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*The Coquette* or the Ambiguities.  
On the Fiction and the Reality  
of Independence in the New Republic.

In her 1797 epistolary novel *The Coquette*, Hannah Foster situates her critical analysis of female freedom and the politics of courtship and marriage within the restrictive confines of a conventional seduction novel. Loosely based on the real-life story of Elizabeth Whitman, *The Coquette* can be properly termed a "dysphoric" novel: in line with Nancy Miller's description of the "dysphoric text," <sup>1</sup> *The Coquette* ends "with the heroine's death . . . and the move is from 'all' in this world to 'nothing'." <sup>2</sup> Eliza Wharton, the protagonist, starts out as a successful, independence-seeking heroine and ends up as a seduced, "fallen" woman who dies giving birth to an illegitimate child.

The friction between Foster's fascination with Eliza Wharton's quest for self-determination and the moralistic conventions of the sentimental genre splits the novel in three thematically distinct sections which are not smoothly connected. The first section (letters 1 to 48) is situated mostly in urban New Haven. Focused on Eliza's remarkable intellectual endowments and her quest for self-realization, it is structured around the classical topos of the testing of the hero. Unlike male epic heroes, however, who fight against nature or super-human forces, Eliza defies socially constructed limitations imposed on female activity and self-development. Analogously, her first defeat (the failure of her marriage plans) is brought about by her well-meaning mother, rather than by a blind fate or a powerful enemy.

The second section (letters 49-63) takes place chiefly in Hartford, Eliza's small hometown. It dwells on the powerlessness of the lonely heroine, the comfort she derives from the attentions of the

fashionable Major Sanford, and the foreboding of her second, fatal defeat: her pregnancy. While Eliza is less epistolarily prolific in this section than in the first, other characters like Major Sanford and Julia Granby (who is rather suddenly introduced in the novel) seem to take over the story and undermine Eliza's narrative authority. They refer to her as "blind"<sup>3</sup> and "altered" (p. 125), and Julia reiterates that Eliza's mind is "not perfectly right" (pp. 121-31).

The third section (letters 63-74) features the revelation of Eliza's pregnancy, her consequent flight, and her eventual death. In this section, Eliza's story is interpreted and narrated almost entirely by other characters. Her complicated life is simplified into a warning to "the American fair" (p. 168) and used by the novelist to justify the morally suspicious act of writing novels. Such a conventional ending, however, barely disguises a much more enigmatic subtext. This subtext stretches the seduction plot to the limits of credibility and exposes its socio-ideological foundations and functions.

Is the crime of dependence to be expiated by the sacrifice of virtue?<sup>4</sup>

This rhetorical question that Harrington, the male protagonist of William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, "reads" in the eyes of the noble-minded but propertyless Harriot whom he is planning to seduce, is enough to convert the rake into a potential husband. But the plight of Eliza with Sanford is a true exemplification of Foster's skepticism toward the saying that "reformed rakes make the best husbands" (p. 57). Eliza's is to join the large group of repentant but irredeemably fallen women characters who die giving birth to an illegitimate child.<sup>5</sup> Harriot, on the contrary, is celebrated by Brown as the innocent victim of someone else's sexual crime, one who dies in the noble attempt to repress her strong but immoral passion for her brother. Harriot's virtue has not been any more conducive to happiness than Eliza's sin. The differences between *The Power of Sympathy* and *The Coquette* indicate more than simple variations on the theme of seduction. Foster turns the ethical dilemma of Brown's heroine on its head and identifies the crucial paradox confronting women in her society: even the preservation of virtue is to be expiated through dependence, namely, marriage.

As the only form of virtuous sexual union, marriage was a rather

complex institution in the late XVIII century. On the one hand, it represented the traditional coronation of the sentimental heroine's successful struggle to preserve her chastity against all odds. On the other, it was a social contract which "in its economic aspect resembled an indenture between master and servant." <sup>6</sup> The new, Lockean theorizations of an affectional rather than an authoritarian economy within the family influenced the new Republic's rhetoric and behavioral patterns, but left untouched a legal system that sanctioned the subordination of woman, her status as "feme covert." <sup>7</sup> Ironically, the combination of legal subjugation and ideals of romantic love put women in the position of having only enough freedom "to choose their bondage," or to risk an even greater social marginality and the ridicule of spinsterhood. <sup>8</sup>

More than any other female character in *The Coquette*, Eliza Wharton explores this paradoxical gospel of happy dependence and dutiful contentment that informed the life of women in the new democracy. She articulates her doubts in letters to her female friends who pity her and sympathise with her problems in choosing a marriage partner, yet resent her lucid analysis of female powerlessness, and censure her outspoken critique of marriage. Whether fondly remembered (Mrs. Wharton), wholeheartedly enjoyed (Mrs. Richman), soberly accepted (Lucy Freeman Sumner), or anxiously anticipated (Julia Granby), marriage is connected with subordination, obedience, and reduced mobility, and at the same time it is accepted as one of the "self-evident" truths of femaleness by all the women in the novel. They are unprepared to interpret Eliza's rebelliousness in ways other than as coquetry, immorality, and, finally, insanity. For men, a few years before, truth had justified a revolution; in the post-revolutionary world

the moral justification behind apprentices' service to masters, the people's deference to governors-even children's obedience to parents-was undermined by newer ideals of individual achievement, equal representation, and popular rights. <sup>9</sup>

For women, on the contrary, truth prescribed submission, and achievement coincided with a deferential morality, which in turn was identified with marriage.

