

Rethinking Ascetic Deferral in an Age of Deliberative Democracy

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Hannah Webster Foster's seduction novel, *The Coquette* (1797), concludes with the heroine's decision to try "what a recluse and solitary mode of life will produce." Eliza Wharton's stylization as an anchoress withdrawn from the social world is further reinforced by the text's repeated references to her rejection of food, her gruesome emaciation, and her consumptive decline in Danvers Tavern. Consistently deploying ascetic tropes of confinement, self-mortification, and hermitic withdrawal, Foster's *The Coquette* interrogates contemporary depictions of the feme sole by self-consciously yoking the ontological concerns of the coquette and those of the female hermit. This paper builds upon previous research into the political significance of the American hermit in which I argue that the hermit's purpose inheres in his willingness to defer taking sides. Where my previous research explained how the hermit's capacity for ascetic deferral marked him as an exemplary democratic citizen, this paper scrutinizes the cultural relevance of gender for understanding post-revolutionary ascetic reclusion. In so doing, I raise the additional question of how cultures of solitude from Daniel Defoe's essay, "Of Solitude" (1720) to Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) populated specifically urban landscapes. Attending to traditions of urban asceticism usefully reframes discussion of the hermit by underscoring the extent to which the ascetic's isolation from society is primarily epistemological (rather than spatial) in nature. Foster's *The Coquette* provides a crucial instantiation of the relevance of urban asceticism for post-revolutionary American society. Through a consideration of late eighteenth-century discourses of coquetry, contemporary accounts of female hermits, and Lockean epistemology, I discuss how the coquette's apparent superficiality and wavering commitments represents an important instantiation of Locke's conception of liberty as suspended judgment. The strange framing of Foster's seduction narrative with references to ascetic reclusion suggests that Eliza's withdrawal from society represents only the most literal example of an epistemology grounded in studied deliberation and deferred judgment. Marshalling the hermit's characteristic epistemology to negotiate the fraught economy of the marriage market, Foster insists that the coquette's stereotypical equivocations must be understood as an ascetic practice of postponing present gratification for future reward, a postponement that applies the studied and deferred deliberation of the American male hermit to the politics of courtship.