


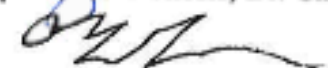
Damsel Dispositions:
Ideologies of Femininity and the Transatlantic Sentimental Heroine

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Introduction

As Europe barreled through the Enlightenment and into the Industrial Revolution, the status of women in society morphed along with class distinctions. As the middle-class—the class between the aristocracy and the working class—formed, so did women’s opinions of themselves and their role in society. This phenomenon is often referred to as the “woman question,” and it plagued both British and American society throughout the late 1700s and early 1800s. In some sense, the sentimental novel emerged in an attempt to answer the woman question. This genre, pioneered by men, tells the stories of women and their quests for love and security. Authors such as Samuel Richardson in his iconic text *Pamela* or Jean Jacques Rousseau in *Julia, or the New Heloise* sought to define femininity for the emergent middle-class reader through their characterizations of their titular heroines. They emphasized a woman’s need for physical and moral virtue and innocence in order to live a desirable and successful life, using the trope of the “fallen woman” as a foil to their heroines and a cautionary tale for their readers. Yet, as men they knew very little of the realities of women negotiating these new class dynamics. To fill this gap in truer representation, female authors Frances Burney, Jane Austen, Hannah Webster Foster, and Sally Sayward Wood picked up their pens and began to write a new perspective of the sentimental genre.

Each of these women writes a different kind of sentimental heroine, and I believe this is because they recognize that, though they must use the conventions set up by their male predecessors, they are responsible for telling the feminine story of their era. As sentimental scholar Nina Baym puts it, “the novels are written by women, are addressed to women, and tell one particular story about women” (qtd. in Hansen, 40). This

particular story involves young women finding financial and physical security through marriage. But just because they “tell one particular story” does not mean that their heroines have the exact same qualities and outcomes. Each heroine does, however, exhibit many, if not most, of the stereotypical traits of the sentimental—traits first employed by male authors such as Richardson and Rousseau. This fact begs the question which I seek to answer: how does the sentimental heroine, when penned by a woman, change the ideology of femininity typically used in sentimental fiction? For each of these authors, I believe that the sentimental heroine allowed them the space to write women with agency that still hold fast to the strictures created by the patriarchal society in which they exist.

As a genre, the sentimental story includes key elements: the evocation of extreme emotion, from both the characters and the reader; the privileging of morality and virtue over vice; a heroine of an obscure background; themes of seduction or arranged marriage; an emphasis on patriarchal power; use of aesthetic characteristics which would later be termed gothic; frequent changes in setting; and an almost unnecessary amount of characters. I am primarily concerned with the heroine of obscure birth. The sentimental heroine has many traits, but she can most easily be defined as a woman of virtue. She is an orphan, either by her parents’ death or neglect, and is decidedly of a middle-class background. Despite any shady upbringing, the sentimental heroine exhibits great purity of heart and body. She is a paragon of good morals and innocence, and she is often described by her suitors as angelic. All in all, the sentimental heroine is an 18th century man’s dream woman, or at least this is the kind of woman male authors of the sentimental write. While women writers use many of the same traits, they do so in an attempt to

undermine the unattainable patriarchal standard their predecessors set for femininity. Because the stereotypical sentimental heroine's heritage is unknown, she typically has more room for agency and autonomy, a fact which women writers emphasize in the characterization of their heroines. Many scholars have looked into how the sentimental novel, when written by a woman, pushes back against the patriarchal standards of middle-class society in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, but few have specifically analyzed the role of the heroine of the sentimental novel in their authors' plight.

In recent years, scholarship on the sentimental novel has focused specifically on British sentimentalism, but prior to the last decade, American sentimentalism led the way academically. Scholar Cathy Davidson paved the way for feminist studies of sentimental fiction. In her 1982 essay, "Flirting With Destiny: Ambivalence and Form in the Early American Sentimental Novel," Davidson expounds on the idea that American authors of the sentimental novel wrote to question the gender roles of the new republic: "Written frequently by women, almost always for and about women, the best books of the time suggest questions about the slowly changing roles that were available to women—and to men—instead of positing absolute answers" (23). In this vein, Davidson points out that "Virtue (writ large) does not always save the heroine" (24). For Davidson, this idea stands out as one of the defining traits of the American sentimental novel. The British sentimentalists put much stock in the necessity of virtue in the heroine, but the Americans have pushed back against that to question the purpose of virtue. Davidson's analysis of *The Coquette* proves this point, and my own argument is heavily influenced by this. Davidson analyzes several early American sentimental works to create a structuralist reading of the genre as a whole.

Along with this article, Davidson further analyzes feminism within sentimental fiction in her book *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in Early America*. In her chapter “Privileging the *Feme Covert*: The Sociology of Sentimental Fiction,” Davidson delves into the historical context of sentimental fiction, specifically the reasons it resonated with women. She begins with an analysis of “The Sociology of the Female Reader” before close reading *The Coquette*. Davidson first points out that the role of women, with specific regard to feminine sexuality, rose as a glaring concern in the early Republic: “The huge social interest vested in women’s sexuality, which was fetishized into a necessary moral as well as social and biological commodity, meant that women themselves had little voice in the matter” (185). This vested interest is one of the driving factors of sentimental fiction, which Davidson illustrates in her analysis of the real-world inspiration for Foster’s novel, *Elizabeth Whitman*. By contextualizing sentimental fiction, especially in terms of the female reader, Davidson makes the case for reading sentimental fiction written by women as an act of rebellion against the patriarchal tradition of the genre. Davidson’s arguments in both of these sources enhance my own claim that authors like Foster and Wood wrote subversively.

Despite Davidson’s stance as one of the foremost scholars of American sentimental fiction, other scholars have critiqued her claims. In his 1999 article, “The Sentimental Novel and Its Feminist Critique,” Klaus P. Hansen argues against Davidson and Nina Baym and their approach to the American sentimental. He claims that Davidson and Baym “...cease[d] to view the sentimental novel as a degenerate continuation of an English genre...” and because of this difference in approach, they have set the sentimental apart as “...a genuinely American phenomenon” (39). He critiques this

approach as one which "...throws the baby out with the bathwater" as it leaves out the important literary history which leads to the American sentimental.

He does, however, give both Davidson and Baym ample credit for their arguments when he cites Davidson's study: "Providing us with ample evidence, she [Davidson] shows that these melodramatic stories were in fact very close to reality. The various 'props' taken from Richardson...were not fictions, but rather the existential presuppositions upon which the lives of women at that time were based" (40). All of that said, Hansen still believes that their approach creates a gap in the overall understanding of the sentimental, and he attempts to bridge this gap between the old approach of only looking at that literary history and Davidson and Baym's newer approach which focuses solely on the future. For Hansen, an accurate analysis of the sentimental is only attainable when looking at both the past and the future of the sentimental, and that includes the English tradition of the genre. His emphasis is on the middle-class ideology surrounding the genre, and he applies this to his reading of Foster's *The Coquette*. Hansen claims that this ideology is precisely what keeps Foster's novel from being truly feminist: "...the coquette is a stock character in the English comedy. In an aristocratic context, it had its allurements; for the middle class, however, it was utterly disgusting" (44). In terms of ideology, Hansen could not be more correct. However, this analysis focuses on Eliza, the heroine of the novel as *only* a coquette, thus pigeonholing her and ignoring the rest of her actions throughout the story. I believe that Hansen's ideas about ideology and the transatlantic relationship between British and America sentimentalism can be applied to the sentimental heroine without necessarily refuting the idea of the heroine as a representation of proto-feminism.

Moving into the new millennium, Sarah Knott latches onto Davidson's train with her arguments on rights feminism and republican womanhood. In her 2003 article, "Female Liberty? Sentimental Gallantry, Republican Womanhood, and Rights Feminism in the Age of Revolutions," Knott notes, "...republican ideology fashioned an explicitly domestic role for white women as rational wives and mothers. That role...appeared in popular seduction fiction, which made domestic women into avatars and emblems of national virtue" (426). For both Knott and Davidson, female virtue as portrayed by the sentimental defined femininity and the roles of women in the new republic. Knott also analyzes the Wollstonecraftian rights feminism which attempted to give women a form of freedom. Knott specifically uses these two concepts of rights feminism and republican womanhood to analyze female sexuality during this time in America. Interestingly, her concept of virtue usually pertains to "citizen virtue" not chastity. This departs from the typical reading of virtue as female virginity.

More recent scholars like Patricia Meyer Spacks, Melissa Sodeman, and Hina Nazar primarily focus on the British sentimental novel. Nazar and Sodeman have both published books on the sentimental novel within the past decade, though they approach the sentimental from decidedly different perspectives. Nazar focuses on theory and male authors of the sentimental, though she does examine Austen's foray into the world of sentimentalism. Her primary argument revolves around judgment, spectatorship, and autonomy, citing theorists from Kant to Arendt. She states her argument as such, "...together Arendt and the sentimentalists mobilize an understanding of judgment, and hence of autonomy, that can be made to challenge the poststructuralist critique of autonomy as perniciously abstractive from the social and material contexts of

subjectivity” (38). She importantly acknowledges that sentimentalism is the reaction to the extreme rationalism spurred from the Enlightenment, but she also grapples with the idea of placing Jane Austen’s works in the realm of the sentimental. She argues that considering Austen an antisentimental novelist also requires scholars to consider writers like Richardson, Hume, and Mackenzie as antisentimentalists as all of these authors, “...endorse various forms of critical distancing from the claims of feelings, and a broad morality of judgment under which the sentiments of approval and disapproval must themselves be approved or disapproved by subjecting them to reflective scrutiny and peer review” (119). Essentially, for Nazar, judgment holds more weight in the sentimental world than sensibility, and it is through this judgment that characters are able to achieve autonomy. It is with Nazar’s argument in mind that I intend to prove the independence of the female authored sentimental heroine; it is through their ability to judge their actions and reactions via their sentimental dispositions that they are able to establish their own paths rather than taking those forced upon them.

Sodeman, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the literary history of women writers of the sentimental. In her book *Sentimental Memorials: Women and the Novel in Literary History*, she details the history of the sentimental novel and its decline, pointing out how that decline not so coincidentally coincided with the rise of women authors of the genre: “Their works record a moment in literary history in which sentimental fiction was never more popular and never less admired, a moment in which women writers successfully navigated the professional marketplace but struggled to position their works among more lasting literary monuments” (3). Sodeman steeps her argument in commentary from the 1780s and 1790s to give a well-rounded New

Historicist reading of the female authored sentimental. She acknowledges the work of other scholars like John Mullan and Marilyn Butler and their analysis of the politics surrounding the genre, but she claims to approach the sentimental from a different outlook:

“...reading sentimental fiction differently, I aim to show how these novels meaningfully respond to changes in the cultural status of literature, authorship, and sentimentality at the end of the eighteenth century, changes that stranded sentimental genres and left their mostly female practitioners on the margins of literary history” (8-9).

Sodeman’s primary texts are those by Sophia Lee, Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Robinson, some of the sentimental’s foremost female authors. Her work focuses on the relationship between the sentimental novel and its task of archiving the lives of women in the 1780s and 1790s.

Sodeman’s approach neglects the concept of femininity as defined by the sentimental novelist, a concept which Patricia Meyer Spacks explores in her article, “Privacy, Dissimulation, and Propriety: Frances Burney and Jane Austen.” She begins with a study of feminine privacy and its links to class, noting that true privacy is only afforded to wealthy women: “The right to privacy, understood as control over personal information, does not pertain to the socially powerless” (522). As the sentimental novel deals specifically with the struggles of the middle-class young woman, Spacks claims that the trope of what she calls psychic privacy as false appearance becomes a standard in the sentimental novel. Though male authors—and many female authors—approached the concept of false appearance with anxiety, Spacks concludes that later female authors put

a spotlight on how manners necessitate false appearances—they give women the option of psychic privacy (520). Yet Spacks complicates her own conclusion in her discussion of propriety, claiming: “The intricate rules of propriety work, particularly on women, as an instrument of control, generating a culture of minute surveillance and censure” (522).

