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Reading the Gothic at Madame Rivardi's Seminary/Prodigal Sons and Virtuous Daughters

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Reading the Gothic at Madame Rivardi’s Seminary/
Prodigal Sons and Virtuous Daughters

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of The College of William & Mary in
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Master of Arts

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Approved by the Committee, May 2017

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ABSTRACTS

In *Reading the Gothic at Madame Rivardi’s Seminary*, I study the reading patterns of young women in the early American republic using letters exchanged between students who attended Madame Rivardi’s Seminary in Philadelphia. By examining the language employed by young women in their discussions of gothic novels and romantic fiction, I argue that young women’s engagement with these texts defied the expectations of educators and moralists, especially in regards to the practice known today as sympathetic identification. By reading, comparing, and identifying with works from these two genres, young women participated in broader discussions regarding artifice and virtue in the early American republic and established a group-specific vocabulary that facilitated communication within their closed social circle.

In *Prodigal Sons and Virtuous Daughters*, I consider how concerns regarding education, counterfeit identities, and corruption found expression in seduction literature. By focusing on the boarding school as a site of seduction, I argue that this space, and the bodies of the students who inhabited it, provided a focus for the political and social anxieties that plagued the early republic. The most significant of these fears concerned the inability of the young women, and American society as a whole, to distinguish between fiction and reality—a process known by modern scholars as sympathetic identification. I also argue that anxieties regarding seduction influenced the educational opportunities available to young women. Many educators sought to combat seduction within their schools by encouraging the formation of close-knit, female communities that protected students from falling victim to the schemes of opportunistic suitors.
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Intellectual Biography

The two papers that form my research portfolio are connected by a shared examination of women’s reading patterns in the early American republic. Both papers focus on the boarding school as a site of moral and intellectual instruction and argue that the novel served as a formative educational text within these institutions. Additionally, both papers engage with the process of sympathetic identification and argue for its centrality to the literary and political culture of the early republic.

In the fall, I examined young women’s engagement with the gothic and romantic genres in a paper entitled “Reading the Gothic at Madame Rivardi’s Seminary.” Using letters exchanged between former and current students of Madame Rivardi’s Seminary in Philadelphia, I studied the language that young women employed in their discussions of gothic novels and romantic fiction. I argued that by reading and comparing works from these two genres, young women participated in broader discussions regarding artifice and virtue in the early American republic. I also examined how their reading patterns led to the establishment of a group-specific vocabulary that facilitated communication within their closed social circle.

This paper introduced me to modes of literary criticism that enabled me to understand why novels occupied a central role in the education of young women during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The concept of sympathetic identification, a process that defines how readers engage with the novel, provided context for my analysis of the political and social anxieties that structured the interactions between young female readers and their peers. This project also provided an opportunity to make an initial foray into a collection of papers that I hope to utilize for future projects.
One of the comments that I received from Dr. Kitamura on “Reading the Gothic,” inspired the research topic that I pursued this semester. In my spring seminar paper, I examined a genre of fiction that briefly appeared in my fall seminar paper but merited further discussion. While continuing to situate my study on the boarding school, I examined the role of seduction literature in the early republic. This paper examines how broader concerns regarding seduction, counterfeit identities, and corruption found expression in seduction genre and how these anxieties influenced the educational opportunities available to young women in the early republic. I also examined how educators sought to combat these anxieties within their non-fictional institutions by encouraging the formation of close-knit, female communities that protected students from falling victim to the schemes of opportunistic suitors.

This paper provided an opportunity to synthesize multiple lines of research from previous projects while also exploring new topics and methodologies. In particular, this topic enabled me to delve into two areas of research that I have become increasingly interested in over the past year: the history of the body and the history of emotion. Both papers fit in to my broader interest in female education and female social networks in the early republic. The historical and literary methodologies that I engaged with while completing these projects will continue to inform my approach to similar topics in the future.
Reading the Gothic at Madame Rivardi’s Seminary

James Gillray, Tales of Wonder!, 1779-1805. New York Public Library.

Emily Wells

Popular Culture and Power
Hiroshi Kitamura
Fall 2016
Introduction

On June 15, 1811, Madame Rivardi’s Seminary for Young Ladies moved to a mansion house on the corner of Twelfth and Chestnut streets in Philadelphia. Built in the gothic revival style, the mansion recalled the castles and cathedrals that dotted the fictional landscapes described by the poets and novelists of the Romantic era. The headmistress, Marie Rivardi, was perfectly suited for her role as the “lady” of the house. A French émigrée, Rivardi had never completely forsaken her courtly manners and educated her students according to European standards. Founded in 1802, the Seminary had quickly become one of the most fashionable schools in the United States. Over time, however, students and patrons of the Seminary became increasingly dissatisfied with the extravagance and aristocratic behavior of the headmistress. In 1815, facing mounting debts and a decline in patronage, Rivardi returned to Europe. Although the Seminary continued for a short period under the guidance of a new headmistress, it soon closed its doors and the celebrated mansion became a private residence.¹

Built in 1809 by the architect John Dorsey, the Gothic Mansion reflected a growing desire to revive the sublime aesthetics of Europe’s gothic period (Fig. 1).² In this context, the term “gothic” does not refer to a specific period or culture but instead references a broad span of time that began in the Middle Ages and extended to the Elizabethan Era. Although rooted in the early eighteenth century, the Gothic Revival did not become a dominant intellectual, literary or aesthetic movement until the mid-eighteenth century when it took on a new life as part of the Romantic Movement.

² For more information on Dorsey’s Gothic Mansion see Calder Loth and Julius Trousdale Sadler, Jr. The Only Proper Style: Gothic Architecture in America (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), 35.
When Romantics looked to the gothic past, they found a lost world of marvels, a time when mystery had not yet succumbed to the rationalizing power of the Enlightenment. Unlike their predecessors, Romantics privileged feeling above reason and glorified man’s relationship to the natural world. They searched for sublimity – a transcendent experience characterized by feelings of terror and wonder – and discovered it among the great ruins of gothic cathedrals. They also found inspiration amidst the ashes of ancient civilizations that had existed in a “natural” state, unhampered the restraints of modern artifice. However, the gothic also recalled memories of “feudal tyrants” and “medieval faith.” The oppressive state structures and corrupt religious institutions of the gothic period had left little room for individual liberty – a fact that many Romantics could not overlook. Due to these contrary associations, the Gothic Revival occupied an ambivalent place within the broader Romantic Movement.  

Many of the tensions embodied by the Gothic Revival found articulation in literature of the era. In 1764, with the publication of The Castle of Otranto, Horace Walpole inaugurated a new genre known as the gothic novel. In Otranto, Walpole introduced many of the tropes that would later come to define the genre, namely a setting in the distant past and a reliance on mystery and suspense. As the genre developed within the context of the Romantic Movement, novelists began to incorporate elements of the sublime, including intense emotion and terror.

In this study, I will not delve into individual texts or attempt a thorough examination of the gothic genre. Instead, I will consider the gothic as a lived experience. Using the correspondence of students who had or currently were attending Madame Rivardi’s Seminary, I will analyze how young women incorporated “the gothic” into their daily lives. This study will

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depart from existing examinations of the Gothic Revival in two ways. First, it will consider the
gothic impulse as both a literary genre and aesthetic movement. So far, no scholar has attempted
an overarching examination of the Gothic Revival. Studies written by literary critics and
decorative arts scholars tend to focus on a single manifestation of the gothic impulse –most
commonly literature, fashion, architecture, or interior furnishings. By drawing on scholarship
from multiple of disciplines I hope to demonstrate how examinations of the Gothic Revival could
benefit from an approach that combines literary and historical modes of analysis. Second, this
study will explore the perspectives of young, female consumers. Drawing upon the methodology
employed by Janice Radway in her examination of twentieth-century romantic fiction, I will turn
my attention away from the isolated text and towards “the complex social event of reading.” This
approach assumes that readers operate as active consumers and have the ability to use and
interpret texts in unexpected ways.

Although I have aimed for an inclusive approach, this study is constrained by its source
base. I have confined the temporal scope of my analysis to the years 1802-1815, the period
during which Madame Rivardi operated her seminary, and the bulk of my analysis will focus on
correspondence exchanged between 1808 and 1814. The letters used in this study represent a
limited demographic scope, namely young, white, upper-class, women. The two primary
correspondents, Victorine and Evelina du Pont, came from a prominent family living in

5 Scholars often identify Chris Brooks’ study The Gothic Revival as a definitive source on the Gothic Revival. Although Brooks examines the movement as a whole, he devotes the majority of his attention to architecture. Other useful studies include In Pointed Style: The Gothic Revival in America, 1800-1860 by Elizabeth Field and Stuart P. Field (an exhibition catalog with a focus on interior furnishings), Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination edited by Dale Townshend (an exhibition catalog with a focus on literature), The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance by Edith Birkhead (a literary analysis of the gothic romance) and Gothic to Goth: Romantic Era Fashion & Its Legacy by Lynne Zacek Bassett (an exhibition catalog with a focus on fashion).

Delaware’s Brandywine Valley. The young women who corresponded with the du Pont sisters also came from prominent families living in the mid-Atlantic region. Although men and women from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds read gothic fiction, contemporary critics consistently identified young women as the genre’s primary consumers. By focusing on this demographic, we can identify how the reading patterns of young women conformed to and defied popular stereotypes and gain insight into how they responded to criticisms of their literary tastes.

This study seeks to answer two questions. First, how did young women incorporate novels into their daily experience? Second, did gothic fiction affect how young women related to the physical world? Unlike contemporary critics who assumed that young women would uncritically consume every piece of fiction that came their way, I argue that young women were active readers who carefully selected and critiqued their reading material. I also argue that gothic literature, and Romantic literature more generally, influenced how young women related to and interpreted the physical world. Students frequently used excerpts from literature to describe the people and places that they encountered and privileged aspects of the real world that recalled their favorite works of fiction. Although contemporary critics warned against the dangers of conflating fiction with reality (a phenomenon now known as sympathetic identification), young women frequently traversed this boundary. Young women used sympathetic understanding as a tool – a way to learn from the examples set by fictional protagonists. They also appropriated and repurposed the language of fiction. In their correspondence, young women formed coded

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7 Both sisters lived in France until 1803 when their family emigrated to the United States. Their father, Eleuthère Irénée du Pont, had emigrated three years earlier in 1800.
linguistic systems based in literary references that allowed them to express sentiments through comparison rather than direct language.

