

Introduction

In the early years of the nineteenth century two fascinating American women, K. White and Elizabeth Fisher, published autobiographical accounts of their lives. Like scores of other women and men in postrevolutionary America, White and Fisher sought to become the “heroes of their own lives.”¹ By refashioning the events of their lives and presenting their version of their trials and tribulations to an avid readership, the two sought to wrest at least symbolic control over their lives and identities and to reassert their independence. Neither elite nor even middle class, the two women, who existed on the margins of their society, illuminate through their writings popular attitudes toward women, marriage, and a set of emerging dominant ideologies.

The stories K. White and Elizabeth Fisher told correspond to each other on several key points (time period, biography, location, and ideology), each complementing the other’s historical basis and the veracity of their sentiments. Of the two texts, Fisher’s *Memoirs* is plainer, in terms of style and rhetoric; nevertheless it is a compelling account of a woman’s life and struggles during and after the revolutionary period. Fisher’s *Memoirs* enables the reader to situate her as a historically verifiable character; in fact, she made a point of providing her prospective reader with specific details (names, dates, places) to bolster her claims—legal claims, as the reader finds out in the closing pages of the *Memoirs*. In contrast, in her *Narrative*, K. White went to considerable lengths to obscure her identity, leaving the authorship of the more sophisticated text open to speculation. It is possible that the text was written by a “real” woman writing a basically true account of her life, a female author writing a fictional account,

or a male author writing a fictional account (nevertheless, I will refer to White as “she” throughout this essay).²

The lives of the two women ran along parallel courses. Both were the daughters of Scottish immigrants to the American colonies. The two women underwent traumatic periods in their childhood. Both were the daughters of loyalists and due to their families’ decision to remain loyal to the British crown during the Revolutionary War, the two were separated from their families and their homes. Despite this they retained their ties to the United States. Eventually, both women found themselves entangled in unhappy marriages. Abandoned for extended periods, they were forced to take on the role of sole provider. Later they became embroiled in property disputes with their male kin, which eventually landed them in prison (where they began writing their narratives).

Elizabeth Munro Fisher (1759–1845) was born in Pennsylvania. Her father, Henry Munro, was serving as a chaplain in the British army, when he met and married Elizabeth’s mother, who was the widow of one of his fellow officers. Both her mother and her first stepmother died soon after childbirth and Elizabeth spent several years with a nurse, until her father’s remarriage in 1766 to Eve Jay, the eldest daughter of the prominent New York family. Fisher suffered years of verbal and physical abuse by her stepmother, and eventually convinced her father to permit her to live apart from the family. When her father decided to marry her off without her consent, she married Donald Fisher against her father’s wishes. The couple and their son lived near Albany until the outbreak of the Revolution, when the family’s loyalist sympathies forced them to leave the area and relocate to Montreal. Elizabeth Fisher and her husband, spent several years in Canada, where she gave birth to four more children. Fisher and her family eventually returned to upstate New York, although Elizabeth and her husband had begun to live separately since 1791. From 1800 onward, Elizabeth was embroiled in lengthy legal battle with her half-brother, Peter Jay Munro, over two thousand acres of land, which both claimed as their inheritance. When attempts to settle the matter out of court failed, Elizabeth was brought up on charges of forgery, convicted, and sentenced to prison in New York City. In 1806 she was released from prison and lived in New York City for the next four years; it was during this period that she began writing her *Memoirs*.

K. White (1772–?) was born in Scotland, arrived in the colonies as a young child, and settled with her parents in Boston. After the outbreak of the Revolution, White was sent to school in Stockbridge. A few months

later, she was captured by the Indians; White endured several months in captivity until she escaped and was reunited with her parents. At the age of seventeen White was engaged to marry a young American officer; a few days before their wedding he committed suicide and much to White's dismay she learned that he was already married. Soon after this, White caved in to family pressure and married S. White, who soon abandoned her pregnant and saddled with debt, after he had seduced their maid. In an attempt to provide for herself, White became a merchant; troubles with her husband's creditor landed her in court and eventually forced her out of Boston. Over the next few years, she moved from one place to another in upstate New York, relishing the predicaments her gender-ambiguous appearance landed her in; she settled eventually in Albany, where she began to write her *Narrative*.

The lives of the two women indicate that the postrevolutionary and early national periods were tumultuous ones, both in political and personal terms. They were periods of self-invention and renegotiation, witnessing the reformulation of core, fundamental relationships: those between the mother country and her former colony, between the state and its citizens, between the free and the enslaved, between men and women, and between husbands and wives. Western political theory, which had long employed the family and family relationships as an allegory for the state and the state's relationship with its subjects or citizens, could no longer escape the personal implications of the political changes ushered by the American Revolution. The intense intellectual work of renegotiating these relationships and of forging a new self-identity (be it of the nation or its individual citizens) often took literary form, especially fictional and nonfictional narratives of self. These narratives trace the outlines of what Cathy Davidson has called a "symbolic map" of the mentalités of the early Republic (1993, 287), and K. White and Elizabeth Fisher in their provocative and invaluable tales provide many of the details of this map. Similar to other women's autobiographies published in this period, White's and Fisher's narratives of self present an unruly, disobedient, and assertive female subject. By articulating a consistent and growing unease concerning the institution of marriage and the unlimited power husbands had over their wives, this genre was laying the groundwork for a political critique of marriage and the status of married women within it.

