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The Scientific Aspect of Melodrama: The Mind/Body Connection in the Late Eighteenth Century Seduction Novel

BY NICHOLE WILSON

Nichole graduated from Bridgewater State College in 2005. This piece was originally written as a term paper for Dr. Ann Brunjes' English Seminar. It was then presented at NCUR. Nichole would like to thank Drs. Lee Torda and Catherine Womack for their assistance and encouragement.

Charlotte Temple and *The Coquette* belong to a group of books that, according to Jane Tompkins, is alleged by twentieth century criticism to "present a picture of life so oversimplified and improbable, that only the most naïve and self-deceiving reader could believe it" (152). In his book, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fielder calls this sentimentalism in literature the dissolution of the Age of Reason "in a debauch of tearfulness" (38). As a result, the works of Susanna Rowson, author of the 1794 American novel *Charlotte Temple*, and Hannah Foster, author of 1797 American novel *The Coquette*, among other female writers, are called "flagrantly bad best-seller[s] before the [arrival in America] of the serious successful novel" (93).

In her book *Sensational Designs*, Jane Tompkins argues that the domestic novel can stand up on its own merit. I would add that these novels and their predecessors, the late eighteenth century seduction novels, can even stand up to the Twentieth Century critics, because the sentiment in these novels does not contradict the pragmatics of the Enlightenment. In fact, one particular facet of scientific discourse makes the melodrama of the late eighteenth century seduction novel seem not only *reasonable* but probable. In *The Coquette*, for example, Eliza's "disorder of the mind" causes her physical demise, suggesting a causal connection between her mind and body. This mind/body connection was a topic of discussion for Enlightenment thinkers, and both *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette*, whether purposefully or accidentally, present a scenario that challenges the twentieth century criticism that allege sentimental fiction "presents a picture of life so oversimplified and improbable, that only the most naïve and self-deceiving reader could believe it" (Tompkins 152) – a naïve reader, no, but perhaps a reader of philosophy.

When most readers hear the name René Descartes, they most likely recall his famous declaration from *Discourse on Method*, published in 1637: "I think therefore I am." However, Descartes' theories about existence went as far as to establish what Dr. Robert Wozniak of Bryn Mawr College calls "the first systematic account" of the relationship between the mind and body, a subject reaching as far back as classical philosophers and as far ahead as today.¹ This system, called Cartesian dualism is based on the idea that the activities of the mind have an effect or consequence on the activities of the body and vice versa.² It is this system³ of causal interaction that is especially present in the novels *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette*.

In order to demonstrate Cartesian dualism's presence in these novels, I'd like to take a moment to summarize it. Descartes believed that although the soul is united to the whole body, its main seat is in a small gland in the brain called the pineal gland (*Passions* 46). This, he said, is what people mean when they refer to the heart, also known as the seat of passions. The reason why the pineal gland has been mistaken for the heart organ is because we feel passion there via the nervous system. Thus, according to Descartes, not only does the mind receive messages from the body and cause emotions but the soul seated in the mind "radiates forth [in the] animal spirits⁴, nerves, and even the blood" of the body (47). Descartes did not say exactly how the soul radiates forth in the body, and Robert Wozniak calls Descartes' theory a legacy, which created, in his words, "intellectual chaos." New theories about the mind and body relationship cropped up during the Enlightenment; although not all could agree just how this connection is possible, most agreed that the mind and body were connected in some way. The idea of this relationship – specifically Descartes' version – seems to have been also taken to heart by writers of literature who used their imaginations as to what the theory in action might look like.

Just as the exact nature of the connection between

the mind and body remained ambiguous to men of the Enlightenment, it is unclear what the exact nature of the connection between these men of science and nineteenth century women writers is. Nonetheless, I will now talk about ways in which this connection might have been possible. According to Nina Baym, nineteenth century and even late eighteenth century American women would have had access to science⁵, which was much more a part of popular culture than it is today, since it was easily read by an educated person (2, 3).

During this time, women had access to scientific books from libraries or their home collections and circulating journals. They could also attend scientific lectures. Thomas Woody, a scholar of women's education, has discovered that women's schools offered a wide range of scientific textbooks (qtd. in Baym 5). Although his earliest finding reaches only as far back as 1798, evidence has been uncovered of English women's interest in science dating back to the *seventeenth* century. Baym suggests that this study is far from being over, and that more evidence of women involved in science will be uncovered in the future (6).