*Dangerous Texts*

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics of the gothic genre frequently debated whether parents should allow their children to indulge in fantastical stories of terror and horror. These concerns seemed especially urgent during the last decades of the eighteenth century when gothic novels experienced a rapid rise in popularity. Because circulating libraries usually carried the latest works of popular fiction, young people could access their desired reading material for a small fee, without requiring funds - and more importantly, permission - from their parents. As gothic novels became more accessible, many began to fear that the genre would exert an unwelcome influence on young, impressionable minds, particularly those of young women.¹⁹

In 1789, Hannah Webster Foster, published a short account detailing the harmful effects of novel-reading in her own novel entitled *The Boarding School*. Under the guise of a wise preceptress, Foster tells the story of Juliana, a young woman who was given little guidance in regards to her literary education. She had “a brilliant fancy, and a fondness for books, which, properly directed, might have proved of great use to her.” However, “having no better principles instilled into her mind, she indulged herself in the unlimited reading of novels, and every light publication which a circulating library could furnish.” As a result, “her imagination took wing, and carried her far above the scenes of common life.” Juliana fell for a “worthless man” who charmed her with his “gallantry” and deceived her with “art and duplicity.” Several years later, a former friend visited Juliana, only to find her impoverished and surrounded by squalor. Still,

¹⁹ Almost every critic used female pronouns to describe the genre’s potential readers.
Juliana maintained her love for novels, even more so now that they provided a momentary escape from her poverty and domestic responsibilities. In crafting her story, Foster drew upon a popular formula: a young woman receives little education or guidance from her parents, marries a young man whose gallant demeanor conceals a fickle character, and ends her life in poverty and despair. This formula draws a clear connection between the intellectual transgressions of youth and the sexual transgressions of adulthood. Juliana’s downfall is attributed to her inability to draw a distinction between fiction and reality. The man who she saw as a gallant knight was, in truth, an inconstant spendthrift. In telling Juliana’s story, Foster hoped to warn her readers against the danger of conflating fiction with reality; a trap to which any novel-reader could fall victim.

The narrative structure of the novel engenders what literary critics refer to as “sympathetic identification.” Simply put, this term refers to the moment when a reader “loses” herself in the text and begins to identify as the protagonist. Although sympathetic identification is a necessary component of the reading process, the reader must also maintain critical distance between herself and the novel. This process is responsible for the downfall of Juliana as well as the protagonists of other novels published during this time. As the correspondence of Victorine

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11 This formula is also reflected in the character Julia from Maria Edgeworth’s *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795) and Isabella Thorpe from Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1814). Broadly, this genre of writing is defined as seduction fiction.
and Evelina du Pont demonstrates, readers often took the warnings presented in these novels to heart. By comparing the warnings presented in *The Boarding School* and other novels published during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the letters exchanged between the DuPont sisters and their friends, we can gain insight into the perceived dangers of sympathetic identification and how readers and authors sought to mitigate those fears.

In 1803, Jane Austen offered a warning against the dangers of sympathetic identification in a satirical novel entitled *Northanger Abbey*.  

14 The novel begins as the heroine, Catherine Morland, prepares to embark on an extended stay in the fashionable city of Bath. Soon after her arrival, Catherine befriends Isabella Thorpe, a capricious young woman with a taste for lurid fiction. Thorpe takes it upon herself to provide Catherine with a “literary education” and introduces her to number of “horrid” tales including Ann Radcliffe’s popular novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.  

15 Although the novels that Isabella selects are intended to excite rather than instruct (thus earning them the descriptor, “horrid”), Catherine is unable to make this distinction. During a visit to Northanger Abbey, the familial estate of her friends, Henry and Eleanor Tilney, Catherine begins to envision herself as the heroine of her own gothic adventure. Surrounded by all the trappings of a gothic landscape, Catherine begins to conflate the fictional worlds found in “horrid” novels and the physical world she inhabits. Catherine’s inability to separate fiction from reality leads her to erroneously suspect the family’s patriarch, General Tilney, of murder. After receiving a stern lecture from Henry, who chides her for her error, Catherine resolves to no longer look to gothic novels for accurate portrayals of human nature.  

14 Austen sold her manuscript to a bookseller in 1803 however it was not published until 1814.  
15 Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1814; Project Gutenberg, 2010), eBook.  
16 After speaking with Henry, Morland comes to the following realization: “charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe’s works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the Midland counties of England, was to be looked for” (Austen, *Northanger Abbey*).
In the end, Catherine learns to temper sympathetic identification with critical judgment. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen does not provide a critique of the novel, but instead of readers who are unable to separate fact from fiction.\(^{17}\)

In the correspondence exchanged by the du Pont sisters and their friends, discussions of the latest novels were frequently accompanied by cautions against sympathetic identification. In October 1808, Rebecca Ralston encouraged Victorine to read *Rosella*, a novel that “points out very forcibly the impropriety of indulging in Romantic flights.”\(^{18}\) In this novel, the heroine’s mother is swept away by tales that contain

all the sublimity of pale moons, blue mists, gliding figures, hollow sighs, shaking tapestry, reverberating voices, nodding pictures, long corredors [sic], deserted west towers, north towers, and south towers, ruined chapels, suspicious vaults, damp charnel-houses, great clocks striking twelve, wood embers expiring, dying lamps, and total darkness.\(^{19}\)

Due to her mother’s inability to separate fiction from reality, the heroine finds herself entangled in a series of dangerous predicaments, from which she is eventually delivered. One month later, Ralston wrote again to discuss her reading habits, admitting that “much as I disapprove of such indulgences I am not willing to relinquish them wholly [sic] – I try to persuade myself sometimes that I am quite a philosophe but a short trial convinces me of my error.”\(^{20}\) Although Ralston’s letters frequently testify to her forays into the world of fiction, she is conscious that her habit is potentially dangerous. These warnings became more urgent after Rivardi moved her school to

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\(^{17}\) Michaelson, *Speaking Volumes*, 155. Austen chided novelists who scorned their own genre: “I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel-writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding” (Austen, *Northanger Abbey*).

\(^{18}\) Rebecca Ralston to Victorine du Pont, October 11, 1808, The Henry Francis du Pont Collection of Winterthur Manuscripts (hereinafter WMSS) 6A7, Hagley Museum and Library.

\(^{19}\) Mary Charlton, *Rosella, or Modern Occurrences, a Novel*, v. 1 (Dublin, 1800).

\(^{20}\) Rebecca Ralston to Victorine du Pont, November 29, 1808, WMSS 6A7.
the Gothic Mansion. Just as the gothic trappings of Northanger Abbey led Catherine’s imagination astray, the Gothic Mansion threatened to blind its residents to reality. Victorine implored her sister to distinguish between the “grandeurs of Art” and the “charms of nature” during her stay at the Gothic Mansion.\(^21\) If Evelina could look past the gothic ornamentation that adorned the Mansion, she would successfully demonstrate her ability to separate reality from fiction.

Just as Austen warned her readers against blurring the boundary between fiction and reality, Foster worried that novels would encourage readers to exhibit artificial emotion. Although Juliana wept for the heroine of her novel, she paid little attention to the needs of her children “who exhibited a picture of real woe.”\(^22\) Juliana’s misdirected sympathies reveal her hypocritical nature. Although she uses the language of sympathy to express pity for the plight of a fictional heroine, she is unable to extend similar feelings to her own children.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen echoes Foster’s characterization of Juliana through the fickle personality of Isabella Thorpe. Throughout the novel, Thorpe uses exaggerated language to express sentiments that she does not truly feel.\(^23\) For example, while expressing her affection for Morland, she promises that her “attachments are always excessively strong,” yet she only bothers to pursue their friendship when it is convenient for her. Like Juliana, Thorpe’s hypocrisy is a result of her excessive indulgence in novels. Mimicking the absurd and over-wrought language that she encounters in these texts, Thorpe crafts a mask of sincerity that hides her true emotions.

\(^{21}\) Victorine du Pont to Evelina du Pont, June 17, 1811, WMSS 6A2.  
\(^{22}\) Foster, *The Boarding School*, 21.  
To avoid a similar fate, the du Pont sisters and their friends kept up a lively correspondence and frequently reassured each other of the sincerity of their affections. In March 1809, Victorine’s friend, Anna Potts Smith wrote assured her “beloved friend” that she “could use nought [sic] but the language of my heart in writing to you.” To strengthen these bonds of friendship, Madame Rivardi assigned each of the older students to a younger student who would become their “daughter.” Within the context of the Seminary, mothers would tutor their daughters, inspect their wardrobes, and guide their conduct. Once students had left school, they would often remain in contact with their mothers and daughters; Evelina frequently spoke with affection of her “mother,” Antoinette Brevost, and Brevost would often ask Victorine for news regarding her dear “Lina.” By asking students to couch their friendships in the language of motherhood, Rivardi hoped to encourage natural and sincere affection among her pupils.

As a distraction from reality, the novel posed a more tangible risk to the domestic sphere. Critics worried that excessive reading would distract women from their household responsibilities. During her visit, Juliana’s friend remarks on “the disorder of [Juliana’s] house” and the “tattered” state of her clothing, which “bespoke the shameful negligence of the owner.” Juliana’s poverty is only made worse by her inability to acknowledge and fulfill her domestic responsibilities.

In a letter to Evelina, Victorine echoes Foster’s concerns when she admonishes her sister for spending too much time composing poetry: “I advise you to learn to pleat it will be much more useful to you than to compose Spanish poems – not only when your washer woman has the small pox, but for when you return here I am in no mood to always do your handkerchiefs.”

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24 Anna Potts Smith to Victorine du Pont, March 17, 1809, WMSS 6A7.
25 Mary Johnson, “Madame Rivardi’s Seminary,” 15-17, 32-33.
26 Foster, The Boarding School, 21.
27 Victorine du Pont to Evelina du Pont, June 25, 1811, WMSS 6A2.
grounding Evelina in the realities of daily life, Victorine hoped to discourage her from emulating the choices made by Juliana and other fallen heroines. Unlike Juliana, who became so enamored by fiction that she could no longer bear the drudgeries of domestic life, Victorine reminded her sister to remain grounded in reality and apply her energy towards practical tasks.

Rather than indulge in novels and other “dangerous” forms of literature, Foster believed that women should spend their time reading history. Unlike the novelists who spun fantastical tales cloaked in layers of artifice, historians offered accounts of true events. By reading history, Foster believed young women could gain “a competent acquaintance with human nature in all its modifications.” For Foster, history provided an antidote to the poison of the frivolous novel; it could ground young women in reality and provide knowledge that would be of “constant use.”