In the course of their lives K. White and Elizabeth Fisher witnessed both a major political transformation and the onset of an economic transformation, which would reach its peak in the nineteenth century. These

changes ushered in a set of new gender ideologies. Women were expected to adhere, display, and foster republican virtues, but they were increasingly expected to withdraw from any involvement in political and public affairs and content themselves with the smooth running of their families and households. Linda Kerber has argued that only by adopting the model of the "Republican mother" and placing their intellects and skills in the service of their families could women hope to reconcile these two conflicting demands and avoid public censure (Kerber [1980] 1986).

Several women's historians have since continued tracing the impact of the role of the "Republican mother." While the model of female republican virtue (which included characteristics such as self-reliance, industriousness, sacrifice, self-discipline, benevolence, frugality, and patriotism) was certainly different from that expected of males, both were seen as necessary for the continued welfare of the new nation. The mother, who faithfully inculcated these values to her sons and daughters and wielded moral authority over her husband, provided an invaluable service both to her family and to her country (Bloch 1987; Zagarri 1992). The republican marriage, a union of "like-minded and virtuous men and women" bound together by affection, would ensure the happiness and continued prosperity of the couple and the nation (Lewis 1987, 720). However, beneath this optimistic rhetoric lurked a grim reality, for "affectionate marriage, a hallmark of republican political rhetoric, obscures the violation of democratic principles" when the wife's legal and political identity becomes subsumed in that of her husband (Barnes 1997, 11). Shirley Samuels argues that fiction played an important role in promoting this ideal of republican marital bliss. "Postulating the happy family operates to keep citizens in line with the state as well as to buffer the sensation of state control, and fiction provides the clearest expression of that family" (Samuels 1996, 19).

The concepts of republican virtue, as familiar to White and Fisher as to other sons and daughters of the Revolution, were being feminized by the turn of the eighteenth century. Ruth Bloch attributes these changes to new meanings of virtue generated by evangelical Christianity, Lockean psychology, and literary sentimentalism (Bloch 1987). Women's historians of the mid-1960s argued that as the workplace moved outside the home in the course of the nineteenth century, there appeared an increasing rhetorical separation of men and women's spheres of activity. The ideology of "separate spheres" naturalized this rhetorical separation between public and private, political and personal. As women were deemed physically weaker, but morally superior to men, they were best suited to the domes-

tic sphere. There they were expected to embody the feminine virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Lerner 1969; Welter 1966).

Later historians and literary critics challenged these views, stressing that the dominant gender ideologies were not seamless; in fact they were rife with tensions, contradictions, and ambivalence. While they retained much of their persuasive powers during the years following the American Revolution their impact on different groups of women was uneven. For example, while many women came to recognize “separate spheres” as an ideology that provided them with an alternative source of power and the basis for the establishment of a female community (Cott 1977; Smith-Rosenberg 1975), others, such as working-class women, immigrant women, rural women, and especially black women (both enslaved and free), found that their exclusion from this paradigm (because of their “failure” to be pious and “pure”) made them vulnerable to physical and psychological abuse (Kelley 2001). Both historians and literary critics recognize that these dominant gender ideologies were often prescriptive rather than descriptive, and that by themselves they are inadequate to explain the lived experience of women in the early republican and antebellum periods (Davidson 1998; Kerber 1988).

The work of anthropologist James Scott offers one way of connecting the prescriptive ideologies with lived experience. Scott has argued that social discourses range from the side of the subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant (“the public transcript”), to a discourse concealed from the eyes of the dominant (“the hidden transcript”). As the dominant group in the Early Republic consisted mostly of white, middle- and upper-class, men (and to a lesser extent women), other groups, be they immigrants or working-class people, free and enslaved blacks, or women from all walks of life, were forced to concede to the dominant group’s political and cultural hegemony, to mask their restlessness and obscure their criticism. This hidden transcript includes all those “speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” (Scott 1990, 4–5). In the South for example, free and enslaved blacks met secretly in secluded areas or in the slave quarters and conspired to rebel openly against their masters (“the hidden transcript”); they also told trickster tales. Using metaphors, allusions, and stock characters, such as Brer Rabbit and John and Old Master, they veiled their hatred of slavery by producing a seemingly innocuous oral tradition (“the public transcript”), which could be retold even in the presence of their masters. Thus, having grasped the price of open, public insubordination,

subordinates learned to conceal their discontent and criticism from the eyes of the dominant—so much so that they are often seen as complicit in contributing to a sanitized official transcript.

I suggest that a similar development occurred with women's texts. Women's novels, which appealed to a middle- and upper-class audience, were more likely to mask open expressions of dissatisfaction, while the narratives of self appearing in the cheap and ephemeral pamphlets were more likely to voice them. Scott's insights make it possible to sift the prescriptive from the descriptive in these two narratives of self; they enable readers to understand why White and Fisher each chose to frame her life as she did, and to discern the relationship between the two transcripts. It is this awareness of the gaps and contradictions between "public and hidden transcripts" and the social forces that necessitate the adoption of the "public transcript," that readers must bring to their reading and analysis of K. White's and Elizabeth Fisher's texts.

