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Emily Nix  
*Seton Hall University*

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# Know Thyself, Own Thyself: An Analysis of Eliza Wharton's Gradual Downfall in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*

Emily Nix  
Seton Hall University

## Abstract

*Eliza Wharton's downfall in Hannah Webster Foster's "The Coquette" is most commonly reduced to her position as a young woman without agency in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Eliza's death is comfortable in the public eye, as it is seemingly a result of her behaviors as a coquette. This paper challenges that idea and presents evidence that Eliza's lack of a support system, lack of worldly knowledge, flighty nature, and title as a "coquette" not only infantilize her but lead to her demise.*

## 1. Introduction

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, changes in religious, political, social, and domestic structures affected those living in the United States. During this era, marriages were public affairs rather than private and had little to do with the intimate connection between the husband and wife. New ideas of private marriage began to emerge in the late 18th century and early 19th century, which influenced some unorthodox opinions among young adults. This was the case of Eliza Wharton in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*. Eliza, the protagonist, is deemed a coquette, or a promiscuous young woman, by her friends, family, and acquaintances as she tries to navigate her life, including the pursuit of either Mr. John Boyer or

Major Peter Sanford. At the time it was published, *The Coquette* was known as a cautionary tale against coquettishness, but it has since been recognized as a story that shows the oppression of women during early America. In the story, Eliza is posited as a coquette who does not have the maturity or virtue to choose a safe and secure husband; thus, those around her begin to worry about how society views her. This traditional reading of Eliza as a coquette is oppressive and does not accurately represent the true events of Eliza's life that result in her downfall. Eliza's demise is the result of her ill-preparedness for life, the labeling of her as a "coquette," her immaturity, and the unsupportive women she has in her life. She also infantilizes herself through her erratic tendencies and delusions of invincibility, which contribute to her downfall as well. These aspects combined put Eliza in a position where she has no agency, no ability to fight for herself, and no true support system she can rely on. Thus, Eliza is killed off and becomes representative of a story that speaks of necessary prudence and care as a woman in society.

## 2. Literary Review

Since the publication of *The Coquette*, and more so since its female authorship was revealed, many critics have had different opinions about what Eliza's downfall was, as well as whether she was at fault. In the 1986 reprint of *The Co-*

quette, Cathy Davidson argues that Eliza's story becomes one of a "femme covert" and that Foster's writing gave early American women an opportunity to see women like themselves in literature, which includes women who were not mentally or emotionally settled on the "simple" man. Furthermore, she argues that "socially conservative readers" were possibly fearful of the response of Foster's Eliza; however Foster quells this fear by making sure Eliza recognizes the ideal form of marriage that she sees in the Richmans (Davidson xii). Other critics, such as Laura Korobkin, observe Eliza's downfall to be a result of her interactions with freedom as it is concerned with her relationships. Korobkin suggests that "the focus is on the critical need for self-discipline and nuanced decision-making and on Eliza's tragic inability to prevent her delight in socializing" (80). Though Eliza's lack of freedom certainly played into her oppression and hindered her ability to spend time choosing who she wanted to marry, other critics believe that the women in her life also played a large role. Makiko Wakabayashi, in her essay "Female Friendship in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette: A Legacy of the Seduction Novel*," argues that the story is "about women's collaboration to fight against a moral corruption of the Early Republic" (163). According to Wakabayashi, the women in the novel try to "claim Eliza back to the realm of female friendship" and that their role is more beneficial for Eliza than it is harmful (167). A similar sentiment comes from Claire Pettengill in "Sisterhood in a Separate Sphere: Female Friendship in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* and *The Boarding School*," where she argues that Foster's "two books cover the prolonged 'premarital state' ... where socializing and 'circulating' are productive labor, not only providing opportunities to choose a suitable mate, but also reinforcing ties between women" (188). Criticism about Eliza's interactions with freedom and what she receives as support from women in *The Coquette* has been varied over the years. Eliza's position as a coquette can also be attributed to her

age, as a coquette must be young. A "coquette" is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "a woman (more or less young), who uses arts to gain the admiration and affection of men, merely for the gratification of vanity or from a desire of conquest" ("coquette"). Therefore, if Eliza were older, her situation would have been less controversial in the public eye. Despite the differing opinions about what caused Eliza's downfall, one idea is clear to all critics, which is that her demise was inevitable, no matter the contributing factors.

