

INTRODUCTION

The Coquette survives today as the most memorable of all the sentimental, "handkerchiefly" novels written somewhat apologetically by American women in the eighteenth century. It is surpassed in narrative power by only one other early American novel, Hugh Henry Brackenridge's picaresque *Modern Chivalry*. Without either the wide popularity and lurid sensationalism of Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, or the feverish sensibility and heavy didacticism of William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, Mrs. Foster's moving story of Eliza Wharton has lost little of its appeal to the heart.

The publication of the novel was announced in an advertisement printed in the *Columbian Centinel* of Boston for Saturday, August 5, 1797:

Just published,

(In 1 vol. neatly bound and lettered,
price One Dollar)

Sold by E. LARKIN, No. 47, Cornhill,
The COQUETTE; or, *The History of*
ELIZA WHARTON,

[v]

a Novel, *Founded on fact by a Lady of
Massachusetts.*

EXTRACT FROM THE WORK.

“Upon your reflecting and steady mind, my dear JULIA, I need not inculcate the lessons which may be drawn from this woe-fraught tale; but for the sake of my sex in general, I wish it engraved upon every heart, that virtue alone, independent of the trappings of wealth, the parade of equipage, and the adulation of gallantry, can secure lasting felicity.—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. Let them despise, and forever banish the man, who can glory in the seduction of innocence and the ruin of reputation. To associate, is to approve; to approve, is to be betrayed!”

This announcement, with its disarming sample of the author’s moral purpose, was reprinted in the issues for August twelfth and nineteenth. A bookseller’s advertisement in Thomas’s *Massachusetts Spy* of Worcester for September 20, 1797, commended *The Coquette* as “A new Novel, founded on fact. This work was written by a Lady near Boston, and is much admired.” Proposals for the publication by subscription of Mrs. Foster’s *The Boarding School*, “By a lady of *Massachusetts*, author of *The Coquette*,” appeared in the *Columbian Centinel* for September 6, 1797. On July 11, 1798, a copyright

of *The Coquette* was issued to Larkin, as proprietor, by the 143d Massachusetts District.

Although *The Coquette* yielded in popular favor to only one other "female novel" printed in America in the last decade of the century,¹ Larkin did not hazard a second edition until 1802. Its appearance was noticed under the caption of "Literary Intelligence" in the *Boston Weekly Magazine* for January 29, 1803: "The *Coquette*, or the History of Eliza Wharton,' a novel founded on fact, by a lady of Massachusetts, as just published, and for sale by E. Larkin, Cornhill—the rapid sale of the first edition, is a proof of its estimation by the moral, instructive and entertaining reader." Shortly before the publication of this new edition, a dramatization by J. Horatius Nichols entitled *The New England Coquette* was issued by N. Coverly of Salem.² Despite this evidence of public interest in the story, Larkin's second edition seems to have satisfied the demand for

¹ Mrs. Rowson's novel was published in London in 1791 as *Charlotte, a Tale of Truth*, but it had its largest circulation in America under the more familiar title of *Charlotte Temple*. R. W. G. Vail has located 161 of the "well over 200 editions" of this famous work. See his *Susanna Haswell Rowson, The Author of Charlotte Temple: A Bibliographical Study* (Worcester, 1922).

² The title page is not dated; Coverly moved his printing establishment from Salem to Boston in 1803. There is no record of the production of this play. See C. K. Bolton, *The Elizabeth Whitman Mystery* (Peabody, Mass., 1912), pp. 154-55.

eight years. A third edition was published in 1811 by Thomas & Whipple, Newburyport.

The Coquette enjoyed its greatest vogue between 1824 and 1828, when the novel was reprinted eight times. It was probably to this period that a reviewer in *Putnam's* referred when he wrote in April, 1855, that Mrs. Foster's story had "attracted, perhaps, almost as much attention as that of the *Waverley Novels*." The tenth and eleventh editions bear the imprint of Abel Brown of Exeter in 1828.³ J. P. Clusman issued the twelfth edition in New York in 1831. A spurious "30th ed.," probably a misprint for the thirteenth, was published by Charles Gaylord of Boston in 1833 and reprinted in 1840.⁴ The edition of W. P. Fetridge & Company of Boston in 1855 included an "Historical Preface, and a Memoir of the Author," by Jane E. Locke.⁵ T. B.

