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“A Very Dangerous Talent”:
Wit for Women in Hannah Webster Foster’s
The Boarding School

YVETTE R. PIGGUSH

Introduction

AN author known for making the witty heroine of her popular first novel a victim of seduction would seem to have justifiably earned the reputation of being unfriendly to mirth. Indeed, some interpretations of Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton* (1797) claim Foster endorses a conservative culture of sentiment that prefers shared tears to a shared joke.¹ These factors make extended reflection on wit, a surprising theme in Foster’s second novel, *The Boarding School; or, Lessons of a Preceptress to Her Pupils* (1798). “What do you think of wit?” asks Caroline Littleton,

I am grateful to Cindy Malone, Joanne Myers, Steve South, and Christina Tourino for their insightful comments that helped me shape this essay.

¹While an analysis of wit in *The Coquette* is beyond the scope of this essay, early discussions of this novel tend to read the heroine’s wit sympathetically and to blame the novel’s sentimental community for its apparent humorlessness. For an analysis of *The Coquette* along these lines, see Julia A. Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 83–115. More recent studies of the novel argue that the heroine’s downfall is at least partly due to her failure to follow norms of decorum in wit. For discussion of the improper uses of mirth in *The Coquette*, see Laura Hanft Korobkin, “Can Your Volatile Daughter Ever Acquire Your Wisdom?: Luxury and False Ideals in *The Coquette*,” *Early American Literature* 41 (2006): 79–107; Thomas J. Joudrey, “Maintaining Stability: Fancy and Passion in *The Coquette*,” *New England Quarterly* 86 (2013): 60–88; and Maureen Tuthill, “Your Health and My Happiness’: Sickness and Social Control in *The Coquette* and *Female Quixotism*,” in *Health and Sickness in the Early American Novel: Social Affection and Eighteenth-Century Medicine* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 47–80.

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one of the novel's Massachusetts schoolgirl characters.² Caroline raises this question in a letter to her friend Cleora Partridge, but her query reverberates throughout the novel. It demands both a reexamination of Foster's views on wit and a reassessment of *The Boarding School's* contributions to literary culture. In her letter, Caroline herself condemns "ill-natured" and "imprudently managed" wit that consists of "smart sayings" and "ludicrous allusions" (217). She argues that this kind of mirth is a "very dangerous talent" that violates the "rules of politeness" because it "dazzle[s]" the "understanding," "excite[s] enmity" and "destroy[s] friendship" (217). Yet, Caroline praises wit that reveals a cultivated "imagination," "real genius," "good sense," and "humanity and benevolence" (217–18). Caroline may be indebted for these views to the widely circulated British prescriptive literature on politeness that praised wit for lubricating social interactions, for producing shared pleasure in novelty, and for helping to distinguish the sensible from the ridiculous.³ When women have learned the rules for generating this kind of wit, Caroline argues, this "talent" helps them to participate in enlightening conversations.

The Boarding School suggests that cultural conversations about wit gained renewed force as elite, New England women redefined their role in the post-Revolutionary social order. In

²Hannah Webster Foster, *The Coquette and The Boarding School*, ed. Jennifer Harris and Bryan Waterman (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013), 217. All subsequent references to *The Boarding School* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text. Sarah Emily Newton defines and analyzes the genre of conduct fiction in "Wise and Foolish Virgins: 'Usable Fiction' and the Early American Conduct Tradition," *EAL* 25 (1990): 139–67.

³The literature on eighteenth-century concepts of and debates over wit and humor is extensive. See Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); John Sitter, *Arguments of Augustan Wit* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Roger D. Lund, "Wit, Judgment, and the Misprisions of Similitude," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65 (2004): 53–54; Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humor* (London: Sage, 2005); Endre Szécsényi, "Freedom and Sentiments: Wit and Humor in the Augustan Age," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 13 (2007): 80; Ashley Marshall, *The Practice of Satire in England, 1658–1770* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

this essay, I build the case for a reconsideration of this novel's cultural work in the early republic as well as its relevance to contemporary debates over the relationship between gender and humor. Studies of *The Boarding School* frequently frame the novel in terms of the rise of sentimental domesticity and the nineteenth-century advent of separate, gendered spheres of influence for women and men. These interpretations point to the novel's stated aims of "domesticat[ing]" women and "turn[ing] their thoughts to the beneficial and necessary qualifications of private life" (138). According to this perspective, the novel synthesizes conservative, sentimental precepts for female propriety and valorizes "stable wives and mothers" who "function in a separate sphere."⁴ My reading of the novel, by contrast, situates it in Enlightenment and early republican efforts to develop women's civic engagement through education and polite conversation. As Jennifer Desiderio and Angela Vietto observe, "Foster shows us women moving, laughing, and enjoying themselves thoroughly in the public realm" in both of her novels.⁵ Foster's women take part in a "conversation society" where, Dietmar Schloss argues, they expand their intellectual horizons, exercise self-government, and influence the public.⁶ Furthermore, Mary Kelley argues that educated early republican women like those Foster portrays increasingly claimed "the right to instruct all males in republican virtue" and even took "the stage as actors in a role . . . that had been played exclusively by men—the making of public opinion."⁷ Schloss

⁴See Harris and Waterman's preface to Foster's *The Coquette and The Boarding School*, xvii; Claire C. Pettengill, "Sisterhood in a Separate Sphere: Female Friendship in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* and *The Boarding School*," *EAL* 27 (1992): 190; Newton, "Wise and Foolish Virgins," 141–42.

⁵Jennifer Desiderio and Angela Vietto, introduction to *The Coquette and the Boarding School*, by Hannah Webster Foster (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2011), 29.

⁶Dietmar Schloss, "Republicanism and Politeness in the Early American Novel," in *Early America Re-Explored: New Readings in Colonial, Early National, and Antebellum Culture*, ed. Klaus H. Schmidt and Fritz Fleischmann (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 276–77.

⁷Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 25.

and Kelley separately demonstrate that women's academies, letter exchanges, and novels offered women more than lessons in sentimental domesticity. They were spaces of polite sociability where early republican women "exchange[d] ideas with others and attain[ed] an intellectual and, to some extent, even a political identity" by enlightening others and by governing themselves.⁸ I argue that Foster uses *The Boarding School* to teach women the ideals of polite wit in order to provide them with tools for participating in civic conversations and for shaping public opinion.

