Corresponding Sentiments and Republican Letters: Hannah Foster's The Coquette

Enlightenment is man's release from self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without the direction of another. Self-incurred is that tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without the direction from another.

(Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?," 1784)

"Lord bless you, my dear girl," cried the teacher smiling, "have you a mind to be in leading strings all your life time. Prithee open the letter, read it, and judge for yourself."

(Susanna Rowson, Charlotte Temple, 1791)

Loose Letters

In a letter posted to her husband on August 14, 1776, Abigail Adams includes news of an illicit romance that keeps one of John's revolutionary colleagues, Elbridge Gerry, from returning immediately to Philadelphia: "I expected Mr. Gerry would have set off before now, but he finds it perhaps hard to leave his Mistress—I wont say harder than some do to leave their wives. Mr. Gerry stood very high in my Esteem—what is meat for one is not for an other—no accounting for fancy. She is a queer dame and leads people [in] wild dances." The inclusion of this gossipy tidbit in a letter otherwise focused on the education of "learned women" and the political benefits of their "literary accomplishments" may seem anomalous. According to the editors of the Adams's correspondence, the "Watertown belle" who attracted Gerry could neither read nor write and perhaps, one could argue, she signifies for Abigail the threat posed by the prevailing inadequacy of female education in the month-old republic. Despite the physical separation occasioned by the pressures of the Revolution, Abigail and John continue their
romance through the mediation of the post, while the same pressures force Gerry and the "belle" to choose between romance and revolution, between personal and political life. Perhaps, another could argue, Abigail's news signifies her jealousy of the very lack of education that enables the "belle" to demand Gerry's physical presence since, she hints, John finds it easier to abandon a literate wife than Gerry does to leave an illiterate mistress. Perhaps, a third might argue, Abigail's news signifies an identification with the "belle" and, through her, that "queer dame" "fancy" whose "wild dances" invoke the "rebellion" Abigail earlier had warned that the "Ladies" were prepared to "foment." "If particular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies," Abigail threatens in a famous letter posted on March 31, 1776, "we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation." As if aware of these multiple readings of her news, Abigail begins her next paragraph with an apostrophe to the post. "But hush," she writes, "Post, dont betray your trust and loose my letter." Thematized most playfully here, anxieties concerning loose letters and the reliability of the post recur throughout Abigail and John's correspondence. "I have one favor to ask," John writes on July 3, 1776, "that is, that in your future Letters, you would acknowledge the Receipt of all those you may receive from me. . . . By this Means I shall know if any of mine miscarry." On November 27, 1775, Abigail notes that "All Letters, I believe, have come safe to hand." Given the immediate context of the Adams's correspondence, this anxiety concerning the circulation of letters once out of "hand" or, in this case, between "hands" is certainly understandable. The quality of colonial post roads varied greatly, and postal riders could be hired by different groups with different ends in mind. Two years earlier in 1774, for example, agents of the Tory press in the United States exploited these irregularities by intercepting, publishing, and parodying letters to Abigail in which John referred to the "Fidgets, the Whims, the Caprice, the Vanity" of his Whig colleagues in the Continental Congress. The anxiety produced by such unauthorized publications only intensified after the outbreak of war with England. "It is not prudent," John warns six days after signing of the Declaration of Independence, "to commit to Writing such free Speculations, in the present state of Things." If loose letters threaten to place the fate of the nation in the wrong hands, then Abigail and John respond appropriately. They recognize that the success of the Revolution demands either that personal letters not circulate inadvertently in public or, failing that, careful editing of any personal opinions conveyed in potentially public letters.

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the post, Franklin characteristically exploited both for his own profit. That an accessible post could also be understood as politically crucial to the public sphere as a site of democratic self-determination is evinced in a 1791 address to Congress by none other than Elbridge Gerry. "However firmly liberty may be established in any country," Gerry argues in a debate over rising postal rates, "it cannot subsist if the channels of information be stopped."14

The symbolic relation between the public sphere and the post is more complicated. Theorists of the eighteenth-century public sphere like Gerry conceived of the post not simply as an institution enabling (or disabling) the publication of personal sentiments. They also understood it as an institution capable of transforming the structural relation between personal and political life. Evidence of this faith emerges most clearly in the contemporary establishment of a state-sanctioned political public sphere accessible only to the sentimental novels that grew out of them. Prior to the revolutionary establishment of a state-sanctioned political public sphere accessible only to privileged individuals (white freeholders, patriarchal heads of families, male citizens), these manuals and novels carved out unofficial public spaces of literary and political debate theoretically accessible to all individuals regardless of status. In contrast to the limitations that the requirements of representation imposed on participation within the political public sphere, this literary model of an accessible and influential public sphere lay at the ideological core of eighteenth-century republicanism, just as it continues to haunt the political imaginary of late-twentieth-century liberalism. As Alexis de Tocqueville was among the first to argue, the effects of this ideology are often twofold. It installs both the utopian, normative possibility of a democratic polity within which unofficial civil associations enable individuals to check the official political power of the nation-state, and the dystopian, normalizing possibility of a political power able to deploy the ideology of self-government even in the absence of such associations.17 My last chapter argued that these two possibilities co-exist in Washington's "Farewell Address," and that they ultimately mark a division within Washington's body as a site of national identification. In modified form, they reappear in Abigail Adams's apostrophe to the post. On the one hand, that apostrophe demands that the post "Hush," that it silence her unorthodox speculations by not circulating her personal letters in public. Faced with a critical divergence between official and unofficial forms of publication, Abigail mandates a strict and inerradatable opposition of personality and publicity. In this sense, her withdrawal of personal from public opinion might seem a typically liberal response to the republican call for the equation of the two. On the other hand, the same apostrophe also demands that the post not "loose" her letters, that it facilitate the public circulation of her sentiments only in authorized channels. As indicated by the very structure of this appeal to the "post," Abigail responds to the possibility that her letters may stray not by eschewing publication altogether, but by maintaining a republican faith in what Mary Favret refers to as the "ideal Post Office."18 This structural ideal promises not undmediated personal communication, but the literary mediation of both personal opinion and political power.

That both of these readings are suggested by Abigail's letter is itself significant. While John encourages her to "write by post," and while he notes that in their personal correspondence she "shine[s] as a Stateswoman," he elsewhere undercuts both her literary and her political authority.19 "As to your extraordinary Code of Laws," John writes in response to her threat of sororal rebellion, "I cannot but laugh":

We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government everywhere. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented. . . . Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems.20 Even as John notes the rhetorical and political affiliations between Abigail's threat and the rebellion he and his colleagues were fomenting through similar means in Philadelphia, he responds to that threat with a dogmatic assertion of "masculine" dominance. In a more serious letter to James Sullivan on May 26, 1776, John repeats this dogmatism in response to the question "Whence arises the Right of the Men to govern the Women, without their consent?": "Depend upon it, Sir, it is dangerous to open so fruitful a Source
of Controversy and altercations.... There will be no end of it." John's attempt to mute the question Abigail raises typifies contemporary conservative reaction to the possibility of democracy in the early republic. And it leaves Abigail with two options. Either she can continue to limit the audience for her threat of rebellion to John as her husband and official representative, or she can circulate her threat to a general public including, among others, "Children," "Apprentices," "Indians," "Negroes," "Watertown belles," "queer dames" and, again, her husband, John.

Like many of her contemporaries, Abigail remained torn between these two options. "I think it my duty," she writes on June 3, 1776, "to attend with frugality and oeconomy to our own private affairs. . . Here I can serve my partner, my family and myself, and enjoy the Satisfaction of your serving your Country." In accordance with the ideology variously referred to as "domestic feminism" and "republican motherhood," Abigail organizes her life with John by separating their spheres of influence. The private, domestic, and familial affairs that fall under her control ideally complement the public and (trans)national affairs that fall under his supervision. Echoing the eighteenth-century legal doctrine of "coverture," Abigail's self-understanding of her "duty" renders her politically invisible, except as represented by her husband. The boundary between personal and political life is thus drawn and secured along gender lines. Abigail's earlier demand for "representation" and "voice" undoubtedly works against this structure of political exclusion. But its address to John mitigates the force of that demand by producing a now familiar compromise between civic activity and state representation, between republican citizenship and sexual subjection. "Women and dependents," Habermas notes, "were factually and legally excluded from the political public sphere, whereas female readers as well as apprentices and servants often took a more active part in the literary public sphere." Only an institutional reduction of the critical function of the public sphere to the representative function of the state—a reduction, in Habermas's terms, of the literary to the political public sphere—would be needed to produce the (hetero)sexist ideology of separate spheres that has dominated the history of liberalism in the United States.

