

The Doctor-Coquette Nexus in *Middlemarch*, *Villette*, and *The Woodlanders*

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Abstract

Although there remains a critical tendency to denounce literary coquettes like Rosamond Vincy as inauthentic, recent developments in gender and cultural theory have led critics to recuperate such anti-heroines. Still yet to be fully realized, however, is the complementary importance of a character type that recurs just as often as the coquette in the nineteenth-century novel: the provincially exiled young doctor. Numerous novels of the mid-Victorian period romantically pair an ambitious coquette – who stage-manages, but does not inhabit her own femininity – with a doctor figure whose ‘scientific’ outlook jars notably with the determinedly superficial self-presentation of the female object in his view.

*Surveying the coquette-doctor relationships forged within George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–2), Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), and Thomas Hardy’s *The Woodlanders* (1886–7), this essay promotes an understanding of the coquette as a kind of Frankenstein’s monster of Victorian culture. Despite (or perhaps because of) the stereotype’s origin in the conservative English psyche, the coquette proves a character highly attuned to the performative strategies she must maintain in order to navigate the strict gender standards of the era. The Victorian doctor stands on the other side of the coupling as a representative of the period’s pseudo-scientific attitudes toward the female body in particular, his diagnostic tool-box of positivist inquiry and empiricist objectivism proving a dubious match for the coquette’s careful curation of her own sexual and social signs.*

In their assessments of *Middlemarch*, literary commentators have tended either to neglect Rosamond Vincy altogether, or else to reduce her character with the loaded accusation of narcissism.¹ F.R. Leavis, for example, describes Rosamond in *The Great Tradition* as ‘simple ego unembarrassed by any inner complexity’, going so far to admit that ‘the reader certainly catches himself, from time to time, wanting to break that graceful neck’.² Few could forget, furthermore, T.S. Eliot’s claim that Rosamond terrifies more than Goneril or Regan, *Middlemarch*’s female antagonist apparently representing – unlike the villainesses of *Lear* – precisely the ‘admixture’ of weakness and satanic villainy which makes character

¹ Perhaps the leading voice in this camp is Barbara Hardy, who in *The Novels of George Eliot* labels Rosamond a ‘grim egoist’ (London: A&C Black, 1985), p. 226. So too does Bernard Semmel – in his only comment on Rosamond – describe her as a ‘narcissistic and beautiful blonde’ in *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 94. See also Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, ‘Negotiating *Middlemarch*’, in *Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Karen Chase (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 107-31 (p. 118).

² F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 84.

plausible.³ Rosamond, then, enrages our first male critic because of her Vice-like simplicity; the second, because of her terrifying realism. What are we to make of such contradictory assessments? This essay argues that the reason Rosamond presents such a threat to the conservative reader is because she cultivates a self-presentation which resists penetrative reading – especially when enacted by the male gaze.

Contemporary commentators have done much to redeem Rosamond from over a century of belittling reviews like those recorded above.⁴ Revisionists have not, however, always situated Eliot's anti-heroine in her proper character typology. Rosamond's stage-managing of her appearance and behaviour – a practice motivated by the desire to make 'conquests' of men⁵ – firmly establishes her as a female coquette, affiliating her with a much wider network of novelistic flirts including Emma Bovary, Becky Sharpe, and Rosamond Oliver. The coquette, as an adept director of her own performance on the social stage, rises to narrative and romantic dominance by virtue of her determined adherence to a femininity which is essentially theatrical. Because of this, the coquette troubles notions of gender essentialism, and poses a problem for readers expecting straightforward expressions of subjectivity in novelistic character. Denying both inherent femininity and selfhood in this manner, the coquette emerges as a figure capable of provoking anxieties about social authenticity and gender fakery in the Victorian age (and, if we are to judge by Leavis' compulsion to violence, on into modernity).

The coquette's subversive potential has rendered her an object of interest for literary and cultural commentators in recent decades. The publication of Richard A. Kaye's *The Flirt's Tragedy* (2002) and King and Schlick's edited collection *Refiguring the Coquette* (2008) speaks to the increased attention paid the figure of the coquette in literature, from her *naissance* in cultural commentary of the eighteenth century, to the nineteenth-century redactions I discuss here. But though both studies mount a fine argument for the coquette's demonstrative gender performativity', neither draws sufficient attention to the spectators who call her performance into being. For the coquette's trick only works when her male onlooker invests mutually in the myth of typical femininity that she projects. 'In order for coquetry to grow on the soil of sociability', George Simmel has

³ T.S. Eliot, 'The Three Voices of Poetry' (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 11.

⁴ See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 514-517; Rebecca Mitchell, 'The Rosamond Plots: Alterity and the Unknown in *Jane Eyre* and *Middlemarch*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 66.3 (2011), 307-327; Anne E. Patrick, 'Rosamond Rescued: George Eliot's Critique of Sexism in *Middlemarch*', *The Journal of Religion*, 67.2 (1987), 220-238; and Doreen Thierauf, 'The Hidden Abortion Plot in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*', *Victorian Studies*, 56.3 (2014), 479-89.

⁵ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 426. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

written, ‘it must meet with a specific behavior on the part of the male’.⁶ Like meaning in Wittgenstein’s language games, the coquette’s false subjectivity is constructed (or, in faith to the theme of this journal issue, *forged*) dialogically, somewhere in-between the intentions and desires of the female flirt, and those of her naïve and stereotyping male victim. Without the latter’s collusion, the coquette would be barred from using a typically-feminine guise to her advantage.

