A Mob of Lusty Villagers: Operations of Domestic Desires in Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette*

Elizabeth Dill

Among themes of liberty, virtue, and the construction of national identity explored in the literature of the early American republic, there is the difficult and seemingly less glorious fact that the canon suffers from a scandalous shortage of prudes. Indeed, some of the most popular American texts during the late eighteenth century portray the virginity of their heroines only to highlight its untimely loss. Sensuous women populate the literature of the early nation, wrecking homes and seducing their seducers, and their presence calls for a discussion of what it means to be sexy in the 1790s. For even after decades of critical attention, the connections between the indiscreet women of post-revolutionary fiction and republican notions of community and virtue are unresolved. We continue to ask why it is that the earliest American novels concern themselves with pleasure-hungry coquettes, seductive half-sisters, lovesick rakes, and the like: not a mob of angry villagers threatening another bloody revolution, but a mob of *lusty* villagers, out to sow their wild oats and explore the social limits of desire. Because seduction plots were often used as a genre to examine this phenomenon, we might turn to them to find an answer to our inquiries. But rather than indicating simply the sexual ruin of a woman seeking liberty outside marriage, seduction in the late eighteenth century engages the social ethics of desire. This
conception of the use of seduction in the early American novel leads
to further questions: why must the new nation struggle to come to
terms with such unencumbered, sexualized, excessively social subjects?
And where does the seduced woman, as an object and as an agent of
desire, fit into our understanding of republican ideologies and the
formation of an American community?

In Hannah Webster Foster's great seduction tale, The Coquette; or,
The History of Eliza Wharton; A Novel; Founded on Fact (1797), it is the
heroine's impulse to delay marriage until, as she says, "I have sowed
all my wild oats" that offers some surprising answers to these ques­tions.¹ Based on the true story of an upper-class Bostonian, Elizabeth
Whitman, whose fatal seduction earned her national notoriety, the
novel offers a fascinating look at the conditions that might lead a
young woman to such an end.² In The Coquette, all the typical elements
of a traditional seduction plot are provided: the ruined girl doomed
to an early death, her stillborn babe, the reformed rake Peter
Sanford, the righteous, rejected suitor Reverend Boyer, the mother
crazed with grief, the friends who warn and then admonish. And yet
the novel resists a simple reading. After all, it is ostensibly Eliza's own
fault for giving in to temptation. But the interweaving of Eliza's vices
and virtues ultimately inspires acceptance from her community. The
seduced woman, a figure presumably representing the vice of
cooquetry, comes instead to represent civic virtue. A definition of the
American self thus emerges out of power defined by sociability and
desire, as The Coquette dramatizes the strengths and the vulnerabili­ties
of the republic through the trials of a thirty-seven-year-old flirt.

The aesthetic arising from resistance to the household as a private
space—a resistance that defines coquetry in Foster's novel—under­stands desire as the source of an agency operating within domesticity,
where attraction creates an ideological climate of sociability. We need
then to consider more carefully the place of desire in relation to the
republican household. Although The Coquette has attracted stacks of
criticism regarding the relationship between liberty and coquetry,
early all readers of Foster's work de-emphasize or dismiss altogether

¹ Hannah Webster Foster, The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton; A Novel; Founded on Fact
² Cathy N. Davidson, Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (New York:
Oxford University Press, 1986). For the story of Elizabeth Whitman and its connection to
The Coquette, see pp. 140-50.
Eliza's physiological attractions as constitutive of her role as a woman of the Wharton household to which she returns for the completion of her seduction. In the pages that follow, however, I argue that the relationship between home and desire is ever present in *The Coquette*. As readers of the novel, we have yet to account fully for its perhaps most scandalous detail: Eliza has sex with a married man in her mother's house. Eliza's sexuality is thus inextricably bound to the domestic sphere. Her seduction is more complicated than a simple resistance to the household as an institution that robs women of liberty, for it is also the place where she acquiesces to a condition of desire in which liberty, strictly speaking, is no longer at stake. In *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*, Barbara Claire Freeman defines a feminine space within Enlightenment and Romantic notions of self when she suggests, "In contrast to Wordsworth's 'I am every thing' and Coleridge's 'I am nothing,' the feminine sublime neither celebrates self-presence and the self's capacity to master the other nor consecrates the immediacy of its absence." Here, instead, is a condition "in which the self neither possesses nor merges with the other but attests to a relation with it." 3 This kind of radical relation resonates with Foster's tale of seduction, where the final intimacies occur within the household; the coquette's refusal to mark her desires as private while they are nevertheless domestic presents an intensely troubled representation of community in which coquetry attests to such unstable relations with the other. And finally, her seduction sexualizes the image of the communal self as a ruined woman.

As a political model for social relations, marriage represents only one vision of the republic, a vision highlighting a voluntary union whose structure parallels a democratic republic founded upon the consent of the governed. As historians of the eighteenth century such as Linda Kerber and Jan Lewis have noted, the role of women in the household complicates that parallel, for their role represents a contribution to the public sphere without actual participation in it through, among other things, the rearing of patriotic children and the redemption of wayward husbands. Foster's study of the coquette, however, reflects an

understanding of the home as a place where the wayward desires of women might develop connections with the social world around them. As many critics of *The Coquette* have argued, the story charts its heroine's struggle as an ambiguous figure of liberty who attempts to resist marriage without losing her place in her community. But Eliza's seduction under the maternal roof and her return to the very space she seems to be resisting complicate matters. Before readers encounter the racier seduction plot at which the novel's title hints, Eliza's letter to her friend Lucy Freeman reports her "pleasure ... on leaving my paternal roof" (p. 107). The novel's first readers would have easily put two and two together, understanding that flirts who leave home are more vulnerable to temptation. It is after Eliza's *return* home, however, that her seduction is completed, and it is as a scene for sexuality and ruin that the home *sustains* rather than subverts the seduction. Further, Eliza's initial rejection of home both as a potential wife and as a daughter, and her later resignation to it as a coquette, represent marriage candidly as an institution failing the republic in all its civic intentions. The coquette's insistence that she maintain her sociability rather than marry imagines a role for women as civic figures whose dedication to community endangers personal virtue at the expense of public virtue. That is, in Foster's novel, Eliza's seduction is a condition of citizenship, a tragic transformation into a communal figure. Desire may ruin reputations and destroy women, but it also depicts the home as a civic space.

