

Freedom and Mourning in *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette*

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother and her witty remarks.

Abstract

My thesis analyzes the expressions of feminine freedom as well as mourning in *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette*, two late 18th-century seduction novels. In my analysis, I examine two angles to understand how death functions in these texts. Specifically, I analyze how the heroines utilized their limited agency to navigate their disenfranchised social positions as well as how Christian themes intersect with women's rights, both in textual allusions and critiques. The heroines' deaths at the end of the novels serve both as a cautionary "punishment" for their social transgressions and as an avenue for mourning "fallen" women who could not survive their own self-determination. By connecting freedom and death in these novels, I illustrate how these texts explored the precarious nuances of womanhood in the late 18th century.

Introduction

Death plays a unique role in the late 18th-century sentimental novels *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette*. In this thesis, I will analyze how death functions within the texts, specifically how it serves to thoughtfully explore feminine freedom and its consequences in an evolving patriarchal society. In *Charlotte Temple*, the author Susanna Rowson evokes Christian themes. In so doing, Rowson is able to reject and accept specific facets of the waning Puritanism of early America. Charlotte's death is both the natural consequence of her sexual and social transgressions, as well as a form of salvation. In *The Coquette*, Eliza's death is more directly tied to her innate desire for social freedom. However, Eliza's rejection of Reverend Boyer and the author's portrayal of him highlight similar Christian criticisms. In other words, both novels work to weave themselves into the fabric of late 18th-century religious rhetoric on death and mourning. By combining both freedom and death, these novels were able to respond to the political and religious issues of their time. Notably, their strengths lie not only in what they responded to, but in how they responded to these issues. The intricate emotional language creates a rich landscape of sympathy where women who had been previously ignored could be appreciated, and the full implications of their precarious and restrictive social identities could begin to be understood.

Although these two deaths are the natural conclusion to these women's expressions of freedom, they do not serve explicitly as punishments. In his analysis of sentimental literature, Winfried Fluck explains the nuanced stance these works take. He writes, "While the sentimental novel claims to teach a moral lesson and submits the heroine to a symbolic punishment for her transgression, it is actually on the side of the heroine by skillfully linking elements of desire, fear, and shame with stories of imaginary self-enhancement" (Fluck 99). Death is superficially

presented as a punishment, but when understood within the greater chain of linked elements, it becomes something much more compelling.

Expressions of feminine freedom serve as the precursor to the heroines' deaths. Feminine freedom is consequently the attempts of these heroines to exert independence in a social environment in which they were dependent on men. Charlotte and Eliza demonstrate contrasting examples of how this freedom was explored. Marion Rust proposes that *Charlotte Temple* "appealed to a female populace with increasingly limited capacity to experience themselves as independent, coherent beings in a post-revolutionary culture that made them the centerpiece of national identity even as it circumscribed their roles ever more closely" (Rust 107). This concept is clearly supported by Charlotte's crippling inability to make her own decisions despite her numerous attempts at resolve. Although portrayed in the novel as innocent and naïve, her indecisiveness is ironically part of what makes Charlotte a coquette.

Charlotte's inability to make her own decisions stems from how high the stakes are for her and how little agency she is afforded. As Rust explains, pregnancy is not an experiment or mistake that can be expunged despite the post-revolutionary rhetoric of self-correctability (Rust 106). If indecisiveness is part of what makes a coquette, then there is a vicious cycle at play here where women are placed in precarious social situations that necessitate indecisiveness, but then punished for that behavior. Charlotte fails to gain independence, but on her deathbed decides to give her child to her father, a decision Rust sees as Charlotte gaining a sense of her own autonomy (Rust 109). Arguably, the sympathetic narration of Charlotte's death, and implied salvation, attempts to retroactively expunge her mistake. After Charlotte has died, she beams with joy and looks up to heaven, implying that she has entered the presence of the Lord and is now sinless. While Charlotte's foray into independence ultimately fails, by pairing her

explorations of freedom with death we can see how the rhetoric of death in the novel attempts to supplement the unfair failings of feminine freedom during this time.

Eliza attempts to assert her own independence and strength through masculine characteristics. Russel Sbriglia meticulously analyzes this behavior in what he terms the “slippage between coquette and rake,” two notably gendered identities (Sbriglia 172). Essentially, within the love triangle between Eliza, Boyer, and Sanford, the masculine and feminine roles exhibit significant flexibility. Eliza is able to occupy the masculine role in her relationship with Boyer while he occupies the feminine role. In her relationship with Sanford, the two alternate between masculine and feminine roles, with both becoming “undone” at different points in the novel (Sbriglia 171-173). Sbriglia, like Rust, underscores the inequality in this undoing. Arguably, Boyer becomes undone too in his own special way, as is seen in his penultimate letter to Eliza, in which he coldly calls himself her “disinterested friend.” The ability for Boyer and Sanford to survive this seductive debacle while Eliza dies alone illustrates Rust’s point regarding the selective bestowment of self-correctability upon men.

Despite Eliza’s desire for, and moments of, independence, she can never truly be independent within her social environment. Her dependence on men is emphasized by her friend Lucy Freeman, who argues faithfully in favor of a responsible marriage. Eliza is not allowed to exist freely as an unmarried woman in her society. When she purposefully avoids marriage, she is labeled a coquette. She is also not allowed to exist freely as a married woman because, to her, that is not freedom and, in the 18th century, marriage for a woman was a far cry from independence. For the first half of the novel, Eliza exerts her agency by being in the public eye and by engaging in behavior that Lucy Freeman calls “coquettish.” In the second half of the novel, there is a notable shift where Eliza withdraws from society after her relationship with

Boyer fails and she is physically seduced by Sanford. This withdrawal is clear to the reader as *The Coquette* is an epistolary novel, and Eliza's withdrawal is paired with her increased reluctance to write letters. Since she is the protagonist, it means that other characters and sources must tell the reader what is happening with Eliza. As Daniel Couch eloquently explains, this phenomenon "explores the paradoxical expressiveness of silence and fragmentation" (Couch 688). In his analysis, Couch pays close attention to Eliza's death through her final piece of writing, the chalk "P.S." on her door. Couch writes, "Eliza's self-representation as one [post-script] shows how she places herself outside of what is locatable, recognizable, and legible" (Couch 699). Eliza's literal disappearance in death is also a literary disappearance that marks not only a political freedom, but a freedom from interpretation, although her friends still try to interpret it.

The act of writing a novel is in and of itself an act of feminine freedom. In her discussion of the early American novel, Cathy Davidson explains that in the late 18th century there were three ways to address a large audience: become a politician, clergyman, or novelist, with the third option being the only one available to women (Davidson 7). Choosing then to write a novel about a woman's seduction was consequently a way for both Susanna Rowson and Hannah Webster Foster to explore their own feminine freedom. Their decision to write about women who failed to meet the strict standards of ideal femininity during this time is notable because they did so in a way that allowed them to address political and religious issues. Desirée Henderson, writing on how early America mourned women, puts forward the idea that the novel served as "the answer to the ineffective nature of religious literature, replacing the authority of the clergy with a woman's emotive persuasion" (Henderson 497). The medium of the novel allowed readers privileged access to the intimate thoughts of the heroines, allowing fallen women to be mourned

for who they were. This seemingly simple motive directly contrasted the two options that the clergy provided: unsatisfactory whitewashing or complete silence.