Early Americans had strict marriage customs which were heavily influenced by English traditions. The patriarchal society that existed during Eliza's time would have allowed a woman little to no agency in her marriage. In the book *Women's Agency in Early Modern Britain and the American Colonies*, Rosemary O'Day explains how the ownership of wife transferred from father to husband, and that "Some marriages were clearly based upon this assumption that the exchange had taken place and that the wife was subject to the husband" (166). This exchange of women from father to husband was sometimes considered as financial protection for women, but it continued to perpetuate the oppression of women (O'Day 164). O'Day also mentions "The courts of the American colonies frequently punished husbands for refusing to exercise authority over their wives, children and servants," which proves how deeply rooted the patriarchal system was in early American life, as even men could be punished for not enforcing those rules (166). The patriarchy was upheld despite new and emerging ideas that surfaced towards the end of the 18th century. In the *Journal of Social History*, Nicole Eustace explains that:

In the seventeenth century, public involvement in courtships was commonplace and parents were expected to exercise a decisive influence on their children's marriage choices [...] By the nineteenth century, on the other hand, the pull of romantic love prevailed

over all other factors [...] Courtships became intensely private matters [...] Eighteenth-century courtship shared aspects of both earlier and later systems. (518)

Thus, the 18<sup>th</sup> century existed as a place of possibility for many women where they had the opportunity for more agency when it came to their marriages. This emerging view on marriage and courtship is evident in *The Coquette*, as it explains Eliza's ability and drive to consider both Boyer and Sanford as potential husbands. Living in a society where emerging ideas directly contradicted traditional ones, though, was a source of Eliza's downfall, and other women's as well.

*The Coquette* is often recognized as a cautionary tale that advises against coquettishness, flirtation, and in a modern, 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of it, "dating." Though Eliza's downfall may work by itself to advise women against her actions, the true story on which it is based shows that it is more of a tragedy of outside influence than an example of personal wrongdoing. *The Coquette* is based on the true story of Elizabeth Whitman, which Davidson details in her introduction. Davidson quotes the newspaper article written by Captain Goodhue that was released after Elizabeth's death at a pub, which says "She was remained at this inn till her death, in expectation of the arrival of her husband, whom she expected to come for her, and appeared anxious at his delay" (vii). Though Elizabeth's life was not initially looked at as an advisory tale, after the initial shock of her mysterious story, people began to question the values and virtues of a pregnant woman found alone in a bar with no identifiable husband. Once the story was well-read and known by the public, the memory of her being the daughter of two well-respected parents and of famous ancestry was reduced to, as Davidson quotes from an anonymous essayist, "a good moral lecture to young ladies" (viii). Some arguments for Whitman's story suggest that she became the example

for women against reading novels because a well-read woman like Whitman was "a case study of a woman first misled by her education into a taste for novels and then corrupted through indulging that unwholesome appetite" (Davidson ix). Elizabeth Whitman's open-ended yet mysterious story gave writers who did not feel sympathy for her the idea that women needed to be kept in tight control, and other writers, including Foster, the opportunity to suggest that such strong restrictions would result in a downfall.

### 3. Summary

At the beginning of *The Coquette*, Eliza is writing to her friend Lucy Freeman (later Lucy Sumner) about her late fiancé, Mr. Haly. She explains how her parents, though they care about her, put Eliza in positions where her happiness is at risk when it comes to marrying Haly. She writes to Lucy, "To them, of course, I sacrificed my fancy in this affair; determined that my reason should concur with theirs; and on that to risk my future happiness" (Foster 5). It is established in this letter that Eliza's expectations from life differ from those of the traditional early American woman. Eliza is later described as having an "accomplished mind," and she mentions writing letters to her mother throughout the novel. These pieces of evidence prove that Eliza is not only a privileged and educated woman but she is also protected and cared for by her parents, in body and spirit.

