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Wild, Noisy, and Fearless:

Coquettes in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Media

INTRODUCTION

Coquettish women appear with frequency throughout eighteenth-century media and literature. The coquette is recognizable by capricious desire, vanity, and a commitment to enjoying everything that pleases her. The coquette's beauty, flirtatiousness, and lighthearted attitude charmed eighteenth century audiences, and her refusal to conform to expectations around virtue and marriage shocked them. This paper will identify three distinct, recurrent perspectives on the coquette in eighteenth-century literature and media: the empowered coquette, the miseducated coquette, and the fallen coquette. By making non-normative choices around her romantic and sexual life, the coquettish woman threatens patriarchal gender norms, and must be insulted, demeaned, and brought to heel through marriage. This paper will suggest that the three prevalent stereotypes around coquetry are attempts to deny women independence, regulate their femininity, and force them into roles approved for their gender.

The first perspective, the "empowered coquette," sees coquetry as a form of power: the coquette's refusal to settle represents freedom and independence; her manipulation of her beauty and charm is her means of seizing the only currency available to eighteenth-century women. The second perspective, the "miseducated coquette," sees coquetry as a symptom of a woman's

improper education; this perspective points to coquettish behavior as a rationale for reforming women's education either progressively or conservatively. The final perspective, the "fallen coquette," sees coquetry as a total failure of character in irredeemable women. This paper will highlight examples of these three archetypes of coquetry in short-form media: newspaper articles, poems, short stories, and argumentative essays. Following each examination of short-form media, this paper will offer an example of each archetype in a coquette from an eighteenth-century novel: the eponymous protagonist in Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* as the "empowered coquette," Arabella in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* as the "miseducated coquette," and Lydia Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as the irredeemable coquette.

The prevalence of these three perspectives in eighteenth-century media make the archetype of the coquette a "cultural fable," a concept developed by scholar Laura Brown in her book *Fables of Modernity: Literature and Culture in the English Eighteenth Century*. Brown describes cultural fables as common imaginative projects "characterized by a set of related figures that have a distinctive structure or are in a dynamic relationship" (1). According to Brown, cultural fables transcend individual writers or texts, rather, they are "generated collectively in many texts over a period of time" (1). The continual portrayal and discussion of coquetry in eighteenth-century texts preserves the coquette as a cultural fable which has lasted far beyond the century of her origination.

Throughout the "many texts" of the long eighteenth century (1660-1815), authors tend to agree on the basic traits which constitute the coquette: she is vain, pleasure-seeking, and noncommittal. In her book *Our Coquettes: Capacious Desire in the Eighteenth Century*, scholar of eighteenth-century literature Theresa Braunschneider attempts to define coquetry distinctly in five traits. Braunschneider's coquette is (1) "defined by her vanity," (2) "regularly accused of

levity," (3) "technically virtuous, because chaste, but careless about making sure others know as much," (4) "defined by capriciousness or fickleness…evidenced by her zeal for whatever is fashionable," and (5) defined by her capricious desire: "a commitment to enjoying everything that pleases her rather than narrowing a broad field of possibilities down to a single selection" (Braunschnieder, 4-5). This paper will rely on Braunschnieder's synthesis of the five predominant characteristics of coquetry to identify examples of coquettes in literature and media.

THE EMPOWERED COQUETTE

The first perspective on the coquette cites coquetry as a form of power. This perspective sees the coquette's refusal to choose (clothing, suitors) and refusal to settle (through marriage) as a form of independence. In a poem titled "Address to a Coquette," published in the *Public Advertiser* in February 1786, the speaker addresses a coquette who has captured his heart:

> Imperious fair, who long my mind hast sway'd,
> And long hast play'd th' unfeeling tyrant's part;
> No more shalt thou my liberty invade,
> Or hold, in slavish bonds, my vassal heart.

The writer, wounded by the coquette, attempts to slander her by labeling her "imperious," an "unfeeling tyrant," and accusing her of holding his heart in "slavish bonds." The writer portrays the coquette in the language of imperial power and control: she is the tyrant, she is imperious, she invades his "liberty" and holds his heart in bondage. Through this language, the author implies that the coquette holds the power in their relationship.