Framing

The Coquette and *Charlotte Temple* have two different ways in which the deaths interacted with the real world: the infamous death and the advertised death. Neither novel shied away from the fact that the heroine would die from her sexual experiences. In the case of *The Coquette*, Hannah Webster Foster had no choice since her story was a recounting of recent history. Regarding *Charlotte Temple*, the publisher of the American edition, Matthew Carey, chose to reveal the heroine's death in his advertisement for the novel. Arguably, the interplay between fiction and reality is valuable here inasmuch as it informs the reading of the texts. By examining this information, I will analyze how the heroines' deaths were operating outside of the novels and within the social context of their publications.

Eliza Wharton, the protagonist of *The Coquette*, was based on the real Elizabeth Whitman, who died alone in an inn shortly after giving birth to a stillborn child. Elizabeth Whitman died during her stay at the Bell Tavern in the former Salem, Massachusetts miles from her home. The *Salem Mercury* posted an initial notice of her death that was then recirculated throughout New England. The notice itself is quite respectful. Elizabeth Whitman is described as follows: "Her person was agreeable; her deportment, amiable & engaging; and though in a state of anxiety and suspense, she preserved a cheerfulness, which seemed not the effect of insensibility, but of a firm and patient temper" (qtd. in Waterman 302). The notice also respects the story she told the people she met during her stay, about being a married woman from Connecticut awaiting her husband. The notice ends by stating the writer's intentions here as "a means of ascertaining her friends of her fate" (qtd in. Waterman 303). The story Elizabeth

Whitman told the people at the Bell Tavern about being married, and that the *Salem Mercury* later perpetuated after her death, was untrue.

Once Elizabeth Whitman's identity was discovered and it came to light that she had given birth to a child out of wedlock, subsequent publications ensued that painted a much less flattering picture of her. For example, the *Pennsylvania Mercury* published a letter by Jeremy Belknap that was subsequently recirculated that argued that her death should be treated as a "moral lecture to young ladies" (qtd. in Waterhouse 303). The author explains, in no uncertain terms, "She was handsome, genteel, and sensible, but vain and coquettish; *a great reader of Romances*. She refused two good offers of marriage... And having coquetted it 'till past her bloom, fell into criminal indulgences, proved pregnant, and then eloped—pretending (where she lodged and died) to be married, and carried on the deception 'till death" (qtd. in Waterhouse 303). The publication does not mourn Elizabeth Whitman but instead treats her as a cautionary tale. In its inability to mourn Elizabeth Whitman's death, this publication illustrates the faults in funerary rhetoric Henderson argues seduction novels attempted to remedy. Namely, "If perfection is a prerequisite for entrance into the rhetorical space of mourning, how are the imperfect dead to be mourned?" (Henderson 495). It is this question that Foster's novel engages with, and it is also a question of women's freedom. Elizabeth Whitman was free to refuse marriages, but she was not free to live with the consequences of her refusals.

The idea of marriage was heavily intertwined with the conception of women's freedom at this time. Another prominent author, Mary Wollstonecraft, was also engaged in this discussion as she wrote, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. This treatise was published in the interim between Eliza Whitman's death and the publication of *The Coquette*. In this treatise on women's rights, Wollstonecraft argues that marriage is actually a form of slavery or legal prostitution in

that it is transactional and will never be sacred until women are equal partners in their relationships (Wollstonecraft 99-106). While the *Pennsylvania Mercury* publication by Jeremy Belknap admonishes Elizabeth Whitman for her “coquettish” refusal of marriage, it also inevitably highlights the fact that marriage at this time, given the dependence women had on men, was women’s only option for a somewhat stable, though highly disenfranchised, existence.

In the 18th century, both the married woman, *feme covert*, and the unmarried woman, *feme sole*, were afforded very little rights, they were denied a truly distinct legal identity. The laws of coverture essentially meant that a woman’s legal rights were subsumed by her husband upon marriage. Before marriage, women’s legal identity was entwined with their fathers, and after marriage, it was entwined with their husbands. Donna Bontatibus writing, specifically about the “civil death” women in post-revolutionary America faced, claims, “If a woman was relegated to the domestic realm, she, like the colonial Other, could not enter the public or political realm... Because a woman was not part of official culture, her rights and concerns were met with indifference” (Bontatibus 59). This is where the novels once again come in as supplementary and contradictory forces to the failings of the cultural discourse on women. Both novels treat women’s concerns with the utmost gravity. Charlotte may be an innocent coquette, but her failure to succeed as a woman in a time when womanhood was so strictly policed is presented as important. Similarly, Eliza is presented as a woman who proves that education is of little concern or value in such a stringent society.

Arguably, Foster and Rowson presented less radical and more immediate forms of education for pre-marriage women than Wollstonecraft did, but the stakes were the same. Wollstonecraft was arguing for necessary and radical social reform, while these novels offered women a fictional sandbox, so to speak, to understand the consequences of disastrous liaisons

and marriages. After discussing a similarly bleak picture of marriage to Wollstonecraft's, Davidson explains that these novels could be ways of testing various avenues of marriage while escaping the negative consequences. She writes, "But by portraying dashing roués, sentimental novelists still allowed women to vicariously participate in a range of relationships with diverse suitors and to imagine what the aftermath of marriage to different men might be like" (Davidson 189). While Elizabeth Whitman's death did in fact become a "moral lecture," Foster, using the medium of the novel, was able to turn it into a much more practical, thoughtful, and palatable one.

Charlotte Temple, unlike *The Coquette*, was not based on a real woman, so the specific story of Charlotte would not have been known to readers through death notices and letters published in newspapers. If readers had known something about the novel through means other than friends, family, or acquaintances, it would have been through the published advertisements. Matthew Carey, the publisher of both the first American edition of *Charlotte Temple* and the first American edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, was responsible for advertising *Charlotte Temple* (Rust 124). Arguably an interesting man in his own right, it is most important to note that his primary goal, regardless of his personal enjoyment of romances or complicated views on women's rights, was to sell books (Rust 132). According to a footnote in Keralis' analysis of Matthew Carey's illustrated edition of *Charlotte Temple*, "Carey places thirty-one advertisements [for *Charlotte Temple*] in his own *Gazette of the United States* between April 29 and July 23, 1794" (Keralis 47). In the advertisement for *Charlotte Temple* dated April 29th, 1794, in the *Gazette of the United States*, Carey makes an interesting rhetorical choice by calling Charlotte a "martyr" (Carey). Part of this review, as Rust proves in her book on Rowson, was in fact borrowed from an English reviewer of the novel (Rust 121). Consequently, his word choice

may not be indicative of his own views, yet it presents a unique frame for the heroine and does serve to link death and freedom.

