“This wanton laceration of an affectionate heart:” A Glimpse into Courtship and Courtship Advice Literature in the Early Republic

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On a spring day in June of 1795 Charles Porter Phelps traveled to church in Newburyport, Massachusetts to see the ordination of a new minister. Beside Charles in his chaise sat Jane Greenleaf. Charles and Jane joined friends and family at the church to celebrate the ordination. After the ceremony concluded Charles took Jane home instead of joining the rest of the group who department for the residence of the High Sheriff of the County for a celebration. According to Charles’ autobiography, as soon as he left Jane at her home he experienced a rush of emotions, dejection and anguish being two of the most prominent of his feelings. Later that evening, with a heavy heart and an even heavier conscience, Charles set out for the house of another young woman. He was admitted into the home of Theophilus Parsons (the man with whom Charles had read law) by Parsons’ niece, Sarah. Sarah was Charles’ betrothed and the cousin of Jane Greenleaf. While Sarah had seen first-hand the events that had transpired earlier in the day at the ordination, which she attended with her uncle’s family, she met Charles with a placid countenance. Remembering the event many years later, Charles recorded the reception he received: “There was no crimination – not a complaint even – not an unkind or hasty word escaped from her lips – not a feature of her face betrayed the slightest tinge of angry emotion.”

\[1\] Charles Porter Phelps autobiography, Porter Phelps Huntington Family Papers (Box 10, Folder 21), Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library, 18.
exterior hid a deeply hurt heart. As a result of Charles’ indiscretion Sarah ended the relationship. He left Newburyport the next day to return to Boston and his law practice. In his autobiography, Charles described his emotional state during this time of pain and confusion:

No pen can describe the feelings, I endured for several succeeding days, - the World was all a blank – and changing only a word in the stanza of a then favorite song, I adopted entirely its sentiment and fully recognized its force...The next day I returned to Boston, but with little relish either for love or law. What was the cause or motive for this wanton laceration of an affectionate heart, this cruel attack upon the peace and happiness of her, whom I best loved, or the gratuitous self-infliction of unmitigated evil on myself, did at the time and for more than a half a century since has surpassed all my reasoning to explain or fully even comprehend.²

He had hurt the woman whom he had courted and loved for many years without understanding his own reasons for doing so.

Charles Porter Phelps was born as Moses Porter Phelps in Hadley, Massachusetts in 1772 to Elizabeth and Charles Phelps. Raised alongside his sister Elizabeth on Forty Acres, the family farm in Hadley, Charles displayed little desire to become a farmer. Instead, from a very young age, Charles demonstrated a desire study law as his father had done. Charles Phelps Senior was a prosperous attorney and politician. As a young man, Charles received instruction from Reverend Joseph Lyman of the neighboring community of Hatfield, Massachusetts to prepare him for university. In 1787, at the age of 15, Charles moved to Cambridge to attend Harvard. Upon the completion of his degree in 1791 Charles moved to the town of Newburyport, 40 miles to the north of Boston. In Newburyport Charles studied law with Theophilus Parsons, a very well known and respected attorney who would sit as the Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Superior Court from 1806 to 1813. It was while living with the Parson

² Charles Porter Phelps autobiography, 18-19.
family that Charles had met Sarah, Theophilus’ niece, who resided with
Theophilus’ family. The two began courting in 1792, three years before
Charles made his fatal (or so he thought) mistake.3

For many months after his last visit with Sarah Charles struggled
to move on with his life in Boston. He half-heartedly practiced law, which
he had belatedly discovered he rather disliked after years of training for
his career. He tried to forget Sarah, but to no avail. Finally rumors began
to circulate around Boston to forced him to seriously consider his future.
With an ever increasingly jealous heart, Charles heard stories of Sarah
and the various men who pursued her affections. These rumors finally
prodded Charles into action and he decided to find an excuse to return to
Newburyport to make a last ditch effort to regain the heart and affections
of Sarah Parsons.