While “Address to a Coquette” paints the coquette's empowerment in negative turns, Charlotte Lennox’s poem “The Art of Coquetry,” published in 1807, celebrates the power of coquetry. Lennox instructs women on how to capture the affections of men through coquettish behavior. First, she names the struggle eighteenth-century women encounter on the basis of their gender: “Ye lovely maids!...Who justly set a value on your charms, / Pow’r all your wish, but beauty all your arms.” Here, she names the plight of eighteenth-century women: they were viewed as property, valued for their appearance, and allowed very little access to conventional masculine forms of power: wealth, employment, and a good education. To young women attempting to exert their independence, weaponizing their beauty (“all your arms”) most likely felt like the only accessible form of “pow’r.”

Lennox’s take on coquetry is radical and unapologetic. She urges women to wield their bodies and wit in service of their goals: “‘Tis harder still to fix than gain a heart / What’s won by beauty, must be kept by art.” Through coquetry, Lennox encourages women to claim their power in romantic relationships with men. At the end of the poem, she promises:

> But for the nymph who liberty can prize,
> And vindicate the triumph of her eyes;
> Who o’er mankind a haughty rule maintains,
> Whose wit can manage what her beauty gains.
> Such, by these arts, their empire may improve;
> And, unsubdu’d, control the world by love.

Here, Lennox encapsulates the power offered by coquetry. Coquetry, she insists, can grant a woman an “empire,” and allow her to “control the world by love.” Lennox’s coquette is neither tender nor sincere. She is “haughty” and “triumphant.” She wields her looks with an expertise

guided by wit. The coquette's beauty and charm made her a popular figure in the early eighteenth century; shortly after, her power made her a controversial one. Readers were charmed by the irreverent, capricious coquette, and deeply disturbed by the threat to their conception of feminine submission and virtue which she represented.

Charlotte Lennox did not limit herself to poetry in her defense of the empowered coquette. Lennox is widely held to be the author of a magazine called *The Lady's Museum*, in which she dismantles the biases around coquetry. Lennox writes, "...to acknowledge the desire of pleasing to be my predominant passion, is in other words, to confess myself, one of that ridiculous species of beings, called a coquet" (Lennox, 2). Her language around the coquette here ("ridiculous species of beings") is deceptively dismissive. However, by characterizing herself—a published writer, an intellectual—as a coquette, Lennox challenges the stereotype of the coquette as vain, frivolous, and capricious. She forces her readers to reckon with the fact that she, an accomplished writer, a wit, an educated woman, claims coquetry. She goes on to hold the mirror directly to the reader: "The desire of fame, or the desire of pleasing…is the poet's inspiration, the patriot's zeal, the courtier's loyalty, and the orator's eloquence. All are coquets, if that be coquetry" (Lennox, 3). Lennox argues that if coquetry is defined as a desire to please, everyone is a coquette. Poets, patriots, courtiers, orators, and fine ladies alike seek to please.

Daniel Defoe offers a perfect example of coquetry as power in his novel *Roxana* (1724). In *Roxana*, the eponymous protagonist, left destitute by a negligent husband, uses her beauty and charm to secure a number of lovers (not husbands) who provide her with fine clothing, jewelry, money, and lodging. Eventually, Roxana achieves significant wealth and independence by profiting from her appearance. Notably, Roxana has no desire to conform to traditional

expectations and secure a new husband. At one point, she explicitly rejects a marriage proposal, aware that coquetry offers her more autonomy than marriage. She says to her suitor:

> I thought a woman was a free agent as well as a man, and was born free, and, could she manage herself suitably, might enjoy that liberty to as much purpose as the men do…that the very nature of the marriage contract was, in short, nothing but giving up liberty, estate, authority, and everything to the man, and the woman was indeed a mere woman ever after—that is to say, a slave. (Defoe, 223-224)

Here, Roxana likens marriage to slavery. Marriage is a total cessation of liberty, estate, and authority for the woman. If a coquette refuses marriage, she threatens what the suitor believes to be his right to money, property, and her personage. Coquettish refusal, often viewed as a social transgression, is also an act of political and economic radicalism, as Roxana demonstrates.