Once the narrative trajectory of the coquette is read in this way (that is, as a series of scenes inhabited by players and audience members who together fashion a particular kind of femininity), then one character type in particular emerges as a common presence opposite her. This is none other than the young, provincially exiled Victorian doctor. It is widely acknowledged that the doctor character, following earlier manifestations in novels such as *Bleak House*, was afforded a more substantial role by later nineteenth-century novelists from Trollope to Wilkie Collins.⁷ Less obvious is the frequency with which the doctor is romantically paired with a coquettish love interest in mid-Victorian realist fiction. Indeed, the novels which hold my critical gaze in this essay, Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–2), Thomas Hardy’s *The Woodlanders* (1886–7), and Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), are only a few of the most representative examples of the doctor-coquette nexus in the literature of this period.⁸

Tabitha Sparks has previously parsed the complex relationship between the Victorian doctor and the marriage plot.⁹ Sparks’s sensitivity to the liminal status of the doctor in nineteenth-century social and literary space – his straddling of the public/realist and domestic/romantic spheres – is a key theme in my own argument. Again, however, Sparks’s study does not consider the medical man’s *epistemological* significance contra the coquette. If, as King and Schlick allege, the coquette surfaces in the eighteenth century as a product inextricable from the material and marriage markets, then it is my contention that the professional doctor emerges in mid-Victorian fiction as a pseudo-scientific extension of the bourgeois morality of the era, his positivist science sparring with the coquette’s social sign-bending to fascinating effect.¹⁰ Thus when Lydgate transports himself

⁶ George Simmel, *The Sociology of George Simmel*, ed. by Kurt H. Wolff (London: Macmillan Publishing, 1950), p. 51.

⁷ Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. xii.

⁸ The titular Emma marries a medical man in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*; Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters* depict the same romantic pairing of coquette and doctor; Harriet Martineau pursues a similar dynamic in *Deerbrook*. Even within *Villette*, Ginevra has a precedent in the dead Mrs. Bassompierre, a coquette who neglects her child and disappoints her doctor husband.

⁹ Tabitha Sparks, *The Doctor in the Victorian Novel: Family Practices* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2009).

¹⁰ King and Schlick write that the coquette’s rise in popular culture coincided with the ‘emergence of a specular economy, [...] the anxiety of selfhood generated by accommodation to newly commercialised social relations, and [...] the rise of the middle classes and of middle-

to a false paradise at the mere thought of Rosamond's sweet laughs and blue eyes in *Middlemarch*, when Dr. John is rendered stupid by Ginevra's supposedly 'artless' charms in *Villette*,¹¹ and when Fitzpiers is lost to the sheer spectacle of the seductively-draped Mrs. Charmond in *The Woodlanders*, the owner of the medical gaze discloses himself not merely as the primary target for the coquette's wiles, but as the active co-creator of her myth. As it politicises the coquette's performance, therefore, this essay will demonstrate that the doctor represents in concentrated form the surveillance of women's bodies and behaviours in the Victorian milieu, displaying in his relations with the coquette the inconsistencies at the heart of the enforcement of gendered subjectivity.

The Victorian Coquette

The Victorian coquette is an inheritance of the prior century, her popularization in English art and literature owing to the civilising efforts of such cultural patriarchs as Steele and Addison. The essays of *The Tatler* (1709–11) and *The Spectator* (1711–12) are dense sites of social stratification, and in them, the coquette is deplored along with other derogatory female types such as the pict, the jilt, and the idol. The coquette's particular flaw was her engagement of womanly wiles which, because deemed to spring from a selfish aspiration toward sexual freedom and pleasure, constituted a vaguely-defined threat to normative femininity'.¹² It did not help that the Gallic etymology of the term 'coquette' – which we see reflected later in the French sensibilities of *Middlemarch*'s Rosamond Vincy, *The Woodlanders*' Felice Charmond, and *Villette*'s Ginevra Fanshawe – worked immediately to signal the coquette's penchant for overt or false display. These supposedly 'French' characteristics made the coquette a didactically-useful figure of contrast when set against the ideally restrained and, as Richard Kaye puts it, 'tasteful' English woman.¹³ The realist novelist imports these nuances into the nineteenth century, adopting Steele and Addison's practice of tracing the coquettish character's allure back to false foundations, to a beauty that is significantly augmented – if not wholly generated – by material adornment, and to a charm that is learned rather than intrinsic.

Given the coquette's association with costume and with pretence, it follows that this character type is strongly allied with theatricality. This association is, in

class culture' ('Introduction', in *Refiguring the Coquette*, ed. by Shelley King and Yaël Schlick (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2008), p.13.

¹¹ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. by Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), p. 149. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

¹² For more on the eighteenth-century coquette, see Erin Mackie, 'Fashion Plates: Subjectivity, Style and Gender', in *Market À la Mode: Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in The Tatler and The Spectator* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 144-202 (p. 172).

¹³ Richard Kaye, *The Flirt's Tragedy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), p. 121.

fact, built into the coquette's very definition: in Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755, 'to coquet' is recorded to mean 'To *act* the lover', and the O.E.D. continues to define the coquette as 'A woman (more or less young), who uses *arts* to gain the admiration and affection of men'.¹⁴ In the mid-Victorian novel, the literary coquette's penchant for the theatrical is often invoked at the level of plot and character (Hardy's Mrs. Charmond is a former play-actress; Brontë's Ginevra Fanshawe literally performs the role of a coquette in her school play) and also dialogically, through the coquette's interaction with her social audience (this is primarily the case with Eliot's Rosamond). Since the realist novelist invariably portrays the coquette's flirtation as an act of deception, the reader quickly learns to oppose this female type with the writer's working conception of the 'real'.

Indeed, generically speaking, the coquette is a character better suited to the conventions of drama than to those of the realist novel. T.S. Eliot anticipates this claim when he likens Rosamond to Iago.¹⁵ Theatre, after all, cannot show the referent, only the material signifier; in this respect, it is the same as the body observed only by the naked eye. Dramatic performance offers to its audience only external symptoms, encouraging spectators to guess at buried meanings without the assuring guidance of an omniscient narrator. The coquette's self-presentation is hence not psychological realism in the sense we have come to know it from Victorian fiction, and it is distinct even from Barthes' realist materialism, under which objects and things perform a straightforward function in announcing themselves as real. 'Good' femininity, as opposed to the coquette's theatrical version, is classic realism: symbols of outward beauty and virtue described by the narrator perfectly correspond with the 'good' female protagonist's inward state, without the merest suggestion of authorial falseness to disrupt the correspondence. Female protagonists like Dorothea Brooke and Polly Bassompierre, for example, support their external loveliness with demonstrable moral purity, the visible signs of gender that they project clearly supported by ethical, inward referents.¹⁶ The coquette, by contrast, exists as an animate compound of fine dresses, memorised sentiments, and trained movements, her announced artifice aligning her with the early-modern masque sooner than with the novel of domestic realism.