By calling Charlotte a “martyr,” Carey is suggesting that, although she has fallen, she is worthy of mourning. Furthermore, the way he validates Charlotte’s martyrdom is by disparaging and placing the blame on Montraville and Belcour. His advertisement reads, “Charlotte dies a martyr to the inconstancy of her lover, and treachery of his friend” (Carey 3). Although the term may evoke Christian connotations, specifically ones that do show up within the novel, here it is performing a different task as Charlotte is not dying because of her faith, nor as a so-called “Devil’s martyr,”¹ but rather she is dying as someone who suffered greatly and unfairly at the hands of two men. Donna Bontatibus writes, “Indeed, Charlotte is both a victim and a martyr. She is the prey of a seducer who possesses a rapist ethic and is a sufferer, not because of ‘love,’ but because cultural traditions have made her feel that she committed a great atrocity. The story itself portrays Charlotte as a sacrificial victim” (Bontatibus 103). It is notable that the two used the same term for Charlotte. Importantly, in the 18th century, a martyr, unlike a fallen woman, is worthy of being publicly mourned. The novel was originally advertised implying Charlotte’s victimization and martyrdom. Now the same language is used by modern scholars to argue it was performing cultural work regarding feminine freedom. In both Carey’s advertisement and Bontatibus’ analysis, Charlotte is simultaneously able to be a victim, a fallen woman, and a martyr. This illustrates how the heroines of seduction novels could and always have been able to

¹The term “Devil’s martyr” is an ironic term for someone who died in the pursuit of evil (“Martyr,” def. 1.b.). While Charlotte was a fallen woman, I do not think this is the meaning Carey implied here because he claims that she died a martyr to the “inconstancy” and “treachery” of the men around her (Carey 3). By vilifying these men and not Charlotte herself, it is inconsistent with the meaning of “Devil’s martyr.”

hold multiple seemingly contrasting social identities simultaneously, highlighting the unfairness of their societal position.

Freedom

The ultimate expression of feminine freedom for both heroines would have been to reject their seducers to avoid seduction because that would have led to positive and tangible results, but in a deeply patriarchal society, that is a restrictive definition of women's freedom. This rejection is expressed against men and, consequently, is defined by men's actions and willingness to accept the rejections. This definition limits women's agency to the men who surround them. In my analysis of freedom, I will look at the attempts to reject seduction regardless of success because that highlights a woman's intrinsic choices despite disenfranchisement.

In 2018, the New York Times published an article entitled "45 Stories of Sex and Consent on Campus" in which young men and women told their stories of rejecting, or attempting to reject, someone's sexual advances. The stories are all quite profound, self-aware, and thoughtful reflections. In fact, one is quoted by Lucia Hodgson at the beginning of her article on consent in *Charlotte Temple*: "The agency to keep saying 'no' isn't agency at all" (qtd. in Bennett & Jones; Hodgson 169). Hodgson does not unpack the quote specifically but, regarding relationships, she explains that constantly saying "no" is a sign of a lack of agency because it implicitly means that one person in the relationship has more control than the other. It also means that the first "no" was not accepted as final, demonstrating the ability to make a choice but not the power to successfully enforce that choice (Hodgson 175-178). So, while both Charlotte and Eliza could have expressed feminine freedom by refusing their seducers, it is unlikely it would have been

accepted since they were legally dependent on men. Also, their seducers were quite stubborn and manipulative in their pursuit, so the heroines' rejections were ignored.

In discussing feminine freedom, it is also important to note the age differences between the two heroines and the implications this has regarding expressions of freedom. Charlotte is only 13 years old when her seducer, Montraville, meets her and just turned 16 when she elopes with him to America. In some ways, this explains why Charlotte has less agency than her counterpart, Eliza, who is 37 years old when she dies. Their difference in ages and, consequently, differences in levels of education, as well as access to guidance are extreme. Charlotte quickly becomes isolated, but it is unlikely her schoolgirl friends would have been able to provide her with the same harsh rebukes as Eliza's older and married female friends. Although the rebukes ultimately do not change Eliza's situation, they are important in the discussion of agency later. Furthermore, the different ages attract different suitors. Charlotte is preyed on by Montraville and his friend Belcour because she is naïve and vulnerable. Eliza attracts the boring Reverend Boyer who desires marriage to an exciting woman as a way to alleviate his mundanity and the rakish Major Sanford who sees seducing her as a triumphant conquest. These differences are also important in understanding how two very different women suffer the same fate in these two "competing" novels of the time.

Given the manipulative behavior the seducers use to gain sexual access to the heroines, addressing female agency or the lack of agency in these cases is complicated. Montraville promises Charlotte he will marry her at a time when he cannot make that promise both for financial reasons and legal reasons because he has no money and any marriage of a woman under 21 could be voided by her father. He also isolates Charlotte from her friends and family in a foreign country, making her dependent on him. Eliza is taken advantage of by the womanizing

Sanford, who emotionally manipulates her and uses the conventions of a patriarchal society to ruin her reputation and lead her into despair. Arguably, while both Charlotte and Eliza did not successfully say “no,” given the social environment of the novels as well as their seducers, they did not say “yes” either. Lucia Hodgson, writing on the legal grey area that Charlotte’s seduction occupies, explains, “Seduction, by definition, is an illicit sexual act that is neither fully coerced nor fully voluntary... it is consensual in the sense that it does not meet the stringent standard of legal rape by which the victim has to have offered utmost and sustained resistance to overwhelming force” (Hodgson 169). Charlotte’s precarious legal position meant that her seduction was not her own personal fault, but instead emphasized the failings of laws that restricted her sexual agency. Eliza’s seduction is evidence of how limiting and dangerous expressions of freedom were even for women who occupied a much higher status than Charlotte.

Charlotte’s age is not merely a rhetorical device to demonstrate her naivete, but serves a critique of the predatory marriage laws of the 18th century. Her age is underscored by Rowson’s focus on the birthday party Mrs. Temple will throw her, the birthday party Charlotte sadly skips because of her elopement. Charlotte is neither a *feme sole* nor a *feme covert*. In other words, she is not an unmarried woman of 21 or older, nor is she married and receiving rights connected to a husband. According to Hodgson, the specific age of 16 allows Rowson to engage in the late 18th-century debate on women’s sexual agency. Regarding this, Hodgson writes, “Rowson aligns Charlotte’s seduction with her sixteenth birthday because sixteen is the age at which white free British and American girls found themselves in the legally precarious position of being old enough to consent to elopement but too young to marry without paternal consent” (Hodgson 170). Given the competing patriarchal desires for control, girls like Charlotte were unable to truly have any sexual agency. It is not so much that Charlotte is too naïve and so lacks agency,

but instead she is bound by laws that attempt to settle the power struggle for her sexual agency by granting intersecting legal powers to both young men and her father.

The 1753 Marriage Act that Hodgson references essentially legalized seduction. She explains, “Fathers could void even consummated marriages, while seducers could promise marriage, even marry, and / or consummate the relationship, safe in the knowledge that legally they could not be held accountable or liable” (Hodgson 177). Charlotte, due to this act, is caught between two male authorities who hold power over her. She lacks legal recourse to combat a false promise of marriage, and she lacks the ability to commit to a marriage that is at odds with her father's own interests.