The Failure of Households

The geography of Eliza's ruin is, for the first two-thirds of the novel, all gardens and house parties, away from home and family. The day at Colonel Farington's, an engagement Eliza attends at the invitation of her hosts the Richmans, inaugurates for her a return to "the busy scenes and active pleasures of life" (p. 109), for which she has longed after her confinement with her dying fiancé, Mr Haly. Eliza is quick to defend her renewed sociability, and she is eager to define the differences between herself and married couples in this regard. Pointing out the contrast, she says, "I am a poor solitary being, who need some amusement beyond what I can supply myself. 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 accom-
pany it, for ought I can see” (p. 115). Comments such as these tend
to mislead readers into the assumption that the further from home
Eliza gets, the more trouble she will encounter; for the body to
accompany the imagination “abroad” suggests a wayward sexuality. But a return to Eliza’s “maternal roof” begins as early as the novel’s
tenth letter. Intriguingly, however, it is her seducer who makes the
first move homeward as we learn of Sanford’s intention to purchase
a house close to Mrs Wharton’s residence. Foster describes these two
neighbouring households with an attentiveness worth appraising.

Financially sunk, Sanford acquires a new house that is “undergoing
complete repair,” a fact that alerts the community to his impending
marriage to a wealthy woman he admits he does not love (p. 194). Sanford’s unusual strategy is to achieve the seduction of Eliza by
insisting that she befriend his wife, Nancy, whose marriage to Sanford
has isolated her from family and friends. Eliza relates Sanford’s
request as she writes, “His Nancy, he said, was far removed from her
maternal friends; but I could supply their place, if I would generously
undertake the task” (p. 204). Eliza later says that Sanford treats her
“with the affection and tenderness of a brother; and his wife... with all
the consoling softness, and attention of a sister” (p. 207). This is a
complex arrangement indeed, for it links Eliza to Sanford’s family as
a sibling, a situation that thematically marks his desires with an
incestuous attraction. Desire thus makes an especially sinister
entrance into the Sanford household through the doubly deviant
attractions of a married man to another woman he treats as his sister
in order to seduce her. As Anne Dalke has argued in her study of
incest in the early American novel, such desires present “a fear of the
dreadful condition incest symbolizes: the absence of a well defined
social system.” Authors of incest romances “used a story of thwarted
love to express, obliquely, deep anxiety about ease of social move­
ment” and the fragmentation of the family that allows such mistakes
to happen in the first place. Sanford’s social mobility as a libertine
who capitalizes on the wealth of his wife demonstrates that anxiety;

4 Readings of Eliza’s ubiquitous riding scenes as a hallmark of uncontrolled and excessive
female sexuality attest to this. See, for example, Julia Stern’s reading of The Coquettess as she notes
that “Foster may be the first American woman writer to use equestrianism as a metaphor for
female sexuality.” This Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel (Chicago:

5 Anne Dalke, “Original Vice: The Political Implications of Incest in the Early American
this marriage facilitates rather than impedes a seduction, thus further destabilizing the shaky social structure of the republican household. Using his home as a place to reconnect socially with Eliza, and then her own home as a place for her sexual ruin, suggests that the lack of a definitive social structure creates the opportunity for subversive social relations within the home. Indeed, Sanford’s strategy initiates a characterization of the home as the potential scene of seduction, as an ally to the fulfilment of his desires.

Eliza’s insomnia is the first signal that her mother’s home has become this ally. As the sexually explicit nature of her relationship to Sanford develops, Eliza’s relationship to the home also becomes increasingly defined by her desires. Her sleeplessness indicates, of course, her guilty conscience, but it also signifies her nightly sexual activities. A sleepless woman, who earlier claimed that the body might as well follow the wayward imagination in pursuit of social “amusement,” carries clear sexual connotations: where might her imagination lead her body in the middle of the night, with a seducer living close by? Julia Granby’s description of Eliza’s final seduction, which she witnesses as Eliza’s houseguest, allows us to explore the impact of desire once it invades this upstanding republican household. At first, Julia and Eliza share a bedroom, but Eliza uses her “restless” condition to provide herself with an excuse to move to a separate apartment, and she tells Julia her excursions downstairs are because “she was very thirsty, and went down for water” (p. 219). Such trips to the kitchen temporarily cover her sexual liaisons with Sanford, marking an insidious conflation of the household’s centre for women’s domestic labour with acts of illicit desire. Finally, Julia, horrified, observes “a man going from the house. Soon after [she] perceived a footstep upon the stairs, which carefully approached and entered Eliza’s chamber” (p. 219).

What is especially interesting about Julia’s account is that it is not the first revelation of Eliza’s seduction. In the preceding letter, Sanford announces, “I have arrived to the utmost bounds of my wishes; the full possession of my adorable Eliza! I have heard a quotation from a certain book ... that ‘stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant’” (p. 217). The additional reference to water as the code for sexual satisfaction underscores the intersection of desire and domesticity, an ideological horror upon which Julia’s second account of Eliza’s ruin dwells. As Eliza finally confesses the full story of her seduction and
impregnation to Julia, she says, "At times I have admitted his visits; always meeting him in the garden, or grove adjoining; till of late, the weather, and my ill health induced me to comply with his solicitations, and receive him into the parlor" (p. 222). Both mundane and sacred functions of the household—to protect its inhabitants from bad weather and to provide women privacy during their pregnancies—operate to harbour seduction. Although critics such as Julia Stern have argued that Eliza's in-house seduction renders "an attack on the very heart of domestic ideology ... [a] defilement of maternal space" that both destroys the home and demonstrates its "pervasive reach" such that "wayward desire has become paralyzed" (p. 142), neither home nor desire is destroyed. Rather, they are ideologically joined when the relationship continues inside the house. Instead of abruptly ending the relationship once it enters the Wharton household, the plot of *The Coquette* lingers upon wayward desire animated within the maternal space. Parlour and kitchen conspire in the "attack" to reveal the household as a sexually ambivalent sphere where "wayward" impulses are not necessarily wayfaring ones. That is, despite all the remote interludes between Sanford and Eliza, her sexuality is finally also a fact of the household, the place where her desire is the most possible while also the most aberrant.