Literary depictions of the coquette commonly involve mirrors and doubling, supporting the notion of a female self-presentation determined to thwart the reader's perception. More than serving simply as a material indicator of the coquette's narcissism, the prop of the mirror serves to disconcertingly rive the coquette in two, questioning the basic realism or coherence of the reflected female subject. Rosamond's mirror-scene in *Middlemarch* is particularly captivating, her image replicated so that

¹⁴ Both definitions taken from 'Coquette, n', *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2017, <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed May 2018].

¹⁵ Eliot, 'The Three Voices of Poetry', p.11.

¹⁶ See Mackie, 'Fashion Plates', p. 147.

two nymphs – the one in the glass, and the one out of it, [...] looked at each other with eyes of heavenly blue, deep enough to hold the most exquisite meanings an ingenious beholder could put into them, and deep enough to hide the meanings of the owner if these should happen to be less exquisite. (p. 112)

Neither ‘nymph’ in Eliot’s visual is easily read. As the eyes of both join in a promise to contain other observers’ meanings whilst safely guarding Rosamond’s own, the reflection in the glass is posited to be just as phenomenologically real (or perhaps more accurately, just as artificial) as the embodied original. Subjectivity is faintly gestured at (‘the meanings of the owner’), but it is obfuscated by layers of theatrical externality. Such stubbornly superficial imagery naturally frustrates the reader who values the existence of a more authentic self. Just as *Daniel Deronda*’s Gwendolen Harleth draws a kind of vital energy to sustain her state of emotional indifference from kissing her own image in the cold glass, Eliot’s antecedent coquette makes use of mirrors to redouble her social mask.¹⁷

Given Rosamond’s talent in arranging her very body to receive others’ meanings, it is no wonder that *Middlemarch*’s narrator describes the coquette as ‘by nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique’ (p. 117). Consider Eliot’s extended description of Rosamond:

Rosamond never showed any unbecoming knowledge, and was always that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted verse, and perfect blonde loveliness [...]. She was not in the habit of devising falsehoods, and if her statements were no direct clew to fact, why, they were not intended in that light – they were among her elegant accomplishments, intended to please. (p.268)

If Lionel Trilling defines sincerity as congruence between avowal and actual feeling, then Rosamond is clearly as compulsive a liar as Iago.¹⁸ Furnished by Mrs. Lemon’s finishing school with an ornamental set of ‘accomplishments’ – all of which anticipate the approval of a social audience – Rosamond’s capacity for social sincerity has been compromised at a formative stage. ‘Subjectivity is further buried beneath coquettish display as a result of Rosamond’s post-debut immersion in a patriarchal society which clearly recommends and rewards the kind of female type-filling that she has been taught in girlhood. Rosamond is, after all, ‘by general consent [...] a rare compound of beauty, cleverness, and amiability’ (p. 268, my emphasis).

¹⁷ See George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), p. 13.

¹⁸ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), p.2.

Villette's Ginevra Fanshawe is still, in fact, a schoolgirl. Like Rosamond, she too enjoys a culturally-approved education more thespian than intellectual in flavour, designed to funnel her into a life of 'music, singing, and dancing, also embroidering [...] fine cambric handkerchiefs' (p. 123). Openly referred to as a 'vain coquette' by Brontë's narrator Lucy Snowe, Ginevra assents to her own stereotyping with gusto, finding it more 'convenient' (p. 103) to perform this cosmetic brand of femininity than to actually espouse traditional female virtues like those possessed by Polly Bassompierre, *Villette*'s quintessential 'Angel in the House'. Ginevra admits to preferring Lucy's honest company to Dr. John's: 'I am far more at my ease with you, [...] who take me at my lowest, and know me to be coquettish, and ignorant, and flirting, and fickle, and silly, and selfish, and all the other sweet things you and I have agreed to be a part of my character' (p. 106). Even in female company, Ginevra performs a socially-negotiated role. By inhabiting that social self wholly, deliberately, and always, Ginevra suggests that the inner personhood expected of the Victorian middle-class woman – disinterestedness, servitude, and other 'sterling qualities and solid virtues' (p. 106) – is in no way preferable to the exhibition of coquetry that can exact the same end: namely, courtship ending in marriage.

When risking classification as a coquette becomes a simpler means of satisfying cultural demand than does aiming for actual sincerity and authenticity, a unique kind of self-division comes into play. This is a self-division unto which the Victorian doctor's distinction between public and private life directly maps. Where a public-facing male like Victorian poet Matthew Arnold can exalt the notion of a 'buried life' because he is allowed respite when in private to cultivate that hidden subjectivity, a coquette like Rosamond or Ginevra is taught to perform even in the most sequestered of settings, her inner self well-obscured beneath the markers of type that she constantly projects.¹⁹ Whilst Arnold is fortunate to sporadically escape the platitudes and disguises of the social world, the coquette has been so moulded into her public mask that she cannot recognise her true self outside of it.²⁰ As Eliot writes, '[Rosamond] even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own' (p.117).

Perhaps this is why the doctor emerges as so appropriate a target for the coquette's wiles. The Victorian doctor, we must not forget, has an act of his own to sustain, and this act – like the coquette's – must be upheld in the most intimate of settings. In the nineteenth century, the general practitioner's work was largely comprised of house calls, whereby he would be summoned to preside over intensely private, deathbed moments. But the doctor, we know from novels of this period, presents in these moments as an impersonal, impenetrable actor, unable to take off his professional mask until within the door of his own home.

¹⁹ Matthew Arnold, 'The Buried Life', in *Arnold: The Complete Poems*, ed. by Kenneth Allott (New York: Longman, 1979), pp. 286-291.

²⁰ Gilbert and Gubar expound a similar argument with relation to *Villette*'s narrator – see 'The Buried Life of Lucy Snowe', in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp. 399-440.

In consequence, the doctor conflates his own household (and the wife stood over its hearth) with the coveted opportunity to free his deeper self. Whilst at home, in other words, the doctor expects his wife to play nurse to his subjectivity, so that he may recharge in preparation for the next day's performance on the most private of public stages. Thus not only is the Victorian doctor's ideal spouse expected to express in the home 'true' femininity (a truth the medical man has theorized), but she is to privilege and nurture her husband's buried self, too.