Within the novel, Charlotte has two exceptional moments where she expresses, or at least tries to express autonomy. The first is when she refuses Montraville, and the second is when she gives her baby to her father. Early in their “courtship,” Charlotte tells Montraville “we must meet no more” (37). This rejection, in no uncertain terms, is an attempt at freedom from the seductive clutches of her seducer. Montraville emotionally manipulates Charlotte by threatening her with his death and begs her to see him again until she relents. Since “no” is not the answer the man in power accepts, it is nullified. Her attempt at agency is reduced to nothing and is judged by Madame La Rue as indecisive. At their next meeting, Charlotte tries again to reject Montraville by borrowing her father’s agency. She says, “My parents would never approve of our union” (42). As the Marriage Act dictates, Charlotte’s father could not only disapprove, but he could void their marriage. While Charlotte may not have power, she knows her father does. However, Montraville disregards this rejection. As the seducer, he has no legal obligations, so this historical context does help to explain his inability within the novel to experience any legal consequences to his actions. Charlotte tries once more to reject Montraville at the carriage. After

her repeated refusals, she faints, and Montraville places her in the carriage anyway. In this moment, the autonomy of Charlotte's physical body is violated. Unconsciousness does not equal consent, but means one has the inability to consent. However, as *Charlotte Temple* illustrates here, the unconscious female body is interpreted by predators as merely the inability to refuse.

Fainting at this pivotal moment places Charlotte in a uniquely precarious situation because to Montraville it means she consented simply because she lost the physical and mental capacity to resist. As Hodgson points out, that since Charlotte is 16, "the burden is on her to prove that she did not consent voluntarily" (Hodgson 186). This is a difficult position given the fact that Charlotte as a young girl, has no rights and would need her father to prove that his "property" has been damaged by Montraville to receive any legal recourse. Montraville sends a letter to Charlotte's boarding school the day of the elopement, informing the school that "she has voluntarily put herself under the protection of a man" (51). Although Charlotte's refusals contradict this, the letter is convincing and Mr. Temple seems to believe that Charlotte has indeed made a choice. While Charlotte's father is convinced of his daughter's autonomy, Montraville feels confident in his ability to completely violate Charlotte's agency and face no legal obligation nor moral obligations as he has no intention of marrying her despite his promises. Charlotte has no legal power over this and Montraville's refusal to allow her any form of agency means that her only option is submission. Fainting, consequently, serves as a metaphor for the lack of power Charlotte's position as a young woman in the 18th century holds. Resistance is futile and submission is disastrous, and these are her only options.

Charlotte faints throughout the novel, creating more and more precarious situations due to her declining health, but in her last moments she is fully cognizant and gives her baby to her father as a final act of autonomy. Rust calls this Charlotte's "single decisive act" (Rust 107). It

truly is, and it is also the first time in the novel where someone respects Charlotte's decision. She also makes the decision without being coerced into it and makes a special effort to use her last drop of strength to carry out her choice. Mere moments before her death "[Charlotte] asked, in a low voice, for her child; it was brought to her: she put it into her father's arms" and asked him to protect the baby (127). Rust proposes that this decision illustrates two contradictions. The baby becomes Charlotte's first act of decisiveness while simultaneously being a moment where Charlotte submits to her father's will, giving him the power to control her fate (Rust 107). This is accurate on both accounts, but also unsatisfying as it shows once again that Charlotte is dependent on a man's benevolence to grant her agency.

Rust sees Charlotte's decision to give her baby to her father as Charlotte having "learned from her mistakes" and developing fortitude (Rust 111-112). Given how I argue that Charlotte was capable of making choices at the beginning of the novel, citing her multiple refusals of Montraville, I interpret this powerful scene slightly differently. It is, as Rust says, her "single decisive act," but not so much because Charlotte has changed but because she is expressing her desires to someone who chooses to grant her power. Charlotte tries to make decisions, but Montraville refuses to accept them, nullifying her power and violating her in the process. By taking and protecting the baby, Mr. Temple grants his daughter's request allowing her agency. The scene consequently once again shows how difficult Charlotte's position is. She has freedom of thought and makes choices because she is a person with a mind, but she is an 18th-century girl, so the ability for her choices to have any power is a privilege that depends on the men that surround her.

While Charlotte is primarily victimized by competing male forces of power and predatory legal issues, Eliza runs into trouble because of her self-determination. This makes her a very

nuanced heroine as she is admirable for her unapologetic disdain for marriage, an arguably problematic institution for women at this time, while she is also immature, materialistic, and impulsive. To read Eliza's expressions of freedom, one must balance her compelling, yet contradictory nature as both a righteous and self-righteous rebel.

In her first letter, Eliza is thrilled at the way her engagement has turned out because she is free from both parental and marital obligations as her father and fiancé have both died before the marriage could take place. To her delight, the two men in her life who held power over her have been removed from the equation. She explains that she agreed to this engagement to the aging Mr. Haly because "Both nature and education had instilled into my mind an implicit obedience to the will and desires of my parents... I was the more encouraged, as I saw, from our first acquaintance his [Mr. Haly's] declining health; and expected, that the event would prove as it has" (4). Eliza had consented to the engagement even though her consent was antithetical to her personal desires. As Gillian Brown explains in her article on Eliza's agency, "by successfully gambling her consent... she has strategically exercised her personal interests even as she followed her parent's wishes" (Brown 626). This situation, where a woman must obey her parents regarding marriage, was quite common at this time. Although it did subjugate women because of the laws of coverture, Eliza is able to craftily negotiate her way through this and come out on top. Her craftiness is admirable, as Brown writes, "The room for individual maneuvering that Eliza finds in her exercise of consent demonstrates what a woman can do for herself within the limits of her historical condition... Foster underscores agency in consent, even when the consenting agent is at odds with the content of her consent" (Brown 626). Therefore, Eliza, even as the disenfranchised party, can have agency in this agreement, a testament to her self-determination even within situations that are designed to severely limit her.

In Eliza's third letter, she challenges readers' admiration of her with her entitled dismissal of Mrs. Laiton's seemingly well-intentioned condolences. After being released from the sick bed of Mr. Haly, Eliza attends a party where an acquaintance, Mrs. Laiton, catches her alone. Of this encounter, Eliza writes:

“...offer her condolence on the supposed loss, which I had sustained, in the death of Mr. Haly. My heart rose against the woman, so ignorant of human nature, as to think such conversation acceptable at such a time... The absurdity of a custom, authorizing people at first interview to revive the idea of griefs... To have our enjoyments arrested by the empty compliments of unthinking persons... is to be treated in a manner, which the laws of humanity forbid” (7).

Eliza's personal recounting of this scene portrays her in a bad light. There is no reason why Mrs. Laiton would know that Eliza was not mourning Mr. Haly. Her decision to speak to Eliza of this loss in private when the two are alone is respectful, and there is no evidence that Mrs. Laiton is superficially performing this condolence.

In Laura Korobkin's article, in which she balances Eliza's behavior against contemporary cultural forces, she carefully analyzes this scene to illustrate how inappropriate Eliza's response is. Korobkin writes, “If anything here might have shocked a contemporary reader, it is the intensity of Eliza's self-righteous response, quite disproportionate to the mildness of the stimulus” (Korobkin 83). Eliza behaves poorly here. Her absolutist belief that she is right as well as her vehement dismissal of customary politeness illustrate how self-absorbed she is. These complications of Eliza's character force the reader to doubt whether she is the one whom they should trust. Her accounts of herself, though articulate and deeply nuanced, are repeatedly challenged by other letter writers.