Although Foster does not name any authors in The Boarding School, it is likely that she approved of the novels and poems written by Sir Walter Scott. Although Scott was a Romantic who drew upon elements of the “gothic,” he did away with the artifice that characterized the genre. When Scott published Waverly in 1814, he inaugurated a new genre of literature known as the historical novel. Set during the Jacobite uprising of 1745, Waverly drew on the not-so-distant past. “I would have my readers understand,” Scott wrote, “that they will meet in the following pages neither a romance of chivalry, nor a tale of modern manners…From this my choice of an era the understanding critic may farther presage, that the object of my tale is more a description of men than manners.” By writing on “men” rather than “manners,” Scott made a conscious choice to break from the artifice that seemed to characterize the gothic novel. Instead, he directed his energies towards examining

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30 For a discussion of how historicism of Scott’s work was mirrored in architecture and the decorative arts see The Gothic Revival. London: Thames & Hudson, 2002.
those passions common to men in all stages of society, and which have alike agitated the human heart, whether it throbbed under the steel corslet of the fifteenth century, the brocaded coat of the eighteenth, or the blue frock and white dimity waistcoat of the present day.\footnote{Walter Scott, \textit{Waverly; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since} (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne and Co., 1814), 7.}

Rather than examine changing modes and manners, Scott hoped to peer into the very soul of mankind. In the words of literary critic Edith Birkhead, he sought to “[create] romance out of the stuff of real life.”\footnote{Birkhead, Edith, \textit{The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance} (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 156.}

The du Pont sisters greatly admired Scott and were always eager to discover new examples of his work. Upon receiving a new volume of Scott’s poems, Victorine immediately wrote to her sister to relay the discovery and promised to pass on the volume once she had finished. “It was for you I requested papa to buy it,” she wrote, “as I well know your partiality for that author.”\footnote{Victorine du Pont to Evelina du Pont, June 21, 1812, WMSS 6A2.} Scott was also a favorite among the du Pont sisters’ circle of friends. In August 1813, Anna Potts Smith wrote to Victorine and expressed her pleasure with the character Matilda from Scott’s narrative poem, \textit{Rokeby}: “he gives you a heroine that you \textit{can} picture to yourself – just such a picture too as touches the heart.”\footnote{Anna Potts Smith to Victorine du Pont, August 8, 1813, WMSS 6A7.} Like many other readers, Smith appreciated Scott’s ability to create characters who seemed real. Other novelists failed to achieve this same effect. In November 1808, Rebecca Ralston complained that the characters who populate Samuel Richardson’s \textit{History of Sir Charles Grandison} “are too perfectly drawn.”\footnote{Rebecca Ralston to Victorine du Pont, November 29, 1808, WMSS 6A7.} Ralston rejected Richardson’s characters because she interpreted their perfection as artifice. Whereas Scott’s characters appeared real and elicited true emotion in the heart of the reader, Richardson offered caricatures that failed to reflect the variances of human nature.
In addition to Scott, the du Pont sisters and their friends enjoyed any novel that drew from historical truth. In April 1811, Antoinette Brevost wrote to Victorine to recommend Jane Porter’s *The Scottish Chiefs*. Brevost was “very much pleased” with the novel, explaining that “the work is free from what you and I call stuff and “interests the feelings.” She also assured her friend that “much of historical truth is preserved.”36 In this context, “stuff” most likely refers to the affectations that plagued the language of other novelists. Furthermore, her interest in “feelings” and praise for “historical truth” reflects her desire to read novels that draw upon human emotion and real occurrences.

*Fiction and Reality*

Despite the cautionary tales found in the works of Austen and Foster, the du Pont sisters and their friends frequently traversed the boundary that separated fiction from reality. In their correspondence, the young women would often describe their surroundings using excerpts from Romantic fiction. These imagined connections also took a material form in the architecture, decorative arts, and modes of dress that they encountered on a daily basis.

The words of Romantic poets frequently appeared in the letters exchanged by the du Pont sisters and their friends. Echoing the sentiments of their favorite authors, the young women celebrated the sublime beauties of nature and scorned the dusty streets and artificial pleasures of the city. In May 1810, Antoinette Brevost adopted the words of the eighteenth-century poet, Oliver Goldsmith when describing her longing to visit the countryside. “How sweetly inviting

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36 Antoinette Brevost to Victorine du Pont, April 11, 1811, WMSS 6A7. In Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, the character John Thorpe uses the word “stuff” while expressing his distaste for novels: “Novels are all so full of nonsense and stuff; there has not been a tolerably decent one come out since Tom Jones, except The Monk; I read that t’other day; but as for all the others, they are the stupidest things in creation.”
the country must now be,” she wrote, “I would give something to be at this moment rambling with Victorine thro’ the ‘matted woods’ of Wistar.”37 One year earlier, Rebecca Ralston had expressed similar sentiments when she described the “truly romantic” scenes she had encountered while traveling up the East River. She wished to experience the “charming [prospects]” with a friend who could share her appreciation for the beauties of nature. “How often when sitting on the deck enjoying the breeze and viewing the picturesque scenery did I long for my Victorine,” she wrote.38

Although the du Pont sisters and their friends did not always describe the landscape using the words of Romantic poets, they assessed its aesthetic merits according to their Romantic sensibilities. While the countryside was “sublime,” “charming,” and “romantic,” the young women could not muster equal praise for the “square houses,” “muddy gutters,” and “crowded pavements” of the city.39 In May 1813, Ralston wrote to Victorine from Philadelphia, and expressed her contempt for the city’s artificial landscape. “I am more impatient than ever to leave the dusty streets and brick walls of this place,” she complained, “Oh! That I could but take a peep at Lake George!”40

In addition to examining landscapes through a Romantic lens, the young women dressed themselves in styles that reflected their admiration for the natural world. In an 1813 portrait, Victorine wears a simple, white dress, its clean lines softened by a thin, muslin overlay. The neoclassic simplicity of its design emphasizes her natural silhouette and is unencumbered by fussy ornamentation (Fig. 2). In the 1790s, as neoclassicism began to inspire new modes of

37 Antoinette Brevost to Victorine du Pont, May 7, 1810, WMSS 6A7. The phrase “Matted woods” is from Oliver Goldsmith’s narrative poem, The Deserted Village (1770): “Those matted woods where birds forget to sing.”
38 Rebecca Ralston to Victorine du Pont, May 26, 1809, WMSS 6A7.
39 Anna Potts Smith to Victorine du Pont, November 1809, WMSS 6A7.
40 Rebecca Ralston to Victorine du Pont, May 15, 1813, WMSS 6A7.
dress, women chose to forgo boned stays and panniers in favor of less-restrictive corded corsets and petticoats. By adopting a new, columnar silhouette, women renounced the artifice that had characterized the dress of previous generations and celebrated the beauty of the natural, female form.\textsuperscript{41}

In her correspondence, Victorine made direct connections between Romantic ideals and her favored modes of dress. In June 1811, she wrote to her sister to describe the alterations that she had made to a straw bonnet: “I intend to put on it a wreath of wild roses – then I may indeed exclaim with our favorite author ‘Oh wilding rose whom fancy thus endears/I bid your blossoms in my Bonnet wave/Emblem of Hope & love through future Years!’”\textsuperscript{42} Victorine’s decision to invoke the poetic language of Scott in her discussion of fashion demonstrates how Romantic philosophies influenced even the most mundane aspects of daily life. One year later, she penned a letter to her sister in which she recounted the fashions she had seen while staying at an inn with her father. The most interesting ensemble belonged to a young boy who “had on a large scarf tied round his body of silken plaid.” After speaking with his mother, she discovered that he had “a complete highland dress,” complete with “a bonnet and plume.” Victorine’s description of this “sweet highland soldier” indicates a broader interest in Scottish culture.\textsuperscript{43} Having read a collection of Scott’s poems earlier that day, the young boy’s dress likely reminded her of his romantic tales, many of which took place in his native Scotland.\textsuperscript{44}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[42] Victorine du Pont to Evelina du Pont, June 17, 1811, WMSS 6A2. Victorine drew her quotation from \textit{The Lady of the Lake}, a poem by Sir Walter Scott.
\item[43] Victorine du Pont to Evelina du Pont, June 21, 1812, WMSS 6A2.
\item[44] Beginning in the second decade of the nineteenth century, men and women began to incorporate plaid fabrics and other elements of traditional Scottish apparel into their wardrobes. These Scottish Revival fashions became especially popular in the 1820s and 1830s. For examples see \textit{Tartan: The Highland Habit} by Hugh Cheape.
\end{footnotes}
The correspondence exchanged by the du Pont sisters and their friends demonstrates the multitude of ways in which Romantic literature became part of everyday life. Their interest in the natural world and desire to imitate historical modes of dress fit seamlessly with their readings of Scott and Goldsmith. Their disdain for gothic artifice also found a place in their daily interactions. Familiar with the works of Radcliffe and other gothic novelists, the young women would often mimic the dramatic language employed by these authors to express their disdain for insincerity and artifice.45

Much of the artifice that characterized the gothic genre found material form in the structural elements of the Gothic Mansion. Unlike the medieval ruins and ancient estates that dotted the varied landscapes of Great Britain, the Mansion was an architectural imposter. The hodgepodge of ancient and medieval accoutrements could not hide its modern origins. Its basic structure – most notably its symmetrical form, evenly-spaced windows, triangular gable, and low-hipped roof – marked it as a modern edifice. The shields, escutcheons, and tablets that adorned the mansion’s interior and exterior walls hinted at a distant past, without calling to mind a specific time or place. One room even departed from the gothic theme to exhibit the exotic styles of Egypt.46 To furnish this eclectic structure, Madame Rivardi was able to choose from an equally varied range of interior decorations crafted in the gothic revival style.

Once Madame Rivardi and her students had moved into the Mansion, friends and relatives wrote to inquire after details of their new home. Just three days after the move, on June 17, 1811, Victorine wrote to Evelina, asking how she liked the Mansion and encouraging her to take advantage of the opportunity to compose her own Romantic verse: “I hope you will not fail

45 Hinsley, “The Reading Tastes of Educated Women.”
to write some Verses on Your installation in this ‘Venerable pile’ – I dare say the ‘Mossy walls’ & ‘awful grandeur’ of the place will fire your genius & the world will be gratified by some good production.”

One week later she wrote again, addressing her letter to “the fair recluse of the Gothic mansion.”

Signora! How am I to suppose that the wild & unstudied letters of a rustic will claim the approbation of your Ladyship? – it were the height of presumption in me to look up for your favor, to expect that I shall obtain it by my simple descriptions of a country life – Believe me I am far from entertaining much a hope – What does the inhabitant of a castle care about the lowly pleasures of the cottager? In truth it is very natural that all our occurrences should seem insipid to You & that is what makes my task so difficult – You are surrounded by all the grandeurs of Art, which corrupt the taste & make us blind to the charms of nature – I am certain your highness is already fatigued with My preamble, & I durst not proceed any farther for fear offending her – I am madam yours very respectfully Pastorella

This satirical preamble, written in the voice of a rustic shepherdess, parodies the highly-wrought prose commonly found in gothic novels. Styling herself as a “country girl,” Victorine draws a clear distinction between the “pleasures” of country life and the artifice of the city. Although her primary goal is to amuse her sister, she also uses the opportunity to remind her to not become enamored by the “grandeurs of Art.” By capitalizing the word “Art,” Victorine makes it clear that she does not simply refer to artistic production, but also anything that hides behind a false pretense. Although her ability to write in a “high strained Style” indicates a familiarity with the gothic genre, she does not admire the overly-stylized language and promises to continue writing in her own voice as she fears that if she did otherwise, her letter would put them both to sleep.

Although Victorine surmised that her sister would enjoy the opportunity to play-act as a gothic heroine, Evelina admitted that she had become “disgothicated” soon after moving into the

47 Victorine du Pont to Evelina du Pont, June 17, 1811, WMSS 6A2.
48 Pastorella is the Italian word for shepherdess
Mansion.\textsuperscript{49} While it is possible that Evelina had simply grown tired of the mansion’s pretentious appearance, it is more likely that she used this term to express disapproval for the many social occasions that had accompanied their move.\textsuperscript{50} Just as Victorine mimicked the language of a gothic novel to remind her sister of the artifice embodied by the Mansion’s highly-stylized façade, Evelina used a similar comparison to express her disdain for Rivardi’s constant pursuit of entertainment.