Beyond her analysis of privacy and propriety, Spacks also delves into a structuralist reading of the sentimental novel. In her chapter, “The Novel of Sentiment,” she explores the relationship between sentiment and satire. The culmination of these two seemingly opposing genres lies in what Spacks calls “the morally unmixed character”—typically the protagonist. For Spacks, an unmixed character is one who has not been “mixed” with corruption, so the sentimental heroine is most definitely an unmixed character. She states, “The potential for foolishness and the possession of purity naturally accompany each other since the morally unmixed character can hardly function effectively in a morally mixed society” (128). Spacks’s analysis of the sentimental as satire raises the question, if the sentimental heroine is in and of herself satirical, is her stance as a feminist icon undermined? It is precisely this question I intend to answer in the following chapters.

As Spacks analyzes the sentimental genre, so too does Helen Thompson as she works with Locke’s theories. In her book *Ingenuous Subjection: Compliance and Power in the Eighteenth-Century Domestic Novel*, Thompson focuses on the British domestic novel—a genre quite synonymous with the sentimental—and the power dynamics within the overarching genre. From the beginning of her argument, Thompson invokes Locke’s definition of liberty: “*Liberty* is a power to act or not according as the Mind directs”. With this in mind, Thompson goes on to question the idea that the only “political act”

that women are capable in the eighteenth-century novel is resistance. She pits women's possible resistance to patriarchy against their actual compliance with it, but for her, that does not mean that the women of the domestic novel are not "free": "...my book claims the free or ingenuous practice of compliance, rather than the entity we presently call the abstract individual, as the standard against which the eighteenth-century domestic novel represents women's political difference" (9). She goes on to analyze specific sentimental texts throughout the rest of her book, including Richardson's *Pamela*, and the impact of both Lockean theory and Astell's feminist physiology. Thompson's main focus is on the role of the wife in the domestic novel and her particular compliance or resistance of patriarchal power. She cites theorists from Hume to Foucault to Derrida, all of whom pad her argument.

With these recent analyses of the British sentimental, we must also look to scholar John Mullan and specifically his book *Sentiment and Sociability*. In his second chapter, "Richardson: Sentiment and the Construction of Femininity," Mullan argues that Richardson's construction of femininity is completely reliant on virtue as chastity, a point which seems to loom over the genre of sentiment as a whole. As Richardson created the genre, Mullan definitely has a point. Mullan notes Richardson's contribution to the rise of the novel: "...Richardson made what we now call the novel respectable. The fixation of his texts upon virtue...made plausible the deliverance of narrative fiction from the category of 'romance'..." (58). However, Mullan also notes that Richardson constructed an ideology of femininity which pigeonholes and vilifies women: "Richardson mythologizes femininity...he isolates virginity as its essential representation" (67). In order to analyze sentimental fiction, we must talk about Richardson's contribution

because it is precisely the structure which he created that women writers used to subvert his close-minded ideas about femininity.

Scholars have primarily focused on either the British or American tradition of sentimental fiction, leaving the transatlantic conversation of the two traditions by the wayside. Siân Silyn Roberts particularly looks at the relationship between the British novel and the American, claiming that the citizens of the early republic were fascinated by the British gothic in particular. Here, I must note that Roberts specifically discounts the existence of the American sentimental novel. For Roberts, the sentimental is a strictly British phenomenon, a claim in direct opposition to that of Davidson and Baym. Roberts's concern is the American gothic, an idea transplanted to the early republic from the British genre. She explores this genre through her analysis of *Julia and the Illuminated Baron* along with an in-depth study of John Locke's theory of individualism. I believe that Roberts's stance on the importance of the gothic to the American novel is spot on, but I disagree with her that the American sentimental novel does not exist. I also disagree with the claims of Davidson and Baym that the sentimental is a strictly American phenomenon. It is rather a transatlantic phenomenon, fueled by the gothic and the anxieties associated with the genre.

While all of these scholars make compelling arguments and tackle the sentimental from various perspectives, few of them deal specifically with the sentimental heroine, and she is the subject of this thesis. From the sentimental novel's origins in England in the 1740s to its heyday in the early republic in the early 1800s, the women writing this genre emphasized the story of the young woman entering the world and eventually finding love. While their male predecessors required the sentimental heroine to be completely virtuous

in body and mind, female authors of the sentimental like Frances Burney, Jane Austen, Sally Sayward Wood, and Hannah Webster Foster complicated this idea. Throughout the following chapters, I will explore the differences in the sentimental heroine across time and distance.

In Chapter 1, I compare Burney's titular heroine in *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* with Jane Austen's neo-sentimental heroine Catherine Moreland from *Northanger Abbey*. These two heroines are opposites as Evelina exemplifies the stereotypical sentimental heroine and Catherine toes the line between sentimental and satirical in her artlessness. This chapter delves into the specific ways in which women writers of the British sentimental employ the tropes put in place by male authors to subvert the patriarchal standards that are almost synonymous with the early sentimental. My key focus is on the concept of virtue and how that plays into the role of the sentimental heroine—does it put the sentimental heroine on a pedestal or does it give her agency? I tie in research from Joanne Cutting-Gray, Susan Greenfield, Martha Koehler, Hina Nazar, Julie Shaffer, Melissa Sodeman, Patricia Meyer Spacks, Helen Thompson, and Jodi Wyett to strengthen my own claim that the female authored British sentimental heroine subverts the standard set by male authors. Though she seems angelic, the female authored British heroine's artlessness pulls her into the realm of reality. This specific combination of angelic and artless dispositions redefines feminine virtue to give the British sentimental heroine an agency and independence that men like Rousseau and Richardson kept from their heroines.

In Chapter 2, I focus on the American sentimental heroine. I compare the popular titular heroine of Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette or, The History of Eliza*

Wharton with the obscure heroine of Sally Sayward Wood's *Julia and the Illuminated Baron*. These two heroines are opposites in that one is the stereotypical, virtuous heroine (Julia) and the other ends the novel as a fallen woman (Eliza). Again, I analyze the role of virtue in the development of each character, but in this chapter, I also analyze the concept of vice in opposition to virtue. How does this dichotomy affect the role of the heroine? Must she overcome vice to be a heroine? Can she be a heroine even after having succumbed to vice? To answer these questions, I pull from Cathy Davidson, Gareth Evans, Klaus Hansen, Siân Silyn Roberts, William Scheik, Abram Van Engen, and David Waldstreicher. In particular, I answer the question of why the American authors grapple with the binary of vice and virtue where the British tend to turn their cheeks to this struggle.

I intend to fill the gap in scholarship on the transatlantic sentimental heroine. Few scholars have looked at the relationship between the American and British sentimental tradition, and even fewer have looked solely at the importance of the heroines of the genre. Through their various adaptations of the sentimental heroine, women writers of both the British and American sentimental subvert the patriarchal standards originally ascribed to the genre and redefine femininity for the middle-class young woman. By analyzing the texts of Austen, Burney, Foster, and Wood, I intend to flesh out this new definition of femininity as posed by the women authored sentimental heroine and her stance as a feminist icon for the age.

Chapter 1 | Angelic and Artless: Feminine Ideologies in *Evelina* and *Northanger Abbey*

The sentimental genre grew popular in the mid to late eighteenth century, so by the Regency and Romantic eras, the genre's style was well known, if frequently seen as low art. This specific style focuses on the evocation of extreme emotion, both from the characters and the readers, to privilege morality and virtue. Melissa Sodeman asserts that sentimental novels were "...long decried for their improbable plots and over-the-top feeling..." (3). Yet the sentimental novel laid the foundation for the novel today. While the original popular authors of this genre were male, by the late 1700s women had taken control of the sentimental scene as the stories being told were primarily about women and their reality. Women began writing sentimental novels because, while the genre focused on women both as characters and readers, the men telling these stories could not accurately or realistically describe the plights of women. My concern is with these women's specific construction of the sentimental heroine as the embodiment of a late-enlightenment conception of femininity. To begin to see how women-authored sentimental heroines redefined or reconstructed femininity in this time, we must first look at the construction of femininity set forth by the "father" of sentimental fiction, Samuel Richardson.

The sentimental novel owes most of its credit—and structure—to author Samuel Richardson. Richardson pioneered the genre with his novels, most notably *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, which Hina Nazar notes as "...the novel that began the entire trend of sentimental fiction" (12). In fact, this trend of naming the novels after their heroines stems from Richardson. Richardson laid out the structure of the sentimental, including the

characterization of the sentimental heroine. This characterization defined femininity in an era that saw an increase in social anxiety about the roles of women. In his book, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*, John Mullan writes on Richardson's "construction of femininity" as he terms it. According to Mullan, Richardson's definition of femininity relies solely on feminine virtue, that is female virginity:

Richardson mythologizes femininity—and, like many male writers before and since, he isolates virginity as its essential representation... Though his attitudes to the roles and prerogatives of women may have been more liberal than those of some men of his age, Richardson does not provide, in his novels, any actual analysis of the condition of women in eighteenth-century society... (67-68)

In essence, Richardson projected a hugely patriarchal value of feminine chastity onto his heroines, despite his countless plotlines that introduce men who endeavor to seduce and corrupt these young women. This particular construction of femininity as equivalent to chastity practically defines the sentimental heroine from Richardson's incarnation of her until the end of the sentimental period of writing. In any event, virtue becomes the sentimental heroine's defining trait, whether she is authored by a man or a woman. Hanne Blank's comprehensive analysis of virginity, *Virgin: The Untouched History*, attempts to explain how this specific characterization of virtue as feminine chastity came to be. First, she acknowledges that as humans,

...we often believe that virginity tells us something about a person's morality, character, and spirituality. We claim that virginity is tangible, part of the physical body, just like a beautiful face or a powerful muscle, but just as we acknowledge

inner strength and beauty that cannot be seen with the eye, we also accept that virginity transcends mere flesh. (6)

This tension between tangible and abstract virtue/virginity is exactly what sentimental fiction grapples with. The problem which feminist scholars find with how sentimental fiction deals with this tension is in the equation of virginity with femininity. Blank goes on to detail the patriarchal construct of virtue as feminine: "...virginity has never mattered in regard to the way men are valued, or whether they were considered fit to marry or, indeed, to be permitted to survive" (10). This point succinctly highlights the purpose of feminine virtue/virginity in sentimental fiction. As we will come to see, women who maintain their virginity are permitted to live while, quite often, women who express sexual freedom are condemned to death. Indeed, the sentimental heroine—as a heroine—must either maintain virginity or die with the loss of it.

To emphasize the struggle between tangible and abstract virtue/virginity, authors typically followed a specific characterization of her. The sentimental heroine was, in some way or another, orphaned and of an obscure lineage. In any instance, whatever parental figures she has are not conventional either in their person or their actions. She is a conventional beauty, often exceedingly so. The sentimental heroine more often than not turns the head of every man in a room. She is traditionally "ladylike", meaning she is well-mannered and accomplished. She draws, sews, plays music, and is learned in the classics, as much as was respectable for any young woman, anyway. The sentimental heroine is, by definition, sentimental. She places her heart and morals above all else, and because her heart—and therefore emotions—are pure, her morals rarely falter. In fact, the sentimental heroine is often referred to as angelic for her purity in every manner. Patricia

Meyer Spacks notes in her chapter “The Novel of Sentiment,” that the sentimental heroine must possess “the requisite moral equipment of...sympathy and willingness to express it in action” (146). Not only must a sentimental heroine’s heart, mind, and body be pure, she must also possess compassion in thought and deed. In addition to all of this, the sentimental heroine has a strong regard and reverence for patriarchal authority. She is dutiful to her father figure and his rules, and in exchange for this loyalty—as well as her adherence to the societal standard of chastity—she is typically rewarded with a good marriage. As Helen Thompson posits in the introduction to her book *Ingenuous Subjection: Compliance and Power in the Eighteenth-Century Domestic Novel*, the sentimental novel “...works with a construction of femininity—or, to make a critical distinction, a construction of daughters and wives—that would ratify the natural power of fathers and husbands” (4). In fact, Thompson claims that Burney uses this exact construction of femininity in her work *Evelina*, a point which I intend to disprove.

