Letters to Hannah Webster Foster: Defined by Virtue

Robin Alsoffi
Faculty Mentors: Justin Carroll, Ph. D., Tanya Perkins, MFA

Abstract

It is 1787. Less than a decade has passed since the formation of the new American Republic and women are eager to assert their voice in public life. Unlike their male counterparts, they are limited by society's mores and must adhere to strict moral codes. Additionally, patriarchal elements impact the work female authors produce. By using research from other literary critics and text analysis, this paper demonstrates the one-sided attitude author Hannah Webster Foster uses in her epistolary novel, *The Coquette,* and explores how her protagonist Eliza Wharton and her untimely death becomes a lesson in virtue for her readers. Subsequently, the book became a best seller and achieved two objectives: first, it solidified the importance of virtue for women and second, it encouraged them to add meaning to their voice through education. Foster portrays her protagonist as a simpleton and flirt whose achievements and resolution to defend herself are swept aside to focus only on her virtue or the lack thereof. Further, the critique opens a pathway to evaluate the current state of women's role in America which finds equitable laws but still, 230 years later, many challenges remain for women to experience true equality.

Keywords

Epistolary, feminism, Victorian literature

Introduction

Recognizing social issues vis-à-vis early American fiction can provide a litmus test for how far our nation has progressed and the weaknesses which still remain. Hannah Webster Foster's novel, *The Coquette*, published in 1797, provided a compelling body of work to examine in order to ascertain why virtue is linked to women, while men appear to suffer little consequence over mores assigned to morality. I chose the epistolic form to critique Foster's

work for two reasons. First, it felt appropriate as the novel itself is epistolary and second, I wanted to add some creativity to honor my vision of Eliza Wharton, the protagonist of the historical fiction, as she might strive for justice within an unjust world. Eliza, a woman determined to enjoy life before being trapped by the constraints of marriage, suffers a great tragedy after one of her suitors, Major Haly, plots to ensnare her for his own means. Addressing the author, her motivations, and the numerous hardships 18th century women faced offered solace for me as a writer interested in causes related to women, but also highlighted the same challenges women still face.

April 3, 2018
Brighton, Massachusetts.

My esteemed and dear Mrs. Foster:

As I rest comfortably in my berth on the night train from Vienna to Istanbul, having just absorbed the parting words of your novel *The Coquette*, I could not help but take out my stationary box, gather my senses, and share some items of concern. Please forgive flaws in my penmanship as we are about to ascend through the Carpathian Mountains near Belgrade. Your story feels like the rain hitting against my cabin window; it starts out gentle, then pounds mercilessly.

I found it dreadful to read of Eliza's death in childbirth; she all alone, along with the loss of her infant, and in all places to die none other than a room above a pub in Boston. However, the question which lingers with me upon this discovery was why must Eliza die alone in utter disgrace? Your point of view illuminates the unfair and hypocritical mores of 18th century America, which places moral responsibility on women while their male counterparts emerge unscathed. This perspective is evident throughout the novel, as Eliza is portrayed as a flirtatious simpleton searching for nothing but freedom from responsibility, as expressed when Eliza writes in her letter to Lucy Freeman: "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" (Foster, 1994, p. 597). Eliza expresses

nothing but the joys of opportunity which await her as she is rescued from a lifetime marriage to Mr. Haly, who she neither loved nor wished to love but, thankfully, his untimely death offers her hope for a more satisfying union in the future. The response from her friend Lucy Freeman is a lecture on morals and accuses Eliza Wharton of being a coquette.

With that, critic Donna Bontatibus argues essential facts have been left out of the novel with various modifications made to the timeline of your protagonists' real-life story. Further, Bontatibus (2000) effectively reinforces her theory that you were aware of an eight-year gap between the dissolution of Wharton's engagement to the minister and the birth of her stillborn child but ignored it to produce a novel on what happens to women with loose moral values (p. 189). Further, your protagonist was 37 when she died, although her letters lead the reader to believe they are witnessing the musings of a much younger, inexperienced woman. Eliza writes to Lucy Freeman, "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" (Foster, 1994, p. 593). The sentimental narration reads more like a study in crime and punishment but, of course, only for Eliza.

In the meantime, your story of seduction allows Major Sanford, the antagonist, to discreetly slip away into oblivion. I appreciate how you define Sanford as a rake, but it seems this licentious character was able to abscond from responsibility and should have been held accountable after hatching a successful plot to take Eliza as his mistress. Indeed, with the utmost respect for your authorial authority, of course, I found your novel to be gender-biased and mostly used as a platform to teach young 18th century readers lessons on patriarchal-based mores in morality. Let me share an example. Major Sanford writes to Mr. Charles Deighton, "But I fancy this young lady is a coquette; and if so, I shall avenge my sex by retaliating the mischiefs she meditates against us" (Foster, 1994, p. 599). Where is Eliza's rebuttal to this attack? Eliza's reputation as a coquette is established for the reader, her attributes and abilities ignored. Moreover, literary critic Bryan Waterman (2011) describes the real Elizabeth Whitman, your husband's distant cousin on whom your story of Eliza Wharton is based, as a poet and reader of great literature (p. 544). Would then Eliza still be seen as a woman without virtue if

she was equal or superior in intellect to the men and women, including Lucy Freeman, who advised and accused her? I am eager to hear your response and hope you welcome the conversation.