The dramatic changes in Sanford's household indicate that his own sexuality is also bound to the domestic sphere. After the dissolution of his marriage following public knowledge of Eliza's seduction, Sanford's creditors force him to stay inside despite his desperate wish to be with her. He laments that "The day on which I meant to visit her, most of my property was attached, and to secure the rest, I was obliged to shut my doors, and become a prisoner in my own house!" (p. 238). While his devotion to property caricatures Sanford as an icon of corrupt self-interest, this image of the housebound libertine also imagines a domesticated sexuality. His imprisonment is not simply the revenge of domesticity upon its invader, but a sign that his sexuality is his first link with a more authentic sentimentality. This is not so much a denigration of the household as it is a redemption of the rake: his lasciviousness has evolved into love, and his mimicry of family as a strategy for seduction has become a feeling response to the object of attraction that registers desire within the domestic sphere. His house, initially acquired as a means of fulfilling his desire, now negotiates his impotence in that very matter, as his intentions shift
from sexual exploitation to sentimental love. His comment, “I would have given millions, had I possessed them, to have been at liberty to see, and to have had power to preserve Eliza from death!” suggests as much (p. 238). “Liberty,” a word that would once have signified what Bryce Traister calls the libertine’s “radical individualism” that is “unfettered by the restraints of institutionalized social mores and dedicated to the freedom paradoxically conferred by the total submission of self to sensualism,” now signifies an entirely sentimental impulse to comfort the object of his desire. Though still intending to seduce her, Sanford also earlier describes a “sincere penitence” and claims, “I never knew I had so much sensibility before! Why, I was as much a woman as the very weakest of the sex!” (p. 205). The feminization of the libertine (insisting that corrupt sexuality, no matter how powerful, be feminine) is in Foster’s novel also his domestication, though it is important to note that this new characterization does not require the dismissal of his physical desire. The sensibility which makes him seem “a woman” and then “a brother” to Eliza, roles that represent particularly domestic positions, is a (perversely) familial sensibility.

Though perverse, this sensibility affects the more stable and virtuous households of the novel. That which is perhaps one of the most profound of domestic purposes, to authorize female sexuality as a matter of duty in the production of children, is complicated by the deaths of those children. As Stern has noted, the prolific births in the novel end with either stillborn or dying children; her conclusion is that the death of so many daughters evidences “a generic blight on maternity” as a vehicle for “real power to influence the public sphere” and the “precariousness” of the new republic and especially of “the failed promise of women’s expression in Federalist America” (pp. 134–35). Though certainly the children’s deaths are meant as tragedies and are not specifically designed as liberatory moments for their mothers, they leave open the possibility that, for coquette or for wife, a woman’s sexuality might be an end in itself.

Similarly, in her study of Eliza, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg proposes a new reading of the body as a “representation of the civic individual” in eighteenth-century fiction that repositions “the political and the sexual.” She continues: “No longer will [the body] appear simply as

a repository of the erotic and the reproductive, a psychic entity confined to social margins and domestic space ... the body’s physical integrity constitutes as significant a material vehicle for symbolic representation as the body’s evocative sensuality.”7 Her rereading recognizes this sensuality as well as the body’s “representation of the civic individual.” While she makes the compelling assessment that Eliza “has invested her female independence and liberty of choice with desire,” Smith-Rosenberg also insists that “the sexual fall comes unaccompanied by either pleasure or passion” (pp. 171, 175). The insistence that Eliza’s seduction—which she herself describes as a “dream of sensual gratification”—occurs without pleasure or passion is one of the unaccountable but common misreadings of The Coquette. We ought, instead, to consider the body animated with desire as a figure of sociability, one in line with Rosenberg’s insight that the body is both “evocative” and “civic.” Once we recognize the ideological link between home and desire, we may more carefully examine the kind of agency constructed by that union, particularly through Sanford’s influence over Eliza’s actions and the kind of civic virtue to which it is related. Often viewed as a political allegory about the dangers of female liberty, The Coquette also invites us to explore the way in which desire presents a politicized mode of sociability offering a civic role for women in contrast to marriage.

Desire and the Social Self

At the heart of constitutional debates over ideal models of civic relations are the even messier debates over human sociability. What really compels human beings to band together? In letters published in the first year of his vice-presidency, John Adams makes some energetic claims in answer to this question:

Men in their primitive conditions, however savage, were undoubtedly gregarious; and they continue to be social. ... As nature intended them for society, she has furnished them with passions, appetites, and propensities ... to render them useful to each other in their social connections.8


Human nature thus makes community a deterministic condition, one that becomes sexualized in Foster’s seduction plot. In *The Coquette*, words such as “passion,” “appetite,” and “propensity” represent the origin of a sociability in Eliza that simply cannot be helped. Traister has argued that the libertine reveals “the extent to which the supposedly free self turned out to be a representational aftereffect of socially determinative forces. Apparently free by virtue of unrestrained indulgence, the libertine remains nonetheless a slave to his passions, passions originating in the ‘mechanical’ world of physiological determinism that render the libertine an automaton.” These principles apply to Eliza as well. She in fact refers to herself as a “predestinarian” whose agency is a matter of whim and fancy as much as it is a matter of rational reflection. Challenging the individualistic constitutions of Eliza and Sanford, these deterministic forces assert the inevitability of the self as a social agent. Of course, there are overlapping values that undo such a tidy binary opposition, but we might say that the tension between the pursuit of one’s rights and the acquiescence in one’s impulses defines the quest for liberty that becomes sexualized in the characters of Eliza and Sanford. In light of Adams’s assertion, we may consider the way the novel intensifies its focus on Eliza’s lack of self-control as that which commands her sociability.

