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**Subversive Coquetry: The Female Villain and National Morality in Hannah Webster Foster's
*The Coquette***

When the novel, in its now recognizable and familiar form, developed in the seventeenth century, few probably could have predicted the significant evolution it would undergo over the next hundred years, particularly in regard to the portrayal of its female characters. The trope of the villainous female has permeated themes in literature around the world and throughout the ages from Homeric Greek to the postmodern novel. In Homer, the Sirens, Circe, and Calypso tempt Odysseus; in Euripides, Medea murders her children in vengeance against the unfaithful Jason; Delilah brings about Samson's downfall for personal gain; Siduri attempts to dissuade Gilgamesh from continuing his quest; the crone in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" teaches the knight a harsh lesson in staying faithful to one's word; and, later on, Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband, leading to treason, murder, and personal tragedy. Whether the literary villainess in these works plays the role of a goddess, a victim, a seductress, a mentor, or a destroyer, powerful and heroic men generally remain her intended objects of possession.

The rise of the novel in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, provided the opportunity for authors to challenge those traditional notions of feminine wickedness. Early women writers of the amatory fiction genre—such as British authors Aphra Behn, Mary Davys, and Eliza Haywood—began experimenting with archetypal female roles, and these relatively lighthearted seduction novels, whose romantic plots often involved glamorous rakes and comically naïve heroines, eventually gave way to more serious, socially-critical novels focused on realistically tragic intrigues in which genteel women faced danger and potential ruin at the hands of unscrupulous suitors.

Two influential European epistolary novels of the fallen woman, such as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady* (1748) and Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) further complicated archetypal conventions by creating misogynistic, predatory female characters who sadistically collude with male libertines to victimize and destroy innocent women. Separated by several decades and the English Channel, the significance of these novels can be seen in their attempt to craft moral messages about the "susceptibility of love to corruption by egotism and hostility," and they explore virtue and morality in their respective societies by examining corrupted versions of female archetypes (Rogers 51).

In *Clarissa*, Richardson warns virtuous British females about the perils of disobeying their parents and being corrupted by profligate men. Two of the female villains in the novel, Mary "Polly" Horton and Sarah "Sally" Martin, who aid the rake Lovelace in the imprisonment and rape of Clarissa, are his former paramours who succumbed to his seductive arts. Once these women are ruined and cast out of polite society, they are forced to become prostitutes in order to survive. They seek to destroy the virtuous Clarissa in order to gain the support of a fellow sufferer who can help alleviate the burden of their degraded status.

Mrs. Sinclair, the madam of the brothel in which Lovelace essentially imprisons Clarissa, functions as a twisted and evil corruption of the female model of virtue. Through her mannish appearance, her sadistic behavior toward Clarissa, and her eventual agonizing death, Richardson clearly asserts that women who attempt to indulge in sexual freedom and behave like men deserve to suffer the consequences of their unnatural actions. Though Clarissa is victimized by Lovelace, his female

accomplices are equally, if not more, culpable for Clarissa's destruction. Because of this, Richardson also conveys "a sense that women's actions [are] of greater importance to the social fabric than men's," an idea that suggests women are "accountable for the morality of the men around them and, by extension, the morality of the nation" (Mulford xxvii, xxvii-xxviii). Richardson therefore not only complicates traditional literary female archetypes, but he also demonstrates the very real tensions between men and women when it comes to their roles in creating an ordered society.

In *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Laclos—who was profoundly influenced by *Clarissa*, calling it "le chef-d'oeuvre des romans," or, the masterpiece of novels—also addresses the complicated relationships between the sexes and their respective obligations where matters of virtue are concerned, and he clearly "intend[s] his novel as a condemnation of immorality" (Keymer 67, Mac Adam xvi). In this novel, the wicked Marquise de Merteuil, a female libertine, and her confederate, the Vicomte de Valmont, represent the moral corruption of the bourgeoisie and illuminate the hypocrisy of the pre-Revolutionary aristocratic French society that masked its licentiousness behind a façade of respectability. The "Editor's Preface" of the novel outlines the moral "utility of the work" as a way for individuals to learn about how villainous people attempt to corrupt the virtuous, how women who socialize with libertine men are victimized, and how the young should be wary of older individuals who offer friendship too readily (Laclos 7). The Marquise de Merteuil is exactly the kind of woman the "editor" warns readers about: she is a social-climbing, self-made woman who, since her childhood, has endeavored to teach herself how to manipulate others. She cultivates her appearance, her education, and her behavior so as to appear virtuous and above reproach. Her internal attributes and her attempts to destroy others, however, demonstrate her aloofness, her feelings of superiority, and her vainglorious desire to manipulate others for her own entertainment. Therefore, like Richardson, Laclos "suggests that unless we adhere to traditional moral codes we are apt to turn into monsters," a particularly pointed lesson for young, genteel women of the time (Mac Adam xvii).