³ The eleventh edition differs in pagination from the tenth. It also has an engraved portrait of the heroine as a frontispiece. The same engraving was used to embellish an edition of *The Boarding School* in 1829. Neither this engraving, nor the later one reproduced in the Fetridge edition in 1855 has a proved resemblance to Elizabeth Whitman. See Bolton, pp. 133-40.

⁴ The title page of Gaylord's "30th edition," when taken at its face value, has led to extravagant claims of the popularity of the novel. No evidence appears to support the inference that eighteen editions were published between 1831 and 1833.

⁵ Mrs. Locke's Preface contains a considerable amount of information, mainly mistaken. Her identification of

Peterson & Brothers of Philadelphia, whose cheap reprints of popular novels catered to the delight of a vast underworld of fiction readers, found it profitable in 1866 to add *The Coquette* to their list of titles in the widely distributed "Dollar Series."⁶ Mrs. Foster's name appeared upon the title page of her novel for the first time in this edition.⁷ The present facsimile reprint is the first printing since 1874.

Copies of the first edition have been located in the Library of Congress, the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, the New York Public Library, and the libraries of the University of Chicago and of Yale. The Hunt-

Pierrepoint Edwards as the original of Sanford, and the father of Elizabeth Whitman's child, is discussed by Mrs. C. H. Dall in *The Romance of the Association* (Cambridge, 1875), and by Bolton in *The Elizabeth Whitman Mystery*. The chief facts of Mrs. Foster's life are set forth by R. L. Shurter in "Mrs. Hannah Webster Foster and the Early American Novel," *American Literature*, IV, 306-8.

⁶ Peterson advertised the series as containing "The best, the largest, the handsomest, and the cheapest books in the world." *The Coquette* was bound "In Morocco Cloth, Black and Gold." A cheaper edition in paper binding was offered at seventy-five cents.

⁷ The title page of this edition made ample atonement for the anonymity of earlier issues: The Coquette;/ or, The Life and Letters of Eliza Wharton,/ a Novel, Founded on Fact./ By Mrs. Hannah Foster./ Wife of Rev. John Foster, of Brighton, and daughter/ of Grant Webster, of Boston./ With an Historical Preface,/ and a/ Memoir of the Author, by Jane E. Locke./ Philadelphia:/ T. B. Peterson & Brothers; 306 Chestnut Street./

ington copy is in contemporary sheepskin, re-backed. A red morocco label with title *Coquette* stamped in gold within a double gilt rule, is on the spine. The Library of Congress copy has an unusual contemporary binding in full morocco stretched over pasteboard; the leather has been stained black or a very dark green. The title is stamped in gold within an ornamental double-rule box; five gold dotted rules are stamped on the spine over the bands. The Chicago, New York, and Yale copies have been rebound. The page measurements of the Yale copy are $6\frac{5}{16}$ x 4 inches; it is this copy which, except for certain defective pages, has been used in this facsimile reproduction. Pages 6, 9, 10, 21, 22, 35, 231, and 249 are reproduced from the copy in the New York Public Library.

The claim that *The Coquette* was "Founded on Fact" appears to have been more than a conventional gesture designed to forestall the criticism of a generation of readers who had been taught to regard all fiction as lies. In its main outline, at least, the tragic career of Elizabeth Whitman of Hartford provided Mrs. Foster with a subject which must have had peculiar interest for an ambitious novelist. For almost a decade before she began to write her story, the fatal seduction of Miss Whitman had been wept over and discussed up and down the Connecticut Valley. Gossip and tradition had united to in-

vest this *cause célèbre* with many of the most precious ingredients of sentimental fiction. A fascinating heroine, who had moved in the best circles of society; her clandestine affair with a mysterious rake, her elopement, desertion, and finally, her pitiful death in a public tavern—these events seemed destined for exploitation in the fiction market.⁸

Less than two months after Miss Whitman's death, the melancholy episode was cited to point a moral by a writer in the *Independent Chronicle* of Boston for September 11, 1788:

What I mention it for is, that I think the story may serve as a good moral lesson for young ladies: For this lady whose conduct appeared so mysterious, proves to be the daughter of a deceased clergyman, in Connecticut. She was handsome, genteel and sensible, but vain and coquettish; a great reader of romances. She refused two as good offers of marriage as she deserved, because she aspired higher than to be a clergyman's wife; and having coquetted

⁸ Readers of *The Coquette*, published nine years after the death of Miss Whitman at the old Bell Tavern in Danvers, should have had little difficulty in identifying certain of the characters. The Rev. Joseph Howe, Elizabeth's fiancé who died in her home in 1775, is represented in the novel by the Rev. Mr. Haly. The initials of the Rev. Joseph Buckminster, with whom Elizabeth was alleged to have coquetted, agree with those of J. Boyer in the novel. No contemporary record mentions the name of Elizabeth Whitman's seducer. Efforts have been made to identify her betrayer as Pierrepont Edwards, but the evidence seems inconclusive.

till past her prime, fell into criminal indulgences, proved pregnant and then eloped—pretending (where she lodged and died) to be married, and carried on the deception till her death.