At the centre of the novel’s seduction plot is an unquestionable absence of individual agency. This state of affairs emphasizes the complex operations of community constructed by those whose actions are commanded by what Adams considered their gregarious natures. The move to defend the virtue of the seduced woman is typical of the genre, and *The Coquette* proves no exception. At the heart of this defence is the fact that neither our heroine nor her seducer is in control of their sexual or emotional appetites, a condition which obfuscates the moral blame of a seduction. Such is the case even of the brutal rake, for though Sanford eventually vows not to seduce Eliza “if I can help it,” he obviously finds that he cannot help it (p. 122). What Foster’s novel suggests is that this lack of control is possible owing to the ambiguity desire casts on agency. When Eliza finally succumbs to temptation, she describes the experience in emphatically unintentional terms. In that generally overlooked passage describing her desire, she says, “not long did I continue in the delusive dream of sensual gratification. I soon awoke” (p. 222). The

9 Traister, pp. 7–8.
wording casts heavy ambiguity over the whole experience. Indeed, it is not a regular experience at all, but a "dream." Her confession thus reveals that desire has confused the security of her individual will. In addition, we might observe that this oblique account is pointedly uninformative; Foster thereby shifts the focus of the narrative away from illicit sex and towards a study of the dreamlike condition of desire that is the prerequisite for a seduction. The novel presents the essence of a seduction not solely as the sex act, but as the equally politically potent transformation of the parties into "dreamers," whose desire deconstructs their individuality.

Wondering what to do about the advances of Reverend Boyer after she finds herself so charmed by Sanford, Eliza says to Lucy:

The heart of your friend is again besieged. Whether it will surrender to the assailants or not, I am unable at present to determine. Sometimes I think of becoming a predestinarian, and submitting implicitly to fate, without any exercise of free will; but, as mine seems to be a wayward one, I would counteract the operations of it, if possible. (p. 122)

The passage relies on a vocabulary of what Gillian Brown would call "unaccountability" that problematizes Eliza's fickle social nature. First, Eliza ruptures a holistic sense of self, instead writing of "the heart of your friend" and "it," momentarily evading the first-person pronoun as she launches into a discussion of what controls her actions. Additionally, there is the dodgy assumption that her problem is one of fate in the first place. In a republic founded by principles of liberty and independence, it is difficult to pass over Eliza's reliance on fate as the agent of her problems. There is also that key grammatical ambiguity in relation to the phrase "wayward one"—which may reference her free will as "wayward," rather than her fate. Is Eliza attempting to counteract her own wayward will, and if so, by what alternative agency? On the other hand, counteracting one's fate hardly constitutes gumption because the defining characteristic of fate

---

10 Gillian Brown reads *The Coquette* as a novel not about personal desire but rather personal consent as a problematic mode of agency for women. "Consent, Coquetry, and Consequences," *American Literary History* 9:4 (1997), 625–52. As is the case with other critics, Brown thus characterizes the issue of female agency in *The Coquette* as a drama affording consent and liberty by opposing them to female desire. According to Brown, "Far from expressing her own desire, Eliza's consent represents the subordination of personal desire" (638). I suggest instead that we read female desire as the central mode of political agency for women in *The Coquette* that challenges individual will as the best performance of communal and national identity.
is its inevitability. A few lines later, she goes even further (quoting a poet’s line), “My feet were guilty, but my heart was free.” The passage opposes the “feet” as operators of wayward will with the “heart,” an organ of sentiment signifying a feeling attachment to others. Yet these two seemingly opposite forces conspire in the loss of individual will. It is rather the wills and bodies of others that commingle with her own in acts of persuasion that refigure her identity. As she concludes, “Well, be it what it may; either the impulse of my own passions, or some higher efficiency; sure I am, that I pay dear for its operation” (p. 192). The “I” disappears in a choice that is now between that “impulse,” which is part of her nature and out of her control, or that entirely ambiguous “higher efficiency.” So much for free will.

The complex interactions of influence and disposition are related to what Elizabeth Barnes calls “a blurring of ego boundaries” in the early American novel. Tales of seduction and particularly of incest involve a “sentimental scheme of sympathy” in which the interdependent “boundaries of identity—for women and for men, in the personal and the political realms—are shown as distinctly flexible.” Eliza’s letters chart the way in which her association with Sanford increasingly confuses those “ego boundaries.” Her remark that her heart is “besieged” represents a condition she more fully defines just two letters later, when, responding to Lucy’s plea that she reject Sanford, Eliza says, “My reason and judgement entirely coincide with your opinion; but my fancy claims some share in the decision: and I cannot yet tell which will preponderate” (p. 125). Her use of “my” places reason and fancy in possession of the agent, but Eliza’s remark that “I cannot tell which will preponderate” removes that sense. Later, the power of “fancy” takes on an even more dramatic effect, as when describing a conversation with Sanford, Eliza says, “My heart did not approve his sentiments, but my ear was charmed with his rhetoric, and my fancy captivated by his address” (p. 132). Charmed and captivated, Eliza’s agency is defined by influence and attraction as much as by her own moral choices. And as things progress between them, she claims that in direct spite of her will to remove herself from his company, she cannot. As she says, “I am inadvertently embarrassed by this man; and how to extricate myself, I know not. I am sensible that the power is in my hands; but the disposition (shall I confess it) is wanting!” (p. 174).

Historically, the relationship between agency and desire has been a difficult one, in which Enlightenment philosophers awkwardly characterize sexual desire as immoral, strictly forbidden, and an enemy to the state and to liberty. For instance, in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), popular enough in America to go through two printings, the power of the coquette's sexuality is the subject of several invectives. Wollstonecraft sufficiently demonizes coquetry as the unfortunate but inevitable consequence of ignorance and irrationality; the idea is to separate such women from the more politically valid rational woman, whose education earns her a right to act as a public, political agent. “Women then having necessarily some duty to fulfill, more noble than to adorn their persons, would not contentedly be the slaves of casual lust; which is now the situation of a very considerable number who are, literally speaking, standing dishes to which every glutton may have access.” Yet the slave to lust is a figure of considerable power in *The Coquette*, in the seduction tale, sexual appetite insists on an acknowledgment of natural impulses in addition to natural “rights” in the construction of an agency that hinges upon the links between actors as the origin of their actions.

