Gender and Genre: Contextualizing Two Early American Novels

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ABSTRACT: This project focuses on the role of gender in Susanna Rowson’s seduction novel *Charlotte Temple* and Charles Brockden Brown’s gothic novel *Wieland*. Incorporating literary analysis, historical information, and the work of other scholars, I contextualize these two novels within early American life and literature. Through this project, I urge readers to resist reading early American novels as a truthful reflection of the historical situation and encourage analysis that is based in gender criticism, rather than feminist criticism. Through this focus, I explore the progressive and regressive aspects of gender representations in the novels, acknowledging both *Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland* as multifaceted in their didacticism.

KEYWORDS: Susanna Rowson, Charles Brockden Brown, Charlotte Temple, Wieland, Early America, Early American Novels, Gender, and Genre.
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GENDER AND GENRE:
CONTEXTUALIZING TWO EARLY AMERICAN NOVELS

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CONTEXTUALIZING THE TEXTS

Approaching the end of the eighteenth century, America’s status as a new nation granted the newly postcolonial society\(^1\) the ability to start anew and establish itself as a nation built upon principles of independence, justice, and endless possibility. While such ambitious virtues served as the ideological foundation for revolutionary America, the new nation was riddled with insecurity in the wake of drastic political and social change. The early American novel captured these feelings of uncertainty and served as a forum for the philosophical debates that surrounded the birth of the nation and the establishment of its culture. Readers received these novels with an insatiable vigor, allowing authors the ability to address, persuade, instruct, and, above all, entertain a wide audience from behind the veil of fiction.

English born Susanna Rowson and her American contemporary Charles Brockden Brown seized the opportunity to make significant contributions to this forum through their respective novels *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth* and *Wieland; or, The Transformation, An American Tale*.\(^2\) Rowson and Brockden Brown\(^3\) employ different stylistic features—distinguishing their novels’ categorization within the genre of early American fiction into the subgenres of the seduction novel and the gothic novel, respectively. As a characteristic seduction novel, *Charlotte Temple* tells the unfortunate tale of a young woman whose manipulated and misguided sexual decisions lead to her fall from grace and subsequent death. *Wieland’s* supernatural, sensational, and horrific


\(^2\) For plot summaries of these two novels, see the Appendix.

\(^3\) Throughout this paper, I refer to Charles Brockden Brown as Brockden Brown to differentiate between he and William Hill Brown, another popular early American novelist.
elements contribute to its apt categorization as a gothic novel. Though the novels differ in genre placement and vary greatly in their portrayals of reality and fantasy, Susanna Rowson and Charles Brockden Brown present the claim that skepticism is an essential component in early American life and literature. Through what Cathy Davidson suggests in *Revolution and the Word* is an attempt to “expose inconsistencies at the heart of the national self-image,” Brockden Brown, Rowson, and other early American novelists utilized the medium of fiction, ironically, to emphasize the importance of doubting that which appears in the public sphere as truth (7).

This emphasis on skepticism is particularly useful when applying it to the conventional constructions of gender roles within literature and within society. Brockden Brown and Rowson simultaneously reinforce and challenge the social constructions of gender in their novels, highlighting the paradoxical nature of the social construction of gender in early America. The cast of female characters in *Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland* demonstrate varying degrees of agency and submission, which the authors complicate further through their development of progressive and regressive qualities within each character. In spite of the range that exists within and among the female characters in the novels, the male characters predominantly occupy a position of authority over their female counterparts. However, the authors undermine this authority through the theme of deception within the novels. Both *Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland* place emphasis on human fallibility within the realms of communication and trust, which serves to level

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4 I discuss skepticism chiefly as a quotidian issue of ethical choices.
5 Davidson’s “Introduction to the Expanded Edition” is particularly rich in its survey of the scholarship that has emerged in early American studies since the date of its first publication in 1986.
6 Slavery and women’s rights are at the core of these inconsistencies, as they negate the nation’s stance for freedom and equality.
certain gender boundaries through the suggestion that both sexes are susceptible to being fooled by others. The novels address issues of trust that not only apply to an individual’s relationship to others, but also call into question the reliability of the individual’s own judgment. Rowson and Brockden Brown suggest that developing an unwavering adherence to moral values protects both genders from the consequences outlined in their novels.

The focus on morality within the novels is indicative of the cultural situation that surrounded their production. During the period of history when these novels were published, America was experiencing an intellectual revolution that followed its literal revolution against the British Empire. This intellectual revolution in the new nation as well as in London promoted the analysis of the human condition, the acknowledgement of human folly, and the endorsement of moral values in an effort to eradicate these flaws. Rowson published *Charlotte Temple* in 1791 (in the U.K) and 1794 (U.S.) with Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* following a few years later in 1798 (Hart 119-20; 720). In *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Robert Ferguson pins down the phenomenon of the American Enlightenment to the span of years between 1750 and 1820. The tenets of this period included, but were not limited to, “the primacy of reason, the reliability of human understanding, the value of individual freedom, trust in method, faith in education, belief in progress, and a corresponding disregard for tradition, constituted authority, and received dogma” (Ferguson 368). Authors encapsulated these values in literary texts, acknowledging a metaphorical and philosophical tug-of-war between promoting “individual freedom” and warning readers against taking a “disregard for tradition” too far.
In essence, the early American novel captured the varying interpretations of what it meant to exemplify the ideals of the new nation—and what it meant to misinterpret them. In doing so, authors prompted their readers to invest their trust in certain moral authorities, such as the narrator in their stories, while asking them to remain skeptical of other typically respected authority figures, such as the archetypal soldier in the seduction novels. If their readers were to receive their moral advice, authors understood that they would have to assume a position of moral and intellectual superiority over their audience, often addressing them using terms similar to those that they use to describe their novel’s victim. This positioning underscores a thread that weaves throughout both Charlotte Temple and Wieland, along with other novels that fit into the cautionary tradition. If it is possible to learn from the mistakes of others, which types of authority should we choose to submit to for such advice and how can we form judgments about their authenticity or the purity of their intentions? These questions applied to the narrators within these novels as well as to the novelists that crafted them.

The early American novel’s tendency to question socially constructed institutions demonstrated that “‘nationalism’ was a process, even a contest, about what shape thirteen colonies would assume in the wake of their successful revolt against England” (Revolution 13). In spite of the nation’s stance for limited government and its wariness toward authorial powers, the culture of early America revealed a power dynamic that is undeniably present. While the distribution of power suggested that Americans’ quest for equality had boundaries within the identifiers of class, gender, and race, it would be a mistake to view these categories as rigid. Rather, I argue that the culture distributed power within and among these categories in a way that allowed both progress and
restriction to coexist. During a personal interview at the Society of Early Americanists’ eighth biennial conference, Dr. Lauren Coats of Louisiana State University cited Abigail Adams as an embodiment of this concept in the famous line, “Remember the Ladies.” Dr. Coats aptly suggested that the letter Abigail wrote to her husband, then-president John Adams, demonstrates that “Abigail is involved in the political discussions of the time, but also that she is removed from them.” Abigail Adams, therefore, embodies the possibility for women to dabble in what Jürgen Habermas\(^7\) has historicized as both the public and private spheres.

Perhaps in response to the dual ties of figures like Abigail Adams, authors became aware that their novels had the capacity to tackle issues that permeated the public and private spheres, complementing Cathy Davidson’s notion that “the novel is less concerned with the promise of a calm nation-state in the aftermath of a revolution than it is with the disruptions of private, domestic space” (Revolution 8). I argue not that the novel is more concerned with one sphere over the other, as Davidson suggests in this excerpt, but that the two spheres are non-hierarchal in the novel and interconnect in a way that brings abstract political questions into concrete, even physical form in the domestic realm. In their thorough Introduction to Wieland, Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro note:

Many critics argue that Brown is primarily interested in abstract questions about how we perceive and know, rather than concrete questions concerning social and political circumstances…. [I]t may be more accurate to say that Brown

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\(^7\) A reader interested in the origins and evolution of public opinion and the concept of separate spheres should look to Habermas’ Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Further, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon’s The Gender of Freedom discusses the separate spheres concept as it relates to early American literature.
understands ambiguity as a result and corollary of particular configurations of social power and political conditions. (xi-xii)

Barnard and Shapiro, therefore, underscore the idea that the public blends into the private within the early American novel. This blurred division and the ambiguity that Brockden Brown highlights with regard to social and political circumstances serve to reinforce the value of skepticism and careful consideration. In *Wieland*, Brockden Brown understands and dramatizes the dangers of misinformed interpretation to demonstrate the potentially life-saving benefits of viewing a situation from multiple perspectives.