At the same time, the structure of Abigail's letters points to their incompatibility with the ideology they otherwise espouse. If read as addressed directly to John, the letters remain a private complaint of personal injuries caused by "Masculine systems," or perhaps even a private concession to those systems. In either case, Abigail's complaint to John reinscribes the anti-democratic structure of representation within the political public sphere. If read as addressed indirectly to John through the mediation of the post, however, the letters become newsworthy—public-oriented attempts to educate her country as to the political injustice of "Masculine systems" or, at worst, public-oriented attempts to educate an audience limited to John. In either case, Abigail's complaint mobilizes the egalitarian promise of the literary public sphere against the inegalitarian practices of the political public sphere. While the first reading is consistently legible in the letters and indicates Abigail's understanding of her sexual identity as assigning her a gendered "duty," the second is by no means illegible and indicates her contradictory understanding of her political identity as expressively linked to her ungendered desire or, as the protagonist of Mary Wollstonecraft's Maria puts it, her "active sensibility, and positive virtue." While the first leads to an ideology of separate spheres characteristic of liberalism, the second leads to a civil egalitarianism characteristic of democratic republicanism. While the first understands personal letters, when circulated in public, as "lost" and reacts to that loss by reaffirming the boundary between personal and political life, the second understands them as "loosed" and reacts by investigating the civil and state institutions that police that boundary.

Given Abigail Adams's contradictory status as a lettered woman within a simultaneously patriarchal and republican political culture, her anxieties concerning the post's loose circulation of her correspondence are neither anomalous, nor simply personal. Rather, they are an effect of a structural antagonism within republicanism between literary and political models of the public sphere, between civil and state authority. The third chapter of this book traced this antagonism to an antithesis between corporeality and nationality within Washington's patriotic body. This chapter and the next investigate the effects of that same antagonism on the sexed and sexualized body. Here, I turn specifically to Hannah Foster's 1797 epistolary novel, _The Coquette_; or, _The History of Eliza Wharton_, as exemplary of the contradictions within the genre of female sentimentalism. Like many sentimental novels, _The Coquette_ explores the political relations among sex, gender, and citizenship by narrating the seduction and death of a young, unmarried, middle-class woman. As in Richardson's ur-texts of the genre (Pamela and Clarissa), Foster stages that seduction as an eroticized struggle for control over the public circulation of personal letters. "I do not think you seducible," Mrs. Richman tells Eliza, "nor was Richardson's Clarissa, till she made herself a victim, by her own indiscretion." _The Coquette_, in this sense, resembles novels like Pamela and Charlotte Temple in its attempt to educate young readers in the ideological and structural requirements of republican womanhood. But it also differs from such novels in its fuller thematization of the costs of the reduction of the literary to the political public sphere or, in short, the reduction of a republican citizenship to republican womanhood. The structural possibility of loose letters, I will argue, produces not only the dystopian plot of _The Coquette_ as a warning to young readers to avoid the seductive perils of indiscrete correspondence, but also the utopian basis of the novel's critical potential as one among many sentimental letters loosed in the early republic.
**Fantasies of Sex and Gender**

As critics have often noted, Foster’s claim on her novel’s title page that *The Coquette* is “founded in FACT” is both a convention of eighteenth-century fiction and, in this case, more than simply conventional. Nine years prior to her literary resurrection as Foster’s protagonist, Eliza Wharton, Elizabeth Whitman arrived at the Bell Tavern in Danvers, Massachusetts, gave birth to a stillborn child and died two days later of puerperal fever. At the time, her possessions were few, consisting of a little money, clothes for herself and the baby, three rings, six silver spoons, and the eighteenth-century equivalent of a laptop with modem—a writing case with paper, pens, and sealing wafers. Reprinted in newspapers throughout New England, the initial account of Whitman’s death appeared in the *Salem Mercury* on July 29, 1788:

Last Friday, a female stranger died at the Bell Tavern, in Danvers. . . . The circumstances relative to this woman are such as to excite curiosity, and interest our feelings. She was brought to the Bell in a chaise. . . . She remained at this inn till her death, in expectation of the arrival of her husband, whom she expected to come for her, and appeared anxious at his delay. . . . Her conversation, her writings and her manners, bespoke the advantage of a respectable family and good education.

The curiosity excited by the death of this “female stranger” only intensified once she was identified as Elizabeth Whitman, daughter of the Reverend Elnathan Whitman and descended, on her mother’s side, from Connecticut’s political and social elite. “Once Whitman’s identity was revealed,” writes literary historian Cathy Davidson, “ministers, journalists, and freelance moralists industriously made meaning—their meaning—of her otherwise incomprehensible life.” Like the heroines who follow in her wake, Whitman arrives at the Bell “founded in FACT” is both a convention of eighteenth-century fiction neatly summarizes one republican polemic against imaginary forms of political identification. This characterization of the anxiety produced by the novel’s confusion of fact and fiction neatly summarizes one republican polemic against imaginary forms of political identification. But it also assumes a series of oppositions that would remain problematic since novels maintain only a counter-factual relation to the real. The aspirations novels inspire are to be understood, in other words, not only quantitatively as less than realistic, but also qualitatively as the very negation of the real.

By condemning novels in this categorical fashion, the journalistic accounts frame Whitman’s death as a result of an epistemological confusion between fiction and reality, produced, in turn, by a generic confusion between the ontological claims of novels and news as antithetical forms of public discourse. Such generic attacks on the novel were ubiquitous in the early republic, and accord with one conservative variant of republican political theory. As Michael Warner has argued, critics of the novel “endlessly avowed a fear that fiction would detach readers’ sentiments from the social world of the polity, substituting a private drama of fancy.” For this form of republicanism, the problem with such a substitution is that it entails a division of personal and political life, of personality structures (“readers’ sentiments”) and structures of publicity (“the social world of the polity”). Fiction threatens, in other words, to fracture the personal-political unity promised by the two linchpins of republicanism: virtue and publication. Sentimental seduction narratives like *The Coquette* consequently mark a tension within republican letters: they promise to wed the sentimental and the social through literary publication, but consistently fail to produce this virtuous conclusion. Seduction plots thus reveal what Warner refers to as the “ideological ambivalences surrounding the personality type of modernity.” Despite Foster’s claim that her heroine’s experiences are “founded in FACT,” *The Coquette* and other early novels can only simulate the factual by publishing fictions grounded in specific social and generic conventions. This contradiction inspires contemporary defenses of novel-writing, as well as attacks on novel-reading. Both uphold, in Warner’s words, “an ideal of republican literature in which publication and the public sphere remain identical; both worry that the environment of fictitious identification might no longer entail public knowledge or civic activity.”