The problem in both *The Coquette* and *A Vindication* is that the power to charm carries with it a certain absence of agency; it is never easy to ascribe the power of charm to simple coquetry—that is, as a simple abuse of the power of beauty or sex. Words such as “appetite,” “influence,” and “nature” (words found in abundance both in *The Coquette* and in *A Vindication*) interrupt attempts to suggest that coquettishness, or even rakishness, is to be helped. Eliza understands that her resistance to the “shackles” of marriage creates an “opportunity ... to gratify [her] natural disposition in a participation of those pleasures which youth and innocence afford” (p. 113). There is no simple operation of free will here, no voluntary process of choosing the right mate: it is a disposition, it is *nature*.

That is, while one may accuse a woman of being a coquette, one cannot ultimately blame her for it. Thus we find Wollstonecraft

12 Davidson details the appearance of *A Vindication* in many libraries and its advertisement by publishers on the backs of other novels. She argues that its popularity accounts for “the single most important theoretical contribution to the egalitarian cause” (p. 131).

undermining her attack on the coquette with such assertions as “Love is, in a great degree, an arbitrary passion, and will reign like some other stalking mischiefs, by its own authority” (p. 246). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, famous for his investment in the rational individual, also gestures towards the problem of the passions. In Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men (1754), he makes claims that tend to assign agency to the passions themselves: “Among the passions that stir the human heart, there is an ardent, impetuous one that makes one sex necessary to the other, a terrible passion that braves all dangers, overcomes all obstacles, and, in its fury, seems calculated to destroy the human race that it is destined to preserve.” He continues, “The physical element [of love] is the general desire that impels one sex to unite with the other. The mental element is what directs that desire and fixes it on one object exclusively” (emphasis added).

Similarly, in The Coquette we find Eliza ruminating, “The events in my life have always been unaccountably wayward. In many instances I have been ready to suppose that some evil genius presided over my actions, which has directed them contrary to the sober dictates of my own judgment” (p. 192). What has happened to the agency of the coquette in these three texts? We have here a mischievous love, a terrible passion, even an evil genius, but no blameworthy home wrecker. Enlightenment philosophers such as Wollstonecraft and Rousseau do their best to suggest that coquettes and rakes are to blame for the destructive force of desire, but they consistently undermine that depiction by suggesting that desire and sexual appetite are uncontrollable, amorphous devils that possess morally vulnerable bodies to do their dirty work.

The rhetoric of desire that pervades The Coquette demonstrates that everything from evil geniuses to natural dispositions contribute to agency. Action becomes complicated in a democratic republic by this almost grotesque menagerie of agencies. Indeed, the seduction novel


15 In discussing The Coquette, Jared Gardner depicts the editor of epistolary writing as a political figure who “works to occupy multiple positions.” He writes that in the culture of early American letters, “one important contribution the novel might offer as it seeks national legitimization is a space which speaks the spectacularly contradictory voices of that nation.” Rejecting the dichotomization of early American politics, “Foster’s novel effaces the individual author in favor of an editorial position that gives voice, in the true spirit of the early national literary magazines, to the intricate weave of competing voices—working to
questions the stability of a republic built upon political action as the civic duty of the “individual.” With an increasing focus on the desire of the coquette, a social agency motivates the seduction plot, and the consequences of this rhetoric are politically far-reaching for the new republic. The coquette’s desire, creating unformalized bonds with her seducer, gestures towards an exaggerated ideal of the communitarian self that finds fulfillment only as a social being. The sexualization of that figure in the coquette warns that attempts to forge such communities may result in a breakdown of self and especially of home. Thus, although many critics insist that Eliza’s seduction is compounded by an absence of her desire,\textsuperscript{16} the centre of anxiety in \textit{The Coquette} is the way in which Eliza’s sexuality is an active subtext in all her social relationships; her character is increasingly driven by her desires. Eliza’s casual employment of sexual innuendo to describe her evening plans demonstrates that her sexuality has become a defining characteristic of even short-term, mundane social encounters. As she says, “I have been trying to seduce General Richman to accompany me to the assembly,” and at his refusal, she attends the festivities with “a new conquest,” Mr Emmons (p. 153). Her parenthetical remark that she might make a good wife once she has sowed all her wild oats defines her future relations as a function of her desires (p. 158).

The Enlightenment politics of gender attempted to abandon women’s potential as political agents because of their ideological link to desire. In her article “Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism,” Cora Kaplan expresses this succinctly when she argues that the problem with Anglo-American feminism, starting with Wollstonecraft’s work, is that feminists “have too often accepted the paradigm which insists that desire is a regressive force in women’s lives, and have called for a sublimation of women’s sexual pleasure to meet a

\textsuperscript{16} For instance, Davidson says that Eliza’s consent to Sanford signifies “sexual acquiescence, accomplished with an appalling lack of desire” (p. 149); Smith-Rosenberg builds on Davidson’s reading when she says that Eliza’s “downfall ... was not lust but the desire for independence coupled with the wish to rise socially” (p. 169). These critics base their arguments on an absence of enthusiasm and desire on Eliza’s part—Eliza’s commitment to Sanford is a reluctant one. Critics see Eliza’s attraction to Sanford as one based on what he represents—pleasure, independence, the pursuit of happiness—but I would add that Eliza’s attraction is more than a theoretical one. And she is hardly reluctant. It is, rather, her perverse capacity to attract and be attracted that makes the relationship deviant in the eyes of her community.
passionless and rational ideal." The Coquette investigates a threat to this understanding of the origins of political agency. The ostensible moral to this story is to withhold consent as a precious medium of political agency and as a guardian of female virtue, but that moral is consistently undermined by a discourse of desire that eclipses all such moralizing. Centring Eliza’s vocabulary on words such as “fancy” and “charm,” the novel threatens to restore a republican definition of civic virtue by turning to the passions as a moral compass commanding women’s sociability at the expense of their private virtue. As we have seen, for Eliza, the home sustains seduction as an origin of a woman’s potential social connections.