Eliza resists the sexual double-standard and resents the hiatus

between the rhetoric and the reality of marriage. Like her contemporary Eliza Southgate, she is painfully conscious that "not one woman in a hundred marries for love," and chooses to separate the social function of marriage from its accompanying rhetorical justifications, namely, the joys of selflessness, domestic contentment, and romantic love.<sup>10</sup> She is aware of not being rich enough to be a fashionable spinster, and perceives marriage as a necessity rather than a pleasure.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, she is determined to prolong her "freedom," to savour fully the power of choice she enjoys during courtship, and to use such power to her best advantage (p. 30).

Eliza disregards her friend Lucy's remark that Reverend Boyer's "situation in life is, perhaps, as elevated" as she has a right to claim (p. 27). Convinced that her "virtue" - a crucial term in the male republican rhetoric of achievement - resides in more than her simple chastity, Eliza is self-confident enough to believe that her intellectual endowments and her beauty will enable her to choose her marriage partner freely and be as much of a self-made woman as the middle-class protagonist of an eighteenth-century novel could imagine. Marrying Major Sanford, whom she believes to be rich, becomes a potential route to wordly success.

The opening letter of the novel, written to her closest friend Lucy Freeman, signals Eliza's entrance into the fashionable circles of urban New Haven. However tempered by the language of filial affection and female delicacy, the letter registers Eliza's happiness at the death of Mr. Haly (the man her parents wanted her to marry) and her subsequent removal from the relative seclusion of her hometown. Having regained freedom through a providential, albeit "melancholy event" (p. 14), Eliza declares her determination to protect her liberty actively, and to cultivate "no other connection than that of friendship" (p. 6).

In her epistolary reflections on her recent experiences, Eliza discusses what she perceives to be the reality of "authority" hidden behind the rhetoric of familial affection and romantic love (p. 13). She realises that her parents put "shackles" (p. 21) on her mind in the shape of Mr. Haly; marriage is described as "hymenial chain" (pp. 13-14). The husband, like the father, is simultaneously a "friend and a

guardian" (p. 5); in both cases, harmony and affection rest on the fiction of voluntary obedience to the guardian's will. Dissent would reveal the underlying inequality of power and would have to be quelled by the exercise of explicit authority.

Significantly, at the start of the novel Eliza is linked by the duty of obedience to her "indulgent" mother only (p. 4). Freed from direct male authority, her father and her fiancé dead, Eliza underestimates the larger patriarchal structure of her society and the hegemony it exerts on her female cohorts.<sup>12</sup> To her distress, in fact, all of her women friends, including Lucy, perceive her "declaration of independence" and her quest for happiness as improper, dangerous, "coquetish," and deserving "monitorial lessons and advice" (p. 78). Their censure seems far too harsh. As Eliza often repeats, the freedom she so highly prizes and her friends so deeply fear is nothing more than the temporary liberty to have friends but no guardians, and eventually to choose independently the man she will marry.<sup>13</sup> If obedience to her parents had threatened to create a split between reason and happiness, in that she had rationally accepted a decision that she knew would make her unhappy, Eliza now wants to use her new freedom and judgment to pursue happiness. Soon aware that neither of her most determined suitors pleases both her reason and her fancy, Eliza decides to base the choice of a husband on an accurate evaluation of which profession, status, and geographical location would be most conducive to her happiness.

Such concerns were far from uncommon among unmarried women at the time. What makes them so disruptive in Eliza's case is her insistence on pursuing her own happiness rather than on making someone else happy. Eliza is deviant because she appropriates for herself the male definition of happiness as self-fulfilment, rejecting feminine self-sacrifice and conceiving of pleasure as direct enjoyment rather than the recollection of virtue. In sum, Eliza's major sin is individualism, the self-reliant attempt to pursue her self-interest. That she initially connects the death of a man with her own freedom reveals just how disruptive the ethics of self-making can be when appropriated by a woman. Even more dangerous is Eliza's critique of marriage, which provides the rationale for the crimes against the family which will later be perpetrated by this attractive and gifted single woman.