This characterization of the anxiety produced by the novel’s confusion of fact and fiction neatly summarizes one republican polemic against imaginary forms of political identification. But it also assumes a series of oppositions
(virtue and fancy, reality and fiction, polity and personality) that was undergoing significant revision in the late eighteenth century. The novel itself contributes to that revision since, as Habermas suggests, it can be read not only as subverting republican virtue by embracing the fanciful or fictive, but also as attacking the very distinction between fiction and reality that informs, for example, the generic distinction between novels and news: "The reality as illusion that the new genre created received its proper name in English, "fiction": it shed the character of the merely fictitious. The psychological novel allowed anyone to enter into literary action as a substitute for his [sic] own, to use the relationships between the figures, between the author, the characters, and the reader as substitute relationships for reality."36 While Warner aligns this structure of substitution with the rise of liberalism as a political regime based on imaginary (and privatized) identifications between personal and public life, Habermas tells a different story. Rather than evincing a turn away from "public knowledge" and "civic activity," the novel's realist fictions support the development of a literary sphere emerging within civil society as a public (and imaginary) space conducive to unofficial critical debate. "The privatized individuals coming together to form a public," Habermas argues, "also reflected critically and in public on what they had read, thus contributing to the process of enlightenment which they together promoted."37 In contrast to Warner, then, Habermas views fiction not (only) as corrupting, but (also) as democratizing public debate. The threat posed to classical republicanism by the novel thus results more from its recoupling, than from its decoupling of fancy and virtue, of fiction and fact, of personal sentiments and public discourse. "Fancy," in this sense, exists not as a simple negation of the real, but as an imaginary projection, as Judith Butler puts it, of the "not yet real."38

According to this second account, the novel neither dismisses all claims to newsworthiness, nor forgoes all participation in public debate concerning the social and generic conventions that constitute reality. Rather, it initiates an alternative regime for the production of the real or, in the case of sentimental novels like The Coquette, for the production of what the Salem Mercury refers to as "our feelings" concerning the public significance of events like Elizabeth Whitman's death.39 Nowhere is the importance of such "feelings" more evident than in the scenes of reading that populate early novels. In the most-read, banned book of the Enlightenment, for instance, the philosophical heroine (Therese) concludes her narrative by recounting the seductive "effects of reading and painting."40 Having tired of her pragmatic preference for masturbation (illicit sensual pleasure without the risk of pregnancy), Therese's lover (the Count) provides her with his library of erotica and proposes a wager. If she can peruse the collection every morning for two weeks without resorting to "manualism," the library is hers. If she fails, she must accept a "divorce from manualism."41 Insulted at the Count's low opin-
As one crucial basis of that culture, the institution of marriage is the most obvious target of this attack. In contrast to the news accounts that trace Whitman's death to her failure to marry wisely, Foster's novel allows its readers to shift the blame to Wharton's male suitors. Positioned between the "attentive and sincere" reverend (Mr. Boyer) and the "gay and polite" libertine (Major Sanford), Eliza faces a dilemma common to eighteenth-century heroines. Again, Therese Philosophe is exemplary. Just as that narrative begins by noting two contradictory "passions" that war within Therese ("the love of God and the love of sensual pleasure"), Eliza's first letter opens by opposing her "obedience to the will and desire of [her] parents" to her "pleasure . . . upon leaving [her] parental roof" (5). Foster aligns the former with Boyer and the latter with Sanford, but she quickly complicates this conventional opposition by committing several of Eliza's early letters to a questioning of why Boyer and Sanford should be her only two marital choices or, indeed, why she should be married at all (24). "What a pity," Eliza writes in a letter to Lucy Freeman, "... that the graces and virtues are not oftener united! They must, however, meet in the man of my choice; and till I find such a one, I shall continue to subscribe my name Eliza Wharton" (22). This "subscription" allows Eliza to maintain the patronym that she inherits from her now dead father. As such, it places her momentarily outside of paternal (or fraternal) control. In a letter to her mother, Eliza repeats this assertion of autonomy in reference to Boyer: "[I]f I must enter the connubial state, are there not others, who may be equally pleasing in their persons, and whose profession may be more conformable to my taste?" (39). The singular appearance of a third suitor for Eliza toward the middle of the novel—Mr. Emmons, a "respectable merchant" from the city—seems to have no other narrative function than to highlight the possibility of marital choices beyond either Boyer or Sanford (92).

Such modifications are not definitive, of course. Labeling Eliza "a spoiled and artful flirt who refuses good marriage offers," Baym echoes both the Chronicle's identification of Eliza as a "coquette" and Lucy Freeman's response to Eliza's objection to Boyer. "His situation in life," Lucy writes to Eliza, "is, perhaps, as elevated as you have a right to claim" (27). In contrast to both Baym and Lucy, Davidson encourages the reader to side with Eliza; her refusals of Boyer and Sanford thus become signs not of her "coquetry," but of her commitment to an emerging redefinition of marriage as a purely contractual relationship grounded in mutual affection and heartfelt sentiments, rather than economic or kinship structures. Eliza's "coquetry," in this sense, typifies what Davidson sees as the sentimental (and romance) novel's "reappropriation of choice" for female protagonists and readers: "By reading about a female character's good and bad decisions in sexual and marital matters, the early American woman could vicariously enact her own courtship and marriage fantasies. She could, at least in those fantasies, view her life as largely a consequence of her own choices and not merely as the product of others in her life." By highlighting the unpredictable (and liberatory) effects of such readerly identification, Davidson skirts Baym's claim that Eliza's story produces "[f]rom a woman's point of view . . . a demoralized literature." While Baym here assumes an immediate identity between the female reader and the seduced and abandoned Eliza, Davidson points to the element of fantasy that mediates any identification between that reader and Eliza as a potentially representative protagonist. By positing fantasy as the mediating link between identity and publication, Davidson positions the reader as an agent capable, through the force of fantasy, of choosing to identify with Eliza as an independent agent, without choosing to identify with Eliza's death as the narrative outcome of that autonomy. Fantasy, in other words, renders the reality of Eliza's seduction and abandonment potentially unreal. As Lucy points out in one of the novel's many self-reflective moments, the topics of Eliza's letters ("a bleeding heart, slighted love, and all the et ceteras of romance") chart only one of many narrative possibilities (107).

This insight into the political significance of fantasy enables Davidson to read The Coquette as historically continuous with nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminism. Rather than simply initiating a privatized "cult of true womanhood," The Coquette utters what Davidson refers to as a "smothered cry for female equality, a cry faintly but subversively heard in those sentimental novels . . . that remained steady sellers into . . . the dawnings of America's first full-fledged feminist movement." But the same insight also points to a weakness in Davidson's portrayal of Foster as, in short, a democratic feminist in conservative republican drag. The problem with this assessment lies neither in its pathos nor its anachronism, but in its failure to extend Davidson's insight concerning the phantasmatic nature of identification to her own critical practice. Davidson notes the naivete of nineteenth-century readers who viewed The Coquette as a roman à clef and attempted, in their critical fantasies, to determine its significance by establishing the historical identities of the fictional characters (Aaron Burr or Joel Barlow as Major Sanford, for example). But she also repeats that strategy by reading the novel sociologically and attempting, in her critical fantasy, to determine its significance by establishing the historical context and probable response of the "early American woman reader." In accordance with Foster's assertion that the novel is "founded in FACT," nineteenth-century readers located the factual in specific historical personalities; in accordance with the same assertion, Davidson locates the factual in a generic historical (and national) personality. While Baym and Davidson explicitly disagree as to the effect that The Coquette had and has on the "female reader," they implicitly agree that the "female reader" is a useful and realistic critical fiction with which to interrogate the novel's political implications.
This fiction of the “female reader” is obviously a commonplace of much feminist criticism. And as a strategy within a larger project aimed at the retrieval of novels written by women, it seems to me unobjectionable. As a tool for reading those novels, however, the category of the “female reader” becomes problematic both theoretically and historically. In theoretical terms, the problem with this sort of critical essentialism is that it repeats the novel’s own encoding of fiction as fact. By identifying the real as primary (in this case, the “fact” of the “female reader”), it misidentifies fantasy as secondary in relation to the real (in this case, as a “strategy” used by the “female reader” to avoid the “demoralizing” conclusions of seduction narratives). “This formulation,” Judith Butler argues, “... operates through an implicit understanding of fantasy as that which both produces and is produced by representations and which, then, makes possible and enacts precisely the referent of that representation.”

Fantasy, according to this implicit understanding of representation, both precedes and proceeds from the real, producing a paradoxical logic of identification best captured in Davidson’s claim that Foster allowed “early readers” to see, “in print, women very much like themselves.” By positioning “print” as the mediating term between “early readers” and “women,” Davidson opens a gap between publication and identification that could lead to an interrogation of fantasy as the means by which fictive narratives like The Coquette interpellate “early readers” as “women.” By asserting an immediate identity between “early readers” and “women,” however, Davidson equates publication and identification. In doing so, she produces an uncritical fantasy of identification that becomes convincing only when, in Butler words, its “own phantasmatic status is eclipsed and renamed as the real.”