Women did not just have *access* to science. Nina Baym observes that women were, in fact, the agents for disseminating it (8, 14). She notes that in the circulation of science, *New England* women were the most active of all American women. Throughout the nineteenth century New England women were those with the "highest literacy rates and the most education of any group of women in the nation" (17). Robert Bruce studies Massachusetts' heavy production of science, observing that by 1850, "Massachusetts produced more than 20% of the leading scientists" (Baym 17). Interestingly, both Rowson and Foster lived in Massachusetts, so they would have had a high level of literacy and education and been exposed to some of the latest scientific advancements.

Susanna Rowson, author of *Charlotte Temple*, was born in England in 1762. She spent most of her childhood in New

England, where, according to Cathy Davidson, she received the education of “gentility” (xxi, xxii). The Rowson family returned to England when Susanna was sixteen. In 1793, Rowson returned to America, and four years later opened a Young Ladies’ Academy in Boston. It was considered “one of the finest available” and taught using a progressive curriculum that included geography and science (xxvi). In fact, Rowson wrote her own geography textbook in 1805. Would anything in Rowson’s life have made her familiar with the Cartesian mind/body theory? That much is not obvious from her biography, but what is clear is that Rowson was a very educated woman, and her text reflects the Cartesian mind/body theory throughout, as I shall demonstrate later.

According to Herbert Ross Brown and Elaine K. Ginsberg, much less is known about Hannah Webster Foster (Brown 651; Ginsberg 72), but it is known that Foster lived in Massachusetts, attended a boarding school and married a minister (Brown 650). As a minister’s wife, Foster might have listened to the “pedantic conversations of scholars,” as Sanford’s warning to Eliza in *The Coquette* seems to indicate (Foster 50). In addition, to quote Ginsberg, “numerous historical and literary allusions in [Foster’s] books suggest that she was well educated for her time and sex” (72). Although it is even more difficult to say whether or not Foster would have been familiar with Cartesian dualism, Foster’s *The Coquette*, like Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*, shows a similar pattern in reflecting this mind/body theory.

Since both Rowson and Foster fall into the category of educated women who had access to science, it is not surprising that both of their novels contain a strong presence of Cartesian dualism. In both *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette*, characters who become mentally distressed often become ill by degrees up to and including death, depending on the amount of mental anguish they experience. In *Charlotte Temple*, Lucy, the main character’s mother, is merely “fade[d... by the...] affliction” of her family’s sad history (14), because she has more “health and spirits” (20),

but her poor mother, “weakened by illness and the [same] struggles,” apparently has not been so fortunate. She is “not able to support [the] shock,” and as a result, falls “into a strong convulsion, and expire[s] in about two hours” (19). Likewise, we see a progression in Charlotte herself as first she is exhausted on her voyage away from home (59), then besieged by fever upon finding out that Montraville, her seducer and the father of her child, has married another (98). A series of more distressing events – eviction, childbirth and a reunion with her father – ultimately demolish Charlotte’s life.

A look at the language in which these events are described further suggests the Cartesian theory that the soul radiates forth in the body. The presence of Cartesian dualism in this novel would mean that the so-called emotional reactions are not in opposition or alternative to the Enlightenment, but a demonstration of participation in it. Take the example of Lucy, who is first described to us when Charlotte’s father, Mr. Temple, goes to the home of his future wife, Lucy. The narrator says, “She [i]s as fair as the lily, but sorrow ha[s] nipped the rose in her cheek before it [i]s half blown” (13). Although she could be using poetic device, the narrator does not say that it is *as if* sorrow had nipped the rose in her cheek, and that the two had coincidentally changed together. The narrator implies that the soul has had an actual impact on the body, and again suggests this further on in the text. While observing Lucy, Mr. Temple says “the rose of youth and health soon fades when watered by the tear of affliction” (14). The most explicit evidence of this idea is given to us when the narrator explains why Mr. Eldridge’s body seems youthful while his mind is in expectation of seeing his granddaughter, Charlotte: the narrator states, “so much do the emotions of the soul influence the body” (48).

Foster, too, demonstrates Cartesian theory. Recounting a broken engagement, Eliza says, “the exercise of mind, and conflict of passions, which now tortured my breast, were too much for me to support!” Since Eliza describes a state of the

soul, if a reader were a Cartesian, he or she would expect what happened next: her body reflected this state of the soul. Thus we see the soul, in Descartes' words, "radiating forth" in Eliza's body: when she sees that Rev. Boyer, her ex-fiancé, has left the room and "actually forsaken [her]," she faints (93).