The expressions of freedom that I will focus on are Eliza's "coquettish" relationships with Reverend Boyer and Major Sanford. The nobleness of her marriage critiques are colored by her explicit desires for luxury. Nonetheless, she does highlight the difficulties women faced when attempting to exert their agency in a world that was designed to subjugate them. Given the laws of coverture, she is a sympathetic heroine. In her analysis of Eliza as an allegory for the United States, Lauren Davis writes, "Eliza's tragic fate shows that such a policy [Jeffersonian independence] is impossible for women, most of whom require 'entangling alliances' simply to ensure their survival" (Davis 399). Eliza is dependent on men because of her social position and gender, so her attempts at independence prove fatal. Regardless of her motivations, the fact that she cannot survive her own self-determination is the substantial issue I wish to analyze here. Her motivations, however, occupy a very important role as they serve as the ammunition with which her friends dismiss her agency and her suitors manipulate her.

Her disappointment with Reverend Boyer, the theoretically eligible suitor that her mother and friends believe she should marry, is both because he lacks the flashy lifestyle she desires and because marriage would strip her of her personal freedom. I say "theoretically" because Reverend Boyer is not without his own faults. As Henderson explains, "His faulty understanding of Eliza Wharton's actions draws into question his interpretative powers, and, thus, his status as the representative of God's word" (Henderson 496). Reverend Boyer's cruel breakup letter is emotional and vindictive. As the shepherd of God's children, he should have done better, but his failure here performs two important functions. First, it allows the reader to sympathize with Eliza who wants to make her own marriage choices. Second, it critiques the church and its ability to offer anything other than condemnation to fallen women.

In Boyer's letter to Eliza, he refuses to acknowledge that her rejection of him has anything to do with a desire for independence. Boyer writes that the cause of her indifference towards him is because of her "aversion to the sober, rational, frugal mode of living to which my profession leads; a fondness for the parade, the gaiety, not to say, the licentiousness of a station calculated to gratify such a disposition... infused your giddy mind by the frippery, flattery and artifice of that worthless and abandoned man [Sanford] (65-66). Essentially, Boyer conflates her desires for independence with her desires for luxury and argues that she is sexually immoral. Korobkin writes of this letter, "Withdrawing his offer of marriage, he accuses her of an immoral and unconstrained love of luxury and position that is tantamount to—and expressed in the language of—sexual immorality" (Korobkin 90). Consequently, Boyer's response to Eliza uses her reason for wanting independence to dismiss her concerns entirely.

Notably, in Boyer's letter to his friend Mr. T. Selby, he explicitly reverses the gendered roles he and Eliza play, illustrating how Eliza's agency masculinizes her and feminizes him. Boyer writes, "I gave free scope to the sensibility of my heart; and the effeminate relief of tears materially lightened the load which oppressed me" (64). In other words, Boyer has what we would call today a "cathartic cry." This "effeminate" display of emotion, when paired with how he describes himself as victimized by "the arts of a finished coquette [Eliza]," underscores the gendered consequences of her self-determination (61). Sbriglia writes in his analysis of this letter, "... in this instance it is Eliza who occupies the 'masculine' position of (would be) deluder of Boyer" (Sbriglia 172). Eliza exerts significant agency and influence in her courtship with Boyer. She refuses his advances and, when he is not around, she enjoys her social freedom, both because he lacks the luxury she seeks and because a marriage to him would restrict her freedom. By prioritizing her freedom in her relationship with Boyer, Eliza takes on a masculine role and

Boyer a feminine role. Sbriglia's analysis illustrates how even language at times could not grant power to women except by describing them in masculine language.

In the case of Major Sanford, Eliza is manipulated into believing he is an option for her because he pretends to be wealthy and willing to marry her. Once again, her desire for independence is superseded by her desire for wealth. Major Sanford is quite the manipulator. Since he is also a materialistic person, he recognizes that in Eliza and offers her false promises of luxury. By ruining Eliza's reputation in the garden, he isolates her from the outside world and offers her his "friendship." Korobkin writes, "She [Eliza] enters the sexual liaison with Sanford because she associates him with her lost dream of material gratification, and sex with him seems to offer access to a fragment of what has been lost" (Korobkin 91). Arguably, this is quite accurate, however, Korobkin glosses over the emotional manipulation Sanford used to gain sexual access to Eliza and how he dangles both luxury and equality in front of Eliza in order to seduce her.

Sanford pretends to be wealthy because he knows, like Boyer, that Eliza desires luxury. Instead of using this as a way to reject Eliza, Sanford uses it to seduce her. In a letter to Mr. T. Selby, he explains why he could never actually be married. Sanford writes, "Her disappointment in the expectation of affluence and splendor, which I believe her ruling passion, would afford a perpetual source of discontent and mutual wretchedness" (57). Consequently, Sanford feigns wealth to manipulate Eliza, but becomes trapped because honesty will only reveal his devious ways. Eliza is materialistic, but it does not excuse the outright lying Sanford commits in order to seduce her.

In her analysis of gendered friendship and its implications in *The Coquette*, Ivy Schweitzer takes on a more sympathetic reading that highlights Eliza and Sanford's complex

personalities and motivations. Schweitzer points out that after Eliza's friend Lucy Freeman is married, "Eliza finds her reflection in Sanford... [who] represents the free pursuit of pleasure, bolstered by (the appearance of) affluence that Eliza mistakes for the pleasurable pursuit of freedom" (Schweitzer 16). After the incident with Boyer and then losing Lucy to marriage, Eliza is isolated from both society and her inner circle of friends. Furthermore, while Boyer and her friends are trying to goad her into an inegalitarian marriage, Sanford offers her an egalitarian relationship. As Schweitzer points out, "Sanford is the only character who even entertains the idea that a woman might want to remain, and might benefit from being, single, a "sovereign" self/state, treating with other sovereign entities" (Schweitzer 17). Arguably, Sanford is not the empowering proto-feminist man this quote alone implies. Sanford is a master manipulator and the only one who does not conflate Eliza's desires for luxury and freedom, but he is also the one who uses these desires against her.

In one of Eliza's letters to Lucy, she explains how she entreated Boyer to rephrase his declarations of love to something more egalitarian. Eliza writes that Boyer took her away from the group to declare his "affection" for her. Her response was, "I replied... I believe you must substitute some more indifferent epithet for the present. Well then, said he, if it must be so, let it be esteem, or friendship. Indeed, Sir, said I, you are entitled to them both" (20). Here Eliza is softly rejecting Boyer, but she is also underscoring her desire for a more equal relationship with him. In Eliza's narration of her conversation with Sanford she writes, "My heart did not approve of his sentiments, but my ear was charmed with his rhetoric, and my fancy captivated by his address. He invited my confidence, by the most ardent professions of friendship, and labored to remove my suspicions by vows of sincerity" (29). While Boyer ultimately dismisses Eliza and her desires for friendship because he sees her love for freedom and luxury as inextricably linked

and, consequently, evidence of deep personal flaws, Sanford professes a deep, albeit insincere, desire for Eliza's friendship. It is unsurprising, then, why Eliza made the choice that she did in this respect.