Female individualism was a concept neither contemplated nor welcomed in post-revolutionary America. The Founding Fathers had claimed the natural *right* of the male offspring to separate himself from a domineering motherland. But they had also assumed that the natural *duty* of women (as mothers or potential mothers) was to nurture their offspring under any circumstances. The libertarian and egalitarian ideals proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence were "peculiarly a function of what [could not] be written *there*,"<sup>14</sup> i.e., the realities of sexual difference. Rights and duties, self-making and self-sacrifice, self-reliance and affiliation were silently and "self evidently" distributed along gender lines in the new Republic, a fact which explains the very different careers of two famous characters, one fictional, one real: Eliza Wharton and Benjamin Franklin.<sup>15</sup>

Eliza indeed possesses many of the qualities that the practical-minded Franklin considered conducive to success in the meritocratic new nation: ambition, self-reliance, education, and reserve. But in Eliza's case, multiple endowments are not of much avail. On the contrary, they cast an ambiguous shadow on her reputation, that crucial though ethereal entity which in Franklin's world was deemed as important, if not more important than, virtue itself. Eliza's ambition is considered "folly" (p. 74) and her self-reliance improper by a society that defines female propriety as the passive acceptance of woman's status as property. Similarly, Eliza's remarkable education elicits censure as well as admiration, because she is too educated and too aggressively conscious of her abilities.

Eighteenth-century arguments in favor of female education stressed its pacifying function. In the words of the contemporary Eliza Southgate,

Women would be under the same degree of subordination that they now are; enlighten and expand their minds, and they would perceive the necessity of such a regulation to preserve the order and happiness of society.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than using her education to accept women's subordination, Eliza uses her intelligence to analyse. Rather than becoming contented with her lot, she becomes so conceited as to feel free to judge the character and merit of her suitors. Far from being intimidat-

ed by Reverend Boyer, she proves to be his intellectual equal in several verbal exchanges, and, in her letters, she mocks his pretentious seriousness with scathing irony (pp. 12, 65). The daring impropriety of Eliza's relationship with Boyer becomes apparent when comparing her nonchalant behavior with Mrs. Holmes's lecture on "the veneration due to the characters of the Clergy" in *The Power of Sympathy*.<sup>17</sup>

Eliza's relationship with Sanford is as egalitarian as that with Boyer, but more competitive. Disregarding all "prudish" warnings about his dangerousness, Eliza claims to "despise those contracted ideas which confine virtue to a cell" (p. 13). Confident in her own intellectual and moral strength, she plays a flirtatious game with Sanford and assesses his mediocrity and shallowness on intellectual, rather than purely moral grounds. Sanford is deficient not only in virtue, as her female friends repeatedly point out, but also in intellectual cultivation. In her letter to Lucy, Eliza refers to Sanford's ignorance in polite but unequivocal terms:

During tea, the conversation turned on literary subjects, in which I cannot say that the Major bore a very distinguished part. (p. 38)

If Eliza's liveliness and charm are displayed in fashionable circles, her intelligence and cunning emerge chiefly from her personal correspondence with other women. Like Benjamin Franklin, she is aware of the power of silence and the effectiveness of covert action. Initially, both of her suitors are attracted to a personality they do not understand, and can therefore arrogantly interpret as they please. Boyer, the moralist, idealizes her as the union of "truth and the virtues and graces" incarnated "in a fair form" (p. 10). On the other hand, Sanford, the misogynist, underestimates her cultivation and describes her as "gay, volatile, apparently thoughtless of everything but present enjoyment" (p. 18). The blindness of her suitors to her real personality gives Eliza an advantage, which she uses to manipulate them so skillfully as to almost succeed in persuading (forcing?) the libertine Sanford to marry her.<sup>18</sup> Only her mother's unpredictable and deeply resented interference ruins Eliza's scheme, by causing Boyer's departure and the destruction of Eliza's reputation in her hometown.<sup>19</sup> Ironically, Mrs. Wharton's protectiveness creates the conditions for Eliza's fall.

Boyer's reproachful departure (which Eliza initially cherishes), Sanford's unexpected abandonment, her public humiliation,<sup>20</sup> the absence of her closest female friends, the unsatisfying trips to visit the Richmans, and the permanent spectre of her unexciting hometown, plunge Eliza into a depression. Her "melancholy" is more the result of objective circumstances than of "indulgence" (p. 112) or a "disturbed imagination" (p. 108) - as her strikingly unsympathetic friends prefer to believe. Indeed, Eliza's increasingly frequent romantic broodings over Boyer, always followed by contradictory lamentations over Sanford's absence, can be taken seriously only in the context of Eliza's growing awareness of her status as a propertyless spinster.

Melancholy is the dominant mood in the second part of the novel. After her rather pathetic, fruitless attempt to reconquer Boyer, Eliza utters the conventional cry of the seduced woman ("I am undone!") which opens the second section (p. 105). In her introduction to the 1986 edition of *The Coquette*, Cathy Davidson interprets this cry as signaling Eliza's "psychologically fallen status" which will soon be confirmed by her succumbing sexually to Sanford.<sup>21</sup> Davidson's comment gives more credit to the insinuations of Eliza's insanity advanced by other characters than to the material conditions of her existence. In light of the few life options then available to women outside of marriage, Eliza's cry voices her belated realization of the dismal consequences of the failure of her marital schemes. Being a moderately well-to-do single woman, separated from all her friends, who are away and married, Eliza experiences at a physical as well as a psychological level the powerlessness and isolation of the outcast long before being seduced.