In 1796 Charles found away to return to Newburyport without
raising too many questions about his motives. He traveled with his mother
who wished to visit some of her friends. While there, Charles requested
an “interview” with Sarah so that he could try to sway her affections back
in his direction. Sarah agreed to hear Charles’ petition. He returned to the
house that had last been the site of his rejection and laid his heart bare to
Sarah with great success:

The interview was less brief than our last one, tho it seemed to
me but a fleeting moment, - yet it was long enough to restore
and confirm the confidence which I had foolishly forfeited, and
to obliterate many unwelcome memories of a sad and sorrowful
year.4

The love Charles had for Sarah was unwavering after the regrettable
incident involving Jane Greenleaf and his joy at being welcomed back into

3 Porter Phelps Huntington Papers, 1698-1968: “Description of Collection,” Archives and
Special Collections, Amherst College Library.
4 Charles Porter Phelps autobiography, 22.
Sarah’s heart is one of clearest emotions in his autobiography. The couple reunited, once again pledging fidelity to one another.

The saga of Sarah and Charles, as recorded in Charles’ autobiography, reveals much about courtship among the emerging middle class during the period of the Early Republic.\(^5\) As part of the provincial middle class of New England, Sarah and Charles both had certain standards that they were expected to adhere to, particularly when it came to their behaviors both publically and privately. In New England especially, where literacy had long been prized as a means to salvation, men and women of the emerging middle class often turned to a growing body of advice literature to help them along the road to civility.\(^6\) This literature, originally imported from England, was increasingly authored by Americans in the post-Revolutionary period, covered everything from how to speak properly, to how to cut meat properly, from how to write formal letters, to how one should greet friends and acquaintances in formal settings. One of the most popular subgenres of conduct literature instructed men and women in the art of courtship. Authors of courtship advice literature dissected gaffes like those Charles committed during his and Sarah’s eight-year courtship and instructed their readers in methods to remedy situations like the one Charles found himself enmeshed in during 1795 and 1796. The rise in the numbers and availability of courtship manuals coincided with a loosening of parental controls over courtship and an increase in social mobility, which to authors of advice literature could spell disaster for those unaware of the implications of these serious shifts. Advice literature in the Early Republic also reflected a slowly growing recognition of the power women could wield during


courtship. Additionally, this literature encouraged the open and honest expression of emotions on the part of male suitors, whom authors felt sometimes revealed too little about their motives during courtship. Charles knew that when he had taken Jane Greenleaf to church he had committed “an unprovoked outrage…against the common courtesies of social life,” the lessons of which were recorded in the pages of eighteenth and nineteenth century courtship manuals.7

Sarah Davenport Parsons lived in a time when women appeared, at least on the surface, to have little control over their destinies. They rarely received an education equal to that of a man like Charles Porter Phelps and they had very few opportunities to create a life economically independent from some level of male control. Women could neither pursue men without seeming unladylike (to put it mildly), nor could they make a proposal of marriage. Advice literature and societal conventions encouraged women to hold back from expressing their true emotions during courtship in order to preserve their reputations should the courtship end without marriage. However, the case of Sarah and Charles revealed an important gap in the power structure of the late 1700s and early 1800s, one that authors of courtship advice literature more frequently drew attention to in the years following the Revolution. When Charles violated Sarah’s trust, she chose to end the relationship for almost a year. When Charles could not stand the separation any longer and approached her to plead his case one last time, it was Sarah again who made the decision about the fate of their relationship, not Charles. In a very serious way Sarah actually controlled the future of her relationship with Charles – a power that justifiably made many men nervous, especially who were used to controlling their own affairs.

7 Charles Porter Phelps autobiography, 19.
Authors of courtship advice literature understood that many middling women in the Early Republic possessed this power and they sought to illustrate the ways in which it might be appropriately used and contained. In the following set of letters from John Trumbull’s 1796 manual *The Lover’s Instructor*, the future of the fictional couple was threatened by a breach of proper behavior. The young woman wrote to her suitor, asking for an explanation of why he had ignored her presence at a gathering, paying attention to a Miss Peacock instead. Unlike Sarah, this fictional woman gave her suitor a chance to justify his behavior, but like Sarah, this young woman could have chosen to end the relationship based on her discovery of an infidelity, real or imagined:

Sir,
The sincerity and freedom with which I have at all times laid open my heart to you, ought to have some weight in my claim to have a return of the same confidence. But I have reason to fear that the best men do not always act as they ought: I write to you what it would be impossible to speak; but before I see you, I desire you will either explain your conduct last night or confess that you have used me not as I have deserved of you.