Even before the Seminary moved to the Gothic Mansion, students used the language and themes found in gothic fiction to express their disapproval for Rivardi’s behavior. In 1809, Anna Potts Smith wrote a “little burlesque” that poked fun at the artificial behavior encouraged by their headmistress. Entitled “The Castle de Rivardi a Tale,” Smith wrote her story in a “pompous style” and played upon the themes commonly found in romances that contained “hideous pictures” of “ghosts,” “hobgoblins,” “secret chambers,” and “dismal galleries.”\textsuperscript{51} Although Smith wrote her letter from an unassuming estate, she imagined it in the style of a gothic castle, complete with “secret passages,” “grated windows,” and “deserted chambers.” Four years later, Smith returned to her gothic theme when describing what she perceived as an inappropriate flirtation between Rivardi and a recently-widowed gentleman: “perhaps this lively widow, the Lady of the Castle may be setting her cap or adjusting her shawl to catch this gay widower – who knows!!” By referring to Rivardi as the “Lady of the Castle” (a character trope often found in gothic fiction) Smith compared her flirtation with the morally dubious plot of a gothic romance. She also used the title “lady” to reference Rivardi’s desire to retain the artificial social distinction

\textsuperscript{49} Victorine du Pont to Evelina du Pont, June 25, 1811, WMSS 6A2. Referencing Evelina’s tendencies towards the Romantic, Victorine wrote: “I congratulate you on being settled in the mansion where I think you have a fitter place for your meditations than an old garret & a more enlivening prospect for your walks than a church yard.”

\textsuperscript{50} Johnson, “Madame Rivardi’s Seminary,” 4.

\textsuperscript{51} Anna Potts Smith to Victorine du Pont, March 17, 1809, WMSS 6A7.
that she had enjoyed as a member of the French aristocracy. The flirtation between Rivardi and the “gay widower” was especially offensive to Smith since the gentleman had only learned of his wife’s death a few days prior to his visit. In this context, the otherwise harmless flirtation became a gross transgression against the natural feelings of romantic love.

**Conclusion**

By recommending, discussing and exchanging works of fiction among themselves, the du Pont sisters and their friends circumvented the need for patriarchal guidance and defied the assumptions of authors who believed young women could not learn to read critically without outside instruction. For them, reading was a shared experience, one that bound them together even after they had left the Seminary. Through their correspondence, they formed a coded linguistic system based in literary references. This system allowed them to communicate complex ideas through efficient comparisons that drew upon a shared body of knowledge. They used the knowledge that they gained from their forays into fiction to guide their conduct and sharpen their critical perception. Their knowledge of gothic fiction prepared them to recognize and critique artifice – a tool that became especially useful once they moved to the celebrated Gothic Mansion. Conversely, the examples set by the protagonists of Romantic fiction strengthened their desire to form relationships based in true affection.

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52 Johnson, “Madame Rivardi’s Seminary,” 8.
53 Anna Potts Smith to Victorine du Pont, October 8, 1813, WMSS 6A7.
Appendix

Fig. 1: Robert Mills, *John Dorsey’s Gothic Mansion*. The Philadelphia Print Shop, Ltd.
Fig 2: Rembrandt Peale, *Victorine du Pont Bauduy (Mme. Ferdinand Bauduy)*, 1813. Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library
Bibliography

Primary:


Secondary:


Prodigal Sons and Virtuous Daughters: Young Women and the Politics of Seduction in the Early American Republic 1780-1830


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Introduction

In December 1894, a reporter for the New York Herald observed a young woman kneeling next to a grave in the yard of Trinity Church. Dressed in black, she bowed her head and shed silent tears into her open palms. After a few moments of quiet contemplation, she arose and “walked swiftly through the gates,” disappearing into the crowded street. According to the reporter, this young woman was “one of the many devotees” who came to pay homage at the shrine of Charlotte Temple, a “poor girl who died for love.” Away from the noise and confusion of New York City, another group of mourners gathered in Danvers, Massachusetts, to visit the grave of another woman who died for love, Eliza Wharton. Although Wharton’s grave undeniably attracted the tears of young women dressed in black, it also served as a pilgrimage for lovers who “plighted their troth amid the whispering of the unmown grass” and relic hunters who “chipped away” at the already-diminished stone. Although dissimilar in location and appearance, these two graves are connected by one crucial circumstance: Charlotte Temple and Eliza Wharton never existed.1

Apart from their stone memorials, Charlotte and Eliza do not exist in any physical form beyond the novels that record their (fictional) life stories.2 Although they first found life in the imaginations of two novelists, Susannah Rowson and Hannah Webster Foster, Charlotte and Eliza quickly became “real” in the minds, and more importantly the hearts, of their readers.

As the protagonists of late eighteenth-century seduction plots, Charlotte and Eliza shared similar paths to the grave. Seduced, impregnated, and later abandoned by fickle men, both

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2 Although it is likely that Wharton’s grave initially bore the name of her inspiration, Elizabeth Whitman, visitors frequently conflated these two identities. Throughout this paper, I will use the names of characters as they appeared in print.
women died in childbirth. Because they were led astray in their youth (a period broadly defined as the time between childhood and marriage), Eliza and Charlotte were unable to complete their educations. This fact was particularly troubling to a nation that placed a high value on educated women whose moral guidance could awaken civic virtue in the hearts of their husbands and children. Although they began as virtuous daughters, they were unable to fulfill their civic duty as republican wives and mothers due to selfish desires of the prodigal sons who had seduced them.

As the products of sentimental literature, a genre that sought to personalize the political, Eliza and Charlotte also serve as proxies for the national community. As these two young women navigated the dangerous “season of youth,” the young nation embarked on an equally formative period, one that would either secure its success or lead to its destruction.

To understand why the stories of Eliza and Charlotte inspired such strong devotion among readers in the early republic, I will examine seduction fiction as a representational space in which readers attempted to resolve national anxieties through the (fictional) bodies of young, white women. By focusing on the boarding school as a fictional site of seduction, I will argue

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4 During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, moralists frequently referred to youth as a “season.” By associating youth with springtime, moralists could draw a comparison between planting (a springtime activity) and education. In *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft compares the minds of “weak and wretched” women to “flowers which are planted in too rich a soil;” a “barren” flower is the product of a “false system of education.” (53) In *The Boarding School*, Hannah Webster Foster reminds her readers that “youth is the seed-time of life” and they must “cultivate that knowledge, which future years must ripen.” (25) In her *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft also states that “youth is the season for love in both sexes.” (53). The correspondence between the “season for love” and the “seed-time of life” created a dilemma for parents and instructors charged with the care and cultivation of young minds. The comparison between education and the tilling of soil merits further examination, especially considering the correspondence that developed in the late eighteenth century between the young, female body and the national landscape. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (Boston, 1792). Hannah Webster Foster, *The Boarding School; or, Lessons of a Preceptress to her Pupils...* (Boston: J.P. Peaslee, [1798] 1829). For more on the definition of “youth” in the early republic, see Rodney Hessinger, *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn: Visions of Youth in Middle-Class America, 1780-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 5.
that this institution performed a practical and an ideological function within the early republic. By guarding the bodies of young white women and shaping their intellectual and moral character, boarding schools provided a necessary service that would help to secure the nation’s future success. However, the boarding school also preyed upon the anxious imaginations of post-revolutionary patriarchs; by temporarily liberating daughters from the bonds of parental supervision and inserting them into the relatively anonymous social world of the early American city, boarding schools placed young women within easy reach of unscrupulous seducers who threatened bodily and moral corruption.

By studying tales of seduction published or sold in the United States between 1780 and 1830, I will examine how the boarding school became a site of national anxiety in the early American republic. In particular, I will study how broader concerns regarding seduction, counterfeit identities, and corruption found expression in sentimental discussions of female education. I argue that by interacting with the boarding school through fictional tales of seduction, citizens were able to act out their existential fears regarding the nation’s future through the unambiguously physical process of sexual seduction. Here, I use the term “citizen” to refer to the elite, white men who directly participated in the political world of the early republic and the women who sought to guide them. I will also examine how educators sought to combat these fears by encouraging the formation of close-knit, female communities that protected students from falling victim to the schemes of opportunistic suitors.

Drawing upon existing discussions of sentiment and emotional sensitivity in the early republic, I will examine how Americans used the language of sentiment to blur the boundaries between private and public, thus allowing them to process national anxieties through the production and consumption of private texts. I will divide these texts into two categories: public
documents that discuss private life (seduction novels) and private documents that became the focus of public consumption (women’s bodies). Second, I will argue that sentimental rhetoric frequently confused the boundaries separating familial and social relationships, a phenomenon that explains why young women were able to view social relationships as extensions of their biological family.

Although a number of historians have examined the emotional climate of the early republic, few examine the emotional lives of young women. In 1975, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg published *The Female World of Love and Ritual*, a seminal study on female friendship and affection in nineteenth-century America. By privileging homosocial and homosexual relationships (and blurring the line between these two modes of affection), Smith-Rosenberg complicated existing narratives that either downplayed the importance of these relationships or attempted to examine female affection through the language and modes of feeling employed by men. Several years later, Nancy Cott published *The Bonds of Womanhood*, a book which emphasized the centrality of female homosocial relationships in a world increasingly divided into “male” and “female” spheres. Drawing upon the work of Smith-Rosenberg and Cott, I will study the emotional lives of young women in the female world of the boarding school.

Although many historians have examined the significance of seduction fiction in the early republic, none of these studies identify the boarding school as a site of anxiety. Considering that the most popular seduction novel in early America, *Charlotte Temple*, begins with the

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protagonist’s elopement from a boarding school, I argue that this aspect of the seduction genre merits closer attention.\(^6\)

I will also break from previous examinations of seduction fiction by putting these texts in conversation with seduction accounts published in newspapers, conduct manuals, and other forms of print media.\(^7\) In addition to print materials, I will examine how men and women “read” the female body, thus transforming it into a legible text. By broadening the definition of seduction literature and what constitutes as text, I aim for a more inclusive approach to the genre that will allow for a thorough examination of the relationship between sentimental literature and political anxiety in the early republic.

Finally, I will complicate existing histories that link seduction fiction to the emerging domestic sphere by examining how young women used familial language to form fictive kinship networks among their female peers. I argue that by broadening our definition of family beyond biological kin, historians can achieve a better understanding of how the anxieties posed by

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\(^6\) While my examination of the female body will derive primarily from the print culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, my study of seduction literature will draw upon a large, existing body of scholarship produced within a variety of disciplines. Katherine Binhammer provides a comprehensive overview of the seduction genre in eighteenth century Britain in *The Seduction Narrative in Britain, 1747-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Cathy N. Davidson includes seduction fiction in *Revolution and the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) as does Herbert Ross Brown in *The Sentimental Novel in America*. Elizabeth Barnes provides a literary critique of the seduction genre in the early republic and argues for the need to view seduction fiction as the precursor to nineteenth century domestic fiction in *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). Moving beyond literature, other scholars examine the historical implications of seduction fiction. In “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” Jan Lewis examines the connection between seduction fiction and the idealized role of the republican wife and mother. In *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn*, Rodney Hessinger examines seduction fiction as a genre through which the rising middle class could define their identity and place within the changing social world of the early republic. In *Prodigal Daughters: Susanna Rowson’s Early American Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), Marion Rust compares the fictional life of *Charlotte Temple* with the life of her creator, Susanna Rowson, to understand the gendered implications of the seduction genre and how literature reflected and affected women’s lives in the early republic. Other scholars have studied seduction fiction through the lens of feminist studies. In “Libertine America,” Leonard Tennenhouse examines the “national family,” as it existed (or failed to exist) in seduction fiction and its successor, domestic fiction; see *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3, vol. 2 (1999/2000).