Take *Middlemarch*'s Lydgate, who subscribes wholly to the binary that Arnold invokes in his celebrated poem 'The Buried Life' (1852), desperate to retreat from the public realm of activity and trade each night to be emotionally serviced by a wife sensitive to his most private concerns and ambitions.²¹ Rosamond projects this truth to begin with, and so Lydgate makes of her his wife. As soon as they begin to inhabit the same space, however, Rosamond effaces the true-self, false-self myth that her husband has invested in, and shows the intimate reality of her character to be as empty as that of her socially-performed identity. When Lydgate comes home to his wife, therefore, he is met not with therapeutic disinterest but a total *lack of* interest, for Rosamond harbours no trace of the wifely compassion her doctor-husband has come to expect from women in the domestic setting.

In *Villette*, Ginevra's initial object of male interest – a doctor, naturally – rescinds his affections before his domestic ideals can be irrevocably disappointed in the same way as Lydgate's. From the beginning of the novel, Dr. John is painted as a paradigm of middle-classness, as a bastion of domesticity.²² Accordingly, his flight from beguilement with coquettish Ginevra to moral repulsion with her is triggered by the revelation of her innate performativity. Watching Ginevra act the role of 'coquette' in the literally theatrical context of a school play, Dr. John sits as an audience member enraptured (p. 142). When both players are removed to the more overtly public setting of the local theatre, however, the young doctor realises that Ginevra *never* suspends her act. In this climactic scene, Dr. John reacts furiously to the girl's flirting sensibility and 'triumphant [...] beauty', concluding that she is 'neither a pure angel, nor a pure-minded woman' (pp. 197–8).

Notably, Dr. John borrows from his medical vocabulary when figuring his expired obsession with Ginevra, claiming that the moment of crisis at the theatre

²¹ Sarah Stickney Ellis' behavioural manual *The Women of England*, originally published 1838, describes the working man's problem with dramatic flourish: 'with a jaded look and feeble step, then, he enters his home. He wipes the gathering dew from his wrinkled forehead, sits down with a sigh almost amounting to a groan of despondency, and then looks round upon the well-furnished parlour, where the ladies of his family spend their idle hours' (London: Fisher, Son & Co, 1839), p. 256.

²² It is soon revealed that Dr. John is a matured form of 'Graham', the boy Lucy grows up with at home in England, simply transplanted to live in a near-identical abode with his mother in France.

effected ‘a mere puncture’ to his heart, that ‘no pain or malady of sentiment has yet gone through my whole system’ (pp. 199–200). Still later, he declares ‘I am better now [...] I have entered another condition, and am now much disposed to exact love for love’ (p. 222). In this way, the doctor functions as a moral yardstick for just how far the coquette can take her emasculating performance before the bourgeois physician returns to full gender fitness – that is, before he retreats to the safe haven of domestic femininity epitomised by *Villette*’s Polly Bassompierre, a superior creature to Ginevra because her beauty is rooted in the ‘firm soil of reality’ (p. 267). The nineteenth-century doctor, in *Villette* and beyond, exemplifies the spilling-over of science into the realm of social ethics.²³ The professional doctor heals the bodies of people in their own homes; the biopower gained from this intimate transaction authorizes, in turn, his commentary on domestic matters of ideological and political import (matters like, evidently, marriage and gender roles). There is perhaps no more insidious instrument of the nineteenth-century’s institutional morality than the Victorian doctor, no more apparently benign extension of surveillance society than the general practitioner going about his house calls.²⁴

The Myopic Scientific Gaze

In an 1836 book titled *Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman*, Alexander Walker promotes a set of physiognomic principles by which the contemporary male reader could supposedly diagnose, through visual interpretation only, a woman’s inherent virtue or vice.²⁵ To be sure, Walker’s is a dubious mode of empiricism, and his brand of speculative science was quickly eclipsed by more ‘rationalistic’ forms of inquiry as the nineteenth century progressed. However, the rise of positivist science and the related professionalization of the medical practitioner in England

²³ Lawrence Rothfield comments further that ‘the faith that sustains Lydgate as a physician-scientist is precisely that the obscure and the minute can be made manifest, and that this operation will yield therapeutically valuable insights, confirming the “direct alliance between intellectual conquest and social good”’ (“A New Organ of Knowledge”: Medical Organicism and the Limits of Realism in *Middlemarch*’, in *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 84–119 (p. 97)).

²⁴ For more on the Victorian doctor’s social function, see Asa Briggs, ‘*Middlemarch* and the Doctors’, in *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs Vol. 2* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), pp. 49–67. For a Foucauldian reading of Dr. John’s gaze (as applied to Lucy Snowe), see Sally Shuttleworth, ‘*Villette*: “the surveillance of a sleepless eye”’, in *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 219–242.

²⁵ Alexander Walker, *Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1836). For an excellent correlating of physiognomy to the coquette, see also Ellen Rosenman, ‘Fear of Fashion; or, How the Coquette Got Her Bad Name’, *ANQ*, 15.3 (2002), 12–21 (p. 13).

did not entail as wholesale a revision of Walker's diagnostic method as one might expect, at least when it came to the perception and conception of gender difference. As Lilian R. Furst has chronicled, the advent of the Victorian age saw major developments in medical theory and praxis, including the popularization of the house call and the idealization of the hospital as a space for scientific progress. But these developments brought also a renewed emphasis on visible, tangible markers of disease, of the kind amenable to detection by the newfangled stethoscope.²⁶

Because the 'principles of science were in this period 'seen to be *universally* operable', fictional doctors can be observed to extend their material hermeneutics beyond their patients to encompass social players also.²⁷ Within this milieu, an anatomy-inclined general practitioner like Lydgate – though keenly interested, as Peter M. Logan records, 'in what is unseen, in hidden mechanisms and physical laws' – creates a firm internal analysis of woman based on the epistemologically-compromised science of seeing.²⁸ Foucault writes in *The Birth of the Clinic* that the symptom 'is the form in which the disease is presented: of all that is visible, it is closest to the essential; it is the first transcription of the inaccessible nature of the disease'.²⁹ In the literary context at hand, the disease in question is biological sex, and the symptoms are the visible signs of sex that mark the female body. The doctor's habit of conflating sign and imagined signifier – or, as Sally Shuttleworth puts it with reference to *Villette's* Dr. John, the doctor's practice of "distinguish[ing] inner experience from outer signs" – is only intensified when the object of this faulty gaze is the coquette, a woman who demonstrates that the biological facticity of sex can be entirely unlinked from the fiction of gender.³⁰ The coquette, as has been established, offers herself up as a body to be read, but arranges the signs of her femininity in a very specific manner indeed, so that they become amenable to their receiver's classification or preferred insertion of reference rather than to any deeper citation of the self.

