prose, and as smart criticism. The essays collected here offer students of nineteenth-century rhetorical criticism a fine opportunity to explore these possibilities.

Stephen Hartnett *University of Illinois*

The Seduction Novel of the Early Nation: A Call for Socio-Political Reform. By Donna R. Bontatibus. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999; pp. 126. $16.95 paper.

In the wake of the American Revolution, privileged white women in the new nation began to write against colonial oppressions, particularly the laws and customs that severely limited women's educational opportunities and denied their political participation. As early as 1776, Abigail Adams urged her husband to "Remember the Ladies," only to be told, "Depend upon it, we know better than repeal our masculine system" (21). Adams, and other women with social capital in the early American nation, felt obliged to speak and write against the common perceptions of women's moral and intellectual inferiority. Novel writing was among the few professional arenas in which educated women were able to articulate their understanding of social and political oppression. Seduction novels were a popular genre in the new nation, which was, not unlike the novels' protagonists, struggling for liberation from colonial authority.

Donna Bontatibus argues that late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novelists Susanna Rowson, Tabitha Tenney, Hannah Webster Foster, and Judith Sargent Murray manipulate the seduction genre in an effort to combine critiques of neocolonialism and instructional narratives for women with the formulae of sentimental novels. Bontatibus points out the ways the novels position seduction as a "complex signifying practice determined and reproduced by limited educational opportunities, colonial laws and customs, circumscribed roles for the middle-class woman, and the existence of a rape culture" (5). Drawing from feminist theory, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory, she delineates a call for sociopolitical reform that is itself multidimensional and nonreductive. Bontatibus intends to make problematic the assumption that seduction novels are demoralizing for women because they portray women as willing victims of their own poor decision making. She convincingly positions the seduction novels of Rowson, Tenney, Foster, and Murray as both representative of the Puritan and Calvinist values of their time and indicative of a burgeoning feminist consciousness. Her analysis should be of general interest to a wide variety of scholarly interests. For that reason, I take each of Bontatibus's three major chapters in turn, mapping the development of her argument and discussing its relevance to cross-disciplinary interests.

Seduction novels such as *Charlotte Temple* were the best selling novels in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America. The seduction novel and its reader, however, quickly gained a reputation for emotionality, irrationality, and escapism. In order to lend the genre an air of professionalism and reveal the author's intent, the novels were marketed as educational, truth-based accounts of women's victimage. In "Intervening Before the Fall: Re-educating the 'American Fair,'" Bontatibus illustrates the numerous ways in which both the novels and their authors espouse the importance of education. Some authors, such as Rowson and Foster, explicitly tailor their books to the educational needs of women, while others, like Murray, published political tracts echoing the themes embedded in their novels. All three authors stress the importance of self-understanding and a balanced education for "control of one's mind, body, and spirit" (43). Their work reveals the emergence of an early and important feminist theme amidst the progressive individualist orientation of colonial America.

Like Rowson, Tenney prefaces *Female Quixoticism* with a letter that attests to the educational value of the novel. Unlike the other novelists, Tenney develops a protagonist who has benefited from "private instructors and an extensive family library" (45). Intelligent, quick-witted, and altruistic, Dorcasina's seduction is as much her own calculation of her privileges as a member of the upper class and her constraints as a member of the female gender as it is a conquest by the "mischief loving scholar" Philander. Bontatibus describes a scene in which Dorcasina contemplates marrying her suitor, Lysander, so that she may emancipate the slaves of his plantation. The role of racial difference, however, is largely neglected in Bontatibus's analysis, as I imagine it is in the novels she considers. Yet the critical lenses through which she views her subject matter suggest that the silence of slave voices (what Toni Morrison would call an "Africanist presence") shapes the construction of middle- and upper-class white female identity in important ways.

In addition to indicating the ways in which the seduction novels anticipate burgeoning abolitionist and women's suffrage movements, Bontatibus's first chapter also speaks to an ongoing debate about the appropriateness of applying postcolonial theory to the intracultural oppressions of white Americans. Bontatibus suggests that the experience of gender oppression in American may be "akin to the devaluation experienced by all those individuals in society who are relegated to the margins as Other" (49). In fact, what makes her analysis particularly insightful is the unique duality of the protagonists' oppression. Middle- and upper-class white women were legally considered property, yet they benefited from a white supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchy in ways that permitted, even encouraged, their oppression of people of color. While Bontatibus by no means resolves the postcolonial dispute, she illustrates here, and elsewhere, the ways in which postcolonial theory can inform critical analyses of American history and literature.