\(^7\) Apart from Hessinger’s *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn* and Rust’s *Prodigal Daughters*, few scholars who study seduction fiction expand their analyses beyond the novel itself.
seduction fiction found resolution through the establishment of affective familial bonds that existed outside of the nuclear family.

_Sympathy, Sensibility, Sentiment, and the Self_

On February 4, 1789, a New York bookseller placed a triumphant advertisement in _The Daily Advertiser_: “FIRST AMERICAN NOVEL. This Day is Published, And to be Sold by ROBERT HODGE, The corner of King and Queen-streets, The Power of Sympathy, or, The Triumph of Nature.”

Published in two volumes, the “first American novel,” displays the seductive, and sometimes fatal, power of sympathy. The primary narrative revolves around two young lovers, Harrington and Harriot, who resolve to marry against the wishes of Harrington’s father, Mr. Harrington. On the night before their marriage, Mr. Harrington discovers the true identity of his son’s lover; Harriot is his illegitimate daughter, and thus his son’s half-sister. In an effort to prevent an incestuous marriage, Mr. Harrington enlists a friend to inform the couple of their kinship. Not long after the revelation, Harriot perishes from grief and Harrington, wishing to join her in Heaven where their love will be “refined” and “freed from all criminality,” commits suicide.

Although _The Power of Sympathy_ does not fit neatly into the seduction genre, its themes of deception, unchecked sympathy, and fatal romance merit examination. As the author of the “first American novel,” Brown sought to fulfill the needs of a newly-nationalized readership. Thus, _The Power of Sympathy_ provides useful insight into the emotional climate that

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8 Isaiah Thomas first published _The Power of Sympathy_ in Boston on January 21, 1789. The inaccuracy of Hodge’s advertisement likely resulted from a delay in communications and a desire to catch the public’s eye with the promise of new stock; _The Daily Advertiser_ (New York, New York), February 4, 1789.

characterized the early years of the American republic. This novel also provides a point of comparison for the sentimental seduction fiction that would begin appear in the 1790s.

As its title implies, *The Power of Sympathy* engages with the benefits and dangers of sympathetic feeling. Due to their shared parentage, Harrington and Harriot are connected by natural bonds of sympathy. Here, sympathy refers to a deep level of mutual understanding that results from the practice of “imagining oneself in another’s position.” According to Brown, Harrington and Harriot are “allied by birth, and in mind,” and it is thus unsurprising that they are immediately able to inhabit the thoughts and emotions of the other. Although the sympathy shared by Harrington and Harriot is natural, it is also uncontrollable. Because sympathy is an emotional response, unmediated by reason, it is impossible to regulate. Harrington and Harriot are destined to love each other and the fault instead lies in the deception perpetrated by their father. Had Mr. Harrington not seduced Harriot’s mother, Maria, or attempted to conceal the true relation between his two children, the affair would have never occurred. In this way, both Harrington and Harriot are seduced. Although later seduction plots assigned sympathy to the sentimental, female protagonist, Brown allows both characters to enact and fall victim to a sympathetic bond based in the gender-neutral mode of sensibility.

In addition to defining the relationship between the novel’s two main characters, sympathy also mediates the interaction between the reader and the text. The novel, which emerged as a dominant literary form during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, introduced a new mode of reading known by modern scholars as sympathetic identification. Unlike earlier, didactic forms of literature, the novel requires readers to “lose” themselves in the

10 Barnes, *States of Sympathy*, 2.
text, temporarily blurring the boundaries of reality and fiction. Through the process of sympathetic identification, the reader abandons their everyday reality and assumes the perspective of a fictional protagonist. By imagining the protagonist as an extension of their own identity, the reader temporarily obscures the boundaries of the “self.” This experience changes the reader and upon exiting the fictional realm, their identity and the identity of the fictional protagonist will remain entwined.\(^{13}\)

It is significant that the “first American novel” investigates the power of sympathy. As Elizabeth Barnes has shown, the process of sympathetic identification was central to the establishment of a national community.\(^{14}\) Here I will adopt Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as an “imagined community” whose existence is embodied in the vernacular language of mass-produced print media.\(^{15}\) If the nation exists as a text, it is necessary to understand how citizens read and interact with that text over time. In the early republic, sympathetic identification served as the primary mode through which citizens understood their relation to each other and the more ambiguous concept of the “nation.” In order to understand their relationship to the national community, citizens of the early American republic used sympathy to enact a “correspondence or unity” between themselves and their fellow citizens.\(^{16}\) Once a citizen had established a sympathetic bond with other members of their national community, they applied a similar logic to their relationships with political representatives. By understanding representatives as extensions of their own political agency, citizens could see themselves as fully

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\(^{13}\) For more on sympathetic identification in early America see Barnes, *States of Sympathy*, 2.

\(^{14}\) Throughout this study, I will differentiate between the nation-state (a political construct) as well as the national community (a social construct) that predated it.


\(^{16}\) Barnes, *States of Sympathy*, x.
represented at the level of the state, and not as subjects of an external authority. In other words, reading sympathetically was synonymous with "reading like an American."\textsuperscript{17}

For an individual to act sympathetically, they must be receptive to emotional stimuli. During the eighteenth century, sensibility provided a mode of feeling through which individuals could enact sympathy. As a gender-neutral mode of feeling, sensibility enabled both men and women to behave sympathetically. This is evidenced in Brown’s portrayal of Harrington as a sympathetic (and thus seducible character). Unlike later novelists, Brown allows men to enact sympathy alongside their female counterparts.

Despite its flexibility as a gender-neutral mode of feeling, sensibility did not extend beyond the upper echelons of society. As Marion Rust observes, sensibility was “deeply embedded in the parallel phenomena of sociability and gentility.”\textsuperscript{18} Unlike sentimentalism, which operates as a language, sensibility is an innate quality that is present from birth. According to David Waldstreicher, the American elite used sensibility to create a “natural aristocracy” in the early republic.\textsuperscript{19} Because they could no longer rely on aristocratic hierarchies of authority, elites promoted sensibility (a quality that only they could possess) as a requirement for all elite citizens who wished to wield political power. Despite its initial success, this mode of social organization soon proved incompatible with the democratic spirit of the early republic. During the final decade of the eighteenth century, citizens of the early American republic witnessed the gradual decline of the elite cult of sensibility and the emergence of a new, democratic mode of feeling that would soon come to define the nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{17} Barnes, \textit{States of Sympathy}, 2.
\textsuperscript{18} Marion Rust, \textit{Prodigal Daughters}, 39.
If sensibility belonged to the eighteenth-century elite, sentimentalism offered a new mode of feeling for members of the burgeoning middle class. Unlike sensibility, sentimentalism allied the expression of emotion with gendered values of privacy and domesticity. Over the course of the eighteenth century, middle-class emphasis on domestic virtue had manifested in a growing distinction between private and public life. Sentimental rhetoric reified this divide by celebrating the private, domestic sphere as a feminine space that provided a safe-haven for morality and virtue. By assigning these values to the feminine, domestic sphere, moralists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did away with the “gender-neutral model of sensitivity” that had once found expression in eighteenth-century notions of sensibility and turned instead to what Hessinger terms as the “feminized sensitivity” of sentimentalism.

Although sentimentalism encouraged the separation of the private and public spheres, it also urged individuals to contextualize actions carried out in the public sphere in the language of private life. As Barnes demonstrates in States of Sympathy, the sentimental novel held up the newly-privatized family as “a model for social and political affiliations.” Although separate from “public” life, the domestic sphere remained central to political debate.

The next section will explore how the transition from sensibility to sentiment accompanied other major shifts in the social climate of the early American republic. The introduction of new modes of feeling occurred alongside the dismantling of traditional patriarchal structures, the rise of an “anonymous” urban class, and the imposition of new moral

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20 Rust, Prodigal Daughters, 38-39.
21 For more on this development, see Margaret R. Hunt, The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680-1780 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
22 Hessinger, Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn, 42.
23 Barnes, States of Sympathy, 2.
and intellectual expectations on young, white women. Together, these changes disrupted the moral and social climate of the late eighteenth century and set the stage for a new, national era.

**Deconstructing the Family: The American Revolution and Crises of Authority**

The “cause of America,” declared Thomas Paine in 1776, “is the Concern of every Man to whom Nature hath given the Power of feeling.” Although the title of *Common Sense* might indicate that the author seeks to engage the reader’s rational faculty, the introduction makes it clear that the pamphlet’s contents are calculated to appeal to the reader’s sensibility as well as their sense. The emotional nature of this appeal is especially apparent in Paine’s passionate censure of King George III. After the Siege of Boston, Paine “rejected the hardened, sullen tempered Pharaoh of England,” writing that he would forever “disdain the wretch, that with the pretended title of FATHER OF HIS PEOPLE can unfeelingly hear of their slaughter, and composedly sleep with their blood upon his soul.”

Although Paine’s passionate language leaves little doubt that he is a true “man of feeling,” it is also apparent that the king lacks the same sensibility. In this short passage, Paine arrives at the heart of a crisis that would come to define the early republican period.

Although Paine and his fellow colonists did eventually cast off their tyrannical and “unfeeling” father, this act undermined the system of patriarchal authority that had legitimized his claim to the throne. When viewed in the disruptive context of revolution, this act might appear radical; however, the decades leading up to the American Revolution had witnessed a steady decline in the reverence paid to patriarchal figures. Jay Fliegelman locates the beginning of this “revolution against patriarchal authority” in the 1750s, however, the movement drew...

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upon enlightenment philosophies that had emerged as early as the late seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{25} When viewed in this context, it becomes clear that \textit{Common Sense} was not the beginning of a revolution but a crisis point.

Despite his impassioned rejection of the oppressive power wielded by the king, Paine did not wish to rid society of patriarchal authority altogether. Instead, he hoped to reconfigure patriarchal bonds to promote a cooperative rather than coercive power structure. Following the educational philosophies promoted by John Locke in \textit{Some Thoughts Regarding Education}, revolutionary thinkers sought to replace external authority with an internalized virtue grounded in eighteenth-century values of sensibility.\textsuperscript{26} If an individual possessed virtue, they would be able to moderate their own desires and act in sympathy with their fellow men. Whereas coercion might encourage a brief display of sympathy or a temporary suspension of self-interest, true virtue represented the ultimate internalization of self-control. Because they could sympathize with their fellow citizens, virtuous individuals would act in the best interest of the nation and preserve it from falling into corruption and decay.

Untethered from the external authority of the king, political actors in the United States attempted to demonstrate their internal virtue through displays of sensibility. As Waldstreicher demonstrates, elites grounded virtue in the language of sensibility, a quality that only they could possess, in order to maintain political power. Individuals who were “insensible” could not enact sympathy and therefore were incapable of acting in the best interest of those whom they were charged to represent. On the other hand, a sensible individual who was sympathetic to the desires of his constituents would act virtuously and pursue their interests over his own. It soon became


\textsuperscript{26} Hessinger, \textit{Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn}, 11-15.
apparent however that sensibility was an “unstable system for representing and policing social values.”

A new generation found that they could “make and remake themselves” by mimicking the linguistic and verbal cues of sensibility, thus creating a language of emotional sensitivity that undermined elite power structures.