The coquette-related chink in Lydgate's outlook can be traced to his contact with Laure, the actress who enraptures him as a young medical student in France. Swapping vivisection experiments in medical school for observation in

²⁶ See Lilian R. Furst, 'Seeing – and Hearing – is Believing', in *Between Doctors and Patients: The Changing Balance of Power* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press (1998)), pp. 55-85.

²⁷ Patrick J. McCarthy, 'The "New, Young Surgeon" of *Middlemarch*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 10.4 (1970), 805-816 (p. 808). See also Rothfield: the Victorian world is one 'split between the microscopic and the human' ("A New Organ of Knowledge", p. 101).

²⁸ Peter M. Logan, 'Conceiving the Body: Realism and Medicine in *Middlemarch*', *History of the Human Sciences*, 4.2 (1991), 197-222 (p. 199).

²⁹ Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, transl. by A.M. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 90.

³⁰ Sally, Shuttleworth, '*Villette*: "the surveillance of a sleepless eye"', p. 220.

the dramatic theatre, Lydgate is in the audience one night when Laure, in a play depicting spousal crime, actually kills her husband. Laure's collision of representation and reality, act and action, teaches Lydgate to readily conflate the visible with the true from that point forward. But the 'scientific view of woman' (p. 153) that he vows to adopt following this shock is a contradiction in terms, a commitment not to an objective hermeneutics of character but to a system of judging which operates according to a theatrical precedent that cannot, in fact, be mapped onto the entire female sex. Once Lydgate enters Rosamond's social orbit in *Middlemarch*, we quickly discover that his 'scientific view' operates in alignment with his desire. By allowing *himself* creative liberties when scientifically theorising the origin of Rosamond's femininity, he fails to look beyond the observable in her. It is this, the blind spot in Lydgate's doctoring lens, which ultimately leads to the ruin of his romantic and vocational narrative.

'Lydgate's science', Peter M. Logan explains, 'is a case-study in the limitations and dangers of naïve realism, that is, of representation that denies its own status as representation'.³¹ In this, Logan hits upon the irony at the heart of Lydgate's supposed rationalism: namely, the prominence of the young doctor's imagination in what is supposed to be his 'scientific view of woman'. Foucault, too, emphasises the creativity belying the epistemology of modern medicine:

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, doctors described what for centuries had remained below the threshold of the visible and the expressible, but this did not mean that, after over-indulging in speculation, they had begun to perceive once again, or that they listened to reason rather than to imagination; it meant that the relation between the visible and invisible – which is necessary to all concrete knowledge – changed its structure, revealing through gaze and language what had previously been below and beyond their domain.³²

It is a paradox of medical practice, in the Victorian period as now, that all diagnostic investigation begins (at least before the turn to inward-seeing technology like the MRI scan and X-Ray) with a conceptual understanding of the body and the inferences drawn from sensory, superficial penetration.³³ Working from a few such inferences of sweet femininity, Lydgate over-determines Rosamond's character, enhancing the fiction she projects with the one imagined in his own mind. He retains, in this, the old medicine's fault of diagnoses 'float[ing], free of any material referent, in the fancy'.³⁴ Lydgate's scientific

³¹ Peter M. Logan, 'Conceiving the Body', p. 209.

³² *The Birth of the Clinic*, p. xii.

³³ Logan distinguishes between Lydgate's *sensory* penetration (that which would require, for example, a stethoscope) and his *imaginative* penetration – the conceptual understanding of the body upon which Lydgate draws to infer its interior condition ('Conceiving the Body' (p. 202)).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

training, it seems, has trained him not for deep etiological exploration, but for the creative augmentation of the literal with the assumed.

When formulating his scientific view of woman, Lydgate's fancy falls on botany. One would surmise that the study of plants is at quite a remove 'from Lydgate's specialization in pathological anatomy; nonetheless, it is the imagery of flowers which he invariably returns when constructing his version of Rosamond. During their courtship, Lydgate poorly naturalises Rosamond's clearly artificial aspects until she becomes something quite different even from what she elects to show of herself. In an exemplary instance, Lydgate becomes distracted

thinking how lovely this creature was, her garment seeming to be made out of the faintest blue sky, herself so immaculately blond, as if the petals of some gigantic flower had just opened and disclosed her; and yet with this infantine blondness showing so much ready, self-possessed grace. (p.159)

Having never had the time nor the interest to 'give him[self] up to natural history' (p. 172), Lydgate appears to have entirely forgotten that socio-historical environment operates as an essential variable in the development of any organism, most of all the human individual. He prefers instead to imagine Rosamond – who is again contrarily 'self-possessed' and 'ready' even in his airbrushed conception – as a direct product of nature. Even her dress, her most material covering, is sublimated into something else by the doctor's delusive thinking. Persisting with his naturalizing mission, Lydgate tries to re-inscribe Rosamond as a flower that has popped up in spite of hostile circumstances: 'After all, he thought, one need not be surprised to find the rare conjunctions of nature under circumstances apparently unfavourable: come where they may, they always depend on conditions that are not obvious' (p. 161). Lydgate is right about the invisibility of certain conditions, of course, but he does not accurately judge the thoroughly *social* character of these external stimuli. It is thus an intellectual shock first and foremost when Lydgate discovers that Rosamond, notwithstanding her periwinkle eyes and nymph-like naturalness, does not embody recognisable organic structures – like the ultra-tangible tissual system studied by his medical idol Bichat, for example – but the immaterial ones of normative society.³⁵ After the bathos of conjugal life supplants courtship, all Lydgate can do is revise his initial conception of Rosamond until she becomes in *Middlemarch*'s finale a murderous, masculinized basil plant: 'He once called her

³⁵ Foucault uses Bichat as a metonym for the late eighteenth-century age of medicine, implicating the French anatomist when discussing corpse-opening, and the process by which 'the complex, inexhaustible *individuality* of the organs is dispelled and suddenly simplified' (my emphasis); also relevant is Foucault's claim that 'Bichat's eye is a clinician's eye, because he gives an absolute epistemological privilege to the *surface gaze*' (*The Birth of the Clinic* (p. 128–9)).

his basil plant; and when she asked for an explanation, said that basil was a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains' (p. 835). In Lydgate's devastating distortion of the botanic metaphors attributed to Rosamond since their meeting, the coquette ends her performance piece blooming on the very brains that fatally overlooked her decidedly anti-floral nature until the entrapping bonds of marriage were already rooted in place.