Brockden Brown and Rowson each emphasize the novel’s ability to level boundaries and address a multitude of issues within the construct of gender. Authors give special attention to this construct in this public/private forum. The portrayals of male and female characters are diverse—within a single novel, characters belonging to both sexes exhibit varying degrees of agency, vulnerability, and integrity. The range of characters in the early American novel highlights the idea that a single individual cannot serve as a conventional representation of an entire group. Although some archetypal patterns exist in fiction, as we see in the stock characterization of the hapless female victims in the seduction novels, novelists understood that gender is a much more extensive category than such stereotypes suggest. Early American novelists emphasized the concept of variability by developing characters of the same biological sex in radically different ways. They often capitalized on the vulnerability of the main female lead, but crafted exemplary supporting characters to emphasize the possibility for individuals to generate different outcomes while operating under the same conditions. In *Charlotte Temple*, Rowson proves this point by juxtaposing Charlotte and her mother. Charlotte’s mother,
Lucy, avoids becoming romantically involved with a malicious suitor because she defers the decision of her attachment to her parents. With their guidance, Lucy does not take the suitor’s hand and instead goes on to marry a man of true virtue. In contrast, Charlotte meets her unfortunate fate because she does not consult with her parents on the development of her secret relationship with Montraville. Proceeding without her parent’s guidance, Charlotte is left unguarded and unprepared for the grim consequences of an unsanctioned romantic attachment. The variations in the outcomes of characters, as Rowson exemplifies through the circumstances of Charlotte Temple and her mother, reinforce the notion that a character’s moral values weigh more heavily on her fate than does her physical identity alone. Novelists promoted the idea that an individual’s gender determined certain guidelines for that person’s life in society and set certain expectations for conduct by addressing issues of pregnancy, marriage, and family. However, novelists highlighted the wide range of possible outcomes that existed to demonstrate the impact of individual choice and the importance of making rational decisions at crucial milestones in a character’s development.

Still, many critics have trouble moving beyond the analysis of the seduction novel’s stereotypically tragic female lead. In an Introduction to a Penguin Classics edition that combines two popular early American sentimental novels, William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* and Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette*⁸, Carla Mulford focuses on the idea that women were the primary targets of the early America novel: “As the eighteenth century turned into the nineteenth century, the market in books served a populace that seems to have had tremendous preoccupation with private

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⁸ These novels, as well as *The Scarlet Letter*, contributed to a broader understanding of the early American novel that made contextualizing *Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland* possible.
activities of people, but especially the private activities—the lives and the bodies—of women” (xi). Mulford accurately acknowledges a preoccupation with women’s lives and bodies at the forefront of the seduction narratives. *Charlotte Temple’s* categorization as a seduction novel suggests that Rowson deems Charlotte’s sexual errors more important than any of the other moral insufficiencies that she presents in the novel. In Davidson’s *Introduction to Charlotte Temple*, she explains that “the double sexual standard (and the biological realities of pregnancy) make her, not her seducer, culpable” (xvii). The capacity for women to physically embody the consequences of their actions through pregnancy did, in fact, contribute to the higher degree of attention that novelists devoted to their moral reform in the novel. The early American novel demonstrates the idea that both the male and female sexes are flawed. Biologically, however, women are able to serve as a representation of these flaws in ways that men cannot. The physical representation of sin in the female body, therefore, separates and elevates the severity of their sins from those of their male counterparts.

Rather than focusing solely on women’s capacity to become pregnant, early American novelists also focused on women in their novels because they held a unique role in their responsibility to uphold the image of domestic tranquility for the nation through their roles as mothers, wives, and caretakers. The focus on republican motherhood in early American scholarship pays special tribute to the idea that women maintained their value to society in the domestic sphere, where the public image of citizens and the nation was cultivated. In order to secure societal health and progress, it became apparent that women’s education and moral rectitude were essential to private and public stability. Mulford states: “If women were to be entrusted with the nation’s
children, the women themselves needed to be educated, it seemed” (xiii). She goes on to state: “In the new United States … books could be the key to developing cultural values appropriate to the commonwealth” (xiv). Mulford acknowledges the capacity for books to function as an educational component of early American culture through the promotion of morality within fictional narratives. However, she argues that the texts are one-sided in their attention to female misconduct:

[T]he novels’ very featuring of the women’s virtue as the corrective to the men’s nefarious actions suggests the extent to which eighteenth-century English and Anglo-American culture would hold women accountable for the morality of the men around them and, by extension, the morality of the nation. (xxvii-xxviii)

Mulford accurately emphasizes the significance of women’s virtue in early American life and literature, thereby highlighting the important influence that their moral standing had on the success or failure of the new nation.

While the novels’ focus on morality is reflective of the historical situation, it is important to distinguish the representation of women in fictional narratives from their historical reality. Women’s increasing power in the new nation contrasts starkly with many of the stereotypically feeble and easily manipulated women in fiction. Mary Beth Norton’s *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* and Marion Rust’s *Prodigal Daughters: Susanna Rowson’s Early American Women* both suggest that women occupied a unique position of authority during the Revolutionary years. With her husband away from home, a woman increasingly became familiar with her family’s finances and business operations, granting her a higher degree of agency than she had before the war. Though this increase in power did not wholly
offset women’s legal and right-based constraints, Norton and Rust suggest that women found ways to operate within these boundaries in a manner that allowed them a significant amount of agency—both within the household and within the community. Both scholars contextualize the experience of early American women and provide ample information on the impact that the historical situation had on their lives. In *Liberty’s Daughters*, Norton writes:

> The postwar period witnessed accelerating changes in American women’s lives, for their wartime experiences and the developing ideology of republicanism combined to alter both society’s view of them and their own self-conceptions. Women who had competently managed the family estates during the Revolution despite severe hardships no longer accepted unquestioningly the standard belief in feminine weakness, delicacy and incapacity. Their daughters, who had watched their mothers cope independently with a variety of difficulties, felt no pressing compulsion to marry quickly; some decided not to marry at all and others chose to limit the size of their families. (Norton 228)

In this excerpt, Norton highlights the reinterpretation of gender roles in post-revolutionary America. The discrepancy between the prominent representations of women in fiction and the lived experience of early American women complicates the idea that women of this time period had anything at all to learn from their often less progressive fictional counterparts. This incongruity raises the following question: If advances were being made in marital equality and spouses were able to discuss issues of the household, the family, and their finances in an increasingly cooperative and egalitarian manner, why did fiction often depict women in terms of their vulnerability?
Norton provides one possible answer to this question in her more recent book *Separated by Their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World*. Norton’s focus on the historical trajectory leading up to the point of the Revolution in *Separated by Their Sex* allows the book to function as a prequel to her earlier *Liberty’s Daughters*. Norton successfully historicizes the shift from social class to gender with regard to access to the public sphere:

Conceptually gendering the public (political and government affairs) as exclusively male required that gendered manhood, rather than ungendered status, define appropriate wielders of political power. Such a redefinition was developed in England in the wake of the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89. The vehicle for that instruction—both implicit and explicit—was the burgeoning print culture of the Anglo-American world in the 1690s and thereafter. (3)

In this excerpt, Norton suggests that novelists had the power to decide which ideals they would seek to promote in their narratives. She reminds us that the focus on moral development in the novel does not imply a strictly moral motive for their production. Authors had the power to promote patriarchal values without appearing to do so, projecting an attitude of concern and sympathy for the female sex while simultaneously propagating the stereotype of their weakness and vulnerability. The novel’s accessibility to the growing literary public in the late eighteenth century made it conducive to the production and promotion of these ideals.