The young people who employed this new “language of sensibility” benefitted from a degree of freedom and mobility that had not been available to their parents. According to Richard Godbeer, young people who came of age in the early republic were less tethered by community and parental supervision. Many young men who would have entered an apprenticeship in their early teens opted instead to make their way in the relatively anonymous world of the early American city. A number of these mobile and ambitious young men discovered that by employing the language of sensibility and eschewing their humble background, they could take advantage of opportunities that would have otherwise eluded their grasp.

By transforming sensibility into a language, middling individuals not only succeeded in acquiring political and social power, they also crafted a new democratic mode of emotional sensitivity that challenged the vestiges of pre-revolutionary modes of social organization. Although sensibility did not live long in the post-revolutionary era, its downfall gave rise to an era that would be defined by the emotional language of sentimentalism.

27 Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 77.
29 Hessinger, *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn*, 27.
30 For more on the manipulation of sentimental language by young men in the early republic, see Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 165.
As young, middling men acquired social and political power, they attempted to align elite conceptions of civic virtue and its attendant language of sentiment with middling values of domesticity and morality. As Margaret Hunt demonstrates in her examination of the “middling sort” in eighteenth-century England, the men and women who belonged to the emerging middle-class defined their identity according to a shared concern for prudential morality. For middling men and women, a politician’s private, moral conduct reflected his ability to act virtuously in the public sphere. Because middling morality existed primarily within the domestic sphere, women became the guardians of this new type of civic virtue.

In the next two sections, I will examine how citizens expressed and resolved public, sociopolitical conflicts through the manipulation of sentimental language. To accomplish this, I will examine two “texts” that provided a relatively safe, representational space through which citizens could vicariously experience and resolve national anxieties. I will begin by examining women’s bodies as private “documents” that became the focus of public consumption and public anxiety. I will then move into an analysis of seduction fiction; using novels, newspaper articles, and other forms of print culture that revolved around fictional (and real) tales of seduction, I will examine how citizens used public documents to work through their deepest-held anxieties regarding the politically-charged domestic sphere.

_Virtue’s Tears: Reading the Nation through Sentimental Portrayals of the Female Body_

As women took on the duty of guarding civic virtue during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, their bodies took on new political meaning. The sentimental print culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries often portrayed the nation through the allegorical figure of a young, white woman. This choice represented a departure from the visual

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31 Hunt, *The Middling Sort*. 

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vocabulary used in pre-Revolutionary depictions of the American colonies. Rather than portray the simultaneously romanticized and sexualized body of a Native American woman, artists now shifted their attention (and anxieties) onto the white, female form.

This shift, which is apparent in much the print culture that proliferated in the early republic, is particularly visible in Abel Buell’s 1784 *Map of the United States*. Although Buell copied the design of the map’s cartouche from John Mitchell’s 1755 *Map of the British and French Dominions in North America*, he added new, republican imagery and excluded all direct allusions to the British Empire. One of Buell’s most significant alterations was his decision to replace the two native figures in Mitchell’s map with an allegory of Liberty. Unlike the submissive, brown figures who gaze fondly up at the coat of arms belonging to King George II in Mitchell’s cartouche, the white, female figure of Liberty casts an independent gaze across Buell’s cartographic design. In this cartouche, the white, female body directly replaces the brown, native body as the primary visual representation of the American landscape. (Figs. 1 and 2)

Young, white women were not just passive subjects of this new visual language; they also actively consumed and reproduced it. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, middling and elite young women who attended private boarding schools and female academies began producing a new artistic genre known as pictorial needlework. Whereas before, young women had oriented the stitches of their alphabetic and pictorial samplers to the grid of the underlying ground fabric, the meandering lines of pictorial needlework allowed young women to move beyond flat, static images to produce dynamic illustrations that closely resembled the popular
print images that served as their inspiration.\textsuperscript{32} In the decades following the revolution, young women frequently produced pictures that centered on white, female allegories of Liberty and Virtue.

One particularly popular source of inspiration for post-revolutionary pictorial needlework was Edward Savage’s \textit{Liberty}. In this print, Liberty takes the form of Hebe, the Greek goddess of youth. As she tramples the trappings of tyranny beneath her feet, Hebe raises a cup to an eagle that hovers above the landscape. The young women who reproduced this image would have likely seen Hebe as a reflection of themselves; in the hours spent in conversation with their needlework, young women would gradually internalize the association between their own bodies and the more nebulous concept of liberty. Although families would hire a painting instructor or professional artist to complete Liberty’s face and body, by this point the image would have already become a permanent fixture of the student’s imagination. (Figs. 3 and 4)

In addition to producing idealized representations of the female form, women also manipulated their own bodies to indicate their status as virtuous individuals. Although the public performance of private virtue required conscious manipulation of bodily signs, a successful performance would not only prove a woman’s virtue but also indicate that she did not think of it as a performance at all, but rather an unstudied expression of her interior state. When presented in the right context, a tearful eye or radiant face could express a person’s virtue as effectively as spoken or written words.\textsuperscript{33} Although interpreted through visible, bodily signs, the virtuous body reflected the unmediated beauty of its internal state. According to this formulation, unvirtuous individuals were inherently incapable of replicating the natural beauty possessed by a virtuous


\textsuperscript{33} Waldstreicher, \textit{In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes}, 75.
individual. Any attempt to do so would result in what Waldstreicher terms as “awkward” and “ridiculous” presentations.34

If the female body operated as a sentimental text, what signs signified her grasp of the internalized language of virtue? According to The Mirror of the Graces, a beauty manual published by an anonymous “lady” in 1811, a truly virtuous woman would not need to consciously perform this language through the imposition of artificial display, but should instead render her body “transparent” so that it might accurately reflect the emotions hidden within. “The animated changes of sensibility,” she wrote “are no where more apparent than in the transparent surface of a clear skin…Who has not perceived, and admired, the rising blush of modesty enrich the cheek of a lovely girl, and, in the sweet effusion, most gratefully discern the true witness of the purity within?” By contrast, a “face bedaubed with white paint, pearl power, or enamel” would mask a woman’s true emotions; “no flush of pleasure, no shudder of pain, no thrilling of hope, can be described beneath the encrusted mould.” Although the author disapproved of white face paint, she did not apply the same censure to rouge. Because rouging “leaves three parts of the face and the whole of the neck and arms to their natural hues,” the “language of the heart” is not “entirely obstructed.” Although a light application of red paint could return a “delicate” complexion to its natural state, an over-application would result in deception.35

In addition to a naturally radiant complexion, dress provided women with a means to express their civic virtue. As with cosmetics, excessive ornamentation would indicate a love for

34 Waldstreicher, In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes, 79-81.
35 According to the author, this deception was actively practiced by the French who applied rouge “from the bottom of the side of the face up to the very eye, even till it meets the lower eye-lash, and creeps all over the temples;” The Mirror of the Graces; or, English Lady’s Costume (London: B. Crosby and Co., 1811), 48-54. In October 1813, Mirror of the Graces appears as a “new publication” in the Newport Mercury. Although the American edition appeared two years after the original publication date (1811), it was available to readers in the early republic. “New Publications, Rousmaniere & Barber,” Newport Mercury (Newport, Rhode Island), October 2, 1813.
artificial display and aristocratic luxury. In 1819, one critic claimed that women were making “destructive inroads” upon the American “simplicity of manners” through their “servile imitations or apishness of the customs and fashions of Europe, luxurious and voluptuous as they are in every respect, and dangerous to the prosperity of a free people.” Just as cosmetics obscured a woman’s interior state, making it impossible for others to read her emotions, a love of luxury and enslavement to foreign fashions would prevent women from looking beyond her own self-interest and sympathizing with the citizens of her own nation.

“Taking Amiss”: Enacting Crises of Authority through (Fictional) Tales of Seduction

If the young, white, female body served as a safe haven for civic virtue, who was she guarding it from? According to Jay Fliegelman, one of the most significant threats to the female body and the society it represented were the “prodigal sons” who roamed the nation’s cities. Upon entering this relatively anonymous urban world, young men were free to gamble, drink, and seduce young women. Eventually, however, the prodigal son would find it necessary to return home. By returning to a life of moral behavior, the prodigal son claimed his right to self-determination; not only would he be allowed to return to society as a productive citizen, but his past missteps would ensure that he would not engage in similar behavior as an adult. A prodigal daughter on the other hand would not receive the same forgiveness. A seduced woman would always bear the physical marks of her misstep and thus was not privy to the same freedom

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36 Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 80.
of self-determination. As such, moral agency shifted away from the prodigal son and on to the virtuous daughter.\(^{40}\)

The authors of seduction fiction expressed their anxieties regarding the corruption of civic virtue through the portrayal of “virginal” and “corrupted” female bodies. In these tales, bodily corruption also indicated the corruption of a woman’s virtue and the successful misdirection of her sympathies. Here, I will discuss two types of authorities that vied to control the sympathies and bodies of young women within the realm of seduction fiction: “natural” authorities—the father, the mother/educator, and the author of “moral” novels—and their antipodes—the seducer, the seductress, and the author of “immoral” novels.

Scholars often cite Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* as the first example of the seduction genre.\(^{41}\) Published in 1748, *Clarissa* follows the seduction, elopement, and death of a wealthy young woman named Clarissa Harlowe. Although published years before the American Revolution, *Clarissa* acquired new cultural relevance in the decades that followed. In a letter to William Cunningham, John Adams explained the dangers of unrestrained democracy through an allusion to the seduction of Clarissa by Robert Lovelace: “Democracy is Lovelace and the people are Clarissa…The time would fail me to enumerate all the Lovelaces in the United States. It would be an amusing romance to compare their actions and character with his.”\(^{42}\) Through this comparison, Adams articulated his belief that a true democracy, with no internal checks or limitations, would result in the seduction and eventual destruction of its sympathetic citizenry.

\(^{40}\) Rust, *Prodigal Daughters*, 51-52; Hessinger, *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn*, 23-26. This attitude is apparent in a poem that appeared in the *Herald of the United States* (Warren, Rhode Island) on August 10, 1793: **MAN, the lawless libertine**, may rove, /Free and unquestioned thro’ the wilds o’ love;/But **WOMAN, sense and nature’s early fool**, /If she but stray from virtue’s rigid school,/Ruin ensues, reproach and endless shame,/And one false step entirely damns her fame.

\(^{41}\) In 1740, Samuel Richardson wrote another novel, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, that followed the unsuccessful attempts of an immoral squire to seduce a young girl who works as a domestic servant in his house. Because this novel does not follow the typical seduction plot, I will not consider it here.

\(^{42}\) Quoted in Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims*, 237.
To avoid Clarissa’s fate, the people require a strong, federal government to protect them from the machinations of dangerous individuals. Adams’ reaction to *Clarissa* aligns with Fliegelman’s reading of Lovelace as a post-Lockean villain; unlike Clarissa’s father who “seeks to control her person,” Lovelace “attempts to control her mind and affections.”⁴³ Although Americans had cast off the pre-Lockean authority of the King, they were now vulnerable to the more sinister persuasion of post-Lockean seducers.

