money to pay for the home that will keep him near his

beloved Eliza. His behavior is often grotesque and self-serving, and yet the community continues to accept his company and treat him with respect and dignity. He is allowed to move freely about the community, without shame or remorse. It is as if the entire community, not merely Eliza, is seduced by Sanford's aristocratic pomp.

Strangely silent are the only two men who might have been able to establish the authority to assist Eliza in completing the negotiation from single to married woman: Eliza's brother and Mr. Richman whose home provided her protection following her fiancée's death. Eliza's brother remains silent throughout. Indeed, he does not garner mention until Eliza returns home to attend the marriage of Lucy to Mr. George Sumner. He is never named and he does not appear again until after his sister and nephew's deaths, when he then assumes the duties of the man of the family.

Nearly as silent, but far more visible is Mr. Richman; however, the appropriate example of Republican marital idealism is silent through the precarious negotiations over Eliza's future that take place under his roof. He never intervenes on her behalf. He makes arrangements with Boyer in an effort to secure Eliza's esteem; yet, at each of Eliza's missteps, he remains a quiet presence or leaves the room. Eliza returns late from her first outing with Sanford and awakens to find both of the Richmans "waiting" for her (20). Mrs. Richman questions Eliza about her previous evening and discourages her from entertaining the man again; however, Mr. Richman never utters a phrase during the exchange. The Richmans leave Eliza alone with the man they prefer, Mr. Boyer, but when they return, Richman makes no inquiries. He does very little to intercede on Eliza's behalf and protect her from Sanford's ill-conceived intentions although he is

acutely aware of her perilous position as an unattached single woman whose father has died. Gen. Richman's most egregious error on the general's part is noted when he comes upon Sanford and Eliza in the garden alone. "He approached us cheerfully, offered Major Sanford his hand" and apologized for disturbing them (Foster 37). The republican father returns to the house with Eliza, but offers her no advise, no scolding, no warning. Once back at the house, it is Mrs. Richman who once again questions and warns the young women of the dangers as her husband sits quietly. Gen. Richman turns his patriarchal authority over to his wife, who has no authority to act as his substitute in the post-revolutionary climate. Mr. Richman writes but one letter in the novel, which stands as his only direct 'dialogue' with Eliza. In it he informs Eliza that Mrs. Richman delivered a baby girl. "This event awakens new sensations in my mind; and calls into exercise a kind of affection which had lain dormant," he writes (69). The brief epistle establishes the significance of the paternal responsibility owing to men in the post-revolutionary period. In the idealized Republican marriage, the husband and wife were equal partners in the home and their domestic life was of mutual benefit. When Eliza complains that "marriage is the tomb of friendship," Mrs. Richman returns that marriage is the place where women "can repose in safety" (25). Mrs. Richman has a happy marriage and has the appearance of a woman granted choice but, even for her, marriage is the only space where she was granted protection. Once again, a member of the chorus reminds Eliza that only through her attachment to a Republican man can she expect to find joy and peace. Foster's text, however, describes how brief and uncertain

happiness is even for the couple who subscribe appropriately to the Republican ideals, as their daughter Harriot dies before reaching her second birthday.

It is as if Foster uses her text both to punish and unify the entire community for their foible in misunderstanding Eliza's simple goal: to find her voice, to make her choice. Female bodies were still considered property—of the men in their private lives and of the community which scrutinized their every sexual miscue. Eliza, who declares she is “undone” by Boyer's final abandonment and stung by “so much censure” from her friends, withdraws from the community. Precariously unattached, she succumbs to Sanford's persistent advances and becomes pregnant. Eliza's bastard infant, conceived with Sanford outside of the bonds of marriage, would know no other home than the grave. That Foster takes Eliza's child is understandable if her work is seen as focusing primarily on educating young women. Eliza and the embodiment of her sin must die and the slate will be wiped clean. However, Foster does not end there. Sanford's wife followed the prescripts of the new Republic. She found herself in an unhappy marriage, but continued to show her husband the kindness and support necessary of Republican women. Even before Eliza and her infant die, Sanford writes to Deighton that his wife “brought me a boy a few weeks past, a dead one though” (Foster 140). Mrs. Sanford attempted to fulfill the Republican mission and did little to deserve the harsh treatment she received from her husband. She married and attempted to fulfill her wifely duties, which included efforts to soften the edges of masculine drives. “Once she had seduced him into virtue, the married woman's task was to preserve her husband in the exalted state to which her influence had raised him” (Lewis 701). But Mrs. Sanford could not

induce her husband to treat her with tenderness. This infant—a male—is conceived legitimately and yet he is stillborn. Foster's novel does not allow Sanford the possibility of a legitimate bloodline. A valid entry into the civic realm of fatherhood is denied. His reproductive efforts are not corrupted simply within the extramarital relationship, but also within the typically legitimizing bond of marriage.