Eliza then meets Mr. Boyer, a man she describes as having "descended from a worthy family; had passed with honor and applause through the university where he was educated; had since studied divinity with success;" however she is not completely pleased with him as the story continues (Foster 8). Eliza craves a person in her life who is going to give her a sense of luxury and adventure, and not only do these traits not fit in with the ideas of marriage, but her complacency about being single also goes against them. Later, Eliza

meets General Sanford and he tells his confidante, Mr. Charles Deighton: “I fancy this young lady is a coquette; and if so, I shall avenge my sex, by retaliating the mischiefs, she mediates against us. Not that I have any ill designs; but only to play off her own artillery, but using a little unmeaning gallantry” (Foster 18). This is the first instance in which someone else directly refers to Eliza as a coquette, as well as the first time that Sanford admits to his motive, which is to attract Eliza without a promise of marriage. Eventually, Eliza agrees to marry Boyer, but he calls off the engagement after repeatedly advising Eliza against Sanford but finding them alone in the garden. Boyer regards Eliza as a friend and wishes well for her, but marries someone else. Heartbroken, Eliza begins to fall ill, until Sanford returns to her and they sleep together. Eliza becomes pregnant and leaves in the night, and Lucy, another friend, Julia Granby, her mother Mrs. Wharton, and Major Sanford all hear that she has given birth and passed away. It is unknown that Eliza is pregnant when she disappears, but it occurs directly after her sexual encounter with Major Sanford. This disappearance acts as a type of *deus ex machina* and serves as an example to other women that the result of sexual misconduct or acting outside of the prescribed notions of marriage has an inevitable end, which Eliza meets not long after her actions.

#### 4. Eliza’s Downfall:

##### 4.1. Lack of Life Knowledge

Throughout *The Coquette*, one key moment in Eliza’s downfall is her ill-preparedness for life. This can also be described as her yearning for a freedom that does not exist. As a privileged woman living in a patriarchal society, Eliza is granted things that women were not always given; however, she does not have a clear idea of what freedom necessarily means in her society. Her interpretation of freedom is explained in her letters, and those around her perpetuate this skewed idea by never giving her a glimpse of true reality. In her

first letter to Lucy, for example, Eliza notes that “It is a *pleasure*; pleasure, my dear Lucy, on leaving my paternal roof! Could you believe that the darling child of an indulgent and dearly beloved mother would feel a gleam of joy at leaving her?” (Foster 5). Eliza is living with her mother at the very beginning of the novel, and it is not until after her fiancé has passed away that she leaves to visit with the Richmans, who are family friends of Eliza’s. It is in the time that she lives with the Richmans that Eliza gets a taste of freedom, as she is no longer with her mother, who can have direct control over her actions. The Richmans, and other people Eliza writes to, can only advise her in certain directions, and she has yet to become a wife or a mother. Eliza is existing as herself and living as a type of “free woman.” The lack of control that Eliza has on her own life, and her false idea of freedom leads her to believe she can live as a single woman, which was not a true option for any young woman. Eliza’s desire for freedom continues, particularly when she recounts her conversation with Mrs. Richman. Mrs. Richman advises Eliza to keep Mr. Boyer in mind, asking “Your heart, I presume, is now free?” to which Eliza replies “Yes, and I hope it will long remain so” (Foster 13). Eliza clearly indicates this desire for freedom, saying to Mrs. Richman,

I hope my friends will never again interpose in my concerns of that nature ... I am young, gay, volatile. A melancholy event has lately extricated me from those shackles, which parental authority had imposed on my mind. Let me then enjoy that freedom which I so highly prize. Let me have opportunity, unbiassed by opinion, to gratify my natural disposition in a participation of those pleasures which youth and innocence afford. (Foster 13)

Eliza vehemently claims that she is happy to be free from the chains that her parents imposed and that she now desires to exercise that freedom,

yet she is confused and uncertain about what that freedom means. Most evidently, Eliza does not recognize that being a young, single woman at the time was hardly possible without a rational explanation so society would not deem her coquettish. Throughout the novel, many of Eliza's friends warn her that her actions are going to have others view her as someone without virtue. She is warned against the path that she chooses to take, but she is never told by anyone from who she seeks advice that her notion of freedom is unreasonable.

Eliza, though desiring freedom, evidently does not understand what it means for her. Her attitude about freedom often leads her to act immaturity too, which is another aspect of her downfall. Eliza's carefree attitude occurs in the scene of the first party she attends, where she is bothered by questions about her late fiancé, which makes her experience of "mirth" and the "delightful retreat" become a "gloom" which she cannot help but feel (Foster 8-9). Korobkin acknowledges Eliza's negative sentiment in her article and writes that "By having her throw a virtual foot-stamping tantrum at the grownup who dares to interrupt her socializing, Foster signals that Eliza's emotions are immature and uncontrolled" (83). As Korobkin points out, Eliza's poor actions are indicative of the freedom that she wants to experience. Eliza is utterly bored by the questions of her late fiancé, which should instead leave her feeling reflective and sad. Many critics argue that Eliza's lack of knowledge is a type of immaturity, but this immaturity and her position as a woman in this society align more with an infantilization that is a result of her inexperience in life. This infantilization comes from those who claim to care about Eliza but rarely tell her she is acting like a child; rather they continue to perpetuate the child-like behavior with poor advice and pity. One particular case of this comes from Julia Grandby towards the end of the novel, when she writes to Lucy, "I regret leaving Eliza! I tremble at her danger! She has not the resolution to resist temptation, which she once possessed. Her mind is surprisingly weakened! She appears