Although the seduction plot was a staple of bookshops and circulating libraries in the early republic, Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* proved especially popular. Originally published in 1791, *Charlotte Temple* follows the story of a young girl who is seduced while attending boarding school. Charlotte’s seducer, Lieutenant John Montraville, sends correspondence through an instructor who works at the boarding school, Madame La Rue. Not long after she receives the first letter, Charlotte asks La Rue to arrange secret meetings between her and Montraville. Although Montraville initially intends to marry Charlotte, his father forbids the match and he instead resolves to take her as his mistress. During one of their clandestine rendezvous, Montraville asks Charlotte to elope with him. After an extended period of indecision, Charlotte agrees and travels with him to New York. However, once in America, Montraville becomes enamored with another young woman and begins to suspect that Charlotte has engaged in an affair with his friend, Belcour. After a few months, Montraville abandons Charlotte, leaving her to the care of a neighbor, Mrs. Beauchamp. Pregnant with Montraville’s child, Charlotte falls into a deep depression and dies soon after giving birth to a daughter, Lucy. Moments before her death, Charlotte reunites with her father and charges him with the care of

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⁴³ Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims*, 236.
her child. After Charlotte’s death, Montraville realizes his error and spends the remainder of his life in misery and regret.

While *Charlotte Temple* did not receive much attention in England, it quickly gained popularity in the United States. Until the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852, *Charlotte Temple* was the bestselling novel in the United States.\(^4^4\) Set on the eve of the revolution, Americans no doubt saw themselves reflected in the sympathetic character of Charlotte and would have likely cast Montraville as an embodiment of the army in which he served. *Charlotte Temple* also appealed to an audience of parents and students who were personally familiar with the dangers and benefits of a boarding school education.

In response to the post-revolutionary desire to create an educated citizenry, more families sent their daughters away to finish their educations. Middling families hoping to marry their daughters up the social scale were particularly eager to provide their daughters with a thorough education. An educated woman would eventually take on the role of republican wife and mother. In this role, she would ensure that her husband and children became virtuous, productive citizens.\(^4^5\) Although republican moralists attached great value to the domestic education of children, most mothers were not equipped to fulfill the educational requirements required of the nation’s young citizens. Although middling and elite women who had come of age prior to the revolution would be well versed in the “ornamental arts,” they would have expected their daughters to eventually surpass the limits of their education and take on more serious topics of study.\(^4^6\) To provide their daughters with a republican education, many parents sent them to boarding schools where they could complete their studies.

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\(^4^4\) Rust, *Prodigal Daughters*, 24n.


Despite the educational advantages provided by the boarding school, this space was rife with moral danger. Freed from the watchful eyes of their parents, a young woman attending boarding school found a new set of authoritative figures who vied for her loyalty. Whereas the seducer sought to take hold of the authority once wielded by the father, the seductress (who could either take the form of a preceptress or a peer) sought to occupy the place vacated by the mother. Although the seducer and the seductress made use of different tactics, both threatened a woman’s virtue.

The physical space of the boarding school could both enable or prevent access to its female inhabitants. While the walls of a boarding school might guard against male seducers, communal housing encouraged young women to form close associations with their peers and instructors. This physical proximity could enable a seductress to befriend virtuous young women and encourage immoral behavior. In Charlotte Temple, Madame La Rue not only persuades Temple to accept Montraville’s advances, but also arranges for their clandestine meetings. The fear that young women would be seduced by their peers or female instructors is present in many published accounts of non-fictional seductions. In 1794, a young woman who had been swept up in an ill-fated elopement cited her school as the “origin of her ruin,” since it was there that “her mind had been contaminated by the conversation...of her school-fellows”  

In 1791, The Federal Gazette published an article taken from a London paper that referred more generally to the danger posed by an immoral preceptress. According to the author,

> Boarding schools are certainly a very dangerous situation for young ladies, unless the characters and good morals of the governess are well enquired into; and the various instances we have had of their misleading the mind—ruining the chastity, and destroying the expected inheritance to which an heiress may become entitled, stamp this observation with truth.  

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47 “Ladies’ Boarding School,” Dunlap’s American Daily Advertiser, December 13, 1794.
Although this author refers to overt designs to steal a young woman’s inheritance, any young woman was at risk of being misled by an immoral preceptress.

In addition to moral seduction, the seductress also threatened to introduce young women to improper sexual behavior. Some moralists feared that the homosocial environment of the boarding school would encourage the formation of homosexual relationships among students. In the *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft argues that girls “are first spoiled” in boarding schools where they “sleep in the same room, and wash together.” Here, they might acquire a “gross degree of familiarity” with their female peers and share “jokes and hoyden tricks” among themselves. Although Wollstonecraft is primarily concerned with shaping a woman’s moral character, the “passions,” which she argues begin to overpower a young woman’s “senses” as she matures, threaten to disrupt this process. Without directly addressing the presence of homosexual behavior at female boarding schools, Wollstonecraft makes it clear that these environments encourage young women to become overly familiar with the bodies of their female peers. In this context, the seductress threatens physical as well as moral-intellectual corruption.

Unlike the seductress, the seducer was required to overcome a number of physical barriers before he could gain access to his victim. Satirical prints, newspapers, and other forms of popular literature took great enjoyment in discussing how seducers managed to penetrate the physical space of the boarding school or how students managed to escape. In 1792, *The Federal Gazette* reported the circumstances of an elopement that had taken place between “young Lady of seventeen” and a “Naval Officer of Subaltern rank.” According to the paper,

the affair was managed with some address on the part of the juvenile *enamorato*, who went to church as usual, fainted away most naturally in the midst of the service, and

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coming out for a little fresh air, met her lover disguised as a clergyman, with a friend and post-chaise in waiting.\textsuperscript{50}

One year earlier, \textit{The Federal Gazette} had reported the elopement of another young woman who, upon coming of age, would receive £6,000 per annum. The paper entered into a long description of the elopement, detailing how

A carriage, horses, and livery servant, were procured, so as to look exactly like those of the young lady’s guardian; they drove up to the boarding school, the servant producing a letter in the name of the guardian, well counterfeited, to Miss Mills, requesting that Miss C. might be suffered to spend the evening at his house at Clifton, as a relation of hers, who was just arrived, and under the necessity of leaving town that evening, on a visit to London, might have the pleasure of seeing her. The young lady was suffered, with her maid, to pay this visit, but instead of visiting at Clifton, she found her way to Stokes-Croft, to the house of her admirer, Mr. P—r—y, a surgeon, where they remained till eleven o’clock at night, when they set out in a chaise and four, accompanied by her maid, and a gentleman of his acquaintance.\textsuperscript{51}

After this daring escape, the other students who attended the boarding school received “a serious lecture on elopements.” It is significant that, in both cases, the \textit{Federal Gazette} chose to publish lengthy descriptions of the deception required to liberate a young lady from her boarding school. Although Andrew Brown, the editor of \textit{The Federal Gazette}, attempted to maintain a degree of impartiality, his paper leaned in support of the Federalist cause.\textsuperscript{52} As John Adams’ reference to \textit{Clarissa} demonstrates, many Federalists feared that, without the guidance of a strong federal government, the American people were vulnerable to seduction by foreign powers; this debate had come into sharp relief several years earlier during the French Revolution as Federalists attempted to stem American sympathy for the radical Jacobins. By publishing extended accounts of these two elopements, Brown may have hoped to call upon his reader’s more abstract fears.

\textsuperscript{52} Mark A. Smith, “Andrew Brown’s ‘Earnest Endeavor’: The "Federal Gazette's Role in Philadelphia's Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793,” \textit{The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography} 120, no. 4 (October 1996).
regarding political seduction. It is also significant that both of these accounts originated in a “London Paper.” Although it is likely that similar elopements occurred in the United States, Brown chose to draw attention to the unprincipled behavior of foreign, English seducers.

Unlike “natural” authorities, the seducer, the seductress constructed “counterfeit” identities through the use of false language and deceitful appearances. Here, I intentionally use the word “counterfeit” as a reference to a broader anxiety that plagued the early republic: the counterfeiting of paper currency. Untethered from the guarantees provided by specie, bonds, or personal credit, paper money was a fiction whose success relied on trust. During the Revolution, Americans had witnessed firsthand the disaster that resulted from a combined lack of trust and runaway counterfeiting of the paper currency issued by the Continental Congress. In this context, counterfeit currency posed a threat to the nation’s very existence, for it undermined the authority of a nation untethered from the traditional structures of monarchial authority.

Anxiety regarding counterfeit currency translated to anxiety regarding counterfeit identities. Fear of the counterfeit individual was embedded into one of the nation’s most prominent founding myths: the betrayal of Benedict Arnold. In the *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*, Mercy Otis Warren emphasizes the deceitful language employed by Arnold and contrasts his behavior with that of his more honorable accomplice, Major John André. After André’s imprisonment, Arnold petitioned for his release using “insolence, and address.” Warren condemned the insincerity of Arnold’s language, saying that “on the seventh of October…he sent out an address to the people of America…couched in

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very insolent and overbearing language.”

Warren contrasted Arnold’s appeals with those made by André who, despite his service as a spy, was generally seen as a man of integrity. According to Warren, André “wrote…with a frankness becoming a gentleman, and a man of honor and principle” and during his trial, he “had too much sincerity to make use of any subterfuge not founded in truth.”

Although Arnold’s attempt to sell information to the British Army did not succeed, his willingness to deceive through the use of artificial language cast him as the ultimate seducer.

A fear of counterfeit language and counterfeit identities speaks to the uneasy trust between Americans and the written word. Rising literacy rates, especially among the middle class, produced a population of readers. Following the logic put forward by Benedict Anderson, the nation was itself a text; paper currency, newspapers, novels, engravings, and other widely-circulated print objects served as physical evidence of the existence of a national community. As such, the distrust that resulted from the conscious manipulation of language had the potential to undermine an already tenuous national identity.

In seduction fiction, the seducer and the seductress are identified by their unscrupulous manipulation of language. According to Cathy Davidson, the female victims in seduction novels are seduced, “not by their own uncontrollable desire but by the verbal chicanery of

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56 Although it is difficult to identify the point at which the literacy gap closed between men and women living in the United States, Linda Kerber estimates that it took place sometime between 1790 and 1830; Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 193.
57 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
58 Fliegelman briefly examines the counterfeit identity in *Prodigals and Pilgrims* within the context of national anxieties regarding corruption and prodigality, and seduction, however he does not extend this discussion to encompass seduction fiction or identify counterfeiting as a gendered activity, 245-248.
men. In Charlotte Temple, the overly indecisive Charlotte is continually confused by the conflicting advice she receives from more determined authorities. Although she at first resolves to refuse the amorous advances of Montraville, Charlotte changes her mind after reading his letter “several times in the course of the day.” With each reading the contents of the letter “sunk deeper in her heart.” In The Power of Sympathy, Harrington’s correspondence occupies almost half of the text, whereas Harriot is not even awarded one tenth of the entire novel. Although literate, the virtuous woman is not a producer of language; in the instances where she does need to produce written correspondence, she must seek out the guidance of a mentor or follow the advice provided in novels and conduct manuals. In The New Complete Letter Writer, a correspondence manual published in Philadelphia in 1790, the author instructed ladies in how to respond to a man who had proposed elopement. Although a woman must turn down these advances, she is not advised to make a direct refusal. Apart from reminding her suitor of his familial duty and the “train of inevitable miseries” that would result from an elopement, she does not offer her own opinion on the matter. As such, the author dissuades women from taking on an active role, and instead encourages them to reiterate the moral advice of others and call upon their suitor’s better judgement.

