

**Facts and Fictions:
Feminist Literary Criticism and Cultural Critique, 1968-2012**

by

Leah Claire Allen

Graduate Program in Literature
Duke University

Date: _____

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Graduate Program
in Literature in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2014

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

“Facts and Fictions: Feminist Literary Criticism and Cultural Critique, 1968-2012” is a critical history of the unfolding of feminist literary study in the US academy. It contributes to current scholarly efforts to revisit the 1970s by reconsidering often-repeated narratives about the critical naivety of feminist literary criticism in its initial articulation. As the story now goes, many of the most prominent feminist thinkers of the period engaged in unsophisticated literary analysis by conflating lived social reality with textual representation when they read works of literature as documentary evidence of real life. As a result, the work of these “bad critics,” particularly Kate Millett and Andrea Dworkin, has not been fully accounted for in literary critical terms.

This dissertation returns to Dworkin and Millett’s work to argue for a different history of feminist literary criticism. Rather than dismiss their work for its conflation of fact and fiction, I pay attention to the complexity at the heart of it, yielding a new perspective on the history and persistence of the struggle to use literary texts for feminist political ends. Dworkin and Millett established the centrality of reality and representation to the feminist canon debates of “the long 1970s,” the sex wars of the 1980s, and the more recent feminist turn to memoir. I read these productive periods in feminist literary criticism from 1968 to 2012 through their varied commitment to literary works.

Chapter One begins with Millett, who de-aestheticized male-authored texts to treat patriarchal literature in relation to culture and ideology. Her mode of literary interpretation was so far afield from the established methods of New Criticism that she

was not understood as a literary critic. She was repudiated in the feminist literary criticism that followed her and sought sympathetic methods for reading women's writing. In that decade, the subject of Chapter Two, feminist literary critics began to judge texts on the basis of their ability to accurately depict the reality of women's experiences.

Their vision of the relationship between life and fiction shaped arguments about pornography during the sex wars of the 1980s, the subject of Chapter Three. In this context, Dworkin was feminism's "bad critic." I focus on the literary critical elements of Dworkin's theories of pornographic representation and align her with Millett as a miscategorized literary critic. In the decades following the sex wars, many of the key feminist literary critics of the founding generation (including Dworkin, Jane Gallop, Carolyn Heilbrun, and Millett) wrote memoirs that recounted, largely in experiential terms, the history this dissertation examines. Chapter Four considers the story these memoirists told about the rise and fall of feminist literary criticism. I close with an epilogue on the place of literature in a feminist critical enterprise that has shifted toward privileging theory.

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Introduction: On Facts and Fictions

This dissertation is a critical history of feminist literary study in the United States at its most productive and prolific moments. It began as an inquiry into the status of literature in academic feminism more generally: as such, I initially set out to explore the role of literature in the early days of Women's Studies as an academic inter-discipline. Why, I asked, were literary texts so central to the founding of a purportedly interdisciplinary field of study? Why did so many modes of feminist interpretation have lineages drawn from literary criticism? Why had feminist thinkers both inside and outside the university so consistently turned to literature, a fictional form of representation, as a foundation for theories about real social relations? I was also curious about the present moment's erasure of what I took to be feminist theory's own debt to literary criticism. For this reason, I wanted my dissertation to offer insight into academic feminism's turn away from literature and toward theory, and to speculate on the relationship between feminist studies and the rise of critical theory in the Humanities.

These questions took me to Kate Millett's 1970 *Sexual Politics*.¹ Before it was a best-selling feminist manifesto that made the new argument that sex was political, and long before it became known as the first work of feminist literary criticism, it was a doctoral dissertation written in Columbia University's Department of English and Comparative Literature. It was one of the first known dissertations in literary studies written from an explicitly feminist perspective in the US. But its status was controversial from the beginning. The text had a fraught relationship with both the literary

¹ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1970).

establishment and the forms of feminist study that emerged in its wake. In fact, Millett's famous work was not even considered literary criticism when it was first published. In the 1970s, Millett was disavowed by many of the feminist scholars who followed her and founded the field of study that is now known as feminist literary criticism. In the decade of the field's inception, *Sexual Politics* was often cited as a cautionary tale: it was an example of "bad" literary criticism whose methods were to be avoided rather than replicated. Millett's work violated literary criticism's sacrosanct separation of the real and the textual world. In her analysis of literature alongside culture, Millett elided the difference between them, conflating the social relations lived under patriarchy and the content of the novels she interpreted. She made no distinction between authors and their characters and even argued that authors' personal histories informed their writing and inflected their protagonists. To her detractors and supporters alike, her work appeared to be so out of step with the most basic principles of literary study that it could not be considered literary criticism proper.²

The story of *Sexual Politics*' reception was so vexed that I had to begin to consider the impossibility of writing a simple history that would name it as the origin of feminist literary criticism and move on to other influential texts. But this was not my only problem, as Millett's reputation as a "bad critic," while most intense in the 1970s, has in a certain sense persisted to this day. The way her work is perceived in both literary fields and in feminist studies remains impacted by the fact that feminists initially

