

She's the man: gender role reversal in the coquette



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Although Hannah Webster Foster names her book *The Coquette*, there is ambiguity in who the true coquette of the story is. Eliza Wharton, named the coquette by Foster and the other characters of the story, does not follow the rules of coquetry. Instead it is Major Peter Sanford who falls under the social definition of a coquette which allows Eliza to demonstrate more masculine characteristics, as the main feminine identity is not her own. Foster creates a gender role reversal in an attempt to challenge the contemporary views for women in the public sphere. Foster presents Eliza as the victim to define the rules of society regulated women's actions in the public. Eliza's actions-the activities which her female counterparts deem coquettish- to Major Sanford's own coquettish behaviors are not reconciled but instead offer reason as to why women are not allowed their quest for individual freedoms as defined by the patriarchy. The freedoms which Eliza lusts after include: sexual freedom, access to wealth and material gain, and a strong public appearance. The attack on Eliza's coquetry has nothing to do with virtues or her character but rather a cover story to conceal the contemporary fears of gender roles, heterosexuality and marriage, and above all female agency in a changing world. The role reversals within the story create a new dynamic for gender roles, assisting Eliza in her reach for "power" in a masculine world. The primary role reversal within *The Coquette* is Eliza's grasp at masculine power. Eliza Wharton, along with the rest of the women in *The Coquette*, struggles to confront the loss of self-definition as she tries to maintain balance in between the space of Republican Mother and cast-out coquette (Richards). While she is definitely not a Republican Mother, casting away all thoughts of marriage and family, Eliza finds herself facing the destiny of a

ruined coquette.[i] When speaking of the domestic sphere Eliza says, “ I recoil at the thought of immediately forming a connection, which must confine me to the duties of domestic life...(Foster 23).” Although Eliza does not wish to be a man, she rejects the expectations of women of her time in an attempt to obtain masculine power. According to “ Consent, Coquetry, and Consequences”, “ her plot to elude the marital expectations placed upon her- causes her friends to call her coquettish.” She is not easily persuaded by Boyer’s overt exclamation of love nor does she seem interested when Sanford admits his feelings towards her. Eliza thinks of “ marriage [as] the tomb of friendship. All former acquaintances are neglected or forgotten and the tenderest ties between friends are weakened or dissolved (Foster 19-20).” She has no interest in marrying anyone because she enjoys her freedom and friendships between other women. According to author of “ Can your volatile daughter ever acquire your wisdom? Luxury and False ideals in The Coquette,” Laura Korobkin, “ Eliza’s resistance to the constraining forces of bourgeois marriage and the conformist advice of her social cohort mark her as a powerful champion of personal freedom and political autonomy.” In today’s society it is often the man who rejects the social construct of marriage due to his lack of commitment and wish to be with the “ guys”, but Eliza makes it well known that she will be no Republican mother. Boyer throws himself at the idea of love and marriage, while Sanford, although accidentally in love with her, refuses to marry someone of little financial value. Eliza is the only character in control of her emotions and those around her. It is through Eliza’s rejection of feminine norms that she is considered to be a coquette. However, by definition she lacks the means of being so. By social definition a coquette is “ a bewitching girl” that is “ happily calculated

to break a husband's heart (Anonymous)." Although the article "A Modern Coquette's account of herself" found in *The Salem Chronicle* is a work of satire, it gives a societal definition of what a coquette does. The article reads, "If any gentleman, therefore, has the least inclination to be made both a beggar and a cuckold, he can by no means apply to a person more devoted to his service." Eliza does try to better herself through marriage but she does not try to play both Boyer and Major Sanford on account of this. Instead she suffers within herself on choosing the "right" suitor. Her sentimental actions of taking the time to choose the man are contradictory of the characteristics of a coquette.

Instead of being the coquette or the Republican mother, Eliza Wharton offers a new definition of the contemporary woman and a woman's role in society. In the case of *The Coquette* it is a "bewitching" man who reeks havoc not only within the heart of Eliza, but also her reputation and relationships. Knowing the effects that a coquette has on a man, Sanford plans to beat Eliza at the game of her sex. He says "But I fancy this young lady is a coquette" and he plans to "avenge [his] sex, by retaliating the mischiefs, she mediates against us (Foster 15)." Sanford is not the only man that is considered to be a coquette of his time. According to Gillian Brown's paper, "There are quite as many male coquets as female and they are far more pernicious pests to society, as their sphere of action is larger, and they are less exposed to the censure of the world." Lucy weighs in on Sanford's disposition by saying, "predilection for this Major Sanford... he is a rake, my dear friend (Foster 21)." During this time period, men were considered rakes while coquette was reserved for flirtatious women. Although Major Sanford is