Towards the end of the novel, secure in her possession of an enormous fortune, Roxana ponders whether what reason she has other than financial to continue to profit from her beauty and her body. She reflects:

> I was out of the reach of all that fate could be supposed to do to reduce me; now I was so far from poor, or the danger of it, that I had £50,000 in my pocket at least; nay, I had the income of £50,000, for I had £2500 a year coming in upon very good land security, besides three or four thousand pounds in money, which I kept by me for ordinary occasions, and, besides, jewels, and plate, and goods which were worth near £5600 more; these put together, when I ruminated on it all in my thoughts, as you may be sure I did often, added weight still to the question, as above, and it sounded continually in my head, 'What next? What am I a whore for now?' (Defoe, 308)

Although Roxana refers to herself as a "whore," and although she profits from her relationships with men, she does not explicitly sell sex for money, and most of her relationships are founded on mutual affection and love, as well as financial interest. In Abel Boyer's translation of a 1702 French-to-English dictionary (*Dictionnaire royal, François et Anglois*), a "coquette" is listed as as a synonym of the word "jilt," which is defined as, "a woman, especially a whore, that cheats or disappoints one." Although this paper prefers Braunschneider's definition of the coquette as "technically virtuous, because chaste, but careless about making sure others know as much," Roxana fits enough of the other attributes of coquetry—vanity, levity, capriciousness and capricious desire—to serve as an example of a coquette. This paper chooses to view her relationships with men as an exertion of her power, rather than transactional sex work. Regardless, in the quotation above, Roxana inadvertently suggests that, had eighteenth-century women means to secure financial stability and independence other than marriage, there would be no need for her to be a "whore" or a coquette. She does not bounce from suitor to suitor because of vanity, levity, capriciousness, or any of Braunschneider's traits, although she is certainly in possession of them. Rather, her primary aim in coquetry is financial comfort and independence—in other words, power.

Notably, Roxana repents her coquetry, vanity, and immorality in the final line of the novel, which reads, "The blast of Heaven seemed to follow the injury done the poor girl by us both, and I was brought so low again, that my repentance seemed to be only the consequence of my misery, as my misery was of my crime" (Defoe, 494). Despite spending the entirety of the novel celebrating Roxana's independence, individuality, and financial success, Defoe feels the need to bring Roxana low as a warning against the dangers of coquetry. This is likely to placate

an audience which would have seen her behavior as immoral and deserving of punishment, and her power as a threat.

THE MISEDUCATED COQUETTE

Celebrating coquetry as power is the most radical, and therefore the least common, of the recurring eighteenth-century perceptions of coquetry. The second perspective which adds to the cultural fable of the coquette is far more popular. This perspective sees coquettish behavior as a negative symptom of a poor upbringing and offers the coquette as proof of a need to reform women's education. To socially conservative—typically male—critics, coquetry results from too little emphasis on modesty and virtue in women's education. To feminist critics, coquetry results from a failure to provide a stimulating, comprehensive education for women equivalent to that received by men. This paper will examine first examples of socially conservative male texts on women's education and upbringing, and then, in contrast, those written by progressive feminist authors.

In his 1739 book *The Present State of Matrimony*, an author publishing under the pseudonym Philogamus presents a critique of women's education—"the wrong, I may say, wretched way of educating our youth: particularly our young ladies"—as a partial culprit in "conjugal infidelity and disorders in the married state" (Philogamus, 19). He believes that coquetry is a symptom of a modern, failing system of education. He writes young ladies "are wiser, and more knowing in the arts of coquetry, gallantry, and other matters relating to the difference of sexes, etc. before they come to be twenty, than our great-grandmothers were all their lives" (Philogamus, 25). To Philogamus, being "wise" and "knowing" in the arts of

coquetry and gallantry is a problem unique to eighteenth-century girls, who are more knowledgeable in those arts than their great-grandmothers had been "all their lives."

Philogamus goes on to describe circumstances to which he attributes this tendency towards coquetry:

> If from their tender years, they see nothing but inflaming and tempting objects; hear nothing but vanity and flattery, if not something worse; being taught almost from the cradle to chase their lovers, to talk of husbands, gallants, etc, when they get together, and not only sow seeds of vice in one another's hearts, but very often are so well instructed before they are out of their teens, that they could teach their grandmothers. (Philogamus, 25)

Philogamus describes coquetry as socialized "from the cradle," meaning that young women are encouraged to fantasize about love and seek flattery from birth. He attributes coquettish behavior to a combination of exposure to temptation and flattery and discussion between girls of these vices. In response, Philogamus advocates for a traditionalist education for young women, which would confine them from society until marriage: "The more they are preserved in chastity and a modest retirement before marriage, the more fruitful as well as chaste will they be in that state, and less subject to complain of their husbands" (Philogamus, 75). Philogamus' proposed cure to the problem of coquetry as a socialized set of behaviors is to isolate young girls "in chastity and a modest retirement" until marriage—an extremely limiting and oppressive solution.