This construction of femininity appears in works written by both men and women; however, I argue that women use the traits inherent to Richardsonian femininity to undermine the narrow view of sentimental femininity. Rather than being used as a means to put the virginal young woman on a pedestal, these traits culminate to give the sentimental heroine an air of agency denied by male authors. Richardson’s *Clarissa* and *Pamela* lead virtuous lives and possess all of the traits outlined above, but their lives are completely in the hands of the men around them. Richardson puts no stock in their ability to make decisions for themselves, despite endowing them with angelic purity of heart and body, a trait which implies that they are more than capable of making good decisions. For Richardson, ideal femininity can only be attained through virginity—the pure body—but

his female successors repurpose femininity to privilege the pure mind over the pure body. This is precisely what authors like Burney and Austen push back against in their characterization of the heroine. I argue that women authors, especially Burney and Austen, define femininity through the virtuous mind and use the virtuous body as a reflection of the heroine's mental and spiritual purity.

Evelina: An Angel with Agency

In her 1778 novel *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Introduction to the World*, Frances Burney tells the story of an orphaned young woman who, though raised in the country, is introduced to London society. Through many twists, turns, miscommunications, and social faux pas, Evelina finds the love of her life, Lord Orville, and eventually marries this equally pure young man. The novel's first introduction of Evelina really does not refer to her at all. Told in epistolary form, the first six letters are exchanged between Evelina's guardian, a country clergyman by the name of Reverend Arthur Villars, and his friend Lady Howard. They convey the story of Evelina's ill-fated mother and her absent father and allude to her "vulgar" maternal grandmother, Madame Duval. Evelina herself is only referred to as "the child" throughout these letters and is described before her name is ever revealed to the reader. Lady Howard writes to

Reverend Villars:

You desire my opinion of her. She is a little angel! ... Her face and person answer my most refined ideas of complete beauty: and this, though a subject of praise less important to you, or to me, than any other, is yet so striking, it is not possible to pass it unnoticed. Had I not known from whom she received her education, I should, at first sight of so perfect a face, have been in pain for her understanding;

since it has been long and justly remarked, that folly has ever sought alliance with beauty. She has the same gentleness in her manners, the same natural grace in her motions, that I formerly admired in her mother. Her character seems truly ingenuous and simple; and, at the same time that her nature has blessed her with an excellent understanding, and great quickness of parts, she has a certain air of inexperience and innocency that is extremely interesting. (22-23)

This description of Evelina immediately places her in the category of the sentimental heroine. Before we even meet the character Evelina, we are told that she is an angel, a term attached her very often throughout the novel, and a connotation that will be discussed at greater length further in the chapter. Her beauty is unparalleled, she has natural grace and poise, and she is “truly ingenuous”—Evelina is pure in every way imaginable. Yet, Lady Howard makes a point to distinguish Evelina’s intelligence as well, a trait for which sentimental heroines are not known. This specific diversion from the standard of the sentimental heroine begins Burney’s reconstruction of femininity through her characterization of Evelina.

In addition to her stereotypical traits as a sentimental heroine, Evelina is often termed “artless”—meaning she has a pure and naïve disposition—especially by the men in her life. In total, she is labeled artless no fewer than six times throughout the novel, yet only by the men who mean and do her no harm. Reverend Villars refers to Evelina in this way three times, but the most telling of these is in his letter to Lady Howard, consenting to Evelina’s trip to visit at Howard Grove: “...I send her to you, innocent as an angel, and artless as purity itself...” (22). Here, Reverend Villars draws a connection between Evelina’s qualities of being artless and angelic, two words which seem to define her very

being. In fact, other characters call Evelina an angel or angelic around sixteen times. By using these two terms so often in reference to Evelina, Burney further implies Evelina's stance as a sentimental heroine in line with Richardson's Pamela—called an angel around twelve times—and Clarissa—called an angel some 170 times. In her paper, "Faultless Monsters' and Monstrous Egos: The Disruption of Model Selves in Frances Burney's *Evelina*," Martha J. Koehler states:

Although Richardson's heroine is, like Evelina, beset by errors and misconstructions (including some of her own, in which she tends to view others too generously), her moral scheme is far from being presented in terms of flawed or disruptive origins. Her values seem to have emerged full-blown from a past idealized by the novel...The important difference from *Evelina* is that Clarissa as paragon serves an idealizing, abstracting function—an *exception* to the confusions around her—resisted by Burney's sense of the forces of error as ineradicable and universal (allowing of no exceptions, no legitimate paragons) in her approach to character and moral instruction. (21)

In other words, Burney uses Evelina to contrast Richardson's portrayal of the sentimental heroine, which can best be seen in her descriptions of Evelina as angelic and artless. As previously mentioned, Richardson terms his heroines angels in order to place themselves and their virginity on pedestals; Burney, however, describes Evelina as angelic and artless to solidify her capacity for agency. Because Evelina is so morally rich, she has the ability to move more freely than other women; she develops her own decision-making skills, which are amplified by her extreme sense of compassion and purity. Julie Shaffer solidifies this point in her article, "Not Subordinate: Empowering Women in the

Marriage-Plot—The Novels of Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen”:

“Evelina is hardly a perfect heroine; there is much she needs to learn. Yet there is much that she knows on her own, that she cannot be taught, especially by her male mentors” (61). It is when Evelina departs from Reverend Villars advice that she gains agency as well as a more solid moral ground, as we see below.

Evelina’s opportunities for agency come specifically from her obscure heritage. From the beginning, we as the reader know that she comes from noble blood, but her dastardly father does not claim her, and thus she is raised by the Reverend Villars. She goes by the surname “Anville,” and as Susan Greenfield notes in her chapter on Evelina, it is this exact namelessness that allows for Evelina’s independence:

Since the plot is based on the trials Evelina experiences in her nameless state, its design dictates that when she meets her father, becomes somebody, and is married, her authorship will end... Were she named, Evelina would be spoken for; because she is nameless, she has both the occasion and the need to speak for herself. (41)

Evelina’s status as orphan gives her the unique experience of agency. Though she defers to Reverend Villars opinion often, her agency is still guaranteed as she spends the majority of the novel outside of his presence.

We see Evelina’s angelic qualities most through her acts of agency. Her first true act of agency is also her most pure. While at the Branghton’s abode one afternoon, Evelina saves one Mr. Macartney—who we later find out is her half-brother—from an attempt at suicide. In describing the situation, Evelina states that “...guided by the impulse of my apprehensions...I followed him...” (183). She later implores Mr.

Macartney “have mercy” on himself and takes the pistols with which he intended to end his life away. Evelina, guided by her impeccable moral compass, saves this man’s life while also committing her first true act of agency. She does not seek the advice of anyone else on how to handle this situation, rather she acts of her own accord.

These angelic acts of agency do not begin Evelina’s story. In her first letter to Reverend Villars, Evelina demonstrates her dependence on male authority. She writes to ask her guardian if she may accompany the Mirvans and Lady Howard to London, yet the predominant tone of the letter is one of bashfulness and obedience. She writes, “...I am desired to make a request to you...yet I hardly know how to go on; a petition implies a want,—and have you left me one? No, indeed” (25). This “petition,” or lack thereof, reveals Evelina’s complete reverence for and obedience to Rev. Villars, a theme that carries on throughout the novel. This extreme respect for male authority very firmly places Evelina in the sentimental heroine paradigm. Her virtue in part comes from this respect and deference to patriarchy. Or that is what Burney would have us think initially, a point which Joanne Cutting-Gray addresses in her article, “Writing Innocence: Fanny Burney’s *Evelina*”. Cutting-Gray notes that Burney herself defines Evelina as the “offspring of Nature in her simplest attire,” which she claims means Evelina is a paragon of innocence. She goes on to describe Evelina’s entrance into the world:

Her private innocence is disrupted when she sallies forth into a disjunctive, public world where, affronted by male assertiveness, she, as female, becomes a problem to herself. Unless one hears in Evelina’s discourse a misguided effort to maintain the ‘simplest attire’ of innocence, one will see only female compliancy. (43)

I believe this point succinctly illustrates Burney's intention with her characterization of Evelina's interactions with patriarchy. As a sentimental heroine—or even as a woman in modern society—Evelina must defer to patriarchal authority more often than not, but that does not mean that she is compliant.

Her interactions with the men in the novel prove this point. While she frequently asks Rev. Villars for his advice and opinions on her adventures—and often defers to her perceived notions of how he would have her conduct herself—she ultimately makes her own decisions. It is worth noting that Evelina's decisiveness is a process; she begins the novel living only through Rev. Villars eyes, but gradually finds her own voice, agency, and mind. In Volume I, Letter XXII, Evelina concludes with the following self-deprecation: "I greatly fear you will find me, not that I am out of the reach of your assisting prudence, more weak and imperfect than you could have expected" (105). This is just one example of many from the first volume which illustrates Evelina's desire to impress and live by her surrogate father's example. However, we must consider the epistolary form of the novel suggests. Evelina may be writing Reverend Villars to ask his opinion on her circumstances, but ultimately her decisions are her own as he is not there to force her to act as he would wish. By the third volume, Evelina, though still asking for Rev. Villars advice, learns to make her own decisions and judgments, especially in regard to Lord Orville, her love match. Despite Rev. Villars demands that Evelina "quit" (309) Lord Orville—and her attempts to do just that—Evelina realizes that her previous notions of Lord Orville's character, as seen in a letter supposedly penned by him, are mistaken. After this, she confides in Lord Orville without consulting her guardian at all. This shift from acting on Reverend Villars's wishes to her own illustrates Evelina's ability to think

critically and decisively. She may go from one male authority in Reverend Villars to another in Lord Orville, but her relationship with Orville has a more equal footing than her relationship with Reverend Villars as she merely confides her thoughts and feelings to Lord Orville rather than seeking his guidance in her actions.

Burney spends much of *Evelina* defining femininity for her readers. Shaffer contends that sentimental novels followed a specific ideology of femininity "...which derives from a long tradition of seeing women as so many Eves needing the mediation of men to guide them to morality, or at least to protect them from their own 'natural,' innate tendency toward fallibility" (55). I, like Shaffer, believe that this ideology is exactly what authors like Burney were writing against. Shaffer notes, "Where this ideology locates women's value is clearly *not* in their innate *morality*; lacking that trait, the most valuable traits a woman could be seen as having were those that kept their asocial, amoral tendencies under rein: modesty, self-effacement, and tractability" (55). While Burney attributes these traits to *Evelina*, she also establishes an ideology of femininity outside of this narrow scope. Reverend Villars states in Volume I, Letter XVIII—in reference to *Evelina*'s actions in saving Mr. Macartney— "Though gentleness and modesty are the peculiar attributes of [*Evelina*'s] sex, yet fortitude and firmness, when occasion demands them, are virtues as noble and as becoming in women as in men" (218). Though he says this in regard to a drastic situation, Reverend Villars acknowledges that agency has a place in the realm of femininity, and because this comes from her guardian, *Evelina* can now recognize this agency in herself. Along with this agency, Burney's sentimental heroine must also exhibit the traditional trait of delicacy. Spacks notes in her article "Privacy, Dissimulation, and Propriety: Frances Burney and Jane Austen," that

“Delicacy, the basis of the good manners derived from ‘sympathy,’ is an intuitive quality marking the genuine lady” (523). Delicacy by this definition is a distinctly feminine quality and one which enhances the heroine’s independence. For Burney, women should be “gentle and amiable” (289), pure of mind and heart, while also exhibiting independence over their own actions, and she strongly demonstrates this new ideology of femininity through her heroine Evelina.

In establishing this ideology, Burney also posits other women who do not fall into her standard of proper femininity. In Volume I, Evelina interacts with female relations, her grandmother Madame Duval and her cousins Miss Polly and Miss Branghton, all of whom embody traits quite the opposite from Evelina’s own disposition. Burney first introduces the character of Madame Duval in the opening lines of the novel, and indeed, it is Madame Duval who spurs the action of the novel, for a time anyway. In fact, Burney introduces Madame Duval before she does the heroine. Lady Howard begins the novel with a disdainful description of Madame Duval:

I have just received a letter from Madame Duval; she is totally at a loss in what manner to behave; she seems desirous to repair the wrongs she has done, yet wishes the world to believe her blameless...Her letter is violent, sometimes abusive, and that of *you!*—*you*, to whom she is under obligations which are greater even than her faults, but to whose advice she wickedly imputes all the sufferings of her much-injured daughter, the late Lady Belmont (13)

Lady Howard communicates quite a bit about Madame Duval’s character in these few sentences. According to this initial depiction, Madame Duval is entitled, volatile, and selfish. Lady Howard goes on to describe Madame Duval in the conclusion of this letter

as "...vulgar and illiterate..." to further back up these previous claims. In the following letter from Rev. Villars in response to Lady Howard, he concurs with these descriptions, stating, "Madame Duval is by no means a proper companion or guardian for a young woman: she is at once uneducated and unprincipled; ungentle in her temper, and unamiable in her manners" (15). Considering both of these descriptions, Madame Duval is the antithesis of the sentimental heroine and thus a truly feminine woman. She has no gentleness, no grace, no likable qualities. In essence, despite her relation to Evelina, Madame Duval is unlike Evelina in every way.