An even harsher judgment against the patriarchal society comes at the expense of the Richman's, the ideal egalitarian couple who may have suffered the greatest loss of all. The couple represented all that was considered right in the new Republic. They share a mutual respect and admiration for one another. Nowhere in the novel is there even the slightest hint of any transgressions between this couple and yet, they lose their daughter, Harriot, just before her second birthday. The ideal post-Revolutionary American mother and father are denied their procreative rights, and his opportunity to become a founding father is eradicated. The legacies of both Mr. Richman, the shining Republicanism ideal of an egalitarian conjugal partner, and Sanford, the selfish rake are broken. Their seed wiped away, punished equally, for neither recognized the need for true equality, nor accepted women's freedom. It is interesting that the Richmans' daughter, being raised in this new republic, never speaks before her death. Foster's novel denies the parents the "pleasure" at hearing their own child speak and contends that there is nothing that she might say in her own words that would be worth saying, or perhaps would garner a chance at being heard.

Harriot, like Eliza, represents every other female in the novel—even the female chorus whose shrill tone never ceases to ridicule and threaten, except after Eliza's

death—whose voices can only be heard if they agree to parrot the masculine dialogue. Mrs. Richman “anticipates” her daughter’s speech, but it does not come. The mute child dies. Mrs. Richman, whose full name is never unveiled through the text, is not alone in her excitement over her daughter’s future. “General Richman is not less interested by these enjoyments than myself,” she writes. “All the father beams in his eye!” (97). His loss is no less important than the loss of the mother. Gen. Richman is a devoted parent. He represents the ideal father, but he too is denied any legitimate future in the new republic. Death after death compounds the communal suffering at the end of *The Coquette*. No member of the community is left unscathed by the multiple losses. *The Coquette* concludes at the gravesite of Eliza Wharton where the reader is granted a final view of the inscription on her tombstone. Eliza’s death is often interpreted as a communal sacrifice, but such readings diminish the significance of the loss of offspring to a male readership. In *The Coquette*, the wide sweeping deaths that plague those who survive Eliza, provide the impetus for the reunification of the entire community, for the fathers are no longer asked to merely sympathize with Eliza’s unhappy plight, they are made to share in her unhappy loss.

“The work of mourning is essential, not as a ‘penance’ but as an indispensable prelude to the formation of autonomous and mature identities for both nations and the individuals who comprise them” (Wolin qtd. in Schlant). Eliza suffers no longer, but those about her must mourn her loss; however, even if they are incapable of joining in suffering on her behalf, her death is melded with the loss of those small republican children who are essential beings in the ongoing process of nation building.

1.5 Conclusion

“If society will not admit of woman's free development, then society must be remodeled,”
Elizabeth Blackwell

In this thesis I argue that the female-authored novel, like many other valuable texts written by American female writers, has wrongly become a sort of *textual covert*—like the *feme covert* it has its place, but does not merit a wholly independent status. The short seduction novel, because it concerns itself with the coquette and the private affairs of its female characters, is believed to be appropriately contained within the sphere of domestic fiction and women’s reading. It is veiled from a full public viewing and denied substantive independent significance, still relegated to a polite, private discourse that is supposedly unconcerned with larger, societal problems associated with male political and economic concerns. The problem is often that female sexuality, and female participation in social life, is viewed as meaningful only to women.

The unfortunate outcome is a continued belief that such texts were only meant to be understood and appreciated by other women, and were not relevant to a broader audience. Furthermore, the depth of focus on the intended female audience is sometimes mistakenly interpreted as suggesting that female authors were neither capable of, nor interested in, entering into contentious public discourses about contemporary political debates. Early American women authors continue to be regarded as those who were

content to write about what they knew—domestic concerns—and to leave the public, political affairs to their fathers and husbands.

Like Elizabeth Whitman, Eliza Wharton's virtue became the obsession of her dueling suitors and the female chorus in Foster's epistolary account; however, Foster uses the literary trope of the chorus not as a method of exploring the bonds of sisterhood, but as a method of implicating the male patriarchy. The dueling suitors are therefore as important as the chorus to understanding the broader implications of the novel. Eliza does not ascribe to the republican virtues that subject women to the "social and legal status as another's personal property" (Mower 316). Eliza rejects the Republican status quo. She does not willingly submit to be any man's property. She refuses the civic mantle of the *feme covert*. This is her crime and death is her punishment. However, if Eliza is implicated, so is society.