These popular and controversial European novels provide insight into the ways that we can examine and consider the female characters in early American women's fiction. At the end of the eighteenth century, Hannah Webster Foster contributed her own version of the sentimental, fallen woman epistolary novel with *The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton; a Novel; Founded on Fact* (1797), which provides yet another variation of the literary villainess that serves a national purpose. In this case, the coquettish victim is also the primary perpetrator of her own destruction, but, unlike the villains in Richardson and Laclos's novels, Eliza does not deliberately target other women in an attempt to lead them into public disgrace. Her behavior does, however, pose a significant threat to other women because it undermines the very foundations of the American ideal of domesticity in which women were viewed as the caretakers of the young nation's moral fiber. In an essay entitled "Manifest Domesticity," Amy Kaplan addresses the way that the "private sphere of female interiority" in the early American home had direct political effects by arguing that domesticity "travels in contradictory circuits both to expand and contract the boundaries of home and nation" (601, 583). Cathy N. Davidson's *Revolution and the Word* particularly acknowledges this complicated moral and national landscape of *The Coquette* in contrast to earlier European sentimental novels which often functioned as instructional tracts and cautionary tales for young women.

Although the moral message is similar to other fallen woman epistolary novels, Foster's novel underscores the importance of virtue not from a simply personal socioeconomic viewpoint, but also as a way to ensure that the foundation of the American nation remained strong. Eliza's villainy in *The Coquette* is, however, paradoxically empowering for women: although it implies that a virtuous country cannot exist if its citizens do not uphold moral imperatives and that women have the ability to dictate men's behavior by governing their own, her villainy is a means to criticize early American society, exposing it for the injustices it has committed against its female citizens by forcing them to conform to patriarchal ideals of femininity in which they have no voice.

One approach that Foster uses to reveal Eliza's villainous behavior is the duality of her character—on one hand, apparently upholding feminine virtue, and on the other, seeking pleasure—which reflects the contradictory notions of freedom engendered in a country that marginalized significant portions of its population. The novel opens with its heroine Eliza expressing a desire to return to good

humor and the pursuit of pleasure now that she has spent an appropriate amount of time—one month—mourning the death of her betrothed, Mr. Haly. As Eliza tells her friend and confidante, Lucy Freeman, Mr. Haly is:

a man of worth; a man of real and substantial merit. He is therefore deeply, and justly regretted by *his* friends; he was chosen to be a future guardian, and companion for me, and was, therefore, beloved by mine. As their choice; as a good man, and a faithful friend, I esteemed him. But no one acquainted with disparity of our tempers and dispositions, our views and designs, can suppose my heart much engaged in the alliance.
(107)

Although she does not revel in Haly's death, Eliza does acknowledge that they were not of equal temperaments, and therefore, probably not well suited to a life of marital happiness. As a result, Eliza looks forward to exercising her "natural propensity for mixing in the busy scenes and active pleasures of life" and enjoying the freedom that she had expected to surrender once she was married (109). At once "naturally cheerful, volatile, unreflecting," and "gay," Eliza also possesses "an innocent heart," an "accomplished mind, and polished manners" (108, 109, 111, 113). She rails against "those contracted ideas which confine virtue to a cell" and deigns "to wear the hymenial chain" until she has had an opportunity to enjoy some measure of freedom and pleasure free from the influence of romantic attachments (114). Eliza's attributes and free-spiritedness both endear her to her friends and cause them concern for her reputation. After Lucy warns her about her coquettish behavior, Eliza replies that she believes her actions "deserve a softer appellation; as they proceed from an innocent heart, and are the effusions of a youthful, and cheerful mind" (109). In her very next letter to Lucy, however, Eliza uses the language of the libertine to describe her "bewitching charms" that have led to the "conquests" of the hearts of those at Colonel Farington's party, especially the one belonging to Mr. Boyer, a respectable young clergyman who is drawn to her vivacity (112, 109).