sensible of this; and yet adds to it by yielding to her own imbecility" (Foster 131). Julia, though wanting the best for Eliza, is not helping her situation in this letter. As opposed to telling Eliza the realities she needs to hear, Julia and Lucy write about them on the side, and in their letters to Eliza try to describe what her life would be with Sanford and the dangers it could hold. Julia and Lucy, like others, go along with Eliza's naivety and immaturity. As a young woman, Eliza believes she is entitled to freedom after she nearly escaped marriage, which is made clear in her comments to Mrs. Richman. It is evident that Eliza, though desiring freedom in her post-fiancé life, does not know what freedom means for a woman in her society, nor does she have the maturity to handle that freedom. It is in this way that Eliza is ill-prepared to take on her life as a woman without and not desiring a husband.

#### 4.2. False Ideas of Invincibility

Eliza's infantilization as it contributes to her downfall is mostly a result of other people, but she does not help herself, either. Eliza perpetuates her infantilization, as well as proving those who see her this way, right. One way in which she infantilizes herself is through the folly of invincibility that she has from the very beginning of the novel. This modern idea of young adults feeling "invincible" is evident at the beginning of Eliza's journey, especially with the false ideas of freedom that were previously mentioned. Though the decision between Mr. Boyer and Mr. Sanford is only Eliza's decision to make, the warnings she receives were clear. After only learning about Mr. Sanford through Eliza's letters, Lucy describes Sanford as "a rake, my dear friend" (Foster 27). Lucy's letter then continues to describe Sanford negatively by highlighting all of what is good about Mr. Boyer. Eliza also points out that both Boyer and Sanford confront Eliza on what her intentions are, and despite these confrontations that she does not like and turns away from,

Eliza still believes Sanford to be a better possibility because of the active lifestyle he can provide her. Later, Lucy counters Eliza's point that "a reformed rake makes a good husband" by telling her "the gaiety of his appearance; with the splendor of his equipage; with the politeness of his manners ... These, alas! are superficial, ensnaring endowments" (Foster 53, 57). Warnings about Sanford continue throughout the novel, and not only come from Lucy but other friends as well. Despite these warnings and claiming that her friends' opinions matter to her, Eliza finds herself pregnant and running away at the end of the novel. Being gracious to Eliza and recognizing that she lacked proper knowledge of freedom as a woman in her society is necessary, as she was certainly a victim. However, she also fell victim to her rash actions and birthed the child between herself and Sanford because of it. Throughout the novel, though nervous, Eliza never really acted like the "worst" could happen, whether that worst was pregnancy, being denounced in society, or otherwise. She continuously pushed further into trouble, and then apologized for not listening to her friends. As a young woman, Eliza's feeling of invincibility, especially after having left home, is not surprising and it leads to her eventual downfall.

#### 4.3. Labeling as "Coquette"

Eliza's lack of knowledge and resulting infantilization are not the only aspects that play into her downfall. Another significant aspect of her demise is her being labeled as a "coquette," which Eliza is often called by those around her. Labelling Eliza as a coquette is connected to her immaturity and infantilization, as the very definition of a coquette includes "young," and continually reinforces an inability to have recognition as an adult. Furthermore, Eliza's labeling as a coquette gives Sanford the ability to do whatever he wants to her; if Eliza is a coquette, then Sanford's actions are justified by Eliza's poor behavior.