While stereotypical representations of feebleness were characteristic of many women in early American fiction, it is dangerous to assume that all authors approached their novels with the intention of promoting patriarchal values or encouraging female
submission. Rather, we must consider the female authorship of many of these sentimental novels. The astounding difference between Rowson’s empowering role as a leader for young women in the early American period and her development of a devastatingly innocent and misinformed main female character was problematic for me when I first read *Charlotte Temple*. However, after widening the scope of my analysis, I found that Rowson attributes naïveté and gullibility to characters of both sexes in the novel. Rather than limiting her attack to the female sex, Rowson demonstrates that her male characters are also vulnerable in situations involving trust and judgment. Rowson establishes a primary example of male vulnerability in the second chapter of the novel, where she diverts from Charlotte’s storyline with Montraville to expand upon Charlotte’s family background. In this diversion, Rowson explains that Captain Eldridge, Charlotte’s grandfather, becomes financially indebted to a man for the sake of his son’s education. Because the man is a friend of George’s, Captain Eldridge’s son, he does not expect to rear any consequences for his decision to trust the man. However, when Captain Eldridge denies the man his daughter’s hand in marriage, the man requests the immediate repayment of the indebted funds. The money was given and accepted on the premise that Captain Eldridge could repay it “whenever most convenient,” however, this agreement was not honored (Rowson 16). As a result, the family was thrown into suffering with the ensuing imprisonment of Captain Eldridge and the deaths of his son and his wife. This situation highlights male vulnerability because both Captain Eldridge and his son experience a breach in trust with their connection to this man. Throughout the novel,

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9 I use first person throughout this project as a tribute to Jane Tompkins and other feminist critics who promote the integration of “emotion and ideation both in substance and in form” (Tompkins 658).
Rowson develops additional instances of male and female vulnerability to demonstrate the importance of acting with caution and careful consideration for all of her characters.

Though it is categorized as a seduction novel, Rowson’s exposition of male and female vulnerability in *Charlotte Temple* establishes the novel as more than just an attack on pre-marital sex and the female gender. In another personal interview at the Society of Early Americanists’ Savannah conference, Dr. Marion Rust reflected on the intentions that Rowson had for *Charlotte Temple* and concluded:

> I don’t think it’s a book about teaching women not to have sex. I think it’s about teaching women how to make choices given the narrowed circumstances of their lives. I don’t think that people read the book and necessarily said, “I must behave differently.” It was a book that people read for all kinds of reasons.

As in this comment, Rust’s scholarship emphasizes the importance of viewing the novel through a wide scope, separating the historical situation from the fictional narrative, and realizing that readers may not have approached the novel with the sole purpose of educating themselves. There were many purposes for the early American novel and many themes that recurred within the genre of early American fiction, but the reception of the novel and its message are unique to each reader—and not every reader was a young woman.

By the same token, not every early American author was exclusively interested in the flaws of young women as they relate to their sexuality. The seduction novels tend to focus on the failure of characters through their missteps in love, but at the root of these supposedly bad decisions is a faulty assessment of the reality of the situation, not the sex itself. Alternatively, Gothic novels like Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* are able to utilize the
grandeur of horror and superstition to elevate the question of authenticity beyond day-to-day experience in a way that promotes the application of skepticism in a universal and all-encompassing way. Gothic novels not only call into question an individual’s experiences with others, but also remind readers and individuals of the fallibility of their own senses. Wieland and Charlotte Temple both revolve around preventable tragedies that occur out of misguided or uninformed trust, securing their place within the cautionary tradition. Wieland separates itself from Charlotte Temple, however, because it highlights the manipulation and mistakes of the novel’s male characters in a way that removes love and sex from the source of the main catastrophe of the plot.

By separating tragedy from sexuality, Wieland emphasizes the notion that employing the use of skepticism is relevant and necessary in all aspects of life, rather than limiting its application to the enterprise of building a healthy family within the new nation. However, Wieland is not an example of progressive gender roles in every respect. Though pregnancy is not the cause of the tragedy within the novel, the women in Wieland primarily occupy a subordinate position to men. Brockden Brown demonstrates the overriding patriarchal authority of the novel through Clara’s continual deferral to male opinion. This is most explicit in Clara’s relationship with her brother. Though Clara’s uncle discloses the circumstances of Theodore Wieland’s guilt and Theodore Wieland himself admits to committing the crime, Clara continues to blame Carwin for the events that have transpired. She consistently venerates her brother in her reflection, mentioning Theodore Wieland in terms of his benevolence and intelligence throughout the novel. In the final sentence of the novel, Clara demonstrates the persistence of her submission by placing the blame of the events equally upon herself and Theodore Wieland: “If
[Theodore] Wieland had framed juster notions of moral duty, and of the divine attributes; or if I had been gifted with ordinary equanimity or foresight, the double-tongued deceiver would have been baffled and repelled” (Brown 183). Beyond the pattern of deference between Clara and her brother, however, Brockden Brown showcases male authority by making the women and children in the novel the casualties of the male characters’ misdeeds. Therefore, it becomes apparent that the portrayal of women as victims to men’s actions does not limit itself to the genre of seduction novels. Though women took the brunt of the suffering for the misconduct in the novels, the men did not proceed through these situations unscathed, either. Therefore, *Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland* both emphasize the need for the moral improvement of both sexes in instances where sexuality is concerned and also where it is not.

In the essay “What is Feminist and Gender Criticism?,” Ross C. Murfin provides helpful context for an inclusive view of gender and its role within the analysis of these novels:

One distinction is based on focus: as the word implies, ‘feminists’ have concentrated their efforts on the study of women and women’s issues. Gender criticism, by contrast, has not been woman centered. It has tended to view the male and female sexes—and the masculine and feminine genders—in terms of a complicated continuum. (377)

Novelists address masculine constructs and feminine constructs with unique motives and with varying degrees of intensity. Even within these representations it is dangerous to attribute any starkly exclusive values to any author in any text. However, gender is central to a comprehensive analysis of early American literature and readers should not
avoid considering it simply because of its complexity. Focusing purely on the role of
dwomen, either in the novel or as readers, would clearly contribute to an analysis that is
both reductive and limited. As Cathy Davidson suggests in *No More Separate Spheres!: A Next Wave American Studies Reader*, “Gender does not mean ‘woman.’ Men have one,
too” (23). She explains further: “Leaving out gender as a category of analysis limits
political impact” (23). Therefore, I will work to consider all aspects of these constructs
carefully, in order to avoid essentialist terminology.

In the sections that follow, I am providing an analysis of the role of gender within
*Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland*. Rowson and Brockden Brown develop their respective
characters with the intention of outlining various models of success and failure in human
conduct. Through the blunders and triumphs of their characters, Rowson and Brockden
Brown highlight certain gender distinctions while bridging other gaps by acknowledging
that naïveté serves as the fatal flaw for both their male and female characters.

**ESTABLISHING THE NARRATIVE VOICE**

In the late eighteenth century, critics often regarded novels as an indulgent and
frivolous enterprise. Authors attempted to defend the usefulness of their craft through
asserting the truthfulness of their tales and establishing the benefits that society could
reap as a result of their production and reception. Michael T. Gilmore notes: “The belief
that a story really occurred meant that people would be more likely to take its moral to
heart, and the genre could better serve society through its rendering of behavior to be
emulated or avoided” (623). At the outset of *Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland*, Susanna
Rowson and Charles Brockden Brown each include an address to the reader that serves to
identify the novel’s primary audience, to ascertain the credibility of the novel’s content, and to establish the purpose of the tale as advisory in nature.

In the Preface to *Charlotte Temple*, Rowson establishes the framework for the novel and introduces the reader to the narrative voice that dictates Charlotte’s tale and interjects lessons on moral virtues throughout the novel. Rowson never fully characterizes this third-person omniscient narrator, but the Preface establishes the narrative tone of the novel as maternal. The narrator’s maternal concern becomes evident to the reader in the following statement: “While the tear of compassion still trembled in my eye for the unhappy Charlotte, I may have children of my own, said I, to whom this recital may be of use…” (5). By citing compassion as her motive, the narrator seeks to establish the purity of her intentions.

Though *Charlotte Temple* develops to include members of both sexes in its focus on moral improvement, the Preface establishes the primary focus of the novel on females. Rowson begins the novel with the following line: “For the perusal of the young and thoughtless of the fair sex….” Within this line, she equates the vulnerability of the novel’s main female character with her intended reader through her deliberate selection of the adjectives “young,” “thoughtless,” and “fair” in this address. These particular descriptions are condescending in nature and serve to highlight the stigma of female weakness that the narrator assigns to Charlotte Temple and to her young readers.