² Of course, these basic principles have a long history. As I will discuss at length in Chapter One and throughout this dissertation, New Criticism dominated the US academy in the period leading up to the publication of *Sexual Politics*, and it was Millett's refusal to adopt New Critical practices that made her work illegible as literary criticism.

miscategorized her work as social criticism and the related fact that literary critics were always hesitant to claim her as a “good” critic. Despite having been met with immense popular success in the early 1970s, *Sexual Politics* later went out of print for over ten years.³ As I interpret it, the stigma of her initial reception in literary criticism was partially responsible for her period of obscurity. But the story that needs to be told is not simply about Millett’s genius initially going unrecognized only to be restored under later critical conditions. *Sexual Politics* presented a conundrum for any account of the emergence of feminist literary criticism. How could I cite it as the inaugural text in feminist literary criticism when it had, and continues to have, such a complicated role in the history of literary study, feminism, and feminist literary criticism?

In accounting for *Sexual Politics*, I had to shift this dissertation’s focus, narrowing its range in order to capture the complexity of the debates I encountered. Instead of tracing the influence of literature on feminist study since the 1970s, this project now studies the unfolding of feminist literary criticism as a self-named practice, with attention to its major conflicts, methodological divergences, and critical impasses. In calling the dissertation “Facts and Fictions,” I am foregrounding the linked roles of reality and representation in that unfolding. Reality and representation were the two main forces which determined Millett’s place in literary history and subsequently defined the feminist literary criticism that reacted *against* her work as it attempted to gain legitimacy as a distinct mode of literary criticism.

³ Kate Millett, “Out of the Loop and Out of Print,” *On the Issues* Summer (1998): 39. Millett has also written about her inability to find a publisher or an audience for her past or recent works.

The story my dissertation now tells begins by focusing on how Millett's scholarly methods were scandalous for feminist literary criticism in the early decade of the field's formation. Her conflation of social reality and literary representation raised issues about realism, experience, and representation that presented, and continue to present, major problems for feminist literary criticism. If the literary was a social form, as Millett suggested, how could critics respect the literary specificity of textual representation? In other words, what was the difference between social and literary criticism and when and for whom did this difference matter? For the social critics discussed in this dissertation, including Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer, feminist criticism was aimed at lived social relations under patriarchy. But Millett insisted that those lived relations *included* literature, literary texts, the mechanisms of literary criticism, and that these forms must be treated in the same way as other social issues. She made it difficult, if not impossible, for critics to make distinctions between life and its representation in fiction—the very distinctions on which literary criticism had depended since its inception. While many feminist critics who followed her in the 1970s sidestepped this vexed relationship between reality and representation, others tackled it head-on. No one was more adamant that the illumination of false representations and negative images of women was key to feminist social struggle than Andrea Dworkin. Her 1974 text *Woman Hating* placed the origin and continuation of patriarchy in the cultural narratives that were recorded in literary texts.⁴ Dworkin consistently considered literature a mirror that reflected patriarchal social relations. In her own terms, her writing was social critique, and yet

⁴ Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: Dutton, 1974).

there is an argument to be made that her work was primarily *literary* criticism; at all times, she read the social through forms of interpretation developed from literary studies and she consistently turned to literary works to ground her theories of patriarchy.

In the turn from Millett to Dworkin, I am interested in how the insistence that representation was a true reflection of reality was never fully compatible with “good” feminist literary criticism, especially during the sex wars and the debates about pornography in which Dworkin was a major player. The contemporary narrative that is often told about feminist literary criticism in this period—what I call in this dissertation “the long 1970s”—is overdetermined by a sense of its critical naivety.⁵ This narrative of insufficiency was heavily influenced, if not driven, by the effects of Dworkin and Millett’s refusal to separate fact from fiction. Subsequent generations of feminist scholars have been embarrassed by their perceived lack of critical sophistication and have underplayed the importance of their methods in the development of feminist literary criticism. In contrast, this dissertation pays close attention to the moments in which Dworkin and Millett intentionally collapse reality and representation. It uses its close reading of Dworkin and Millett to trace the influence of these two “bad critics” on the development of feminist literary criticism. I argue that no matter how often both these figures were rejected for their conflation of social reality with textual representation, the problem of that relationship has remained central in feminist literary criticism.

⁵ Since some important work from the late 1960s and early 1980s shared the same critical concerns as the work that was produced in the 1970s proper, I use the term ‘the long 1970s’ to include that work. The term also enables me to indicate that the preoccupations of feminist literary criticism defy conventional decade-based periodization.