Eliza has significant agency in her relationship with Boyer that is demonstrated in the reversal of the masculine and feminine dynamic between them. In her relationship with Sanford, she does have less agency, yet it is not simply because he seduces her with false visions of grandeur. Sanford seduces Eliza with false visions of equality as well. This complicates Eliza's agency further because, although she is seduced, it is a decision that she consents to because she believes it will grant her more agency. Korobkin touches on this when she analyzes Eliza's legal rights. Korobkin explains, "Eliza, an adult in her mid-thirties, has sex with a man she knows to be both married and a notorious libertine... sexual intimacy with Major Sanford occurs without even the potential for a regularizing, respectable marriage... Foster presents her as retaining decision-making capacity" (Korobkin 97). Eliza makes the decision on her own to such an extent that she would not have any legal recourse in a seduction suit. Unlike most seduction suits, Eliza's would have failed legally because she had too much agency in her downfall. Eliza understood what she was doing, yet she did it anyway because Sanford understood the nuances of the desires Eliza had.

Death and Mourning

A heroine's death at the end of a late 18th-century seduction novel is, in many ways, a convention of the genre that reflects both a rhetorical purpose and a practical purpose. As Davidson explains, "I tend to see death-in-childbirth in narrative terms and also in philosophical terms as an expression of the ultimate frustration of eighteenth-century writers when it came to envisioning alternative models of female sexual expression and behavior" (31). Both Charlotte

Temple and Eliza Wharton die in childbirth, so a superficial reading provides a simple moral lesson: a woman's sexual transgression begets death. This reading consequently allows the novel to operate as a trojan horse, existing at the surface level as a cautionary tale while concealing a more salacious plot. Davidson provides the contemporary readers of seduction novels with much more agency of freedom of thought than any fabulist reading suggests. She writes, "If the convention of the seduction novel genre is an unhappy ending, then one could say that it is the unhappy ending itself that permits the exploration of desire... the fixity gave the writer and reader alike narrative mobility... accepting the discourse conventions of an unhappy ending allowed the reader to indulge in a guilty pleasure" (37). Davidson's reading is satisfying as it finds a little freedom within the strict conventionality. This brings to mind the ironic possibility that perhaps some young women in the late 18th century received *Charlotte Temple* or *The Coquette* as an educational gift and then were pleasantly surprised by the titillating adventure that ensued upon reading. Regardless, given the significant mental and physical suffering both Charlotte and Eliza experience in the time between their premarital sexual experiences and deaths, it is extremely unlikely that any reader would be envious of their lives. In other words, no matter how enjoyable parts of the stories are, no one wants to be Charlotte or Eliza. Therefore, the deaths, although conventional, are also punitive and cautionary.

The specific cause of Charlotte and Eliza's deaths, childbirth, necessitates further analysis as it represented a universal concern for all women of this time regardless of their marital status. Davidson explains how pronounced maternal death was during this time when she writes, "Although, then as now, the overall life expectancy for women was higher than for men, every young woman facing marriage also faced the prospect of death in childbirth, which did increase women's mortality rate above men's during their prime childbearing years" (Davidson 192).

Although marriage was presented as the goal for a young woman, so that she might have stability and safety upon leaving her father's home, the situation was not without its inherent biological dangers. Consequently, Charlotte and Eliza's deaths, in addition to their narrative and practical functions, reflect the realities of the time when childbirth was fundamentally a dangerous experience for women. Davidson wittily remarks that "the sentimental novel may well have been the most effective means of birth control of the time" (Davidson 193). Given the way in which these novels underscored pregnancy as a fatal consequence of sex, along with how they increased literacy rates among women at this time, there is significant historical truth behind Davidson's comment.

Everything that furthers the plot in *Charlotte Temple* further weakens Charlotte herself, so her death at the end of the novel, though sad, seems par for the course. Ann Douglas writes in her authoritative introduction to *Charlotte Temple* that Charlotte becomes, "a kind of seduced saint of what was once called 'holy anorexia,' records physically that which is within her, that which defies words but not show" (Douglas XXXI). Charlotte's pregnancy is pathologized by the narrative. It is not a state of being in and of itself, but a symptom of her seduction. Pregnancy for Charlotte is a fateful illness. It is notable that Douglas uses religious terminology here. As I have illustrated with Bontatibus' and Carey's uses of the term "martyr," it is tempting for critics and publishers alike to associate Charlotte with religious themes. Her suffering, penitence, and sinfulness leave her vulnerable to these sorts of descriptors.

Prior to reaching her deathbed and becoming a "mournable body," Charlotte is evicted from her house, and Rowson herself aligns Charlotte with Christian themes. While preparing to give birth, she sets out on a pilgrimage through a New York blizzard. She is turned away by Madame La Rue (now Mrs. Crayton), and gives birth in a generous servant's "hovel." The idea

of an expectant woman on a journey in a foreign land being turned away from an appropriate shelter and then forced to give birth in a lowly environment is oddly reminiscent of the popular Virgin Mary narrative that originated in the Gospel of Luke. It is a strange parallel, given the drastic differences between these two people. However, the parallel serves to highlight the differences, not the similarities. In Henderson's article, she discusses how seduction novels created a way to mourn fallen women by rejecting the Puritan rhetoric that those who are worthy of mourning must also be worthy of imitation. Henderson writes, "Within the novel, it is suggested, the work of mourning results in the sympathetic acknowledgement of imperfection rather than the construction of an artificial and alienating perfection" (Henderson 498). This subtle comparison of Charlotte with a venerated biblical figure who is alienatingly perfect in her faith at a time when Charlotte is most vulnerable serves to further emphasize the sinfulness of Charlotte allowing her to be both imperfect and a person worthy of mourning.

When Charlotte dies, she is described as peaceful, so that readers know to sympathize with her. The chaos, pain, and suffering are alleviated in death. Charlotte's death is described as follows: "Unable to finish the sentence, she sunk back on her pillow: her countenance was serenely composed; she regarded her father as he pressed the infant to his breast with a steadfast look; a sudden beam of joy passed across her languid features, she raised her eyes to heaven—and then closed them for ever" (127). For the first time in the novel, Charlotte experiences composure and joy. This death is especially notable when contrasted with two of the villains in the novel's deaths. Montraville begs for death, but is sentenced to a life that consists of "severe fits of melancholy" and weeping over Charlotte's grave (130). He is left to mourn her death and regret his hand in it. Madame La Rue dies "overtaken by poverty and illness... a striking example that vice, however prosperous in the beginning, in the end, leads only to misery and

shame” (132). Charlotte is the only character who experiences this transcendent peace. Henderson argues that this authorial salvation, “replaces the salvation function of the Bible” (Henderson 496-497). Rowson cannot make explicit theological claims about Charlotte’s salvation, or any other fallen woman’s salvation for that matter. She can, however, provide an implicit narrative salvation that serves to set Charlotte up to be mourned in a way that the waning Puritan climate of the time would not have encouraged.

In her book, *The Plight of Feeling*, Julia Stern examines the ideological intentions behind the forceful way that Rowson’s narrative voice presents Charlotte as a character to be mourned. Stern writes, “Charlotte cannot be restored, but the sorrow that her death provokes—in both narrator and reader alike— allows for the cohesion of an “imagined community” around the wound to the social body that her passing represents” (Stern 37). Although Stern is primarily focusing on Charlotte as an allegory for the United States, she makes a very compelling point about how the novel is designed to make one mourn Charlotte. Instead of focusing, like Stern does, on the allegorical nature of Charlotte and that community, I will focus on the literal community of mourners that saw Charlotte not as a country but as a person.