Foster helps women to learn prudent management of their wit by charting a middle way between conservative fears that wit is socially disruptive and the liberal optimism that it refutes vice.⁹ She does not subscribe to the most extreme versions of the conservative, sentimental view, expressed by popular conduct writers like James Fordyce, that "a propensity to melt into affectionate sorrow" and "the sigh of compassion" always befit women better than sociable mirth.¹⁰ But, as Caroline's strictures on offensive mirth indicate, Foster also does not endorse wit that disrupts social norms. As a result, her account of wit challenges the generalization that what distinguishes women's humor is that it "makes fun of the powerful" or is "a subversive protest."¹¹ Her views on wit in *The Boarding School* build on a strain of argument within conduct literature that women can contribute to and benefit from social interaction beyond the domestic sphere so long as they follow polite norms of reason, toleration, and self-restraint. Foster's schoolgirls, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster argues, "mature into activists and critics" in the course of the novel. Yet they do so by using polite wit to regulate women and to attack corrupt male

⁸Schloss, "Republicanism and Politeness," 276.

⁹Szécsényi, "Freedom and Sentiments," 87.

¹⁰James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* (London: J. Cadell and W. Davies, 1814), 1:141–42.

¹¹Regina Barreca, preface to *Women and Comedy: History, Theory, Practice*, by Peter Dickinson et al. (Vancouver, CDN: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014), 8; Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 10.

behavior.¹² They succeed as activists and critics because they are adept at following the early republic's social norms for wit.

In addition, *The Boarding School* connects its educational instructions on polite wit to women's satirical and ironic writing. This connection is established first through the novel's two-part structure that melds conduct textbook with the epistolary novel.¹³ The first half of *The Boarding School* takes place at a school for young women named Harmony-Grove, located on the Merrimack River in rural New England. It consists of a series of topical lectures delivered by the school's founder, Mrs. Williams, that synthesize and adapt prescriptive literature on politeness for educated New England women. In the novel's second half, the schoolgirls return to their homes in cities and towns like Boston, Newburyport, Salem, Worcester, and Concord and write letters to one another about their efforts to live out and to disseminate Mrs. Williams's instructions. In a few of these letters, the schoolgirls compose satirical essays on vices like consumerism or offer ironic advice to readers. The writers of the satiric letters assume a superior position and expose the follies of consumerism and misogyny. The ironic advice letters offer an alternative model of public critique. In these ironic letters, writers humbly risk the possibility that their irony will be misinterpreted in order to deflate the self-righteous superiority and vanity that corrupt men and threaten the republican experiment. *The Boarding School* ultimately demonstrates how New England women advance their uses of wit to support the republican experiment in self-government by targeting social vices with critical and corrective satire and irony.

Polite Wit

Before they are ready to use wit in the service of reform, Foster's schoolgirls and her readers receive a thorough grounding in the first part of *The Boarding School* on the norms for

¹²Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Troping the Body: Gender, Etiquette, and Performance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 49.

¹³Pettengill argues that *The Boarding School* is a bridge between the conduct book and novel. "Sisterhood in a Separate Sphere," 189.

whether and when women should deploy wit in social interactions. The ideals of polite sociability that Foster teaches reflect both the longstanding emphasis on circumscribed speech for women in conduct literature and eighteenth-century philosophical debates over wit's nature and uses. Although classical and biblical sources frequently enjoin silence on women as the best evidence of their chastity and modesty, early modern conduct literature departs from this precedent. It counsels women to practice "prudent self-containment" by cultivating social interaction while avoiding both excessive loquaciousness and monotonous silence.¹⁴ In the English translation of his *The Compleat Woman* (1639), Jacques Du Bosc explains that, unlike the classical authors, he "would not have them [women] thinke, I purpose [*sic*] to take away the use of speech, instead of ruling it."¹⁵ For Du Bosc, female speech needs careful circumscription, but this containment should not result in a total silence. Indeed, silence may breed anxiety in would-be interlocutors, especially men. "If they mock those *women* that are free" in their conversation, "they distrust those who are not so," Du Bosc warns.¹⁶ Appropriate female speech is speech that allows the woman to be known and, therefore, potentially controlled.¹⁷ Likewise, in *The Gentlewomans Companion; or, A Guide to the Female Sex* (1673), Hannah Woolley approvingly cites Socrates's advice that women exercise "*Discretion, Silence and Modesty,*" but she continues on to argue that this classical precept is "too general" for a more modern audience that recognizes the benefits of social interaction. "Since conversation . . . is the first and chiefest thing, both animal as well as rational creatures do most desire and delight in" and "since Life

¹⁴Michèle Lardy, "From Silence to 'Civil Converse': Of the Attempts to Control Seventeenth-Century Women's 'Ripe Wit and Ready Tongues,'" *XVII-XVIII* 73 (2016): ¶3-¶4, ¶15. <http://doi.org/10.4000/1718.752> (accessed November 8, 2018); Christina Luckyj, "*A Moving Rhetoricke*": *Gender and Silence in Early Modern England* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002), 57.

¹⁵Jacques Du Bosc, *The Compleat Woman*, trans. N. N. (London: Thomas Harper and Richard Hodgkinson, 1639), 19.

¹⁶Du Bosc, *Compleat Woman*, 18.

¹⁷Luckyj, "*A Moving Rhetoricke,*" 69.

without Society is more insupportable than Death,” Woolley explains, “I shall first advise, as to choice of company; next your carriage, therein, both in gesture, look, speech, and habit.”¹⁸ For representative early modern conduct writers like Du Bosc and Woolley, Michèle Lardy argues, “general self-control” and “appropriateness of speech” replace silence as the evidence of a woman’s modesty and virtue. These conduct writers “focu[s] on which topics to discuss and on which interlocutors to choose, as well as on [the] timing and duration of [women’s] speech.”¹⁹ This emphasis on self-awareness and self-control in early modern conduct literature informs Foster’s instructions about wit.²⁰ When women offend with their wit, Caroline explains, it is “owing to the want of self-knowledge” (217). Yet, for both the early modern conduct writers and for Foster, restraint in speech or wit is not tantamount to submission. Instead, appropriate circumspection in speech evidences women’s wisdom, common sense, and capacity for self-government.

In the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world, conduct writers prescribed decorous forms of wit not only because they evidenced self-government but also because they were conducive to modern forms of sociability in which persons interacted in public or quasi-public spaces where they encountered strangers. Sociability describes interactions that take place in the “public sphere,” or the space between the family and the state, and in a world of increasing economic and geographical mobility and urbanization.²¹ David Shields argues that sociability is distinct from traditional forms of “hospitality” and from relations based on “ties of neighborhood, congregation, family, and common employment.” It is based on “friendship, mutual interest, and shared appetite” and it promotes “more intimate (and artificial) forms of association” including “clubs” and “friendly circles.” Wit, according to Shields, plays an important

¹⁸Hannah Woolley, *The Gentlewomans Companion; or, A Guide to the Female Sex* (London: A. Maxwell for Dorman Newman, 1673), 33.

