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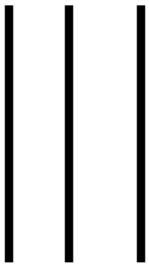
The Dialogical Zone in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*

Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) can be read as a sentimental novel with a traditional seduction plot. Rejecting the respectable suitor Reverend Boyer, Eliza Wharton has an affair with the charming, "reformed rake," Major Sanford and dies as she gives birth to her illegitimate baby at the end of the novel.[1] Based on this seduction narrative, *The Coquette* can be labelled as a moralistic novel that represents the downfall of a wo0 Tcl-3CEMC Q BT(e)6air wl-1(s)-11(i)-12(m-11(i)-12(m-7(Z)7.Q BT12 373.32 382.1)-6(nd dy

styles, world views of another,"[3] I will argue that Foster offers us a "panoply of voices" that represent both the patriarchal world view of her own times and the resistance to that dominant ideology.[4] As we witness the discourse of Eliza's friends—Julia Granby, Lucy Sumner, and Mrs. Richman—that justifies patriarchy and her struggle both to obey and resist the ideals of virtue and domesticity, we see how Foster provides differing perspectives on women's role in post-republican American Socie12(e)s2-8(o)-st-8(o) 1876(ic1)-8(o)]T0 Tc 0



motherhood in the novel,"[13] for Davidson, has internalized the republican belief that for the future of the nation, women should "set standards of virtuous behavior for their husbands and children."[14] She becomes an agent that transmits patriarchy's power with her efforts to convince Eliza of "the glory of the marriage state." However, Eliza criticises matrimony as being a "selfish state," the "tomb of friendship" that weakens the "tenderest ties between friends" and in which "benevolence itself moves in a very limited sphere."[15] Acknowledging the fact that matrimony excludes women from their social sphere—their former associates and friends—she refuses to imprison herself in the limited sphere. As the representative of the republican ideal of marriage, Mrs. Richman justifies women's limited role in the domestic sphere as being indispensable for the interests of society. She writes, "but the little community which we superintend is quite as important an object; and certainly renders us more beneficial to the public."[16] She argues that in order to benefit the public, it is woman's duty in marriage to circumscribe her enjoyments—neglecting or forgetting her former associates and friends—and to devote herself to her family. She perpetuates the republican logic that limits woman within the "walls" of the marriage institution by accepting her "virtuous" role in the "little community" which she believes is essential for the success of the nation.

The "agents" of the republican ideology not only instruct Eliza about the "glory of the marriage state" but also about the rules of femininity which are defined by men. Lucy encourages Eliza to remain faithful to the codes of femininity and be dependent, virtuous, and sensible. She cautions Eliza that virginity is the "inestimable jewel" of a woman and that its loss will ultimately bring corruption "which can never be repaired."[17] Thus, she advises Eliza to be suspicious of Major Sanford, who declares that he got married not for

love but for his wife's great fortune and that Eliza is "the only object of his affections."[18] She wants Eliza to beware of his "flattering professions" and not let herself to be seduced by the rake.[19] As Tassoni would remark, Lucy and Julia's letters aim to ensure virtue both in the home and in society.

Despite her friends' warnings, Eliza loses her "inestimable jewel," her purity, by spending the night with Sanford in her mother's house. As Davidson writes, "eighteenth century moral tracts,… all share the governing assumption that lost virginity signifies, for a woman, lost worth; that the sexual fall proves the social one, so much so that in this case the signifier and its significance are one and the same."[20] Julia, who lives with Eliza and Mrs. Wharton, discovers Eliza's "guilt" when she sees Sanford leaving their house in the middle of the night. Witnessing their "infamous intrigue," Julia constructs a negative identity of her best friend as she unfolds the "tale" of seduction in her letter to Lucy. With the loss of her virginity, she emerges as the "ruined, lost Eliza!"—"wretched, deluded girl!"—in the correspondence between Lucy and Julia.[21] As Julia Stern in *The Plight of Feeling* writes, "the most dangerous wielders of words in the novel are her own female peers."[22] It is ironic that it is not men but women who label Eliza wretched and punish her for her "fall."

We see how women like Julia act as the guardians, the "voluntary actors" of the system that moulds them into a domestic, pure image by maintaining women's obedience and submission to patriarchy.[23] Discovering her secret, Julia decides to go to Eliza's chamber and "let her know that she was detected."[24] Julia acts as a "detector" who reveals Eliza's secret, condemns her for having an illegitimate affair, and exposes her

guilt to Lucy. In other words, it is not men but women who detect and punish Eliza for her fall from virtue. Julia writes to Lucy,