The first line of *Charlotte Temple* continues: “…this Tale of Truth is designed; and I could wish my fair readers to consider it as not merely the effusion of Fancy, but as a reality” (5). This line demonstrates the narrator’s desire for her readers to take the tale seriously, rather than dismissing Charlotte’s situation as fictional and improbable. If
Charlotte’s story is true, readers are more likely to make the connection between her situation and their own. By forging this connection, the narrator seeks to increase her reader’s bond to the story and its morals. Fostering sympathy through vicarious experience, the narrator seeks to render the reader more vulnerable to her instruction and advice. In Mulford’s Introduction to *The Power of Sympathy* and *The Coquette*, she highlights early American society’s resistance to view fiction as an eligible vehicle for such instruction:

[S]ome thought all novel reading a mark of the devil in the English wilderness, and they frowned on fiction (whether romances or novels) regularly marketed by the 1780s that featured sentimental tales of seduction, incest, suicide, and painful death. In the eyes of these readers, authors seeking to educate their audiences toward moral behavior should provide their advice in the edifying vehicles that would have no vices depicted in seducingly attractive ways. In other words, authors seeking merely to improve their readers should publish sermons, educational tracts, and/or conduct books. (xxix).

In response to this resistance, Rowson seeks to justify her purpose by asserting the truthfulness of *Charlotte Temple*.

To further establish the significance of the novel, Rowson writes: “I wrote with a mind anxious for the happiness of that sex whose morals and conduct have so powerful an influence on mankind in general” (6). This statement reaffirms the idea that the morality of women in early America held significant weight in assuring the prosperity of the new nation. By referring to the wide-ranging effects of female moral rectitude, the
narrator is able to build the novel’s credibility and to offset arguments against the usefulness of the genre.

To further reinforce the value of this cautionary tale, its narrator identifies insufficient guidance as the downfall of her female characters and establishes the novel’s ability to fulfill this need in its readers’ lives. The narrator refers to Charlotte and other potential female victims as those who have “neither friends to advise, or understanding to direct them” (5). *Charlotte Temple*, therefore, suggests that young women are particularly vulnerable in positions of isolation and/or independence. Within the novel, the narrator will specifically highlight the importance of deferring decisions to parental authority and allowing moral virtues to serve as a guide in their absence. Personifying these traditionally religious as well as secular values as friends, Rowson writes:

> Look, my dear friends, at yonder lovely Virgin, arrayed in a white robe devoid of ornament; behold the meekness of her countenance, the modesty of her gait; her handmaids are Humility, Filial Piety, Conjugal Affection, Industry, and Benevolence; her name is Content; she holds in her hand the cup of true felicity, and when once formed an intimate acquaintance with these her attendants, nay you must admit them as your bosom friends and chief counsellors, then, whatever may be your situation in life, the meek eyed Virgin will immediately take up her abode with you (34).

Rowson writes this cautionary tale with the intention to expose the reader to the unfortunate events that can occur when an individual neglects to adhere to parental obedience and filial duty. Charlotte does not ‘hold in her hand the cup of true felicity’

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10 Parental authority is tightly connected to religious authority in early American culture.
because she does not remain dutiful to her parents or her own sense of right and wrong. Through the use of a maternal tone, Rowson has the narrator align herself with the parental authority Rowson is promoting, which further asserts the reliability of this novel’s message.

Although seduction novels like *Charlotte Temple* predictably warn young females against the opposite sex, Rowson’s narrator establishes the idea that her young female readers, like the young Charlotte, may be susceptible to the deceit of immoral members of both sexes. The narrative voice identifies her audience as young women who “are thrown on an unfeeling world without the least power to defend themselves from the snares not only of the other sex, but from the more dangerous arts of the profligate of their own” (5). References to the “arts” of dissolute women reappear throughout the text with a negative connotation. In an exchange between Mr. Temple and his father, Rowson expands upon the concept of female arts: “Art, Sir!” cried Temple eagerly. “Lucy Eldridge is as free from art as she is from every other error. She is—” “Everything that is amiable and lovely,” said his father, interrupting him ironically: “no doubt in your opinion she is a pattern of excellence for all her sex to follow…”(22). Through this conversation, Rowson establishes the term art as the opposite of benevolence and virtue. Rowson also uses the term to describe Mademoiselle La Rue, the novel’s female villain. La Rue, Rowson writes: “saw her own power, and, with the art of a Circe, made every action appear to [Colonel Crayton] in what light she pleased” (73). These references indicate that artful women are aware of the power of their sexuality and in turn use this power to put on performances that allow them to acquire what they want from others with no regard for their well-being. These manipulative performances align the femme fatales
of the novel with the male seducers. By providing examples of female manipulators as well as male manipulators, Rowson expands the novel’s moral instruction to include members of both genders, even as the Preface remains undeniably one-sided in its address to young women.

Charles Brockden Brown addresses the readers of *Wieland* in a manner that is much more comprehensive than Susanna Rowson’s Preface to *Charlotte Temple*. In relaying the tale of *Wieland*, Brockden Brown notes that the writer’s purpose is “neither selfish nor temporary, but aims at the illustration of some important branches of the moral constitution of man” (3). In this declaration, Brockden Brown does not limit the gender of his audience, nor does he impose any qualities upon them. Though readers in the twenty first century may identify the use of the term “man” specifically with the male sex, the etymology of the word expands the meaning to include both male and female readers. This range of meanings starkly contrasts with Rowson’s address to the “young and thoughtless of the fair sex” (5). By addressing both genders in his Advertisement, Brockden Brown establishes a much more progressive view of gender in his novel from the outset.

However, like Rowson, Brockden Brown anticipates the reader’s disbelief in the story that follows and seeks to dissipate this skepticism: “It is hoped that intelligent readers will not disapprove of the manner in which appearances are solved, but that the solution will be found to correspond with the known principles of human nature” (3). Within this statement, Brockden Brown claims that while the ensuing story is remarkable, it is true. He further seeks to establish his credibility by referring to the novel’s historical framework and placing the events “between the conclusion of the French and the
beginning of the revolutionary war” (3-4). Aligning the novel with historical events and acknowledging the rarity of the novel’s circumstances serves to reinforce the credibility of the novel’s events.

To further establish the credibility of the tale, Brockden Brown clearly distinguishes his address to readers in the Advertisement from the predominant narrative voice of the novel. Where Rowson never explicitly provides readers with the identity of the narrator in *Charlotte Temple*, Brockden Brown initials the end of his Advertisement to assert his contribution. He also notifies his readers that Clara Wieland serves as the primary narrator for the remainder of the novel: “[T]his narrative is addressed, in an epistolary form, by the Lady whose story it contains, to a small number of friends, whose curiosity, with regard to it, had been greatly awakened” (3). This sentence tells the reader that Clara Wieland has control over her own story in a way that Charlotte Temple does not. In this way, Brockden Brown immediately grants Clara a significant amount of agency because her story does not pass through another medium on its way to the reader. Rowson tells Charlotte’s story, on the other hand, through an authorial voice, which claims: “The circumstances on which I have founded this novel were related to me some little time since by an old lady who had personally known Charlotte” (5). Though each female character is defenseless at many points in her novels, Brockden Brown grants Clara the power to defend herself and her circumstances to the reader; Rowson does not give Charlotte that opportunity.

*Wieland*’s epistolary format further serves to bolster the intimate connection between Clara and her reader and contributes to the believability of the tale. By announcing that Clara has written the letters to her friends, Brockden Brown gives the
reader no reason to believe that Clara would be dishonest regarding her circumstances. Whether the reader can actually trust Clara or not, however, is questionable as the plot unfolds.