I find it fascinating that Charlotte Temple was privately and publicly mourned by her readers in the years following the novel's publication. Despite Rowson’s claim in her preface that she has only “thrown over the whole [story] a slight veil of fiction,” there was no real Charlotte Temple, nor any evidence that a real person inspired the story (Rowson XLIX). Regardless of its truthfulness, the story generated true mourning in its diverse audience, including men and women of multiple races, social classes, and occupations (Douglas X). One example pertinent example from Cathy Davidson’s archival research is that multiple late 18th-century women wrote poems mourning Charlotte on the flyleaf of their copies (Davidson 145). In addition, the

grave of a young woman named Charlotte Stanely was assumed to be the real-life Charlotte Temple, and people travelled to pay their respects to her. Ann Douglas explains that “thousands of nineteenth century Americans made the pilgrimage to Trinity Churchyard in New York ... to leave tears, flowers, locks of hair, and crude verses on the tombstone” (Douglas XVI). There was no Charlotte Temple outside of Rowson’s novel, but for many readers, Charlotte was real enough to mourn. Henderson, writing on both *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette*, sees the conclusion of the novel with the heroines’ deaths as “a plot device which allows the authors to place the reader at the gravesite, directing her to experience the heroine’s death as a personal loss” (Henderson 495). Consequently, the mourning of Charlotte was an intentional and natural response to reading the novel.

Eliza’s death in *The Coquette* is, as is everything she does, complicated by her own narrative or, as the case may be, lack of narrative. Eliza passes away in private, and other characters recount her death to the reader. The reader consequently never gets to understand how Eliza conceives of her own death, nor how an omniscient narrator wants them to understand it. Eliza’s friends perform the work of mourning in the novel. The final letter in *The Coquette* is one from Julia Granby to Eliza’s mother that includes a facsimile of the epitaph that was engraved on her tombstone, inviting readers, as Henderson claims, to the gravesite to bring the mourning out of fiction and into reality.

Foster’s novel was so sympathetic that she was able to effectively reverse the public perception of Eliza in quite a few readers. In their preface to *The Coquette*, Jennifer Harris and Bryan Waterman call Eliza Whitman/Wharton “an indigenous American folk hero” because of the cultural impact she had (Harris and Waterman XVI). Harris and Waterman explain that people went to the grave to weep, the grave itself was chipped away into tiny souvenirs,

Elizabeth Whitman's items were preserved in a museum, and even the doorstep to the Bell Tavern still exists today because of the tragic association (Harris and Waterman XVI). The most notable aspect of the Eliza Whitman/Wharton public response was that it conflated the fictional and the real woman. As Harris and Waterman write, "The success of Foster's novel was, in some ways, its own undoing. Notably, it introduced a conundrum for other readers via the Wharton/Whitman figure in that some found Wharton so sympathetic that they refused to believe Whitman guilty of the sexual fall that first brought her to the public's attention" (XVI). Some of these sympathetic readers, such as the late 19th century writers Caroline Wells Healey Dall and Charles Knowles Bolton, went so far as to rewrite Whitman's letters and complete extended and erroneous revisionist histories to prove she was married and not, in fact, a fallen woman (XVI-XVII). Therefore, the conflation of Eliza Wharton with Eliza Whitman created a more intense readership.

The conflation of fiction and reality in the pursuit of sympathy after the publication of *The Coquette* illustrates that there was something inherently special and convincing about how Foster wrote about death, something that was not present in the newspaper publication nor the funerary discourse that surrounded the real woman's death. As I have already established in my discussion of the newspaper publications, most readers would have had some understanding of Eliza's fate before they read the epistolary novel. I assume that those readers, like me, expected more letters from Eliza narrating her own downfall and death. Daniel Couch explains that "For Foster, Eliza's sense of being fragmented and stranded serves as an indication that the culture of epistolary sentiment—so dominant during this period—cannot fully account for Eliza's harrowing emotional life" (Couch 687). This claim is not only very compelling, but also answers the question of why Eliza can be an absent object of sympathy and mourning. She is not there

because her pain is so great. Her suffering escapes words. Earlier in this thesis I discussed Eliza's imperfections. Her own accounts of herself are often unflattering and leave her vulnerable to the judgments critics such as Korobkin make, so her disappearance consequently also allows her to be more enigmatic. As such, her inner discourse is a *tabula rasa* that the reader can project their own perceptions on, allowing Eliza to feel what they themselves would have felt if they were her, making her more sympathetic.

Even though Eliza stops writing letters for the reader, she continues to be the center of the novel's attention. This creates a community of mourning. Eliza's last piece of writing that appears in the novel is the chalk "P.S." she writes on her door to let her seducer, "Peter Sanford," know her location (123). This final piece of writing allows Eliza's mourners to reshape her life as they try to make her a woman worthy of mourning. In his close reading of this "P.S.," Couch also focuses on how Eliza's friends attempt to rewrite her life in the inscription on the tombstone. The incriminating line on the epitaph is "LET CANDOR THROW A VEIL OVER HER FRALITIES" (133). Couch calls this mourning a "collective forgetting" that "shows how Eliza's community has taken up with what it sees as the important didactic elements of her life without recognizing the end of Eliza's life as unrecognizable or reading her as unreadable" (Couch 699). Essentially, Eliza's community even after her death is still working against her.

Of all the secondary characters in *The Coquette*, Julia Granby seems to be the most active in suppressing and reshaping Eliza's posthumous existence. In Julia's letter to Lucy after Eliza has passed away, she writes, "My testimony of Eliza's penitence, before her departure, is a source of comfort to this disconsolate parent [Mrs. Wharton]. She fondly cherishes the idea, that having expiated her offence by sincere repentance and amendment, her deluded child finally made a happy exchange of worlds" (127). It is Julia who controls the narrative now. Her

testimony of how she interprets how Eliza felt acts as the narrative salvation for Mrs. Wharton. However, Julia seems intent on making an example of Eliza by highlighting not Eliza's suffering, but Mrs. Wharton's suffering. She writes:

“This parent I here behold, inhumanly stripped of the best solace of her declining years, by the ensnaring machinations of a profligate debauchee [Eliza]! Not only life, but what was still dearer, the reputation and virtue of the unfortunate Eliza, have fallen victims at the shrine of *libertinism!* Detested be the epithet! Let henceforth bear its true signature, and candor itself shall call it lust and brutality” (128).

Julia makes an important narrative decision by holding Eliza responsible not only for her own sexual promiscuity, but also for the suffering it caused others. For Julia it seems that Eliza is not a victim of suffering, but a perpetrator of suffering. In conjunction with this, Julia also conceals Eliza's final letters. She writes to Lucy that Eliza's brother found letters written by Eliza at the inn where she died. These letters function to “greatly alleviate the regret occasioned by her absence, at this awful period” (127). Despite the soothing nature of the letters, they are not reproduced, so Eliza's narrative power ends with Julia's testimony once again.