Felicity Nussbaum formulates a similar argument regarding autobiographical writing, although she frames it in different terms. She claims that "autobiographical writing allows the previously illiterate and disenfranchised to adopt a language sufficiently acceptable to be published, and, at the same time, it enables them to envisage new possibilities in the interstices between discourses or to weave them together in new hybrid forms" (Nussbaum 1989, 37). Nussbaum argues that while narratives of self produce, reproduce, confirm, and undermine prevailing ideologies of perceiving and representing reality, in their private forms (i.e., those not intended for publication) they often reinscribe these ideologies. While individuals may identify with these ideologies, they themselves or others may also fully or partially reject them,³ thereby revealing previously invisible aspects of these ideologies. It is at this point that individuals may be able to create new subject positions, through which change may be effected. White and Fisher not only wrote as women but they focused their narratives on their experiences as married women. Nussbaum's argument suggests that they (like other married women in the period) took seriously the models of the "republican mother" or the "republican marriage," but were on some other levels quite critical of it.

Novels have held a special place in the lives of American women, for more than any other literary and cultural form they were "dedicated to the proposition that women's experience was worthy of detailed, sympathetic, and thoughtful attention" (Davidson 1993, 286). Situated, as the novels' plots were, within the events of women's lives, the novels presented their

readers alternative scenarios of what life as a woman might hold in store for them. Linda Kerber argues that the numerous attacks on women's choice of reading material, especially the novels, should be viewed in a large part as attacks on emotion, passion, and sexuality. Critics feared that novel reading, both as a solitary interpretive activity and as a fictional confession of a secret, hidden, or private self, would foster a view of the self as the ultimate source of authority, and thus would encourage independence and other inappropriate forms of female behavior (Kerber [1980] 1986, 241–45).

Critique of the novel in America peaked after the Revolution, just as issues such as authority, personal and political liberty, and the limits of the pursuit of happiness were being debated as well. Critics of the novel in the early nineteenth century were well aware of the threat it presented. The novel was a subversive genre, because it destabilized notions of form, style, and subject matter. But just as disturbing as its choice of characters and plots was its intended audience: a popular audience, made up of both sexes and all classes, which needed to possess only a basic education in order to read the novel unsupervised. Women in particular became the focus of the critics' diatribes. Despite the numerous denunciations in the press, sermons, advice books, and surprisingly enough in novels themselves, the readership of the novels grew, first and foremost through the increase in the numbers of circulating libraries. By midcentury, when novels became less expensive, their readers began to buy and own them, reading them devotedly time and again (Davidson 1993).

One of the main differences between political tracts and novels was that, while the political rhetoric of the period utilized the "disembodied unspecific male" to stand in for both the individual and the collective, sentimental fiction worked out sociopolitical questions on a gendered body. As a result "the woman's body serves as a synecdoche for the emotional susceptibility of the republic" (Barnes 1997, 8). Although the inner working of a marriage and power relations within the family were the focal point of both novels and more popular and cheaper pamphlets, the pamphlets expressed significantly greater ambivalence and unease with the institution and contained a far more subversive subtext. While in political tracts and sentimental novels "Republican Motherhood," companionate marriages, and the joys of domesticity were often lauded as highly desirable ideals, the fictional and nonfictional female narratives of self found in pamphlets not only noted the flaws and failures of these ideals, but launched a sustained critique of the institution of marriage and

the position of women within it. These two distinct, but interconnected, literary styles were part of an ongoing discourse on women, and wives in particular. However, this discourse was not monolithic, it ranged over an entire spectrum; authors drew upon a shared set of values, images, and texts, but differed in their responses to them.

The early nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a distinct women's genre in pamphlet form, tales of marital and domestic discord. The authors drew upon a long-standing Anglo-American popular literary tradition, which focused on disorder, abuse, and violence within the family (Dolan 1994; Kane 1996; Robb 1997). Although the novels of this period (which expressed more of the "public transcript") have been extensively analyzed, and historians have recently turned their attention to women's magazines of the period (Aronson 2002; List 1994), far less attention has been paid to the personal, fictional and nonfictional, narratives published in the pamphlets (which incorporated more of the "hidden transcript").⁴ When researchers have turned their attention to pamphlets, they have focused on the numerous ones of the antebellum period and especially on sensationalist fiction and nonfiction (Branson 1996; Keetley 1998, 1999).

The narratives of K. White and Elizabeth Fisher are part of a much larger (albeit ephemeral) body of pamphlet literature written by women during the early nineteenth century. The texts that have survived tell a perturbing tale of women's lives during this period. Abigail Abbot Bailey, for example, told the story of her twenty-five year marriage to an abusive, violent, and adulterous husband, whom she eventually divorced in 1793 only after he had sexually abused one of their daughters (Taves 1989). Eliza Ann Alby recounted the tale of her numerous pre- and extramarital affairs and her abandonment of her six children (1840?). Ellen Stephens told of her husband's abandonment. Left with their infant child, Stephens masquerades as a young man and goes in search of her husband, working as a cabin boy on a Mississippi steamboat (1840). Elizabeth Hill narrated her history of parental abuse, early widowhood and the economic difficulties facing a single mother struggling to survive and provide for her children (Hill 1852).