As well as invoking his fancy rather than his empirical knowledge when he attempts to deduce Rosamond to a scientific certainty, Lydgate also regularly returns to his belief in the species-level difference between the two sexes.³⁶ This way of thinking is a direct manifestation of the 'spots of commonness' which *Middlemarch's* narrator highlights as Lydgate's fatal flaw. Eliot draws attention to the flimsy grounds of the doctor's reason when she writes that Lydgate 'seem[ed] always to have present in his *imagination* the weakness of [women's] frames and the delicate poise of their health both in body and mind' (p. 835, my emphasis). Acerbically critiquing the Victorian era's rudimentary business of differentiating between the sexes by surrogating the terms of folly for those of evolutionary science, Eliot offers a prescient insight into the hypocrisy of constructing a dialectic of gender nature and gender artifice with the unproven ideological tools of popular culture.³⁷

A Failure to Act: the High Stakes of Staying in Character

Courting Rosamond, Lydgate lives within an ideality half of his own construction. His mode of perception is specular, mirroring his preexisting beliefs about orthodox femininity back to him – and since Rosamond intends her signs to refract, Lydgate is quickly entangled in her web. What ensures his inevitable catchment in Rosamond's web is the coquette's refusal to disrupt, for the duration of their courtship at least, her own projection of the signs of typical femininity with any compromising referents. In contrast to Rosamond, Felice Charmond of Hardy's *The Woodlanders* exemplifies the dire fate reserved for the coquette when her act is disrupted. At the beginning of *The Woodlanders*, Mrs. Charmond appears as archetypal as her novelistic counterparts, though with a touch more of the eighteenth-century *femme fatale* than Rosamond or Ginevra in terms of age and appearance. 'She in the House' is afforded a coquettish history by multiple members of Little Hintock even before she is presented to the reader directly.³⁸

³⁶ Lydgate thinks of Rosamond 'as if she were an animal of another and feebler species' (p. 667); he relies 'especially on the innate submissiveness of the goose as beautifully corresponding to the strength of the gander' (p. 36).

³⁷ See Elizabeth Langland, 'Inventing Reality: The Ideological Commitments of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*', *Narrative*, 2.2 (1994), 87-111 (p. 92).

³⁸ The scandalous nature of Mrs. Charmond's history is seemingly confirmed when a former lover stumbles – rather theatrically – into the plot. See Tim Dolin, 'Who belongs where in *The Woodlanders*?', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73. 4 (2012), 545-568 (p. 551).

Marty, for example, gossips that ‘if stories are true she’s broke the heart of many a gentleman already’, and the favourite subject of the copse-workers is their proprietress’ personal character and history.³⁹ But it is precisely Mrs. Charmond’s failure to follow Rosamond’s (and Ginevra’s) example in observing the defensive symbiosis between *empty* melodrama and coquetry that eventually identifies her more strongly – and tragically – with a self-sacrificing heroine like Dorothea than with the more successful coquettes.

This factor of difference is best illustrated by parsing the distinct versions of ennui suffered by both Mrs. Charmond and Rosamond. Women of leisure have, of course, long been associated with languor, and charged in that idleness with a likening for sexual fantasies and games. Just so, Mrs. Charmond is introduced yawning in a carriage, whilst Rosamond Vincy suffers from the same complaint of world-weariness after winning Lydgate, her internment in the marital home leading her to fantasize about both Captain Lydgate and Will Ladislaw as if a character in an Arthurian romance. Initially, both Mrs. Charmond’s and Rosamond’s scenes of ennui are theatrically styled. When Lydgate stops his visits during their courtship, for example, ‘Poor Rosamond lost her appetite and felt as forlorn as a stage Ariadne – as a charming stage Ariadne left behind with all her boxes full of costumes and in no hope of a coach’ (p. 299). Eliot’s condescending pity in this, her picturing of Rosamond not as Ariadne but as a mere actress playing her, puts a crucial distance between the coquette and her emotions which implies that Rosamond is only affected in the histrionic sense of the term. So, too, does Mrs. Charmond’s ‘mien of listlessness’ (p. 53) present as notably performative in the early chapters of *The Woodlanders*, echoed or perhaps inspired by the ominously ‘relaxing atmosphere’ (p. 54) of Hintock House. ‘I am the most inactive woman when I am here’, says Mrs. Charmond after summoning Grace to the House; ‘I think sometimes I was born to live and do nothing, nothing, but float about, as we fancy we do sometimes in dreams’ (p. 55). Sounding strikingly out-of-place amidst the awkward niceties of the women’s first meeting, Mrs. Charmond’s existential musing has the same melodramatic cast as Rosamond’s casually nihilistic comment that ‘There really is nothing to care for much’ (p. 601), fuelling the critical tendency to regard Felice, too, as a mere dramatic player.⁴⁰

However, what presents as insincerity in Mrs. Charmond’s piece of dialogue is complicated by Hardy, whose narrator vindicates an equally melodramatic speech of Dr. Fitzpiers’s by arguing that sometimes, ‘real feeling glides into a mode of manifestation not easily distinguishable from rodomontade’

³⁹ Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, ed. by Dale Kramer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 13. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

⁴⁰ Take this comment from Tim Dolin as paradigmatic: ‘[Mrs. Charmond’s] melodramatic excess [...] frequently descend[s] into farce’ (‘Who Belongs Where in *The Woodlanders*?’ (p. 551)).