While Dworkin and Millett's methodologies were challenged throughout the period under discussion here, one aspect of their critical practice prevailed: feminist literary critics from 1970 onwards used *literary objects* to sort out the relationship between reality and representation. In building theories of social relations and resisting patriarchy, feminist literary critics turned to a wide range of fictional and non-fictional texts and interpreted them through the idioms of literary study. These objects included novels, plays, poems, biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, essays, fairy tales, print pornography, and experimental forms such as biomythography.⁶ At all times the critics, authors, and activists who populate this dissertation used literary objects to navigate the distance between real life and fiction.⁷ While this distance was miniscule or even non-existent for Dworkin and Millett, for others (more in line with mainstream literary criticism) it was a vast gulf that rightfully ensured the specificity of literature as a representational, artistic, and aesthetic form with few political commitments to real life. It was their commitment to literary objects as the content and substance of social relations that led Dworkin and Millett to oppose the separation of fact and fiction, a separation long justified on aesthetic grounds. They wanted to hold male authors accountable for the patriarchal content of their works and refused to allow them to hide behind the polite distance between author and protagonist that appropriate critical methods demanded. It was this desire that turned Dworkin and Millett into "bad critics" and also the reason why they are at the center of this dissertation; in using literary objects to mediate and

⁶ I use the term "literary object" because many of these forms are only debatably covered under the term "literature." My goal is not to evaluate their literary status or merit but rather to accept them as important texts in the archive of objects upon which feminist literary study was built.

⁷ As well, literary texts were the *object* of feminist study. They were its purpose, the foundation of its inquiry, and the means by which feminist study originally self-constituted as a field.

politicize the relationship between reality and representation, they isolated the concerns that would occupy feminist literary criticism through the rest of its development, even when their own methods were repudiated. In the story this dissertation tells, Millett and Dworkin, the subjects of Chapters One and Three, are the architects of the ensuing debates discussed in Chapters Two and Four.

I argue that Dworkin and Millett were certainly not “bad critics.” Rather, they developed a mode of literary reading that has been too quickly dismissed, one in which literary objects *could* serve as documentary evidence of real life. In Millett’s words about her own text, “I have operated on the premise that there is room for a criticism which takes into account the larger cultural context in which literature is conceived and produced.”⁸ The way in which she, and then Dworkin, went about this led to what Toril Moi described as their “extreme reflectionism.” In 1985, Moi summed up many similar objections to Dworkin and Millett’s work on the basis that they failed to acknowledge “the way in which writers constantly *select* the elements they wish to use in their texts” as “one of the basic facts of textual creativity.” As Moi put it, “reflectionism posits that the artist’s selective creation should be measured against ‘real life,’ thus assuming that the only constraint on the artist’s work is his or her perception of the ‘real world.’”⁹ In my view, Dworkin and Millett consciously made this assumption, anticipated later cultural

⁸ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970, xii.

⁹ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 45. Here Moi is addressing ‘Images of Women’ critics such as Susan Koppelman Cornillon, but her analysis includes Millett as well, for instance when she says that “the title of the main literary section of *Sexual Politics* is ‘The literary reflection’, which would seem to imply a somewhat mechanical, simplistic theory of the relationship between literature and the social forces she has previously discussed.” *Ibid.*, 30.

studies forms of reading, and deliberately argued that a text's location in culture was the single most important factor to consider in its interpretation.

The story I now tell in this dissertation, then, proceeds from the understanding that Dworkin and Millett's methods and contextualization of literary objects were neither "bad criticism" nor inaugural modes for feminist studies. Rather, they were part of the complicated unfolding of a field that was not at all linear; at many moments, feminist literary critics turned their backs on the figures and modes that had preceded them. This is not strictly a story of disavowal, however. Just as often, feminist literary critics returned to previous forms of literary study and intentionally picked up elements that had been long forgotten or denied, for instance when Millett strategically politicized elements of early twentieth-century criticism, the period Gerald Graff has described as the emergence of criticism.¹⁰ Throughout this dissertation, I attempt to rescue Millett's methodology: I ground this project in feminist writers as personalities, as people. My aim is also to recuperate Dworkin as a thinker and as a specifically literary critic. I realize these goals by prioritizing context, circumstance, and even biography. In so doing I make the claim that this particular history can best be explained through the methods of the figures who instigated that history.

Chapter One begins with Millett's radical break with the methods of New Criticism. New Criticism focused on the text itself to the exclusion of all else, in its own departure from earlier modes of more contextual biographical and linguistic criticism. Millett intervened into the New Critical modes that were firmly entrenched in 1970 when

¹⁰ Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 121.

Sexual Politics was published.¹¹ She insisted that male-authored novels bore a transparent relationship to real life. This insistence made the literary object a social document. It also allowed feminist critical sensibilities to emerge and revise the meaning and stakes of attending to “culture” as an important tool of patriarchal power. Millett argued that male-authored texts were not so much fiction as fact: their authors recorded (and celebrated) a blatantly masculinist and patriarchal world. As a result, she chose to de-aestheticize their work and refused to consider their novels as artistic constructions, or in other words, as properly fictional. She interpreted Jean Genet, D. H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer, and Henry Miller as sexual politicians whose texts had didactic and pedagogical aims. In the face of over thirty years of New Criticism and its separation of the author and context from “the work itself,” Millett put the author and his patriarchal context at the forefront of her analysis.¹² She claimed there was essentially no difference between a literary object and an ideological treatise. In hindsight, it is also remarkable that *Sexual Politics* had a seeming disinterest in the status of women’s literature (literature written by women that purported to depict women’s experience). In this sense, authorship for women was