While both Susanna Rowson and Charles Brockden Brown ask their respective readers to believe in the authenticity of their characters’ individual circumstances, it is the probability of the plot’s repetition that separates *Charlotte Temple* from *Wieland*. Brockden Brown writes: “It will not be objected that the instances of similar delusions are rare, because it is the business of moral painters to exhibit their subject in its most instructive and memorable forms” (3). In this way, Brockden Brown suggests that he does not seek to provide advice to his readers in the event that they should be in a situation that mirrors the actual occurrences within the novel. Rather, he implies that a reader can apply the moral instruction surrounding this tale to many instances of human nature. Rowson, on the other hand, suggests that *Charlotte Temple*’s plot has potential for great frequency and applicability for members of the young female sex:

If the following tale should save one hapless fair one from the errors which ruined poor Charlotte, or rescue from impending misery the heart of one anxious parent,

I shall feel a much higher gratification in reflecting on this performance. (6)

While Rowson’s gratification lies in the prevention of seduction plots such as the one that surrounds Charlotte, Brockden Brown does not provide a more specific goal for his writing than the moral improvement of the human race.

Categorizing *Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland* as a seduction novel and a gothic novel, respectively, is evident even in these beginning addresses. Rowson’s explicit address to young women in the Preface indicates a focus on sexuality and a heightened
attention to gender that is absent from *Wieland's Advertisement*. The authorial voice of *Charlotte Temple* seeks to appeal to the reader's sentiment in the opening text, which contrasts starkly with Brockden Brown’s rather detached and empirical address. Rowson’s narrator uses emotionally charged language where Brockden Brown simply delivers facts regarding the circumstances of the novel. The emphasis on emotion in *Charlotte Temple*’s Preface and the emphasis on reality in *Wieland’s Advertisement* serve to highlight the distinctive focuses of the two novels and distinguish their belonging to different genres.

Though short in length, the beginning addresses to *Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland* are rich in content and context. Rowson and Brockden Brown each condense the purpose of a complex novel to the ultimate goal of improving the morality of others. However, as each novel progresses beyond its introduction, complications in character development and interaction unravel paradoxes in the novelists’ respective treatments of gender.

**CONSTRUCTING THE FEMALE LEAD**

“A tall, elegant girl looked at Montraville and blushed,” Rowson writes (9), introducing Charlotte Temple to the reader through her relation to the man that seduces her. Throughout the novel, Rowson continually refers to Charlotte as a lovely or sweet girl, but this passage is the last time the reader reads that she is “tall.” While this detail is insignificant in isolation, Rowson links Charlotte’s height to her moral standing in the novel. Rowson illustrates this connection when Montraville falls in love with Julia Franklin, a woman whose virtues have not been compromised: “Julia Franklin was the very reverse of Charlotte Temple: she was tall, elegantly shaped, and possessed much of
the air and manner of a woman of fashion” (70). Through this parallel, Rowson aligns Charlotte’s moral deficiencies with her physical stature. The subsequent descriptions of Charlotte’s loveliness and sweetness serve as a contrast to the first image that readers have of her. From the moment that Montraville sets his eyes upon her, Charlotte shrinks, in effect, into a position of submission.

In order to develop Charlotte’s character, Rowson strays from the main narrative to relay the circumstances through which Charlotte’s parents became united. The circumstance of Lucy Eldridge’s union with Mr. Temple serves to highlight the strong moral foundation upon which Charlotte’s parents raised her. Rowson uses the moral rectitude and general goodness of Charlotte’s family to heighten the drama that surrounds her slip from righteousness. Rowson shows that if a young woman coming from a background of such strong morality could fall prey to seduction, the potential for other young women to suffer the same fate becomes more likely, especially those young women who emerge into society without such shining examples of honor to serve as their guide.

When Rowson finally gives Charlotte a voice in Chapter VII, she says, “I cannot think we have done exactly right in going out this evening, Mademoiselle…. Nay, I am sure it was not right; for I expected to be very happy, but was sadly disappointed” (29). Using the moral compass that her parents instilled within her, Charlotte reflects on her actions and expresses remorse. This expression of remorse marks Charlotte’s character throughout the remainder of the plot. Rowson demonstrates Charlotte’s ability to decipher between right and wrong in her first statement of the novel, but also establishes a pattern that dictates the course of Charlotte’s future—she ruminates on her errors in
hindsight but is ill equipped to avoid these unpleasant outcomes before they are set in motion. Rowson’s focus on Charlotte’s morality and good intentions suggests not that she is a flawed character, but rather that her goodness blinds her to the ulterior motives of others. As such, Rowson places Charlotte upon a pedestal while simultaneously throwing her off of it. Rowson renders Charlotte worthy of the reader’s approbation with regard to her integrity and synchronously renders her deserving of their pity for the weakness that such unguarded innocence produces.

It comes as no surprise to the seasoned reader of tales like Charlotte’s that the main female lead in a seduction novel should be portrayed in terms of her weakness and vulnerability. In my interview with Dr. Marion Rust, she explained, “What makes the story of the seduction novel so great is that the prodigal daughter is left to die. It is only in death that she is able to find redemption.” Charlotte Temple is no exception. After Charlotte is betrayed by her heart and, by extension, Mademoiselle La Rue, Montraville, and Belcour, she is referred to throughout the remainder of the novel as poor and deluded. Montraville says he will “pay visit to [his] poor melancholy Charlotte” (70) and Mr. Temple refers to her as his “poor deluded child” (90). However, the last adjective to accompany Charlotte’s name in the novel is “lovely” (118). In this final pairing, Rowson suggests that readers should look upon Charlotte’s story with compassion, not disapproval. Though Charlotte suffers throughout the majority of the novel for her mistakes, Rowson concludes the novel by谴责 those who deceive her. Instead of placing full responsibility on Charlotte for her fate, the narrator sentences Montraville, Belcour, and Mademoiselle La Rue to misery and shame for their actions against her innocence. The displacement of shame in the final segments of the novel serves to offset
the novel’s locus of weakness. Though Rowson sculpts Charlotte as a stereotypically frail female, she emphasizes the moral fragility of the other characters, thereby shifting the focus from gendered weakness to human immorality.

In Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*, Clara vacillates between demonstrating a significant amount of agency and falling into a regressive role of female submission. The first line of the novel is: “I feel little reluctance in complying with your request” (5). Compliance, therefore, initiates the tale that follows and highlights Clara’s capacity to submit to the will of others. However, Brockden Brown offsets the theme of submission by the fact that Clara has sole control over the narrative. Her narrative position grants her supreme authority over her reader’s knowledge of events and situations; she decides what to include, what to exclude, and how to frame her story. However, Clara undermines her power by bidding the reader to “[m]ake what use of the tale [he/she] shall think proper” (5). Though she is able to present her tale as she sees fit, she ultimately acknowledges the fact that she cannot control how the reader will receive it. The tug and pull of power and submission, as evident in these beginning lines, carries throughout the remainder of the novel.

Clara’s economic situation further reinforces the independence and agency of her character. After her father’s death, the family property is divided equally between herself and her brother. In Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro’s edition of *Wieland*, they provide the following note to contextualize the significance of this distribution:

> Under the laws of “coverture,” part of Anglo-American common law in this period, women had no legal personhood or formal independence. A woman’s legal identity (and consequently her right to own property, sign contracts, and so
on) was absorbed into or “covered” by that of her father, husband, or other male guardian…The relatively equitable division of Wieland patrimony between siblings, by contrast, implies that Clara has a potential for freedom from the period’s customary restrictions on women’s behavior and status. (22)

Barnard and Shapiro, therefore, highlight the uniqueness of Clara’s position within society. The ownership of her own property grants Clara an identity that is separate from her male relations. This opportunity allows her to live freely from the anxieties of procuring a romantic connection. Where such connections are concerned, however, she is also relieved of the pressures to marry for property value and can instead focus on other matters.

Brockden Brown directly undermines the independence that Clara exhibits with regard to her economic position, however, by the way she chooses to behave in spite of her potential for freedom. She often submits to prescribed gender roles despite her legal freedom from them. One such example is the way she spends her leisure time. In Chapter IV, she notes: “We females were busy at the needle, while my brother and Pleyel were bandying quotations and syllogisms” (29). This quotation is a classic embodiment of the concept of separate spheres; the women portray themselves through their involvement in domestic affairs, while the men portray themselves through their involvement in intellectual pursuits. Clara’s participation in these gendered divisions is voluntary, so her choice to reinforce these roles in spite of her remove from them complicates the more progressive aspects of her character.