In historical terms, the theoretical problems raised by this foreclosure of fantasy are doubly significant since the late eighteenth century marks a pivotal moment in the development of the generic category of the “female reader.” Historians Londa Schiebinger and Thomas Laqueur have established that the democratic revolutions in France and the United States coincided with a shift from a one-sex model of the human body as differing only by degree along an “axis whose telos was male” to a two-sex model of “radical dimorphism, of biological divergence.” An anatomy and physiology of incommensurability, Laqueur writes, “replaced a metaphysics of hierarchy in the representation of woman in relation to man.” In response to the revolutionary assertion that the “mind has no sex,” eighteenth-century anatomists discovered a direct correspondence between bodies and minds, between sex and gender. “The essence of sex,” explained one French physician in 1775, “is not confined to a single organ but extends, through more or less perceptible nuances, into every part.” In the United States, Benjamin Rush’s Lectures on the Mind both confirmed this conclusion and drew from it a now familiar political moral. “I hold it to be essential,” Rush asserts, “…that there should exist exactly those degrees of inferiority and contrast between the two sexes which have been described. Many of the disorders, not only of domestic, but of political society, I believe originate in the inversion of this order.” Alongside contemporary ideologies based in racial logics of embodiment that reconciled the egalitarian promise of republicanism and the economic reality of chattel slavery, sexual dimorphism provided a justification for gender inequality. As Nancy Armstrong and Robyn Wiegman have suggested, sentimentalism’s focus on bodies and affect contributes to this naturalization of sexual difference when it reduces the politics of gender relations to the corporeal “reality” of the sexed body. From Pamela to Emma, Armstrong concludes, sentimental fiction transforms “political information into the discourse of sexuality.”

Given these varied objections to the critical fiction of the “female reader,” the problem with Davidson’s account of sentimental novels like The Coquette is that it replicates Foster’s own contribution to the dimorphic logic of the modern sex-gender system. Repeating Baym’s often-cited description of sentimentalism as writing “by and about women,” Davidson stages the interpretive controversy over Elizba Whitman’s death as a battle between opposed communities of male “moralists” and female “readers.” Of the seventy-four letters that make up The Coquette, fifty-eight mediate homosocial relations between women, while only six mediate heterosocial relations between women and men. For Davidson, this preponderance of letters written to and from women indicates the novel’s public affirmation of what she refers to as “woman-talk: women confiding, chiding, warning, disagreeing, and then confronting one another.” Davidson here notes the agonistic nature of such “talk,” but her argument resolves any dissent through reference to the apparently self-evident category “woman.” By using this category to unify the “talk” of the politically and economically diverse characters who make up The Coquette, Davidson overlooks the problem that lies at the center of both the novel and much critical response to it—that of wedding sentimentality and sociality by deploying the category “woman” as a public site of readerly identification. “From the melancholy story of Eliza Wharton,” writes Lucy in her final letter, “let the American fair learn to reject with disdain every insinuation derogatory to their true dignity and honor. Let them despise, and for ever banish the man, who can glory in the seduction of innocence and the ruin of reputation” (168). While Davidson and Baym read this concluding moral as addressed to an already existing “female reader,” I will argue that it constructs that category by encouraging a fantasy of identification between the republican citizen whose “mind has no sex” and the sentimental subject for whom anatomy is (only) in the process of becoming destiny.
Sex, Gender, and Horsemanship

Like the figures of the “coquette” in the journalistic accounts of Elizabeth Whitman’s death and the “Watertown belle” in Abigail Adams’s letter to John, the figure of Eliza as seducible positions her at the boundary of the “American fair.” If read teleologically, Foster’s account of her heroine’s indiscretions secure that boundary by delineating the norms of “dignity and honor” that ideally protect republican women against the designs of male seducers like Sanford. But this reading does not tell the whole story. It is certainly significant that Foster highlights the duplicity of the sexual double standard by positioning Eliza between Boyer and Sanford as symmetrically undesirable male suitors. If nothing else, this narrative deviation from the earlier news reports expands the boundaries of the “American fair” by complicating any facile categorization of Whitman as a “coquette.” But this deviation itself relies upon a second, arguably more significant pair of oppositions. Foster locates Eliza amid a chorus of specifically middle-class women (Lucy Freeman/Sumner, Julia Granby, Mrs. Richman) flanked, on one side, by aristocratic women like the “agreeable” but “soulless” Miss Laurence and, on the other, by lower-class women typified by the circus performers who appear as part of Lucy’s censorial reflections on public entertainments (21, 34). Just as Boyer and Sanford mark the two extremes Eliza must negotiate in her search for a republican husband, Miss Laurence and the circus performers mark the extremes she must avoid if she is to move from the margins to the center of republican womanhood. Both Eliza and the reader must learn to defend their “dignity and honor” from the “snares,” as Rowson puts it in her preface to Charlotte Temple, “not only of the other sex, but from the more dangerous arts of the profligate of [their] own.”

The pitfalls of an identification with characters like Miss Laurence are relatively straightforward. In contrast to the middle-class women who provide the novel’s moral center, Miss Laurence is as bad a reader of generic and social conventions as the news reports made Whitman out to be. Educated in aristocratic fashion, she lacks the insight necessary to plumb the immoral and impoverished reality behind the fortune-hunting Sanford’s “superficial, ensnaring endowments” (58). Foster leaves little doubt as to where such misguided faith in the class-based conventions of public representation leads: Miss Laurence winds up unhappily married to a second “fortune hunter,” Mr. Laiton (98). At the opposite end of the social spectrum, the circus performers present a more complicated and revealing set of problems. In a none-too-subtle warning to both Eliza and the reader, Lucy prefaces her comments on the circus by cautioning against tragic drama. “Death,” she writes in reference to a performance of Romeo and Juliet, “is too serious a matter to be sported with! An open grave cannot be a source of amusement to any considerate mind” (112–13). She then quickly moves to the circus performers whom she condemns not, like Miss Laurence, for their excessive attention to the conventions of public representation, but for their inattention to those same conventions. “The circus,” Lucy observes, “is a fashionable resort of late, but not agreeable to me”:

I think it inconsistent with the delicacy of a lady, even to witness the indecorums, which are practiced there; especially when the performers of equestrian feats are of our own sex. To see a woman depart so far from the female character, as to assume the masculine habit and attitudes; and appear entirely indiffident, even to the externals of modesty is truly disgusting, and ought not to be countenanced by our attendance, much less by our approbation. (113)

The letter concludes by recommending an antidote to both the theater and the circus. The “rational and refined amusement” of “Mr. Bowen’s museum,” Lucy suggests, “will bear frequent review without palling on the taste” (113).

Foster positions Miss Laurence and the circus performers antithetically: Miss Laurence’s aristocratic education makes her too conventionally feminine (vulnerable to men of “show and fashion”), while the problem with the circus performers is that they do not appear to be feminine enough (“indifferent, even to the externals of modesty”). But together these two extremes allow Foster to achieve one of the prerequisites of any successful ideology—to portray an historically specific code of behavior (middle-class femininity, in this case) as universal. Miss Laurence and the circus performers fall outside the category of the “American fair” due to their inappropriate enactments of the relation between sex and gender, not because of their respective class positions. As Armstrong suggests, this depoliticization of class difference through reference to naturalized gender conventions is typical of both the sentimental novel and contemporary middle-class reform movements. In his “Thoughts upon Female Education,” for instance, Rush provides what could be taken as a gloss of Miss Laurence’s romantic fate. Upper-class educational practices, he argues, exaggerate gender difference by depriving women of the “useful branches of literature,” thus rendering them susceptible to the “intrigues of the British novel” and the “refinements of Asiatic vice.” In his Lectures on the Mind, Rush supplements this argument for educational reform by fixing its limit at the anatomical division between male and female bodies: “There is an original difference in the bodies and minds of men and women, stamped upon both in the womb by the hand of nature. This difference shews itself in childhood, independent of precept and/or example; e.g., who ever saw a boy amuse himself with a doll? or a girl anticipate riding on horseback, by straddling or riding a stick?” That the specter of female equestrianism haunts both The Coquette and the Lectures is as striking as it may be coincidental. Like Lucy, Rush...
conjures the image of female masculinity (and male femininity) in order to portray emerging middle-class gender conventions as universal, as a reflection of anatomical facts rather than an effect of political relations.