The Coquette asks if desire is necessarily private when it constitutes social bonds. Among others, Barnes argues that “In order to neutralize the effects of private desire, seduction novels make desire public.” Barnes powerfully assesses the contrast between seduction and marriage when she notes that unlike seduction, through marriage “private relations serve as a public model while simultaneously making what is public, or political, appear more natural and intimate.” It is unclear, however, that in The Coquette publicity entirely neutralizes desire while naturalizing the political intimacy of marriage. It is difficult to say how the publicity of Eliza and Sanford’s relationship neutralizes the effects of their desires, which were never entirely private in the first place. The novel struggles with its intense ambivalence about Eliza’s virtue; desire depicts civic sociability as equally “natural and intimate.” The problem, of course, is this incompatibility between the virtue of public citizenship and the vice of women who attempt to pursue it through sexual means.

Homebound Civic Desires

A staunch supporter of a return to republican civic virtue whose signature appears on the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Rush pleads for the value of civic duty in his essay entitled “Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic” (1798):

18 Barnes, pp. 70, 67.
Next to the duty which young men owe to their Creator, I wish to see a regard to their country, inculcated upon them. When the Duke of Sully became prime minister to Henry the IVth of France, the first thing he did, he tells us, "Was to subdue and forget his own heart." The same duty is incumbent upon every citizen of a republic. ... Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property.¹⁹

Interestingly, given the date of publication and contemporary American concern over revolutionary fervour, this characterization of communitarian sentiment is indirectly invoked as the solution to French anarchism; the social self is not the origin of anarchy but its prevention. Vehemently rejecting the virtue of possessive individualism, Rush used his essays instead to promote the value of the social self to a community perceiving itself in danger of a second revolution. Ontologically, the self as "public property" cleverly appropriates "property" as part of the communitarian rhetoric, a concept normally associated with possessive individualism. Honouring citizenship above all else, then, presents the social self as the most virtuous ontological possibility.

Similar rhetoric exists in *The Coquette*, during discussions of marriage and the civic role of women. In contrast to the home as a site of desire, the novel also offers representations of the home as an institution isolating women from their espoused civic impulses. Answering her daughter's reluctance to marry, Eliza's mother declares, "With regard to its being a dependent situation, what one 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?" (p. 136). Mrs Wharton's vision of the new nation is as a community in which social being is the essence of virtue. Eliza's mentor Mrs Richman concurs when she asserts, in a discussion about women's interest in government, that women are feelingly affected by what occurs outside the home through their connections with others. Eliza notes the aftermath of Mrs Richman's words when she remarks that "The gentlemen applauded Mrs. Richman's sentiments as truly Roman; and what was more, they said, truly republican" (p. 139). Early Americans often regarded ancient republics as models of civic virtue, and Mrs Richman sees the role of women as crucial to that model; the sentimental lifeblood of a community, women maintain the connectedness of its members.

However much they are conventionally understood as belonging to the private sphere, as citizens women are "public property" in their maintenance of community through feeling. Bruce Burgett's reading of Mrs Richman's speech observes these complexities regarding the public/private dichotomy and the civic role of women: "Mrs. Richman's appeal ... exploits this structural interpenetration of private and public spheres in order to critique the ideological separation of those spheres along gender lines."20 The flip side of this condition exists in marriage, which offers some disturbing contradictions to the virtue of the social self. Mrs Richman embodies this contradiction: in spite of her endorsement of "truly republican" sentiments, she later tells Eliza: "All my happiness is centered within the limits of my own walls; and I grudge every moment that calls me from the pleasing scenes of domestic life" (p. 182).

In this context, it is not surprising that Eliza cannot imagine a smooth transition into married life. She is quite clear about her views on marriage, as when she complains that "Marriage is the tomb of friendship." When her friends begin to marry, she contends that through marriage a woman loses everything, and adds that marriage "appears to [be] a very selfish state. Why do people, in general, as soon as they are married, centre all their cares, their concerns, and pleasures in their own families?" The community of intimate friendships among women is torn apart by this isolationism, and Eliza wants no part of it. "The tenderest ties between friends are weakened, or dissolved; and benevolence itself moves in a very limited sphere" (p. 123). Mimicking a rhetoric of republican civic virtue, Eliza would rather live in a world where pleasures are connecting home to community, and tender ties between friends constitute a strong, unlimited sphere of benevolence. Instead, the obligations of the domestic sphere break up intimate relationships.21


21 Noting the primacy of female friendships in The Coquette, Claire C. Pettengill, in "Sisterhood in a Separate Sphere: Female Friendship in Hannah Webster Foster's The Coquette and The Boarding School," Early American Literature 27 (1992), 185–203, develops an explanation as to why Eliza uncharacteristically asks Boyer to reconsider marrying her after she has rejected him. Pettengill argues that alongside the seduction plot in Foster's novel exists another plot about the evolution of friendships broken apart by marriage to men. It is only after Eliza's two best friends evolve from the roles of sisterly friends into those of mother (Mrs Richman has a baby) and wife (Lucy gets married) that the seduction is possible. "To repair the loss of the female friendships, "she must accept the unappealing, unsympathetic Rev. Boyer,
Mrs Richman has a chance to answer to Eliza's objections to marriage, and when she does, she makes some interesting characterizations of the alternative found in illicit relationships. She quotes a bit of verse to articulate her position, saying “The friendships of the world are oft / Confed'racies in vice, or leagues in pleasure: / Our’s has the purest virtue for its basis; / And such a friendship ends not but with life” (p. 123). Mrs Richman follows her quotation by calling marriage not the tomb of friendship but “the little community” of home and family. The difference between a “league in pleasure” and this little community seems to be the terms by which such parties might split; a friendship of the world exists at the mercy of desire and whim, but a marriage “ends not but with life.” Thus the novel distinguishes communities based on a “natural” human sociability from those based on contractual obligation.

Indeed, the novel rather emphatically insists that Eliza’s “nature” reflects Rush’s notion of the self as “public property,” and the seduction plot confronts this problematic condition. Eliza describes her “natural propensity for mixing in the busy scenes and active pleasures of life returning.” She is known by others for “a temper peculiarly formed for the enjoyments of social life” (pp. 109, 116), which prompts her rejection of Reverend Boyer as a suitor. In her rebuttal to his pestering advances, she says, “I have just launched into society. My heart beats high in expectation of its fancied joys” (p. 126). The novel’s basic plot structure, at least through the first half, is founded on Eliza’s many social engagements; Eliza is almost never at home and almost never alone until close to the novel’s conclusion. She clearly represents a naturally social agent, whose links to others define her identity and the community in which she exists. But the generic virtue of sociability, which marks Eliza’s contrast to her friends, becomes her personal vice.