In an even harsher citation of coquetry as demonstration of women's inferiority, an article in a column titled "The Muses Gazette" and published in *The Original Weekly Journal* in April 1720 cites coquetry as one of many reasons to "exclude [women] from the Number of Rational

Creatures." The author argues against the equality of men and women. He insists that men are rational where women are not:

> Abundance makes me poor; for to enumerate all the Vices and Follies of the fair Sex in this one City, would take up more time than I can here allow them…their Pride, their Ignorance, their Affectation, their Coquetry, their Hypocrisy, their Inconstancy, their Lewdness, their Rapaciousness, their Violence; in short, all their Passions, Vices, and Follies, which entirely Influence their whole Conduct and Lives, will, I think, very easily exclude them from any Claim to be call'd Rational Creatures.

The "Passions, Vices, and Follies" of the coquette and the qualities associated with coquetry—vanity, capriciousness, levity—were weaponized by authors like the one above in the intellectual debate during the eighteenth century over the rights of women to an education. Women were caught in a vicious circle: denied an equal education, they were encouraged to engage in coquettish behavior as means of exercising power; at the same time, men viewed coquetry as evidence that women were intellectually and rationally inferior, and therefore undeserving of an equal education.

Much like Philogamus and the author of "The Muses Gazette," feminist writer and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft decries coquettes as poorly educated women. In her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), Wollstonecraft asserts that eighteenth-century women were socialized to value beauty and to appeal to the male gaze: "Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison" (Wollstonecraft, 91). Here, Wollstonecraft is describing the outcome of coquetry as a socialized behavior. Teresa M. Pershing, a modern critic of eighteenth-century literature, also characterizes

coquetry as a socialized set of behaviors in her article "Unbecoming: Desire and Futurity in Amelia Alderson Opie's *Dangers of Coquetry*." She writes, "When a culture locates women's value in their ability to attract and marry a man, it popularizes coquette-like practices. The cultivation of such skills, however, automatically endangers a woman's reputation" (574). Pershing's article refers to Amelia Opie's 1790 novel *Dangers of Coquetry*, a novel in which the protagonist's coquetry leads to the deaths of her husband, herself, and her unborn child. Pershing identifies the absurd paradox of eighteenth-century gender norms, which forced women to enact a precarious "balancing act" between popularized coquette-like practices (to attract a man for marriage) and the preservation of their reputation (as modest, chaste, and virtuous). Wollstonecraft's statement affirms Pershing's assertion that eighteenth-century English culture located women's value in their ability to attract and marry a man, by teaching them "from their infancy" that their value correlates to their beauty.

Wollstonecraft disapproves of the socialization of women to be chaste, docile, and focused on enhancing their beauty. She writes:

> Girls…are only educated to please, to manage their persons, and regulate their exterior behavior; and their minds are corrupted, at a very early age, by the worldly and pious cautions they receive to guard them against…the education of society was a school of coquetry and art. (Wollstonecraft, 179-180)

Wollstonecraft insists that by preaching fiercely against immodesty, as Philogamus is wont to do, girls are encouraged to prioritize it in their thoughts. Society thereby offers them an "education of coquetry and art." Wollstonecraft's proposed solution is to encourage women to acquire "strength, both of mind and body" and to "convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of

weakness" (6-7). By emphasizing that women should seek strength in 'body and mind," Wollstonecraft highlights the intertwined physical and intellectual oppressions of women: women are encouraged to sacrifice bodily and intellectual strength for the sake of beauty and docility. In contrast to Philogamus and his ilk, Wollstonecraft argues that, "a degree of equality should be established between the sexes as would shut out gallantry and coquetry, yet allow friendship and love to temper the heart for the discharge of higher duties" (390). To Wollstonecraft, equality between the sexes would allow for friendship and love to replace coquetry and gallantry. Coquetry is a flaw which can be cured by an equal opportunity in education for women.