considered a rake, he is still invited to all the parties where the women wish to be with him and the men envy him. According to Korobkin, “ Foster clearly censures Eliza’s society for permitting his seeming fortune to overcome their scruples about his character so that they fail to exclude him from their social circle, she also makes Eliza the recipient of a chorus of pointed condemnations of Sanford that reject him as an appropriate suitor.” Women were more harshly judged while holding the title of a coquette than a man who held the title of a rake. Eliza wishes to have the power of a public appearance as Sanford holds, but it is lost upon her due to her condemnation as a coquette. As a woman of little material resource she is “ confined to the rigid rules of prudence and economy” while Sanford’s whole mode is dedicated to “ show” and equipage” (Richards). The party culture of which she is a member of “ required [women] to invest themselves deeply in their appearance and then [were] derided for this obsession (Rosenman).” Sanford’s foppish dress and overextensions of his wealth are what characterize him as masculine, while Eliza’s own attempt at a public appearance are rebutted. The importance of appearance is seen most when Eliza prepares for Boyer’s visitation and says, “ I must begin to fix my phiz... and try if I can to make up one that will look madamish (Foster 48).” Although she attempts to have a wealthy appearance she fails and is still considered to be the coquette, losing not only her reputation but her life. While Sanford does take the form of a ruined coquette saying, “ I am undone!” after he had schemed to avoid poverty by marrying the heiress, Eliza is the one who ends up a pregnant, single beggar.

Major Sanford's reputation and appearance gives him the appeal of masculinity that Eliza lusts after when contrasted to Boyer's demure, feminine demeanor. What Eliza loves about Sanford is not him but the materiality, clothing and the improvement of her own image that he offers.

[ii] Although Eliza rejects Boyer's advances this grants her a more masculine power over the man, and her lust for Sanford is not merely for his own being but more for the the power of masculinity he holds. When a woman was referred to as a coquette it is said she had ulterior motives, such as financial gain, for seducing the man. Eliza does want the power of wealth that men hold, but she wants it without the title of marriage. Eliza's attraction to Sanford is due to her yearning for financial freedom that he presents. She declares in a letter to Lucy that Maj. Sanford possesses " a fortune sufficient to ensure the enjoyments of all the pleasing varieties of social life... My fancy leads me for happiness to the festive haunts of fashionable life (Foster 42)." It is evident that Eliza wishes for Sanford's fortune for her own conveniences in an attempt for material gain (Korobkin). However, it is not Eliza who goes after Sanford in order to gain wealth, nor does she attempt to make him a cuckold after his marriage. Instead, Sanford forces Eliza into becoming the beggar. However according to Korobkin, " Sanford's seeming wealth and privilege are doubly deceptive: he does not have them to offer," but because he is a man his wealth is not questioned. Because of Eliza's interest in material gain, she is deemed a coquette, however her arts of seduction are not specifically for the materiality but instead another act of masculine power. On the other hand, men who acted promiscuous were not judged for being in it for personal gain but had the excuse of sexual nature on their side.

Although Eliza does find pleasures in flirting with both Boyer and Maj. Sanders, she does not necessarily do so for financial gain, but instead just to enjoy the pleasures of the moment due to her volatile nature. If any of the relationships of Eliza are to be considered coquettish it would be her first engagement arranged by her parents. Her parents arrange the marriage to Mr. Haly in an attempt to better their daughter's financial standings. In her description of the man Eliza says, " Mr. Haly was a man of worth; a man of real substantial merit (Foster 1)." Eliza has no real emotional attachment to the man but rather his pocketbook. She holds no desire to marry Mr. Haly out of love but instead out of duty. According to " Consent, Coquetry, and Consequences from Gillian Brown, " Her consent to this " alliance" signified no ' passion of love for Mr. Haly', only her compliance with her parents' will." In her submission to her parents she is representing a common constraint on female and filial consent (Brown.) During Mr. Haly's illness it is Eliza who takes on the role of competent nurse. This is the only point at which Eliza takes on the role of Republican Mother in an attempt to save the wealth. When Mr. Haly dies, she is able to escape the role of Republican Mother and expands her own quest for wealth in the masculine world (Rosenman). Although society assumes that she will mourn the loss of Mr. Haly but she celebrates liberation from her " paternal roof".[iii] Eliza has exercised her personal wishes while following her parents' will but she did so with with a sense of odds posing a " rick" to her " future happiness". Seeing upon Mr. Haly's " first acquaintance, his declining health" Eliza was more voluntary to endure the relationship with the Reverend. Her speculation proves to be a success. This overt rejection of patriarchal authority gives Eliza her newfound power in the public world (Brown). It is Maj. Sanders who chases Eliza for

financial gain only to drop her when he meets a woman with more wealth. Furthermore, he shows no remorse in hurting Eliza when he marries nor does he show remorse when he cuckolds his wife who recently lost their child. In “A modern Coquette’s account of herself” the author says, “I could say- My Life! to a husband, at the same time I was winking at another man in company, and call him a “dear creature!” Sanford does exactly this by seducing Eliza while staying “happily” married to his wife. Eliza’s lack of conformity to either a coquette or a lady of the time offers up a new type of role for women in society and creates the image of the modern lady, while Maj. Sanders behavior are that of the masculine man of the time. Eliza does take great pleasure in toying with both Maj. Sanford and Boyer, but she lets her own feelings become involved; thus, breaking the first rule of coquetry. In Foster’s *The Coquette*, it is Boyer who assumes the feminine role. This might be the reason why Eliza’s female counterparts urge her to marry him. His virtue ranks above all his stately value and his careful thought before each action rank him among the best women in the society, maybe even above Mrs. Richman who is the holder of feminine virtue and the image of the female expectancy.

