

FEMALE FRIENDSHIP IN HANNAH WEBSTER FOSTER'S *THE COQUETTE*: A LEGACY OF THE SEDUCTION NOVEL*

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Introduction

Hannah Webster Foster's seduction novel, *The Coquette* (1797), is a protest against the contemporary view of seduction as a penalty for women's moral vulnerability. Recycling the then widely known historical account of Elizabeth Whitman's seduction, Foster tries to rescue Whitman from the cultural condemnation as a fallen woman by elaborating a story that rewrites the signification of seduction not as women's self-victimization but as the victimization of women.¹ Julia Granby's angry words toward the end of the story: "Not only the life, but what was still dearer, the reputation and virtue of the unfortunate Eliza, have fallen victims at the shrine of *libertinism*! Detested be the epithet! Let it henceforth bear its true signature, and candor itself shall call it *lust* and *brutality*!" (163)

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¹ It is the *Salem Mercury* for July 29, 1788 that publicized the first notice of Elizabeth Whitman's death. Supposedly written by the landlord of the Bell Tavern, the account remembers Whitman not as a fallen woman, but as a woman of accomplishments: "The circumstances relative to this woman are such as excite curiosity, and interest our feelings," as the account reads, "Her conversation, her writings, her manners, bespoke the advantage of a respectable family and good education. Her person was agreeable; her deportment, amiable and engaging; and though in a state of anxiety and suspense, she preserved a cheerfulness which seemed to be not the effect of insensibility, but of a firm and patient temper" (qtd. in Davidson 141). As Cathy N. Davidson points out, "Whitman became, in effect, a case study, a woman first misled by her education into a taste for novels and then corrupted through indulging that unwholesome appetite" (142), the historical seduced woman was made by the culture into a representative image of a coquette. Not only contemporary journalism such as *Boston Independent Chronicle* and *Massachusetts Centinel* but also novels like William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* made a contribution to spread the coquettish image of Whitman. For more detailed information about contemporary reactions to the Whitman seduction, see Davidson and Shuffleton.

enunciate Foster's reinterpretation of seduction most representatively as they ascribe Eliza's tragedy directly to the moral failure of the Early Republic that treats male sexual license as if it were an epigone of liberty. Many scholars, however, also contribute their analytical efforts to clarify Foster's critique of the cultural discourse of seduction. Foster's deployment of seduction plot, to mention just a few examples, not only enables Carroll Smith-Rosenberg to read Eliza's sexual fall as an inevitable outcome of the Early Republic's "fundamental inconsistencies between their new capitalist and individualistic economy and the civic humanism they had inherited from their Augustan ancestors" (178) but also helps Donna R. Bontatibus find "seduction and rape as the ultimate representations of women's colonization in a rape culture — a culture that fosters violence against women and uses the fear of being victimized as a means of social control" (5).²

Interested also in the creativity of Foster's deployment of seduction plot, this essay will contribute an analysis of the role of female friendship in giving birth to a new language of seduction. Female friendship is, indeed, entitled to our recognition as one of the important themes of *The Coquette*. It is not just because Foster fashions this novel so that the story deploys itself as epistolary communications among women, but also because there is a cultural background that makes such a choice of narrative form even more meaningful. The idea of female friendship was, that is to say, undergoing a radical change toward the end of the eighteenth century. Formerly, friendship was normally applied to kinship relations, but around the turn of the eighteenth century, "the verbal distinction between family members and unrelated friends became clearer" in a way "language released 'friendship' from blood tie so that it existed purely in elective relationships" (Cott 186). *The Coquette* appeared in such a remarkable period when women of the Early Republic started crystallizing their relationship with other women by uniting themselves together in their "willingness and ability to extract themselves from familial definition" in order to explore "a new individuality" in "a world of true peers" (Cott 190). Taking this cultural background into special consideration, this essay

² Many other critics contribute their analytical insights to locate the cause of Eliza's fall in various cultural, social, and historical contexts of eighteenth-century America. See, for example, Davidson, especially, Chapter 6 "Privileging the *Femme Covert*" (110–150), Hamilton, and Shuffleton.

will demonstrate a reading of *The Coquette* as a story about women's collaboration to fight against a moral corruption of the Early Republic. Not only will this reading call for a certain modification to the dominant view that in *The Coquette*, friendship betrays the heroine Eliza Wharton, it will also offer a perspective to reconsider historical significance of the seduction novel, especially, a seduction novel's possible contribution to the emergence of "woman's fiction" in nineteenth-century America.³