Burney also illustrates the juxtaposition of desirable and undesirable femininity in Evelina's damsel in distress moments, specifically in Volume II, Letter XXI. In this scene, Evelina gets separated from her party and, catcalled and accosted by men from all sides, seeks refuge in the company of two women who, through their mockery of Evelina, have come to be recognized as prostitutes. Burney emphasizes Evelina's gentle femininity as it opposes the vulgar and brazen attitudes of these women:

...imagine, my dear Sir, how I must be confounded, when I observed, that every other word I spoke produced a loud laugh! However, I will not dwell upon a conversation, which soon, to my inexpressible horror, convinced me I had sought protection from insult, of those who were themselves most likely to offer it! (234)

As we know Evelina, we can rest assured that, even in her least ladylike moments, she would not laugh at a young woman seeking protection from handsy passersby. These women are worldly and experienced, yet cruel and unrefined; essentially, the polar opposite of Evelina.

Burney purposefully situates opposing examples of femininity in an attempt to solidify Evelina's ideal femininity. In Volume II, Letter XXX, Evelina herself defines femininity when she describes Mrs. Selwyn:

Mrs. Selwyn is very kind and attentive to me. She is extremely clever; her understanding, indeed, may be called *masculine*; but, unfortunately, her manners deserve the same epithet; for in studying to acquire the knowledge of the other sex, she has lost all the softness of her own...I have never been personally hurt at her want of gentleness; a virtue which, nevertheless, seems so essential a part of the female character... (269)

According to Evelina, women should be soft and gentle as well as kind and clever. Here, I must note that Mrs. Selwyn may be seen as masculine because she is a woman who stands up for herself and other women. She does not back down from men when they condescend to her, as seen in her response to the definitions of femininity set forth by Lord Merton and Mr. Coverley. According to these men, women should be seen and not heard, to which Mrs. Selwyn replies, "It has always been agreed...that no man ought to be connected with a woman whose understanding is superior to his own. Now I very much fear, that to accommodate all this good company, according to such a rule, would be utterly impracticable, unless we should chuse subjects from Swift's hospital of idiots" (362). While this remark definitely falls outside of the realm of Evelina's femininity, Burney includes it as a means of contrasting two types of women: Madame Duval and Mrs. Selwyn. While neither woman seems to be the "prudent and sensible female" by whom Rev. Villars wishes to see Evelina influenced, one woman is decidedly more appropriate than the other. Madame Duval, while a woman of her own means, does not

have an ounce of propriety or sense, a point which Evelina remarks upon to Rev. Villars: "...to me, it is very strange, that a woman, who is the uncontrolled mistress of her time, fortune, and actions, should chuse to expose herself voluntarily to the rudeness of a man who is openly determined to make her his sport" (74). Because of Madame Duval's misuse of her independence, she cannot have any qualities of proper femininity. However, because Mrs. Selwyn uses her independence to shut down rude men, however harshly, Burney bestows her with qualities like kindness and cleverness. By contrasting these two women, Burney allows Evelina's femininity to adopt a more independent slant. She possesses all the qualities of the stereotypical sentimental heroine, but she also has the added advantage of agency and a voice of her own. The characters of Madame Duval and Mrs. Selwyn help Burney establish her own ideology of femininity by illustrating what proper femininity is *not*.

Burney's character Evelina is a direct contrast to the Richardsonian heroines of *Clarissa* and *Pamela*. Burney purposefully employs the very tenets of Richardson's construction of femininity to advocate for a proto-feminism which focuses on female agency via their purity of both mind and body. Burney establishes Evelina as a stereotypical sentimental heroine, specifically through her characterization of Evelina as both angelic and artless, but she uses this characterization to give Evelina more freedom in her society and her life. Through this strategy, she redefines femininity as encompassing feminine agency as well as angelic and artless dispositions, and it is this strategy which Jane Austen uses in her novel *Northanger Abbey*.

***Northanger Abbey*: Jane Austen's Neo-Sentimental Heroine**

When it comes to Jane Austen and the sentimental novel, scholars are divided. Though Austen employs many of the tropes of sentimental fiction, many scholars argue that Austen, and specifically her novel *Northanger Abbey*, is decidedly satirical of sentimental fiction rather than a practitioner of it. While Austen's novel definitely has elements of satire, I argue that she directs any elements of satire at the gothic genre in an attempt to privilege the sentimental novel. In fact, she spends much of her narrator's time praising the sentimental novel:

‘It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;’ or in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. (32)

Austen incorporates sentimental style, not only because of her admiration of Richardson and his works, but also to portray an ideology of femininity which subverts the strict and static femininity set forth by her male predecessors. As Nazar points out, “...the biographical testimony of Austen's brother and nephew...identifies Richardson as her favorite novelist and as the novelist from whom she learnt the art of rendering character” (116). We have proof that Austen enjoyed Richardson's works, yet her writings in and of themselves consistently subvert how Richardson and his contemporaries treated women. To break down Austen's stance a sentimental author and her characterization of the sentimental heroine, I will first identify how she specifically uses sentimental conventions in the whole of *Northanger Abbey* before fully diving into the ideology of femininity Austen privileges in her construction of Catherine Morland.

To begin situating *Northanger Abbey* in the sentimental conversation, we must first look at its heroine, Catherine Morland. Austen specifically uses Richardsonian tropes of the sentimental heroine: the orphaned heroine, an emphasis on seduction and arranged marriage, excessive emotion (especially in women), and patriarchal authority and power. I argue that these conventions situate *Northanger Abbey* in the category of sentimental fiction while also highlighting Catherine Morland's undeniable similarities to the sentimental heroine. To begin with, Austen gives readers a sentimental heroine, Catherine Morland, who though not orphaned by the death of her parents, is metaphorically orphaned by the ignorance of her parents and the carelessness of the guardians to whom her parents entrust her. In chapter two, Austen describes the manner with which Catherine's mother sends her away: "...the maternal anxiety of Mrs. Morland will be naturally supposed to be most severe...but Mrs. Morland knew so little of lords and baronets, that she entertained no notion of their general mischievousness, and was wholly unsuspecting of danger to her daughter from their machinations" (12). Mrs. Morland does not have even the slightest inkling that something terrible could happen to her daughter. While some may discount this as Mrs. Morland being optimistic and—to an extent—artless, her ignorance of the reality of scandal that abounds in Bath alone illustrates her neglect as a parent. Austen further implies this neglect with her description of Mr. Morland: "Her father, instead of giving her an unlimited order on his banker...gave her only ten guineas, and promised her more when she wanted it" (13). Again, this does not necessarily signify a father who does not care, but rather one who has "checked out", as it were. Even beyond these initial descriptions, Mr. and Mrs. Morland do not make another appearance until much later in the novel, where they again

act as inattentive parents. Catherine's despondency at coming home and James's broken engagement only inspire flippant condolences from Mrs. Morland, as she says "... Well, we must live and learn..." (221). In Austen's world, a neglectful parent is about as good as a dead parent. This equation of the two situates Catherine as a form of an orphan which furthers her status as a sentimental heroine, a subject to be further explored later.

In line with this convention of the orphaned heroine are those of seduction and arranged marriage, which ties in the heroine's defining trait of virtue/virginity. These two conventions are typically forced on the heroine, and as a woman of virtue and morals, she ultimately overcomes both conflicts and is rewarded with the man she desires. Julie Shaffer notes that many feminist critics of the marriage-plot take issue with the heroine's inability to find true autonomy. She states:

By consistently concluding with the heroine's wedding—by presenting marriage to the male protagonist as the virtuous heroine's best reward—such novels compromise their challenge to conventional views of proper femininity both by suppressing the heroine's movement toward autonomy under the plot of her movement toward relationality, and by reinscribing even refreshingly unconventional female characters into the conventional role of subordination for women, the role of wife. (51)

Shaffer, and the feminist critics of whom she speaks, is not wrong; however—and Shaffer goes on to argue just this point—this claim leaves out historical context. For the sentimental heroine, a good marriage must be the end goal, not because Richardson prescribes this, but because society does. In order for the heroine to prove herself worthy of a good marriage, she must work past possible instances of seduction, and it is this

element with which Austen plays, though not strictly with Catherine. Isabella Thorpe—a boy crazy flirt—deals with the seduction conflict, and because she succumbs to it, she ultimately loses the man she hoped to marry. Austen carries over the seduction plot with John Thorpe’s attempts to marry Catherine. While he does not truly seduce her, Thorpe seeks to marry Catherine because he believes her to have a fortune. However, he fills the role of villain, the typical seducer in the sentimental genre.

In true sentimental fashion, Austen portrays her heroine as having strong emotions and a fancy for sentiment. In her article “Jane Austen and the Last Laugh: Parody in *Northanger Abbey*,” Kyriana Lynch points out that these extreme emotions are typically marked with physical reactions: “Two of the distinguishing features of sensibility are physical: tears and blushing” (74). Though Catherine has few instances of excessive tears, Austen still plays up the physical attributes of sensibility in Catherine’s growth from a naïve country girl to a polite and self-aware young woman. Upon reflection, Catherine blushes a total of seventeen times throughout the novel, proving her penchant for the sentimental’s emotions.

Catherine’s emotional responses paired with her enchantment with novels—specifically her fancy for the gothic—gives readers the idea that Catherine is not as sensible as Austen may initially have them believe. In chapter twenty, Mr. Tilney plays with Catherine’s obsession with novels by telling her stories about *Northanger Abbey* and how frightful her stay there could be, teasing her by saying, “And are you prepared to encounter all the horrors that a building such as ‘what one reads about’ may produce?” (148). He describes to her the apprehension with which she may find a locked trunk in her quarters, and when she does indeed find this trunk, all of her romanticized notions of

what may be inside are dashed as the trunk holds only some linens. Though she is let down by her active imagination, Catherine persists as a woman who enjoys novels without shame.

Austen further blurs the line between the sentimental and its satire with her portrayals of patriarchal power. The sentimental novel focuses on the power of the husband over the wife, for better or worse as the wedding vows go. As *Northanger Abbey* definitely falls into the “courtship” category of the genre, Austen takes the husband/wife dynamic and translates it to the courtship dynamic. Heroine Catherine must navigate courtship with two men, John Thorpe and Henry Tilney. Though Mr. Tilney remarks that in terms of courtship—and thus matrimony—“...man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal,” Catherine learns from both men that as a woman, she has very little power of her own (71). Catherine’s power as a woman—even when limited to that of refusal—does little good to establish her independence from the whims of the men in her life. Shaffer points out that *Northanger Abbey* follows the “lover-mentor convention” whereby the heroine, ignorant of the ways of the real world—typically because of her preoccupation with reading novels—learns to “relinquish the illusions she has formed” (53). She notes, though, that Austen often uses this convention subversively and “...challenges [the lover-mentor convention] dialogically in ways that demonstrate the limitations of males’ access to truth and morality...thereby question[ing] males’ right to power and domination over women...” (53). Using this convention, Austen highlights the imbalance of power in Catherine’s relationships with men.