While Sanford acts on impulse and desire, Boyer thinks of social customs and feelings. Boyer views women as both an object of conquest but more over as an object of affection. Eliza does not deal with affection when dealing with either man but is focused primarily on controlling them both. When Boyer comes to press Eliza for an answer to the proposal, but he is fearful to lose the object of his intrigue when he finds Sanford in the garden with Eliza (Richards). When Boyer discovers Sanford and Eliza talking discreetly at her

mother's house, he immediately begins to cry. Not only does he storm off but he says that Eliza has made him "the dupe of a coquetting artifice". Due to his broken heart he says "I gave free scope to the sensibility of my heart and the effeminate relief of tear materially lightened the load which oppressed me (Foster 67)." He does not confront Eliza with the problem but instead writes a letter explaining his behavior and ending the relationship. It is almost as if he is too fragile to even confront the situation (Richards). Maj. Sanford however, takes no worry in Boyer's interference with his relationship with Eliza. Sanford is not threatened by Boyer's presence but is instead the more dominant male in Eliza's life. Maj. Sanford believes he holds agency over Eliza's heart. Eliza exercises her power of sexual freedoms within her relationship with Boyer. Although she does care for the man she still wants the power to express sexual desire outside of one relationship; the same power Sanford exercises in his marriage. Eliza has extended her need for material luxury to sex. Failed in her attempt of marriage, Eliza enters the sexual liaison with Sanford because she associates him with her lost dream of power of material gratification. Her sexual promiscuity grants her satisfaction in the world of the patriarchy (Korobkin).

While Eliza plays the role of the Coquette, a woman who flirts and controls men's emotions, it can be seen that she is the true holder of the masculinity or power. She holds agency over both Boyer and Maj. Sanford, who believe that they are coquetting her for her affection and beauty. Foster allows the ideal of the "New Woman" to fall apart through Eliza's own follies, leading up to her death. Doing so, Foster creates the illusion that the "New Woman" cannot cohabitate in the contemporary world. Eliza's "luxury-loving

materialism, her desire to live as a wealthy aristocrat, served and admired by inferiors, her preference for round after round of social “ hilarity”, and her hostility toward anything that interrupts her fun or smacks even minimally of middle-class adult responsibility,” are the qualities in which she gains her masculine powers (Korobkin). When Major Sanford describes Eliza in his letter he says “ gay, volatile, apparently thoughtless of everything but present enjoyment.” Eliza’s volatility is what creates her reputation as a coquette, although it is evident that her male counterpart suits that term better. Just as a woman is “ apparently thoughtless of everything but present enjoyment” so is Sanford. He only wishes to be with Eliza for sex. It is his excessive confidence that defines his personal masculinity but at the same time he reasserts Eliza’s. Her lust for material gain has stretched outward to sexual enjoyment, thus giving her power through her new sexual “ immorality”. Eliza finds new life in the power she holds over both men while her friends fall victim to the expectation of what women were to do during this time. Her quest for independence is ultimately her downfall. She rejects the norms of society to emphasize her power over society but yet she dies, unwed. Her pride and disregard for the consequences of living the life of a “ coquette” are what define her as the masculine character within the book. Although Eliza is able to escape the gender role of the Republican mother, she does not escape the blame of a ruined coquette. Her friends cast her away because she does not follow social rule. Her reach for masculine power, although successful, caused her death.

Foster writes the role reversals in *The Coquette* in an attempt to question the normative gender roles, the institution of marriage, and the power that

women held in the patriarchy. Although each character successfully takes on their new role, it is ultimately their downfall. Foster presents Eliza's fancy for the masculine features not as a pull for political freedom and self-sufficiency but as a battle toward sensuality, self absorption, and social caresses (Korobkin). Foster does so in an attempt to reason whether or not women can really escape the domestic sphere or whether they would remain victim to the patriarchy. Foster forms the novel in an attempt to analyze the masculinist accounts of femininity, but it does not allow for female transcendence (Brown). Eliza Wharton obtained the masculine power she lusted after, however, her refusal of the Republican mother and marriage not only killed her but also her reputation. Some would argue that even though she escaped the patriarchy she could not fully escape its effects.

[i] To learn more about Republican Motherhood and the virtues it was meant to instill especially in the novel of *The Coquette*, see " Writing Vice: Hannah Webster Foster and *The Coquette*" by Jennifer Harris. This article also gives a historical background of the " crime" that Eliza committed on her virtue

. [ii] To discover more about the roles that the coquette challenged during the Victorian era, see " Fear or Fashion; or How the Coquette got her Bad Name" by Ellen Bayuk Rosenman.

[iii] To find out more about the short-lived liberation of Eliza from the patriarchal bonds that held the women of her time, see Gillian Brown's " Consent, Coquetry, and Consequences".

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