I. Predicaments of Female Friendship

The Coquette is informed by Foster's insight into a sexual double standard of the Early Republic. Women's condemning voices against the cultural atmosphere of rake tolerance as well as against rakes themselves permeate throughout the text, as Lucy Freeman (later Lucy Sumner) representatively writes:

I look upon the vicious habits, and abandoned character of Major Sanford, to have more pernicious effects on society, than the perpetrations of the robber and the assassin. These, when detected, are rigidly punished by the laws of the land. If their lives be spared, they are shunned by society, and treated with every mark of disapprobation and contempt. But to the disgrace of humanity and virtue, the assassin of honor; the wretch, who breaks the peace of families, who robs virgin innocence of its charms, who triumphs over the ill placed confidence of the inexperienced, unsuspecting, and too credulous fair, is received, and caressed, not only by his own sex, to which he is a reproach, but even by ours, who have every conceivable reason to despise and avoid him. (63)

Lucy, here, discloses her concerns about the paralysis of moral sense of

³ The term "woman's fiction" is Nina Baym's invention: "Works of the genre that I am calling woman's fiction meet three conditions. They are written by women, are addressed to women, and tell one particular story about women. They chronicle the 'trials and triumph' . . . of a heroine who, beset with hardships, finds within herself the qualities of intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage sufficient to overcome them" (22). By this term, Baym clarifies generic divisions of the nineteenth-century women's literature which used to be grouped all together by the single term, the sentimental novel. I adopt this term because, in the way of discussing the possible link between the seduction novel and the nineteenth-century women's literature in what follows, I do also want to dissociate the seduction novel from such ideological properties of nineteenth-century women's literary discourse as sentimentalism and domesticity in order to emphasize the seduction novel's specific affinity with the Bildungsroman plot of Baym's "woman's fiction."

the Early Republic that, unable to recognize sexual violence on women as punishable crime comparable to robbery and murder, tolerates the presence of rakes in society. The understanding that there is no institutional means to penalize rake's wrongdoings motivates Lucy to espouse social banishment of rakes as women's cause: "I write warmly on the subject; for it is a subject in which I think the honor and happiness of my sex concerned," as she goes on to say, "I wish they would more generally espouse their own cause. It would conduce to the public weal, and to their personal respectability" (63).

Lucy is, however, not the only one who embraces such an anti-rake sentiment. Foster's women, with an important exception of Eliza Wharton, are actually all united together in this sentiment. Calling Eliza's partiality for Major Sanford as "juvenile indiscretion" (17), Mrs. Richman is unusually severe on Eliza's coquettish conduct, as she reportedly talked to Mr. Boyer: "We must...look with a candid eye on such excentricities. Faults, not foibles, require the severity of censure" (17). Julia Granby also takes her part. She recalls Lucy's past dealing with a marriage offer from a reformed rake: "I was once present when a person was recommended to her for a husband. She objected that he was a rake. True, said the other, he has been, but he has reformed. That will never do for me, rejoined she" (136) in order to praise Lucy's anti-rake sentiment as "a sentiment worthy the attention of our whole sex; the general adoption of which, I am persuaded, would have a happy influence upon the manners of the other" (136). With this sentiment in mind, Julia actually repels rakes by her determined attitudes. "I should never attempt to seduce; yet she is a most alluring object," writes Major Sanford about Julia, "But the dignity of her manners forbid all assaults upon her virtue. Why, the very expression of her eye, blasts in the bud, every thought, derogatory to her honor; and tells you plainly, that the first insinuation of the kind, would be punished with eternal banishment and displeasure!" (140). Mrs. Wharton, who is supposed to be a defeated Republican mother, exercises an unusual parental authority to stand in the way of Eliza's intercourse with Major Sanford: "My mama then informed me, that Major Sanford had been with her, and inquired for me," as Eliza angrily reports, "but that she thought it unnecessary to call me, as she presumed I had no particular business with him" (89).

Foster's critics usually attribute the discords of female friendship to the

difference between Eliza and her friends in the view of marriage. "The chorus of women correspondents," states Julia Stern representatively, "practices a thoroughgoing ideological ventriloquism as it spouts conventional views of marriage and morality, women's circumscribed place, and the joys of domesticity. Women are patriarchy's finest spokesmen in *The Coquette*" (90). The blame is, in this way, usually placed on the epistolary circle of women as they are thought to facilitate Eliza's isolation, sexual downfall, and death by their prejudices not to see Eliza's individualist pursuit of affluent marriage as anything but an unforgivable deviance from a rational path of women's lives. Once we recall Lucy's critical insight that grasps the perpetration of rakes as the product of the Early Republic's moral frailty rather than of women's failing, however, Foster's women would not always sound like "patriarchy's finest spokesmen." Instead of it, Eliza would appear to be more like a patriarchy's faithful servant as she makes herself available to the rake. The coquette's etymological link to the masculine noun, cock, already discloses her secret, but innate, affiliation with masculine value.