Austen’s portrayal of power dynamics plays up her satire of the gothic. As a genre born out of the sentimental, the gothic plays an important role in establishing *Northanger*

Abbey as a product and practitioner of sentimental fiction. Thorpe himself acts as antagonist to *Northanger Abbey*'s heroine, scheming for her hand in marriage and essentially kidnapping her, if only for an afternoon. His sense of entitlement and pride also paint him as the villain, as these qualities go against the sentimental value of virtue. As a sentimental villain, his role as a man of questionable morals and his ignorance of Catherine's desires lend his character to that of a gothic villain as well. Beyond the villainous Thorpe, Austen nods to gothic architecture, while simultaneously keeping the satisfaction of such dramatics from the reader:

...every bend in the road was expected with solemn awe to afford a glimpse of its massy walls of grey stone, rising amidst a grove of ancient oaks, with the last beams of the sun playing in beautiful splendor on its high Gothic windows. But so low did the building stand, that she found herself passing through the great gates of the lodge into the very grounds of Northanger, without having discerned even an antique chimney (151)

Austen toys with the reader through Catherine's romantic sensibilities, and though she specifically withholds the gothic aesthetic from the reader, Catherine's willingness to look only at the aesthetic leaves her open to a setting which eventually leaves her defenseless and alone. Smith notes, "...sentimental fiction of the period prior to the appearance of Radcliffe's works often contained gothic elements—indeed some critics seem to have a 'greater sensitivity' to distinctions between the gothic and the sentimental than probably existed at the time" (39). In pointing out this distinction between the gothic and the gothic elements common in sentimental fiction, Smith highlights the need for these gothic elements. By creating a gothic scene—even in imagination rather than fact—

Austen creates the plot device which ultimately leads Catherine to her greatest growth, furthering Catherine's role as neo-sentimental heroine.

All of these conventions converge to firmly place *Northanger Abbey* in the genre of sentimentalism. So why do scholars continue to claim that the novel is satire of the genre? I believe they do so for two reasons: they look down on the genre as much as high society in Regency England did, and they also misread Austen's tongue-in-cheek commentary of the gothic genre as satire of sentiment. While many of her instances of sentimental conventions seem to poke fun at the genre, they rather create a subgenre of the sentimental, a neo-sentimental as it were, while also satirizing the gothic. Here I must note that the sentimental gave rise to the gothic, so the use of sentimental conventions to comment on the gothic works to Austen's advantage. Leo Braudy defines the split between the genres as thus: "The induction through the daylight public world to the private world of darkness and emotion beyond is the legacy of the sentimental novel to the gothic—the pathway to a world without the frame of society or providence to depend on" (7). Catherine's expectations about General Tilney, completely based on her romantic notions of life through the lens of the gothic, are dashed when Mr. Tilney points out that they do indeed live in the real world where they have a frame of society. When Catherine all but accuses General Tilney of the murder of his wife, Mr. Tilney responds, "Could [atrocities] be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies and where roads and newspapers lay everything open?" (186). This speech indicts Catherine in her folly while also illustrating for the reader how unrealistic the gothic truly is. Austen further uses Catherine's character to parody the

gothic. Take, for instance, how Catherine—and the reader—meets the novel’s hero Henry Tilney. Before any thoughts of hero and heroine meeting, Austen states: “Neither robbers nor tempests befriended them, nor one lucky overturn to introduce them to the hero” (13). She makes a point to highlight that Mr. Tilney and Catherine do not meet in some unrealistic, dramatic fashion because that convention is entirely gothic, not sentimental. As with most sentimental novels written by women, Mr. Tilney and Catherine meet at a ball, a civilized and rather unpoetic place. Their meeting is altogether Austenian, yet because they meet within the first two chapters of the novel, they are set up in the sentimental fashion.

The Sentimental Heroine and Catherine Morland

Austen specifically creates Catherine Morland, a girl who, as previously mentioned, is as far from a sentimental heroine as a reader could imagine. She had a family who loved and cared for her, a “...thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour,...and strong features,” and to top it all off, she was a tomboy: “She was fond of all boys’ play, and greatly preferred cricket, not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush” (7). In short, Catherine Morland has little place in fiction as a heroine because she is neither beautiful nor feminine nor extraordinary. She is blissfully plain and ordinary, a girl whom her own parents describe as, “...almost pretty...” (9). Austen uses these differences to situate Catherine as a sentimental heroine in her own right: “To look *almost* pretty is an acquisition of higher delight to a girl who has been looking plain the first fifteen years of her life, than a beauty from her cradle can ever receive” (9). Because of Catherine’s lack of beauty, she also lacks the pride and vanity which tend to

accompany beauty. While many sentimental heroines meet with conflicts of vanity, Austen puts Catherine on a different pedestal, one where she cannot fall because of vain pride.

Despite the picture painted of Catherine in the first pages, Austen goes on to clarify her character for the reader:

...for the reader's more certain information, lest the following pages should otherwise fail of giving any idea of what her character is meant to be; that her heart was affectionate, her disposition cheerful and open, without conceit of affectation of any kind—her manners just removed from awkwardness and shyness of a girl; her person pleasing, and, when in good looks, pretty—and her mind about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is (12)

This chunk of a sentence gives the reader a clear sense of how Catherine is meant to be a new type of sentimental heroine, not a caricature of the typical sentimental heroine.

Catherine grew out of her awkward tomboy phase and into a young woman possessing most of the attributes a heroine needs. As a sentimental heroine, Catherine must be kind and goodhearted with at least a hint of beauty. We must note that Austen deliberately states that Catherine's manners are "just removed" from that awkward phase, and this point speaks to Catherine's behavior and growth throughout the novel.

Austen's main divergence from the sentimental heroine lies in her portrayal of Catherine as an imperfect heroine. In contrast to Catherine's imperfection, Shaffer defines the "perfect heroine convention" through Richardson's Pamela, a character Austen specifically works against: "Far from needing to be taught proper behaviors and

attitudes by a male protagonist or male guardian figure, Pamela is perfect from her story's beginning and in fact proves a necessary figure for the moral mentoring not only of her male protagonist...but also for his entire upper-class family" (55). Catherine does not live by this convention. A large portion of her maturity comes from her interactions with and guidance from Mr. Tilney; Catherine does not have the key characteristics of the "perfect heroine" until after she is guided to them by her fellow protagonist. Though Catherine possesses a majority of the elements of the sentimental heroine, she also lacks self-determination (as seen in her apathy towards her education), impeccable manners (as seen in her many faux pas throughout the novel), and awareness of herself and her surroundings (as seen in the many times she must extract herself from John Thorpe's attempts to "woo" her). In her chapter, "Judgment, Propriety, and the Critique of Sensibility: The 'Sentimental' Jane Austen," Hina Nazar points out that Richardson's Pamela—the most well-known of the sentimental heroines—is very self-aware: "[Pamela] spends much of her narrative struggling to become a more detached judge of her feelings and motives" (123). Catherine Morland spends very little time trying to become a "more detached judge of her feelings and motives". In fact, she spends much of her time living in a fiction. She initially removes herself from the opportunity to reflect on her motives and emotions, and she only takes the time to delve within when she sees how far up in the clouds her head has been. These major differences—and flaws of character—set her apart from the sentimental heroine and place Catherine as a neo-sentimental heroine, one whose trajectory focuses on growth and self-reflection.

Despite Austen's portrayal of Catherine as an imperfect heroine, she still employs many of the conventions of sentimental fiction in her characterization of Catherine. Much

like Burney's *Evelina*, Catherine lives up to the standards of femininity set forth in Richardson's novels. Catherine has an air of innocence which borders on naïve; she, like *Evelina*, is gentle and amiable, sometimes anyway; and she participates in the societal standards of delicacy and propriety. This naivete or artlessness is Catherine's most stereotypical sentimental quality. For Austen, naivete is the heroine's portrayal of virtue. Because of Catherine's disinterest in playing the courtship game, she can be rewarded with the man she desires. Catherine diverts from Burney's construction of femininity in her independence. Both *Evelina* and Catherine mature throughout their plotlines, but Catherine does not mature from indecisive to decisive, rather she matures from ignorant to worldly.

To further Catherine's stance as sentimental heroine, and thus virgin, Austen gives Catherine a foil in the character of Isabella Thorpe. Where Catherine is naïve and artless, Isabella is experienced and scheming. From their introduction, Austen portrays Isabella as a foil to Catherine. Mrs. Thorpe compliments her daughter as "the handsomest" of her children, which is much nicer than Mrs. Morland's "almost pretty" comment. Austen also immediately points out Isabella's experience: "Miss Thorpe, however, being four years older than Miss Morland, and at least four years better informed, had a very decided advantage in discussing such points [as dress, balls, flirtations, and quizzes]" (27). Though the experience to which Austen alludes here seems more or less innocent, it foreshadows Isabella's true nature and fate. Isabella schemes; she pursues a friendship with Catherine only after she finds out that Catherine is the sister of James Morland, Isabella's love interest. She ingrains herself into the young Morlands' lives in an attempt to marry into money, but when she discovers John's specific lack of

funds, she turns down the road of the coquette, leading one man on while seeking attention from another. Isabella begins a flirtation with Captain Tilney only for John to find out and break off the engagement. While Austen only alludes to this scandal in a letter from James to Catherine, she still uses Isabella's experience and "interest" in the courtship game privilege Catherine's artless and naïve approach to finding a husband. In doing so, Austen uses *Northanger Abbey* as positive reinforcement of virtue rewarded while keeping the cautionary tale of vice looming in the background.

With the inclusion of Isabella as foil, we—and Catherine—more clearly see Catherine's flaws, and we see this because *Northanger Abbey* was written by a woman. When authored by men, sentimental heroines rarely get the chance to see their flaws—or even have flaws—as clearly as Catherine does. Yet, Austen seeks to remove Catherine from the this type sentimental heroine even further by removing the trope of "reforming" the heroine, as Jodi L. Wyett puts it, "Though many eighteenth-century readers and modern scholars alike have focused on the means of *curing* the female Quixote, Austen's fiction, in particular, shifts the focus away from reforming the heroine" (262). While Catherine grows as a character, she does not change any inherent qualities. For Wyett, this entails Catherine's continuing fondness for reading novels, but I argue that Catherine only changes her unrefined manners and lack of tact. She maintains her kind heart, naïve demeanor, and easy-going attitude. By keeping Catherine's inherent qualities and lifelong hobbies, Austen further sets Catherine apart from the sentimental heroine, transforming her into the neo-sentimental heroine.

This portrayal of Catherine as a neo-sentimental heroine, one with flaws and room for growth, makes Catherine at her core a work of Austen's, a character with a foundation

in reality. As Patricia Meyer Spacks states in her chapter “The Novel of Sentiment,” “...it is necessary...to give up expectation of even approximate realism” (130). The sentimental novel does not seek to tell stories of realism in plot, but rather in the trials and tribulations of women; whereas, Austen seeks to tell stories based in reality both in plot and in the tensions which women faced. This specific veer from the sentimental solidifies Austen’s subgenre of neo-sentimentalism, and therefore Catherine’s place as a neo-sentimental heroine.

Throughout *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine’s virtue seems to be tied very loosely, if at all, to her virginity. She is a young woman of morals, but Austen shifts the focus from virginity as the representation of virtue to Catherine’s actions as a representation of her virtue. In doing so, Austen endows her heroine with decidedly more depth and agency than her male predecessors ever did. To prove this point, Catherine’s virtue must be tested, the final test being her reaction to being thrown out of Northanger Abbey. In this scene, Eleanor Tilney is tasked with “errand” of relaying the news to Catherine that she is no longer welcome in the Abbey and must leave early the next morning: “To-morrow morning is fixed for your leaving us, and not even the hour is left to your choice; the very carriage is ordered, and will be here at seven o’clock, and no servant will be offered you” (211). To this, Catherine asks, “Have I offended the General?” and while Eleanor believes that this could not be the case, she acknowledges that “He certainly is greatly, very greatly discomposed...His temper is not happy, and something has now occurred to ruffle it in an uncommon degree...” (211-212). As we come to find out, Catherine herself has done nothing to instigate this hostility; the General’s sudden urge to send Catherine home has only to do with his frustration at having found out that Catherine is not as rich

as he thought. Yet, even in this instant, Catherine handles herself with composure and compassion. Even after receiving this hard news, she worries more for her friend than herself: "It was with pain that Catherine could speak at all; and it was only for Eleanor's sake that she attempted it" (212). Here, she truly shows her virtue through her compassion. Even so, we must not forget that Catherine is the imperfect heroine. While she handles herself with grace under pressure, she still has more emotions than soft, gentle compassion. As she realizes that she will leave Northanger without saying goodbye to Mr. Tilney, Catherine also realizes "...the indignity with which she was treated..." which "...made her for a short time sensible only of resentment" (214). Austen humanizes Catherine, and thus adds another facet to her ideology of femininity; the heroine should be virtuous of heart and mind, but that does not mean that she cannot also feel other emotions, even the grittier ones. For Austen, femininity as developed in the neo-sentimental novel must be realistic and attainable.