Much like Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Lennox takes up the mantle of gender equality with respect to education in "The Lady's Museum:"

> The ladies must allow me once more to repeat to them that the only means of charming, and of charming long, is to improve their minds; good sense gives beauties which are not subject to fade like the lilies and roses of their cheeks, but will prolong the power of an agreeable woman to the autumn of her life. If the sex would not have their influence confined to the short triumph of a day, they must endeavor to improve their natural talents by study, and the conversation of men of letters. Neglect will not then steal upon them in proportion as their bloom decays; but they will unite in themselves all the advantages of both sexes. (Lennox, 16)

Here, Lennox asserts that for a woman to be educated is a more lasting means of temptation than to be beautiful: intelligence will serve her past the bloom of youth to the "autumn of life." Lennox plays on women's socialized desire to be "agreeable" and "charming" to convince readers of the necessity to improve their minds. At the beginning of this magazine, cited earlier

in this paper, Lennox proclaims herself a coquette. As a "coquette" and an intellectual, she allows that any person can be both. She goes on to say that to "prohibit women entirely from learning is treating them with the same indignity that Mahomet did, who, to render them voluptuous, denied them souls," and that "the sex is more capable of attention than we imagine: what they chiefly want is a well directed application" (Lennox, 9, 13). Unlike Wollstonecraft, Philogamus, and the author of "The Muses Gazette," Lennox makes a powerful argument for women's education without condemning women for their socialized desire to please—their coquetry.

Charlotte Lennox's novel *The Female Quixote* (1752) offers an example of a heroine raised in seclusion (as Philogamus would support) whose poor education through low-quality literature leads her into inadvertent coquettish behavior. Arabella, the protagonist, turns to "a great store of romances" which are, unfortunately, "very bad translations" to entertain her in her isolation (Lennox, 3). Arabella's literary pursuits give her an unrealistic view of love, marriage, and reality. Arabella is predisposed to coquetry through vanity, pride, and the reading of romance novels:

> Her glass, which she often consulted, always showed her a form so extremely lovely, that, not finding herself engaged in such adventures as were common to the heroines in the romances she read, she often complained of the insensibility of mankind, upon whom her charms seemed to have so little influence (Lennox, 4).

When Arabella finally begins meeting suitors, she strings them along, hoping for them to earn her love with extravagant action. With respect to marriage, she believes, "…It was necessary…that her lover should purchase her with his sword from a crowd of rivals, and arrive to the possession of her heart by many years of services and fidelity" (Lennox, 10). However, at

the end of the novel, this perspective is challenged. After throwing herself into a river in a flight of fantasy and becoming severely ill, a doctor manages to explain to Arabella the negative implications of her romantic fantasies—namely, that they "soften the heart to love, and harden it to murder" (Lennox, 250). Ashamed, Arabella repents, wonders how "the blaze of enthusiastic bravery could hinder [her] from remarking, with abhorrence, the crime of deliberate unnecessary bloodshed" (Lennox, 250), and decides to marry the man who has been in love with her the whole time. Although miseducation led Arabella to coquetry, the kind correction of an educated man puts her to rights, and she achieves a happy ending—a marriage. Her story is a softer warning against coquetry than most at the time.

THE FALLEN WOMAN

The final of the three prominent eighteenth-century perspectives on coquetry—the trio which make up the coquette as a cultural fable—sees the coquette as a total failure. She is neither empowered, nor reformable by education. In her book *Our Coquettes*, Braunschneider notes that, after the mid-eighteenth century, coquetry was treated with a "less indulgent and optimistic tone" (6). She writes that the "emphasis in coquette discourse shifts from her (amusing, delightfully familiar, only slightly risky) assurance on maintaining a broad field of choice to the dire consequences of such insistence" (Braunschneider, 6). This is evident in the brutal downfall of Louisa in Amelia Odie's *The Dangers of Coquetry* (1790) a novel in which the protagonist's coquetry leads to the death of her husband, herself, and her unborn child.

In a story titled "Coquetry, or the story of Lady Wildham" in Thomas Holcroft's *The Family Picture; Or, Domestic Dialogues on Amiable and Interesting Subjects* (1783), the author

takes a similar attitude of dire warning towards coquetry. In the story, the old lady of Wildham Hall tells her niece that, in a show of coquetry, she strung along two young men (Sir Harry and Glanmore), to the point that they dueled over their rights to her. Glanmore shot Sir Harry dead, and, "instead of ever renewing his claim, was frequently heard to declare, that he deemed himself exceedingly happy in having escaped an indissoluble connection with a woman who was capable of so much injustice and ingratitude" (Holcroft, 64). The lady married instead a crueler man and had to live with the "pain and disgust" of knowing she caused Sir Harry's death (Holcroft, 64). She tells her niece to "beware of coquetry," and calls it the "most dangerous vice to which any woman can be addicted" (Holcroft, 50). This short story implies that coquetry is physically dangerous—it can cause death, pain, and lasting unhappiness. Holcroft's story demonstrates Braunschneider's point that, by the end of the eighteenth century, coquette stories were more often than not tragedies warning of the "high stakes of female indiscretion" (Braunschneider, 6).