(p. 181).⁴¹ Sure enough, Mrs. Charmond's ennui is revealed to be genuine as her investment in Fitzpiers grows. Hardy's narrator later comments without irony that, when left alone, 'Her whole being seemed to dissolve in a sad powerlessness to do anything, and the sense of it made her lips tremulous and her closed eyes wet' (p. 179). Whereas Rosamond engages her feminised ennui in the private space of the home as an affective means to gain dominance over the 'warmhearted and rash' (p. 301) Lydgate, who feels 'a strange timidity' (p. 770) when confronted with his wife's melancholy, it would seem that within Hardy's murkier conception of the boundary between the genuine and the *apparently* disingenuous, feeling hovers dangerously close to the surface. The romantic-melancholic disposition that Mrs. Charmond initially only simulates comes to directly commune with the volatile emotions that she vainly tries to suppress.⁴²

Mrs. Charmond's telling Fitzpiers that she cannot 'coquet' (p. 174) with him consequently marks the moment that, for her, performance becomes inextricable from truth. It is Grace Melbury, Fitzpiers's lawful wife, who unexpectedly helps to abolish Mrs. Charmond's coquetry from that point on:

'I thought till now that you had only been cruelly flirting with my husband, to amuse your idle moments – a rich lady with a poor professional gentleman whom in her heart she despised not much less than her who belongs to him. But I guess from your manner that you love him desperately, and I don't hate you as I did before [...] since it is not sport in your case at all, but *real*.' (p. 214)

Humiliated that she exposed her true feeling to the extent that her character can be so softened and tenderised by her lover's spouse, Mrs. Charmond tries unconvincingly to assert her own inauthenticity: 'I *have* been insincere – if you will have the word – I mean I *have* coquetted, and do *not* love him!' (p. 215). But the sheer fact that Mrs. Charmond's 'manner' is expressive enough to allow Grace a clear window into her heart makes a sea-change from the 'blank unreflecting surface' (p. 587) that Lydgate comes up against when he tries to access Rosamond's mind, or the unreadable '*nonchalan[ce]*' (p. 102) that characterises Ginevra's dispassionate sensibility in *Villette*. Where Mrs. Charmond's femininity was formerly amenable to interpretation as the effect of performance and costume, Hardy's psychologizing of his coquette throughout *The Woodlanders* suggests that womanliness is in fact the essential foundation of her character, that the impassioned dimensions of her coquetry are genuinely felt.

⁴¹ Alison Byerly comments on this quirk in *Realism, Representation, and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); see p. 160.

⁴² As Hardy's novel progresses, it becomes evident that Mrs. Charmond's horror at the prospect of losing her grip on deceptive female performance is more than justified, as by the finish of *The Woodlanders* she is 'a passion incarnate', finally meeting her end in an unrelated 'scene of passion and crime' (p. 211, p. 233).

Assenting to her own weakness as a woman in love, however, has the effect of stripping Mrs. Charmond of the unusual autonomy of identity she formerly enjoyed as a widow. Instead of defending her own mystery with her habitual aristocratic haughtiness, she descends to the level of the lovesick peasant Suke Damson, another of Fitzpiers's 'Wives all' (p. 233).

Why does Mrs. Charmond's act fail so? The most obvious explanation would be the progression of her coquetry beyond mere flirtation to sexual involvement with Fitzpiers. As King and Schlick remind us, an essential criterion of coquetry is the maintenance of sexual virtue: the coquette is 'neither wholly fallen (because she carefully preserves her chastity by conceding her body to none of her many suitors), nor wholly virtuous (because she consciously and overtly seeks to arouse desire in men)'.⁴³ Once Mrs. Charmond surrenders her body to Fitzpiers, she transitions from the theatrical Mrs. Charmond to whom we are first introduced – complete with false *coiffure* – to a Felice who is dangerously real. Her body is henceforth transformed into one for use and abuse, not unlike the surgeon's practice cadaver. Once its first wall is broken and the initial hypothesis confirmed, the body's text is considered exhausted, its disposal the next and final stage in the experiment.

The metaphysically-inclined Fitzpiers does not initially seem the type to embody such cruel scientific detachment, but Hardy soon makes it clear that the young doctor's romantic notions extend only so far. Fitzpiers's bodily-scientific perception of the world – and the women in it – resurfaces once his affinity for idealistic theory is exhausted. At one juncture, he reverts to a doctorly pragmatism which leads him to dismiss Mrs. Charmond's chronic, culturally-induced depression as the result of 'staying indoors so much' (p. 178). After his self-described sexual 'conquest' of Mrs. Charmond is achieved, moreover, Fitzpiers assumes a power over the former coquette's emotions that forces her into a position of conventional womanhood: he seeks Felice's self-effacing sympathy and aid – as a *nurse*, ironically – when he is injured, but extends none in return when she protests against the 'terrible insitencies (*sic*) of society' (p. 192) that keep her true character stifled. But this doctor's influence is not limited to the abstract realm of diagnosis. When Mrs. Charmond's pregnancy is as good as announced in an ashamed whisper to Grace, Fitzpiers's proves a bodily control as well, an insidious form of biopower which makes it impossible for Mrs. Charmond to forget the fact of her sex. Confined to her body, Mrs. Charmond is hereby permanently bound to Fitzpiers and his vacillating desire, a self-declared 'slave' (p. 220) kept in his 'passionate bondage' (p. 237). There is no longer any shielding dependence, any sustaining interface, between Mrs. Charmond's coquetry and Fitzpiers's medical gaze. The promise of the coquette's material symptoms of femininity have, in Fitzpiers's eyes, been fulfilled to their full

⁴³ King and Schlick, 'Introduction', *Refiguring the Coquette*, p. 22.

extent, and so he dictates that her mystery – and their tryst – is come to its natural end.

Radical Duplicity

The cautionary tale of Mrs. Charmond proves that the coquette can only win dominance if she continually confiscates her ‘true’ self from male society’s reach. To understand a successful literary coquette with a view to the political implications undergirding her performance of femininity is, therefore, to revise her egoism as a survival tactic in an empirico–rational society which, though demanding the appropriate appearance of gender, has no way of ensuring its internal continuity. In *Middlemarch*, Rosamond’s performance of coquettish femininity is soon exposed as little more than a calculated entrance-card into respectable society and marriage. Once a wife, she proves incapable of intimately, sympathetically relating to her husband: ‘her want of sensibility [...] showed itself in disregard both to [Lydgate’s] specific wishes and [...] his general aims’ (p. 652). Decrying marriage’s ‘demand for self-suppression and tolerance’ (p. 753), acting boldly in the pursuit of her own interests, and strongly denying maternity, Rosamond is alert to the benefits of exploiting her feminine frailties or wiles at crucial moments in her narrative, abandoning her gender (and the weaknesses associated with it) like a stage-costume once those battles are won.⁴⁴ Unlike Dorothea, who undergoes a steady moral development throughout the novel, Rosamond does not experience a narrative progression (an ethical *bildung*) so much as a narrative undressing of the most peculiar sort. Each passing chapter reveals only more of the fully-formed deceptive artist beneath Rosamond’s feminine mask – so that even after marriage, she is in ‘her secret soul’ still ‘utterly aloof from [Lydgate]’ (p. 649-54). Rosamond is duplicitous, to be sure: vitally, however, her synthetic display proves not to point to her feminine vapidness but rather to her enigmatic alterity or opacity.