¹⁹Lardy, “From Silence to ‘Civil Converse,’” ¶23, ¶18, ¶24.

²⁰Luckyj, “A Moving Rhetoricke,” 55.

²¹Kelley, *Learning to Stand*, 2.

role in facilitating sociable interactions. In the salons and spas that served as spaces for mixed-gender socializing in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, wit brought freshness, surprise, and pleasure to the conventions of polite conversation that structured interactions between men and women. Wit particularly helped women to pursue sociability. Since marriage placed limits on the friendships and forms of social circulation women could enjoy, polite women used wit to challenge romantic propositions without giving offense.²²

Shields acknowledges, however, that this ideal of wit as a means of maintaining freedom in social situations draws primarily on the views of Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury's writings present the optimistic argument that wit enhances politeness by exposing selfishness and irrationality. In his *Sensus Communis, An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor* (1709), Shaftesbury contends that "raillery and humor" play an essential role in promoting disinterested "conversations" and "good company" free "from the formality of business and the tutorage and dogmaticalness of the Schools."²³ Wit facilitates sociability by deflating vanity and ridiculing self-interested motives. Wit also improves and becomes more genteel through free circulation. "Wit will mend upon our hands and humor will refine itself," Shaftesbury asserts, "if we take care not to tamper with it and bring it under constraint by severe usage and rigorous prescriptions." Shaftesbury's optimistic views of wit attracted the ire of both reformed Christians and social traditionalists, especially when the wits in question were women. To his critics, Shaftesbury's arguments for "a freedom of raillery" provided women with a license to resist male prerogative and to engage in antidomestic coquetry.²⁴

A more moderate view that seeks to use reason to regulate wit while still advocating sociability can be found in the

²²David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 31, 26–27, 42–43.

²³Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, *Sensus Communis, An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor in Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 37.

²⁴Shaftesbury, *Sensus Communis*, 31, 33; Shields, *Civil Tongues*, 46.

writings of Joseph Addison. Addison's *Spectator* essays circulated widely in British North America and provided educated women like Foster with many of the norms for sociable mirth. Addison tries to help his readers recognize wit that damages social bonds by constructing a distinction between "true" and "false" wit. Caroline's letter about wit praises what Addison calls "true wit," or wit circumscribed by reason that facilitates pleasurable intellectual exchange. "True wit," Addison argues, "consists in . . . a Resemblance and Congruity of Ideas . . . that gives *Delight* and *Surprise*" by providing its audience with mental stimulation.²⁵ False wit, by contrast, involves mimicry or imitation as in doggerel rhymes, puns, and impersonating the actions or mannerisms of another person. False wit is also likely to be exclusive as a result of its bawdiness. Vulgar jokes about bodily functions may cement relations between intimates, but to strangers and even to friends they can appear "ill-natured, immoral, and absurd."²⁶ Addison argues that such wit is devoid of reason and morality. Instead of promoting sociable circulation, it can lead to a kind of "frenzy" or madness that produces a private world. The punster and the mimic, Addison argues, are indifferent whether their humor promotes vice or virtue or gives pain to friends or foes. Like the falsely witty young woman Caroline condemns in her letter, they have such a "propensity" to display their mirth that they cannot "resist any temptation" to do so, even though they offend others and disrupt sociable interactions (217). False wits are "ludicrous only for the sake of being so." For Addison, wit needs the constraint of reason to keep its socially damaging tendencies in check.²⁷

Eighteenth-century New England women like Foster also acquired their understanding of sociable wit by reading satirical British writers such as Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope,

²⁵Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator* (London: J. Tonson, 1733), 1:241. For analysis of the distinction between true and false wit, refer to Sitter, *Arguments*, 62–64; Szécsényi, "Freedom and Sentiments," 83–84; and Lund, "Wit, Judgment," 64, 71.

²⁶Addison and Steele, *The Spectator*, 1:242, 140.

²⁷Addison and Steele, *The Spectator*, 1:139, 140. Szécsényi, "Freedom and Sentiments," 83–84, 87.

and Laurence Sterne. Foster's references and quotations in *The Boarding School* indicate her significant debt to the British satiric tradition and her expectation that her audience is also acquainted with its major works. *The Boarding School* repeatedly cites Pope's verse satires such as *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) (217, 219) and "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" (1734) (175), as well as Edward Young's satiric poem *Love of Fame, the Universal Passion* (1728) (159–60, 172–73, 203, 237). Yet, Foster encourages women to carefully evaluate this witty reading, both because republican women need to fortify themselves against moral corruption and because women are too often targets for male satirists. For example, one of the schoolgirls repudiates "her brother's library" of wit, including Sterne's published sermons and his novels *Sentimental Journey* (1768) and *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67) along with the writings of Jonathan Swift because the "wit" in these works is "blended with indelicacy" (234–35).²⁸ In another instance, Cleora's father remarks that he does not blame women who criticize Pope because "he always treated them [women] satirically" (197). Although Foster herself is familiar with the writings of the eighteenth-century satirists, she cautions her readers that these works will bring them into repeated contact with jokes about the body and intimate acts, jokes that routinely demean women.

Foster's reliance on other popular advice literature for her commentary on wit can be deduced from her direct references to *The American Spectator, or Matrimonial Preceptor* (216), John Bennett's *Letters to a Young Lady on a Variety of Useful and Interesting Subjects* (222), Pierre-Joseph Boudier de Villemert's *The Ladies Friend* (221–22), Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (147, 209), and James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (164).²⁹ Mrs. Williams sums up much of the discussion of polite women's wit in these

²⁸Attacks on eighteenth-century satirists by elite women were relatively common at the end of the century. For another example, see Kelley, *Learning to Stand*, 248.

²⁹Foster's reading in conduct literature included most of the English and European texts that were popular and reprinted in the thirteen colonies and the early United States. For a list of the most reprinted conduct texts in North America, see Newton, "Wise and Foolish Virgins," 163n7.

works when she counsels the schoolgirls that “in the midst of hilarity and mirth” they must “remember that modesty, diffidence, discretion, and humility are indispensable appendages of virtue and decency” (153–54). For example, De Villemert asserts in *The Ladies Friend* that “a woman of merit scorns to purchase applause” with “witticisms, or smart sayings, which are crowned with . . . bursts of laughter.”³⁰ In his *Sermons to Young Women*, Fordyce likewise warns his readers that the “dangerous talent” of wit often betrays women into “great indiscretions . . . by inflaming their thirst of applause: by rendering them little nice in their choice of company . . . and finally, by making them . . . forgetful of those cool and moderate rules that ought to regulate their conduct.”³¹ Fordyce’s thermal imagery connects a woman’s desire for attention to “inflaming” heat, which opens the body’s pores and renders the woman’s body as vulnerable and disorderly as a mind uncircumscribed by “cool” rules. Women who display their talent for wit in public without prudence or circumspection are heated and therefore open to both social and sexual transgressions.