The pattern of increasingly severe criticisms of coquetry held true in newspapers and advice columns. In an advice piece titled "Coquetry," published in *The Lady's Weekly Miscellany* in April 1807, the author cautions women that age will decrease their beauty (and therefore value in men's eyes), which may leave them susceptible to ruining their reputation when they receive attention. She warns, "'Tis then that coquetry employs all its artifice and address…'tis then that this lover, if he is not an idiot, may, without being beloved, destroy not only her reputation, but likewise the peace of her future life." This dire proclamation plays on women's fear of aging and of sullying their reputation to dissuade them from coquettish behavior in courtship.

Jane Austen provides an example of a truly irredeemable coquette in her novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Lydia Bennet, the youngest of the Bennet sisters, reveals herself from the beginning of the novel as a coquette to her core. From her early flirtations with the officers of the

nearby militia, to her elopement with the rakish Mr. Wickham, to her proud, jubilant return to Longbourn Estate, Lydia is headstrong, vain, and unrepentantly a coquette—and Austen punishes her for it. Austen reflects Wollstonecraft's view that coquetry is attributable to an improper education, but she never encourages sympathy for Lydia's attitude or behavior.

In the first half of the novel, Austen establishes Lydia's vanity, levity, and capriciousness. Lydia (and her sister Kitty) are described as follows: "They were ignorant, idle, and vain. While there was an officer in Meryton, they would flirt with him; and while Meryton was within a walk of Longbourn, they would be going there for ever" (Austen, 265-266). Scholar Lloyd W. Brown notes in his paper "Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition" that Lydia represents the "sex-seeker image of the miseducated female" (331). She has "high animal spirits, and a sort of natural self-consequence" (Austen, 58). As evidence of her capricious nature, Austen writes, "She was a most determined talker; but being likewise extremely fond of lottery tickets, she soon grew…too eager in making bets and exclaiming after prizes, to have attention for anyone in particular" (98). Her infatuation with lottery tickets suggests a weak mind, flighty interests, and a capricious desire for anything new and interesting, regardless of value. Austen's choice of diction with respect to Lydia is revealing. She is, "unguarded," "uncivil," and speaks "boisterously" (Austen, 162). She has little respect for anyone and flirts incessantly with the officers. Lydia has no concern about preserving her virtue. Elizabeth reflects, "she is very young: she has never been taught to think on serious subjects," suggesting that Lydia's coquetry is her parents' fault (Austen, 330). Lydia is, from the start, destined for a fall.

To the extent that *Pride and Prejudice* may be read as a marriage plot, the focal marriage is between Elizabeth Bennet, Austen's protagonist, and Mr. Darcy. However, there are three other marriages which Austen introduces: Charlotte and Mr. Collins, Jane and Bingley, and Lydia and

Wickham. Brown notes that Austen is focused in *Pride and Prejudice* on the "conscious, and extended, preoccupation with conflicting concepts of education for women and the relationship between that education and marriage" (Brown, 328). Elizabeth and Darcy represent a marriage of mutual respect, affection, and intellectual equality; Lydia and Wickham represent a union of intellectual and moral inferiority. Brown notes that their marriage is a "ritualistic confirmation of the parallels which Mary Wollstonecraft underscores between the biological norms of 'corporeal' accomplishments for women, and the anti-intellectual training of the sensual red-coat" (Brown, 331). Austen intends Lydia and Wickham's elopement to reflect on his part a rakish, flighty nature, and on hers a coquettish instinct, which Austen suggests to be a product of her youth and miseducation. The pair are married at her family's insistence, to protect her reputation as well as their own, and at a mere sixteen, Lydia is sent away from home and linked to a known scoundrel. Austen suggests, through Elizabeth's reflection, that little happiness can come from a union of passion, rather than a virtuous one of love and intellectual compatibility: "But how little of permanent happiness could belong to a couple who were only brought together because their passions were stronger than their virtue" (Austen, 382).