Ostensibly this literature was intended as a caution to its readers, but its entertainment value was high as well; bookstores and lending libraries stocked up on this relatively inexpensive literary genre. Fictional tales and nonfictional narratives of self written by or about abandoned women, abused wives who then murdered their husbands, unfaithful or bigamous wives, poisoners, and female criminals (often those awaiting execution)

made up the staple fare of these pamphlets. Many of the later fictional sensationalist tales consciously took on the form of a narrative of self (memoirs, journals, letters, and autobiographies). These pamphlets explored the inner workings of a marriage that had possessed the capacity to turn a virtuous married woman into a murderer, and an intemperate man into an abuser. The themes and issues present in these pamphlets run counter to the dominant discourses of “Republican Motherhood,” domesticity, and the ideology of “separate spheres.”

While great consideration has been given to the dominant ideologies articulated in the novels, and the ways they shaped an evolving transatlantic feminist consciousness, less attention has been focused on the oppositional ideologies found in the pamphlets. Both are the precursors of a feminist consciousness, which would emerge in political form in the mid-nineteenth century. A growing number of literary critics and historians have been voicing similar views. Cathy Davidson and Laura McCall have ably demonstrated that the domestic novels themselves can be viewed as a subversive genre. Davidson argues that even novelists, who expressed much more traditional, perhaps even reactionary, views regarding marriage and the appropriate role of a wife, such as Helena Wells in her novel *Constantia Neville* (1800) and S. S. B. K. Wood in *Amelia* (1802), undermined the “public transcript” by presenting a dreary and bleak picture of what happens to the women who adhered to it (Davidson 1998). McCall, who conducted a content and textual analysis of best-selling novels and stories published between 1820 and 1860, found that “obedient and dependent women were not the ideal in either men’s or women’s fiction” (McCall 2001, 98). Even when these novels lauded marriage as a woman’s highest aspiration, they put forth alternatives to marriage and portrayed women achieving objectives outside marriage. McCall’s findings echo those of earlier studies; Nina Baym, for example, argues that these novels very often posited an individualistic and self-assured heroine and that they articulated a form of “a moderate, or limited, or pragmatic feminism” (Baym 1984, 18; see also Kelley 1984).

Because of the long-standing tradition of equating the state and its relationship with its subjects or citizens to the family or marriage and the emotional bonds that sustain them, fiction (in book or pamphlet form) and narratives of self dealing with family and marital relations were, by any standard, political statements. They constitute an integral part of the political discourse of the early Republic. The particular conventions of each genre enabled authors to articulate elements of the “hidden transcript,” to

put forward their own answers to political and social questions, which might have encountered far greater resistance had they appeared in other literary forms. Because the novels could be labeled as fictional and the narratives of self as personal, and therefore nonrepresentative, the political critique they represented could be contained and tolerated.⁵ Thus it is possible that early-nineteenth-century readers read the breakdown of White's and Fisher's respective marriages, and in fact their inability to sustain any kind of family ties, as symbolic of the failure and collapse of the old political order, and the loyalist cause in particular. They could also have concluded that in a world that saw the disintegration of the colonial relationship between "Mother" England and her unruly daughter, America, other familial relationships were rendered vulnerable. But the threat and fear some readers may have felt in face of these unruly narratives of self may have also led them to read these two accounts (and others like them) as merely the out of the ordinary tales of two unhappy, marginal women.

White's and Fisher's narratives present unrelenting tales of betrayal and abuse, especially by the people who were supposed to protect them. Both women were abandoned by their parents, both literally and symbolically. Fisher's mother died a few days after giving birth to her, and Elizabeth was sent off to live with a nurse while her father served as chaplain with his regiment. When she was three years old, her father remarried, but less than a year later her beloved first stepmother died soon after she gave birth to a baby. After her stepmother's death, Fisher's father once again placed her and her half-brother (who soon died as well) in the care of the nurse, while he left for England. Upon her father's remarriage a few years later to Eve Jay (his third wife), Elizabeth was taken once again from her nurse and placed in the care of her stepmother, while her father set off on his ministry once again. According to Fisher, Eve Jay Munro abused her and her half-brother, Peter Jay Munro, both verbally and physically. Eight-year-old K. White was sent away to school in Stockbridge after the outbreak of the Revolution, when her loyalist father left Boston for England, leaving the family behind. White was soon taken captive by Indians and spent several months with them before escaping.

Some of these events were clearly not within the control of the two girls' parents, and the parents, especially their fathers, responded to these events in a manner most contemporaries would have found reasonable. K. White's parents may have wished to keep her out of harm's way and spare her the public abuse heaped on loyalists and their families. Henry Munro, who was himself recovering from the deaths of two wives and an infant

son, was trying to advance himself in the world and contract an advantageous marriage alliance, which he did by marrying into the prominent Jay family. Once he did, he immediately placed his daughter in his new wife's care. Yet, it is difficult not to sympathize with two very young girls and their pain, which are obvious years after the events took place. What was clearly not acceptable to Elizabeth, nor the servants and neighbors for that matter, was Munro's neglect of his daughter's physical and emotional welfare. Fisher acknowledged that it was the kindness of strangers, the servants who slipped her food and the interference of the neighbors who informed her father of her continued abuse, which enabled her to survive those traumatic years (though with deep emotional scars). In view of her childhood experiences, Elizabeth Fisher's inability to trust, or to form lasting emotional attachments with people, is not surprising.