The second chapter fully develops the connection between the oppression of middle-class white women and the failure of the American Revolution to address women's concerns and needs. Bontatibus argues, in "Declarations of Independence: Seduction and the Disenfranchised Woman," that the seduction novels instructed young women about the realities of their status as adults at a time when some privileged women were apt to prematurely declare their independence from family. Although a single white woman could rightfully own property and earn a wage, she "had neither voice nor representation in a government that demanded she pay taxes and abide by the laws" (59). The idea of voice and silence is crucial to understanding the neocolonialist conditions to which women were subjected. By marrying, and becoming a "feme covert," a woman's legal rights and public voice were subsumed by her husband. In essence, the only independent choice women made was their choice of husband. In the case of Rowson's Mary Lumley, "Her only viable means of exercising authority over her life is to determine to which man she will give up her authority once she is married" (62).

Women are not only legally silenced by patriarchal institutions in the seduction novels, though. Charlotte Temple is figuratively silenced when her letters to her family are stolen and destroyed by her seducer. Throughout *Charlotte Temple,* Charlotte's voice is appropriated and her only means of communication is lost. Tenney's Dorcasina eventually resists her father's attempts to speak for her by deciding to marry the fortune hunter Patrick O'Connor. Dorcasina is labeled a "fallen woman" not because of her union with O'Connor but because she has radically asserted her voice in the matter. Bontatibus contends that "a woman's declaration of independence in the face of patriarchal authority transforms her from a silent object to a speaking subject" (66). In this chapter, the power to silence and the power to give voice to one's desires and concerns are played out in terms of the neocolonial relationship between father and daughter as well as seducer and seduced.

Rhetorical and feminist critics may find the discursive reconstruction of the "fallen woman" of interest. Bontatibus highlights the ways in which resistance to patriarchal authority contributed to broader reformation of feminine etiquette. In contrast to the vision of Republican motherhood into which they were indoctrinated, the protagonists of these seduction novels represent women's desires to transgress the social and political constraints placed upon them. The authors, too, are giving voice to those desires.

In her final chapter, "Seduction and Neocolonization: The Presence of a Rape Culture," Bontatibus situates her analysis within the larger framework of a "rape culture," a culture that condones and encourages physical and psychological aggression toward women. The seduction/rape motif is definitive of white women's colonization in the early American nation. As such, it frames a variety of practices of masculine aggression including the physical appropriation of women's bodies.

Bontatibus demonstrates the ways in which the seduction novels enable women to recognize and resist the attempts of seducers by positioning the narratives as consciousness-raising devices.

The narrow focus upon the generic novels of middle- and upper-class white women permits what is perhaps the book's greatest contribution to feminist theory. The analysis interrupts a tendency in feminist literary criticism either to reject or accept wholesale the ideological and sociopolitical orientations of a literary work. Bontatibus acknowledges, even confirms, the devastating portrayals of female victimage while resisting the tendency to view the demise of the seduced as merely a lesson in individual morality. She posits the seduction novel as an historical, contextual feminine practice of knowledge production. In doing so, she emphasizes the seduction novelists' conviction that educational and political reforms were necessary conditions for women's declarations of independence in the new nation.

Emily Plec *University of Utah*

Lives of their Own: Rhetorical Dimensions in Autobiographies of Women Activists. By Martha Watson. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999; pp. vii + 149. $24.95.

Rhetorical critics, seeking to recover the voices of American women, have long recognized the need to be resourceful in that task. As many have noted, the legacy of women's public speeches is scattered in unlikely places and, when discovered, often difficult to authenticate. Thus, scholars have cast a wide net in their effort to include women's experiences in the literature.

In her 1991 edited volume, Martha Watson noted the fleeting nature of public oratory and made the case for considering the nineteenth-century woman suffrage press as a viable site for rhetorical criticism. In this latest work, Watson makes an equally compelling case for appropriating women reformers' autobiographies for the same purpose. Watson asserts that "Autobiographies argue, albeit differently from other forms of public discourse" (8). She takes the position that the reformers' written presentations of their lives serve not only to tell their stories, but also to generate support for their various causes.

In *Lives of Their Own: Rhetorical Dimensions in Autobiographies of Women Activists,* Watson employs the autobiographies of anarchist Emma Goldman, temperance advocate Frances Willard, suffrage activists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Anna Howard Shaw, and African American social activist and educator Mary Church Terrell as case studies for support of her thesis that such texts are rhetorical in nature.

Watson carefully makes her argument for the rhetorical nature of autobiography in the first two chapters of the text. Employing Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm,

Copyright of Rhetoric & Public Affairs is the property of Michigan State University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.