This comparison disguises an important difference, however. Foster may agree with Rush that gender conventions are grounded in the (sexed) body, but Lucy’s judgment of taste is not as simple as his anatomy lesson. For Rush, the question of the relation between the body and the body politic—between sex and gender—is merely rhetorical. Sex (the “original difference in the bodies and minds of men and women”) naturally expresses itself as gender (girls play with dolls, boys straddle sticks). Because this relation exists “independent of precept and/or example,” any critical discussion of either sexual or gender (cross-)identification can only lead to utopian speculation: “The notion started by the ingenious and eloquent female author of The Rights of Women, that all the difference between the talents and the virtues of the two sexes is the effect of education, is as hypothetical as Helvetius’s notion of all the variety in human talents depending on the same cause.” In contrast to this biological determinism, Lucy portrays the relation of sex and gender as mediated by neither anatomy nor nature, but by taste. Equisetarianism is unsuitable to the “female character” not because it is counter-factual (she testifies that women may straddle sticks), but because it is distasteful. This substitution of aesthetic for anatomical judgment both reframes the question of the relation between sex and gender, and provides one typically sentimental answer. In response to democratic feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges who attacked the masculinist foundation of contemporary republicanism, many social conservatives drew upon the discourse of manners, refinement, and taste in order to shore up patriarchal gender conventions. It is this counter-revolutionary discourse that Norbert Elias refers to as “civilizing” and G. J. Barker-Benfield as “sentimentalizing.” Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France provides a notable example of this conservative defense of sentimental refinement, while Foster’s deployment of the language of taste and disgust positions The Coquette within the same political field.

As a metaphor for aesthetic sensibility, taste is perhaps most familiar from Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Judgment where it tends to be shorn of any sentimental residue. “The Iroquois Sachem” who “was pleased in Paris by nothing more than by the cook shops” demonstrates, according to Kant, his inability to distinguish between two forms of taste: the sensual and the aesthetic. While the former confirms the truism that “everyone has his own taste (the taste of sense),” only the latter can justify a “rightful claim upon everyone’s assent.” Yet the rigor with which Kant polices this distinction (a rigor that leads him at times to abandon the sentimental altogether) disguises an historical (and etymological) continuity between sensual and aesthetic judgments. Kant exploits the metaphor of taste precisely because it links the abstract requirements of aesthetic universality to the experience of sensual embodiment. The “Sachem” may not yet be able to render universal aesthetic judgments, but neither can Kant’s preferences determine without his assent what such judgments will reveal. The metaphor of taste thus contains a paradox since it confirms the autonomy of every body’s sense perceptions while evoking, at the same time, what Kant refers to as a sensus communis—a socio-aesthetic consensus that transcends without violating individual sensibilities. Kant’s negotiation of this fine line between autonomy and heteronomy requires a delicate balance between identification and projection. Playing a role analogous to that of the circus performers in The Coquette, the “Sachem” must be othered within the Critique without becoming alien to it. His aesthetic judgments may vary from those of enlightened Europeans, but Kant warns that such variations ought not lead to skeptical or relativistic conclusions. The metaphor of taste prevents this (multicultural) outcome by mapping a route from bodily sensation to universal aesthetics, from the “Sachem’s” actual preference for Parisian “cook shops” to his theoretical inclusion in the “collective reason of humanity.”

As the ideological antithesis of the universal judgment of taste, Lucy’s expression of disgust negotiates a similarly fine line between autonomy and heteronomy, between identification and projection. The circus performers share Lucy’s sexual identity as “women,” while their deviation from middle-class gender norms (their adoption of “the masculine habit and attitudes”) provokes her critical judgment of them. “Ladies,” Lucy warns, ought not to “countenance” “women” who “depart from the female character.” This complicated prescription could lead to debate concerning the “habit and attitudes” of the “female character,” but Lucy’s disgust forecloses that possibility. Like the tears that secure gender norms elsewhere in this and other sentimental novels, disgust refers questions of gender normativity to the presumably unmediated experience of bodily sensation. This response echoes Rush’s biological determinism, but with a difference. Lucy agrees with Rush that gender norms emerge from the body, but the body to which she refers gains a gender identity on sentimental rather than anatomical grounds. Where Rush conceives of the feminine virtues of “modesty” and “delicacy” as a reflex of a sexually dimorphic anatomy, Lucy views them as (natural) resources available through an aesthetic education of the senses. The resulting gap between sex (“women”) and gender (“ladies”) frees the circus performers from the strictures of Rush’s anatomical destiny, but it also deprives them of the social and political benefits accrued by subjects whose bodies are trained to the normalizing code of sentimental gender aesthetics. “Like sensibility,” Barker-Benfield observes, “taste” expressed distinction, not only from ‘the world’ but above the ‘vulgar.’ Paired with Eliza’s dismissal of Miss Lawrence as “soulless,” Lucy’s disgust at the circus performers allows Foster to construct a specifically middle-class femininity—a sen-
sus communis—that is both theoretically universal (authorized by the sensations of any body) and practically exclusive (limited to bodies trained in the codes of sentimentality).

That *The Coquette* ends with Eliza’s death marks her individual failure to make the transition from *lumpen* to “true” womanhood, from sentiment to sentimentality. But it also does little to disrupt the hegemony of middle-class gender norms. Pictured in the novel’s concluding letter, Eliza’s gravestone redeems her by transforming her failure into a lesson: “Let candor throw a veil over her frailties, / For great was her charity to others. / She sustained the last / Painful scene, far from every friend; / And exhibited an example / Of calm resignation” (169). Where the “open graves” of tragic dramas like *Romeo and Juliet* “distress” “sensibility” by “rack[ing] the soul with grief,” the closing of Eliza’s grave stages her death as an exhibit which pacifies and contains the bodily sensations that it relies upon and provokes (112–13). This conclusion ought to be neither surprising nor fully satisfying. As Barker-Benfield points out (and any reader of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* knows), deathbed and graveyard scenes mark a critical tension within the culture of sensibility.77 *The Coquette* begins by evoking sentimentalism’s generic commitment to the authenticity of individual sensibility as a bulwark against heteronomous authority. And Eliza enacts this ideal in her opening letters when she relegates social conventions concerning her subjective experience of grief to the realm of the “fashionable”: “To have our enjoyments arrested by the empty compliments of unthinking persons, for no other reason than a compliance with fashion is to be treated in a manner, which the laws of humanity forbid” (9). By the end of the novel, however, sentimentalism’s ideological commitment to the collective management of sensation prevails: grief harnesses the autonomy of any aleatory sensibility to the middle-class code of sentimental femininity. Like the “refined amusement” of Mr. Bowen’s museum, the “example” of Eliza’s “calm resignation” teaches a lesson that passes “without palling the taste” from exhibitor to spectator, from Eliza’s “weeping friends” to the “strangers” whose tears “watered her grave” (169).

The Ends of the Epistolary

The reduction of sentiment to sentimentality ultimately secured by Eliza’s death has more than one effect in sentimental novels like *The Coquette*. At times, it anchors a conservative idealization of conjugal domesticity as women’s natural vocation. Boyer, for example, reconciles Eliza’s subjective “enjoyment” with the objective requirements of what would become the “woman’s sphere” when he describes her as the type of “cheerful wife . . . necessary to a person of a studious and sedentary life” (11). Mrs. Richman echoes Boyer when she informs Eliza that “[i]t is the glory of the marriage state . . . to refine, by circumscribing our enjoyments. Here we can repose in safety” (24). At other points, the same reduction opens onto less restrictive possibilities. Not only does Eliza imagine a divergence from the marriage plot when she “recoil[s] at the thought of immediately forming a connection, which must confine [her] to the duties of domestic life” (29), but she and Mrs. Richman also reject the belief of Miss Laurence and her mother that the public world of “politics” does not “belong to the ladies.” Presented in her drawing room, Mrs. Richman’s response aligns her with Eliza. “Miss Wharton and I,” she retorts, “beg leave to differ:

We think ourselves interested in the welfare and prosperity of our country; and, consequently, claim the right of inquiring into those affairs, which may conduce to, or interfere with the common weal. We shall not be called to the senate or the field to assert its privileges, and defend its rights, but we shall feel for the honor and safety of our friends and connections . . . Why then should the love of country be a masculine passion only? Why should government . . . be wholly excluded from our observation. (44)

Applauded by her “gentlemen” auditors as “truly Roman” and “truly republican,” Mrs. Richman’s speech drives a wedge between sex and citizenship, between the “masculine passion” of patriotism and a republican interest in the “common weal.” Along with Eliza, Mrs. Richman may be excluded as a woman from the official functions of the “senate” and “field,” but her appeal argues for and from within the theoretically ungendered and democratic space of the literary public sphere.