Though her fondness for the social life underscores the happy intimacy of communitarian sentiment, such a sociable nature is not without its risks, as her friends warn. Eliza jeopardizes and eventually loses her virtuous reputation; but even worse, she is perceived especially by men as an object of circulation. When Eliza’s suitor Reverend Boyer sends his friend Thomas Selby to check up on Eliza, Selby confirms suspicions of her coquetry with smug moral superior-
ity. Yet he is nevertheless charmed by her. Noting his delivery of her letter to Boyer along with his own, he remarks, “I am almost tempted to break the seal of her letter to you” (p. 141). Rush’s idea of the social self as “public property” takes on an ominous connotation in this case. For women, sociability translates into circulatability, becoming the property not of an egalitarian community but of the patriarchy. Grantland S. Rice’s innovative argument that “the novel in republican America took on the deportment of a ‘coquette’ ... in order to engage a changing reading public” explores the impact of that kind of circulation. Seen as a trope of women’s writing, the coquette participates in “a tradition of public writing in America [that] found its origins in civic rather than economic or artisanal imperatives.” Thus the sociability of the coquette, even as it endangers her public virtue, gestures towards a model of civic power for women.22

Disturbing these formulations of the relationship between women and community even further is the novel’s concern over the loss of Eliza’s sociability. Eliza’s “fall” is marked first by her excessive need to be in the social sphere; in the seduction tale, the coquette sexualizes the social self, thus representing such a condition as transgressing the moral authority of contractual individualism. But ultimately, her seduction forces her into secrecy and solitude. Eliza’s “misanthropy” (her word) is perceived as an equally transgressive condition, and of great concern to her friends. Telling them she is “now trying what a recluse and solitary mode of life will produce,” she provokes their serious alarm (p. 214). Their worries over Eliza might be understood at the level of national politics, for, as Robert W. Hoffert argues, republican notions of civic culture understood that “Personal meaning and fulfillment are not matters of isolated experiments at self-discovery and self-expression. ... Personal and social well-being are not antithetical.”23 Hence the panic-stricken tone of Eliza’s companion Julia when she observes, “Her vivacity has entirely forsaken her; and she has actually become, what she once dreaded above all things, a recluse! She flies from company, as eagerly as she formerly sought it!” (p. 193). This observation points to the threat “isolated experiments at self-discovery” pose to the common good. As Isaac Kramnick has noted, “The


meaning of virtue in the language of civic humanism is ... the privileging of the public over the private." Eliza’s sociability, however, tends to refute the ethical division between public and private behaviour for women. Sociability, a condition that links private and public means of fulfilment, discovers a communitarian impulse in Eliza, but one that remains unrewarded because of its sexual character.

The theme of seduction in this work engages with debate over what principles really do, and really should, bring people together as a nation. As Kramnick argues, over and against the principles of republican civic humanism which insisted that “Man was a political being who realized his telos only when living in a vivere civile,” the position of possessive individualism gloried “in an individualistic and competitive America, which was preoccupied with private rights and personal autonomy.” But what about the principles that should bring people together as families? In post-revolutionary debates over competing ideologies of community, the culture was shifting away from communitarian sentiments and towards the diversity of a commerce-based society that promoted self-interest over public interest, or rather, self-interest as public interest. In The Coquette, the result of this shift becomes a matter of home and its role as a civic institution. The dichotomy between the politics of civic humanism and possessive individualism unravels in the face of such terms as sympathy, charm, and desire—conditions which confuse the distinction between healthy and unhealthy social and familial bonds. Tales such as Foster’s then use seduction to evoke simultaneously a nostalgia for communitarian values and an anxiety about the danger of their return in the construction of households. For while acts of seduction display the redemptive power of intimacy and sociability, they also threaten to destroy the very bonds they attempt to restore.

The raciness of Foster’s work makes that nostalgia all the more risky. For this seduction novel represents communitarian sentiments


25 Kramnick, pp. 36-37.

26 Kramnick’s discussion of the formation of national identity through the period of Constitutional revision and ratification later develops competing notions of virtue, based on civic humanism, liberalism, commerce, and industry; he concludes that "the decline of republican hegemony in the face of the alternative worlds of Locke liberal and the Protestant ethic" (p. 53) creates a personalized notion of virtue replacing older notions of public, civic virtue.
of sociability through acts of increasingly illicit desire, a pattern culminating in the pregnancy and death of the unmarried coquette. Emerging out of this troubled plot is a discourse of desire which articulates a sexualized social self. In Eliza, the self is presented as the unmarried woman—her body under the constant sway of biology—whose person is already so fully constituted by her sexuality that her refusal to marry mucks up the social order with relative ease. Eliza’s “vivacity” is clearly an issue of proper public identity for women; the virtuous position of a married woman who with subtlety acts as the social glue of her community pales in comparison to one who would take on public displays of pleasure towards the same end.

Along with other critics, I contend that the general effect of seduction plots is a criticism of the individual will; my argument expands this discussion by insisting that desire is the muscle behind that criticism, presenting a new perspective on the value of voluntarism as the building block of an enlightened republic. I also attempt to broaden the context of that criticism to post-revolutionary debates over various models of the home. Contesting the value of privacy and self-interest in post-revolutionary culture, the coquette’s desire retheorizes a construction of self that finds the shift into social being through desire, not purely through contract. Through a study of women caught between competing notions of female virtue, the seduction novel reveals a potential ideological link between desire and contract as constitutive of the republican household. Thus we must think about desire as a condition of private bodies whose entrance into the public sphere deeply affects traditional understandings of what Carol Pateman calls “most famous and influential political story of modern times,” namely the story of the social contract. Pateman contends that we are dealing with “a modern story of masculine political birth” that secures patriarchal sexual right by creating a political reality out of the rational mind. Such a narrative also sees the birth of the modern man as the creation of a sphere in which his passions might be checked at the door; like the man who inhabits it, the public sphere becomes defined by a code of rationality. As an alternative mode of “creation,” such a tale attempts to obscure or squelch altogether the presumably anarchic social potential of the body’s physical desire. But there is an important assumption here, namely, that passions are hyper-individualized states

of being which keep the people who experience them from bonding with others and forming meaningful relations. Foster's novel offers a complicated, non-traditional understanding of the household by implicating desire in the construction of a social self in the character of a woman who does form those relations, but at great cost.