In *Villette*, it is not the demure Polly who emerges as the outstanding model of female autonomy for Brontë’s narrator, but instead Ginevra, who is cast as ‘a sort of heroine’ (p. 155) in Lucy’s personal struggle to determine for herself a female identity that is not wholly self-imprisoning. In particular, Ginevra’s experience with Dr. John is invaluable for its alerting Lucy to the relative two-dimensionality of the doctor’s emotional character when compared to the passionate nature of Monsieur Paul, who notwithstanding his sporadic misogyny sets Lucy on a path to professional independence. Ginevra makes a similar

⁴⁴ On Rosamond’s denial of maternity, see Lauren McKean, ‘The ethical treatment of Rosamond and Dorothea in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*’, *The Explicator*, 74. 2 (2016), 104–106 (p. 105). Doreen Thierauf also mounts an intriguing argument regarding Rosamond’s failed pregnancy in ‘The Hidden Abortion Plot in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*’, *Victorian Studies*, 56.3 (2014), 479-489. For gender as costume, see Louisa Schein, ‘Performing Modernity’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 14. 3 (1999), 361-395 (p. 370).

exchange herself, swapping Dr. John for the very *atypical* Alfred de Hamal, a man with ‘too much spirit’ to conform to the ‘humdrum way[s] of other people’ (p. 382), and interestingly effeminate in his own right, dancing as well as he can climb, full of quixotic notions, and quick to dress as a woman for the sake of romance. Ginevra, it would appear, has successfully lured a spouse who does not expect her extrinsic beauty to pervade into moral regions.

This is not to say that the trajectory of the successful coquette’s career is any model for female liberation. Rosamond’s great achievement in life is her relocation to another domestic ‘cage’ with superior ‘flowers and gilding’ (p. 835) to the one in *Middlemarch*, whilst Ginevra spends her *vivre* on motherhood. But it is surely significant that *Middlemarch*’s finale takes leave of Rosamond as she makes a ‘pretty show’ (p. 835) of herself, parading the streets of London and signalling her power in the only way that she can: materially. Equally notable, Ginevra’s storyline is concluded with an envious statement from Lucy regarding the coquette’s talent for survival: ‘she was pretty sure to obtain her will, and so she got on – fighting the battle of life by proxy, and, on the whole, suffering as little as any human being I have ever known’ (p. 385).⁴⁵

The coquette’s act is detached from her interiority, which develops almost independently of her various narrators’ pejorative statements about the ‘shallow[ness]’ of her nature and the absence of her intelligence. This detachment gives the flirt leverage over the people in her life, makes quiet rebellion possible because she does not commit herself to womanly sympathy with the same fervour as the domestic angel.⁴⁶ In this respect, coquettish characters like *Middlemarch*’s Rosamond and *Villette*’s Ginevra unexpectedly herald the possibility of the world that Butler identifies in her foundational essay ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution’ (1988) – a world in which ‘acts, gestures, the visual body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes usually associated with gender, *express nothing*’.⁴⁷ The coquette’s stratagems show that even in the nineteenth century it was a radical exercise to contemplate what opportunities might follow from the realization that ‘there is no essence, origin, or reality prior to or outside of’ the cultural enactment of femininity.⁴⁸

The ideological currency that these conceits of essence and authenticity afford to ethical denunciations of the Victorian flirt explains why the doctor type plays so integral a part in the coquette’s story. Emblematic of nineteenth-century society’s sexist and simplistic understanding of the female sex, the medical man

⁴⁵ This is not in itself insignificant: Bourdieu points to the comingling of material and cultural capital in *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 170. As cited in Laland, ‘Inventing Reality’, p. 88.

⁴⁶ See Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 701 and p. 707, and for similar remarks regarding Ginevra, Brontë, *Villette*, p. 102.

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution’, *Theatre*, 40. 4 (1988), 519-531 (p. 530).

⁴⁸ Schein, ‘Performing Modernity’, p. 369.

is perfectly placed to demonstrate conservative society's desperation to establish an internal continuity between woman's outward presentation and her abstract nature. Though Eliot and Brontë intend to make a moral statement *against* female deception by correlating the male demand for a pretty show with the frequent appearance of women like Rosamond and Ginevra, it is the doctor's specular defect which in fact equips the coquette with the understanding of artifice she requires in order to realise that biological sex and true character might be things apart.⁴⁹ Alert to the reality that gender might be a thing fashioned rather than a thing inherent, the coquette can direct her performance to a man whose very vocation recommends the diagnosis of the invisible from what is visible. In the fictional doctor's inability to distinguish between the coquette's actual identity and her calculated constitution of a feminine self, the reader becomes aware that the abstract phenomenon of 'gender' cannot be held within the enlightenment regime of knowledge that underpins the authority of the medical gaze. The coquette is the doctor's foremost indication that a 'real' woman is in fact one who betrays – or, to move away from the vocabulary of deceit, *exceeds* – the seen, expected, and typical.⁵⁰ Thus when a critic of the former century calls for Rosamond to 'somehow be awakened to fulfil the promise of her beauty and talents',⁵¹ one might feel compelled to reply that it is the coquette's very refusal to fulfil such a loaded 'promise' which constitutes her greatest achievement.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 370.

⁵⁰ See Claudia Moscovici, 'Allusive Mischaracterization in *Middlemarch*', *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 49. 4 (1995), 513-531 (p. 526).

⁵¹ Suzanne Ferguson, 'Mme. Laure and Operative Irony in *Middlemarch*: A Structural Analogy', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 3. 4 (1963), 509-516 (p. 516).

⁵² Rosamond, Peter M. Logan observes, is an unlikely heroine, but 'by defeating Lydgate's simplistic determination to 'take a strictly scientific view of woman', she becomes a heroine none the less' ('Conceiving the Body'), p. 211.

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