The staging of this speech in the Richman’s drawing room highlights its structural implications. As Habermas and others have argued, the historical significance of the eighteenth-century salon lay in its status as an unofficial public space of literary and political debate. Like other such spaces (the male-dominated coffeehouse, for example), the salon both secured and bridged the boundary dividing private and public life. “The line between private and public spheres,” Habermas observes, “extended right through the home. The privatized individuals stepped out of the intimacy of their living rooms into the public sphere of the *salon*.”78 What is “republican” about Mrs. Richman’s appeal is that it exploits this structural interpenetration of private and public spheres in order to critique the ideological separation of those spheres along gender lines. Her appeal assumes that citizens’ actions in the unofficial public sphere of the literary salon bear only a contingent relation to the (gendered) attributes of their (sexed) bodies. Such an appeal suggests, in turn, a central contradiction within sentimental novels like *The Coquette*. Drawing on the sensationalist and materialist psychology of the early Enlightenment, such novels deploy a conception of sentiment that both grounds subjectivity in the experience of the body and dissociates
that experience from any socially sanctioned forms of embodiment. Sentiment consequently refers to an array of bodily sensations that provide both the site and the ground of debate concerning the relations (or nonrelations) among sex, gender, and citizenship. The tension between these two uses of sentiment—as site and as ground of debate—produces an ambiguous model of identification in *The Coquette* since it interpellates individuals like Eliza and Mrs. Richman into the public space of the literary salon both as citizens capable of debating the political effects of sex and gender, and as subjects whose (gender) politics are determined by their (sexual) identity. This dual interpellation allows (and even requires) Mrs. Richman to speak as an ungendered citizen of the republic (one who “feels” for her country), even when the content of that speech prescribes the gender norms central to the conservative attack on (re)public(an) women.

Speeches like Mrs. Richman’s thus point to a fissure within the genre of sentimentalism between its structural commitment to the unfettered publication of bodily and intimate sensations on the one hand, and its ideological commitment to policing the boundaries of the public sphere along gender lines on the other. Outside of the novel, the same fissure reappears in Foster’s signature. As “a Lady of Massachusetts” or, later, “Mrs. Hannah Foster,” Foster participates in the literary public sphere, even as she grounds her participation in her status as a married woman, a “feme covert” in the eyes of the state. While the speech and the signature assume a sexed and gendered body, they also reveal the structural contradictions within a sentimental code of (sexual) embodiment that can be secured only through a disavowal of the (gender) politics of its own public construction. This contradiction is replayed in Eliza’s own comments on public entertainments. In response to Lucy’s letter, Eliza suggests that public stages like the circus and theater need better supervision. “I think it a pity,” she writes, “they have not female managers for the theater. I believe it would be under much better regulations, than at present” (124). Eliza’s recourse to specifically “female” managers as a safeguard against ideological misrepresentation expands, without betraying the aesthetics of sexual dimorphism upon which the sentimental discourse of womanhood rests. In this sense, her suggestion foreshadows what Paula Baker has referred to as the “domestication of America politics”—the metaphorical extension of the duties of wives and mothers to the public and political spheres. But her language also contains more subversive implications. Where Lucy’s judgment of (dis)taste figures bodily sensation as expressively linked to sentimental gender norms, Eliza’s reliance on “managers” to enforce those norms highlights their strategic and regulatory nature. If one assumes that “female managers” invariably adhere to the middle-class norms of the “female character,” Eliza’s prescription averts the scandal provoked by the circus performers’ adoption of the “masculine habit and attitudes.” Without this assumption, however, Eliza’s prescription merely repeats that scandal.

Foster’s thematization of this contradiction through a characterization of the unmarried and childless Eliza is no coincidence, of course. In their response to Miss Laurence and her mother, Mrs. Richman and Eliza together argue against the belief that a “passion” for national politics betrays the “female character.” Though never explicitly attacked in *The Coquette*, this defense of female citizenship is vulnerable to a counter-argument central to later revisions of republicanism. Nineteenth-century sentimental reformers and domestic ideologues typically worried that virtually any form of civic activity would repeat the transgressive conflation of the “female character” with the “masculine habits and attitudes” that Lucy and Eliza elsewhere attribute to the circus performers. For Mrs. Richman, this counter-argument holds little force since she shares with many of those reformers a (gendered and nonpolitical) identity as mother and wife that provides her with a private life acceptable for publication. For Eliza, however, the same argument maintains its force since Foster constructs her identity around the poles of fancy and sensation, not public (gender) and private (sex). Eliza begins the novel by discovering the “unusual sensation” of “pleasure” upon leaving her “parental roof” (5). A few pages later, she generalizes from this singular experience: “[The mind, after being confined at home for a while, sends the imagination abroad in quest of new treasures, and the body may as well accompany it, for ought I can see” (15). In each case, the conjugal home Mrs. Richman idealizes becomes a space of confinement. “Marriage,” Eliza tells Mrs. Richman, “is the tomb of friendship. It appears to me a very selfish state” (24). Like the “protean” Sanford, Eliza refuses marriage in order to act upon a libertarian potential common to democratic political theory and sentimental aesthetics. “But whether the fancy ought not to be consulted in our settlement in life,” Eliza writes in a statement that nicely defines her character, “is with me the question” (68).

Eliza’s opening letters provide one answer to this question. In the republic she begins by imagining, political virtue involves the right to the public pursuit of what Thomas Jefferson referred to twenty years earlier as “happiness.” In this context, Olympe de Gouges (the author of the French “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen”) provides a transnational analogue for Foster’s “coquette.” As Joan Scott argues, the critical and revolutionary potential of the imagination served as the battleground upon which feminists like de Gouges confronted their critics. “She likened herself to the great thinkers of the age,” Scott writes, “not in her command of philosophy and political theory, but in her ability to dream: ‘But don’t expect me to discuss these matters in political and philosophical discourses; only in dreams have I been able to pursue them.’” As in the journalistic accounts of
Elizabeth Whitman's death, this admission of fancy as a source of social and political autonomy could be marshaled in retrospect as evidence of an inevitably tragic fate. Hence, La feuille du salut public eulogized de Gouges as follows: "Olympe de Gouges, born with an exalted imagination, mistook her delirium for an inspiration of nature. She wanted to be a man of state. She seems the law has punished this conspirator for having forgotten the virtues that belong to her sex." 83 Eliza’s mother, for one, agrees with this intertwining of sex, gender, and citizenship. "With regard to [Boyer’s] being a dependent situation," Mrs. Wharton asks, "what is not so? Are we not all links in the great chain of society; some more, some less important; but each upheld by others, throughout the confederated whole?" (41). Merging Renaissance social theory (the "great chain of society") with the language of contemporary Federalism (the "confederated whole"), Mrs. Wharton envisions society as an indivisible space of positive identities. Within this republic, fancy plays no part. Virtue involves knowing and maintaining one’s divinely ordained place since, as John Winthrop puts it in "A Modell of Christian Charity," the "glory of [God’s] power" is revealed in his "ordering all these differences for the preservation and good of the whole." 84

Echoing Lucy’s response to the circus performers, Eliza’s correspondents agree with Mrs. Richman’s advice, but for different reasons. Concerned that Eliza’s "fancy will mislead [her]," Lucy responds to her declaration of independence by reconciling the freedom that imagination provides with the constraints of middle-class gender norms: "Act then with that modest freedom, that dignified unreserve which bespeaks conscious rectitude and sincerity of heart" (26–27). One letter later, Lucy refines this advice: "You are very tenacious of your freedom, as you call it; but it is a play on words. A man of Mr. Boyer’s honor and good sense will never abridge any privileges which virtue can claim" (31). In contrast to Mrs. Wharton, whose emphasis on social (inter)dependence neglects the values of sentimental autonomy, Lucy urges Eliza to follow her "heart." But she also assumes that its "modest" passions will remain within the institutional bounds of marriage and family. "Slight not the opinion of the world," she writes, "We are dependent beings; and while the smallest traces of virtuous sensibility remain, we must feel the force of that dependence" (133). This emphasis on "dependence" echoes Mrs. Wharton’s earlier letter. But the form of dependence Lucy imagines is grounded neither in divine law (Mrs. Wharton), nor in secular law (La feuille du salut public). It relies instead on the concept of "virtuous sensibility." The paradox of a "dignified unreserve" captures the tension within this attempt to wed virtue and sensation, "conscious rectitude" and the "sincerity of the heart." Like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s demand that the reader "feel right" at the end of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Lucy merges a sentimental faith in the authenticity of sensation with a moral authority that gains its force from—to use Stowe’s terms—the "strength," "health," and "justice" of those sensations. 85 The authority of the law, in other words, relies not on the heteronomous power of either God or the state, but on the sentimental body’s autonomous expression of (moral) sensation.