¹¹ As will be discussed at detail in Chapter One, this timeline of New Criticism’s prevalence in the US academy has been contested and rewritten many times: Mark Jancovich placed the origin of New Criticism in 1930, while Alastair Morrison argued that it was more accurate to cite “around 1919” as the beginning of the movement even though most critics used 1941 as a “date of convenience.” Frank Lentricchia claimed New Criticism maintained its hold on the academy until “about 1957,” while Miranda Hickman said it lasted until the 1970s. While I deal with the importance of this contested timeline in Chapter One, I accept the 1930s to the 1960s as the general period of New Criticism’s strongest influence on the US academy. Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Alastair Morrison, “Eliot, the Agrarians, and the Political Subtext of New Critical Formalism,” in *Rereading the New Criticism*, ed. Miranda B. Hickman and John D. McIntyre (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 47–64; Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Miranda B. Hickman, “Rereading the New Criticism,” in *Rereading the New Criticism*, ed. Miranda B. Hickman and John D. McIntyre (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012).

¹² While examples of New Criticism privileging “the work itself” abound, perhaps the most stringent in its focus on the work in and of itself was Cleanth Brooks’ *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947).

implicitly conceived in *Sexual Politics* in the critical mode, which had a clear impact on the unfolding of a distinct feminist literary criticism.

This relationship of authorship to text in feminist literary criticism is at the center of Chapter Two. Because Millett read on the attack and eviscerated the male authors whose works she interpreted, the feminist critics who followed her could not use her work as a template to bring feminist literary analysis into the university. They aimed to incorporate women authors into the canon and to read and teach historical and contemporaneous women authors in their work and classes. Many feminist literary critics wanted to cultivate sympathetic methods for reading women's writing that would encourage the production of more works by women. Of these critics, most sought the representation of women's real lives in their works, and valued novels and poetry on the basis of how accurately they represented the conditions of women's inner lives and experiences in the patriarchal world. Others, such as those Moi has called "Images of Women" critics, turned their attention to depictions of women in texts authored by both men and women, and sought to unpack the damaging history of the narrow roles women had been allowed to play in literary objects. In all these veins, feminist literary critics of the long 1970s debated the usefulness of the canon and moved to consider the role of the woman writer, reader, and the feminist critical act. While this work had an incredible influence on the academy and accomplished "the 'opening' of the canon" to women authors, the fact that it often did not make meaningful distinctions between fact and

fiction instantiated a problem of representation for the feminist critics who followed in the 1980s.¹³

The feminist sex wars of the 1980s included some of feminism's most prolific, if divisive, moments. In Chapter Three, I analyze the legacy of the feminist literary critics of the long 1970s and their desire to see reality and women's experience depicted in literary objects. The main debate of the sex wars was whether or not reality could ever be separable from fantasy. Anti-pornography feminists such as Dworkin drew on the literary modes of feminist interpretation that dominated the 1970s and argued that there could be no such thing as fiction, as even fantastical representations bore a meaningful relationship to real life. I turn to Dworkin because she has so rarely been read as a literary critic, despite the fact that she grounded her analysis of pornography in literature and, in fact, was reading and interpreting culture through the practices of literary study. When issues of censorship and representation became public concerns during a backlash against feminism in general, feminists were called upon to stake positions on pornography. They often justified their pro- or anti-pornography stances with reference to the theories of representation that had grown out of the literary criticism of the long 1970s. To that end, I read the presence of literature and literary objects in the sex wars. How does it change the putative history of feminist literary criticism and the sex wars to see them as wars about *literary* representation? Chapter Three's main project is to read Dworkin as a literary critic and to argue that Dworkin's theories of pornography were in fact theories of literature. In her archive of texts, *Woman Hating* in particular, I find that she grounded

¹³ Christine Froula, "When Eve Reads Milton: Undoing the Canonical Economy," *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (December 1, 1983): 323, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343353>.

her theories of pornography in literary objects and that she developed a mode of social and cultural criticism borrowed from literary studies. Along with other anti-pornography/pro-censorship feminists, Dworkin believed that literary objects bore a prescriptive, pedagogical relationship to real life. Dworkin deliberately and intentionally refused to separate reality from representation. Building on Millett's earlier insights, she argued that fantasy did not exist in a realm distinct from reality. For Dworkin, who became a representative of the anti-pornography position in both popular and academic understandings of feminism, there could be no such thing as fiction.

Following Dworkin and the sex wars, the feminist literary critics of the founding generation returned, once again, to notions of authorial agency that depended on the author's influence in the real world. In Chapter Four, I examine the re-emergence of "experience" and the biographical in feminist literary criticism at the turn of the twenty-first century. The consistent incompatibility of reality and representation through Millett's work, the literary critical debates that followed her, and in the subsequent sex wars led me to the proliferation of feminist memoirs at the turn of the twenty-first century. In a context where the bulk of the feminist work that occurred over two long decades has been cast as retrograde, it is no surprise that in more recent decades many of the feminist critics who participated in those debates would turn to memoir as a means of rewriting, reframing, and recasting the dominant narrative of the long 1970s and the sex wars.

