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Symbiosis: a Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations

Volume 5.1

Pam Perkins

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The Letters of
Eliza Southgate Bowne**

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PUBLICATION DATA

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First published in SYMBIOSIS, Volume 5.2 October 2001, pp.121–38

2nd electronic edition published in 2007 by Humanities-Ebooks LLP

<http://www.humanities-ebooks.co.uk>

Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

Essays published in Symbiosis are subsequently digitized for the benefit of the author (80%) and the Journal (20%)

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ISSN: 1362-7902

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Pam Perkins

Writing Republican Femininity: The Letters of Eliza Southgate Bowne

The American adventurer Gilbert Imlay had no doubt that his countrymen were different from their European counterparts. Life in the new world, he explained in a series of letters published in England in 1792, had made the American man a more noble, natural being, fit to live according to the pure standards demanded by a Republican government. According to Imlay and others, Americans were shaped by a political system that could be sustained only by a manly independence of mind—and so were entirely unlike Englishmen, who were supposedly corrupted by the luxurious tastes and submissive habits inculcated by a monarchical system. Given such convictions about the demands and effects of Republican rule, it is not surprising that Americans used their political system as the basis of a national identity. Yet attempts to develop an identity based on a political system, however appropriate for men of the ruling classes, made the task of developing a model American who also happened to be a woman particularly awkward.

The letters of Eliza Southgate Bowne, a young New Englander whose correspondence with her family and friends was collected and published in the late nineteenth century, reveal some of the conflicts and difficulties faced by women of the early Federal era in trying to create identities for themselves as Republicans, Americans, and also feminine women. Writing at a time when most familiar models of femininity, whether domestic or Republican, were still British, but when Americans had already begun to insist vehemently on their