Even though Sanford, Eliza's scandalous love interest, claims that he has been told Eliza's "indisposition [...] is purely mental," he, too, notices "her pale dejected countenance, with the sedateness of her manners, so different from the lively glow of health, cheerfulness and activity which formerly animated her appearance and deportment" (125). Sanford talks not just about Eliza's inclination to behave a certain way, but her "health" and "appearance" which imply her *physical* health. Later he says that "absolute distraction seized the soul of Eliza, which has since terminated in a fixed melancholy. Her health is too much impaired...and I tremble when I see her emaciated form" (140)! Eliza's friend Julia agrees with her self-diagnosis that she is ill, and so offers to "be [her] physician." I would like to point out a difference between the expected treatment and the prescribed one,

because I want you to see Cartesian dualism at work in the text. What sort of treatment does Julia offer Eliza? Bed rest? Healing herbs? A hot bath? No, Julia offers "company, and change of air," to lift her *spirits* (138). Here, we see that the soul cannot only have a negative effect on the body, but can have a positive one as well. Unfortunately for Eliza, Julia is not able to lift her spirits. Having given in to Sanford, Eliza is ashamed. Her shame leads to grief, this grief "undermines [her] constitution. [Her] health [falls] sacrifice to a disordered mind" (146).⁶

Thus, we see that, contrary to what some critics would believe, the acute physical reaction to an emotional state in sentimental literature does not oppose or undermine scientific reasoning, but rather, the portrayal of illness in sentimental literature has connections to a scientific belief that the mind is causally connected to the body. Thus, the frequent fainting spells and deaths of characters in sentimental literature is not a show of the shallowness of this literature, but an emphasis on one piece of scientific knowledge, interpreted in a creative way.

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End Notes

In an article from *The New York Times* that ran this February 18, Linda Johnson covered the phenomenon of “heart break syndrome,” in which the “sudden death of a loved one can really cause a broken heart,” evidenced by “heart-attack symptoms doctors at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.” New England Journal of Medicine published a study that distinguished between what they dubbed “heart break syndrome” and a heart attack. “Dr. Daniel Shindler, director of the echocardiography lab at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Brunswick, N.J., said... the researchers offer the first explanation he has heard for the phenomenon and their conclusions make sense, given the well-known link between the brain and heart.”

As a *Dualist* (Vesey, Preface 13), Descartes believed that the mind and body are two different substances that are “conjoined.” He defined the mind as the intelligent substance that feels, imagines, wills and conceives ideas. The body is the corporeal or extended substance that has figure and the ability to move (Descartes, *Meditations* 28, 29).

While occasionalism is the belief that God either effects both the body and mind or has created the two to be in harmony with one another, and parallelism is the belief that the activities of the mind and body occur in harmony without any third cause, such as God (Wozniak). Other schools of thought had to do with the question of substance, and whether or not the substances of the mind and body were one and the same (e.g. Dualism versus Monism). There is also epiphenomenalism, interactionism, dual-aspect monism, and mind- stuff theory.

Probably message-carrying chemicals.

Although the term “scientist” was not yet in use, science was the realm of philosophers or “men of science” (Baym).

As Finseth argues, “Foster suggests the inadequacy of rhetoric for guiding one’s actions” (15). Rowson does the same, not necessarily within her plot, but by merely using the same style device as Foster – melodrama. The result of melodrama is that in the late eighteenth century seduction novel, the authors do not have to rely on abstract words, but can “show” their stories through physical action to extract a stronger feeling from readers.

Portrayal of the mind/body relationship functions in these novels to conveniently allow the effective use of melodrama as a didactic tool. The physical action in the novels portrays the lesson they have to teach other than

simply stating them. This melodrama works to move the audience to feel for the characters (Brunjes 9/ 21/04) rather than being told to feel for them. When a character becomes fatally ill because of the guilt of a sin, for example, it serves to “teach” the character “a lesson,” thereby adding support for the moral of the story. When a character becomes ill because of a wrong done to him or her, it serves to build sympathy for that character. An example of the former is the death of Madame La Rue, who is responsible for leading Charlotte astray. The misery that she experiences as a result of her vice is experienced in conjunction with a fatal illness, and her death is “a striking example that vice...in the end leads only to misery and shame” (120). We readers, of course, are not supposed to feel sorry for Madame La Rue. We are supposed to feel that justice has been done and agree with the lesson.

Charlotte’s death, on the other hand, is more of an “untimely fate” (118). While it is true that Eliza is a much more complex character than any in *Charlotte Temple*, her death is still a melodramatic device to teach a lesson. Eliza is still held culpable for her actions, but the way in which she bore her penalty is considered admirable. On one hand, Lucy Sumner says that Eliza has “erred” (167) and warns “the American fair” to heed her story; on the other hand, the “calm resignation” to which Eliza met her punishment is memorialized on her tombstone (169).