The first time that Sanford calls Eliza a co-

quette, he establishes that he is only going to pursue her to "avenge his sex." Sanford, then, was going to act as what can be considered the male version of a coquette, which is known as a "rake." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a rake is "a fashionable or stylish man of dissolute or promiscuous habits" ("rake"). The women in the novel repeatedly refer to Sanford as a rake, and his pursuit of Eliza proves this, as he has no intention of marrying her. Sanford's position as a rake leads Eliza away from the virtuous choice of Boyer, and even though he does not treat Eliza with respect, his noncommittal attitude is desirable to her. In a letter to Lucy, Eliza describes Sanford as follows: "His person, his manners, his situation, all combine to charm my fancy; and to my lively imagination, strewn the path of life with flowers. What a pity, my dear Lucy, that the graces and virtues are not oftner united!" (Foster 22). Eliza is disappointed that Sanford is not virtuous; however, she goes on to mention that she will not stop searching for a husband until he is both exciting to her and virtuous in manner. As the novel continues, Eliza becomes more interested in the idea of Sanford and what he can provide for her. His unwillingness to marry her is also an attractive idea to Eliza, and though the label of "coquette" is offensive, it allows her to remain in a free position. After telling Lucy that she "recoil(s) at the thought of immediately forming a connection, which must confine me to the duties of domestic life," Eliza recounts that Sanford said to her, "But, circumstanced as you and I are, at present, I will not sue for your attention, as a lover; but rest contented, if possible with that share of kindness, and regard, which your benevolence may afford me as a friend" (Foster 29). As friends, Eliza and Sanford know that their relationship is hiding something more than either party lets on. Eliza's downfall, as it relates to labeling, is because of how she plays into the title. Eliza knows that being friends with Sanford is dangerous, as she is often advised against spending time with him and being associated with him. Still, Eliza continues to meet up

with Sanford in ways that make Boyer and others suspicious of Eliza's intentions, which jeopardize how others view her in society, her marriageability, and her virtue.

Boyer, like Sanford, also calls Eliza a coquette. Boyer's labeling of Eliza as a coquette is different from Sanford's intentions when he chooses that label; Boyer wants to make Eliza feel bad about her actions, whereas Sanford does it to view her in a conquerable light. Furthermore, Boyer's use of "coquette" reinforces the male-dominated society in which they are living, and he tries to show Eliza that her desire to make decisions for herself is not well received by the public. The first instance of Boyer calling Eliza a coquette occurs when he suspects she is misbehaving; he writes to his confidante, Mr. T. Selby, "What pity it is, that so fair a form, so accomplished a mind, should be tarnished, in the smallest degree, by the follies of coquetry!" (Foster 74). Though this is not said directly to Eliza's face, Boyer's first use of "coquette" reinforces the patriarchy in which they are living. Boyer's description of himself, "so fair a form" and "so accomplished a mind" undermines Eliza even further when he uses "coquetry." Boyer positions himself as better than Eliza and thus shows how his use of "coquette" diminishes Eliza, intellectually and emotionally. Two other instances in which Boyer uses the word "coquette" occur in his break-up letter to Eliza after he finds her in the garden alone with Sanford. Eliza attempts to tell Boyer that she only met Sanford to say they can no longer be friends as Eliza is marrying Boyer; he writes back with, "I have been too long the dupe of your dissimulation and coquetry. Too long has my peace of mind been sacrificed to the arts of a woman, whose conduct has proved her unworthy of my regard" (Foster 81). In this instance, like the first, Boyer uses the term "coquette" to put down Eliza and to make her feel bad about her actions. It also continues to put Boyer in positions of power over Eliza. Later in the letter, Boyer notes that he does not want to know what the result of Eliza's coquetry would have been,

had they been in a marriage together (Foster 82). Both uses of "coquette" are Boyer's attempt to put Eliza in an inferior position to him. They also are an example of how Boyer, like others throughout the novel, tries to warn Eliza that her actions are not approved by the society she is living in. Because being a coquette is not necessarily an accepted role in society, he thinks by calling her a coquette she will pick up on the fact that her assumed role is not acceptable. Though she does not seem to care about this claim initially, it is one part of Eliza that eventually results in her downfall. The "coquettish" behavior that she performs is not suitable for the patriarchal society she is living in, and Boyer's labeling her as "coquette" is his attempt to explain that to her.

