

Edited and with an Introduction by
SHARON HALEVI

THE *other*
Daughters
OF THE
Revolution

The *Narrative* of K. White
{ 1809 }
and the *Memoirs* of Elizabeth Fisher
{ 1810 }



The Other Daughters
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*For my parents,
Sylvia and Samuel Ezekiel*

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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-