In Lydia's case, Austen implies that the coquetry of the daughter is a result of improper education by the parents: "neglect" on the part of the father and "mistaken indulgence" on the part of the mother (Austen, 343). In her article "Of Woman Borne: Male Experience and Feminine Truth in Jane Austen's Novels," Sarah Morrison notes that, rather than focusing on sexual relationships, Austen is far more concerned with "other kinds of intimate relationships, whether between siblings, child and parent, or friends" (Morrison, 341). Morrison also suggests that the relationship between sisters is the most important in Austen's novels: "the experience behind the relationships imagined by her in her novels is always an experience of relationships of

blood, of which that between sisters is certainly the most deeply felt" (Morrison, 339). Notably, Lydia lacks intimate relationships with her parents or siblings. Her mother, although indulgent, is no mentor to Lydia. Rather, it is her favoritism that "brought [Lydia] into public at an early age" (Austen, 59). Kitty, the family member to whom Lydia is closest, is a follower rather than an equal: "She will follow wherever Lydia leads" (Austen, 289). Jane and Elizabeth, the sensible sisters of the family, offer little guidance or mentorship to their younger sister. Her coquetry, her failure, as Austen suggests, is attributable not solely to her nature but to the failure of her entire support system. However, despite acknowledging the circumstances which created the coquette, Austen shows her little pity.

Lydia's utter unrepentantance suggests her irredeemability. The worst has come to pass: a near loss of virtue and total ruin of the family's reputation, and yet Lydia's spirit is unbroken. She feels no shame. Austen offers her as a one-dimensional archetype of the coquettish woman. Through Lydia, Austen suggests that coquetry is abhorrent and will ruin a woman's life. Lydia is close to becoming a ruined woman. The only reason Austen saves her reputation is to heroicize Darcy, and to save Elizabeth and Darcy's chances of marriage—it is very likely he would not have married Elizabeth had Lydia been ruined. Lydia is punished with a husband who is a gambling addict, a liar, and not in love with her. And yet she does not repent. When Lydia and Wickham return to Longbourn for the wedding, the family is shocked to find that "Lydia was Lydia still; untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy, and fearless" (Austen, 386). Perhaps there is something to be said for this attitude.

Another reading of Lydia sees her as ahead of her time: totally confident, entirely herself, doing everything she wants, and getting everything she desires in the end. The descriptors which Austen attaches to her were, in 1813, unfeminine, but would not have necessarily have been

negative qualities in a man: “high animal spirits,” “self-consequence” “determined,” “unguarded,” “boisterous,” “untamed,” and “fearless.” Most of Lydia’s character traits are not bad, but they do not conform to the standards of femininity of the day. Lydia is presented negatively because she exhibits masculine qualities. Scholar Teresa Pershing notes that coquettes “destabilize assumptions about monogamous marriage as a predetermined route for women” by their insistence on “having choices and at times making non-normative choices” (575). Lydia fits Pershing’s description: she appreciates her choices of the officers, she makes the non-normative choice to elope with Wickham, she is comfortable living with him without being married: “[Darcy] found Lydia absolutely resolved on remaining where she was…She was sure they should be married some time or other, and it did not much signify when” (Austen, 396). By forcing Lydia to marry Wickham as quickly as possible, her family and Mr. Darcy regulate Lydia’s errant femininity and sexuality using the most powerful tool to that end: heterosexual marriage. They are attempting to reassert the dominance of the patriarchal order—by binding the coquette to a man, they will force her to cease her disobedience. However, Pershing also notes that “if she chooses marriage but continues to be a coquette, then marriage fails to regulate femininity” (Pershing, 575). Rather than feeling ashamed and repentant, Lydia’s “ease and good spirits increased” (Austen, 388) upon coming home married. Lydia’s refusal to change after her scandal—“Lydia was Lydia still”—alerts readers that she is still a coquette, and thus marriage has failed to regulate her femininity.