Ultimately, Foster’s *Boarding School* and the satirical and prescriptive literature on which it is based warn women against wit that is antisocial, either in the sense that it is exclusive or in the sense that an individual may use wit to pursue her desires at the expense of the normative social order and social bonds. The polite, “true wit” that Addison describes emphasizes the mental pleasures that invite others, casual friends, and even strangers, to engage with it intellectually. Polite wit appeals to norms of reason and beauty that, according to eighteenth-century commentators, are easily and universally shared. The eighteenth-century concept of publicness, Michael Warner argues, rejects forms of speech or writing that are “too embodied, too aggressive, and too sexualized to be imagined as the indefinite

³⁰Pierre-Joseph Boudier de Villemert, *The Ladies Friend; Being a Treatise on the Virtues and Qualifications Which Are the Brightest Ornaments of the Fair Sex* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1771), 45.

³¹Fordyce, *Sermons*, 145–46.

circulation of discourse among strangers.”³² Fordyce’s comments about wit “inflaming” women, for example, euphemistically associate improper mirth with improperly public expressions of individual sexual desire. De Villemert is more explicit. He describes sexually incontinent “female rakes” aggressively engaging in “boisterous mirth” and “frantic jollity.” These women use wit to attract attention and to display desires that the dominant norms of social behavior deem too physical for display. Bawdy or burlesque wit, the conduct writers warn, is an “antipublic” form of frenzied madness or “intimacy out of place” that is tantamount to public nudity.³³ It draws attention by shocking interlocutors rather than by offering pleasing novelty or shared sense. Both Fordyce and Foster quote Edward Young’s lines from his satire *Love of Fame, the Universal Passion*, “Naked in nothing should a woman be, / But veil her very wit with modesty” (159).³⁴ A polite woman, Mrs. Williams explains, should keep her aggression and her physicality hidden from the people she encounters in social settings and “never obtrude even” her “real graces and accomplishments upon the world” (159). According to all of these commentators, a woman who exhibits her wit in order to draw attention advances an individual agenda that destroys social bonds and undermines her reputation for virtuous submission to social norms.

In her adaptation of the prescriptive literature on wit, Foster is particularly concerned that young women who have become close friends in school will use their wit to reinforce their private bonds rather than to participate in sociable and civic conversations. In her lecture on writing, Mrs. Williams tells the story of Celia and Cecilia to condemn bawdy wit that is shared among intimates. Celia is a popular women’s name in British pastoral literature. Foster’s doubling of this name in her story, however, suggests that she may want readers to relate both of her characters to the Celia satirized in Jonathan Swift’s poem “The Lady’s Dressing Room” (1732). Swift’s poem ridicules

³²Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 79.

³³De Villemert, *Ladies Friend*, 44. Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” 79.

³⁴Fordyce, *Sermons*, 150.

Celia's naïve lover who is disillusioned to discover the filthy, physical body that exists in the private space of her dressing room and beneath her polished, sociable exterior. The poem calls into question artificially polite constructions of femininity. Foster's narrative also raises the problem of polite femininity, but she asserts that republican women should maintain the polished, polite exterior that facilitates their social circulation even in ostensibly private settings. Instead of satirizing Celia's lover, Sylvander, Foster countenances his use of public ridicule to discipline Celia and Cecilia for failing to practice polite wit in their private correspondence.

Like the schoolgirls in the second half of *The Boarding School*, Celia and Cecilia begin "an epistolary correspondence" after returning home from their boarding school. But unlike Foster's ideal young women, Celia and Cecilia do not observe the rules of decorum in their letters.³⁵ They "imagin[e] themselves perfectly secure from the censure of the critic" (151). They "write with unlimited confidence" to their audience of one other person and share "without the least reserve . . . every dictate of levity and thoughtless folly" (151). In their imaginary, private world, Celia and Cecilia lose the self-control that enables them to participate in the forms of polite, rational discourse that constitute society. The result hints at the possibility that educated women can create alternative spaces for sociability or counterpublics that, Warner argues, "alter the norms of 'publick Places' so as to allow [women] the same physical freedoms as men."³⁶ But Celia and Cecilia's correspondence does not ultimately challenge the dominant norms for sociable behavior. Instead, the women's private liberty results in their loss of control over their correspondence. Sylvander, jealous of their intimacy, steals and reads their correspondence. In their letters, he discovers "illiberal wit, frothy jests, double entendres, and ridiculous love-tales" that seem incompatible with the "purity of sentiment, delicacy of thought, and refinement

³⁵Elizabeth Hewitt, *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770–1865* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29–31.

³⁶Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 79.

of taste” that the women use to circulate in social situations (151). Like the lover who invades his beloved’s dressing room in Swift’s poem, Sylvander discovers that women are fundamentally grotesque—unformed, unreasonable, and unclosed—in their private spaces. But Foster endows Sylvander with the duty to restore politeness, reason, and order by taking the women’s intimate conversation and unbounded wit into public.

Foster’s conservative fears about the dangers subversive wit poses to society lead her to prefer public ridicule to the specter of the private coterie or of the counterpublic that challenges dominant norms.³⁷ Because sexual humor and fornication are both instances of intimacy out of place, the consequences women face are the same: public humiliation, isolation, and death. Foster acknowledges that the “scandal and malicious wit” Celia and Cecilia endure after Sylvander “circulate[s]” their “letters among his acquaintance” are “censurable . . . unjust and ungenerous” (151–52). But she reasserts the republican views that genuine virtue is visible and that public surveillance ensures good citizenship.³⁸ Indeed, Sylvander is almost admirable because, instead of taking private advantage of the women’s loss of self-control to seduce them sexually, he brings them back to a public conversation in order to impose reason and restraint on their behavior. Celia signals her enclosure by the dominant norms of public decorum by retreating into them. She “seclude[s] herself” and her incurably “wound[ed]” sensibility from society and “live[s] and die[s] in melancholy, regret, and obscurity” (152). Celia’s isolation and silence are at once a demonstration of her extreme submission to the ideals of decorous restraint and a punishment for her lack of wisdom and self-government.

In the story of Celia and Cecilia, Foster acknowledges mirth’s rebellious and subversive qualities and demands that these

³⁷Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” 80.