In Chapter V, Pleyel highlights the duality of Clara’s character by acknowledging her position above other women and asserting his assumption of her inferiority and
deference to men. He begins relaying a story to Clara, stating: “[S]ay not a word to Catharine. Her strength of mind is inferior to yours” (39). In this statement, Pleyel positions Clara above Catharine and trusts that she is capable of withstanding the shock of Pleyel and Theodore Wieland’s presumed supernatural experience. However, Pleyel proceeds to relay a discussion between himself and Theodore Wieland that indicates his perception of her inferiority. The conversation follows: Theodore Wieland notes, “There are my sister and wife, with whom it will remain for you to maintain the contest. And trust me, they are adversaries whom all your force and stratagem will never subdue.” Pleyel, however, counters the notion of strength that Theodore Wieland supposes by stating: “I insinuated they would model themselves by his will” (40). This supposition reinforces the idea that Clara vacillates between autonomy and submission. Interestingly, Clara does not provide commentary on this dialogue; as the narrator, her choice not to address her opinion on this matter suggests a degree of deference on its own.

As the novel progresses and terror unfolds, Clara’s weakness becomes more prevalent than her strengths. Brockden Brown often portrays her as passive and stupefied by the events of the novel. Her independence is removed from her by fear, and she states: “That solitude, formerly so dear to me, could no longer be endured” (53). Her most obvious claim to agency was the ownership and maintenance of her own home; after the suspicious and awe-inducing events of the novel unfold, Clara seeks Pleyel’s company for protection, and he takes up residency with her. Clara’s threatened safety and her vulnerability to solitude mark an impediment to her independence that is indicative of the submissive qualities that overtake her characterization throughout the remainder of the plot.
Though Clara portrays herself as extremely weak and vulnerable to the horrific events that ensue, she is able to escape death and proceed with the task of setting the tale into print. The fact that she does not perish as a result of shock, as many women in early American literature did, is significant. She is able to compose herself after these events to the extent that she is able to reflect upon her actions, as well as the actions of others, in order to provide an assessment of the circumstances. While Clara is comprised of many paradoxes, she is ultimately able to survive in spite of her tainted experiences. The fact that Brockden Brown allows her to live grants Clara the capacity to learn from her lived experience. The opportunity to survive is one that the authors of early American literature denied to many female characters. Clara’s survival, therefore, places her above characters like Charlotte Temple who merely serve as an embodiment of caution for other individuals.

Though *Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland* are both steeped in cautionary tradition, their main female leads handle their respective situations quite differently. Rowson and Brockden Brown portray Charlotte Temple and Clara Wieland as similarly gullible characters, but their emotional reactions to their situations render them dissimilar. In my interview with Dr. Lauren Coats, she affirmed this point and remarked, “Clara has significantly more fun with it than Charlotte does.” Dr. Coats suggested that Clara revels in her agency and seems to enjoy the thrill of the storyline, where Charlotte’s agency merely produces despair. Throughout Charlotte’s narrative, she anxiously anticipates the possible consequences of her actions and is often absorbed in remorse. Clara Wieland, on the other hand, is preoccupied by the sensationalism of her circumstances, which she relays in this statement to her readers: “How will your wonder, and that of your
companions, be excited by my story!” (6). This statement is indicative of Clara’s
treatment of her tale; she is often so wrapped up in the excitement of the events that she
neglects rationality and reason.

*Charlotte Temple*’s categorization as a seduction novel and *Wieland*’s
categorization as a gothic novel explain the difference in Clara and Charlotte’s divergent
reactions to their circumstances. The remorse of the main female lead in the seduction
genre is meant to vicariously reprimand the behavior of the reader. However, the gothic
genre’s features of horror and supernaturalism necessitate the awe of the character and
the reader alike. In this way, Clara’s excitement and Charlotte’s remorse are reflective of
their respective genres.

Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* and Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* centralize their
focus on the experiences of their female leads. While Charlotte and Clara occupy
different positions of authority within their respective novels, each serves as the central
focus of her novel’s events. Charlotte Temple consistently occupies a submissive role,
where Clara Wieland sways between roles of submission and autonomy. Rowson
highlights the susceptibility of Charlotte’s character in a way that reinforces gender
stereotypes of frailty and highlights a prevailing lack of strength in her convictions.
Brockden Brown also portrays Clara in terms of her lack of conviction; she is both
independent and inherently deferent to patriarchy. The main female leads of *Charlotte
Temple* and *Wieland*, therefore, are representative of the wide-ranging interpretations and
applications of gender roles in early American life and literature.
EXERCISING MALE AUTHORITY

In *Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland*, the submissive qualities of the female characters are accentuated by the recklessness and violence of their male counterparts. Like the female characters in both novels, the male characters are flawed. Society’s unequal distribution of power between the genders, however, combines with these flaws to produce disastrous effects on the novels’ female characters. In *Charlotte Temple*, Rowson primarily utilizes the archetypal soldier to illustrate this concept. In *Wieland*, however, Brockden Brown does not limit his male characters’ source of power to anything other than their gender. Regardless of their variations, both *Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland* demonstrate the realities of dominant male power and its potential to victimize women.

Authors of seduction novels emphasized male dominance specifically within the realm of sexuality and romantic pursuits. This genre capitalizes on the frailty of its main female characters, highlighting their incapacity to ward off the advances of a strong-willed man. Authors placed particular emphasis on the frailty of the female protagonists in these cautionary tales by using hyper-masculine antagonists. The dominance of the male characters is no match for their delicate, impressionable female counterparts. In *Charlotte Temple*, Rowson explicitly discusses this vulnerability in the following passage:

A man of an indifferent appearance, will, when arrayed in a military habit, shew to advantage; but when beauty of person, elegance of manner, and an easy method of paying compliments, are united to the scarlet quote, smart cockade, and
Rowson accomplishes several things by attributing the title of soldier to her male lead in this seduction novel. Associating Montraville with the military insinuates that he possesses qualities of roughness and ruthlessness that serve as a distinct contrast to Charlotte’s kind, gentle nature. Further, it places Montraville in a recognized position of authority and therefore suggests that Charlotte will relinquish all of her agency to him, ceasing any behavior that isn’t congruent with docile obedience.

The use of the soldier in seduction narratives is popular because soldiers are notorious for their propensity to conquer. Accustomed to achieving objectives by force, the archetypal soldier does not relinquish control in the presence of resistance. By definition, a soldier’s duty is to persist at all costs. In *Charlotte Temple*, Rowson highlights the soldier’s tenacity through Montraville’s pursuit of Charlotte. The language that Rowson employs in his encounters with her emphasizes domination. When Montraville comes across Charlotte and Mademoiselle La Rue in the courtyard, Rowson writes: “He overtook them” (11). Later, when the group meets again, Rowson writes: “Montraville, who had waited their coming with impatience, received them with rapturous and unbounded acknowledgments of their condescension” (37). The use of terms such as overtook, impatience, rapturous, and unbounded suggest a highly charged immediacy that Rowson wants her reader to associate with his character. She emphasizes this immediacy by acknowledging the fact that soldiers have an unpredictable claim on the future. Montraville states: “I never think of the future, but am determined to make the most of the present” (Rowson 10). This concept of brashness is what marks Montraville’s
character and illuminates his disregard for consequences. As such, his pursuit of pleasure is unlimited by the fact that he considers penalties only momentarily and then disregards them to partake in immediate satisfactions.

Rowson describes Montraville as adamant in his pursuit of Charlotte and persistent in his efforts to break her will, but she does not suggest that he puts forth these energies with the intention of inflicting pain or misfortune upon her. Rather, Rowson suggests that Montraville simply has not fully considered the outcomes of his actions: “[H]ad these dreadful consequences been placed before him in a proper light, the humanity of his nature would have urged him to give up the pursuit” (38). The narrative voice of *Charlotte Temple*, therefore, sympathizes with Montraville. Though Rowson portrays his actions as careless and the exertion of his power spurs the tragic events of the novel, Rowson suggests that he, like Charlotte, simply lacks the guidance that might save him from committing these follies. Marion Rust expatiated on this concept in our conversation, stating:

For many people, soldiers were the male version of the sentimental heroine. They, too, were youthful, vulnerable objects of seduction. They were seduced into service and perhaps licentiousness as well.