Foster presents Julia as the virtuous friend to Eliza's fallen status. However, as Henderson notes, the virtuous friend is often not the most likable. She explains that, while the funeral sermon contrasted the “pious and fallen women” to highlight the pious woman's virtues and fallen women's faults, the novel directs the reader's sympathy to the fallen woman because the pious woman is ineffective (Henderson 497). Julia's grieving is ineffective because it demands silence.

Given the intimacy and understanding the reader is directed to feel for Eliza in the novel it is difficult to accept Julia's suppression and attempts to silence Eliza. Eliza's other "good" friend Lucy's mourning is more nuanced because she had a more intimate friendship with Eliza. She asserts that she will only remember Eliza's virtues, but also that the entire story should be treated as a moral lesson. Lucy writes, "No; she shall still live in the heart of her faithful Lucy; whose experience of her numerous virtues and engaging qualities, has imprinted her image too deeply on the memory to be obliterated... From the melancholy story of Eliza Wharton, let the American fair learn to reject with disdain every insinuation derogatory to their true dignity and honor" (131). Logically, it should be one or the other—Eliza is either fallen and a lesson in vice, or she was perfect, and her faults were forgotten. Lucy's insistence on combining both Eliza's best qualities and her worst qualities is evidence of a budding attempt to grieve Eliza as a complete person, which constitutes a revolutionary rejection of the funerary discourse of the time. The idea that the novel did function in this way is supported by the public mourning that occurred after its publication.

Conclusion

The sympathy and mourning for the heroines' deaths in *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette*, both by the characters in the novels and their readers, illustrate that these texts had a profound emotional impact on their readers. The mourning is nuanced, though, as it is for fallen women who were failed by the restrictive nature of their social environments. The Marriage Act significantly limited Charlotte's agency to the point that she was left powerless in a male power struggle for her autonomy. Eliza was given the illusion of choice. She believed she could choose between marriage and social freedom, but she could only choose between restrictive marriage and what later proved to be disastrous coquetry. As I have demonstrated in my analysis of

Charlotte and Eliza's expressions of feminine freedom, they did not become fallen women purely by their own impetus. Their "falls" were a combination of both their own intrinsic motivations and extrinsic social and political forces. The novels preface the heroine's deaths with their attempts to navigate these restrictions. Consequently, their failure to successfully navigate their situations is not entirely a personal failing, but intertwined with the restrictive political systems of their time. Arguably, this is what makes them compelling heroines who deserve to be mourned and also what makes their public mourning so politically charged.

These novels critique political restrictions. The Marriage Act makes Charlotte vulnerable, and the laws of coverture lead Eliza to be enticed by coquetry. The novels are veiled by a moral lecture in that they show how a woman's lack of agency can lead to grave consequences, but they fail to show how a woman may find agency in these situations. "No" was not an option for either heroine, yet it seems the only realistic way they could have avoided such disastrous consequences. Davidson writes that "Eliza naively sought to exercise her freedom only to learn that she had none" (Davidson 227). Arguably, Charlotte did as well. This incongruity is itself a social critique enveloped in a didactic narrative.

The novels also critique the religious rhetoric of the time. Given the public response of sympathy to these heroine's deaths, they directly inspired what the waning Puritanism sought to discourage. They encouraged the mourning and remembrance of fallen women as complete women. Since each heroine dies an unmarried maternal death, it is impossible to grieve them as "perfect" because their deaths cannot be separated from their deeply flawed lives. It is equally impossible to grieve them if they are simply a lesson in vice. Arguably, no one grieves the characters who got what they deserved. Evidence of this is seen in how no one grieved Montraville, Madame La Rue, or pre-1797 Eliza Whitman, who was publicly criticized prior to

The Coquette. As Henderson explains, “The novel provides a unique forum for explaining the actions and motives of the heroine. The reader enters into the heroine’s experience and can therefore understand her options, her choices, and her sin” (Henderson 499). The novels, consequently, are not so much about what women do, but how we understand what women do. Through mourning, women who were supposed to be excluded from society are brought back into the fold.

The combination of freedom and death is necessary to understand not only how these narratives functioned in their own fictional worlds, but also how they operated in the broader cultural context. My work builds on Henderson’s by bringing freedom into the idea of mourning imperfection. Mourning an unmarried woman who dies in childbirth feels natural to us in the 21st century but, as I have shown both with the religious rhetoric of the time and Julia’s response to Eliza’s death, it was not supposed to be the natural response. Condemnation of the woman and learning from her mistakes were the prescribed responses. As Henderson points out, “the sermon participated in constructing an image of virtuous womanhood that vilified imperfect women and rendered them unsuitable to mourn,” while the seduction did the opposite (Henderson 488). Both novels explicitly claim that they hope their readers will learn from the heroines’ lives and not make the same mistakes, but through telling a complete story, they encourage mourning. The story itself becomes the tool needed to generate sympathy, forgiveness, and personhood as it humanizes its heroines. I have not and will not ignore the prescriptive nature of these texts. They do teach one to avoid seduction, but by allowing the heroine to be more than just her sins they also foster compassion, a more revolutionary undertaking than the fabulist instruction that women should just avoid the outside world and its dangers.

Through the medium of the novel, Susanna Rowson and Hannah Webster Foster were able to carve a space for mourning fallen women. These authors do not do as Wollstonecraft did and vindicate the rights of women, but they do provoke thoughtful mediations on the complicated nature of women's bodies, and the politics that govern (and sometimes fail) to protect those bodies. As Elizabeth Barnes points out, "Rather than depicting 'female education' as an antidote to seduction, novels like Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* and Hannah Foster's *The Coquette* reveal the extent to which seduction proves an indispensable element of patriarchal education" (Barnes 15). Both Charlotte and Eliza are inseparable from their narratives, their bodies from politics, and their deaths from religion. This overlapping means that "seduction fiction puts sociopolitical anxieties concerning the nature of authority into a personal context, where private interpersonal relations intersect with public concerns" (Barnes 9). Consequently, the personal and the private overlap as readers are given the opportunity to understand both how the heroines' themselves feel as well as how the broader society perceives them. Privileged and intimate information then becomes the fuel for public displays of understanding as seen in how the heroines' were mourned by their readers. The heroines' unique personal identities become public in the novel, challenging the prescribed social identity of fallen women as an ostracized social category.

Death in these novels functions not as a punishment, but as a way to understand how feminine freedom was so severely circumscribed at this time in history. The politics that governed women sought to limit them. The religion that comforted and instructed them was bestowed on a purely conditional basis depending on how well they met the strict standards of womanhood. Death is the reaction to a woman's failure to meet society's expectations. In death, though, the women are seen as people who, although they should not be imitated, should be

mourned. The novels expand the social sphere to include women's concerns, by harnessing the infectious nature of the novel to generate sympathy.

My goal in exploring freedom and death here is simply to highlight how this pairing is essential to the understanding of the cultural work that these texts performed. In a time when the ideas of "women's politics" and "mourning fallen women" were, for all intents and purposes, oxymoronic, these texts refuted those claims. In my thesis, I mention a few scholars who read *Charlotte* and *Eliza* as allegories for the United States. This line of thinking is valuable here in so much as it highlights how politically charged these works were and, in my opinion, continue to be. Women's sexuality as well as agency is still a deeply political and religious issue, and it is an issue to which a response of sympathy will always be valuable and powerful.

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