³⁸David Waldstreicher, “‘Fallen Under My Observation’: Vision and Virtue in *The Coquette*,” *EAL* 27 (1992): 205–6; Wendy Bellion, *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 15.

become the target of disciplinary ridicule. She even tolerates “malicious wit” and a male-dominated context for wit’s reception if they serve the larger aim of curbing humor’s dangerous tendency to challenge the dominant norms of politeness and social exchange (151). At the same time, Foster asserts that education in the ideals of polite sociability and mirth gives women the ability to regulate themselves. In the second half of the novel, Foster’s schoolgirls demonstrate their capacity for self-government when they leave Mrs. Williams’s supervision and continue to practice polite wit in their homes and among their friends. When Sophia Williams rejects her brother’s offer of a book by Swift because it has “obscene and vulgar ideas,” she demonstrates that she does not need an external authority to censor her reading (235). When Caroline criticizes her new acquaintance, who is “reputed a wit,” for her poor taste in mirth, she shows that she does not need seclusion at a boarding school to manage her social interactions (217). Finally, as some of the schoolgirls take up the production of satire and irony in their writing, Foster demonstrates that educated young women can also use wit to influence public conversations.

Satire and Ironic Advice

In the second half of *The Boarding School*, Foster turns from issuing precepts on the proper uses of wit to providing examples of how young women deploy theirs in social interactions and in debates over the welfare of the republic. The letters that the schoolgirls exchange in this portion of the novel include satires of vicious behavior and ironic advice on women’s roles in the early republic. The fact that Foster licenses some forms of women’s wit in the second half of *The Boarding School* after warning sternly against excessive mirth in the first part of the novel has contributed to the argument that the first and second parts of *The Boarding School* exist in tension with one another.³⁹ The shift from Mrs. Williams’s lecture in the first part

³⁹Foster, *Troping the Body*, 47–49; Hewitt, *Correspondence and Am. Lit.*, 30. Desiderio and Vietto, introduction to *The Coquette and The Boarding School*, 21.

of the novel to the schoolgirls' dialogic correspondence certainly opens more interpretive possibilities in the second half of the novel. The premise of this shift, however, is that young women who have been educated in the ideals of politeness are capable of self-regulation with the help of ongoing enlightened conversation by letter.

Both parts of *The Boarding School* teach women how to speak and write in a civil society that includes both men and women rather than only to converse with their intimates. Like Mrs. Williams, the schoolgirl correspondents repeatedly condemn forms of mirth that reinforce relationships among members of a group while excluding, targeting, or offending strangers.⁴⁰ Harriot Henley opens the letter exchange by denouncing the "riotous mirth" in the Boston streets that disturbs her sleep (191). Sophia Manchester condemns coteries of women who target "their acquaintance who were absent" with "ludicrous insinuations, hackneyed jests, and satirical remarks" (208). Julia Greenfield warns Maria Williams that if women conduct themselves with "levity of deportment" and "a fondness for admiration," they will "fall a prey to seducers" (225). The schoolgirls use Mrs. Williams's teachings to label all of these forms of mirth as inappropriate because they solidify the connections among group members—fellow party-goers, girlfriends, and lovers—and fail to consider humor's effects on the social exchanges that make up republican society more broadly. In place of wit that excludes, the young women favor mirth that aims to attract new auditors by offering them novelty, intellectual exercise, and enlightening self-knowledge. At the same time, Foster's young women do not shy away from using their wit to regulate men and to attack the extremes of patriarchy. Men's behaviors and petty concerns provide targets for much of the schoolgirls' wit. These satirical attacks do not aim to

Pettengill, by contrast, reads the letters in the second half as an uncritical echo of Mrs. Williams's moral lectures in "Sisterhood in a Separate Sphere" (189).

⁴⁰Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 64, 59. Warner argues, however, that the unknown others in civil society are not wholly indefinite or infinite. They have "shared social space, habitus, topical concerns, intergeneric references, and circulating intelligible forms" (75).

exclude men but rather assert that the polite social bonds enabling republican self-government require self-restraint on the part of men as well as women.

The first major form of polite wit that the schoolgirls deploy within their letters is social satire in an essay or narrative form. The schoolgirls' satirical letters are impersonal—they target social defects rather than individual persons. This kind of satirical practice, Ashley Marshall argues, aims at “provocation” by assuming a superior point of view and judging to “provoke thought, issue a warning, or unsettle the reader.” The tone in these satirical letters is sharp or tart rather than angry, cheerful, or accepting.⁴¹ For example, Julia targets men's overbearing and licentious courtship behavior in a letter to Caroline about her experiences at a dance. She recounts to Caroline how she “inwardly smile[s]” at “the futile arts of pretty fellows” competing for her attention (196). Julia acerbically comments, “Their speeches appeared to have been so long practiced, that I was on the point of advising them to exercise their genius, if they had any, in the invention of something new” (196). Julia is not vain, so she does not take the men's praise to heart or display her witty talents at their expense to attract attention. She exercises “polite conformity” to the norms of decorum and “restrain[s]” her “satire” against individuals in public (196). Politeness and sociability, she demonstrates, entail toleration. In her letter, however, Julia mounts a satirical attack using the intellectual tools of reason and wit against vicious male conduct. Her written account of her experiences exposes the artifice in men's courtship behavior generally. Julia particularly aims to enlighten the women who read her letter. She encourages women to self-regulate their tendencies to vanity, as she does, to avoid being duped by flattering men.

Julia's letter is almost immediately followed by an exchange between Cleora and Caroline that seeks to reform public opinion on women's fashion. In these letters, Foster demonstrates that women can competently occupy the culturally masculine position of the satirist as a “moral, perceptive outsider” by

⁴¹Marshall, *Practice of Satire in England*, 31, 32.

giving the two girls increasingly panoramic views of the republican debate over fashion and virtue.⁴² Cleora and Caroline protest the idea that women's fashions reveal an essential frivolity that makes women unfit for self-government. Cleora opens the discussion with the argument that male commentators take a biased, narrow view of fashion that lacks perspective and experience. She writes,

I have often smiled at the pitiful wit of those satirists and essayists, who lavish abundant eloquence on trifling foibles, the mere whims of a day; and of no consequence to the body natural, moral, or political. The extension of a hoop, the contraction of the waist, or the elevation of the head-dress, frequently afford matter for pages of elaborate discussion. These reformers, too, always aim at the good of our sex! I think it a great pity they do not lop off some of their own exuberant follies. . . . I have sometimes thought their satire to be tinctured with malice; and that the cause of their disaffection may generally be found in personal resentment (197–98).