When young males enter the military, they are often not prepared to handle the power of their new role responsibly. Such is the case with young women who come of age and are not prepared to handle the responsibilities that are enmeshed in the new territory of their sexuality. *Charlotte Temple*, therefore, suggests that Montraville’s seduction of Charlotte is simply the result of the characters’ impulsive will to fulfill traditional roles of authority and submission in the absence of proper guidance.
Within *Wieland*, Brockden Brown complicates the power distribution by establishing Clara Wieland’s claims to independence. However, the men in the novel still occupy a position of authority over her and her sister-in-law Catharine. The primary examples of this dominant power are found in the male characters’ actions of intrusion, belittling conversations, and violence.

Speaking of his wife and sister, Theodore Wieland asserts early in the novel that he “live[s] to be their protector and friend, and not their tyrant and foe” (40). However, as the novel progresses, his actions reflect the very opposite. Pleyel, on the other hand, assumes their position of subordination from the beginning. He presumes that “Catharine would think obedience her duty” in a situation where Wieland must make a decision regarding the family (Brown 40). Pleyel’s presumption, though Wieland contends with it, is representative of the period’s typically accepted views on women’s servitude. Mary Beth Norton contextualizes the concept of female submission in *Liberty’s Daughters*:

Eighteenth-century Americans proved to have very clear ideas of which tasks were properly ‘feminine’ and which were not; of what behavior was appropriate for females, especially white females; and of what functions ‘the sex’ was expected to perform. Moreover, both men and women continually indicated in subtle ways that they believed women to be inferior to men. (xviii)

Therefore, Pleyel exhibits beliefs that are concordant with the novel’s setting in pre-revolutionary America. Wieland’s resistance to these views, however, is progressive for this period.

While the characters’ treatment of gender varies in *Wieland*, Brockden Brown utilizes the gothic nature and supernatural aspects of the novel to demonstrate the
equalizing effect that terror has upon the novel’s male and female characters. In some respects, supernatural authority trumps gendered authority. Readers can see this pattern specifically in Wieland’s first experience with disembodied voices: “To be uttered by Catharine at a place, and on an occasion like these, enhanced the mystery. I could do nothing but obey” (32). Theodore Wieland, therefore, submits to a warning that he believes his wife has issued. The role-reversal of a husband’s submission to his wife is atypical for the period; it is brought upon, however, by the alarming and surprising circumstances that surrounded the command. While the women of the novel do not undermine Theodore Wieland’s frightful concerns regarding the situation, the men of the novel often trivialize women’s concerns. Pleyel inflicts this discourtesy upon Clara: “He treated my fears with ridicule” (53). This articulation is demonstrative of the double standards that Brockden Brown represents within *Wieland*.

Another aspect of male power within *Wieland* is evident in Carwin’s disrespect for and intrusion upon Clara’s privacy:

> Your house was rendered, by your frequent and long absences, easily accessible to my curiosity…. I was of a different sex: I was not your husband; I was not even your friend; yet my knowledge of you was of that kind, which conjugal intimacies can give, and, in some respects, more accurate. (155)

In this confession, Carwin details his admission into her home without her permission and his subsequent investigation of her private life without her knowledge. His references to the depth of his investigations also suggest that this intrusion was not a minor offense. To attain knowledge that extended beyond that of a close relation without her cognizance
reflects his claim to ownership over her privacy through a blatant disregard for the notion that, as a woman, she should have a choice in the matter.

Before Clara becomes aware of Carwin’s insult through intrusion, however, his biloquism also contributes to her suffering with regard to her relationship with Pleyel. The circumstances are such that Carwin’s disembodied voices lead Pleyel to believe that Clara has had an affair with Carwin, although she has not. Clara is doubly wounded by this situation because Carwin dishonestly impersonates her voice for his benefit, and the effect of this situation on Pleyel is such that he refuses to allow Clara to defend herself. After Pleyel unjustly accuses her, Clara notes: “Saying this, he rushed out of the house. I saw him in a few moments hurrying along the path which led to my brother’s. I had no power to prevent his going, or to recall, or to follow him” (85). Brockden Brown uses this situation to suggest that both men assume power over Clara. In Carwin’s case, he makes use of her voice to fulfill his own need without considering the effect it may have on her. As far as Pleyel is concerned, he assumes that Clara has no right to provide her own explanation for the event and therefore assumes that his perception is the sole authority on the circumstance.

The preceding examples indicate the inclination for Wieland’s male characters to victimize the novel’s female characters. Brockden Brown further and most explicitly demonstrates this pattern when Theodore Wieland murders his wife and children and proceeds with intentions to harm his sister. The pattern of female victimization is also present in seduction novels, but the physical brutality and the explicit intentions for harm in Wieland separate Brockden Brown’s novel from Charlotte Temple. In Charlotte Temple, the characters do not act with the intention to harm; they simply do not consider
carefully enough the consequences of their actions. Also, Rowson’s characters express remorse, while Brockden Brown’s primary assailant attempts to justify his actions instead. Theodore Wieland attempts to excuse his actions by citing supernatural or religious causes, but Carwin reveals the circumstances of the situation and insists that the disembodied voices that he is responsible for did not, in fact, call for these cruel actions. Still, Brockden Brown has Theodore Wieland unwaveringly insist that he is devoid of blame by stating: “I am pure from all stain. I believed that my God was my mover!” (168). Brockden Brown has the violence in *Wieland*, in addition to the male created voices that instigate this terror, render the female characters victimized by way of both physical and mental attacks.

In *Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland*, the male characters occupy a position of authority over their female counterparts with few exceptions. The dominant male power within the novels coincides with the sentiments of the time period in which they were set. The emotional and physical pain within the novels, however, is not simply limited to members of the female sex. In the section that follows, I will expand the concept of immorality beyond gender boundaries.

**LEVELING GENDER BARRIERS THROUGH DECEPTION**

In both *Charlotte Temple* and *Wieland*, Rowson and Brockden Brown emphasize the fallibility of both their male and female characters by exploring those characters’ vulnerability to be deceived. As part of the seduction genre, Rowson primarily emphasizes the role of deception within the realm of love. However, she extends this discussion of deception to the realm of friendship as well. In *Wieland*, Brockden Brown
extends the conversation still further, acknowledging the deceptive power of others but also calling into question the reliability of one’s own senses. Jay Fliegelman notes in his Introduction to *Wieland* and *Memoirs of the Biloquist*:

Brown’s novel of authority misrepresented and authority imagined is a terrifying post-French Revolutionary account of the fallibility of the human mind and, by extension, of democracy itself…Brown thus exposes the manipulative fictions of representation that disguise the fact that representation always involves distortion and loss. (x-xi)

In this excerpt, Fliegelman emphasizes the destructive power of representation and interpretation. Acknowledging that naïveté and innocence render both genders defenseless to manipulation, Rowson and Brockden Brown promote the necessity for their male and female characters to exercise skepticism within all avenues of their lives.

In *Charlotte Temple*, Rowson suggests that the novel’s male characters as well as the novel’s female characters can exhibit the fatal flaw of innocence. Colonel Crayton is a prime example, as Rowson states that he “was beloved for his humanity and benevolence by all who knew him, but he was easy and unsuspicious of himself, and became a dupe to the artifice of others” (58). Rowson suggests that the hazards of innocence can affect both genders, but she suggests that this innocence is often illuminated or taken advantage of in situations of romantic involvement. Colonel Crayton’s main blunder is in his pursuit of Madam La Rue, who has ulterior motives for her connection with him. This detail gives the novel a dynamism that isn’t present in many of the other seduction novels, whose authors seem to underestimate the potential of female characters toward rake-like, scheming tendencies. Further, the novel begins with a
tale in which a man whom Mr. Temple had trusted with his family and his financial situation takes advantage of him. This man breaches Mr. Temple’s trust when he desires a romantic connection with Mr. Temple’s daughter, Lucy. He leaves Mr. Temple with a predicament that leads to his placement in jail (Rowson 15-23). The outcome of these events suggests that romances can be dangerous for both genders and that both sexes must be wary of blind trust and innocence.

Further exploring this idea, Rowson calls attention to the shock that Charlotte experiences when she becomes aware of La Rue’s intentions to marry a man other than the one to whom she had initially imparted her word at the outset of their journey. Montraville is, ironically, the character who points out the silliness of her innocent belief in the goodness of the woman: he “laughed at her simplicity, called her a little ideot, and patting her on the cheek, said she knew nothing of the world” (207). His patting her on the cheek is a paternal gesture that suggests he sees Charlotte as a childish and impressionable woman. This condescension alludes to the unfortunate fate she will meet with at his very hands. In this way, Rowson suggests that while innocence has its endearing qualities, and an idealistic view of the world is not altogether undesirable, it is necessary to meet with harsh realities in order to avoid despair.