In fact, Eliza starts gaining more access and more popularity in male society, as her intercourse with Major Sanford deepens her sentimental isolation in the epistolary realm of female friendship: "I am so pestered with these admirers; not that I am so very handsome neither; but I don't know how it is, I am certainly very much the taste of the other sex. Followed, flattered, and caressed; I have cards and compliments in profusion" (12). Her mobility in male world, then, transforms her into something like a psychological twin to Major Sanford, as if, indeed, realizing the hermaphroditic etymological property of the word, coquette. Criticized her partiality toward Major Sanford by Mrs. Richman, for instance, Eliza vindicates her own conduct by challengingly saying: "I hope, madam, you do not think me an object of seduction!" (38). At another instance, her vindication goes even in favor of the rake, as she answers to Mrs. Richman's accusation of Major Sanford's character: "You, madam, are advocate for charity; that, perhaps, if exercised in this instance might lead you to think it possible for him to reform; to become a valuable member of society; and, when connected with a lady of virtue and refinement, to be capable of making a good husband" (51). Such self-confidence as Eliza's that she possesses virtue enough to reform a rake to be a good husband, instead of falling a prey to his rakish art, is

the very psychology of seducible woman that a rake preys on for his lascivious intention: "our entrapping a few of their sex, only discovers the gaiety of our dispositions, the insinuating graces of our manners, and the irresistible charms of our persons and address," as Major Sanford writes, "They think to enjoy the pleasures which result from this source; while their vanity and ignorance prompt each one to imagine herself superior to delusion; and to anticipate the honor of reclaiming the libertine, and reforming the rake!" (55).

To reclaim the coquette from the vicious hands of the rake, then, constitutes the principal agenda of female friendship in *The Coquette*. It is hardly deniable that Eliza's friends, quite often than not, appear to be rather too severe with Eliza. Lucy's epistolary response at the critical moment of Eliza's gross failure in regaining Mr. Boyer's friendship and trust: "Your truly romantic letter came safe to hand. Indeed, my dear, it would make a very pretty figure in a novel. A bleeding heart, slighted love, and all the *et ceteras* of romance, enter into the composition" (107) actually sounds totally devoid of compassion, sympathy, and all the marks of friendship. Such expressions as "the virtuous part of my sex" (51), "those of our sex, who observe no esteem" (57), and "the baser part of the sex" (57-58), or Lucy's disgust at a female equestrian whose "masculine habit and attitudes" in her opinion "ought not to be countenanced by our attendance, much less by our approbation" (113) also make women's anti-rake sentiment look like a disguised expression of "sororophobia."⁴ Such epistolary interactions between Eliza and her friends induce us to think that in *The Coquette*, "considerations of virtue," as John Paul Tassoni puts it, "overwhelm the affectional discourse" (104).

It is, however, true that female friendship exists in this novel as the most tenacious interpersonal relationship. While Foster's deployment of epistolary discourse substantiates the weakness of male homosocial tie by the decisively one-sided correspondence between Major Sanford and Charles Deighton, Foster produces no happy instance of heterosexual relationship, either. Marriage not only stands as "the tombs of friend-

⁴ This is Helena Michie's term that "attempts to describe the negotiation of sameness and difference, identity and separation, between women of the same generation, and is meant to encompass both the desire for and the recoil from identification with other women. Sororophobia is not so much a single entity as it is a matrix against and through which women work out — or fail to work out — their differences" (9-10).

ship" between Eliza and Lucy by practically disabling Lucy to offer her consoling company to Eliza, but also fails Mrs. Richman to be a happy Republican mother. Every heterosexual relationship turns out to be destructive for Eliza. Friendship can induce Mr. Boyer to forgive Eliza's errors, but it is only with a condition that the fact of their connection should be completely obliterated from memory: "Whatever we may have called errors, will, on my part, be for ever buried in oblivion," as Mr. Boyer writes to Eliza, "and for your own peace of mind, I entreat you to forget that any idea of a connection between us ever existed" (104). Being the immediate cause of Eliza's ruin notwithstanding, Major Sanford, too, hides some sort of aversion to a seducible woman, as he writes right after deserting Eliza, "I hope, one time or other, to have the power to make her amends, even by marriage. . . . Though I confess that the idea of being thus connected with a woman whom I have been able to dishonor would be rather hard to surmount. It would hurt even my delicacy, little as you may think me to possess, to have a wife whom I know to be seducible" (157).