The newly-wed and newly-enriched Sanford rescues Eliza from marginality and obscurity. By now fully conscious that the status of women depends on their male relations, Eliza does not want to give up the reviving attentions of the fashionable Sanford. At the same time, she has to justify to the world, as well as to herself, the concern which a married man, too young to be fatherly, shows towards a woman other than his wife. Thus she attempts, ineffectively, to neutralize the threat of Sanford's sexuality by defining him as her "brother" (p. 126) and his wife Nancy as her "sister" (p. 127).<sup>22</sup> But as a result, Eliza's eventual liason with Sanford takes on the connotations of an incestuous seduction.



*The Coquette* can thus be seen to incorporate the two most disturbing themes present in much post-revolutionary fiction: incest and seduction. While the former is connected to the young Republic's preoccupation with origins, the latter is linked to the "fear that political liberty would be associated with sexual license" and to the relation between good citizenship and female virtue in the rhetoric of the new state.<sup>23</sup> That these two themes dominate the literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries invites speculation on the connection between them. Both incest and seduction exemplify the restrictions that the past and biology (rather than nature in its largest sense) impose on personal freedom, especially in the case of women. In addition, both are sins which call for the intervention of society in the regulation of the individual, through either reformation or punishment. In the democracy of the new world, seduction and incest, as examples of sexual deviance, epitomise the disruptive potential of unqualified notions of personal freedom and natural rights. The dying heroines of many sentimental novels come to realize that there are biological limitations to liberty. Ironically, the subtitle of *The Power of Sympathy* is "The Triumph of Nature."

Commonly regarded as the first American novel, *The Power of Sympathy* addresses the themes of seduction, incest and the related issue of female happiness in ways that differ from, but shed light on, *The Coquette*. As stated above, Brown's novel celebrates the redemptive moral qualities of the best among women. In spite of the heroine's virtue, her happiness is thwarted by the uncontrollable, lingering effects of past illicit sexuality: as a result of her mother's seduction, her potential husband is revealed to be her actual brother. Once her virtue is defeated by someone else's sexual crime, Harriot dies, helplessly wondering:

yet I have preserved my innocence and my virtue-what then have I to deprecate, what have I to detest?<sup>24</sup>

*The Power of Sympathy* sets the tone for the sentimental novel's exploration of the passive power of female virtue: it is forceful enough to reform men, yet it is not powerful enough to ensure life, liberty, and happiness for the heroine. In striking contrast with the meritocratic

male universe of Benjamin Franklin, the world of the sentimental novel reveals that there is no causal link between virtue and happiness. In Brown's novel, only death seems to offer Harriot the realization of the Republican triad: *freedom* from service to Mrs. Francis; *happiness* in the otherworldly union with Harrington; and everlasting *life*.

If female virtue is not always rewarded, female crime is always punished. The pattern of female death and male survival that characterizes *The Power of Sympathy* and seduction narratives in general is repeated in Foster's novel.<sup>25</sup> Even though rakes are vociferously condemned in both *The Coquette* and *The Boarding School*, adherence to the true story of Elizabeth Whitman and to the narrative conventions of the sentimental genre require that Eliza die and Sanford live. Nonetheless, Foster's treatment of the seduction theme is amazingly, though ambiguously, innovative.

It is almost inaccurate, in fact, to describe Eliza's liason with Sanford as a seduction. The crucial factors of naïveté, youthfulness, and speed are missing. Undoubtedly, Sanford is a rake, but Eliza is aware of it and has been able to neutralize his verbal chicanery for years. Also, unlike most other seduction victims, who are generally under twenty-five, Eliza is a mature woman in her late thirties.<sup>26</sup> Lastly, Eliza is ruined in her hometown, in her mother's house. The elopement that often accompanies seduction occurs only when her pregnancy becomes "too obvious to be longer concealed" (p. 154). These facts, together with the half-articulated admission that the affair has been going on for sometime and Julia's hint at Eliza's temporary elevation of spirits, point towards a deliberate union rather than a reluctant seduction (pp. 145, 136). Yet, society's proscription of consensual premarital or extramarital sex among the middle classes is so strong as to oblige Foster to impute Eliza's sexual transgression to her temporary insanity. Deprived of free will, Eliza does not accept the liason with Sanford: she is seduced into it. Almost a century later, Catherine Dall's attempt to salvage Eliza's reputation offers interesting insights into the persistence of traditional notions of female purity. In order to invalidate Foster's charges of insanity, Dall strives to prove that Eliza was properly married to her supposed seducer.<sup>27</sup>

The real, final decline of Eliza's physical and mental stability occurs when she learns that she is pregnant. Immediately before

Sanford's letter announcing the "unlucky, but not . . . miraculous accident" to his friend Deighton, the worried Julia wonders what new occurrence has brought about the resurgence of melancholy evident in Eliza's last letter. Sanford himself admits that

At the first discovery, absolute distraction seized the soul of Eliza, which has since terminated in a fixed melancholy. (p. 140)

It is not so much the sexual transgression in itself that haunts Eliza as the visibility of such transgression, for it makes it impossible "to elude the invidious eye of curiosity" and obliges her to face the ultimate female powerlessness, her lack of control over her own body (p. 154).