Although the seducer and the seductress are adept manipulators of language, it is obvious to the reader that their attempts are stylized and their words do not match their internal state. Although the victims of seduction do not share the same command of language, their bodily appearance accurately reflects their emotional state. In Charlotte Temple, the protagonist is

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59 Davidson, Revolution and the Word, 185-186.
60 Susanna Rowson, Charlotte, A Tale of Truth (1791), Project Gutenberg.
61 Davidson, Revolution and the Word, 186.
62 The New Complete Letter Writer; or, the Art of Correspondence (Philadelphia: William Spotswood, 1790), 110-111.
continually blushing, bursting into tears, and growing pale. During times of trouble, the “perturbation of her mind” is apparent in the appearance of “her delicate features.” Even after her seduction, an acquaintance notes that “the goodness of her heart is depicted in her ingenuous countenance.” Unlike the “artful” La Rue, Charlotte is incapable of deception.

By its very nature, elopement requires deceitful action. Both elopements described in The Federal Gazette include some variety of counterfeit. To elope from church, the young woman must put on a performance while her lover dons a disguise. Similarly, the elopement between Miss. Clerke and Mr. Perry is facilitated by a falsely decorated carriage and a “counterfeit” letter. As such, the corruption of a woman’s virtue precedes the corruption of her virginity since the very act of elopement requires the woman to actively participate in deception.

Artful language was also the marker of another authority that young women encountered in seduction novels: the novel itself. As Elizabeth Barnes explains, the novel “bridges the gap between internal and external authority.” Because the reader temporarily identifies as the protagonist, the novelist could exert undue influence on the reader’s mind. While “moral” novelists always struggled to differentiate themselves from their “immoral” counterparts, they also attempted to seduce minds and hearts of their readers, although ostensibly toward a more noble end.

Although the authors of seduction fiction are aware of the seductive capacity of their genre, they clearly state that their purpose is to instruct their readers. In the preface to Charlotte Temple, Rowson justifies her choice to set Charlotte’s tale down in writing through her hope that “the following tale should save one hapless fair one from the errors which ruined poor Charlotte,

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63 Rowson, Charlotte, A Tale of Truth.
64 Barnes, States of Sympathy, 9.
or rescue from impending misery the heart of one anxious parent.” With this preface, Rowson not only assures her readers that they will encounter no moral risk by reading her novel, but also justifies her decision to transgress against the implicit gendering of language to become a manipulator, rather than a receiver, of the written word.

Despite the apologies that prefaced seduction fiction, authors consciously selected this genre, knowing that its seductive power would allow them to exert a strong influence over their readers. According to Catherine Kerrison, the advice literature that circulated through the United States in the late eighteenth century took two forms: “the older, more straightforward instructions of the seventeenth century” that emphasized “submissiveness to male authority,” and “the newer literature of short stories and novels in which heroines taught clearly discernible lessons to readers about the need to rely on their own wits, rather than male protection, to preserve their virtue.” The same authors who sought to “seduce” their readers through the power of sympathetic identification also hoped to impart the dangers of that practice. Although an overly sympathetic individual placed herself at great risk if she could not determine whose example to imitate or what advice to follow, she could not close off her sympathies entirely. The authors of seduction novels and other forms of advice literature relied upon the sympathetic nature of their readers; without this quality, it would be impossible to make an impression upon their minds.

To further guard themselves from accusations of deception, the authors of seduction fiction frequently advocated for the veracity of their tales. In the preface to Charlotte Temple, Rowson assures her readers that her novel is a “tale of truth;” she had first heard the story from “an old lady who had personally known Charlotte.” Hannah Webster Foster, the author of

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65 Rowson, Charlotte, A Tale of Truth.
another popular seduction novel, *The Coquette*, also based her tale on the “real” seduction of Elizabeth Whitman in 1788. Although Whitman’s name is never directly stated, the publisher advertised *The Coquette* as “a novel founded on fact.”67 Both novels are made more real through the establishment of physical graves to honor the memory of their heroines.68 The same grave that Montraville would visit in the final years of his life appeared decades later in New York’s Trinity Churchyard. Although it is unclear if the name over Elizabeth Whitman’s grave originally bore her name or the name of her fictional alias, an illustration of Eliza Wharton’s grave appears on the second-to-last page of Foster’s novel.69 Apart from the name, every detail matches that of the stone erected above Elizabeth Whitman’s burial place in Danvers, Massachusetts. The veracity of their tales does not require the presence of an actual body, but the perceived “realness” of their stories. Through the process of sympathetic identification, these characters became “real;” as such, the graves are not conceits but instead authentic expressions of the reader’s experience.

Considering the benefits of “moral” and “instructive” novels, what danger did other, “immoral” novels pose? Although most critics did not specify which novels they considered dangerous, they frequently urged parents to actively guide the reading habits of their children and asked children to follow the advice of their parents with regards to reading material. An article published in *The Daily Advertiser* that outlined the dangers of novel reading did not encourage the “cynical exclusion of novels” from a young person’s education, but instead instructed children to consult with their “better informed parents and friends” before making a

67 Rowson, *Charlotte, A Tale of Truth*.
68 While Elizabeth Whitman’s grave was likely installed by her friends in the years following her death, Charlotte Temple’s grave did not appear until the 1840s and was most likely crafted by a stonemason while making repairs to Trinity Church.
final selection. This compromise would allow readers to continue to receive instruction from the authors of moral novels while also regulating youthful consumption of “indelicate” literature.\(^7\)

*Reconstructing the Family: The Formation of Fictive Kinship Networks*

If a student could not depend upon her parents to guide her conduct or provide her with moral reading material, how could she avoid falling prey to powers of seduction? Although a young woman could always return home to escape the dangers of the boarding school, doing so would interrupt her education. Rather than return to the safety of the nuclear family, many young women fashioned fictive kinship networks among their female peers. These networks often extended beyond the confines of the boarding school, thus providing women with a degree of social stability in an increasingly mobile world. Many preceptress encouraged the use of familial language among their students and even went so far as to assume the temporary mantle of “mother.” By reconstructing the family within the confines of the boarding school, young women created a protective network that mitigated the threat of seduction and enabled them to complete their education.

One year after publishing *The Coquette*, Hannah Webster Foster published another epistolary novel that provided a model for the preceptresses of non-fictional institutions. Foster establishes the moral authority of her fictional preceptress, Mrs. Williams, by calling upon her role as a mother of two “lovely and promising” daughters. Uninterested in profit, Mrs. Williams establishes her school to “promote [the] advantage and enlarge [the] society” of her own

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\(^7\) “Polite Literature. Female Education. Concluded from Our Last,” *The Daily Advertiser* (Boston, Massachusetts), June 10, 1809.
children. Because the boarding school is an extension of Williams’ motherly duty, the reader is assured that she will exert a maternal influence on her students.

The preceptresses of boarding schools bartered their livelihood on their reputations as effective moral guides. In 1790, Frances Ramage of Charleston, South Carolina referenced her previous success as an educator by calling upon “those friends who have already entrusted her with the tuition of their children “to make her most grateful acknowledgements, and to assure them and the public, that no exertions shall be wanting on her part, to instruct her pupils in the knowledge, and inculcate in them a due observance of the moral and social duties.” By invoking her previous success through the assumption that her “friends” would again entrust her with care of their children, Ramage draws on an implicit network of trust that served to guard students from ineffective or immoral educators. Because the instructor was responsible for preventing the corruption of her students, a single transgression could prevent her from pursuing future employment as an educator. In 1795, Mrs. Graham of New York found it necessary to publish a written contradiction to rumors that a student had eloped from her school:

A report having circulated and gained general credit, that a Miss Crawford, whose marriage to Lewis D. Flinn, appeared lately in the New-York papers, eloped from Mrs. Graham’s boarding school, she finds it necessary for the satisfaction of parents at a distance, to take this method of contradicting it. Although addressed to the parents of her current students, Mrs. Graham undoubtedly wished to rectify her reputation in the eyes of future customers and maintain her reputation as a trusted educator.

In addition to the maternal influence of the virtuous preceptress, young women depended on the moral guidance and support of their female peers. In her study of female friendships in the

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71 Webster Foster, *The Boarding School*, 1.
72 *State Gazette of South-Carolina* (Charleston South Carolina), June 6, 1790.
early republic, Carol Lasser argues that sororal bonds provided a framework within which young women could structure their relationships with female peers. By couching same-sex relationships in the language of sisterhood, young women called upon the sympathetic and emotional bonds that defined the sentimental family.

Although the sentimental language of sisterhood did provide an important structure for female friendships, female peers also employed the language of maternal and filial affection. At Madame Rivardi’s Seminary in Philadelphia, the preceptress encouraged her students to establish fictive kinship bonds through a formalized network of “mothers” and “daughters.” Styling herself as the “mother” of the entire school, she delegated some of her maternal authority to older students who took on responsibility for their younger “daughters.” According to Mary Johnson, “mothers” tutored their ‘daughters,’ checked their wardrobes, and reprimanded them for misconduct or inattentiveness in their studies.” Mothers also cared for their daughters when they fell ill, “consulting with the attending physicians about appropriate mediations.” By regulating and caring for the bodies of their fictive daughters, students at Madame Rivardi’s Seminary established authority over the conduct of their younger peers. Once students had left school, they would often remain in contact with their fictive kin; one student, Evelina Du Pont, frequently spoke with affection of her “mother,” Antoinette Brevost, and Brevost would often ask Evelina’s sister, Victorine for news regarding her dear “Lina.”

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74 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s study, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” published in Signs 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1975), introduced a new framework in which historians could consider the range of emotional fulfilled by same-sex relationships, however few historians have examined female friendships as a mode of social organization in the early republic. See also, Carol Lasser, “Let Us Be Sisters Forever: The Sororal Model of Nineteenth-Century Female Friendship,” Signs 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1988); Nancy F. Cott The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman's Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).


76 Mary Johnson, “Madame Rivardi’s Seminary,” 15-17, 32-33.
Whether configured as maternal or sororal bonds, the formation of fictive kinship networks was essential to resolving the anxieties that accompanied the deconstruction of the patriarchal family unit. These bonds protected young women during the “dangerous season of youth” and established the foundations for future networks that would provide moral guidance and support in an increasingly unpredictable world.

Conclusion

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the seduction novel was gradually supplanted by a new genre, the domestic novel. According to Nina Baym, domestic fiction offered an antidote to the plight of the seduced woman. Rather than portray protagonists whose excessive sympathy results in a paralysis of indecision, the authors of domestic fiction insisted that “innocence was compatible with agency” and allowed their heroines to overcome the dangers of youth to achieve a future of domestic bliss. The advent of the domestic novel reflected a similar progression in the development of the American nation. Having overcome the instability of the 1780s and 1790s, Americans had passed through the “dangerous season of youth.” Although sympathy remained foundational to the national community, seduction literature had taught citizens to read critically and protect themselves from deception.

Appendix

Fig. 1: John Mitchell, *A Map of the British and French Dominions in North America*, 1755. Library of Congress.

Fig. 2: Abel Buell, *A New and Correct Map of the United States*, 1784. Library of Congress.
Fig. 3: Edward Savage, *Liberty. In the form of the Goddess of Youth, giving support to the Bald Eagle*, Philadelphia, 1796. Library of Congress.
Fig. 4: Needlework Picture, 1796-1820. Winterthur Museum.
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