In the memoirs that academic and activist feminists wrote in unprecedented numbers during the 1990s and 2000s, "experience"—this time the critic's own

experience—came to mediate the trauma that the critique of the subject generated for feminist thought. Instead of asking questions about the representability of women’s experiences in fictional texts, feminist memoirists foregrounded their own experiences as possible answers to the problems of fictional representation with which feminist literary critics had been grappling since 1968.¹⁴ They reasserted the importance of the personal to the political that had informed the radicalism of 1970s feminism. They attempted to regain the cultural authority of the author figure that Millett had denied the male authors she read, mainly by asserting the memoir’s ability to recollect or remember the past. At the same time, they *reemphasized* the importance of literary objects to the project of feminist literary criticism which had seemed to drift toward theory in the 1980s. The shift toward the personal in feminist literary criticism began in the late 1980s with works of personal and autobiographical literary criticism such as Jane Tompkins’s influential 1987 article “Me and My Shadow.”¹⁵ Early adopters of the personal mode, Nancy Miller in particular, wrote about the importance of the feminist “I” and harkened back to second wave feminism’s founding claim that the personal was political.¹⁶ At first, the personal appeared in asides and brief autobiographical moments in critical articles, but the impulse to the critical “I” transitioned through the 1990s and 2000s into a huge range of full-fledged book-length memoirs. While these memoirs took an array of topics as their subjects and were authored by a host of differently-positioned feminists, it is notable that

¹⁴ Although Chapter One begins with Millett’s 1970 text, I make a claim to the period from 1968-2012 because Mary Ellmann’s 1968 *Thinking About Women* was an important, if unacknowledged, precursor to *Sexual Politics*.

¹⁵ Jane Tompkins, “Me and My Shadow,” *New Literary History* 19, no. 1 (October 1, 1987): 169–78.

¹⁶ Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

many of the founding figures of feminist literary criticism produced stories of their own lives in this period. I argue that they were rearticulating the political importance of the personal in the face of their perception that literary and feminist theory had occluded women's experiences by privileging the abstract realm of theory. Writing in an ostensibly non-fictional genre but consistently thematizing the vagaries of memory, figures such as Dworkin, Jane Gallop, Carolyn Heilbrun, and Millett returned to the realm of fact, but at the same time they emphasized that their memoirs were *also* fictions.

Because the initial miscategorization of *Sexual Politics* that launched this story is so important to the trajectory this dissertation has taken, in it I am very invested in categorization: in the first chapter, I resist Millett's early categorization as a social critic, and argue that my examination of the nuances of her contribution to feminist literary criticism is a means of telling a different story about the field's history. In Chapter Three, I make a similar argument about Dworkin. Ironically, given this project's origins in questions about the status of literature in relation to feminist theory, I am attempting to pull both Dworkin and Millett out of the realm of feminist social criticism and theory and into the realm and the history of feminist literary criticism. As a result, I accept the importance of categories such as activist feminist, academic feminist, social critic, literary critic, cultural critic, and so on.

At the same time, the story I tell is not just about the academy nor about academic literary study. It takes place against the backdrop of feminism's activist and movement-based history. Feminist social critics such as Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer, as well as feminist writers and poets including Dorothy Allison and Adrienne Rich, are an

important part of its narrative. Groups such as the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT), The Lesbian Sex Mafia, Redstockings, and Women Against Pornography (WAP) figure centrally in my discussions of the debates about reality and representation, which were not at all restricted to the academy. I also consider popular locations that registered reactions to new feminist reading strategies, including *Harper's Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *Penthouse*, *Time*, and other widely-read magazines and publications. In these sites, readers and reviewers grappled with the implications of the growing body of feminist literary criticism for popular reading. They captured the energy and public interest in feminist debates that sometimes, in the present, appear as though they were confined to academic journals and monographs. This dissertation is an institutional history, to be sure, but in the long 1970s the academic institution had a particular relationship to public debate. That relationship is perhaps best exemplified in the Theater for Ideas debate on Women's Liberation held in New York City's Town Hall in 1971, which I discuss in Chapter One.¹⁷ In that debate Norman Mailer, the central antagonist of feminist literary criticism, faced off against Jacqueline Ceballos, then-president of the National Organization for Women (NOW); feminist social critic Germaine Greer; poet, writer, critic, and lesbian separatist Jill Johnston; and popular literary critic Diana Trilling. In one evening in April 1971, Norman Mailer fully registered feminist literary criticism's threat to his authority as a male author, and exemplified the reasons why *Sexual Politics* had been misunderstood by the literary establishment. Clinging tightly to the methods of New Criticism, Mailer asserted and reasserted that he could not be held

¹⁷ D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hedegus, *Town Bloody Hall: A Dialogue on Women's Liberation* (Pennebaker Hedegus Films, 1979).

responsible for the words and actions of the characters in his novels who were, after all, completely separate from him as an author. The debate was raucous: more than one audience member walked (or rather, stormed) out, Mailer called an audience member “cunty,” and Betty Friedan and Susan Sontag stood up to speak during the question and answer period. The productive tension and energy of the event, which did not feature academics nor take place at a university, was nevertheless fully a part of feminist literary criticism’s institutional history.