If Eliza's authorial presence in the novel has been waning in the second section, it virtually disappears in the third, after she becomes pregnant. In one of the only two letters she writes here, Eliza resigns the copyright of her story to Julia, and her subsequent silence is ominous of her impending death. Long before she dies her life has become "a tale" for others to tell (p. 141).<sup>28</sup> By mixing narrative with direct quotations from Eliza's speeches, the fictional authors, especially Julia, replicate in the narrative the interpretative activity of the real author. Foster thus displaces the burden of historical accuracy: she hides behind the authority of eyewitnesses and presents her interpretation of Elizabeth Whitman's life as truthful.

Sanford and Julia are the dominant figures in the third section of the novel. The former enjoys "full possession" of Eliza's body in much the same way as the latter possesses her narrative voice (p. 139). Their control over Eliza is confirmed on a structural level, in that the last two letters written by the heroine are enclosed in one by Julia and followed by a letter from Sanford to Deighton. Also, of the twelve letters of the last section of the novel, six are written by Julia and three by Sanford, and only one is addressed to Eliza. The "fallen woman" is talked about, rather than talked to by her concerned friends. The very structure of *The Coquette* thus mirrors the reality of the community-enforced exclusion and silence that befalls the seduced female, and brings to completion the circular retributive pattern of the novel: the initially boisterously free Eliza ends up as a "wretched wanderer" (p. 154).

The authorial coup of Sanford and Julia takes on further significance in the light of a comparison between these two characters and Eliza. Julia enters the novel as the consoler of the depressed and isolated Eliza as well as her *alter*, and better, *ego*. Julia resembles Eliza in many ways: she is attractive, gifted, and single. Being younger, she is going through much of the same troubling decision-making Eliza experienced earlier in the novel. Julia's uncertain speculation about her future, "should I ever enter a married life," echoes Eliza's previous, more reluctant statement, "should it ever be my fate to wear the hymenial chain" (pp. 136, 14). However, their respective models of perfect marital happiness are significantly different. Eliza fantasizes about the romantic marriage of the Richmans as being distinguished by "the purest and most ardent affection" as well as by "health and wealth" (p. 14). Julia, instead, exhorts the more rational marriage of the "discreet and modest" Lucy, whom she describes as "most happily united" (p. 136). In support of her assertion, she adduces a list of the virtues of Lucy's husband. Interestingly, Eliza's evaluation of a happy marriage focuses on the quality of the interaction between the two spouses, while Julia seems to assume that the simple juxtaposition of two worthy individuals is conducive to happiness. In reality, there is nothing in the letters Lucy writes that confirms Julia's optimistic assessment of her marriage. Rather, the only comment Lucy makes on her married life is far from enthusiastic and reveals a desire to return to her hometown, as symbolic of her previous status as "Freeman." She writes to Eliza:

I am happy in my present situation; but when the summer returns, I intend to visit my native home. Again, my Eliza, will we ramble together in those retired shades which friendship has rendered so delightful to us. (pp. 113-14)

Morally correct but fictionally rather forced, Foster's celebration of Lucy's marriage of reason is connected, on an ideological level, with the destruction of Mrs. Richman's happiness following the death of her beloved daughter. Between Mrs. Richman's punished romantic enthusiasm and Eliza's fall, stand Julia's sense of duty, her realism, and her sober acceptance of the "modest freedom" to which women can aspire on earth (p. 27). Shielded by her unbreachable virtue and aggressive discretion, which ward off even the libertine Sanford, Julia

will go through life relatively unscathed. In comparison with Eliza, however, it is apparent that what Julia gains in safety she sacrifices in complexity of personality.

Eliza shares with Sanford an elasticity of moral sense that sets her in opposition to the rigorous Julia and the other women in the novel. Foster scatters throughout the text evidence of the similarity between the language and personality of the heroine and the profligate seducer. Both think of marriage as imprisonment and intend to avoid it as long as possible; both are tempted by the freedom that a single life seems to offer; both are "gay" and ultimately rakes (pp. 14, 23, 37).<sup>29</sup> Such clues to Eliza's potential for immorality speak loud to the sexual double-standard of the late 1700s. Sanford is censured and ostracized, albeit belatedly, for being actively "incontinent": he is a well-known libertine who squanders a large patrimony and ruins both the life and the fortune of his worthy wife. For this, he is punished with poverty and homelessness. Paradoxically, Eliza is punished much more harshly than Sanford, and not for what she does, but rather for what she does not do, i.e., for not rejecting Sanford's attentions from the very start, for not securing her own modest happiness by marrying Boyer and, finally, for not protecting her chastity. Sexual double-standards equate man's active immorality to woman's failure to protect her virtue. The "veil of charity" (p. 37) that Sanford asks Eliza to draw over his faults early on in the novel, is unjustly similar to the other "veil" Eliza's friends ask "candor" to throw over her "frailties" (p. 169). Such a wish is inscribed on Eliza's tombstone, a far more tangible veil than the one Sanford had in mind.

