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The Seduction Narrative in Britain by Katherine Binhammer. (Review)

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In 1783, in a tract on the loss of female chastity, Charles Horne identified three separate elements in the act of seduction: seduction of the heart, seduction of the person, and seduction of the mind. Although previous interpretations of the period might have led us to believe that the physical loss of virtue would have been his main concern, in fact Horne was most preoccupied with the seduction of a woman's heart. Traditional feminist readings of the seduction narratives that proliferated in the second half of the eighteenth century point to their construction of women as helpless victims of male sexual aggression. Such interpretations, however, depend on the facts of the plot rather than on the structure of the narratives; these interpretations also depend on reading mainly canonical texts in an overly narrow historical context.

Through a richly historicized analysis of the narrative structure and cultural contexts of the seduction tale, Katherine Binhammer demonstrates that such stories helped create much more than an ideology of victimhood: they also helped to define the operations of the female heart, and hence the female self. More significantly, the proliferation of seduction narratives during the second half of the eighteenth century indicated

not a repetition of a hegemonic dogma about women's nature or virtue but an ongoing discussion and exchange about the female heart and female selfhood since "no one meaning about seduction yet dominated cultural representations" (2). As Binhammer points out, "seduction narratives in the second half of the eighteenth century serve as the epistemic testing ground for imagining how women can know their hearts" (3).

It is possible to understand *Clarissa* as a simple morality tale teaching us, as Richardson himself suggests, that counter to received opinion, a reformed rake does not make a good husband. This is in fact the message offered in a popular eighteenth-century abridgement of the novel, in which the several thousands pages are reduced to several hundred. The very length of Richardson's novel, as well as the spacing of the publication in separate volumes, and the heroine's syntactical emphasis on other possible ways her tale could have unfolded, however, allowed readers to take seriously Clarissa's own suggestion that she herself does not fully know her own heart and that her story did not have to become the clichéd narrative of seduction that Lovelace is so determined to play out. For Binhammer, while the novel's ending "fixes meaning in terms of a restrictive bourgeois femininity," the narrative itself suggests other possible endings "that reflect the heterogeneous terrain for knowing love in the mid-eighteenth century" (39).

The richness of Binhammer's narrative analysis is matched by the depth of the historical context she brings to her study. Her chapter on prostitutes' tales, both real and fictional, helps us understand the complex cultural response to Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753, which by formally codifying marriage allowed men to ignore the earlier cultural understanding that a promise of marriage followed by seduction already constituted a legal marriage. Thus prostitutes' narratives (some published to generate sympathy for the Magdalen Hospital for penitent prostitutes), which tended to "prop up the new affective discourse that defines a valid marriage as based on love not money," confronted the "failure of social institutions" and laws such as the Hardwicke Act, "established in support of companionate marriage, to sanction love properly" (50).

In her chapter on novels that follow the couple into married life, Binhammer points to the importance of the embedded seduction narratives often found in such texts. This narrative embedding emphasizes "the way affective agency links wives and seduced women" by offering the tales of seduced women as "test cases for women's knowledge of their hearts"; such examples show "how that knowledge translates into legitimate erotic relations" (75). Binhammer's chapter on ballads and street literature delineates the cultural construction of the heart in different strata of social rank. While some ballads depicted seduced and abandoned women as mere victims, others offered comic tales of women who had outwitted their social betters and tricked the lying

seducer into marriage. In these cases, the seduction narratives themselves construct knowledge of the heart as necessary for protecting the heart and demonstrate that the self is dependent on the knowledge of prior narratives of seduction, contradicting the traditional dictum that reading novels of seduction can lead women astray.

In her final chapter on the melodramatic tales of seduction that became popular during the 1790s, Binhammer traces the role that such narratives played in court trials. Such tales helped establish the affective significance of a man having won a woman's heart (whether or not he had physically seduced her) and influenced key court decisions offering financial compensation for women whose jilting suitors had broken their hearts. On the other hand, melodramatic seduction narratives also "point towards a new landscape of seduction for nineteenth-century women where," as in the abridged versions of *Clarissa*, "the first step outside the path of virtue becomes imagined as also the last" (175).

Binhammer's work effectively counters Nancy Armstrong's earlier Foucaultian analysis of the domestic woman choosing her own "sexual and domestic confinement" (2), although Binhammer does not refer to the portion of Armstrong's analysis in which she argues that "the modern individual was first and foremost a woman" (Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987], 8). Nevertheless, Binhammer's book has implications that reach across the lines of gender and lay the groundwork for future studies, not only of the changing perceptions of women's selfhood in the nineteenth century but also of parallel developments in male selfhood and emergent notions of the modern individual.