As a site of such ideological struggles, the seduced woman becomes a troubled participant in intimate relations by adulterating (both literally and figuratively) the ideal of contractual relations. The political climate after the Revolution employed marriage as the symbol for and the ultimate expression and practice of the ideal world of contractual relationships. Indeed, Lewis assesses the importance of marriage as a political model for social relationships when she says that early Americans believed "citizens were to be bound together not by patriarchy's duty or liberalism's self-interest, but by affection, and it was, they believed, marriage, more than any other institution, that trained citizens in this virtue. ... Marriage was the very pattern from which the cloth of republican society was to be cut." 28

As Mary Beth Norton points out in *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, when a woman enters the marriage contract, what essentially happens is an initial act of consent, but consent to the sacrifice of future acts of consent. Contract, for women, always means giving up the rights of consent to the "union" of man and wife. 29 Lewis succinctly assesses this problem when she points to the "legal fiction ... that in marriage the husband and the wife are one, and the husband is the one." 30 In this way, the marriage contract ultimately presents itself as an *obstacle* to the spirit of voluntarism, not a means to it. Though ostensibly breakable, the contract is in the end a very binding obligation, that which brings and keeps people together as they would not naturally be. Seduction, on the other hand, models community after an agency compelled by several forces, none of which is attributable to the liberal construction of the individual. Interpreted in this light, seduction presents a danger to the republic, by enacting intimate relationships whose viciousness might be read as civic virtue; the bond of seduced lovers thus institutes a radically communitarian model of


30 Lewis, 711.
social bonds and the family. By representing political agency as a matter of impulse, the seduction novel stands for the fatal struggle to follow through on the dictates of making unions perfect: for what union could be more perfect than the one unfettered by obligation?

Indeed, the novel’s conclusion turns away from an emphasis on Eliza’s reclusive death, instead making excessive reference to her postmortem social currency. In this way, she has indeed become an icon of communitarian virtue. Her friends concur with this line of reasoning, mourning Eliza’s death as a communal loss. The novel’s last letter is from Julia to Eliza’s mother; the words used to comfort this grieving mother are words of praise for Eliza’s social value. “Nor do I doubt,” writes Julia, “but you will join with me in execrating the measures by which we have been robbed of so valuable a friend; and society, of so ornamental a member” (p. 237). The act of joining together in mutual mourning offers a tribute to the more virtuous impact of Eliza’s sociability. Her death functions as an event which brings people together, as a language of friendship and community overwhelms its meaning. “The grave of Eliza Wharton,” insists Julia, “shall not be unbedewed by the tears of friendship” (p. 241). In the novel’s very last words, Julia writes to Eliza’s mother:

I hope, madam, that you will derive satisfaction from these exertions of friendship, and that, united to the many other sources of consolation with which you are furnished, they may alleviate your grief; and while they leave the pleasing remembrance of her virtues, add the supporting persuasion, that your Eliza is happy. (p. 242)

Friendship will heal the wound of Eliza’s loss, and through this sentiment female friendships become the moral compass of the novel—the test of civic virtue—and, importantly, a model for communitarian culture disappearing from post-revolutionary society. The last words on Eliza’s epitaph express a need for the republic to mourn the loss of its old revolutionary ideals: as “the tears of strangers watered her grave,” we witness Eliza’s symbolic regeneration; the communal impact of desire creates a truly social being, as those tears carry a powerful social valence. For once they cry at her grave, they are no longer purely “strangers” at all: the language of this inscription precludes the position of the stranger who is already in inevitable relation to others. Lewis’s argument about the political power of sociability defines this empowerment. “Sociability, then, was nurtured
in the family, and the bonds of affection that were created there stretched ever outward, from the family, to friends, the community, the nation, and even to humankind itself" (p. 125).

Where does such a conclusion bring us? As literary critics, we have long since moved beyond seeing the drama of the birth of the republic as a mere bloody clamouring towards a culture of contract—that is, towards a nation built upon principles of free will, consent, and reason. The fall into community through more radical bonds than those forged by principles of contract seems to be the subject of so many early American novels. Indeed, what is most glorious about these stories is their unfailing insistence that at the centre of all of life's plots is this messy and ambiguous business of what brings us together. Call it lust, desire, a nameless impulse to join another in a union more compelling than the independence of solitude, it is a force which ultimately threatens the contract that constitutes an ideal community.

By exploring illicit, intimate relationships as a model for community, novels such as *The Coquette* offer a theory of seduction; their place in the canon of American literature takes on special significance. For what that theory proposes is that marriage and the political ideals it was used to model are essentially un-American. It sees the failure of contractual ideals. Stories naming desire as that which compels human beings to join together offer much more radical terms of community and the agency facilitating it, terms which perhaps undermine the very notions they seem to restore. Their very instability insists on community as an ever changing, and ever changeable, social construction. In some ways, the most lasting impact of the seduction tale is its depiction of community as an uneasy condition whose terms are constantly in flux. Even more important, perhaps, is that as much as the tensions between the two models treated here of marriage and seduction ask us to reshape our understandings of early American politics, they also ask us to rethink our critical paradigms. For instead of talking about the ways in which desire merely subverts the community, the seduction novel asks us to think about how desire can also constitute community.

Alfred University
The Editors of *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* invite submissions to a special *ECF* number (April 2005) on Fiction and the Family in the eighteenth century. MSS should reach us by 1 April 2004. Considerations of any aspect of family relations as they are expressed in and affect the fiction of the period are welcome: parents and children; masters and servants; women; inheritance; marriage; the marriage act; elopement and adultery; infanticide; abduction; rape; fixed marriage; reproduction; private and public spheres; poverty and wealth; alternative families; personal space; conduct literature; sibling relations and rivalry; sexual desire and relations.

David Blewett, Editor, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*
McMaster University CNH-421, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, L8S 4L9, e-mail: ecf@mcmaster.ca