In this remarkable passage, Cleora rejects the claim in many conduct books that women's greater emotional sensitivity makes them vulnerable to vanity, superficiality, and consumerism.⁴³ She also contradicts the classical republican political logic that individual fashion choices have momentous consequences for the destiny of the state. This entire discourse, she argues, relies on men's nearsighted attention to trifles. Furthermore, she contends that men and women are equally likely to be guilty of excessive consumption so women should not be the only targets for corrective satire. Finally, Cleora assumes an even broader view of consumption and virtue than the male satirists and concludes that chauvinism and misogyny, not patriotic sentiments, inspire their critique of women's fashion.

In her reply, Caroline offers both conservative correction and nuance to Cleora's satirical treatment of diatribes against women's fashions. Yet, Caroline takes a still larger perspective and calls for even more ridicule to be directed at fashions because, she argues, they exacerbate class divisions. "Absurd

⁴²Felicity Nussbaum, "Risky Business: Feminism Now and Then," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 26 (2007): 82.

⁴³Newton, "Wise and Foolish Virgins," 144.

fashions” and “luxury and extravagance,” Caroline explains to Cleora, stimulate emulation in a social system that is increasingly based on appearance (198–99). Expensive clothes do not raise the poor to the level of the rich. Instead, they aggravate inequality by leading the poor to live “beyond their income” in clothing that is “unsuitable to their circumstances and condition in life” (199). Caroline paraphrases Mrs. Williams’s earlier instructions in her lecture on dress. “It is a very false taste which induces people in dependent and narrow circumstances, to imitate the expensive mode of dress which might be very decent for those who move in a higher sphere,” Mrs. Williams tells the schoolgirls (165). Affected extravagance, she continues, is “a great offence, both against ourselves, and the community to which we belong” (165). Caroline concurs, “absurd and expensive fashions” have a real impact on national welfare because they lead the wealthy to neglect their responsibility to the poor and the poor to ruinous discontent with their circumstances (199). “Satire leveled against” fashionable excesses generally would be “laudable in its design and likely to produce a good effect,” Caroline asserts (199). Like Mrs. Williams, Caroline rejects the emerging liberal dream of the United States as a place where each individual can fashion his or her own identity. She hopes for a nation where persons thrive because of their obligations to one another. But she agrees with Cleora that when male satirists target women for their fashion choices, they lack perspective. The real danger is that all extravagant clothing leads to vicious consumerism. Julia, Cleora, and Caroline’s letters model how republican women can use written satire to assert their superior moral perception, to enlighten other women, and to shape public opinion.

Foster’s schoolgirls ultimately exercise their wit on the genre of advice literature for women. Two of the novel’s letter exchanges offer examples of what Nancy Walker identifies as a tradition of ironic advice in American women’s humor writing warning “women of the perils of women’s traditional role.”⁴⁴ In the context of the early republic, ironic advice to women

⁴⁴Nancy Walker, “Agelaste or Eiron: American Woman Writers and the Sense of Humor,” *Studies in American Humor* 4 (1985): 122.

tends to emphasize their struggles with norms of domesticity and privacy that hinder women's participation in enlightening, sociable conversations. For example, Lisa Logan argues that two satirical women's advice columns in the Boston *Gentleman and Lady's Town and Country Magazine* challenge sentimental views of marriage as a wholly private and emotional bond. The spokesperson of these columns is "a respected (and respectable) woman" who seeks to educate her audience to act reasonably and practically.⁴⁵ In both columns, women receive approval to leave their marriages when the evidence of bigamy or of venereal disease leads them to conclude that their spouses have deceived them. In these early versions of humorous advice, as in *The Boarding School*, educated women practice enlightening conversation to help other women become more self-governing.

While most of Foster's commentary on wit argues against exclusivity, the ironic advice letters create a hierarchy between an in-group audience of educated women who can infer the ironic message and less sophisticated women and men who cannot. More than other forms of polite wit, Linda Hutcheon argues, irony requires a receptive audience because it is a "part of a communicative process" not a "static rhetorical tool." Since irony consists of saying something you do not mean and then expecting people to understand what you do mean and your attitude toward it, "irony isn't irony until it is interpreted as such." Irony needs an interpretive community capable of inferring a meaning in a statement that is different from what that statement says.⁴⁶ Yet, even a well-known interpretive community cannot overcome the fact that, as Stanley Fish argues, "irony is a risky business because one cannot at all be certain that readers will be directed to the ironic meanings one intends."⁴⁷ In order to motivate her readers to be part of the educated

⁴⁵Lisa M. Logan, "'Dear Matron—': Constructions of Women in Eighteenth-Century American Periodical Advice Columns," *St. in Am. Humor* 3 (2004): 57.

⁴⁶Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1995), 17, 13, 6, 2, 10.

⁴⁷Stanley Fish, "Short People Got No Reason to Live: Reading Irony," *Daedalus* 112 (1983): 176.

in-group and in order to manage the insecurity of language that irony creates, Foster's ironic advice letters are addressed to more concrete audiences than most of the other letters in *The Boarding School*. The two ironic advice letters are among the five occasions out of the novel's forty letters where Foster gives both a letter and its reply.⁴⁸ In the case of ironic writing, Foster allows and even encourages the development of an in-group. She wants her readers to aspire to be part of a more exclusive community of educated women who come together to engage in intellectual and civic pursuits. Ironic advice writing demands that women consider and cultivate their audience, as Foster does in creating *The Boarding School*, while embracing the insecurity of language.

Foster's foray into the ironic advice tradition begins with an exchange of letters between Cleora and Harriot Henley that burlesques the feminine sensibility and privacy idealized in sentimental conduct literature. The fact that critics have differed in their interpretations of these letters—some reading them as serious and others as humorous—reinforces Hutcheon's argument that irony depends on its reception. An ironic reading of these letters rests on the fact that the letters address prudishness, a common target of ridicule in the late eighteenth century.⁴⁹ Throughout *The Boarding School*, Harriot exemplifies Mrs. Williams's ideals of republican womanhood. She rises early, finds useful occupations for her time, and avoids the temptations to dissipation in urban Boston. But Foster also shows that the dutiful Harriot sometimes becomes prudish. In Harriot's letter, she explains to Cleora that she has recently attended a friend's wedding. The experience calls to mind every sentimental platitude about courtship and marriage that

⁴⁸Hewitt, *Correspondence and Am. Lit.*, 31.