While I include many sites and figures outside the academy, this dissertation also takes place “at the center.” Although feminist literary criticism was initially formed on the margins of the discipline of English, the vast majority of the academics, critics, authors, and public figures I discuss are now well-known, well-respected, and thoroughly anthologized. The universities whose names come up throughout this dissertation are familiar: Barnard, Bennington, Columbia, Cornell, Wellesley College. Many of the feminist literary critics I discuss are heterosexual, white, and, by virtue of their status in the late twentieth-century university, middle-class. While the history I tell includes the development of black and lesbian feminist literary criticism, it does so by using the contributions of critics such as Barbara Christian, Hazel Carby, Gloria T. Hull, Barbara Smith, and Bonnie Zimmerman whose voices are now fully at the center of the history of feminism, feminist literary criticism, and feminist studies. I take this focus because I am also interpreting the story of feminist literary criticism as it has been represented in the most significant texts and anthologies of academic feminism. I offer my own interventions into this version of feminist history, add nuance when necessary, and

certainly recuperate figures such as Dworkin who have been written out of the story. And yet, at the same time, I prioritize the “center,” the accepted histories, the authors, critics, and writers who were the most prominent and influential. In so doing, I tell the story, both the facts and the fictions, of feminist literary criticism’s instantiation as a field.

Chapter One: “Don’t you know the simple functions of the novel?”¹: Kate Millett’s Radical Theory of Literary Practice

Introduction

When Doubleday Press published Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* in July of 1970, the book was almost immediately the subject of intense controversy in the popular press. Some publications like *The New York Times* and *Life* magazine hailed it as “a scholarly polemic which is to Women’s Lib roughly what *Das Kapital* was to Marxism”² and anointed Millett the “high priestess of the current feminist wave.”³ Others, like *Harper’s Magazine*, issued scathing critiques of the text with titles such as “The Middle Class Mind of Kate Millett.”⁴ Regardless of whether it was greeted with admiration or derision, *Sexual Politics* was received as an important missive in the emerging category of wildly popular, bestselling feminist non-fiction that accompanied the growth of the women’s liberation movement in North America and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. Even those commentators who dismissed *Sexual Politics* on ideological grounds acknowledged its notoriety, as in this 1970 review: “imagine the sheer comedy of it: a book declaring itself to be a ‘revolutionary’ manifesto, presenting Jean Genet as a moral exemplum, and with the barest lilt of the eyebrow envisaging the abolition of the family, gains for its author a not-so-small fortune, selection by the Book-of-the-Month Club, and the cover of *Time*.”⁵

¹ These words are Norman Mailer’s, and will be discussed at some length in this chapter.

² Marie-Claude Wrenn, “The Furious Young Philosopher Who Got It Down on Paper,” *Life*, September 4, 1970, 22.

³ Frank Prial, “Feminist Philosopher: Katharine Murray Millett,” *The New York Times*, August 27, 1970, 30.

⁴ Irving Howe, “The Middle-Class Mind of Kate Millett,” *Harper’s Magazine* 241, no. 1447 (December 1970): 110–29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

Comedic or not, the fame and fortune which greeted Kate Millett upon the publication of *Sexual Politics* put the book in a category with texts like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (published in the US in 1964) and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (published in the UK in 1970 and a year later in the US). These works of feminist social criticism sold millions of paperback copies and spent weeks on bestseller lists in English-speaking countries. Read alongside Greer and Friedan's texts, *Sexual Politics* was a deep denunciation of the prevailing social order, the danger of which a 1970 reviewer of the text described by saying "the threat is clear. Kate Millett has formulated a forceful indictment of patriarchal society[.] One need not agree with every example...to come to the realization that 'there remains one ancient and universal scheme for the domination of one birth group by another—the scheme that prevails in the area of sex.'"⁶ When this denunciation of patriarchy was connected to newly organized forms of feminist social activism, as Greer and Friedan both were, the danger of such forms of analysis was in fact clear. Unlike those two authors, however, Millett's work was aimed not just at social relations lived under patriarchy, but at the representation of such social relations in *literature*. Despite this central fact about the text, *Sexual Politics* has rarely been studied for its explicit theory of literary interpretation, and was not received as a work of feminist literary criticism. Rather, both in its immediate reception in the early 1970s and later as it became a canonical feminist text, *Sexual Politics* has most often been considered in relation to the women's movement and feminist social activism.

⁶ Phyllis Jacobson, "Kate Millett and Her Critics," *New Politics* Fall (1970): 1.