It is reasonable to believe that Foster would take up the very tools of the patriarchy—print culture—to shake the yoke of patriarchal subjugation. I contend that Foster recognizes the opportunity the novel grants her to speak both privately and intimately, through the frame of private letters, and widely, through publication, to men about the socially untenable plight of women and the very real threat their suppression posed to the establishment of a strong republic. Foster denies life to each and every baby born within the pages of her novel, a symbolic infanticide that serves a rhetorical purpose. Foster engages her readers in the "natural identification individuals have with feelings of resentment toward those who injure and oppress without concern for the sentiments of the sufferer" (Burstein 612). Neither the women of the chorus, nor the

men with whom they aligned themselves, were concerned with Eliza. Instead the concerned themselves with traditions and ignored her plight. Eliza's suffering ends at the moment of her death. She no longer faces a precarious world. She is no longer the object of ridicule and scorn. She no longer faces judgment from the friends whom she could not tolerate disappointing and so left to die alone. The infants—not unlike many of the individual women in the novel—have no voice, no agency, and no independent function; however, as symbolic vessels of innocence, the infants provide a useful mechanism for meting out sweeping indictments. Death is the mission they fulfill, but the bloodletting has an important socio-political aim. Literary historian Elizabeth Dillon examines literary infant deaths in relationship to the expression of maternal bonds in literature that appeared in women's writing in the nineteenth century. Dillon supports her claims by identifying the singularly defining bond between the child and its mother in the literature produced during this period. The public's sympathy for the mother's relationship to the infant, Dillon argues, allows the reader to identify and experience the ultimate loss. Dillon notes that the mother-child bond is privileged in this literature. I believe the same can be said of the purpose of infant death in eighteenth-century literature: infant death allows the readers to publicly share in the ultimate private loss. However, unlike nineteenth century literature, eighteenth-century literature continued to privilege paternal bonds. We can therefore read textual examples of infant deaths in relationship to the expression of paternal loss, rather than merely maternal loss. Infant deaths served a dual purpose—to increase the sentiments of familial devotion and to

serve as a symbolic threat to the stability of a nation still in its tenuous infancy. As Dillon suggests, death is the “most prominent action [babies] perform” (205).

If this novel were solely an examination of feminine roles and feminine virtue alone, then an understanding of the limits of the seduction narrative would be appropriate and current scholarship would be sufficient to explain the epistolary novel’s highly polarized debate that ends in tragedy for Eliza and her newborn presumably because she disregarded the constraints of the community, but Foster’s text goes far beyond punishment of a single immoral woman. Foster punishes not only the fallen women who rejected republican ideals, but also two important women who were in compliance with the ideals—Mrs. Richman and Mrs. Sanford. Both Mrs. Richman and Mrs. Sanford abide by the proscribed rules and yet each has their child taken from them. These infant deaths cannot be ignored. They in fact provide important clues as to Foster’s beliefs about women, men, marriage and the public interest in reproduction. Examining the female characters and their relationships to one another does not adequately explain Foster’s sweeping literary judgments that are meted out against both the coquette and the republican mothers.

Mrs. Sanford, the woman who consented to marrying the novel’s rake, has her infant snatched by death. Even the idealized Republican mother, Mrs. Richman, suffers the same fate as the coquette for she is no better than Eliza, according to Foster’s recasting of the story of the fallen woman. Mrs. Richman is not allowed to nurture her mute-from-birth-daughter because she has failed to provide appropriate stewardship for her younger charge, Eliza. Female consent in *The Coquette* is as deadly for offspring as

non-consent—a significant claim if marriage in fact is the institution designed to protect and legitimate children. The death of all children significantly challenges the socially constructed mini-polis of the republic.

More importantly women are not the sole perpetrators of immorality—and therefore retribution—in Foster’s examination of Eliza’s life and death. Foster takes aim, not merely at the coquettish woman as many other seduction novelists did, but at men by creating a thoughtful character whose attempts to resist are denied because there are no means for her resistance. Men share in the judgment. Foster saves none from her literary wrath, yet little has been written about Foster’s direct assault on the post-Revolutionary patriarchal society. Many literary critics have largely ignored the conduct of the rake, Major Peter Sanford, and the true patriot, General Richman, seeing them as only tangential to the central ideas of female friendships and female sexuality. In Foster’s novel men are inextricably woven into the great moral fable of loss—the loss however is not one of virtue but one of freedom, of a future. The revolutionary fathers lauded equality and exalted the political freedom of men while they legally condemned women to a life of subordination. Foster, in many ways, picks up the mantle of the feminist cause in an effort to narrate the folly of “deep rooted prejudices [that] clouded reason” as Mary Wollstonecraft asserted in her undeniably political treatise *A Vindication of the rights of Woman*—a text published five years before *The Coquette* (Wollstonecraft 1).