K. White preceded her captivity narrative with a statement claiming that her parents were loving and affectionate. This is only one of two cases she admits these feelings toward anyone in the course of her tale. White mentions her father only once again in the *Narrative*, in the course of a following chapter, when she recounts his insistence that she marry S. White, her future husband, who deserted her. Twice, although well intentioned, her father had failed to protect her.

Their fathers' role in arranging their marriages was a sore point for both women. Although both women stressed their right to marry for love, rather than for economic considerations or parental pressure, they did not do so. As a result they did ascribe (perhaps unconsciously) part of the blame for the failure of their marriages to their respective fathers. White claimed that her father did not recognize duplicity of her first suitor, a bigamist who committed suicide before the wedding, or the perfidy of the second, who would become her future husband. Fisher's father insisted she marry a man more than twenty years her senior with whom she was barely acquainted. Munro's attempt to arrange unilaterally his daughter's marriage ran counter to what was the accepted norm in America. By this time young men and women selected their future spouses, while their parents retained at best veto power over their decisions (Shumsky 1976; Whyte 1992). When Fisher refused to accede to her father's choice and in a desperate act of defiance chose a few months later to marry Donald Fisher (a man she did not love), her father disinherited her.

White claimed that she had barely recovered from the "melancholy" she lapsed into following her fiancé's death, when she yielded to her father who "was strenuous to win my consent to a union with S- W-" (*Narrative*, 43).

Fisher reconstructed for her readers her thoughts at the time of her marriage: "I shall have someone to take care of me—I shall have a home—I shall never be a trouble to my father . . . and another thing which had great weight on my mind, was, that I should be out of my stepmother's power" (*Memoirs*, 81). By failing to recognize their daughters' needs, fears, and desires both fathers pushed their daughters into unhappy and miserable marriages.

Both marriages soured after a few months. Within a year of their marriage, after impregnating their maid, White's husband deserted her. White, who was also with child, was left to deal with the social and economic consequences of this desertion. Although Elizabeth Fisher did admit that her husband was "fond" of her, she became so despondent in the months following her marriage that at one point she seriously contemplated suicide.

White and Fisher were highly critical of the legal and political system, which placed them under the power of their male relatives, especially their husbands. The middle-class social expectation, that they remain emotionally and economically dependent, compelled them to marry, but once married they were denied both companionship and financial security. Both women disparaged their respective husbands' economic ineptitude. White, in particular, made the connection between the personal and the political; her husband's failure to provide for her became emblematic of the financial power husbands wielded over their wives. "Too many females," she observed, "are lost to society by the inattention and cruelty of their husbands, who, instead of benevolently aiding and giving them comfort, consign them to the bitter cup of poverty and distress. How many vices and crimes owe their birth to these causes!" (*Narrative*, 63).

Their husbands' inability to provide for them, and in Elizabeth Fisher's case her husband's political loyalties, left both women socially and economically vulnerable. The two women's attempts to recover their finances, their entanglements with their creditors and the law, and their respective husbands' attempts to reassert financial control over them, make up the bulk of their remaining stories. If, as Lenore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argue, female gentility was increasingly associated with not only a withdrawal from the public sphere, but with a reluctance to act as a "visibly economic agent" (1987, 315), then both White and Fisher rejected, if only due to economic necessity, this form of bourgeois femininity offered for their emulation. Both actively asserted their right to engage in financial transactions, to own property, and to dispose of it

according to their own will, while their husbands attempted to force them back into economic dependence.

Despite their rejection of an emerging dominant model of middle-class, white femininity, Fisher and White often seem to measure their lives against that standard. Time and again they interjected their narratives with asides to their readers, which suggest that they were unwittingly reevaluating their lives against those norms. These asides are also some of the best examples of how White and Fisher are complicit in producing a sanitized official transcript. Fisher went to great lengths to explain her estrangement from her husband by stressing how time and again he promised to provide for her; when she relented and went to live with him, it became clear he had had no intention of keeping his promises. He took all their money and left for England and then the United States, leaving her and their children without any funds to support themselves. Later, after once again failing to provide his family with a home, Fisher's husband and his natal family confiscated all of Elizabeth's possessions in order to prevent her from returning with the children to Canada (*Memoirs*, 89).

Fisher explains her independent and unsubmitive behavior then, not by asserting her right to do so, but by proving her husband's ineptness as a husband and a provider. Yet at the same time she is rejecting her prescribed role as a wife, she is confirming it. A few pages later, she tells of her husband's death and notes, "[A]fter his death I seemed to be more reconciled, for he was a great trouble to me when living" (*Memoirs*, 90). Immediately, as if she herself were startled and uncomfortable with her statement, which ran counter to any bourgeois notion of a companionate marriage, she attempts to justify her blunt sentiments by establishing his disregard for her feelings and relating how in an act of vindictiveness he sold her enslaved woman, who had probably been her sole emotional support during these trying years (*Memoirs*, 90).