⁴⁹Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 6. Gwendolyn Foster acknowledges the humorous elements in Cleora's letter but reads Harriot and Cleora's letters seriously "as an early exemplification of the open discussion about lesbian love." *Troping the Body*, 54. Desiderio and Vietto (*The Coquette* [Peterborough ed]) likewise read the letters from Cleora to Harriot as a kind of marriage proposal (27). Pettengill, by contrast, reads Cleora's letter as a "jok[ing]" proposition "that they stay 'old maids.'" "Sisterhood in a Separate Sphere," 2029g. Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (New York: Walker and Company, 2006), 435, 438, 441.

Harriot has ever read or heard, and she pours out these phrases in her letter. Harriot lectures Cleora that marriage is a “solemn occasion,” and a “trial” that “presents . . . a variety of new cares and duties” (201). Love and courtship are full of “deceptions” and those who marry are “frequently misled in their opinions” of one another (201). Finally, Harriot cannot understand how “a delicate and sensible female” can endure the public celebration of her wedding (201). Harriot declares, “I should choose to retire from the observation of those indifferent and unfeeling spectators, to whom the blushing modesty of a bride is often a pastime” (201). Harriot’s account of marriage inflates and mixes up anxieties about self-control to such an extent that she elevates the woman’s temporary publicity during the wedding ceremony to the status of all the other pitfalls of courtship and marriage. Thanks to all of Mrs. Williams’s careful instruction and her sentimental reading, Harriot has become so fastidious about privacy that even the attention people give to brides at weddings seems intolerable. Her prudish notions of privacy threaten to prevent her from fulfilling her roles as a wife and mother to the republic’s citizens.

In her response, Cleora encourages Harriot to perceive her desire for privacy as an exaggerated anxiety and to laugh at it. She offers a burlesque of Harriot’s views that is at once sympathetic and distorted.⁵⁰ Cleora begins by announcing her wholehearted agreement with Harriot’s perspective that marriage is a difficult enterprise. Therefore, she asserts, she and Harriot should never marry at all. Cleora writes, “We had better resolve not to risk the consequences of a wrong choice . . . but wisely devote ourselves to celibacy. I am sure we should make a couple of very clever old maids” (202). After pursuing Harriot’s ideas about the seriousness of matrimony to their logical extreme, Cleora doubles back to reveal the contradiction in Harriot’s efforts to pursue both the ideals of sentimental privacy and the ideals of republican marriage. Cleora inquires, “What

⁵⁰This account of the burlesque draws on Jennifer A. Greenhill, *Playing It Straight: Art and Humor in the Gilded Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 82, 86.

say you to my plan, Harriot? If you approve it, dismiss your long train of admirers immediately” (202). Cleora points out that Harriot’s behavior has become perverse. She cannot be an icon of sentimental privacy and engage in courtship. Cleora triumphantly concludes by deflating Harriot’s prudishness. If Harriot will agree to celibacy, Cleora claims, she will also “display my fortitude by renouncing a connexion which must be doubtful as to the issue, and will certainly expose me to the mortification of being looked at, when I am married” (203). Cleora’s ironic assertion that perpetual celibacy is better than “being looked at” makes the point that Harriot’s extreme desire for privacy is nonsensical. Through Cleora, Foster encourages her educated female audience to evaluate critically sentimental notions of privacy for women that exclude them from sociability and access to the enlightenment and self-government it provides. Harriot’s ultimate marriage indicates that she understood Cleora’s irony and learned to avoid overly prudish links between female decorum and privacy (241).

In another set of letters, Mrs. Williams’s own daughters, Anna and Maria Williams, assume positions as naïve outsiders to critique ironically men’s domination of public discourse.⁵¹ They demonstrate that men’s social vices of self-righteousness and vanity are exacerbated by women’s unequal access to formal education and limited opportunities to address the public. Anna visits Harriot in Boston and attends the Harvard commencement during her stay. Speeches by the graduates play a significant role in the celebration. Anna writes to her sister that she expected to learn about the academic subjects the young men supposedly study. Instead, she tells Maria, “I never knew before that dress was a classical study; which I now conclude it must be, or it would not have exercised the genius of some of the principle speakers on this public occasion!” (205). With feigned astonishment, Anna explains how she learned that “the female garb . . . claim[s] particular attention” in the college

⁵¹My reading of these letters draws on Walker’s analysis of the position of the “eiron” or naïve outsider in nineteenth-century ironic advice literature in “Agalaste and Eiron” (105, 118, 122).

curriculum and that lectures on “the *bon ton*, taste, and fashions of our sex” are an appropriate topic for an “audience, composed, in part, of our legislators, politicians, and divines!” (205). Pretending to take the young men’s concern for women’s clothing seriously, Anna solemnly advises them to forego college so that they can follow “the business of a friseur or the man-milliner; either of which would afford them more frequent opportunities for the display of their abilities, and render their labors more extensively useful to the sex” (205–6). Anna’s apparently innocent view that young men who care so much about women’s fashion have simply followed the wrong calling by attending college deflates their claims to superior knowledge. These elite men know less about women’s clothing than the tradesmen who regularly produce it. Yet, the arrogant graduates dominate the public discussion of fashion. Anna also uses her feigned amazement to indirectly protest against women’s exclusion from institutions of formal higher education. If all the young men learn at Harvard is to criticize women’s clothing, then women are better positioned to succeed in college.

Maria’s response maintains Anna’s affected innocence and her ironic mode of saying what she does not mean. “I think you rather severe on the classical gentlemen,” Maria begins, for “we simple country-folks must not presume to arraign *their* taste” (206). Maria poses as a rural outsider who has been educated in the country, but according to the republican ideas she has learned, the countryside is a source of virtuous simplicity, not ignorance. From her rural home, Maria makes sophisticated use of irony to appraise critically the young men’s claims to wisdom. Maria’s pose as one of the “simple country-folks” also demonstrates her awareness of the inequity fostered by women’s limited access to education: to elite young men, all women are simpletons. Yet, instead of being narrow-minded and myopic, Maria demonstrates that her position as an outsider to the all-male college world gives her a broader perspective. She can perceive not only how women understand themselves but also how men view women. Maria encourages her female audience to use their outsider perspective inversely to keep men enthralled. “As for the follies of fashion,”

Maria writes to Anna, “I think the gentlemen are under obligations to the ladies for adopting them; since it gives exercise to their genius and pens” (206). In her ironic view, made possible by her outsider status as a woman who cannot attend Harvard, women have wisely discerned how to use fashion to keep these silly men preoccupied. If republican society will not provide women with greater opportunities for self-improvement and for speaking publicly, Anna and Maria ironically advise women to keep on distracting men with fashion.