The Coquette problematizes recent understandings of the long-standing American gender divide that ultimately resulted in the distinct spheres of male and

female influence. Critical understanding of the two spheres of authority, the public sphere of male influence and the private sphere of female influence, crystallized in the nineteenth century with the irresistible label. Historians and literary scholars argued that beginning with the early colonies, the public sphere was the civic arena in which men worked for social and political change, while the private or family sphere was the domestic arena in which women could exert their limited control. “In the colonies, women had been viewed as wholly domestic beings whose influence in the world was confined to their immediate families” (Norton, “Evolution” 616). However, the tremendous instability of the events leading to the American Revolution began to profoundly reshape the dialogue about womanhood and woman’s place, while at the same time redefining manhood. “Rather than being sharply defined and fundamentally opposed, notions of public and private were unstable and ambiguous in revolutionary America” (Dorsey 13). The social instability of the post-Revolutionary period resulted in both the creation of new spaces and greater sharing of existing spaces.

The Coquette is a political document that seeks not to resituate power in a new center—the domestic sphere—by subverting the patriarchal power structures, but rather seeks to eliminate the artificial boundaries through a renegotiation of the public’s relationship with the fallen woman. Foster, in retelling the story of a widely publicized sexual “fall,” attempts to complicate the prevailing political strategy that codified gender transgressions as feminine and private. Foster’s novel reformulates the relationship between the public and private. Foster was not interested in merely examining the lives of women, but the lives of men and women and the intimate

connections between them. Foster did not write a novel to explore the domestic sphere of women publicly, but publicized the transient boundaries of public and private spheres. Through her novel she attempts to examine the intimate nature of public discourse. The public and private are connected and they cannot be separated neatly along gender or spatial boundaries. However, Foster illustrates the difficulties of negotiating the new spheres.

Foster presages not just the individual loss of particular individuals within her text, but casts a larger threat against the very future of the fledgling democracy, for no society can survive if it cannot ensure the survival of all its members, including women and children. The private act of reproduction engenders social and political meaning. By exterminating the children, Foster literally and figuratively robs men of their possessions and eliminates their opportunity to participate in the future promised land. It is as if her entire book is a public speech that warns: “Deny women their rightful participation in building a public American identity and your role in a flourishing new nation will terminate as well.” By taking the small lives, she exposes the necessary relationship between the public and the private—for the private production of the female body is absolutely necessary for the public production of a healthy nation. Foster’s novel is a less-than-tacit threat against the frail union and fires a direct warning at her readers. If, as Michel Foucault insists, “Politics is war pursued by other means,” Foster is standing at the front lines in a battle for women’s equal rights, warning that the politics of subjugation rather than feminine sexual transgression will lead to ruin—not only for women, but for men, and for the nation as well.

A reexamination of Foster's text that focuses on an imagined male audience allows for a rereading of *The Coquette* as an important political text that does not limit its concerns to a private—often equated with feminine—sphere as some scholars have noted, but also on the public, political sphere. More precisely, I argue that the novel is a very public examination of both the private and the public spheres as a method of disrupting the perceived lines between the two. Foster publicly admonishes men in the novel for their private behavior and provides male readers with an intimate view of the private lives of women through a publicly mediated examination of the plight of one “superior” woman (Foster 169). In *The Coquette*, Foster relies on what literary analyst Cathy Davidson describes as the subversive nature of the novel to fictionalize the real-life events with which Foster would have been intimately familiar—Whitman was a relative—in a very public political debate over women's rights. Her epistolary novel dramatizes political inequality rather than merely reinscribing female roles, as many traditional analysts have argued her text does. The novel also does more than simply work to reinvent the space of the domestic sphere as some feminist theorists contend. Eliza is not a stupid woman, nor is she uneducated or immoral. Her lapse is in her desire for independence, and yet she is unjustly prevented from attaining it. In the end she gains freedom and becomes an eighteenth-century political martyr who is wrested from the subjectivity of private anonymity through her death and public mourning. As literary theorist Dillon notes, “death was a decidedly public occasion” and it provided a pivotal moment for the accepted blending of the private and public spheres (205).

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