Fisher had also internalized the middle-class notions of a companionate marriage, although she was well aware of the fact that both her marriage and her father's marriage to Eve Jay failed to adhere to this ideal. She meticulously noted the symptoms of this marital failure: separate beds, constant fights and disagreements, threats, and prolonged absences. She was also aware that her emotions toward and relationship with her parents did not conform to middle-class expectations of a parent-child relationship. Her feelings toward her father were ambivalent at best even toward the end of her account (*Memoirs*, 100). While she was unable to reconcile or even express feelings of anger and resentment toward her father, she was

more than able to articulate them toward her stepmother, and during her childhood often found animal surrogates and acted out her violent emotions on them. In a manner reminiscent of the eighteenth-century Parisian artisans, who massacred their masters' cats (Darnton 1984), Fisher vented her hatred of her stepmother and the anger she felt at the stepmother's mistreatment of her onto the favored household pets, poisoning, drowning, and slaughtering them (*Memoirs*, 93–95).⁶ Fisher was fully aware that these acts not only upset her stepmother and preyed on her anxieties, but also were sure to increase the tensions between her and Henry Munro, as her stepmother inevitably vented her anger onto him.

Later in the *Memoirs* Fisher must come to terms with her “failure” as a mother, not so much because she failed to care and provide for her children (the requirement of a working-class mother) but because of her failure to establish and foster long-lasting emotional bonds with them (the requirement of a middle-class mother). Fisher projected onto her children her sense of failure to maintain the mother-child emotional bond, accusing them of neglecting her because of her poverty. She attempted to enlist her readers' sympathies by requesting those who are parents to place themselves in her shoes, and asked: “Can children, let them be ever so kind, repay their mother for what she has to undergo in body and in mind, in bringing them up till they are able to do for themselves? I say they cannot” (*Memoirs*, 102).

White made similar comparisons to an emerging sex/gender system when forced to explain her gender transgressions, as a cross-dresser, as a woman who made sexual advances toward other women, and as a woman who defined her honor in masculine terms.⁷ The main purpose of a sex/gender system is to define the sociopolitical boundaries between different human bodies and check any violations. These violations do not necessarily arouse anxiety and horror; in fact they may prove to be sources of pleasure and excitement. In the eighteenth century when the popularity of the tales of such (real and fictional) gender transgressors, in particular masquerading heroines, peaked, they were a source of pleasure. However, by the early nineteenth century as their popularity declined they were increasingly becoming a source of concern and even panic (Cressy 1996; Dekker and van der Pol 1989; Dugaw 1989; Wharman 1998). While the tales of these gender transgressive women (whether transvestites, confidence women, or spies) never completely disappeared during the course of the nineteenth century, they were most certainly muted (De Grave 1995).

White's explanations of her disorderly behavior, as a woman who made a play for other women, were designed to neutralize her readers' growing hostility to it, by admitting to the events and appealing to her readers' indulgence, terming one of these transgressions as "a freak of the moment which my better judgment wholly condemned" (*Narrative*, 48), and another as a "foolish adventure" (*Narrative*, 59). By framing these incidents as aberrations or jokes and recognizing their impropriety, White defuses their subversive potential, producing yet again a more sanitized transcript.

A few chapters later the unrepentant White is right back at it, this time claiming for herself not the appearance or sexual prerogatives of a man, but her right to a masculine definition of her honor. White rejected the prevailing view regarding female honor, which was predicated upon a woman's sexual behavior and reputation. According to this view, insults could only detract from a woman's honor and her male kin (as the ones most affected by these insults) were responsible for seeking redress. While men were not invulnerable to sexual insult, their honor was not predicated solely upon their sexual behavior; they were also able to accrue honor through acts of bravery or the fulfillment of civic duty (Gowing 1993; Norton 1987).

Again it is useful to compare the responses of Elizabeth Fisher and K. White to attacks on their honor. In 1789 (after living apart for several years) Donald Fisher suspected Elizabeth Fisher of having "criminal connexion" with a young lodger (*Memoirs*, 95). At the instigation of Donald Fisher's nephew, the young man was brought before a justice, examined, and released on his oath, but Elizabeth's reputation was irrevocably and very publicly tarnished. While Fisher was furious with her husband's behavior, she did not say one word during these public proceedings; only in the privacy of his house did she challenge and taunt him. In contrast, White behaved as a man would: seeking redress for her honor and contrasting her bravery with the cowardly behavior of her male opponents. In the first instance, her irate landlord, who had believed she was man in female disguise, verbally abused White for spending time in private with his wife. White responded by presenting him with her brace of pistols, and reasoned "as he judged me to be a man I would act up to it"; her landlord hastily declined the offer to duel (*Narrative*, 59). In the next town, White was suspected of being a British spy. She soon challenged to a duel the young man suspected of spreading these rumors. Only when the young man realized she was serious about carrying out her challenge did he agree to retract his charges (*Narrative*, 61–63).⁸

Regenia Gagnier argues that this pattern of rejection mixed with acceptance of middle-class gender ideology often appeared in the autobiographical writings of nineteenth-century working-class men and women who, in an attempt to analyze their lives through narrative, adopted literary models derived from the writings of middle-class authors, models that reflected the realities of a bourgeois life. "However," she claims, "their experience cannot be analyzed in terms of their acculturation" (1991, 46). The ensuing gap between ideology and experience exacted a very high psychic cost from the women and men who did not lead a bourgeois life, and the result is not only the disintegration of the narrative, but also, Gagnier argues, the disintegration of the personality itself. Stephen Arch also senses this disintegration, and as a result concludes that "White's and Fisher's narratives are not fully emerged as autobiographies" (2001, 156).