In this chapter, I separate *Sexual Politics* from the category of feminist social criticism in which it has been read and consider it specifically as feminist literary criticism. By situating *Sexual Politics* in the context of literary studies in the 1960s and 1970s, I focus on its mode of literary reading, rather than its account of patriarchy. In so doing, I highlight Kate Millett's remarkably prescient contribution to literary study and analyze the significance of her radical break with the prevailing methods and ethics of New Criticism,⁷ which held a prominent position in literary studies from the 1930s to the 1960s.⁸ *Sexual Politics* was a sudden, radical departure from the then-dominant model of literary scholarship.⁹ In addition, I argue, Millett's work anticipated the field of cultural

⁷ Constructing a precise definition of New Criticism is difficult: as Frank Lentricchia observed, "*the New Criticism was in fact no monolith but an inconsistent and sometimes confused movement.*" *After the New Criticism*, xii–xiii. It is somewhat reductive to describe the variety and diversity of the critical work which occurred from the 1930 to the 1960s under the heading of New Criticism: as Gerald Graff argued, for instance, after World War II a "compromise" emerged "between New Critical and historical pedagogy" *Professing Literature*, 11. In addition to these narratives which complicated New Criticism as it was enacted from the 1930s to the 1960s, several recent scholars have attempted to counter the dominant narratives that have been told and reiterated about New Criticism since it lost critical favor in the 1960s. With their recent edited collection *ReReading the New Criticism*, Miranda Hickman and John McIntyre have collected a range of essays that refute long-dominant notions of, as Hickman put it, New Criticism as emblematic of "irresponsibly formalist approaches to literature that showed critical practice at its narrowest." Hickman, "Rereading the New Criticism," 2. As examples of such work, Hickman and McIntyre cited Mark Jancovich's book-length refutation of the well-established idea that New Critics completely rejected political engagement through literary study, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism*. Likewise, Hickman and McIntyre pointed to other work in the late 2000s in the same vein: Jane Gallop, "The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading," *Profession*, January 1, 2007, 181–86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595865>; Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007); Camille Paglia, *Break, Blow, Burn* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005).

⁸ This timeline is generally agreed upon by most scholars of New Criticism, though some debate exists about its precise origins and endpoints. Alastair Morrison, for instance, noted that while a "date of convenience" for the first work of New Criticism is 1941, the year in which John Crowe Ransom's edited collection *The New Criticism* was published, Jancovich went back further to 1930 and the group publication *I'll Take My Stand* by Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and others. Morrison went back *still* further to "around 1919," and the beginning of T.S. Eliot's career. "Eliot, the Agrarians, and the Political Subtext of New Critical Formalism," 49. The end of New Criticism is even more difficult to locate: Lentricchia argued that "by about 1957" New Criticism was in such "moribund condition" that it left a "critical void." *After the New Criticism*, 4. Hickman, however, claimed that it was not until 1970 that New Criticism's "academic sun was setting." "Rereading the New Criticism," 18.

⁹ This chapter accepts the dominant view of New Criticism that has prevailed since it lost critical favor. I am concerned with the way in which New Criticism and its institutionalization were perceived by critics

studies and its modes of reading culture in relation to literature. In fact, following the rise of cultural studies, the literary practice seen in *Sexual Politics* is now considered a standard way of thinking about literature and culture. In 1970, however, this method and its break with literary convention was so drastic as to be unintelligible to Millett's many detractors and even most of her supporters, particularly when her text was read as an activist work primarily linked to the feminist social movement.

This chapter returns to *Sexual Politics*' origins as a work of feminist literary criticism and begins by addressing the reasons why it has so seldom been read this way. I explain how factors surrounding the media's representation of the text fueled the perception that it was an activist manifesto, and discuss the complications that arose from that assumption. Second, I argue that Millett was engaged in a radical de-aestheticization of the literature she read, and that her work was difficult to understand as valid literary criticism because it departed from New Criticism's formalist attention to the internal workings of texts. New Critics "established a certain conception of methodological rigor as a condition of professional respectability. This conception... implied the isolation of literature as an autonomous mode of discourse with its own special 'mode of existence,' distinct from that of philosophy, politics, and history." New Criticism encouraged "the detachment of 'close reading' from the cultural purposes that had originally inspired it."¹⁰ Millett's interdisciplinary work could not have been further from this methodology, or

before, during, and immediately after the publication of *Sexual Politics*. As a result, I do not attend to some of the finer nuances about New Criticism that contemporary scholars such as Hickman and McIntyre are currently attempting to elucidate.

¹⁰ Graff, *Professing Literature*, 145.

from the contention that literature was separate from other modes of existence. And yet, her work was incredibly potent as the often-unacknowledged foundation for feminist literary criticism's development. Following this explication, I turn to Norman Mailer's critique of *Sexual Politics*, which was representative of many of the claims made against Millett's work in the 1970s: that she was an inadequate literary critic with a fundamental misunderstanding of the appropriate (New Critical) way of reading literature. I offer instead my own reading of *Sexual Politics*, which emphasizes the radical nature of her treatment of literary objects as cultural artifacts, stripped of their aesthetic value. This chapter ends by mounting a defense against the critiques of Millett's work on a basis that was unavailable to her contemporaries. Other feminist scholars in the 1970s could not defend her against the claim that she was a "bad critic" because her methods were similarly unintelligible to them following the heyday of New Criticism.