The time is now late, and the steward has just removed my tea tray. I bid you *adieu*.

Duchess Robin Freeman

April 4, 2018
Brighton, Massachusetts.

My esteemed and dear Mrs. Foster:

This morning, as the train passes Sofia, Bulgaria, the views from the dining car are spectacular. The sun, so magnificently radiant, lightly touches the golden domes of St. Sofia's Church, turning them into perfectly set soufflés. Sadly, the empty cemetery east of the cathedral brings to mind how alone and unloved Eliza was at the end. To return to our previous discourse on *The Coquette* and your point of view in the novel, it appears literary critic Daniel Diez-Couch (2014) believes the heavy-handed tactics used by Eliza Wharton's so-called friends was to share a lesson with women of the period (p. 683-684). These tactics included the inscription on her tombstone which read:

> This humble stone, in memory of ELIZABETH WHITMAN,
> Is inscribed by her weeping friends,
> To whom she endeared herself
> By uncommon tenderness and affection.
> Endowed with superior genius and accomplishments,
> She was still more distinguished by humility and benevolence.
> Let Candor throw a veil over her frailties,
> For great was her charity to others.
> She lived an example of calm resignation,
> And sustained the last painful scene,
> Far from every friend.
> Her departure was on the 25th of July, A.D. 1788.

In the 37th year of her age;
The tears of strangers watered her grave. (as cited in Diez-Couch, 2014, p. 683)

He argues, and I agree, that Eliza did not have a political or feminist agenda. Instead, she presents an elusive identity who failed to conform to the rhetorical vision of her peers (Diez-Couch, 2014, p. 683). When, in fact, we must ask ourselves if one could find a similar inscription, begging the reader to forget the sins of the deceased, on the headstone of a man?

Additionally, the moral high-ground has been established as you use Lucy Freeman's responses to verify your stance on Eliza's relaxed and flirtatious attitude towards life, a stance which helped solidify trust between you and your readers. Can you explain the interaction between your text and the reader as you pursue meaning? Further, I realize that to preserve your presentation of a female writer in the late 1700s, you had to assure your readers of your character. Critic Jennifer Harris (2009) argues the fine line you would have been forced to follow in the portrayal of the protagonist Eliza Wharton, when writing about virtue (364). She explains that in 18th century America, a female writer's reputation might be damaged if she had enough knowledge of sexual liaisons and inappropriate behaviors to write about them. Readers would question how the writer learned of these indecent habits (Harris, 2009, p. 365).

My breakfast has arrived, and the fresh cream used to top my raisin scone has accidentally dripped over onto the paper. Please excuse my folly. Adieu.

Duchess Robin Freeman

April 13, 2018
Brighton, Massachusetts.

My esteemed and dear Mrs. Foster:

The Grand Bazaar of Istanbul is bustling with activity; its endless maze of narrow stone paths filled with hawkers spiritly peddling goods as captivating

aromas of Turkish delight invade the senses. As I meandered my way out of the bazaar, the servile attitude of the street vendors once again reminds me of Eliza. Luckily, I happened upon a quaint street café for respite and a moment to return to the discussion at hand.

In essence, as literary critic Dorothy Baker (1996) points out, Eliza's primary role was to please, not to be pleased (p. 59). This notable statement from Baker coincides with my perception as a reader that women of the 18th century were only defined by their virtue. Lucy Freeman offers an example of this: "[L]ay aside those coquettish airs which you sometimes put on; and remember that you are not dealing with a fop, who will take advantage of every concession, but with a man of sense and honor, who will properly estimate your condescension and frankness" (Foster, 1994, p. 20). Morality ruled lives, most especially the lives of republican women. However, men were not held to the same rigid standards and this becomes evident according to the point of view in your novel.

I feel strongly that you have left out essential information from Eliza Wharton's life, followed patriarchal elements in conveying meaning to your readers, and used the behavior and eventual early death of Eliza to frighten young 18th century women readers on the consequences of seeking sexual pleasure before marriage. Could you have been swept up in the religious fervor of the time period? I understand democracy is new and still unsettled in late 1700s America. Puritan ideologies will be challenged and should be, so Eliza and other women do not die alone and unloved.

Last, we both know attitudes towards women have changed. We can now vote and are legally equal to our male counterparts in the eyes of the law. In reality however, 230 years since your novel appeared, women still face battles. They are still compartmentalized, sexualized, and have not yet gained enough trust from the American people to be elected president. In time, let us hope women will experience true legitimacy in and outside of literature.

I pray you consider what I found disagreeable in your novel. My return train to Vienna awaits me. I bid you *adieu*.

Duchess Robin Freeman

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