Fisher and White did indeed present fragmented narratives and selves. They proposed to tell the story of their lives in coherent and more or less chronological order but they did not do so. Feminist scholars have noted that fragmented selves, spaces in the narrative, temporal shifts, are characteristic of women's narratives of self (Smith and Watson 1998; Benstock 1998). The two narratives contain large gaps (an issue I will return to near the end of the last section). Fisher's narrative is interspersed by "flashbacks" to her childhood, while White mixes genres as easily as she blends genders.

GENDER AND GENRE

White's and Fisher's narratives of self, like other such narratives, which appeared in pamphlet or in book form, were intimately connected to the early novel which often took the guise of a narrative of self (letters, diary, memoirs) to gain authority and veracity. As noted earlier, the two texts echo each other on several important points (time period, biography, location, and ideology), each reinforcing the other's historical basis and the authenticity of opinions expressed. However, there are also significant differences between the two texts.

Fisher's *Memoirs* is a fairly straightforward text, written in simple prose. It contains very few literary allusions, and but for a few flashbacks and flash-forwards, it is organized according to a linear timeline, beginning with her parents' acquaintance and ending with a description of Fisher's life after her release from prison. White's *Narrative*, on the other hand, is a highly crafted text, almost an embryonic or proto-novel, which incorpo-

rates several separate subgenres (the captivity narrative, the seduction tale, the narrative of marital woes, the cross-dressing narrative, and the prison account) and interweaves poetry and prose. The text may be read as an early draft version of a picaresque novel, one in which White is experimenting with various literary genres, testing their suitability, attempting to fit the square pegs of episodes in her life into the round holes of preexisting genres. Yet, if read as a whole the use of these subgenres further destabilizes and subverts the coherency of the narrative and the woman who is its subject. The reader is never afforded the luxury of comfort, a sensation that accompanies any reader familiar with the conventions of a particular literary genre chosen by the author. White constantly pulls the rug from under the reader's feet; just as the reader is about to settle comfortably into the conventions of the captivity narrative, White shifts to the narrative of seduction, only to shift a few pages later to the story of a female transvestite. These constant shifts between literary genres, poetry and prose, references to texts outside her text, and allusions to duplicitous or Janus-faced mythological and mythic characters (such as Hymen, Mercury, Fortune, or Pope Joan); constantly reemphasize the overall quality of destabilization and subversion.

The first subgenre to make its appearance in White's *Narrative* is the captivity narrative. Captivity narratives were the most popular literary genre during the colonial period and their popularity endured well into the nineteenth century. They played an important role in the formation of an American national identity by testing the boundaries of racial and gender identity (Smith-Rosenberg 1993). These narratives (especially the ones written by women) had a strong influence on the evolution of sentimental fiction on both sides of the Atlantic (Armstrong 1998). They posited a new kind of female heroine, who through her moral fortitude and courage, rejected a more stereotypical definition of femininity and the conventions of domesticity and redefined feminine virtue. White's sketchy account of her Indian captivity ends abruptly with her midnight escape and her joyous reunion with her family. She skipped over the events in her life during the following years and resumed the story of her life at the age of seventeen, with the no less popular seduction narrative.

Seduction was a theme seriously and regularly explored in popular novels and periodical literature of the late eighteenth century and by the early years of the nineteenth it began to be presented on stage. One of the more notable and highly popular articulations of this theme in America was Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791), which tells the story of a

young English girl who elopes to America with her seducer. There she is abandoned and dies soon after giving birth to her daughter. Some historians view the increased usage of the seduction theme as a form of cultural backlash against the growing independence of young adults from patriarchal control, especially when it came to marital choices (Hessinger 1998). By casting young men in the role of unrestrained predators, the authors were able to impress upon young women the necessity of placing themselves voluntarily under benign parental supervision.

White's account of her first courtship and engagement conforms to the conventions of the seduction tale. She fell in love with a young army officer; the two were soon engaged and began preparations for their marriage. A few days before the wedding, her fiancé left Boston abruptly and soon after his return committed suicide. The details of this tale conform, step by step, to the conventions of the genre. Her fiancé is a would-be bigamist, who in true literary fashion repents before the wedding, confessing in a letter to his first marriage and his undying love and respect for White, and then obligingly commits suicide.

Next, the readers were introduced to a tale of marital woes. Elizabeth Barnes has argued that although seduction and marriage have been portrayed in fiction as "antithetical models of heterosexual relations," both symbolize the complex relationship between coercion and consent. Both represent a "relationship paradigm" based on an imbalance of power, which is rendered temporarily invisible by the language of affection (1997, 11). Both White and Fisher viewed this disparity of power as the source of their troubles; their inability to influence their husbands' political and economic choices and their initial ignorance of financial and legal matters left them vulnerable and hard-pressed to fend for themselves. Their accounts echo themes from sentimental fiction: the unfaithfulness of husbands, the emotional abuse inflicted on dutiful wives, and finally the poverty they were forced to endure when abandoned by their husbands and other male kin.