Making a striking contrast with these other forms of interpersonal relationship, Foster's women exert strenuous efforts to claim Eliza back to the realm of female friendship. Without heeding friends' advices and warnings, Eliza blindly instrumentalizes herself for the prurient use of the rake. Even while suffering such a betrayal from Eliza, Foster's circle of women is, indeed, always there for Eliza to take refuge in. When Eliza's attempt to mend the relationship with Mr. Boyer results in irrevocable failure, Mrs. Richman becomes so concerned about Eliza's feelings that, immediately and before anybody else, she writes Eliza "a very friendly and consolatory letter" (98) in which she says: "But I will not moralize. Come and see us; and we will talk over the matter once, and then dismiss it for ever" (97). When Eliza writes to Lucy: "to have some friend in whom I could repose confidence, and with whom I could freely converse, and advise, on this occasion, would be an unspeakable comfort! Such a one, next to yourself, I think Julia Granby to be" (106), Lucy complies with the request by immediately arranging Julia's trip to Hartford with these words, "Nothing short of your request could induce me to part with her [Julia Granby]" (108). As Eliza's depression and melancholy deepens to a critical degree, Lucy, again, does not hesitate to act for Eliza. When Eliza asks: "Send me some new books; not such,

however, as will require much attention. Let them be plays or novels, or anything else, that will amuse and extort a smile" (109), Lucy fulfills this request: "I have contributed my mite, by sending you a few books; such as you requested. They are of lighter kind of reading; yet perfectly chaste; and if I mistake not, well adapted to your taste" (112). And if there comes up a danger of Eliza's resuming an intercourse with Major Sanford, Lucy tries to get Eliza away from the rake by asking a visit from Eliza: "I cannot relinquish my claim to a visit from you this winter. Marriage has not alienated, or weakened my regard for my friends. Come, then, to your faithful Lucy. Have you sorrows? I will sooth, and alleviate them. Have you cares? I will dispel them. Have you pleasures? I will heighten them. Come then, let me fold you to my expecting heart" (133-34).

Reading *The Coquette* as a critique of a society that allows men to make up their faults just as Benjamin Franklin does by errata in *Autobiography*, while denying the same privilege to women, Sharon M. Harris points out that Foster's women represent women's wish for the world in which "the rectification of 'errata' could become possible for young women" (18). As is suggested in Mrs. Richman's words cited above, "we will talk over the matter once, and then dismiss it for ever" or Lucy's encouragement to Eliza to restart her life, "Past experience will point out the quicksands which you are to avoid in your future course. Date then, from this, a new era of life" (108), however, such a world that accepts women's "rectification of 'errata'" actually exists in this novel as the women's world of friendship. Even Eliza's sexual fall is, in fact, pardonable in the eyes of friendship between women. Eliza obtains her mother's forgiveness: "Oh madam! can you forgive a wretch, who has forfeited your love, your kindness, and your compassion? Surely, Eliza, said she, you are not that being! No, it is impossible! But however great your transgression, be assured of my forgiveness, my compassion, and my continued love!" (149). She also makes her peace with Julia Granby: "In my breast you are fully acquitted," as Julia says to Eliza, "Your penitential tears have obliterated your guilt, and blotted out your errors with your Julia" (149). By thus demonstrating the tenacity and constancy of Foster's female friendship, however, I am not trying to argue for its competence in restoring the fallen woman to society. In *The Coquette*, women, in reality, fail to save Eliza. It is, however, by no means from any fault of their own. Women's efforts to recuperate Eliza, rather, suffer failure primarily

because of the absence of a society that is willing to give fallen women chance for penitence and reform, with intellectual and sentimental resources for a *feme sole* to find positive existential meaning.⁵