The author of a communication to the *Massachusetts Centinel* of Boston for September 20, 1788, attributed Elizabeth's miserable end to her depraved taste for the trash which stocked the shelves of the fashionable circulating libraries:

In her younger days she was admired for her beauty, good sense, and other engaging qualities. She was *a great reader of romances*, and having formed her notions of happiness from that corrupt source, became vain and coquettish, and rejected some very advantageous offers of marriage in hope of realizing something more splendid. . . .

The burden of these observations was echoed by Brown, who used Miss Whitman as a horrible example to enforce one of his many pious admonitions in *The Power of Sympathy*:⁹

This young lady was of a reputable family in *Connecticut*. In her youth she was admired for beauty and good sense. She was a great reader of novels and romances, and having imbibed her ideas of *the characters of men*, from those fallacious sources, became vain and coquettish, and rejected several offers of marriage, in expectation of receiving one more agreeable to her fanciful idea.

⁹ *The Power of Sympathy*, I, 50.

Mrs. Foster was undoubtedly familiar with these comments and many similar homilies by those who held up Miss Whitman's conduct as a "beacon" to the "American Fair." Moreover, her marriage to a cousin of the victim should have enabled her to learn the facts had she cared to investigate them.¹⁰

Here, ready at hand, was compelling material which might be used to furnish forth a novel based upon "Truth," and yet one which could be made to inculcate sound moral principles and appeal strongly to the heart of sensibility. Somewhat similar domestic tragedies had been recorded a few years earlier in *The Power of Sympathy* and in *Charlotte Temple*. The career of Elizabeth Whitman, however, was not the only source of Mrs. Foster's story. The shades of Clarissa and Lovelace, as well as

¹⁰ Elizabeth Whitman has had several champions who have attempted the gallant, but hopeless task of correcting Mrs. Foster's portrait. Mrs. Dall believed the records of Elizabeth's marriage still "exist in some of the inedited manuscripts hidden at this moment under the sheltering roofs along the Connecticut River." In an autograph letter inserted in the New York Public Library copy of *The Romance of the Association*, she wrote in 1875 that she hoped to be able to substantiate her claim. No conclusive evidence has been advanced to establish the marriage of Elizabeth or the identity of her lover. C. K. Bolton in *The Elizabeth Whitman Mystery* has concluded wisely that whatever was the source of Mrs. Foster's inspiration, Elizabeth's character has been fashioned for all time in the character of her heroine, Eliza Wharton.

those of Elizabeth and her unknown betrayer, constantly hover over the pages. In mood and pattern, *The Coquette* remains the most striking example in early American fiction of the pervasive influence of the novels of Samuel Richardson.

The author of *Clarissa* enjoyed a singular immunity from the censure which was heaped upon other English novelists by the custodians of American morals. Mrs. Foster exempted his works from her condemnation of the "greasy, combustible, duodecimos" which flooded the fiction market:¹¹

The noble conduct of Clementina and Miss Byron are worthy of imitation; while the indiscretion of Clarissa, in putting herself under the protection of a libertine, is a warning to every fair. . . . I am not equally pleased with all Richardson's writings; yet so multifarious are his excellencies, that his faults appear but specks, which serve as foils to display his beauties to better advantage.

If Mrs. Foster was captivated by Richardson's moral "beauties," she also found much to admire in his craftsmanship. "But the species of writing, which is open to every capacity, and ornamental to every station, is the epistolary," she testified in *The Boarding School*.¹² Her skillful use of the letter form lifts *The Coquette*