The contradictory nature of Eliza's behavior at the outset of the novel therefore establishes her character as both a part of society and apart from it; her assertion of her freedom and desire to pursue pleasure mark her as *other* because her "pursuit of gratification simply will not mesh with republican standards of female virtue" (Baker 109). She is "volatile" and "gay," and therefore, like other disenfranchised members of society—such as the Native Americans and other people "overlooked in the framing of the Constitution"—she needs civilizing (Baker 93). Eliza's behavior seems innocent enough on the surface, but her desire to exercise her perceived freedom threatens the established social order because women of the time were not, in fact, completely free to do as they wished—so long as they valued their respectability and marriageability. Therefore, Eliza's need for "self-discipline that is so central to the domestic novel might be viewed as a kind of civilizing process in which the woman plays the role of both civilizer and savage," which exemplifies the nature of her villainy in the novel (Kaplan 601). Although Eliza often seems naïve, she is insightful enough to realize the limitations that marriage imposes upon women when she asserts that, "[i]f I am to become a recluse, let me, at least, enjoy those amusements, which are suited to my taste, a short time first" (173). On the surface, her character traits appear to reflect a superficiality that revels in the trivialities of pleasure; yet, Eliza expresses both a desire for and a critique of both the promises and limitations of liberty for all citizens, an expression that echoed throughout the young American republic.

Eliza's brand of villainy also complicates the perceived notions of female virtue and its influence upon the overarching morality of the nation through her views on female friendship and the impact that marriage has upon it. Although Eliza essentially declares her independence from the old-fashioned, patriarchal expectations of womanhood, she is still subjected to those very ideas through her relationships with her closest friends—Lucy Freeman (later Mrs. Sumner), Mrs. Richman, and Julia Granby—who are all upheld as paragons of virtue in their society because they embrace their womanly, subordinate positions. Eliza claims to value the opinions of her female confidantes and frequently seeks their advice throughout the novel, yet she also criticizes and usually ignores their admonitions. For example, after her escape from what she knew would be an unhappy marriage with Mr. Haly, Eliza tells Mrs. Richman that she hopes her "friends will never again interpose" in her romantic concerns; however,

Eliza consistently requests their advice as she navigates the tumultuous sea of romantic entanglements involving her new suitor, Mr. Boyer, and the known libertine, Major Peter Sanford, who has directed his amorous attentions toward her (113). Eliza also laments the fact that “[m]arriage is the tomb of friendship” because it necessarily forces women to refocus their energies away from “the little community” of female friendship that “renders [them] more beneficial to the public” and direct their efforts into the creation of a harmonious household for their families (123). Eliza therefore implies that the friendships among single women are useful, but once women are married, they must adhere to male notions of propriety dictated by their husbands, which in turn become societal directives. Thus, Foster “does not merely critique rules of conduct; she also exposes the political agenda encoded in the rhetorical strategies by which rules of conduct were passed down” (Harris 3). Though Mrs. Richman asserts that women are “interested in the welfare and prosperity of our country; and, consequently, claim the right of inquiring into those affairs, which may conduce to, or interfere with the common weal,” Foster subtly implies that all women have the power to do is “inquire” rather than actively participate (139). Eliza’s refusal to heed the advice of her friends, therefore, is a method of subverting “the basic structure of patriarchal culture” that dictates female behavior (226).

As the novel progresses, Eliza’s moral turpitude is further accentuated through her coquettish behavior as she attempts to mitigate the attentions and affections of Mr. Boyer through her burgeoning flirtation with the rakish Sanford. When she is confronted by Mrs. Richman about her initial interactions with Sanford, Eliza excuses his past behavior as “the effects of juvenile folly,” which parallels her beliefs about her own actions and desire for freedom (119). Later, once everyone assumes that Eliza and Mr. Boyer are truly engaged, Mrs. Richman once again challenges Eliza’s continuing encouragement of Sanford, to which Eliza replies that “[p]erhaps a gay disposition, and a lax education may have betrayed him into some scenes of dissipation” (146). In both of these instances, Eliza’s defense of Sanford is essentially also an attempt to mitigate presumptions about her own behavior. Part of Sanford’s allure is that Eliza perceives him to be her equal: they are both interested in pleasure and amusing themselves without the attachments and responsibilities of marriage, which Eliza believes limits one’s liberty. Although Mrs. Richman attempts to disabuse Eliza of this notion by admonishing her that she has “wrong ideas of freedom,” Eliza begins to adopt behaviors that are similar to those of her rakish paramour: she mistreats Boyer by leading him on without providing a firm commitment, and she continues to meet with Sanford in secret (127). Both of these acts parallel Sanford’s misconduct toward Eliza herself. What Eliza does not seem to understand is that men and women in this new nation are held to different standards of conduct; her “liberal character” is a violation of the social order that people, especially women, were expected to follow because men and women were indeed not equals (Castiglia 24). As we see through these characters, societal conventions seemed to suggest that women could achieve a level of agency—a symbolic form of enfranchisement, perhaps—through exercising their reason and virtue, and Eliza’s coquettish behavior demonstrates neither. Instead, her actions jeopardize national ideals of domesticity that “[draw] strict boundaries between the home and the world of men... the site from which the nation reaches beyond itself through the emanation of women’s moral influence” (Kaplan 586). By blurring the lines between gendered behavioral expectations, Foster casts Eliza as both a victim and a villainess who “exposes the sexist bases of the new nation’s political ideologies” (Harris 3). Because of Sanford’s reputation for leading otherwise virtuous women into vice, Eliza’s continued interactions with him, her defense of his behavior, and her adoption of aspects of his duplicity reflect how she is a villainous threat to societal notions of female propriety.

