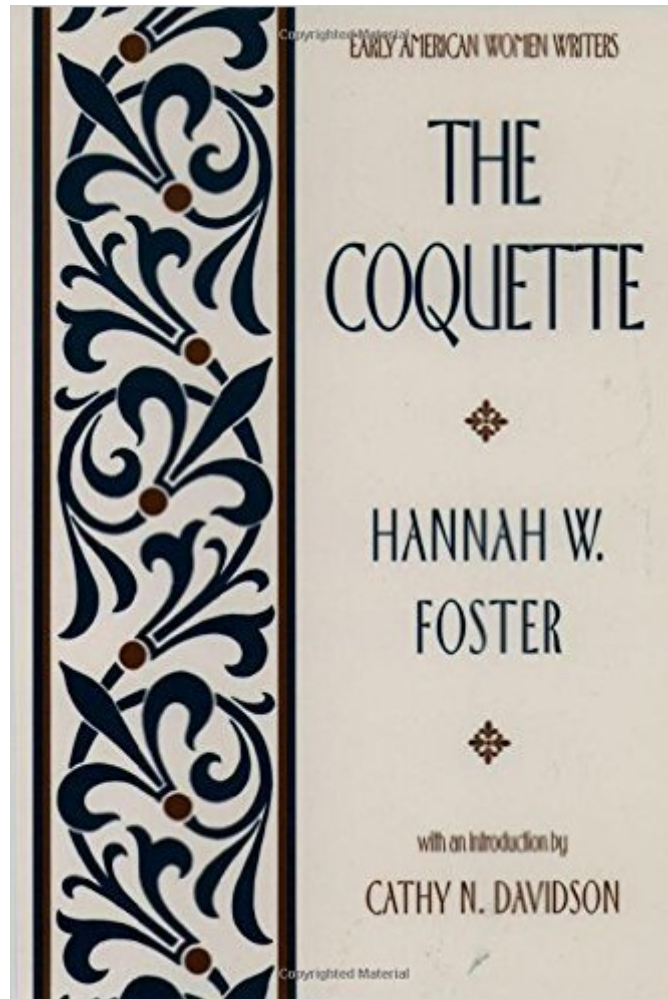


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The Coquette (Early American Women Writers)



Synopsis

The *Coquette* tells the much-publicized story of the seduction and death of Elizabeth Whitman, a poet from Hartford, Connecticut. Written as a series of letters--between the heroine and her friends and lovers--it describes her long, tortuous courtship by two men, neither of whom perfectly suits her. Eliza Wharton (as Whitman is called in the novel) wavers between Major Sanford, a charming but insincere man, and the Reverend Boyer, a bore who wants to marry her. When, in her mid-30s, Wharton finds herself suddenly abandoned when both men marry other women, she willfully enters into an adulterous relationship with Sanford and becomes pregnant. Alone and dejected, she dies in childbirth at a roadside inn. Eliza Wharton, whose real-life counterpart was distantly related to Hannah Foster's husband, was one of the first women in American fiction to emerge as a real person facing a dilemma in her life. In her Introduction, Davidson discusses the parallels between Elizabeth Whitman and the fictional Eliza Wharton. She shows the limitations placed on women in the 18th century and the attempts of one woman to rebel against those limitations.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Hannah Foster's 1797 novel, "The Coquette," seems, at first glance, like an early American ripoff of such famous 18th century British novels like Samuel Richardson's "Pamela" or "Clarissa," and indeed it contains references and allusions to both, and to a wealth of other 18th century British fiction. In its historical context, though, "The Coquette" acquires added significance and cultural

depth, as a response to the guiding philosophies and political stances of the new American nation. "The Coquette" begins with death and a rebirth. The main character, your title coquette, if you will, Eliza Wharton, rejoices in her freedom from the structure of her family's controls. Her betrothed, an elderly man named Haly, has just died, releasing Eliza from an unloving engagement. Free now to indulge her native sprightliness and sociability, Eliza goes to New Haven, Connecticut, to spend some time with and in the society of her married friend, Mrs. Richman. In New Haven, Eliza, already in her late 20's-early 30's, is the darling of society, where her cultivated mind, and liberal temperament are given free reign. Here, she is wooed by two men, Reverend Boyer, about to come into a residency in a fashionable parish, and Major Sanford, widely known as a libertine, but permitted into polite society because of his rank and apparent wealth. The action of the novel concerns Eliza's choice between the two. The choice, simple as it may seem, is complicated by its inflections by way of the political and social culture of the early American republic. In such contexts, Eliza, with the help and advice of her confidants, Mrs. Richman, Lucy Freeman, Julia Granby, and her own mother, must try to negotiate newly-found freedom and independence within the gendered constraints of virtue and propriety.

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