It is in vain to deny you took pains to recommend yourself to Miss Peacock; your earnestness of discourse also shewed me that you were no stranger. I desire to know, Sir, what sort of acquaintance you can wish to have with another person of character, who made me believe that you wish to be married to me? I write very plainly to you, because I expect a plain answer. I am not apt to be suspicious, but this was too particular; and I must be either blind or indifferent to overlook it. Sir, I am neither, tho’ perhaps it would be better for me if I were one or the other.

The gentleman in question responded with the following thoughts on the event in question:

My dearest Nanny,
I CANNOT conceive what can have put it in your thoughts to be suspicious of me, while heart and soul you know are truly yours, and whose whole thoughts and wishes are but on you. Sweet quarreler, you know this: what afternoon have I spent from you? Or, who did you ever see me speak to without distaste, when it
prevents my talking with you?

You know how very often you have cautioned me not to speak to you before your uncle; and you know he was there. But you do well to abuse me for being too obedient to your commands; for I promise you, you shall never get any other cause. I thought it most prudent to be seen talking with another, when it was my business not so much as to look at you. Miss Peacock is a very old acquaintance. She knows my perfect devotion to you, and she very well knew all that civility and earnestness of discourse about nothing, was pretended. I write to you before I come, because you command me; but I will make you ask my pardon in a few minutes for robbing me but of those few which might have been spent with you, and which it has taken to write this letter…

Here the suitor argues he was not at fault in talking with Miss Peacock, claiming was only the circumstances that drove him to pay more attention to Miss Peacock than his dearest Nanny. If Nanny had not chosen to believe his story then the courtship would have ended under a cloud of suspicion, as did that of Charles and Sarah.

The main goal of authors in writing pieces like the above was to instruct women on how to defend themselves from potential ruin at the hands of a man who clearly would not make a good match for life. Authors recognized that “it is extremely difficult, to detect malevolence amidst the assiduities of courtship, and to distinguish the man under than almost inscrutable disguise the lover” and that giving women tools to protect themselves was essential. 8 While Charles felt that the “the most plausible – tho still perhaps not entirely satisfactory explanation of the affair may possibly been found in a somewhat peculiar trait of [his] mind and character,” stemming from “a morbid and depressing sensitiveness” that had always been a part of his psyche, as well as “a strong, tho somewhat singular, proclivity to self-depreciation, and a

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tendency, at least, to magnify, if not multiply [his] deficiencies”, other men may have had darker motives when they courted and abandoned women. Authors of advice literature advised women to move slowly and cautiously through the ritual of courtship, not revealing too much of their innermost emotions as particular groups of men might take advantage of a woman whose emotions were so evident and easily manipulated. British and American seduction novels like *The Coquette* (1797) and *Charlotte Temple* (1791), both popular around the time Charles broke Sarah’s heart, demonstrate what could happen to women whose affections were bestowed in an open and unrestrained way on an undeserving man. At least Charles had not tried to unwontedly seduce Sarah but he had gained her affections and then broken her trust as the rakish men did in these novels. In the end Sarah does not die a fallen woman in a roadside tavern like Eliza Wharton, the main character in *The Coquette* because Charles is no Major Sanford. Nor does she die friendless, the mother of a small child, alone in a foreign country like Charlotte Temple. But like both of these women, she risked her future if she placed her trust in the hands of the wrong man. Charles’ infidelity suggested to Sarah that he was indeed the wrong man for her, and unlike the doomed heroines of the two novels, she took steps to protect herself from a potentially unhappy and uncertain future.

Authors of advice literature found many ways to encourage women to protect themselves from over-exuberant (and perhaps false) suitors. In the following conversation taken from *The Lover’s Instructor*, the man’s plea for affection calls to mind Charles’ appeal to Sarah after his disastrous error. Like Sarah, the woman in the imaginary conversation keeps a “placid countenance,” refusing to rise to the bait of the suitor’s...