Though Burney and Austen portray two vastly different heroines, both represent the agency which heroines like Richardson's *Clarissa* and *Pamela* lacked. These authors recognized that as the world around them changed, so too did the position of women in society. As writers of some of the most popular novels of the time, Austen and Burney strove to represent an ideology of femininity which defines virtue as purity of mind and body. Rather than use their platform to build strictly cautionary tales out of their protagonists, Burney and Austen write novels of virtue rewarded with independence and agency. In her specific ideology of femininity, Burney creates a sentimental heroine that has the ability to move with freedom while still upholding the values of virginity, modesty, gentleness, and artlessness. Austen's heroine Catherine, though at first glance a

satire of heroines like Evelina, diverts from the ideal of the perfect heroine to privilege an ideology of femininity which upholds independence as well as humanity and realism.

Through their characterization of their heroines and their deliberate use of conventions and constructions of femininity set forth by men, Burney and Austen establish resounding ideologies of femininity which give women more power over their own lives.

Chapter 2 | Riot Grrrls: Virtue, Freedom, & Femininity in American Sentimental Fiction

Authors of the early United States gravitated toward the seduction novel and the novel of manners, both of which fall under the broader category of sentimental fiction. Cathy Davidson in her essay, “Flirting with Destiny: Ambivalence and Form in the Early American Sentimental Novel,” asserts sentimental fiction as one of the most popular forms of the eighteenth century for two reasons:

The social critics were placated by Richardsonian fables that advocated middle-class ideals regarding the necessity of and the necessary connection between virtuous maidenhood and holy matrimony. Moral critics were appeased by the way in which these same novels ostensibly fostered morality through pointed examples of virtue rewarded and vice punished (18).

The concept of virtue as paramount looms large over all sentimental fiction, and Davidson’s assertions hold true for most authors in this genre. However, in the new republic the concept of virtue was challenged by the increasingly relevant ideal of freedom. Unlike their British predecessors, American authors Hannah Webster Foster and Sally Sayward Wood in their novels *The Coquette; or the Life and Letters of Eliza Wharton* and *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron*, respectively, explore the roles of women in the new republic beyond the overly simplistic concepts of virtue rewarded and vice punished. Written three years apart, both of these novels portray their heroines through the specific roles of the virgin and the coquette—a role specifically left out of the British cannon of sentimental heroines. By using these specific roles for women, Wood and Foster construct a new ideology of femininity that includes the most American of ideals:

freedom. With the concept of freedom came the idea of feminine sexuality and liberty, thus the character of the coquette entered the realm of the sentimental heroine.

The roles of virgin and coquette come to literature with a certain amount of baggage; however, Wood and Foster in some part subvert readers' preconceived notions about the virgin and the coquette. This dichotomy of the virgin and the coquette also plays into what Davidson calls the "woman question," an American phenomenon which she describes thus: "Americans at this time extensively debated the political status of women, the importance of female education, the nature of marriage, the limits of sexual freedom, and the function of the family" (24). In her chapter, "Privileging the *Feme Covert*: The Sociology of Sentimental Fiction," Davidson also looks at the ideology of femininity put forth by Rousseau, Fordyce, and Gregory, who though European, were popular novelists in the early republic. She claims that these authors portrayed women as "...naturally subservient within the family, and each author also argued that education made a woman less submissive and thus less appealing" (204). For Davidson, authors like Wood and Foster specifically tackled the woman question in an attempt to privilege female education and push back against the patriarchal stance on this issue. With this in mind, the American sentimental genre frequently focused on the role of women in the new republic—both domestically and publicly. According to William J. Scheik, even Thomas Jefferson was of the mind of these authors: "Jefferson too thought of education as a facilitator of virtue and benevolence and as a principle means of narrowing the gap between social extremes in the new nation" (115). By emphasizing education, specifically female education, both Foster and Wood point to an ideology of femininity with the capacity for agency and identity. Creating this ideology specifically answers the

woman question, but it does so by sticking to the conventions of the sentimental novel. Davidson explains that, for most authors of American sentimental fiction, the woman question is answered only through marriage. She states, “These fictions asserted that women were frail, could not act on their own or make a decision for themselves, and thus should enter into the permanent haven of marriage” (26). Foster and Wood, however, do not strictly follow this line of thinking. In an attempt to answer the “woman question,” Wood and Foster adopt the characters of the virgin and the coquette as their heroines to further analyze their society’s limited views of virtue and freedom to redefine femininity in the new republic.

Defining Women

Before delving into these novels, the roles of the virgin and the coquette must first be defined, as well as their place in the realm of sentimental fiction. According to Gareth Evans, “Sentimental novels demonstrate both what this emergent [middle] class stands to lose from aping aristocratic manners and what it stands to gain from adopting middle-class values and behaviour patterns” (41). With this in mind, the characters of the virgin and the coquette both must fit into the structure of the middle-class, and their fates hinge on their adherence to those “middle-class values and behaviour patterns”. Klaus P. Hansen in his article “The Sentimental Novel and Its Feminist Critique” asserts that because of this emphasis on the middle-class, merit and morality were the standards for all people, but he differentiates, “For women morality meant chastity and virtue in particular” (41). Both Evans and Hansen fall in line with Davidson’s own definition of feminine “virtue”: “They [the people of the early republic] saw ‘virtue’ as merely chastity and ‘vice’ as nothing more than virginity’s loss” (18). This definition of morality through

feminine sexuality—or lack thereof—directly impacts the roles of the virgin and the coquette as they move throughout the realm of American sentimental fiction.

The virgin is characterized by her physical virtue and honor—two traits upon which sentimental fiction places immense value. She is the quintessential good girl, raised in a middle-class home that places chastity, humility, and honor above all else. She has good manners; she rarely has a harsh word to say about anything or anyone; she has an incredibly strong moral compass. The virgin is the prime example of “republican womanhood,” as Evans terms it. He claims, “What the new model woman who appears in these same novels consents to is a form of ‘self-governance’ by which she checks both sexual desire and the desire for social eminence.” The virgin starts the novel as a single young woman, and throughout the story she is challenged by rakes and rogues who vie for her virtue. Yet, she inevitably thwarts her villain—or rather, her true love match does—retaining her virtue, and is rewarded with marriage to a man she loves. In general, the virgin stands for the middle-class’s perspective on feminine virtue as paramount and marriage as the ultimate goal for single, young women.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a coquette as, “a woman (more or less young), who uses arts to gain the admiration and affection of men, merely for the gratification of vanity or from a desire of conquest, and without any intention of responding to the feelings aroused; a woman who habitually trifles with the affections of men; a flirt.” This definition implies that a coquette schemes; she knows exactly what she is doing, and she likes doing it. Yet, in American sentimental fiction, the coquette is often depicted as the virgin gone wild. While she and the virgin have similar middle-class upbringings, they personally place their value in different things; the virgin values her

virtue and honor, but the coquette values flattery and vanity more than those gracious traits. In terms of the coquette's journey in a sentimental novel, her fate is not as rosy as that of the virgin. The coquette, falling into the trap of flattery and vanity, more often than not relinquishes her virtue to a man of untrustworthy repute, and for that sin against middle-class values, she must be punished. As Evans puts it, "The seduced woman in early American novels cannot play the role her culture ascribes her because she either fails to follow the path laid out by the republican father or because she fails to see the virtues of the potential model republican husband." Yet Evans's analysis of the coquette character distinctly labels her as a seduced woman, which implies that the coquette herself has no authority over herself. This is a direct contradiction to the above definition of the coquette. I argue that though the coquette generally falls ill or dies rather soon after her foray into the sexual world, she can redeem herself. For Evans, the coquette is the virgin seduced. She lacks the moral fortitude of the true virgin, and thus falls prey to vanity and, renouncing her control, is seduced by the rake. Wood and Foster, however, contend this point. The coquette has more power than Evans allows her. Even when she inevitably falls, she does so with responsibility. She may be a victim in a sense, but she accepts responsibility for her fall. Both Foster's heroine Eliza and Wood's minor characters Donna Julia and Leonora fall into this category of coquette redeemed rather than coquette seduced. Women writers of sentimental fiction use the coquette's story as a cautionary tale for young women—without virtue and honor, a young woman cannot be rewarded with a good marriage because she has gone against the entire system—while still privileging the coquette's redemption over her fall.

The virgin and the coquette pervade the pages of early American sentimental fiction, and as they do, they define femininity for the new republic. These two tropes harken to the age-old Madonna-whore dichotomy, and just like this dichotomy, the virgin and the coquette pigeonhole women of the sentimental era. Because of her status on the middle-class's pedestal of femininity, the virgin is a primary figure in sentimental fiction and is often written as the sentimental heroine. While she lives within the bounds previously described, she also must act in a certain way to maintain her "visible virtue," as Waldstreicher would put it. Waldstreicher asserts that virtue has everything to do with public perception: "...all...acts of looking participate in the contemporary politics of virtue...men and women of the middle and upper classes searched each others' countenances as they examined their own hearts for the signs of benevolence" (207). Taking this idea into account, the virgin must accept graciously any advance by a man and be completely honest—though cloyingly kind—in her reactions to it. The motivations of the man have little to do with the reaction required of the virgin. In order to maintain her stance as the ideal young woman, she must adhere to a strict social code of benevolence and demureness, lest she be deemed a coquette.

As a young woman in middle-class society, the coquette lives a similar life to the virgin, but rather than adhere to the standards placed on interactions, she guards herself. In traditional terms of the sentimental heroine, the coquette does not fit into the Richardsonian mold, as she cannot be placed on that pedestal for her virtue, moral or physical. The coquette as heroine does, however, come from a middle-class, well-respected family. She runs in the same social circles as the virgin. However, the coquette is not "artless"; she understands the world and the ways and whims of men.

Waldstreicher states: “The ‘coquette’ was the name for the woman whose display did not match and reveal her heart” (207). In other words, the woman who guards her emotions from the preying eyes of men is reduced to a vain and vapid flirt. Yet this reduction does more than put a label on women scared of vulnerability; it attempts to define their very destinies. If we take sentimental novels at face value, the coquette’s life always ends in sorrow and/or a tragic death. Thus, the fate of these women is sealed—the label “coquette” essentially dooms them.

Femininity within these roles can only be a few things—virtuous, wise, benevolent, and honest. Yet, even women who subscribe to the proper roles—i.e., do not give into their own will and turn down the road of the coquette—are put into such small boxes that they cannot thrive. In her essay, “Female Liberty? Sentimental Gallantry, Republican Womanhood, and Rights Feminism in the Age of Revolutions,” Sarah Knott explores how these ideologies of femininity eliminate female sexuality completely:

Republican womanhood depended on a femininity marked by reason and control of the passions, and plotted against autonomous female sexuality. The typical flavor of revolutionary radicalism...was idealistic moralism, a sober brew that hardly included the extramarital experimentation or female sexual agency that was scandal’s hallmark. (426)

Through Knott’s analysis, the virgin is the paragon of republican womanhood, whereas the coquette has no room for redemption in these ideologies of femininity. Because of these limiting roles for women, the sentimental novel allowed female readers the opportunity to live vicariously through the female characters. Rust notes that *Charlotte Temple*, and most sentimental novels,

...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. (107)

In this structure, femininity means a woman must be whatever and whoever other people want and/or need her to be. Even when she has authority over her own domain, she cannot live for herself. However, authors like Foster and Wood take these tropes and flip them in subtle acts of subversion. While *The Coquette* and *Julia* use the tropes of the virgin and the coquette in many of the traditional ways, they also shine a light on the inherent dangers of placing such strict rules on women.

Freedom or Flirtation: *The Coquette*

Foster's novel, though following many British conventions, stands out as distinctly American. The tale of *The Coquette* recounts in epistolary form the life and death of one Eliza Wharton, a young woman whose fiancé dies just before their wedding. When visiting friends, young Eliza begins courting two different men—a soon-to-be clergyman, Mr. Boyer and Major Sanford—of rather different levels of integrity, and after much debate with her family and friends, begins to fall in love with the less reputable of these men, Major Sanford, an officer consistently described as “deficient of character” (70). Though she values virtue and honor more than vanity and fancy, Eliza falls prey to Sanford's dastardly intentions. As a result, she gets pregnant and dies during childbirth. If we read *The Coquette* through the lens of Richardson, Eliza's death is imperative. A surface reading indicates that Eliza falls prey to vanity and is thus seduced, which must result in her death and the death of her sinfully conceived child. However, by

analyzing Eliza in terms of the roles of both coquette and virgin, we see Foster's subversion of patriarchal standards on women.