Eliza’s mistreatment of Boyer and her indiscretions with Sanford create a scandal that ultimately results in her completely disappointed hopes: not only does Boyer release her from any further attachment, Sanford leaves town for several months, supposedly on business. Although Eliza eventually seems to regret her actions by writing to Boyer to apologize for her behavior and profess her tenderness for him, it is too late: he has already moved on and transferred his affections to a woman he believes will better suit his temperament and station in life. Once it becomes clear that there is no hope for reconciliation between Boyer and herself, Eliza retreats from society and shuns the pleasures she once pursued at the expense of her reputation and Boyer’s affections. When Sanford reappears a year later as a married man, he confesses his sins and begs Eliza’s forgiveness, imploring her to become a friend to

his new wife, Nancy. Unsuspecting that Sanford only married to procure the fortune that he led everyone, including Eliza, to believe he already had, Eliza mistakenly believes that Sanford's motives are innocent and that he is no longer a threat to her reputation. She attempts to take the moral high ground by becoming friendly with Sanford's new wife, Nancy, which allows Sanford to once again insinuate himself into Eliza's life and continue his attempts at seduction. Eliza withholds from her letters the specifics about how, when, and why she finally succumbs to Sanford's advances, but she eventually falls pregnant, and, once her situation can no longer be hidden, she leaves town and confines herself to an inn, where she and her baby die not long after Eliza gives birth.

Eliza's consummation of her scandalous behavior with Sanford solidifies her status as a villainess because not only does she violate social conventions, she also participates in the victimization and humiliation of Sanford's innocent and unsuspecting wife. On the surface, her death can be viewed as a just punishment for her crimes against morality and her sex; however, Eliza's mother and friends, the female bastions of domestic morality in the novel, express pity for Eliza and disdain for Sanford. Part of their sympathy is inevitably inspired by Eliza's genuine repentance for her "crime," but in their forgiveness, there is also a subtle underlying condemnation of a society in which "women have no power to procure their own rewards but depend, in marriages or affairs, on the luck of the draw" (Foster 234, Davidson 230). Sanford's wife leaves him, and he ends up penniless and a social outcast; Eliza's memory, however, is preserved through a gravestone placed by her circle of friends as a tribute and "pleasing remembrance of her virtues" (Foster 242). This seems paradoxical given that Eliza sinned and died as a result of her moral indiscretions, but it reiterates the unjust nature of a society that denies women the opportunity to have a voice in the political process or a measure of agency in their own private lives, yet holds them to a higher standard of behavior than men.

While Eliza Wharton in *The Coquette* is not a predatory female who seeks to destroy other women like the prostitutes in *Clarissa* or Madame de Merteuil in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, she does participate in self-destructive behavior that is potentially detrimental to emerging ideas of female enfranchisement in the young American republic. In *The Coquette*, Foster clearly "attempt[s] to educate young readers in the ideological and structural requirements of republican womanhood," but the work also "reflect[s] her ambivalence about the role of women in republican society" (Burgett 87, Doolen 124). Although most of the other women in the novel express a belief that all people are "links in the great chain of society... each upheld by others, throughout the confederated whole," Eliza's desire to exercise personal freedom reflects the unfair and paradoxical nature of the woman's place in the new republic (Foster 136). Her plight subtly questions how women can be expected to be the arbiters of national morality when they are excluded from the political processes to which they are subject. On the surface, therefore, Foster's novel seems to uphold traditional moral imperatives for women through the fall and tragic demise of its heroine; however, Eliza's villainy can be read as an effort to complicate and subvert those very notions of republican womanhood.

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