¹¹ *The Boarding School* (Boston, 1798), p. 161.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

far above the artless, go-as-you-please narratives of her contemporaries. The seventy-two letters which comprise the novel reflect the varying moods of their authors, and, at the need of the plot, shift from the easy circumstantiality of familiar correspondence to moments of agonized self-betrayal. Mrs. Foster deftly trimmed the outline of Elizabeth Whitman's story to fit the popular pattern bequeathed by Richardson in *Clarissa*. Eliza was provided with an American cousin of Clary's Anna Howe in the person of Lucy Freeman, to whom she confided her problems; while Deighton, who played the part of a Yankee Jack Belford to Sanford's Lovelace, was regularly informed of the progress of the rake's intrigue. Although letters by other hands appear from time to time, the main narrative, as in *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, is presented by the heroine. The confidante, like Anna Howe, has a placid love affair of her own, but her chief end in the story is to furnish advice and solace to the victim. "I have received your letter; your moral lecture rather;" Eliza wrote to Lucy, "and be assured, my dear, your monitorial lessons and advice shall be attended to."¹³

The influence of Richardson is also to be found in the mood of the letters and in the general tone of the story. The heroine, Clarissa-

¹³ *The Coquette*, p. 9.

like, is depicted in the novel as being hurried away by chaise at night, without the knowledge or consent of her friends and relatives. "In simple fact," wrote Mrs. Caroline Dall, who was in possession of certain of Elizabeth Whitman's letters, "she went away in the regular stage-coach, at high noon, with everybody's warm approval."¹⁴ A similar Richardsonian bias was given to the character of Eliza's betrayer. Of all the seducers who gave their days and nights to a study of the maxims of Chesterfield and the wiles of Lovelace, none is more convincing than Major Sanford. With sufficient fortune to procure him respect, and with manners captivating enough to make him a welcome figure at polite assemblies, he merited the titles of "a Chesterfieldian" and "a second Lovelace" which were bestowed upon him by Eliza's friends. Sanford possessed more than the outward trappings of his notorious original. His was something of the joy of the game which added zest to Lovelace's philandering. "Not that I have any ill designs;" he wrote to Deighton, "but only to play off her own artillery, by using a little unmeaning gallantry."¹⁵ When Eliza seemed to favor the suit of Boyer, Sanford's pride was touched. "I shall be the more interested," he exulted, "as I am likely to meet

¹⁴ *The Romance of the Association*, p. 68.

¹⁵ *The Coquette*, p. 26.

with difficulties. . . .”¹⁶ He was impelled upon his criminal course as strongly by a desire to gratify his vanity as to satisfy his passion. “I must own myself a little revengeful too in this affair,” Sanford admitted to his crony. “I wish to punish her friends, as she calls them, for their malice towards me; for their cold and negligent treatment of me whenever I go to the house.”¹⁷ It is this element of outraged pride which distinguishes the seducer in *The Coquette* from many of his wicked contemporaries in English as well as in American fiction.

The ever-present menace of the seducer is only one of the many traces of Richardson’s influence which have left their mark upon the form and subject matter of *The Coquette*. To his example must also be ascribed the emphasis given to questions concerning “the grand article of marriage”; the action of the novel turns almost wholly upon the axis of Eliza’s marital prospects. Richardson is also mainly responsible for the dissertations upon problems of conduct and conscience with which many of the letters are heavily freighted. Mrs. Foster’s insistence upon the doctrine of poetic justice emanated from the same fertile source.

The character of Eliza Wharton, however, becomes something more than the familiar stock

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

figure of the seduced female, a horrible example with which to frighten school girls. She makes her chief appeal to us across the years as a rebel against the terrific decorums which stifled the individuality of her sex. Before accepting the inevitable duties of marriage, Eliza demanded the right to live her own life. She chafed at the well-meaning attempts of her friends to provide her with a suitable husband. "Marriage is the tomb of friendship," she protested. "It appears to me a very selfish state."¹⁸ A young lady might be volatile, she insisted, and virtuous, too. When Mrs. Richman urged the propriety of an early settlement, Eliza replied spiritedly to that dragon of discretion: "But I despise those contracted ideas which confine virtue to a cell. I have no notion of becoming a recluse."¹⁹ Although she could be "sentimental and sedate" when the occasion demanded it, she found Boyer's conversation a bit cloying. "So sweet a repast, for several hours together, was rather sickening to my taste," she confided gaily to her anxious friend.²⁰ Eliza was destined to learn that "natural volatility" and independence were not prized as virtues by those who made a modern ideal of the conduct of the patient Griselda. We are allowed a glimpse of her tortured soul in the contrite letter in which she belatedly offered her hand

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

to Boyer. The miserable death which followed her yielding to Sanford probably seemed to many of Mrs. Foster's early readers a just retribution. In the feverish world of the sentimental novelists, this was the fate of all lovely heretics who refused to worship at the shrines of feminine punctilio, delicacy, and propriety.

H. R. B.

Bowdoin College
Brunswick, Maine

