

Felix, Regina. *Sedução e heroísmo: imaginação de mulher. Entre a República das Letras e a Belle Époque (1884-1911)*. Florianópolis: Editora Mulheres, 2007.

Regina Felix's *Sedução e heroísmo: imaginação de mulher* is a welcome contribution to the historiography of women's writing in Brazil. Focusing her analysis on four narrative works, two by Maria Benedita Bormann (1853-1895) and two by Emília Bandeira de Melo (1852-1910), Felix successfully shows how Bormann's and Melo's literary representations capture the ongoing changes in societal gender roles, namely the process whereby middle-class Brazilian women moved from the patriarchal "casa grande" to the public sphere of the street, where work issues and political voices prevailed.

The book opens with a dense review of major philosophers, theoreticians, and literary critics. It begins by framing Bormann's and Melo's fictional narratives within the theoretical realm by focusing, first, on Michel Foucault's notion of literary subject and following with a discussion of Walter Benjamin's historical subject and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of literary dialogism. The first chapter very successfully contextualizes Bormann's and Melo's milieus from the Republic of Letters to the *Belle Époque* (roughly 1884-1911). In it Felix reviews, in broad strokes, Rio de Janeiro's gendered spaces of public and private spheres against a theoretical background that combines Jürgen Habermas, Roberto DaMatta, and Hannah Arendt. In so doing, she reveals to the reader, on the one hand, the major Brazilian literary authors and philosophers of the time—the predominantly male ruling literati—and, on the other hand, women in their prescribed roles as domesticated, spiritualized beings or as markers of the patriarchal status, contained within the home outside of which undisciplined women were erased from the national narrative.

The second chapter introduces Bormann and is subdivided into two sections, each discussing one of her novels, *Duas irmãs* (1884) and *Celeste* (1893). Felix suggests that *Duas irmãs* seems to dialogue with its milieu's largely male intellectual establishment. In the novel's plot, in order to control her own sexual impulses, the female protagonist opts for a sublimation of desire through a spiritually or metaphysically cloistered life (with a non-consummated marriage replacing the monastery). In the second novel, the romantic heroine, hampered

by her verbally and physically abusive parents, and after a disillusioned and sexually violent marriage, makes a conscious choice to allow her decadent and dissolute persona to emerge. These works by Bormann, both of which exhibit the structure of a *Familienroman*, are read by Felix as emphasising “sedução,” which stands, in her interpretation, for the conscious choice to satisfy the urges of the female body and reject the denial of women’s materiality as prescribed by patriarchalism. Given that women were then educated for either maternal docility or social dejection, both narratives challenged their readers to rethink home, marriage, and patriarchal values. Daring to adopt deviant behaviors, however counterintuitively, is what allows Bormann’s protagonists access to intellectual freedom as well as to erotic pleasure.

Following the same structural pattern, the third chapter moves to Melo’s *Gradações* (1897) and *A luta* (1911). *Gradações* is organized as a collection of short stories that, though apparently disconnected, maintain cohesion through the repetition of characters, places, and situations, as well as through thematic progression. In it, Melo inserts Teresa of Ávila, Tantalus, Mazepa, and Prometheus, all of whom, Felix notes, heroically challenged authority. Therefore, she contends that in *Gradações* Melo challenges the then-dominant literary style, realism and naturalism, by proposing, in a sentimental tone, a “coletividade constituída por mulheres como referência de outra sociabilidade” (93). Through a process of either exile, mystical ecstasy, or self-analysis, the mature heroine experiences a displacement that marks her entrance in a new discursive and social milieu. Melo’s *A Luta*, observes Felix, further exposes “o abandono da casa colonial como o elemento fundamental de fixação da ordem patriarcal, avançando a conquistas de trabalho e de representação” (103). The book, she continues, juxtaposes a disciplined, stable colonial world of marriage and inheritance with a modern, though destitute, matrilineal family. Felix discusses how Melo’s female characters subvert stereotypes: just as the young Celina begins with the misguided belief that marriage is the way to social ascension, D. Margarida is able to free herself from archaic notions of what a woman’s role might be within the family and church.

At once dense and succinct, Felix’s *Sedução e heroísmo* is a detailed analysis of these two Brazilian women writers’ defiance and contribution to their

intellectual milieu. Given its sophisticated theoretical analysis and language, it's better suited for an advanced reader. Though the study provides precise explanations of every argument it advances, a novice reader might not recognize, for example, some of the major theoreticians presented, a few of whom, unfortunately, are not referenced in the bibliography. Nevertheless, Felix's book represents a great contribution to the history of Brazilian literature, especially since it focuses on lesser known authors who wrote during a very important period, showcasing the exact moment of profound societal transformation. It is objective, very well organized and written, and especially relevant for academics in the fields of feminism, exclusion, and resistance.

**Débora Ferreira**

*Utah Valley University*