Eliza once tries to follow Lucy's advice, "No female, whose mind is uncorrupted, can be indifferent to reputation. It is an inestimable jewel, the loss of which can never be repaired. While retained, it affords conscious peace to our own minds, and ensures the esteem and respect of all around us" (133) by silently awaiting for "what a recluse and solitary mode of life will produce" (135), but all she can find in such solitude are conducive only to the confirmation of her own placelessness in the world. "I look around for happiness, and find it not. The world is to me a desert [sic]!", writes Eliza, "And, when I have recourse to books, if I read those of serious description, they remind me of an awful futurity, for which I am unprepared; if history, it discloses facts in which I have no prospect of realizing!" (135). Eliza finds herself in a world in which a solitary woman like herself constitutes an epistemological void. The world prepares nothing for Eliza to renew her existence and restart her life, completely invalidating Lucy's advice that virtue would restore her to "the esteem and respect of all around us." The relationship between Eliza and the external world, indeed, becomes curiously paradoxical. As Julia describes the solitary state of Eliza as "patience on a monument, smiling at grief!" (137), Eliza can no longer share emotional experiences with the world. She becomes unintelligible to those who surround her, "A paradox, indeed," as Julia says, "is the greater part of your letter to us, my dear Eliza" (136). As a *feme sole* trying hard to clear herself of the infamy of a coquette, Eliza cannot establish any meaningful contacts with the world. While women's efforts to rehabilitate Eliza are overwhelmed by such an antagonistic atmosphere of the Early Republic, Eliza is, once again, seduced by Major Sanford into the ensnaring role as a friend to his wife, Nancy. "His Nancy, he said, was far removed from her maternal friends," reports Eliza, "but I could supply their place, if I would generously undertake the task" (123). Because it is the only remaining role for Eliza to make herself socially useful, she takes up this fatal "task" and spells her doom.

⁵ For general information about women's social status in the Early Republic, including this *feme sole*, I am indebted to Kerber, Lewis, and Norton.

II. Women's Declaration of Moral Independence

Foster's women cannot prevent Eliza from falling into the prototypical destiny of eighteenth-century seduction heroines which usually consists of elopement, desertion, and death by puerperal fever. The fact that Eliza's challenging spirit that supported her all the way of her individualist pursuit for self-realization outside the conventional marriage and domesticity results in a suicidal end comes to us as the main irony of *The Coquette*. Eliza's elopement and death, however, are not the events that exactly mark the real ending of Foster's seduction novel. Eliza's retreat from the front stage of the text, rather, constitutes a turning point in which *The Coquette* becomes, in a genuine sense, a story about female friendship. It is in this story which relates how the fallen woman and her friends collaborate to challenge the Early Republic's sexual politics with a new understanding of seduction that we can best observe not only the innovativeness of Foster's deployment of seduction plot but also the originality of Eliza Wharton as a heroine of the seduction novel.

After Eliza forces herself to be out from the text in order to take the consequences of her own moral and sexual indiscretion silently among strangers in Salem, *The Coquette* obtains Julia Granby as a new actor and epistolary reporter. Entrusted by Eliza with a task of "an intercessor" (143) between the fallen woman and her intimate friends, Julia, that is to say, comes to take up the narrative position of this novel in order to realize Eliza's last wish: "And now, my dear Julia, recommending myself again to your benevolence, to your charity and (may I add?) to your affection," as Eliza's last epistolary words to Julia go, "and entreating that the fatal consequences of my folly, now fallen upon my devoted head, may suffice for my punishment; let me conjure you to bury my crimes in the grave with me, and to preserve the remembrance of my former virtues" (156). Though her effort to find Eliza, no matter how hard she exhorts Major Sanford to give information as to Eliza's whereabouts, comes to nothing, Julia devotes herself heart and soul to gather material to fill the narrative gap between Eliza's disappearance and her death. Julia obtains from Eliza's brother pieces of information about Eliza's last moment: "she was well accommodated, and had every attention and assistance, which her situation required," as Julia reports, "The people where she resided appear to have a lively sense of her merit and

misfortunes. They testify her modest deportment, her fortitude under the sufferings to which she was called, and the serenity and composure, with which she bid a last adieu to the world" (162). Julia also procures "several scraps of her writing, containing miscellaneous reflections on her situation, the death of her babe, and the absence of her friends" (162). Knowing that these miscellanies are nothing else but the fruits of Eliza's faithful performance of the promise, "I shall take measures that you [Julia] may be apprized of my fate" (156), Julia encloses Eliza's sincere regard for her friends in her epistolary report by writing: "These valuable testimonies of the affecting sense, and calm expectation she entertained of her approaching dissolution, are calculated to sooth and comfort the minds of mourning connections" (162-63).