Though Rowson utilizes these instances to reflect upon deception within the realm of romantic involvement, she expands the consequences of innocence to the realm of friendship as well. Within *Charlotte Temple*, same-sex friendships are just as at-risk as opposite-sex romances. In fact, the narrator suggests that Mademoiselle La Rue is particularly at fault for the unhappy circumstances of Charlotte’s life. Speaking of La Rue, she notes:
[O]nce a woman has stifled the sense of shame in her own bosom…she grows hardened in guilt, and will spare no pains to bring down innocence and beauty to the shocking level with herself: and this proceeds from that diabolical spirit of envy, which repines at seeming another in the full possession of that respect and esteem which she can no longer hope to enjoy. (32)

In this excerpt, Rowson suggests that La Rue is jealous of Charlotte’s purity and will therefore attempt all means necessary to lead her into temptation. Rowson represents La Rue’s intentions to do so as particularly evil because, unlike Montraville’s intentions, hers is to lead Charlotte into ruin. Also, because she is of the same sex, an unspoken trust renders Charlotte defenseless against her guile.

Another example of deception among friends in the novel occurs between Montraville and Belcour. After Montraville has seduced Charlotte, Belcour ruins Charlotte’s image in Montraville’s eyes through suggesting that the two are having an affair. Though untrue, Montraville believes his friend and states: “Belcour, you have injured me in a tender point,” to which Belcour replies, “Prithee, Jack, do not make a serious matter of it: how could I refuse the girl’s advances? and thank heaven she is not your wife” (86, 87). This exchange is interesting because Belcour defers his blame to Charlotte. Montraville, though aware of Belcour’s treacherous tendencies after this incident, ignores this behavior and instills his trust within him once more. Rowson has Montraville discover Belcour’s deception at the end of the novel, and the two fight, resulting in Belcour’s death. Montraville, initially the novel’s villain, therefore becomes the victim to his own innocence and naïve trust.
In *Wieland*, Brockden Brown also highlights the effect that love can have on one’s judgment. Clara states: “Surely that passion is worthy to be abhorred which obscures our understanding, and urges us to the commission of injustice” (69).

Throughout the novel, Clara develops an interest in Pleyel that reduces her to game-playing and manipulation. She earlier notes: “That the belief of my having bestowed my heart upon another, produced in my friend none but ludicrous sensations” (60). She is aware of the power that matters of the heart have upon her love interest and acknowledges the fact that this power leads people to committing unfair crimes of the heart. Pleyel, whom Brockden Brown typically characterizes by his inclination toward reason, demonstrates an inability to apply this reason to love. When he does not receive a letter from his German love interest, which could have very easily been lost en route, he contends that it could be “nothing less than infidelity… [T]he miscarriage of a letter was hardly in reach of possibility” (37). Therefore, Brockden Brown suggests that love can cloud readers’ judgment just as it does these characters’.

Throughout *Wieland*, however, love is not Brockden Brown’s central focus. Rather, he has the characters in the novel struggle with the supernatural, or what they perceive to be the supernatural. Carwin is responsible for the creation of disembodied voices that impart terror on the other characters and spur the tragic events of the novel into motion. The mysterious nature of the voices leads the characters to ruminate on several possibilities for their appearances. However, the characters continually misattribute these voices to supernatural causes, rather than attempting to rationally explain them. The first appearance of the voices prompts Theodore Wieland to state: “Your assurances are solemn and unanimous; and yet I must deny credit to your
assertions or disbelieve the testimony of my senses” (31). In this statement, Brockden Brown has Theodore Wieland present his choice to be either a belief in community or belief in himself. As the novel unravels, Theodore Wieland chooses the latter and terror ensues. Brockden Brown suggests, therefore, that it is better to corroborate our beliefs with others than to trust in our own perceptions. At the end of the novel, Theodore Wieland defers responsibility for his actions by stating, “If I erred, it was not my judgment that deceived me, but my senses” (168). In this statement, Brockden Brown has Theodore Wieland suggest that his judgment is in line with what he perceived the situation to be. Therefore, Brockden Brown presents the argument that sound judgment cannot protect us for the errors of our senses.

Overall, both Charlotte Temple and Wieland suggest that fallibility is not limited to either males or females, nor is it exclusive to situations that involve sexuality. In this way, Rowson and Brockden Brown level the barriers between the genders because they suggest that errors in judgment and perception are universal.

**DETERMINING THE MESSAGES**

Charlotte Temple and Wieland fit into the cautionary tradition, warning readers against many possible consequences for common missteps. However, within this purpose, Rowson and Brockden Brown employ varying elements, situations, and characterizations to accomplish their intentions. In the Introduction to Revolution and the Word, Cathy Davidson labels the novel as “[d]ecentralized, polyphonic, [and] almost impossible to pin down” (13). Her description echoes this notion that Brockden Brown spelled out almost two centuries earlier in Wieland: “There is no determinate way in
which the subject can be viewed” (34). Charlotte Temple and Wieland do not have a singular message for all readers to receive; rather, the novels are multifaceted in their didacticism. To narrow the focus of either novel as it relates to any given topic is to undermine the concept of vastness that characterized early American culture. As such, I am not arguing that the authors meant simply for readers to focus on the frailty of the novels’ female leads, the novels’ representation of dominant male authority, or the novels’ equalization of these barriers through the exploration of naïveté. Instead, I contend that there is no singular truth to extract from the early American novel. Rather, the application of skepticism in combination with the promotion of rational thinking allows the reader to absorb all of the elements without reducing the messages or attempting to pigeonhole the characterization of any given group or gender within the novels. The variations within both Charlotte Temple and Wieland remind readers that individuals, like novels, are multidimensional.
APPENDIX: PLOT SUMMARIES OF THE TWO TEXTS

Entries from The Oxford Companion to American Literature

Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth

Sentimental romance by Susanna Rowson, published in England (1791) and in the U.S. (1794). Based on experiences of the author’s family, it was “designed…for the perusal of the young and thoughtful of the fair sex.” By 1933 it had gone through 161 editions in the U.S. A sequel, Charlotte’s Daughter (1828), is usually published as Lucy Temple.

At 15 Charlotte is a pupil in Mme Du Pont’s school for young ladies. An army officer, Montraville, aided by an unscrupulous teacher, Mlle La Rue, seduces the girl, who elopes with him from England to New York. There he deserts her to marry an heiress, Julia Franklin. Charlotte gives birth to a daughter, Lucy, but abandoned even by the heartless Mlle La Rue, now married to Colonel Crayton, she dies in poverty. Her father later adopts Lucy, but refuses to punish the repentant Montraville. The latter in a duel kills his former friend Belcour, who had further misled Charlotte, and returns to the tender Julia (Hart 199-20).
Wieland; or, The Transformation

Epistolary Gothic romance by C.B. Brown, published in 1798. The elder Wieland, a German mystic, emigrates to Pennsylvania, erects a mysterious temple on his estate, and dies there one night by spontaneous combustion. His wife dies soon afterward, and their children, Clara and the younger Wieland [Theodore], depend for friendship on Catherine Pleyel. Wieland marries Catherine, and Clara falls in love with Henry Pleyel, who is engaged to a woman in Germany. Into their happy circle enters a mysterious vagabond, Carwin (see Memoirs of Carwin), and at the same time comes the first of a series of warnings from unearthly voices. Henry falls in love with Clara after one of these disembodied voices announces the death of his German fiancée. When circumstances force him to believe that Clara and Carwin have had an affair, Pleyel deserts her, discovers his former fiancée to be alive, and marries her. Wieland, inheriting his father’s fanaticism, is driven mad by the voices, and murders his wife and children. Carwin then confesses to Clara that a “mischievous daemon” led him to test the family courage, producing the mysterious voices by ventriloquism to command Wieland to desist. The unhappy madman commits suicide, Carwin departs to a remote district of Pennsylvania, and Clara marries Pleyel after the death of his first wife (Hart 720).
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