Lucy is another person who actively calls Eliza a "coquette" throughout the story. Though *The Coquette* is often looked at as a story that represents strong female friendship, Lucy is brash in her words and, like Boyer, tries to position herself above Eliza by using the term "coquette." Eliza reveals that Lucy refers to her as a coquette, presumably before the story starts, in what Eliza describes as a "moral lecture," when she writes "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," which assumes that Lucy has called Eliza a coquette previously (Foster 7). Though Lucy's observation of Eliza as having "coquettish" behavior is meant to be productive, it results in further degradation of Eliza. Like Boyer, Lucy is trying to tell Eliza that these behaviors are not acceptable in society, as "coquettishness" is not acceptable. Lucy is a woman who is complacent in the patriarchal society that has been established; she is married early in the novel, always pushes Eliza to choose Boyer over Sanford, and she disapproves greatly of Eliza's actions even if Eliza believes them to be the best decision for herself. In this way, Lucy begins to take on the role of an oppressive man in *The Coquette*. She, like her

male counterparts, believes that Eliza's actions are going to result in a soiled social view of her. This is proved when she uses "coquette" to put herself in a superior position to Eliza, as Boyer does later in the novel. After Eliza expresses her concerns about marriage to Lucy, she replies, "I have pride enough to keep me above coquetry, or prudery; and discretion enough, I hope, to secure me the errors of both" (Foster 31). Lucy's belittling of Eliza in this instance is similar to Boyer's when he undermines Eliza's by calling her a "coquette." As a fellow woman, Lucy's reference to Eliza as a "coquette" has a duality of oppression to it; not only does it contribute to Eliza's downfall but it also puts Lucy into the position of perpetuating the patriarchal power structure.

#### 4.4. Unsupportive Female Relationships

Eliza's friendships that she experiences throughout *The Coquette* have been viewed in polarized positions. Wakabayashi argues that *The Coquette* is an example of strong female friendship and one that "commemorates the sacrifice of seduction heroine in the spirits of those women who stand at the center of the Early Republic as moral guardians" (Wakabayashi). According to Wakabayashi, then, Foster intended to create Eliza as a martyr for women who were better suited to become role models of the changing ideas that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This reading is slightly aligned with that of Pettengill, who argues that "The bonds of female friendship – theoretically sacred, practically fraught with tension – shape Eliza's thoughts and actions as much as any other system of values (...) the novel's apparent climax (...) and its denouement (...) hinge on a previous, precipitating crisis, less apparent but no less real, in the 'female plot'" (186). The women's role in the novel begins to take on their own subplot while also enhancing Eliza's search for freedom. Because of the nature of the epistolary novel, the intimate interactions between women are released and

show the struggle of navigating personal life in a society that is catering towards men. Despite their significant role being generally assumed as positive, an understanding of Eliza's downfall as the backdrop to female action shows how questionable their "friendship" really is. Lucy and Julia both play considerable roles in Eliza's life, with Lucy being a much harsher friend, and Julia being much more sympathetic; however, neither woman gives Eliza the guidance that she needs to find happiness within herself while still being accepted in society. Lucy degrades Eliza with her language throughout the novel, but she also contradicts herself in these warnings. Early in the novel, Lucy advises Eliza against Sanford, explaining that he is a "rake," and the traits included are "of true love they are absolutely incapable. Their passions have been too much hackneyed to admit so pure a flame. You cannot anticipate sincere and lasting respect from them ... They are always hard hearted and cruel" (Foster 57). Lucy believes Sanford to be virtually unlovable and ill-suited for the life of a husband, and asks Eliza, "Can you, who have always been used to serenity and order in a family, to rational, refined and improving conversation, relinquish them, and launch into the whirlpool of frivolity ..." (Foster 58). Lucy does not keep it a secret from Eliza that she does not like Sanford, nor that she believes Boyer is the better choice for a husband. Though Lucy believes this to be helpful for Eliza, she only continues to confuse Eliza.

Lucy calling Eliza a coquette changes after both Boyer and Sanford leave Eliza, and she begins to fall ill. After Lucy receives melancholy letters from Eliza that detail her heartbreak from being left, Lucy asks in a letter, "Where, O Eliza Wharton! Where is that fund of sense, and sentiment which once animated your engaging form? Where that strength of mind, that independence of soul, that alacrity and sprightliness of deportment, which formerly raised you superior to every adverse occurrence" (Foster 107). Lucy's questioning of Eliza's temperament is not only contradic-