However profligate, men maintain the authority to judge female virtue or lack thereof. In the same letter in which Sanford praises Julia for her incorruptibility, he also blames Eliza for her fall. At the end, Eliza herself seems to accept the moral double-standard, as proof of her own repentance and a means to exert moral influence on Sanford. In their last meeting she tells him:

"I wish not to be your accuser, but your reformer. On several accounts, I view my own crime in a more aggravated light than yours; but my conscience is awakened to a conviction of my guilt. Yours, I fear is not." (p. 160)

Eliza's moral redemption rests on her acceptance of the ethics of female self-sacrifice. Having confessed to having abandoned all hope of earthly felicity, she relishes the idea of becoming a "beacon to warn the American fair" (p. 159) and of saving the rake who, unlike herself, "may yet become a valuable member of society" (p. 160).

Paradoxically, it is only by losing her life that Eliza regains part of the power she relinquished to Sanford and Julia. On the one hand, death finally puts her beyond the reach of the libertine who has pursued her, physically as well as psychologically, throughout the novel.<sup>30</sup> On the other, her last speeches, though reported by other characters, contain her own interpretation of her life and compete in authority with Julia's. Eliza's final powerfulness results from renunciation rather than acquisition. She loses life to acquire freedom and happiness in the next world. She renounces the independent dreams of her youth in order to gain respectability. From the male rhetoric of self-assertion, she is forced back to that of female self-denial. It is a sad irony that the novel ends with Julia's expression of "the supporting persuasion . . . that . . . Eliza is happy" (p. 169).

Even those critics who perceive *The Coquette* and Eliza to be, respectively, the "most memorable seduction story in eighteenth-century American fiction,"<sup>31</sup> and "the only convincing heroine in the sentimental novel,"<sup>32</sup> have a hard time reconciling the highly complex and ambiguous portrayal of Eliza's quest with her conventional death. Traditional interpretations emphasize the inevitable, awkward didacticism that characterizes sentimental novels. In *The Early American Novel*, for example, Henry Petter notes:

Mrs. Foster succeeded with considerable discretion in steering clear of the numerous opportunities to preach which her plot afforded; but she appears to have yielded to the necessity of making her moral points at the conclusion of *The Coquette*.<sup>33</sup>

More recently, however, scholars of popular fiction like Walter Wenska, Linda Kerber, and Cathy Davidson have focused on the socio-political implications of the sentimental genre.

In his 1977 article "*The Coquette* and the American Dream of

Freedom," Wenska identifies the crucial preoccupation of Foster's novel as the attempt to define liberty. Hailing Eliza as an "antinomian"<sup>34</sup> prefiguring many other freedom-seeking American characters like Huck Finn, Natty Bumppo and Isabel Archer, Wenska notes the inevitable failure of all idealistic quests for absolute liberty. That both Eliza and Sanford "are defeated in their quests for self-determination," confirms the genderless, universal limitations to human freedom. Foster emerges from Wenska's analysis as a rather moderate ideologue of post-revolutionary America who wants "to dispel or at least radically qualify" illusions of perfect liberty. As such, it is only "unintentionally" that Foster's novel lends itself to more controversial interpretations.<sup>35</sup> Notably missing from Wenska's article is the analysis of the very different degrees of unfreedom that pertain to men and women in Foster's fictional and real world.

More detailed and gender-conscious is Kerber's 1980 book, *Women of the Republic*. In direct contrast to Wenska who describes the new Republic rather generically as a new land newly dedicated to births of new freedoms, Kerber maintains that even "the most radical American men" never intended the libertarian ideals of the revolution to affect the status of women as non-political, happily domestic beings. Women were to remain "a tradition-bound, underdeveloped nation within a larger, more politically sophisticated one."<sup>36</sup> The hiatus between the democratic ideals and the legal non-existence of women gave rise to an ambiguously ennobling ideology of "republican motherhood," which articulated women's liberty to integrate political values into their domestic life.<sup>37</sup> Far from providing them with a collective political identity or concrete political power, republican motherhood kept women at the periphery of political life. In the long run, however, it provided a rhetoric that women's movements could invoke to justify agitation for their political rights. While not describing Foster as a radical, Kerber none the less claims she is one of "the central architects of the new female ideology" and credits her with a higher degree of awareness than Wenska does.<sup>38</sup>

If Kerber, a historian, sees Foster as a moderate reformer who never totally escaped the prevailing rhetoric of her times, Davidson, a literary critic, stresses the limitations that the sentimental sub-genre imposed on the conceptualization of a different story for Eliza Whar-

ton. In her introduction to the 1986 edition of *The Coquette*, Davidson writes:

the form itself - or the writer - cannot imagine a life beyond her society's limitations without violating the essential social realism on which sentimental fiction . . . is ultimately based.<sup>39</sup>

The female writer, that is, faces the same problems of unfreedom as her heroine. Foster's attempt to give voice to the powerless is as doomed as Eliza's quest for freedom. Davidson reinterprets the story of Elizabeth Whitman in these terms:

The full tragedy of the novel . . . is that ultimately there was no tragedy at all—only the banal predictability of a fall that was precisely what the most conservative proponents of the status quo labored to prevent. Or perhaps the tragedy is that it can readily be reduced to this formulation and is thus reduced even in the telling.<sup>40</sup>

The ideological contradictions and structural disjunctions of *The Coquette* can also be approached from another angle that incorporates the issues of unintentionality, agency, and cooptation. In both her novel and her manual, Foster seems to grapple with the realities of hegemony and the divided loyalties of women, "the only subordinated group that has belonged to the same families as its rulers."<sup>41</sup> With respect to the ambiguous position of middle-class women who share their men's socio-economic status and have some self-interest in reforming, rather than radically transforming, an ultimately convenient status quo, *The Coquette* becomes a study not only of "silence, subservience, stasis,"<sup>42</sup> but also of the degree of female complicity in the maintenance of such silence.

From this point of view, Foster herself can be seen as hegemonized. In her novel, she explores the fascinating notion of female liberty only to show what one loses by pursuing it; she uses her perceptive understanding of the tragedy of Elizabeth Whitman's life to sanction the social values that caused it and to write a socially acceptable novel. The narrative of Eliza's death thus becomes the exemplary public execution of a rebel who has been betrayed by her own group. The fictional female community is extremely judgmental of Eliza. Her women friends use the same sexist, unsympathetic vocabulary to rebuke her as her suitors do to condemn her; they treat Eliza like an



irresponsible child and misunderstand or scorn her most open-hearted confessions. They justify such behavior in the name of the necessity to protect "the honor of [the] sex" (p. 63). The suspicion remains, however, that Eliza's friends censure her non-conformist behavior because it obliges them to question their own vulnerable logic of existence as self-sacrifice. Indeed, the plain telling of Eliza's life exposes female powerlessness and unfreedom—rather than female immorality—as the primary reasons why the community needs to protect its members and fails to do so. That the women characters try to neutralize the disturbing pariah by persuading her to get married reveals their keen, albeit unarticulated, awareness that marriage means silence, dependence, and legal inexistence.

*The Coquette*, then, explores the underside of the protective "network of emotional and moral support" Foster portrayed in *The Boarding School*. The very necessity of such a "sorority of affection" was a response to women's subordination.<sup>43</sup> The female world of love and ritual that Carroll Smith-Rosenberg idealized in her 1975 article, was indeed a "milieu in which women could develop a sense of inner security and self-esteem" but not one where "hostility and criticism of other women were discouraged."<sup>44</sup> Belonging rested on acceptance of, and obedience to, a moral code that for a long time would remain identical to that of the larger patriarchal society, and would be as strictly enforced by women as by men. In this context, strong female friendships among middle-class women emerge as contradictory amalgams, as both fulfilling and potentially revolutionary relationships, as compensatory reactions to subordination, and as instruments for the enforcement of internalized hegemonic patriarchal values. They function to console, rather than liberate; they turn anger into grief, rather than protest.

Many of the same contradictory impulses surface in Foster's ideological stance. *The Coquette* both registers and tries to quell the last spurts of turbulence and discontent among the women of the new Republic. Like other novels of seduction, it responds to the need to qualify uncalled-for dreams of freedom by portraying the exemplary failures that even the best among women inevitably encounter in the world. With the increasing consolidation of the "separate spheres" economy, women's chances to face the dangers of the world outside

their homes seem to diminish drastically, and the novel of seduction loses its socio-ideological function. Not surprisingly, "after approximately 1818, the seduction plot virtually disappears from sentimental fiction."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. xi.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, p. xi.

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Webster Foster, *The Coquette* (1797; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 111. All subsequent page references are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>4</sup> William Hill Brown, *The Power of Sympathy* (1789; rpt. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Sexual transgression is indeed an unforgivable sin. In a popular didactic text on the subject of female deportment, Foster writes: "But though I advocate the principles of philanthropy and Christian charity, as extending to some very special cases, I am far from supposing this fault generally capable of the least extenuation." See *The Boarding School* (1798; rpt. Boston: J. P. Peaslee, 1829), pp. 207-08. Such a strict moral code applies to the white women from the middle and upper classes who populate Foster's novel. On the contrary, according to John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman in *Intimate Matters. A History of Sexuality in America*, the moral standards of "working-class, immigrant and black women" are expected to be looser (New York: Harper & Row, 1988, p. 46). In *The Boarding School*, after telling the story of a seduced and abandoned Irish woman, Foster concedes, with a touch of condescension, that "allowance may be made for those, whose ignorance occasions their ruin" (p. 208).

<sup>6</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 185.