This exchange of opinions between Eliza and her correspondents reflects pressing ideological differences between competing models of republicanism during the 1790s. 86 Read structurally, though, the same exchange reveals an important similarity among those ideologies. As in all epistolary novels, differences of opinion are mediated through the publication and exchange of personal letters. 87 This insistence on literary correspondence as a means of ideological synthesis relies, in turn, on a fundamental opposition between ideology and publication, between the conclusions of public opinion and the structures of the public sphere. "Politics," to paraphrase Mrs. Richman, "belongs to the ladies" because the literary ideal of the public sphere is universal, neither male nor female, masculine nor feminine. This intersection of ideology and structure pinpoints the crux of the novel’s (feminist) politics, as well as Baym’s and Davidson’s readings of the novel. What is at stake in both contexts is the relation between an aesthetics of sentimental embodiment and its public mediation and, in this sense, it is appropriate that Butler’s structural critique of essentialist feminism illuminates both the novel and its critical reception. Writing against feminist advocates for state censorship of pornographic representations, Butler argues that the anti-pornography position relies on an internally contradictory understanding of the relation between fantasy and identity: "The fixed subject-position of ‘women’ functions within the feminist discourse in favor of censorship as a phantasm that suppresses multiple and open possibilities for identification, a phantasm, in other words, that refuses its own possibilities as fantasy through its self-stabilization as the real." Opposed to the regulation of publication by any state (even a "feminist" state), Butler argues instead for a structural expansion of unofficial public spaces of ideological production: a "proliferation of representations and sites of discursive production." "The task," she concludes, "must be to safeguard the open production of [identity] categories, whatever the risk." 88

Butler’s argument resonates with The Coquette because Foster attributes Eliza’s seduction and death to her adoption of a parallel strategy in relation to both her male suitors and her female correspondents. Throughout the first half of the novel, Eliza’s personal letters maintain an expressive relation to her body that blocks the one-way path from sentiment to sentimentality, from subjective experience to social norm. As Michel Foucault writes of the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin, she allows one to "imagine that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity
of its pleasures.” Like Eliza herself at the beginning of the novel, these diverse bodily sensations are loosened without reserve in the literary public sphere. “I must write to you the impulses of my mind,” Eliza tells Lucy, “or I must not write at all” (8). By the second half of the novel, though, the relation between Eliza’s “impulses” and her letters changes. Her sensational publications are privatized (relegated to a “clandestine intercourse” with Sanford that the reader never sees), while her public letters lose their counter-hegemonic force and, eventually, vanish altogether (87). The first indication of this shift appears when Eliza reflects upon Boyer’s marriage to Maria Selby: “This theme carries away my pen, if I but touch upon it. And no wonder; for it is the sole exercise of my thoughts” (109). A subsequent letter to Julia reveals the degree of Eliza’s alienation from all epistolary models of sentimental publication. “Writing,” she explains, “is an employment which suits me not at the present. It was pleasing formerly, and therefore, by recalling the idea of circumstances and events which frequently occupied my pen in happier days, it now gives me pain” (134). This rejection of writing deprives Eliza of publication as a means of expressive self-determination by confirming a separation of public and private spheres. Having eschewed marriage, she lacks the conjugal home that generates and shelters the audience-oriented subjectivities of her middle-class correspondents. The corrosive effects of this lack are confirmed by Foster’s narrative: childbirth (out of wedlock) and death (in a public tavern) collapse the writing and the sexual body by “disclosing” the involuntary effects of Eliza’s “intercourse” with Sanford (146).

This shift in Eliza’s letters could be explained thematically. Like Abigail Adams, Eliza arguably acts as a strategist, opting to censor her letters due to the critical judgments they would inevitably provoke. The problem with this explanation is that it assumes a liberal separation of personal motivations and public opinion without accounting for it. It overlooks, in other words, the structural significance of the displacement of Eliza’s initial understanding of personal and public life as internally linked through sentimental publication. Foster validates Eliza’s faith in expressive letters in her advice to young writers published, a year after The Coquette, in The Boarding School. In a chapter on “Writing and Arithmetic,” Foster’s fictional preceptress (Mrs. Williams) advocates “the epistolary” as a method of “exchanging sentiments.” “Ease, frankness, simplicity, and sincerity,” she explains, “should be its leading traits.” Eliza adheres to this advice when she writes the “impulses of [her] mind” in her early letters, but she never manages to follow the contradictory advice Mrs. Williams provides on the following page:

Your characters during life, and even when you shall sleep in the dust, may rest on the efforts of your pens. Beware then how you employ them. Let not the merits of your attainments in this noble art be degraded by improper subjects for its exercise. Suffer not the expectation of secrecy to induce you to indulge your pens upon subjects, which you would blush to have exposed. In this way your characters may be injured, and your happiness destroyed.

The “characters” such letters construct are divided between two demands. Mrs. Williams advocates the “ease, frankness, simplicity, and sincerity” typical of Eliza’s early letters, while she simultaneously requires a strategic self-management of all literary “subjects,” proper or improper. Like other sentimental reflexes (tears, taste, disgust), the “blush” of the letter writer ideally links bodily sensation and sentimental norm. But as Eliza quickly learns, even blushes may expose a secret no more authentic than the “tear of sensibility” that Sanford feigns (29).