tory to what she had been advising Eliza throughout the novel, but it also freezes Eliza. From the beginning of *The Coquette*, Lucy tries to tell Eliza to avoid her “girlish airs” and to act more maturely. Yet, when Eliza realizes she loves Boyer but cannot have him, Lucy questions where her “tenacious” attitude has gone. These contradictory comments put Eliza, who needs advice from the women in her life, in a position where she does not know how to proceed. On one hand, her light-hearted attitude and chase for freedom are seemingly unfit for society, but on the other hand, it is the temperament that others expect to see from her, even when she is experiencing heartbreak. Lucy’s disregard for Eliza continues after her death, wherein her final letter to Julia, she writes, “From the melancholy story of Eliza Wharton, let the American fair learn to reject with disdain every insinuation derogatory to their true dignity and honor ... To associate, is to approve; to approve, is to be betrayed!” (Foster 168). In this farewell phrase, it may seem at first glance that Lucy is only denouncing men, but instead she ends up victim-blaming Eliza. The phrase “to associate, is to approve” suggests that Eliza agreed to the poor treatment she received from Sanford; in reality, Eliza was only ever trying to find out who would bring her more happiness, Boyer or Sanford. This is another way in which Lucy continues to perpetuate the patriarchy because she positions herself for the last time as someone who sees only faults with Eliza, rather than recognizing her as a woman who deserves happiness. What Lucy fails to realize is that she is one of the main perpetrators of disdain in Eliza’s life, as she never provides a straightforward piece of advice. Though Lucy’s role in *The Coquette* is often viewed by critics as a friend in favor of Eliza, she is better seen as one who contributes to Eliza’s eventual downfall. Lucy’s letters to Eliza are harsh, misleading, and contradictory, and perpetuate Eliza’s role as an inferior woman in a patriarchal society.

Julia Granby, the other main female figure in Eliza’s life, is less controversial throughout *The*

*Coquette*. Julia, like Lucy, tries to lead Eliza away from associating with Sanford and therefore suffering the consequences of a man who does not desire association. Julia advises Eliza against Sanford, writing, “Can *you* expect sincerity from the man, who withholds it from an amiable, and deserving wife? No, Eliza; it is not love, which induces him to entertain you with the subject! It is a baser passion; and if you disdain not his artifice; if you listen to his flattery, you will, I fear, fall victim to his evil machinations!” (Foster 130). Though Julia is equally as vehement about her dislike and disapproval of Sanford, she approaches the topic with more humility and respect for Eliza. Lucy’s letters are written in a berating and degrading tone, but Julia recognizes Eliza’s opinions and concerns as valid. Using words and phrases such as “can you” and “I fear” give Eliza agency in this process; it is merely Julia expressing how she feels with room for Eliza to think for herself, and then reply. The reason for Julia’s kindness and understanding of Eliza is explored further in Wakabayashi’s piece on female friendship. She argues that Eliza must die, for the coquette cannot continue to live in a society that pushes her down, but Julia lives on in her honor. Wakabayashi writes, “Julia Granby is, indeed, a spiritual reincarnation of Eliza Wharton. Eliza Wharton is, in this sense, waiting for our recognition as a heroine,” for the “young girls like Julia to find their *raison d’être* in acting a moral part for American society” (176-77). Wakabayashi’s argument that Julia holds the spirit of Eliza is certainly true, as she is sympathetic about Eliza’s mishaps and recognizes her more than Lucy as someone who is a victim of the patriarchy. Despite this, Julia, like Lucy, complicates Eliza’s endeavors. After learning about Sanford’s insistent interference in Eliza and Boyer’s engagement, Julia recalls how she was there when Lucy was once introduced to a rake, and how she denied that man. Afterward, she writes, “I hope neither you, nor I, Eliza, shall ever be tried by a man of debauched principles. Such characters I conceive to be totally unfit for the society of

women, who have any claim to virtue and delicacy” (Foster 136). Though this is seemingly beneficial advice, it is more of a waste of Eliza’s time. At this point in the novel, Julia knows that Sanford is a rake and that he is trying to become a part of Eliza’s life. Rather than using the empathetic communication skills that she has already proved to have, she avoids the main point she is trying to make in favor of advising Eliza of a lesson. Though Julia, like Lucy, wants the best for Eliza in her heart, she only continues to contribute towards Eliza’s downfall. Eliza is someone who needs to be taught how she can function in the patriarchal society in which she lives; however, she is not advised with clarity or with regard for her confusion.