9 Charles Porter Phelps autobiography, 19.
seductive words:

Man:...I have long been broiling on the flames or ardent affection towards your dear self, and never had the opportunity of happiness to discover my loves before this time…it would absolutely break my heart [if she rejected him]
Maid: Men’s hearts are not so soon broke.
Man: Have you never heard of any that died for love?
Maid: Some of my own sex.10

The imagined conversation continues along this same line, the man telling the woman not to doubt that he loves her deeply and truly, to which she replies cuttingly, “I cannot but doubt it” and that men always prove faithless. She holds herself distant from his flattery, compliments, and pleas to turn over her heart to his care. Like Sarah, this fictional character recognized the risks inherent in letting a man control her heart until she understood his true intentions. Once Sarah was convinced of Charles’ remorse and his true devotion to her, she allowed him back into her heart and life. But until that point, she held him at a distance, protecting herself from any further heartache.

The courtship of Sarah and Charles illustrates another theme evident in courtship advice literature that helped women protect themselves and their reputations during courtship. While parental power over courtship in some American circles had been on the decline since before the American Revolution, authors of advice literature recognized that family and friends still played an enormous role in making matches. While parents were cautioned that exerting too strong of a hand during courtship could ruin their relationship with their children, few authors imagined a world where courtship occurred in a vacuum. Rational Enlightenment philosophies may have led Benjamin Franklin to argue that “no parental Authority, that is repugnant to the Dictates of Reason

and Virtue or (which is the same Thing) the moral Happiness of our Natures, is any ways binding on Children” well before the philosophers of the American Revolution associated too much parental power during courtship with the tyranny of a king over his subjects.\textsuperscript{11} However, despite this growing freedom from parental control, both men and women still relied on friends and family for support and advice during the often-tumultuous period of courtship. Family and friends also had the power to influence the courtships of those close to them. Letters exchanged between Sarah and Charles’ sister Elizabeth Phelps show how friends could try to sway one another towards choosing a favored suitor. Even when Charles and Sarah reunited after their falling out, Elizabeth continued to push and prod Sarah to marry Charles. At the close of every letter she wrote to Sarah, Elizabeth said something to the effect of “My friend, I look forward to the time when I may call you by a more endearing title”.\textsuperscript{12} Elizabeth also urged her brother to seal his relationships with Sarah, including comments like “I should like to know if you ever intend to get married – for I shall want to come to Boston again – in the course of a few years perhaps – and I had almost determined not to go till you had given me a home there – which I shall take advantage of” at the conclusion of her letters to him.\textsuperscript{13}

The story of Charles and Sarah, with its attendant highs and lows, is just one of thousands of similar tales of love and heartbreak recorded in diaries and letters in the Early Republic. Coupled with the ever-growing

\textsuperscript{12} Elizabeth Whiting Phelps Huntington to Sarah Parsons, October 18, 1797, \textit{Porter Phelps Huntington Papers} (Box 12, Folder 17), Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library.
\textsuperscript{13} Elizabeth Whiting Phelps Huntington to Sarah Parsons, March 19, 1798, \textit{Porter Phelps Huntington Papers} (Box 12, Folder 14), Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library.
amount of courtship advice literature, it is clear that authors tried to make readers aware of just how much was at stake during the tumultuous time of courtship. Had Charles truly thought through his actions as purveyors of advice suggested, he would have never taken Jane Greenleaf to church, he would have never broken Sarah’s heart and he would not have spent a year alone and miserable in Boston. Authors of advice literature warned their readers through letter templates, imaginary conversations, essays and novels just how treacherous this time could be. A woman could find herself cast out from polite society if a suitor succeeded in corrupting her morals. A man could find himself denied access to she whom he most loved for a violation of the strict code of conduct surrounding courtship. The story of Charles and Sarah also underscores the slowly changing notions of female power in post-Revolutionary society. While women were denied equal standing as citizens, both politically and economically, they were given an increasingly large role in policing virtue and in controlling their own moral destinies, especially when it came to marriage, which created a bit of tension as men struggled to comprehend this changing power. These changes did not occur overnight, nor were all women allowed to participate in this newly defined role (especially poor women and women of color).