Though the novel is titled *The Coquette*, and specifically refers to Eliza's life, the character Eliza exemplifies traits of both the virgin and the coquette. She begins the novel as the virgin, a young woman who has just lost her fiancé, but however intact her physical virtue is, her moral virtue seems conflicted. She confesses to her friend Lucy Freeman in a letter after Mr. Haly's death: "...no one acquainted with the disparity of our tempers and dispositions...can suppose my heart much engaged in the alliance...I sacrificed my fancy in this affair; determined that my reason should concur with [my parents']; and on that to risk my happiness" (5). While she accepts her duties as both a daughter and the virgin, she does so despite her longing for a different life, or husband at the very least. Eliza is, however, self-aware. In this same letter, she admits her fondness for Mr. Haly: "...for though I believe that I never felt the passion of love for Mr. Haly; yet a habit of conversing with him, of hearing daily the most virtuous, tender, and affectionate sentiments from his lips, inspired emotions of the sincerest friendship, and esteem" (5-6). She also concludes the letter with the acknowledgement that all the information divulged is "all egotism" (6). From the start, Foster clues the reader into the complex identity of Eliza. In these passages, we see Eliza's reverence for virtue, authority, and honor, but we also see her longing for personal autonomy and freedom. Because of this conflict, Eliza does not perfectly fit either category of the virgin or the coquette, though she certainly begins with more traits of the virgin.

After Mr. Haly's death, however, Eliza's stance as the virgin becomes even more unstable. As a young girl, she longs to be free, untethered. However, as a woman who has

already had a prospective marriage, she is expected to act with wisdom and restraint, worrying more about finding another suitable match than about doing what she wants. Eliza does not worry about finding another match, though. Instead, she worries that marriage will change her life more than she is ready for, that she will be required to distance herself from her friendships. In a letter to Lucy, she states, “Marriage is the tomb of friendship” (77). For Eliza, friendships trump marriage. She does not concern herself with the security which should come with marriage, only with the control she must relinquish should she get married. In her eyes, marriage means that she must give up her friends and her ability to make decisions for herself. Because of this, Eliza is incapable of truly filling the role of the virgin because she refuses to subscribe to a life lived solely for others. Eliza has a good and kind heart, and thus has the moral virtue of the virgin, but her refusal to relinquish her right to a life of her own sets her apart from this trope.

Because Eliza refuses to subscribe to the tenants of the virgin’s role in society, her only place in society can be that of the coquette. Really and truly, the coquette is the single, young woman who dares to live a life all her own, the woman who dares to be free. In fact, the word freedom—and variations on it—is mentioned nineteen times throughout the novel, not to mention multiple times in the publisher’s preface. Eliza’s coquetry comes down to her craving for freedom and agency. As Van Engen puts it, “For Eliza, freedom means choosing her own pleasures at her own pace—or in other words, self-determination...within her way of thinking, virtue counts not as an *expression* of freedom, but as a *regulation* of it” (310). In her eyes, virtue and freedom are not mutually exclusive concepts; however, society requires that she live her life for other people either as a virgin or a married woman, thus making them concepts which cannot coincide with

one another. For example, Eliza tells Mr. Boyer in response to his pleas for her hand, “My sanguine imagination paints, in alluring colors, the charms of youth and freedom, regulated by virtue and innocence...I recoil at the thought of immediately forming a connection which must confine me to the duties of domestic life...” (83-84). She believes she can retain her virtue while maintaining her freedom. Marriage means letting go of her friendships and resigning herself to a life which she believes her “...disposition is not calculated...” (100). Because freedom also implies a degree of sexuality and desire, Eliza’s attempts at maintaining both virtue and freedom must be thwarted according to the values of society. Marion Rust notes that the sentimental novel frequently addressed female sexuality and desire, but within the bounds of patriarchal control: “...desire is given its due as long as it occurs within the sanctified bonds of marriage” (101). For women in the early Republic, marriage was both security and a relinquishment of control. In line with this idea, Karen A. Weyler highlights the emphasis placed on marriage in novels of the early republic: “Rather than imagining courtship and marriage as stages in women’s lives, which comprise many phases ranging from infancy to old age, these novels imply that courtship and marriage are the only stages that matter” (7). This emphasis ostracizes voluntary single women, no matter their reason for being single. For Eliza, control of her own life is more important than that security, which puts her in a quandary. She must choose between a life she does not want—being a housewife to a clergyman—and a deceptive man who would see her reputation ruined, as Major Sanford states in his first letter: “...I fancy this young lady is a coquette; and if so, I shall avenge my sex by retaliating the mischiefs she meditates against us...and let her beware the consequences” (68). Her choices are slim, and in her eyes, both will ultimately leave her

unhappy and dissatisfied. As Davidson puts it, “She must weigh the prospects of a restrictive domesticity against the freedom from stultifying convention that is promised by a passionate suitor” (23). When put in these terms, it is clear why Eliza chooses the man who makes her happiest in the moment—Major Sanford. This choice seals her fate as a coquette, and as such, she must pay the price of her society.

In the end, Eliza succumbs to Major Sanford’s entreaties for her virginity. In doing so, she officially sets herself apart from the virgin; she can now only reside within the realm of the coquette. Davidson notes: “She is seduced only after she has been cruelly disappointed by both Boyer and Sanford and has sunk into despondency; in brief, after she has given up coquetry” (31). Her seduction is more a response to her psychological state than to her values of virtue or vanity. Indeed, Eliza’s friend Mrs. Richman states early on in the novel, “I do not think you [Eliza] seducible; nor was Richardson’s Clarissa, till she made herself the victim, by her own indiscretion” (38). Eliza is not a woman without morals and integrity, as Mrs. Richman points out, but due to her despondency, she allows herself to fall victim to Sanford’s ploys. The price she pays is pregnancy out of wedlock and, ultimately, death, as she dies giving birth to her child. Through her analysis of *Charlotte Temple*, Rust points out that this despondency and consequential seduction must end in death: “...Charlotte does not so much surrender her chastity...as lose track of it altogether, along with every other aspect of her being” (102). For Rust—and I believe, Foster—the fall of these heroines is a direct result from their lack of identity. Eliza had the opportunity to act with “independent agency,” but because she succumbs to her emotions without a rational voice to counter them, she loses that opportunity, and in taking that for granted, she must die.

Despite Eliza's residency as a coquette and "seduced" woman her friends and family still esteem her, and as much can be seen in the epitaph on her headstone:

"This humble stone, in memory of ELIZA WHARTON, is inscribed by her weeping friends, to whom she endeared herself by uncommon tenderness and affection. Endowed with superior acquirements, she was still more distinguished by humility and benevolence. Let candor throw a veil over her frailties, for great was her charity to others" (301).

The sentiments of her friends ascribe a humanity to Eliza, to the coquette, that has been stripped by society. This epitaph asserts that Eliza possessed many of the emotional and moral qualities of the virgin, qualities which should be completely foreign to the coquette. In this moment, Foster complicates the concepts of the virgin and the coquette. Eliza never truly fit the role of the virgin, but she obviously did not truly fit the role of the coquette either.

Though Eliza dies, she does not do so in vain. Foster uses Eliza's death to broaden the scope from which her peers view femininity. Hansen claims, "...Eliza is both a positively portrayed heroine as well as a warning example" (45). While this claim has merit, I argue that Eliza has to die for two reasons beyond merely warning young female readers against coquetry. As this novel is based "in fact," on the life of one Eliza Whitman, Foster must have Eliza die to stay true to the story. However, she also dies because that is the prescribed ending for the role she played. Yet, by putting her death in terms of freedom and humanity in a nation coming down from the high of revolution, Eliza's death begins a conversation around femininity in the new republic. Foster asks the reader to question whether a woman can crave freedom as much as men and still have

virtue. Her answer to this question seems to be a resounding yes, as she continuously reminds the reader of Eliza's benevolence and grace in the novel.

Virtue Without Virginity: *Julia and the Illuminated Baron*

In *Julia*, Wood weaves the tale of a young girl who has little knowledge of her heritage—and thus her identity—taken in by a wealthy widow and subjected to a number of horrors, including kidnapping by a devilish baron who turns out to be her half-brother. Throughout the novel, the title character Julia falls in love, undergoes a criminal trial, and eventually finds her identity and her happy ending. Interestingly, Wood sets her novel in Revolutionary-era France. Sian Roberts notes that this might be one of the main reasons Wood's novel has gone unnoticed by scholars: "With its spectral hauntings, secret histories, impregnable castles, and innocence persecuted, *Julia and the Illuminated Baron* uses every Radcliffean signature in the book while refusing to conform to a strictly American nationalist framework" (31). According to Roberts, scholars have seen *Julia* as "...far removed from the 'specifically American concerns'—namely race, gender, frontier expansion, the failure of America's liberal promise..." (31). While to an extent, these scholars are correct, Wood's use of setting outside of America gives her the space to analyze feminine ideologies safely. Unlike Foster, however, Wood does not use her heroine as a means of examining both the virgin and the coquette. Rather, Julia is the stereotypical sentimental heroine. In fact, the novel itself falls strictly into the structure of the stereotypical sentimental novel—British or American. Wood uses a heroine who, like *Evelina*, has an unknown lineage, yet somehow also retains a strict moral compass. She creates a villain who, as an entitled man of noble blood, seeks to undermine the emerging middle-class structure. She sets her novel in part in a gothic castle. Based on plot alone,

the untrained eye would assume Wood's novel to be one from the British canon rather than the American. But her characterization of Julia—and other women throughout the novel—speak to the specific anxieties Americans faced in regard to the woman question. By privileging the virtuous mind and soul over chastity, Wood illustrates the need for a new ideology of femininity in the new republic.

Heroine Julia definitively falls into the virgin category. Though she was not raised in a particularly middle-class home in terms of perceived wealth, she was raised with middle-class values. William Scheik outlines this upbringing in his article, "Education, Class, and The French Revolution in Sarah Wood's *Julia*": "Living at the lower levels of society, they [Julia and her eventual husband Colwort] have learned humility, virtue, and 'genuine dignity'...through their education...they have achieved an interior independence of mind" (114). This middle-class upbringing gives Julia her defining traits of humility and purity of mind along with the ability to make decisions for herself. Along with these values, Waldstreicher's concept of visible virtue is also applicable to Julia's character as she speaks plainly but with grace, thus keeping herself firmly out of the category of coquette. Rust points out the class distinctions in feminine virtue: "For while women outside the elite were often depicted as explicitly and even joyfully carnal, those who wished to claim the status of a lady needed to subdue lustful urges in order to lay claim to the virtue that was theirs to safeguard in the new republic" (104). As a middle-class citizen, Julia's class status would invite readers to view her as explicit and carnal, but her purity of heart and mind give her the space to lay claim to the virtue of a lady. This point is only proven the more so as we find out that Julia is, in fact, a noble by blood. She places immense value in honor and virtue, refusing to dress up for a

masquerade even for one evening. The narrator describes Julia's state of mind as follows: "She had an innate and lively sense of female propriety and never had she once deviated from it. She had always thought it highly inconsistent with the true dignity of a young woman to appear in borrowed character" (120). To Julia, being a woman means being the virgin. Indeed, Wood describes the gravity of Julia's virtue when she meets the Count: "Never was the power of virtue more fully proved over the vicious than in the present instant" (59). She must never deviate from the role she has accepted as the virgin, for that would land her in even stickier situations than the ones she endures in the novel. Julia's place as the virgin keeps the novel safe and uncontroversial. She plays the role perfectly and is rewarded with her love and a family at the end.