Foster never reconciles these two demands. The pens that write in The Boarding School are both strategically and expressively linked to the hands that hold them, while Eliza’s will to maintain the sort of expressive relation between personality and publicity conventionally valued in eighteenth-century letters dooms her to silence in The Coquette. Indeed, the alienation from her pen that Eliza experiences toward the end of the novel can be read as the Janus face of the strategic use of the pen that Mrs. Williams advocates in The Boarding School. Like Miss Laurence and the circus performers, Eliza lacks the desire (and the structures) that would enable her to differentiate personal (sexual or gender) identity from publication. As a result, she remains unable to use her pen to construct an identity around the poles of sex and gender—to position herself within what is referred to in the vocabulary of late-twentieth-century liberalism as an identity politics. Within most varieties of republican political discourse, this resistance to an identitarian and strategic use of publication would be understood as a form of political virtue; within the novel, the same resistance introduces a threat of corruption into an otherwise virtuous society. Eliza’s ungendered sensations may free her from the constraints of middle-class gender norms, but her fate marks the cost of that freedom. Her seduction, her withdrawal from the literary public sphere and, finally, her death narrate the future of a republican citizen who fails to act, in public and private, as a properly gendered subject. Any more democratic conception of virtue as grounded in citizens’ autonomous civic activity is, in The Coquette, an inevitable failure due to the vulnerability of any woman outside of the home. This inevitability explains the sudden introduction of Eliza’s brother at the end of the novel to confirm her death and retrieve her belongings (162). Foster’s deferral to fraternal authority is necessary because, she insists, Sanford’s “snare” are “too deeply laid for any one to escape who had the least warmth in her constitution, or affection in her heart” (158). Sanford’s (masculine) control of public space provides narrative confirmation of Mrs. Richman’s liberal defense of the “marriage state”: “Here we can repose in safety.”
There is one exception to this general rule. As the novel concludes, Julia Granby remains publicly active and unmarried. Sanford himself provides a gloss of this exception. "She is a most alluring object," he assures the reader, "but the dignity of her manners forbid all assaults upon her virtue" (140). Julia escapes from the threat of (hetero)ssexual seduction because her "manners" exclude passion from public life. This exception becomes the rule of much nineteenth-century sentimentalism. In Uncle Tom's Cabin, for instance, Rachel Halliday provides Stowe with an emblem of the sexed and desexualized heroine: "Bards have written of the cestus of Venus, that turned the heads of all the world in successive generations. We had rather, and other passionate heroines, the tactic of marginalizing sexuality as an "improper subject" within the genre of sentimentalism holds little promise. Not only does the "sensation" of (sexual) "pleasure" lead to seduction that leads to pregnancy that leads to death, but death enables the publication of a narrative that censors the activities of sexed and (hetero)sexualized citizens in public. According to Mrs. Williams, of course, Eliza's historical predecessor Elizabeth Whitman should have known that her life and letters would be used to such posthumous ends. "Your characters during life," Mrs. Williams warns, "and even when you shall sleep in the dust, may rest on the efforts of your pens." Foster exploits this inevitability by penning letters for Whitman, but she also marks the alienation involved in such posthumous forms of citizenship. "I know not what to say," Eliza writes in one of the orthodox letters Whitman never wrote, "my brain is on fire. . . . These letters have almost distracted me; but they are written, and I am comparatively easy." (150). No longer easily linking sensation and publication, such letters become sites of nervous disorder. For Eliza, death lies at the end of the epistolary, if only because she fancied that by taking pleasure in epistles as ends in themselves she could reconcile the autonomy of bodily sensation to the heteronomous demands of the sentimental code.

Sentiment and the Public Sphere

Partly an elegiac response to Elizabeth Whitman's death, The Coquette is equally and more importantly a pedagogical response which capitalizes on that death in order to publicize a fantasy of sexual identity—of a sexed body—unmediated by the (gender) politics of (sexual) identification. While many of the ideological effects of this fantasy are historically specific to the 1790s, the structures that condition it have a longer and more varied existence. As Elizabeth Grosz points out, modern identity-based political movements (liberal feminism, in this case) rely upon a similarly paradoxical un-

understanding of embodiment. "The body," Grosz writes, "provides a point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable, a point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and other." By installing the body as both a ground and a site of political contestation, sentimental novels like The Coquette provide a prehistory of this paradox and require an analogous rethinking. The sentimental (non)distinction between sensation and norm—between sentiment and sentimentality—transcends the body by locating, within it, the political (non)distinction between citizenship and subjection. This paradox produces a contradictory model of identification in The Coquette since the novel interpellates readers, first, as republican citizens of the literary public sphere and, only second, as gendered subjects of the nation-state. Foster attempts to resolve this ideological contradiction by reducing the bodily sensations Eliza experiences and inspires to a sentimental aesthetics of sexual embodiment, but such a reduction remains structurally impossible as long as it can be secured only through publication. Foster's letters, in other words, advocate the sort of sentimental identity politics typical of later liberalisms, yet they do so only within and against a republican understanding of all subjectivity as audience-oriented and publicly mediated.

The significance of this paradox emerges with particular clarity in the sentimental seduction narrative that Mary Wollstonecraft left unfinished at her death in 1797. The story of a woman unjustly imprisoned by her husband, Maria concludes with notes in which the heroine (Maria) defends her lover against the legal charge of seduction brought against him by her husband. In those fragments, Maria pleads guilty to adultery, but argues that the charge of seduction cannot be justified since it deprives her of any sense of autonomy by positioning her between the competing, but equally heteronomous authority of her husband and her lover. "To force me to give my fortune," she explains, "I was imprisoned. . . . I met the man charged with seducing me. We became attached—I deemed and shall ever deem myself free. The death of my babe dissolved the only tie which subsisted between me and my, what is termed, lawful husband." Maria's argument participates in the emerging ideology of republican womanhood: only the death of her child frees her from what she refers to elsewhere as the "duties of a wife and mother." Yet Wollstonecraft frames that argument so that duty remains both responsive to Maria's sensations and inseparable from her abstract principles. "The sarcasms of society, and the condemnations of a mistaken world," writes Wollstonecraft, "were nothing to her, compared with acting contrary to those feelings which were the foundation of her principles." The revolutionary implications of this recourse to sensation as a source of political autonomy are not lost on Maria's paternalistic judge.
Echoing her earlier description of marriage as having "bastilled [her] for life," the court rules against Maria's introduction of "French principles in public and private life."\(^98\) Because it allows a woman to "plead her feelings, as an excuse or palliation of infidelity," Maria's defense threatens to open "a flood-gate for immorality."\(^99\) Following a similarly sentimental logic, Federalist judges in the United States acted throughout the 1790s to "protect" both "seducible" women and the "virtue" of the social order by restricting, if not eliminating more democratic divorce, property, rape, and inheritance laws passed during the 1770s and 1780s.\(^100\)

Nor are the implications of Wollstonecraft's recourse to sensation lost on later sentimental writers. Accepting the reduction of sensation to sex, authors ranging from Fanny Fern to Harriet Jacobs articulated what Foucault refers to in *The History of Sexuality* as a "reverse-discourse."\(^101\) By adopting the dimorphic logic of the modern sex-gender system as the foundation upon which demands for social and political equality rest, these authors rely upon their identification of and with the category of "woman" in order to transform the legal and political status of both properly and, at times, improperly gendered subjects of the republic. "O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood," Jacobs writes in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, "whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely."\(^102\) Itself an abolitionist refiguring of the conventions of the seduction narrative, *Incidents* maintains a complicated relation to the genre of sentimentalism. This relation will be the subject of the sixth chapter of this book. In the immediate context, what is significant is that *Incidents* both appeals to and challenges its readers' affective identification with a now deracialized and deregionalized category, "woman." Like Stowe, who condemns the slave system for producing "women who were not women," Jacobs deploys naturalized gender conventions in order to denaturalize relations between masters and slaves.\(^103\) Reversing and radicalizing the dimorphic logic of the sex-gender system, Jacobs relies on the stability of the category "woman" in order to construct a public site of affective identification for readers otherwise divided along alternative lines of identification—race, class, and region, to name three. To the degree that Jacobs succeeds not only in reflecting, but also in transforming her readers' identifications, however, her reliance on the stability of the category "woman" is itself threatened by her inevitable foregrounding of the constructedness and, hence, the potential incoherence of that category.

As in *The Coquette*, what is at stake in Jacobs's narrative is the wedding of sentimental autonomy and social normativity through the construction of the category "woman" as the public site of readers' affective identification. Since sociality in this case involves a progressive abolitionist politics, Mrs. Flint, the slave-holding mistress, replaces Miss Lawrence and the circus performers as the figure which marks the boundary between sex and gender, between "women" and "ladies." While this substitution is undoubtedly crucial to any appraisal of the ideological significance of Jacobs's narrative, the very interchangeability of the figures highlights a structural contradiction central to the affective power of sentimentalism as a genre. Both narratives negotiate political questions by constructing public sites of affective identification with a form of embodiment that is seen, itself, as sentimental and private. If it is in this sense that, as Shirley Samuels suggests, "sentimentality is literally at the heart of nineteenth-century American culture," then I would further suggest that both of these metaphors need to be taken literally.\(^104\) If, in other words, sentimental letters are "literally at the heart" of the culture, then those same letters foreground the figurativeness, the literariness and, ultimately, the public mediation of the body itself. Even novels like *The Coquette* that move narratively toward the stabilization of the sort of sentimental identity politics typical of later liberalisms still rely structurally on a democratized literary public sphere as the space in which those identity politics are constructed and reconstructed. The public sphere thus names the space of the political within any politics of identification, the space that renders identification political in the first place. This is the structural lesson that *The Coquette* teaches. At the "heart" of nineteenth-century culture lies not only a privatized sentiment, but also a republican model of the literary public sphere without which any sentimental politics of identification would be impossible.