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The Impossible Cost of Freedom: Virtue versus Independence in *The Coquette*

ASHLEY HEMM

Quarante Club Prize

Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* is representative of several genres: the seduction novel, in which a young, female protagonist pays the price of succumbing to seduction with her life; and the novel of manners, in which a society's characteristics and values are described, often in contrast to individual desire. However, the novel's setting and background—a fictionalized account of real events set during the first decades of American history—add a much more complicated context than other examples of either genre. Eliza Wharton's struggle to define herself in her own terms is at once reminiscent of revolutionary America's struggle for not only autonomy but also cohesive identity. Viewed through the lens of the novel of manners, Eliza's struggle for personal freedom is a bitter one, and ultimately one that cannot succeed due to society's restrictions upon women. In this context, Foster also twists the concept of the seduction novel. Eliza's death is still a direct result of her seduction—her seducer is not, however, the rakish Major Sanford but the very concept of freedom and its impossible allure.

Unmarried women have no real standing in Eliza's world: they are seen for their potential as wives rather than their merit as individuals. By deferring the foregone conclusion of marriage and placing a higher value on her individual freedom, Eliza progressively lowers her value as potential mate until she is seen as nothing but a tease: the titular coquette. Her dalliances with Sanford chip away at her perceived virtue until there is nothing left; by the time his conquest is complete, the damage has long since been done. The text steadily reinforces this notion, particularly in the context of Eliza's three suitors: the deceased Mr. Haly, Mr. Boyer, and Major Sanford. Eliza's relationship with each man emphasizes her attempts to purchase freedom with virtue, the only currency society allows her to possess.

It is telling that Eliza's only official engagement has concluded before the novel has taken place, with the untimely but unsurprising death of Mr. Haly, her fiancé.

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The novel opens with her letter to Lucy Freeman describing her pleasure at finally being able to “leave [her] paternal roof” (Foster 806) upon the end of a suitable period of mourning for Mr. Haly. Eliza hastens to explain that she “esteemed” the man her family chose to be her spouse, but that “no one acquainted with the disparity of our tempers and dispositions, our views and designs, can suppose my heart much engaged in the alliance” (807). At first glance, this behavior may appear callous, after all, Eliza sees her fiancé’s death (as well as that of her father, mentioned in passing in Boyer’s first letter [811]) as a means to achieve her own freedom. As C. Leiren Mower suggests in “Bodies in Labor: Sole Proprietorship and the Labor of Conduct in *The Coquette*,” Eliza is simply “refusing to continue the sham of mourning for her dead suitor...readjusting the locus of control: in place of her parents’ wishes and the mourning conventions of her culture, she asserts the to labor over her own body” (Mower 329).

Unfortunately, Eliza cannot make such assertions without consequence. Her second letter to Lucy shows a response to an unseen reprimand of her previous words: “I have received your letter—your moral lecture rather; and be assured, my dear, your monitorial lessons and advice shall be attended to” (809). This is the first example we see of Lucy’s function as a typical member of society, cautioning her friend not to sacrifice her virtue for freedom. While Eliza tentatively agrees to modify her behavior, she still shows a reticence to agree with Lucy’s (and thus society’s) values: “I believe I shall never again resume those airs which you term *coquettish*, but which I think deserve a softer appellation, as they proceed from an innocent heart, and are the effusions of a youthful and cheerful mind” (809). That Eliza’s relief at no longer being burdened with an unwanted engagement is perceived as coquetry despite her never once having mentioned another man shows the extremely limited options she has. Eliza’s candor in expressing her newfound freedom is the first warning sign that her friends will latch onto: as an unattached woman, she should be considering her options for a suitable husband, not basking in the pleasure of being unattached. By admitting this pleasure, Eliza has already signaled to her peers that she is no longer as virtuous as she is expected to be. This precedent will set the tone for the events of the rest of the novel.

Eliza’s next letters introduce her second suitor, Mr. Boyer, as well as her reticence to pledge herself so quickly to another man. Wenska puts it succinctly in “*The Coquette* and the American Dream of Freedom”: “Unfortunately for Boyer, he represents everything Eliza is Trying—at least temporarily—to escape” (Wenska 247). While Eliza never once rejects the concept of marriage as a whole,

she very clearly wishes to defer it, particularly so soon after the end of her previous engagement. Upon Mrs. Richman's suggestion of Boyer as a suitable husband, Eliza implores her to "[l]et me, then, enjoy that freedom which is so highly prize" (812). Mrs. Richman's reply is but the first of many in the same vein, urging Eliza to take care not to enjoy her freedom too much. "But I despise those contracted ideas which confine virtue to a cell," she tells Lucy (812), unaware that the only way in which her peers allow the preservation of virtue is to confine it.