<sup>7</sup> Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> Cott, *The Grounding*, p. 187.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy F. Cott, ed., *Root of Bitterness* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972), p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> Twenty years after *The Coquette*, Jane Austen will explore the connection between money, spinsterhood, and ridicule in *Emma*: "it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman with a very narrow income must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid! . . . but a single woman of good fortune is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else!" See Jane Austen, *Emma* (1816; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> In his article on *The Coquette*, Frank Shuffelton argues that "In a very real sense the death of Mr. Haly . . . is a displaced version of the death of her [Eliza's] father." See "Mrs. Foster's *Coquette* and the Decline of Brotherly Watch," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century American Culture*, 16 (1986), p. 217.

<sup>13</sup> It is one of the ironies of the novel that all of Eliza's female friends turn into "guardians" upon realizing the potential disruptiveness of her quest for independence. Statements like: "Forgive my plainness . . . It is the task of friendship, sometimes to tell disagreeable truths" (p. 27) characterize most of the letters to Eliza. Only death seems to promise liberation from such zealous friends. In her last conversation with Julia, the ruined and sickly Eliza declares that she is looking forward to the "rest" she will find in being "insensible to censure and reproach" (p. 142).

<sup>14</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, ed., *Reconstructing American Literary History*, *Harvard English Studies*, 13 (1986), p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> In his article "'We Hold These Truths': Strategies of Control in the Literature of the Founders," Robert Ferguson argues that for men like Franklin, Jefferson and Adams "The purpose of silence is to control difference." See Bercovitch, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Cott, *Root*, p. 107.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, p. 92.

<sup>18</sup> After Boyer's angry departure, Sanford writes to his friend Deighton: "indeed Charles, I was seriously alarmed. . . . So great was my infatuation, that I verily believe I should have asked her in marriage, and risked the consequences, rather than to have lost her!" (p. 95).

<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Wharton does not let Sanford meet with her daughter at the time Eliza appointed. The encounter has to be hastily and secretly postponed. Then, Boyer discovers Eliza and Sanford whispering in close conversation and feels deceived.

<sup>20</sup> Eliza writes to Lucy: "my affairs are made a town talk. My mamma persuades me to disregard it. But how can I rise superior to 'The world's dread laugh, which scarce the firm philosopher can scorn?'" (p. 99).

<sup>21</sup> Davidson", *The Coquette*, pp. vii-xx.

<sup>22</sup> *The Power of Sympathy* presents another interesting attempt to remove the threat of illicit sexuality through words. Harriot tries to regulate the more than familial affection she feels for her brother by calling Harrington her "father." See Brown, p. 153.

<sup>23</sup> Wendy Martin, "Women and the American Revolution," *Early American Literature*, 11 (1976-77), pp. 322-25.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, p. 150.

<sup>25</sup> Harriot's seduced mother dies, while her father lives happily with his family for years.

<sup>26</sup> Davidson, *Revolution*, p. 112.

<sup>27</sup> Catherine Dall, *The Romance of the Association: Or, One Last Glimpse of Charlotte Temple and Eliza Wharton* (Cambridge: n. p., 1875).

<sup>28</sup> Both Foster and Julia skirt the boundaries separating truth from fiction. While the former insists that *The Coquette* is a novel based on truth, the latter, supposedly an eyewitness, refers to Eliza's life as a "story" (p. 147) and "drama" (p. 161).

<sup>29</sup> In one of his reports on Eliza's behavior in society, Mr. Selby writes to Boyer: "I am quite a convert to Pope's assertion, that 'Every woman is, at heart, a rake.' . . . How else shall we account for the existence of this disposition [dissipation], in your favorite fair?" (p. 53).

<sup>30</sup> Sanford meets Eliza in New Haven and follows her to Boston, where her friend Lucy lives, and then to Hartford, where he decides to buy a house to be near her.

<sup>31</sup> Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860* (New York: Pageant Books, 1959), p. 390.

<sup>32</sup> Janet Wilson James, *Changing Ideas about Women in the United States, 1776-1825* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981), p. 128.

<sup>33</sup> Henry Petter, *The Early American Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971), p. 263.

<sup>34</sup> Walter P. Wenska, Jr., "The Coquette and the American Dream of Freedom," *Early American Literature*, 12 (1977-78), p. 249.

<sup>35</sup> Wenska, pp. 250, 253, 245.

<sup>36</sup> Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic* (1980; rpt. New York: Norton & Co., 1986), pp. 9, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Mrs. Richman is the true spokeswoman for Republican motherhood in *The Coquette*. While making clear that she does not expect to "be called to the senate or the field" (p. 44), she asserts the right of women to be interested in politics: "Why should the government, which involves the peace and order of the society, of which we are a part, be wholly excluded from our observation?" Indeed, Mrs. Richman's request is innocuous enough to be praised as "truly Roman" and "truly republican" by Mr. Selby (p. 44).

<sup>38</sup> Kerber, p. II.

<sup>39</sup> Davidson, *The Coquette*, p. XIX.

<sup>40</sup> Davidson, *Revolution*, p. 149.

<sup>41</sup> Aileen S. Kraditor, *Up from the Pedestal* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> Davidson, *Revolution*, p. 147.

<sup>43</sup> Shuffelton, p. 222.

<sup>44</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 64.

<sup>45</sup> Davidson, *Revolution*, p. 135.