As Julia writes to Lucy, "The drama is now closed! A tragical one indeed it has proved!" (161), the history of Eliza Wharton ends up in tragedy. Eliza's tragedy is, however, by no means a futile story. In justification of mercy and pardon for fallen women, Eliza sets a personal example for a seduced woman's moral sense to take the consequences of her own mistakes. Eliza's sacrifice is, actually, rewarded doubly by Julia's epistolary mediation. Julia not just concludes her account of Eliza's life and death during her self-inflicting exile by absolving Eliza from her moral sin, "Her elopement can be equalled only by the infatuation which caused her ruin. 'But let no one reproach her memory. / Her life has paid the forfeit of her folly. / Let that suffice'" (163). She makes use of Eliza's sacrifice as an opportunity for women to give positive expressions to their anti-rake sentiments. Julia now clearly sees that seduction is not always about the issue of women's moral frailty: "Not only the life, but what was still dearer, the reputation and virtue of the unfortunate Eliza, have fallen victims at the shrine of *libertinism*! Detested be the epithet! Let it henceforth bear its true signature, and candor itself shall call it *lust* and *brutality*!" (163). Julia gains a ground to see through the euphemism of "*libertinism*" and find seduction as a crime of male sexuality. "My resentment at the base arts, which must have been employed to complete the seduction of Eliza, I cannot suppress," continues Julia, "I wish them to be exposed, and stamped with universal ignominy! Nor do I doubt but you [Lucy] will join me in execrating the measures by which *we* have been robbed of so valuable a friend; and *society*, of so ornamental a member" (163-64). By thus writing, Julia manifests her determination to say deci-

sive no to the Early Republic's tolerance toward libertinism by initiating rake crusade. Lucy joins with Julia in this determination by showing her willingness to work for raising the moral consciousness of American young women: "From the melancholy story of Eliza Wharton, let the American fair learn to reject with disdain every insinuation derogatory to their true dignity and honor," as she writes, "Let them despise, and for ever banish the man, who can glory in the seduction of innocence and the ruin of reputation. To associate, is to approve; to approve, is to be betrayed!" (168). Julia Granby and Lucy Sumner occupy a leading position of moral reform to dismantle the Republic's infamous "shrine of *libertinism*." Eliza's heartfelt wish for the eradication of seduction from American society: "I hope to be the last wretched female, sacrificed by you [Major Sanford] to the arts of falsehood and seduction!" (159), here, becomes one with these women's determination to take action to banish rakes from the Early Republic.

Ingenuity of Foster's deployment of the seduction plot in the eighteenth-century American literature cannot be exhausted by her giving birth to a heroine who, far from reiterating the passivity and powerlessness of such seduction heroine as William Hill Brown's Ophelia or Susanna Haswell Rowson's Charlotte Temple, exercises her own free will both in plunging herself into the suicidal scenario of seduction and in taking the consequences of her own action. It is because the innovativeness of Foster's seduction novel seems to consist also in her elaborating on a story of seduction as a story of female friendship in which eighteenth-century American women voluntarily stand up as a moral guardian of the nation by taking up a social task of rake crusade. In *The Power of Sympathy*, Brown does not allow a rake to survive his moral sin with impunity by making Mr. Harrington's past as a seducer visible in the incestuous sympathy between his own children, Harriot and Harrington. Brown, however, winds up his seduction novel by privatizing, even feminizing, the problem of seduction as a matter of individual woman's judgment and moral understanding, insofar as he dedicates his volumes to "the young ladies of United Columbia" in order "to inspire the female mind with a principle of self complacency" (5). Coming to deal with seduction theme in her *Charlotte Temple* and *Charlotte's Daughter; or, The Three Orphans*, Rowson, in her own turn, answers Brown's rendition of seduction plot not only by having her rake character, Montraville, suffer an unbearable

psychological torment of his own guilty consciousness and die, but also by designing Charlotte Temple to be a tear-inducing, frail, and decisively sentimental figure of seduced girl with which to justify her view that seduced women need to be forgiven and rehabilitated to society: "Believe me, many an unfortunate female, who has once strayed into the thorny paths of vice, would gladly return to virtue, was any generous friend to endeavour to raise and re-assure her," says Rowson, "Oh, thou benevolent giver of all good! how shall we erring mortals dare to look up to thy mercy in the great day of retribution, if we now uncharitably refuse to overlook the errors, or alleviate the miseries, of our fellow-creatures" (70). Foster follows Rowson's lead in defending the seduced heroine's entitlement to society's mercy and pardon by means of Julia's words, "But let no one reproach her memory. / Her life has paid the forfeit of her folly. / Let that suffice" (163). At the same time, however, Foster's deployment of seduction plot differs crucially both from Brown and Rowson in framing the seduction plot by the epistolary correspondence among women and giving expression to seduction as communal experience. By doing so, Foster abolishes the traditional emphasis on seduction heroine's powerlessness and sentimentalism and obtains the seduction plot as a story about eighteenth-century American women's challenge to the Early Republic's sexual and gender politics that records women's struggles to break through their political and social anonymity as *feme covert* and carry out a social task of rake crusade.