unloving husband who is indifferent to her feelings. Not only Mrs. Sanford, but also Mrs. Richman, the model republican motherhood, "cannot be permanently happy within her familial sphere."[39] After the death of her newly born daughter, she writes, "All my happiness centered within the limits of my own walls; and I grudge every moment that calls me from the pleasing scenes of domestic life."[40] From the accounts of Mrs. Sanford and Mrs. Richman we see that virtue and marriage do not necessarily bring harmony, love, and happiness to women. As their despair and frustration within the limited "walls" of marriage coexist with Lucy's and Julia's moral lectures, we see how the novel represents a variety of women's voices in American culture. Foster both represents the republican ideals of virtue, marriage, and femininity prevalent in her times, and hints at the limitations of that ideology on women. The novel becomes a "constantly evolving heteroglossia" as the signification of virtue and happiness, constructed by the "general voice" of patriarchy, blends and clashes with the voices of married women who are as miserable as the "fallen woman," Eliza. The simultaneous construction of republican ideals of virtue and marriage, characteristic of late eighteenth-century American culture, and deconstruction of those ideals as necessarily advantageous and desirable for women, creates the dialogic zone in the novel.

Another "social speech type" is that of Eliza, who represents the resistance to the "general voice" in the eighteenth century that preaches virtue, domesticity, and reason. She resists the female circle's power to transmit patriarchal ideology in encouraging her to lead a virtuous life by o04 2(n t)-7d(o)-14(gn6CJ 0 Tc 5)-2(5)-2(5)-2(5)-2(o)-4(r)-1i(t)r on ld(o)-ke M Eliza's point of view, we are presented with the limitations of the "aging" roles of femininity and ofatrimony tha t need to be changed for women's freedo in Foster's

society by equating desire not with irrationality but with freedom and enjoyment. Her "delusive dream of sensual gratification" leads her to have an affair with a married but charming Sanford.[48] From her fondness for Sanford, Lucy concludes that not reason but fancy influences Eliza's judgment and behaviour. She tells her that pleasure is "unsatisfactory enjoyments; incapable of gratifying those immortal principles of reason and religion, which have been implanted in your mind by nature."[49] In line with the eighteenth-century ideals, she advises her friend to follow reason, "lay aside those coquettish airs," and marry Boyer who is a "man of sense and honor."[50] In other words, like Wollstonecraft, Lucy foregrounds the "noble" duties Eliza has to fulfil by marrying a man of worth and ensuring virtue in her family. Once again we see how Lucy's language is inseparable from the worldview of Foster's times that human beings should be guided by reason, regularity, and proportion, as opposed to fancy, imagination, and pleasure. However, the discourse of desire and temptation in Eliza's letters challenges the republican concept of woman as necessarily pure and virtuous. We might argue that Foster hints at the limitations of that worldview that encourages women to restrain themselves and follow their reason in the choice of a soul mate. Foster represents the voice of women who suffer because they cannot live up to society's expectations. With the tragic death of Eliza, we see how women who listen to their "heart" instead of the dictates of reason have no place in society. Foster's giving voice both to women who internalize the ideals of virtue and to those who refuse to act as the agents of dominant ideology also creates the dialogic zone where differing points of view blend and clash.

As the number of Eliza's letters decreases, she gradually ceases to exist both in the female circle and in the novel. She writes to Julia:

I hope Mrs. Sumner and you will excuse my writing but one letter, in answer to the number I have received from you both. Writing is an employment, which suits me not at

between the characters.[59] The question is where does Foster stand in this dialogic zone? Bakhtin writes:

> The author (as creator of the novelistic whole) cannot be found at any one of the novel's language levels: he is to be found at the center of organization where all levels intersect. The different levels are to varying degrees distant from this authorial center.[60]

He argues that the "author is in a dialogical relationship" with the characters.[61] In other words, it is difficult to identify the author with one of the social speech types, languages, or points of view in the novel. We cannot identify a character as the spokesperson of the author's ideological standpoint. Instead the author can be "found at the center of" heteroglossia where different outlooks, ideologies, and voices about women's roles in society intersect. We can argue that it is impossible to associate Foster either with "the general voice" that encourages women to ensure virtue both in the home and in the nation or with Eliza's resistance to that voice. Through the "language zone" of the characters, Foster offers differing conceptions of marriage, virtue, and desire in the eighteenth century but refuses to be associated with one, unified, single worldview. In "An Assault on the Will," Kristie Hamilton also points out the lack of authoritarian author-figure in the novel:

> Because the form Foster chooses foregrounds the reactions of multiple voices in the community to events, it offers a dialectical analysis of Eliza's fall that refuses the tidy resolution possible when a third person narrator authoritatively pronounces judgment.[62]

As Hamilton points out, the letter format contributes to the "dialogy" in the novel. The omniscient authorial voice dissolves in the characters' correspondence that represents a polyphony of voices in Foster's era.

Ultimately, Hannah Webster Foster's

[4] Julia A. Stern, *The Plight of Feeling* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 151.
[5] Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," 49.
[6] Ibid., 47-48.
[7] Ibid., 49.
[8] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, in *The Dialogic on]TJ /TT0 1 Tf 0 Tc 0 Tw 8,*