The story of Charles and Sarah, then, is not only a love story, but a brief snapshot of slow changes to a highly gendered world. Change did not come quickly (as change rarely does) as the popularity of pieces of advice from courtship literature well past its prime demonstrates. For example “On Choosing a Husband” was first published in London in 1766, but the editor of the American magazine *Ladies Port Folio* thought the advice remained pertinent to readers in 1820. The advice is also apropos to
our own discussion as it instructed young women to avoid the attentions of inappropriate young men:

The chief things to be regarded in the choice of a husband, are a virtuous disposition, a good understanding, an even temper, an easy fortune, and an agreeable person. Ask any lady, if she would either receive, or recommend to her friend’s acquaintance, a husband without these accomplishments, and her answer will be – None but a fool, or a mad woman would; yet, how many of the fair sex throw themselves away, upon what the speculative world calls PRETTY FELLOWS, who want courage, honour, sincerity, and every amiable virtue? How many are sacrificed to the riches of an illiterate drone, or an old debauchee?14

In addition, the long-popular advice of James Fordyce, the British theologian, also demonstrates change to courtship advice, when it came, came slowly and advice remained relevant for decades. Fordyce first published his Sermons to Young Women in England in 1766, but American printings in 1787, 1796, 1809, and 1818, suggest the lasting power of his advice (and the reluctance to break ties with Britain in the wake of the Revolution). Like the author of “On Choosing a Husband” Fordyce’s advice warned young women that seeking the true character of a suitor was the fundamental goal of courtship and that all women should be sure to avoid being trapped in a marriage to a rake:

That he who has been formerly a rake may, after all, prove a very tolerable husband, as the world goes, I have said already, that I do not dispute. But, I would ask in the next place, is this commonly to be expected? Is there no danger that such a man will be tempted by the power of long habit to return to his old ways; or that the insatiable love of variety, which he has indulged so freely, will some time or other, lead him astray, from the finest woman in the world? Will not the very idea of a restraint, which he could never brook while single, make him only the more impatient of it when married? Will he have the better opinion of his wife’s virtue, that he has conversed, chiefly, with women who had none, and with men amongst whom it was a favorite system, that the sex are all alike? But it is a painful topic. Let the women who are so

Many publishers felt that the advice Fordyce shared with young women about the dangers of marrying a rake was just as relevant in 1818 as it was in 1766. Countless other examples of advice literature, including *Reflections on Courtship and Marriage*, by Benjamin Franklin, were published over and over again, clearly demonstrating that when change to courtship and advice literature came, it did not come quickly, nor did it come without attendant anxiety about women’s growing power.

In the end, Charles and Sarah made it through the tumultuous time of their courtship. In 1799, on the eve of his marriage to Sarah, Charles left Boston and the practice of law because he could not generate enough profits to cover his expenses and that of his soon-to-be wife. He returned to the family farm in Hadley and worked on alterations to the farmhouse to make it large enough for two families, as he planned to bring Sarah to Hadley after they were married. This was not to be; Charles and Sarah moved to Boston some months after their marriage where Charles formed a business partnership with Edward Rand. The mercantile business partnership was cut short, however, when Rand was killed in a duel. Charles continued to run the business until 1816. During this time he also began his political career as a member of the State Legislature. In 1815 Charles decided he would build a house on his tract of land on the family farm in Hadley. Unfortunately, Sarah never saw the house, as she fell ill with typhus during the families move to Hadley, and died. Charles married her cousin Charlotte who had assisted with the five Phelps children after Sarah’s death in 1820. Many of the Phelps children died young, only two living to adulthood out of nine from his first two

marriages. During this period, Charles continued to be elected to the State Legislature, and he returned to the practice of law. Charlotte died in 1830, and Charles married for the third and final time in 1833, to Elizabeth Judkins.\footnote{Porter Phelps Huntington Papers, 1698-1968: “Description of Collection,” Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library.} His second and third marriages do not figure largely into the story Charles told in his autobiography – Sarah clearly remained his one true love well after her death.

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