White then embarked on the cross-dressing narrative, drawing on a long-standing Anglo-American tradition, although one declining in popularity by this period. The standard plot of most of these accounts tells the tale of a young woman, who disguises herself as a man in order to follow her husband or lover who has gone off to war or to sea. After a series of adventures in war and while on leave, which often include making sexual advances toward other women, the woman and her beloved are eventually united in marriage (Dekker and Van der Pol 1989; Dugaw 1989; Jelinek

1987). Although the cross-dressing narratives seem to threaten and subvert gender norms, the threat is a temporary one; in fact the transvestite's re-adoption of female dress and behavior at the end of the story, and its heterosexual resolution reinforce the prevailing gender system. Deborah Samson Gannett's account of her masquerade as a young man and service in the Continental Army during the Revolution, ended with her unmasking, and later marriage (Hiltner 1999; Sobel 2000, 191–96; Young 2004). Even Lucy Brewer, the fictional heroine of *The Female Marine* (1815–1819), who is seduced, abandoned, and coerced into prostitution before she escapes and joins the Navy during the War of 1812, ends up happily married (Cohen 1997). At the heart of the majority of the traditional accounts of female transvestism (such as the Female Warrior ballads) lies the story of a heterosexual romance. The accounts do present a world turned upside down, but this is a temporary inversion or reversal, which will be righted at the end of the tale (Dugaw 1986).

White and Fisher plot a much more radical course, for at the core of their narratives lay the failure of the heterosexual romance. Domestic happiness and marital bliss do not lie in store for them; on the contrary, the failure of their marriages is the source of their travails and their gender transgressive exploits. White disingenuously denies that her masquerade was the result of any deliberate intent on her part. Claiming to have become more masculine as time passed, she argues, "Nature had so 'ordered it' and I could not remedy it" (*Narrative*, 46). So she goes along with nature's decree, amuses herself, and gets herself into trouble. When White takes on the persona of a man she often is mistaken for one by women; men on the other hand suspect her not only of being a man disguised as a woman but as a British or French spy. White manages to cross and defy the boundaries of both gender and nation, and even when threatened with imprisonment refuses to clarify her identity.

Fisher's one-time masquerade as a man has the potential of being far more subversive than any of White's antics; it is not a mere narrative strategy intended to pique the readers' flagging interest, but an open display of wifely rebelliousness and disobedience. In defiance of her husband who sold Jane, an enslaved woman who had been with her since childhood, Elizabeth "borrowed" a man's clothing and set out to rescue Jane. Jane was the only person in the *Memoirs* toward whom Fisher expressed any feelings of love. Using a form of emotional projection found in other accounts when free, white, men and women discussed their emotional attachments toward enslaved people, Fisher projected her emotions onto Jane saying:

“. . . went in pursuit of the negro girl who loved me beyond expression” (*Memoirs*, 91).⁹ Fisher does not don men’s clothing in order to follow a man, but in order to save an enslaved woman whom she loves; with this one act she threatens to subvert the boundaries of both gender and race (*Memoirs*, 90–92).

Both women’s narratives ended with an account of their imprisonment. White and Fisher wrote and published their accounts after their release from prison, both in order to present their versions of the events that led to their imprisonment and perhaps in an attempt to earn some extra income. Both tapped in to a long-standing literary tradition of criminal narratives. The early criminal narratives, especially the criminal conversion narratives, had both sacred and secular objectives. Written in prison, most often while awaiting execution, the condemned reflected upon their lives of sin, repented, and sometimes at the end of this process of self-scrutiny and self-assessment they also underwent religious conversion. While these tales of a life of scandal and sin followed by repentance did serve a didactic purpose, cautioning and sermonizing to the readers about the wages of sin, they also titillated their readers, providing a glimpse of a depraved or criminal life (Boudreau 1997; Franklin 1989; Williams 1986). By the early nineteenth century however, the didactic message was fading away, and the narratives became a way for readers to participate vicariously in the risks and excitement of urban criminal life (Branson 1996; Cohen 1999).

In the closing pages of her *Memoirs*, Fisher stated that she underwent a religious conversion while in jail, yet the reader is hard-pressed to take Fisher at her word that her “heart is weaned from the cares of this world—every soul has my best wishes for its welfare” (*Memoirs*, 103). The self-abasement and unconditional surrender often found in conversion narratives is missing from Fisher’s account (Juster 1991), despite her protestations to the contrary she remained antagonistic, belligerent, and unreconciled to her fate, promising a revised version of her *Memoirs* where she would prove her innocence (and her brother’s guilt).

One of the most important stylistic differences between Fisher’s and White’s texts is the latter’s combination of prose and poetry. Critics have argued that the mixture of genres was often perceived as “a threat to endogamous, hegemonic order” (Favret 1994, 160). In the eighteenth century a well-established gendered literary hierarchy was in place; within this hierarchy women were conceded a place in prose writing while the writing of verse was considered a masculine domain. Throughout the cen-