However, Wood still finds a way to complicate the dichotomy of the virgin and the coquette, though she does so through the supporting character Leonora rather than through the heroine of the novel. Leonora *is* the good girl gone bad, the virgin gone coquette. This dying woman was once a nun who abandoned her post to marry a man with whom she thought she shared a passion: "The moment his eyes met mine, I imbibed that fatal passion that has since proved the destruction of my happiness" (149). Months later, after he delayed the wedding many times, Leonora comes to find out that he has been telling people that she is his kept mistress. Enraged, she leaves him and seeks solace at her sister's chateau where she lives out the remainder of her days. All of that said, Leonora never forsakes her physical virtue; Wood makes sure to establish Leonora's virginity: "...my regard to my honor bid me absolutely refuse to see my lover until I could be acknowledged as his wife before all of his connections, and though I made as a great a sacrifice to reputation as ever was made, I obeyed the dictates of honor" (150).

But as Davidson points out, “Virtue (writ large) does not always save the heroine” (24). Because Leonora abandoned her devotion to God, and thus her spiritual virtue, she cannot be rewarded with a marriage to a man she loves. With her reputation ruined, she eventually dies ill and alone. While this ending to Leonora’s life is stark and does not seem to complicate the trope of the coquette, I argue that the simple fact of going from nun to outlaw does just that. For Wood, virtue does not necessarily have to be virginity; it can also be purity of mind and soul. This distinction sets Wood’s coquette apart from the typical sentimental trope. Eliza had to die because she turned her back on the values of society by giving into physical temptation; however, Leonora’s sin lies in turning her back on the values she held for herself. Rather than living the life she chose for herself—a life with which she seemed happy—she gave into spiritual temptation. She abandoned her own values as well as God’s, and for Wood, this is why she must die.

This concept applies to another coquette in the novel, Donna Olivia. From the moment we meet this woman, she fawns over the Count: “Donna Olivia exerted all her talents to please the count, and it is certain that he appeared to be pleased, and paid her an attention at once flattering her...” (61). Wood portrays Olivia as a coquette from the beginning, establishing Olivia as the Count’s mistress and thus outside the realm of feminine virtue. In the end, Olivia seems discontented with this life, and says to Julia upon assisting her escape, “...when you think of the vicious Olivia, think of her with sympathy” (182), implying that her choices have led her to a life of misery rather than happiness. In a letter Olivia leaves for Julia, she details the circumstances that brought her to life with the Count, along with the Count’s involvement with the Illuminati. He wishes for her to join, but Olivia refuses, stating, “Though dead to virtue, I was not

entirely lost to decency” (207). Though Olivia does give up her physical virtue, she is not punished with death as other sentimental coquettes are. She did not betray her own values—the more overt political values of society—so she gets to live, and for her change of character in assisting Julia’s escape, she is even rewarded with her own estate (232). In some ways, Wood rewards Olivia the most of all. As a single woman, she gets to have her independence solely because she rectifies her sins rather than merely repenting them. She proves a virtuous soul, despite her impurity of body, a point which the narrator emphasizes here: “...though she sacrificed to vice, her soul bowed to virtue...” (209). Donna Olivia’s character development from coquetry to redemption further supports Wood’s attempt to establish feminine virtue as a matter of the soul rather than the body.

Wood uses the women in *Julia* to redefine femininity, and specifically feminine virtue, in a new nation. In his article, “Rakes, Coquettes, and Republican Patriarchs...” Gareth Evans claims that, “Writers in the early republic created a new role for women as republican mothers or wives who set standards of virtuous behaviour for their husbands and children.” While this may be true, Wood’s characters do more than set the standards for virtue; they restructure it entirely. Up to this point, writers of sentimental fiction focused on feminine virtue as virginity. Davidson states: “...most of these writers proclaimed that female virginity had to be preserved at all cost and that its loss must necessarily lead to degradation and even death” (18). Yet Wood argues against that line of thinking. Virtue lies within purity of soul, so even the women who have forsaken their virginity are able to go on to lead happy lives and grow as people. Wood states as much in the final pages of the novel: “...Julia preferred the claim of virtue and benevolence to that of rank...” (240). While Julia is rewarded with riches from her newly discovered

family and a husband whom she loves, her values are virtue and benevolence. To trade those values for the celebrity of a title would betray her virtue, and thus she would have a fate similar to Leonora's. In her eyes, being a good person is virtue, not merely saving her body for Colwort. By establishing these values as imperative to her ideology of femininity, Wood also sets up the reward for buying into this brand of femininity as a marriage of equals. Much like Burney's Evelina and Lord Orville, Julia and Colwort are equal in their moral merit and virtue, and thus they are able to have a fruitful and successful marriage outside the scope of the corrupt aristocracy and its narrow standards for the roles of women. Yet even in this marriage of equals, we see flares of patriarchal influence through Wood's descriptions of the characters. Scheik points out, "*Virtue* is a word used all too often in descriptions of and responses to Julia, and *benevolence* is a word used to describe an innate characteristic of Francis..." (115). Again, virtue is an identifier of women, not men, meaning that even with regard to Julia's purity of heart and mind, her virginity remains a fixed point of her character.

Putting It Together

Within the realm of sentimental fiction, femininity typically lies within the strict bounds of patriarchy. However, authors Hannah Webster Foster and Sally Sayward Wood rewrite the terms of femininity in their novels *The Coquette; or the Life and Letters of Eliza Wharton* and *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron*. Both of these novels deal extensively with portrayals of women—the virgin and the coquette—to examine the strictures placed on women in the early republic. Van Engen describes the problem of virtue in a discussion of Eliza Wharton's choices:

She can achieve the ability to love and exercise virtue, but she still faces a world where what counts as virtue remains tied to patriarchal republicanism and where her options to practice it are slim. The whole problem...lies in its cooption by temporal, social norms—the early Republic’s narrow definition of female virtue interpreted as God’s will, God’s way (318).

By looking at these two novels together, we are able to grasp how early American society condemned women and how that sin can be rectified. Both Foster and Wood portrayed their heroine’s virtue through a different lens, virtue as purity of soul rather than purity of body. Eliza Wharton’s fall deals more with the impurity of the society which condemned her rather than her “loss of innocence”; and Julia’s entire character is based on her impeccable moral compass rather than her physical virtue. In creating heroines that fall within the structures of sentimental stereotypes, Foster and Wood subtly subvert the tradition’s patriarchal grip on femininity.

For these women, blurring the line between vice and virtue is the main idea behind American sentimental fiction. Foster argues that humanizing “fallen women” is paramount in understanding femininity and creating a new order for the new nation. Without recognizing the depth of every person’s traits, we cannot fully see the person. Through her portrayal of Eliza as both—and neither—the virgin and the coquette, Foster begins a tradition of rewriting virtue in conjunction with rewriting femininity. For her, femininity should not be defined as what a woman can do and be for those around her; it should be defined by the desires and free will of the woman herself. Femininity becomes linked with freedom, though subtly. While virtue still remains intimately tied to virginity in *The Coquette*, Eliza’s stance as a woman of pure heart even at the end of the novel, as

we see on her gravestone, sets the stage for writers like Wood to truly reconfigure the new nation's ideal of virtue. As for Wood, her femininity comes down to purity rather than freedom. In her eyes, virtue lies within the soul and mind, not just the body, so for society to place a woman's worth in her body leaves out the true essence of virtue. She argues that for society to use the term so freely, they must first understand its gravity. For Wood, femininity is defined by the thoughtfulness of a woman and her willingness to rectify her wrongdoings.

Though they focus on the end goal of marriage for their heroines, they do not portray women of weakness and indecision. Both Foster and Wood write heroines that challenge the boundaries of patriarchal virtue. Essentially, women authors of American sentimental fiction define feminine virtue via identity, much like their nation defined itself. Through their analysis of virtue and how categorizing women can destroy the very roles they hold in society, both Foster and Wood ask their readers to reconsider what it means to be a woman and what it means to be free.

Conclusion

The transatlantic sentimental novel made strides for fiction as we know it today, and more than that it made strides for women and their status in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century British and American society. As society began to change in terms of economy and class, the status of women shifted outside of merely the domestic sphere, spurring anxiety about gender roles. In a reaction to the strict claims of logic prominent in the early enlightenment, the sentimental novel both sought to represent women outside the home while also privileging emotion over stark logic. Initially this genre pigeonholed women into narrow categories which stripped them of their rights and dignity, even if they did conclude their stories with the reward of marriage. But as women took up their pens in this genre, the sentimental heroine changed from a damsel in distress to a woman with a voice and agency. While these women authors paid homage to authors like Samuel Richardson, they also recognized that the sentimental story is uniquely tied to ideologies of femininity and that it was their responsibility to tell these stories with as much accuracy as Richardson's structure afforded them.

Over the course of the female study of sentimental fiction, women redefined the femininity originally put forth by Richardson and his contemporaries. For Richardson, femininity is directly tied to virginity, and while women writers of the British sentimental tradition followed this convention, they did so to enhance their heroines' depth of character. Burney's *Evelina* and Austen's *Catherine* both exhibit the physical attributes of virginity in that they are chaste; however, their chastity acts as a reflection of their purity of mind and heart. Burney bases *Evelina* off of the Richardsonian model, endowing her with the gentle traits of the *Clarissas* of the world while also gifting her the intelligence to

make her own decisions and use her own voice. As an epistolary novel, *Evelina* very specifically awards the heroine her own voice from the very beginning, thus establishing Evelina's capacity for agency. By combining Richardsonian femininity with a realistic form of agency, Burney pens a heroine who portrays a new ideology of femininity in the emerging middle-class. Though aristocratic by blood and marriage, Evelina's upbringing sets her apart from the aristocracy and gives her the angelic and artless qualities that define her character. Catherine Morland acts as the antithesis to the Richardsonian heroine while still maintaining the essence of Richardson's original conventions. She meets very few of the stereotypical aesthetic qualities of the sentimental heroine, but her heart and mind come from the same gentle, angelic, artless place of Evelina. In setting up such a contrast between the physical and mental/spiritual, Austen creates a new sentimental heroine and thus a new sentimental ideology of femininity. Building off of Burney's idea that femininity, though tied to virginity, is not solely dependent upon it, Austen tells her readers that true femininity deals more with the purity of mind and heart than body—though that is important too, as we see with the fate of Isabella Thorpe. These British authors seek to focus on the positive reinforcement of virtue rewarded over the negative reinforcement of vice punished. They zero in on young women who exemplify desirable femininity, whether perfectly or imperfectly, to explore an ideology of femininity that demands agency and autonomy.

American sentimental authors take a different approach, exploiting the dichotomy of vice and virtue as it pertains to femininity. Hannah Webster Foster's Eliza Wharton exemplifies both sides of this dichotomy as virgin and coquette in one being—a device which Foster uses to illustrate the danger of defining women by such narrow categories.

While Foster still includes some of Richardson's sentimental foundations, she ultimately subverts his idea of femininity. For Foster, true femininity, just as with Burney and Austen, comes from purity of mind and heart. Unlike her British counterparts, however, Foster's femininity works as a reflection of identity and self-determination, not as a reflection of virginity; though Eliza dies a coquette, she does so only because she lacked the self-determination to stand on her own. For Foster, agency and identity are paramount to femininity. Sally Sayward Wood, too, takes up this line of thinking. Her heroine Julia exemplifies a true Richardsonian heroine, but her actions show a self-determination and confidence which Richardson's heroines lack. Wood pens the character Donna Olivia both as a foil for Julia's "perfection" and for the traditional cautionary tale about women who succumb to vice. Olivia has relinquished her virginity, but never her identity, and for that virtue, she may live. Like Foster, Wood's femininity relies more on identity as a reflection of inner purity than virginity as the defining characteristic. Truly, this ideology of femininity falls in line with the birth of the nation as identity became more and more prominent in the minds of readers.

In the transatlantic sentimental conversation—between women authors, anyway—femininity stands as the defining trait of the genre. Though the genre and its authors have long been criticized for formulaic and often shallow plots, authors like Frances Burney, Jane Austen, Hannah Webster Foster, and Sally Sayward Wood subvert the original confines of the genre. Though they stick to the marriage-plot formula, all of these authors make it clear that the reward for virtue should not be merely marriage, but rather feminine independence. In writing these characters—who align with the authors themselves as they, too, must adhere to patriarchal standards of society—Burney, Austen,

Foster, and Wood answer the woman question with a profound idea: women of morals and virtue do not necessarily need to be virgins, but they do need to have a sense of self and the confidence to truly be themselves.

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