CONCLUSION

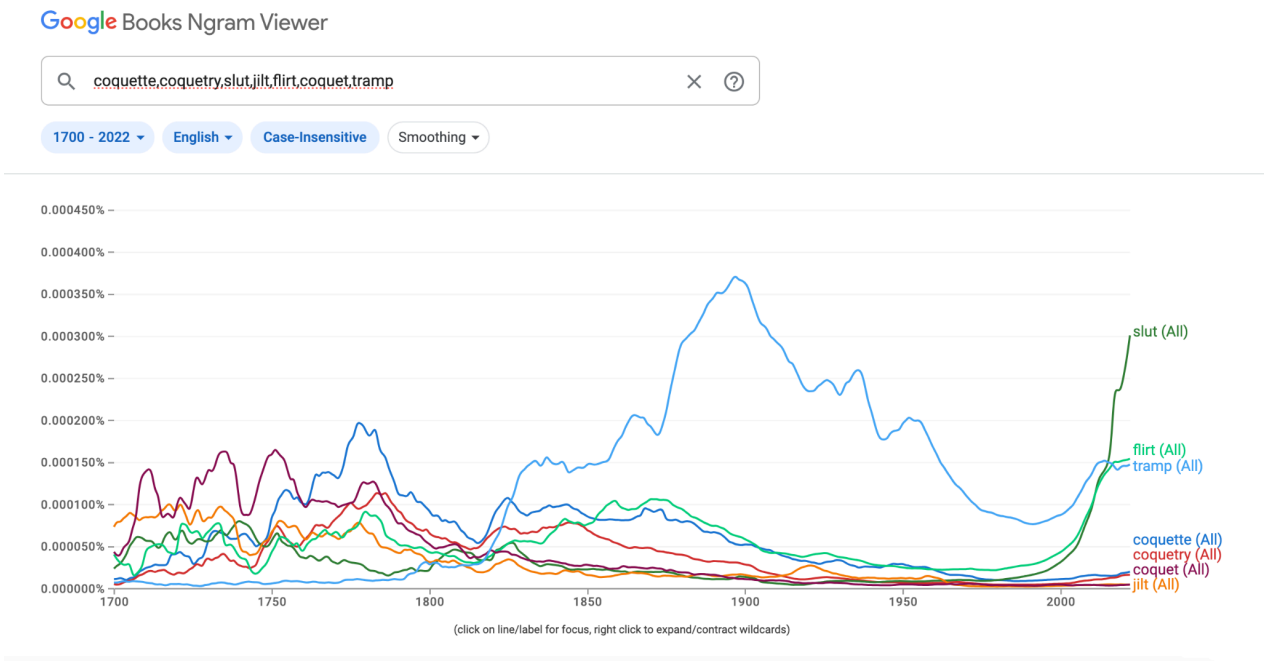
By many standards, the coquette attains ideal womanhood: she is beautiful, she is socially adept, she is attractive to men; but that is not enough. By making non-normative choices around her romantic and sexual life, she threatens patriarchal gender norms, and therefore must be insulted and demeaned until she is properly brought to heel through marriage. The label of coquette casts the errant woman into one of three stereotypical roles: the powerful coquette, who is, like a tyrant, destined for a fall; the badly educated woman, whose behavior reflects her poor upbringing; or the ruined woman. All of these stereotypes are attempts to force the coquette back into a socially-acceptable relationship with one man and into the role approved for her gender. Referring to a woman as a coquette takes away her individuality and her ownership of her femininity. The term places her in a centuries-long context of debate about correct and incorrect behavior for women. Whether a coquette is empowered, miseducated, or fallen, she is typecast. She is most certainly not herself. The fact that these three perspectives on coquetry are so predominant in eighteenth-century literature makes them a cultural fable—a lasting characterization of womanhood that endures beyond the century in which it was born. The cultural fable of the coquette has enshrined these three perspectives on womanhood in the cultural narrative and canon of western literature and media.

Although the term "coquette" or "coquetry" has fallen out of use, the stereotypes around womanhood that she embodies live on in other terms: tramp, flirt, whore, and slut (see Appendix, Fig 1). Coquetry has been aestheticized in contemporary fashion. Women are still subjugated in certain fields of education and areas of the workforce—there exists a feminized sector of labor to which Wollstonecraft would certainly object. And twenty-first century women, although the world might like to believe otherwise, are still burdened with the task of preserving their good reputation—their virtue, their chastity—and denying their sexual instinct and urges.

Heterosexual marriage still regulates many women's femininity. The coquette is hiding just below the surface of every conversation around femininity, sexuality, and what it means to be a "good" woman. The Lydia Bennets of the twenty-first century are still slandered and brought low. Perhaps, in the twenty-first century, society can abandon the negative characterizations around coquetry, abandon the term altogether, and encourage women to remain, like Lydia, untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy, and fearless.

Appendix

Figure 1



This graph was produced using Google Books Ngram Viewer.

Fig. 1. Google Books Ngram Viewer; *Google Books*; Web. Accessed 14 Dec. 2024.

Figure 2



Fig. 2. Vermeer, Johannes, 1632-1675. *Coquette: Girl with Wineglass*. oil on canvas, 1659-60. Herzog Anton-Ulrich-Museum Braunschweig, *JSTOR*, https://jstor.org/stable/community.13608906. Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.

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