Ultimately, Anna and Maria’s letters ironically appraise men and women’s relationships to the public. They show that men fail to communicate because of their self-righteousness while women succeed because they consider their audience and tolerate the risks of speaking ironically and indirectly. The male graduates confidently monopolize the audience’s attention and betray no concern that their auditors may not interpret their message as intended. Indeed, they do not really conceive of a public that may include women and other unfamiliar persons, only an audience of other men like themselves. Anna is particularly surprised that the graduates give lectures on female dress at a “public occasion!” where they must address an audience they cannot fully know (205). The men are as secure in their public roles as Celia and Cecilia are secure in their privacy. Both the graduates and Celia and Cecilia believe they have eliminated the danger that the meaning of their message will go astray. Foster ridicules both of these forms of excessive security. Celia and Cecilia have their letters read ironically by Sylvander and his friends in a manner that makes the young women the victims of the joke. Anna and Maria interpret the graduates’ speeches contrariwise and turn their audience’s laughter onto the young men. Their audience is select—other educated, young, well-to-do, white women like themselves—but it is not imagined as completely private. Anna and Maria do not target a particular individual or use bawdy jokes, as Celia and Cecilia do. Instead, they use irony to undermine the security of the graduates’ messages even though by doing so they must engage in the dangerous tactic of transmitting meaning indirectly to readers they cannot perfectly know. But unlike the graduates,

the young women are aware of their dependence on their audience. They are supported by sisterhood, literally in the sense that they are biological sisters and figuratively in the form of the community of educated women who participate in Foster's text. In order to deflate the young male graduates' self-righteousness for this public, Anna and Maria make themselves vulnerable to and dependent on their audience. They openly risk being misinterpreted. Anna and Maria's letters demonstrate that when women writers understand that they are writing to an audience comprised of more than their intimates, irony is a risk, but a risk worth taking.

Conclusion

This union of irony and politeness exemplifies the alternative version of women's mirth that Foster develops throughout *The Boarding School*. Foster's schoolgirls make fun of men, but they do so while conforming to the social norms of enlightening conversation that enable republican self-government. Her polite, witty women exhibit the kind of "comic sensibility" that Cynthia Willett describes as also "acknowledg[ing] vulnerability and dependence on others." Urging her female readers to avoid using wit to cement their individual security or the security of their intimate group, Foster advocates for a wit that supports republican self-government by challenging the social vices of "vanity, arrogance, or self-deception."⁵² In *The Boarding School*, women's outsider perspective and willingness to take the risk of using irony enables them to unsettle the tendencies to self-righteousness and individualism that threaten the republican experiment. Foster's portraits of witty women advance our understanding of how New England women use humor to expand their social and political influence during the early republic.

For those studying the relationship between humor and gender, Foster's representations of polite, witty women contribute new meanings to accounts that have struggled to incorporate

⁵²Cynthia Willett, *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 22, 7.

women's voices. In his analysis of cartooning in late eighteenth-century London, for example, Vic Gatrell admits that "what women laughed at, how unrestrainedly they laughed, whether they laughed at all, and how many of them laughed, are among the murkiest of our subjects."⁵³ Foster's novel helps clarify this archival "murkiness" by providing insight into the cultural constraints and social practices that shape—but do not silence—women's humor in the early republic. Although politeness restrains women's laughter in this text, the novel provides substantial and surprising insight into what triggers early republican women's mirth: men's opinions on fashion and bungling commencement speeches. Socially-minded and conformist, conduct fiction seems like an improbable place to find women targeting men with pointed humor. Yet, *The Boarding School* demonstrates that early republican women are much more invested in wit and in its social effects than we have previously recognized.

Finally, *The Boarding School* contributes a longer historical perspective to the ongoing and highly charged debate about the relationship between sex difference and success in humor. Because the novel focuses on the social production and social effects of women's wit, it challenges the idea, present both in Foster's day and to some extent in our own, that women are naturally unfitted to produce mirth. According to eighteenth-century conduct writers like Fordyce and De Villemer, women's efforts to produce wit lead them to become so "heated" that they fall victim to unnatural physical and mental frenzy. Conversely, the seventeenth-century playwright William Congreve argues that women fail at wit because they are naturally too cold. In his essay "Concerning Humor in Comedy," Congreve claims to "have never made any Observation of what I apprehend to be true Humour in Women." He reasons that the "natural Coldness" of the female body means that "Humor cannot exert itself to that extravagant Degree, which it often

⁵³Gatrell, *City of Laughter*, 346.

does in the Male-sex.”⁵⁴ Although seventeenth- and eighteenth-century commentators ascribe opposite characteristics to the female body—it is either too hot or too cold to be funny—they both conclude that women are at a natural disadvantage when it comes to mirth.

Recently, the view that women are biologically unfitted for humor has received new currency from studies of the relationship between sex difference, natural selection, and responses to humor in the brain. In particular, psychologists have argued that “men are not attracted to funny women” due to evolutionary pressures that encourage men, and not women, to produce humor. Men, these studies contend, are naturally selected to be better at comedy because men use humor to “signal their mate quality” to women.⁵⁵ Christopher Hitchens’s provocatively-titled *Vanity Fair* essay, “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” likewise promulgates the view that natural selection makes men better comedians because humor improves their chances of having sex with women.⁵⁶ *The Boarding School’s* detailed portrait of how the republican culture of politeness shapes women’s mirth provides an important corrective to this simplistic but enduring story that nature matters more than nurture when it comes to women’s humor. As I have argued in this essay, the republican focus on social bonds gives New England women reasons to produce and to circulate wit while it also limits the forms of mirthful expression considered appropriate for women. In her rebuttal to Hitchens’s essay, Alessandra Stanley argues that society, not nature, has “different expectations for women” in comedy.⁵⁷ Foster’s novel provides

⁵⁴William Congreve, “Concerning Humor in Comedy,” in *Letters on Several Occasions*, ed. John Dennis (London: Sam Briscoe, 1696), 92.

⁵⁵Eiman Zaim, et al., “Sex Differences in Brain Activation Elicited by Humor,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 102 (2005): 16496–501. Eric R. Bressler, et al., “Production and Appreciation of Humor as Sexually Selected Traits,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 27 (2006): 121–30. Gil Greengross and Geoffrey Miller, “Humor Ability Reveals Intelligence, Predicts Mating Success, and Is Higher in Males,” *Intelligence* 39 (2011): 188–192.

⁵⁶Christopher Hitchens, “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” *Vanity Fair*, January 2007.

⁵⁷Alessandra Stanley, “Queens of Comedy: Who Says Women Aren’t Funny?” *Vanity Fair*, April 2008.

an early and distinctively republican lens on the beginnings of gender expectations surrounding humor in America. Today, when gender continues to shape access to and success in the lucrative US market for comedy, such insight is especially timely.

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