Despite Eliza's misgivings towards marrying Boyer in a timely manner, she continues to allow him to court her. Mrs. Richman continues to push her toward accepting his suit, refuting Eliza's concerns about giving up her freedom by claiming that she has "wrong ideas about freedom and matrimony" that she hopes Boyer "will happily rectify" (822). Eliza's "wrong ideas" are quite justified, Mower argues, "for not only will she be subject as a married woman to...social regulations...but she will also be subject to the legal regulation of her body and possessions" (330). Unfortunately, Eliza's reluctance to commit to Boyer, regardless of the reason, is interpreted as coquetry, particularly due to her association with Major Sanford, a known and unapologetic rake. Boyer makes this abundantly clear upon his formal ending of his suit: "too long has my peace of mind been sacrificed to the arts of a woman whose conduct has proved her unworthy of my regard; insensible to love, gratitude, and honor" (852). Eliza's unwillingness to pledge herself entirely to Boyer and her continued acquaintance with Major Sanford are enough to brand her a coquette. Any unwillingness to marry Boyer is clearly a sign weakness of character, if not downright villainy on her part. Worse, Boyer assumes that her behavior is due to Sanford's influence: "[b]anish him from your society," he implores her, "if you wish to preserve your virtue unsullied, your character unsuspecting. It already begins to depreciate" (854). Eliza's virtue is irrevocably tied to her willingness to marry; any hesitation on her part only sullies her reputation further.

Perhaps the most complicated relationship in *The Coquette* is that of Eliza and Major Sanford. Sanford is an unrepentant rake, happy to entertain himself at the expense of others, particularly Eliza. In his first letter to Deighton, Sanford states that, if Eliza is truly a coquette, "I shall avenge my sex by retaliating the mischiefs she meditates against us" (815). Sanford's proof of Eliza's coquetry is her demeanor: "gay, volatile, apparently thoughtless of every thing but present enjoyment" (815). Eliza's ability and desire to enjoy herself freely is already a sign of tarnish on her virtue, and one that Sanford will exploit throughout the novel,

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sabotaging Eliza's already tenuous relationship with Boyer in an effort to claim her for himself.

Eliza and Sanford share many common traits: while neither is overly ready to marry (though Sanford does admit that “[w]ere I disposed to marry, I am persuaded she would make an excellent wife” [818]), they each mention a desire to marry up. “Whenever I do submit to be shackled,” Sanford writes, “it must be from a necessity of mending my fortune” (818). Likewise, Eliza tells Lucy that “when I thought more seriously, [Sanford’s] liberal fortune was extremely alluring to me, who, you know, have been hitherto confined to the rigid rules of prudence and economy, not to say necessity, in my finances” (840). However, these similarities are overshadowed by Sanford’s and Eliza’s respective genders. Eliza will never be allowed the same freedom as Sanford; to even attempt to play along with his game is a clear recipe for ruin, as her friends and family consistently remind her. It is within Eliza’s relationship with Sanford that the last vestiges of her virtue are relinquished. Circumstance freed her from Haly, and the combination of her reluctance and Sanford’s machinations have freed her from Boyer, but nothing remains to free her from Sanford, who has finally succeeded in “the full possession of my adorable Eliza” (886). Here, at the novel’s close, Eliza pays the ultimate price for her continued struggle for independence: having run out of virtue, she pays with her life.

Throughout the course of the novel, Eliza Wharton consistently makes choices that further her personal freedom, regardless of their incompatibility with the rules of her society. Kristie Hamilton puts it succinctly in “An Assault on the Will: Republican Virtue and the City in Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette*”: Eliza is branded a coquette because “she attempts to balance all of her opportunities, sanctioned and unsanctioned, until one should present itself as that which will best satisfy her in her pursuit of happiness” (Hamilton 148). Eliza’s descent into ruin can be easily traced through the men in her life—Haly, Boyer, and Sanford—because it is they who hold the power in her society. As an unmarried female, Eliza is at best a future spouse, and at worst a negative example to her peers. Lucy Freeman Sumner, ever the paragon of proper female behavior, phrases Eliza’s predicament the best:

Slight not the opinion of the world. We are dependent beings; and while the smallest traces of virtuous sensibility remain, we must feel the force of that dependence in a greater or less degree. No female, whose mind is uncorrupted, can be indifferent to reputation. It is an inestimable

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jewel, the loss of which can never be repaired. While retained, it affords conscious peace to our own minds, and insures the esteem and respect of all around us. (882)

As a “dependent being,” Eliza has no chance whatsoever to achieve and sustain the level of freedom which she desires. Eliza has been unalterably seduced by freedom, and is unable to resist its call in order to resume her place in society. In a particularly biting twist, we are left with the knowledge that Eliza’s strength of will is ultimately her weakness, and the cause of her downfall.

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