#### 4.5. Flighty Nature

In *The Coquette*, Eliza’s limited agency and freedom cause her to rely on others for advice and guidance, even though she does not always love what they have to say to her. A key way in which Eliza is infantilized is shown towards the end of the novel, and that is her flight response to issues. Eliza continues her infantilization by running from the parts of her world that she does not like. Eliza was not pleased with her life at home after Mr. Haly died, so she goes to live with the Richmans to see what they can offer her, both in lifestyle and in the realm of her love life. When Eliza does not like the advice that she is given throughout the novel, she pushes it away and tries her best to follow what her heart and mind are telling her. Finally, Eliza runs away at the end of the novel when she finds out she is pregnant, writing to her mother “I have become a reproach and disgrace to my friends ... Oh, let my sufferings be deemed a sufficient punishment ... This night, therefore, I leave your hospitable mansion!” (Foster 154). Much like a child, Eliza avoids facing her problems, confronting the parts of her life that she does not like, and separates herself from those who will make her face those problems.

Though this is an issue for Eliza, it is necessary to recognize that she may not have had another choice. Whether or not running from her issues infantilizes her, Eliza was a victim as a woman in a completely male governed society. She did not have the tools nor agency to take care of her problems herself, and most evidently, lacked confidence in her voice to push back against her lack of freedom, and instead acted without recognizing the consequences.

#### 5. Conclusion

Eliza’s personhood in *The Coquette* is degraded by the very system she lives in. As a young woman in a patriarchal society, surrounded by other women who know little about the opportunities and agency they could have, Eliza’s room for growth and a claim over herself is slim. Though Eliza’s downfall results in her death, few critics acknowledge that Eliza, through cheeky language and sarcasm, attempts to reclaim her personhood and, despite the pushback, continues to see herself as a woman worth freedom. The first example of this is in a letter to Lucy, where she denounces the traditional ideas of marriage, writing, “Marriage is the tomb of friendship. It appears to me a very selfish state. Why do people, in general, as soon as they are married, centre all their cares, their concerns, and pleasures in their own families? former acquaintances are neglected or forgotten” (Foster 24). Eliza is calling out Lucy for participating in the traditions of marriage that have been laid out for her, without questioning her friends and desires outside of marriage. It is especially interesting to observe this quotation because, at this point in the novel, Lucy had not replied to seven of Eliza’s letters, and it can be assumed that Eliza figured Lucy to be too busy with her fiancé, Mr. Sumner. The other instance of Eliza’s backlash to Lucy is in the form of sarcasm, commenting on Boyer’s courtship. Eliza writes, “He expects the superlative happiness of kissing my hand next week. O dear! I believe I must begin to fix my

phiz. Let me run to the glass and try if I can make up one that will look *madamish*. Yes, I succeed very well” (Foster 61). Though Eliza’s sarcasm is certainly fueled by being fed up with Lucy, it cannot help but recall the absurdity of the expectations that are placed on her. It is ridiculous to suggest that Eliza must make herself presentable for Boyer’s judgment; however, it was the expectation of women to better themselves for the sake of the male gaze and evaluation. These instances are only two examples of where Eliza tries to claim herself as an individual, yet this occurs throughout the novel, too. The most persistent and convincing occurrence of Eliza’s claim for personhood is through her insistence on freedom and not being tied into a relationship she does not want. Though Eliza’s downfall in *The Coquette* is death, she does not go with complacency.

Though commonly referred to as a story that advises against coquetry, Eliza’s story in *The Coquette* is one of female tragedy and a forced downfall, as Eliza could not continue to live her life as a woman searching for happiness in her society. Eliza’s death is built upon, as the story continues, beginning with her infantilization into her young adulthood that makes her ill-prepared to enter a patriarchal society. As the story continues, Eliza is labeled a coquette by those around her and is treated poorly as a result, and is left without a supportive group of women as the story closes; however, her downfall happens in reverse. The unstable foundation of a support group that Eliza needs does not provide for her, and both participate in and allow for the labeling of her as a “coquette.” Where her support system could have rectified the lack of knowledge Eliza entered the world with, they instead contribute to her confusion and ignorance. Furthermore, Eliza was not confident in herself or her decision-making skills, which resulted in infantilizing herself and perpetuating her issues, and was still a victim nonetheless. Eliza’s story and the overall message of *The Coquette* have not been completely eradicated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though women have much more

agency, the patriarchy continues to persist through issues in the workforce, education system, and in some states, through legislation. What Eliza lacks, her society and her unsupportive support system, all women need to end the “cautionary tale,” and instead rebrand these stories as new beginnings for women.

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