Put in this reading of *The Coquette*, the epitaph that Julia and Lucy inscribe on Eliza's tombstone would reveal itself with fresh significance:

This humble stone, / in memory of / Eliza Wharton, / is inscribed by her weeping friends, / to whom she endeared herself by uncommon / tenderness and affection. / Endowed with superior acquirements, / she was still more distinguished by / humility and benevolence. / 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. / Her departure was on the 25th day of / July, A. D. —, / in the 37th year of her age, / and the tears of strangers watered her / grave. (169)

Majority of critics take this epitaph as a hypocritical and exploitative rewriting of Eliza Wharton's personality. Julia Stern, for example, ob-

serves that this epitaph is informed by her friends' "renunciation of the heroine's totality, its erasure of her fancy and imagination as vital aspects of her being" (147). For Gillian Brown, this epitaph "converts the story of coquetry into the biography of a moral paragon" (142) and "merely recapitulates the public record and popular lore concerning another woman" (144) because it recycles "word for word (except for the change in name from Elizabeth Whitman to Eliza Wharton), the inscription on the Whitman gravestone in Peabody, Massachusetts" (144).⁶ This inscription, however, does not represent women's hypocrisy in concealing Eliza's sexual dynamics under the discourse of virtue. To grasp the tenor of this epitaph, we should call to our mind, once again, Eliza's last request for Julia Granby to "bury my crimes in the grave with me and to preserve the remembrance of my former virtues" (156). The epitaph's discourse of virtue that "throw[s] a veil over her frailties," literally, marks friends' compliance with Eliza's this particular request. Uniting the sentiments of Eliza and her friends together in the plea for the exoneration of a seduced female from the infamy of a fallen woman, this tombstone monumentalizes women's determination not to support the cultural view of seduction as women's moral failure. As such, the gravestone symbolizes women's declaration of moral independence from the Early Republic — that is, the declaration that women refuse to take part in the nation's sexual politics that perceives seduction as a matter of women's moral fault and, instead, fight their own battle against seduction as a crime of male sexuality. *The Coquette* outlines the existence of communities that make efforts to put rakes into communal ostracism in Major Sanford's epistolary words, "By the virtuous part of the community, I am shunned as the pest and bane of social enjoyment. In short I am debarred from every kind of happiness" (166). By declaring their independence from the moral consciousness of the nation, Foster's women represent, even lead, such an anti-rake sentiments of "the virtuous part of the community." Eliza Wharton's tombstone, in short, stands as a public monument that announces the existence of women's community that, holding onto the memory of Eliza's sacrifice, exerts their efforts to root out the crime of seduction from the Early Republic.

⁶ For some more examples of similar interpretation, see Burgett, Mower, Pettengill, and Waldstreicher.

Conclusion: A Literary Legacy of the Seduction Novel

The seduction novel is an isolated genre in the history of American literature. There are scholars who point out a certain generic resemblance between seduction heroines like Eliza Wharton and Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Henry James's Isabel Archer, and Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier in their sprits to defy various sorts of constraints imposed by their societies and cultures for the sake of personal freedom (Wenska, Jr. 252). Apart from such remote sisterhood, however, heroines of seduction novels have not yet been admitted to any claim of filial relationship from American literary women. Rowson, unusual for an author of a seduction novel, not only allowed Charlotte Temple to leave an illegitimate daughter, Lucy Temple, but also granted the daughter to weave her own story in *Charlotte's Daughter; or, The Three Orphans*. What Rowson expects to do in the daughter's story, however, seems to purge the mother's sin from the family history of the Temples: "the history of her family was closed with the life of its last representative [Lucy]; those who had witnessed, in her mother's fate, the ruin resulting from once yielding to the seductive influence of passion," as Rowson urges us, "acknowledged, in the events of the daughter's life, that benignant power which can bring, out of the most bitter and blighting disappointments, the richest fruits of virtue and happiness" (265). Rowson, that is to say, wants Lucy's virtuous life to cover up or, if possible, redeem her mother's scandalous life. As Susan K. Harris points out, "Most significant, perhaps, Charlotte's baby becomes a reincarnation of virtuous womanhood, a throwback to her grandmother, showing no signs of her mother's rebellion. Named Lucy, she is in effect her grandmother's clone" (49), Lucy has no memory of her mother, does not know the secret of her birth from the beginning to the end of the story, and possesses no "seductive influence of passion" like her mother. Rather than reuniting Charlotte and Lucy in a mother-daughter relationship, Rowson severs their family tie by the use of the binary opposition between the corrupt and the virtuous in *Charlotte's Daughter*. Helped by the historical fact that seduction plot disappeared from women's literature around 1818, our longing to find an appropriate and legitimate place for the seduction novel in American literary history tends to end up in frustration. Circumstances are, indeed, quite unfavor-

able for the seduction genre to refute Nina Baym's powerful observation that women's literature of the nineteenth century expressed "a protest against long-entrenched trivializing and contemptuous views of women that animated the fiction of Richardson and other later eighteenth-century fiction of sensibility" (29).

Reading *The Coquette* as a story of female friendship seems especially appealing and useful to gain a prospective standpoint to discover a literary legacy of the seduction novel for the emergence of "woman's fiction" in the nineteenth century. A link between Foster's seduction novel and "woman's fiction" has already been pointed out by Gareth Evans. "While the coquette and the need to warn against her remain significant but now secondary concerns," writes Evans about the ending part of the novel, "women such as Foster's Julia Granby move from implicit heroines in an early sentimental novel's subplot to explicit heroines of the main plot in nineteenth-century 'woman's fiction.' Indeed, it is through the nineteenth-century daughters of Julia Granby that 'woman's fiction' 'shows [its] readers how to live'" (56). As Evans aptly discerns, Julia's role in the last part of the novel — that is, a role as a pioneering figure to rectify the moral corruption of the Early Republic — associates her with such nineteenth-century heroines of women's literature as Lydia Maria Child's Mary Connant (*Hobomok*, 1824), Catherine Maria Sedgwick's Jane Elton (*A New-England Tale*, 1822) and Hope Leslie (*Hope Leslie*, 1827) who serve as moral guardians and bring about various sorts of moral and ideological changes to American communities. Given such a family resemblance between Julia Granby and these American girls of the nineteenth-century women's novels, Foster's seduction novel has more information to give us about the genealogy. Julia Granby acquires her social visibility as a moral reformer without ground. As Dorothy Z. Baker points out: "Because of Eliza's death, Miss Granby is made aware of the tragic consequences of social language that is less than candid in identifying either virtue or vice" (65), it is Eliza Wharton and her sacrifice that supply Julia with an intellectual ground to grasp seduction as a crime of male sexuality and, with this understanding, to start working for banning rakes from American society.

Julia Granby is, indeed, a spiritual reincarnation of Eliza Wharton. Eliza Wharton is, in this sense, waiting for our recognition as a heroine who, playing out all the tragic parts of seduction plot, makes it possible

for American young girls like Julia to find their *raison d'être* in acting a moral part for American society and, with this self-consciousness, to set out for a journey to discover a new literary genre for their own life story. The nineteenth-century "woman's fiction" is a fruit of such literary quest by American girls. Foster wrote *The Coquette* neither to join with "the reactionary move against the [Republican] daughter's discourse at the close of the eighteenth century, in favor of the discourse of maternity" nor to record "the voice of the republican daughter in order to empty it of currency" (Fizer 244). *The Coquette* was by no means a seduction novel that reiterated the "long-entrenched trivializing and contemptuous views of women" in order for the subsequent generations of literary women to take as their literary models "the novel of manners" and "the fiction of the English women moralists — Mrs. Opie, Mrs. Barbauld, and especially Maria Edgeworth" (Baym 29). Foster offered *The Coquette* to the readers of the Early Republic as a story of female friendship that commemorates the sacrifice of seduction heroine in the spirits of those women who stand at the center of the Early Republic as moral guardians. *The Coquette* is, indeed, Foster's literary effort to save the seduction novel from its futility and generic isolation which would have otherwise been the most probable destiny for the genre by entrusting the spiritual legacy of seduction heroine to Julia Granby's possibility and prospect as a new literary heroine. The genealogy traced from Eliza Wharton through Julia Granby to Mary Connant, Jane Elton, and Hope Leslie suggests that the subsequent female authors chose to follow Foster's lead by producing sisters and daughters for Julia as the first spiritual descendant of the seduction heroine. The tradition of "woman's fiction," then, came into being as a sentimental repository for those literary women of the Republic who did not want to forget and waste the sacrifices of eighteenth-century seduced heroines.

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