Sexual Politics and Social Criticism

Millett's hybrid position as an activist, artist, and academic impacted the media's rush to include *Sexual Politics* in a category with Greer and Friedan's bestsellers. The text was a scholarly work in the sense that before its publication by Doubleday, Millett defended it as her dissertation for a PhD in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University.¹¹ At the same time, however, before 1970 Millett was known as an artist, and dealt with uneasy connections between her artistic fame and her academic work. Well in advance of the publication of *Sexual Politics*, she described her life as a

¹¹ Fittingly, given the text's status as both an academic and a popular treatise, she completed the work with the motivation of an advance of four thousand dollars from Doubleday. *Sexual Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), xvii.

doctoral candidate in literature and an artist as a “double life.” She wrote that “during my preliminary examination the fact that two of my sculptures had recently appeared in *Life* magazine was thrown up to me as proof I was not a serious scholar.”¹² According to Millett, she was able to write the “‘to hell with it’ first chapter” of *Sexual Politics* because she had been fired from her teaching post at Barnard College as a result of her participation in the Columbia University student strike of 1968 and was no longer working toward a PhD with the explicit goal of maintaining her teaching position at Barnard.¹³ Clearly, her self-proclaimed status as “both a student and a teacher as well as a committed feminist, a protestor against the war in Vietnam, and a pacifist” contributed to the public perception of her as an activist, much like Greer and Friedan.¹⁴ Her experiences within the academy also placed her in public opposition to that institution in a manner that played out in the popular press: after the publication of her dissertation, one of Millett’s doctoral committee members, George Stade, was quoted in a 1970 *Time* magazine article saying that “reading the book is like sitting with your testicles in a nutcracker.”¹⁵

The fact that the book both belonged and did not belong to the literary academy was a part of the circumstances of its creation and also a major factor in its reception. It was unclear whether the book was intended for an audience of literary critics or as wide a mainstream readership as possible. This refusal to claim a generic position is reflected in its arrangement: as Millett wrote in the preface to the first edition, *Sexual Politics* was

¹² Ibid., xv.

¹³ Ibid., xv–xvi.

¹⁴ Ibid., xvi.

¹⁵ “Nation: Who’s Come a Long Way, Baby?,” *Time*, August 31, 1970, 16–21.

“composed of equal parts of literary and cultural criticism, is something of an anomaly, a hybrid, possibly a new mutation altogether.”¹⁶ The text was markedly interdisciplinary, a status which Millett attributed to the way in which it was a product of both an academic and an activist context. In addition to siding with students in the 1968 strike, Millett participated in Columbia Women’s Liberation, a group where she and other graduate students and faculty “deliberately [used] the tools of our academic training to attack the system.” At the same time, she said, “we were dedicated to scholarship, loved it, believed in it so much that we dreamed about it out loud, lying on someone’s rug uptown and outlining a curriculum freed of sexual prejudice, a whole new way to see history, literature, economics, psychology, political events. We were beginning to invent women’s studies, we were reinterpreting knowledge, discovering a new learning.”¹⁷ This “new learning” plainly crossed not just disciplinary boundaries but also brought into question the divide between popular and scholarly publications.¹⁸ This divide was strikingly visible in the way *Sexual Politics* was received so differently from the one related work of feminist literary criticism which preceded it.

Mary Ellmann’s text *Thinking About Women*, published in 1968, was a more conventional work with a more typical provenance for an academic work of literary criticism. Ellmann, who held a PhD in English, published the text while she was a professor of English literature at Wellesley College. *Sexual Politics* eclipsed the

¹⁶ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970, xii.

¹⁷ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 2000, xvii–xviii.

¹⁸ Of course, this divide is in many ways a false one. There is no reason, for instance, why an academic work of literary criticism cannot also be a bestseller, and *Sexual Politics* in fact proves that such a thing is possible. However, since the classification of the text is so important to its relation to the literary academy, it is necessary to pay attention to this split and accept it as meaningful.

publication of *Thinking About Women* both at the time of its publication and also in later feminist retrospectives: Jane Gallop, for instance, has described *Sexual Politics* as the “first book of academic feminist criticism”¹⁹ and Patricia Clough revised this statement to name it “the first book of academic feminist literary criticism.”²⁰ Few such claims were made about Ellmann’s text despite the fact that *Thinking About Women* engaged in feminist analysis of sexual stereotypes in literature. It also critiqued prevailing forms of what Ellmann called “phallic criticism” in literary analysis, accomplishing work similar to Millett’s.²¹ Millett had read Ellmann’s prior work, though she cited Ellmann only once in *Sexual Politics*, and not until page three hundred and twenty-nine (in a footnote to this one reference, Millett wrote that “Ellmann is the first literary critic I know of to comment extensively on recent masculine reaction [in literary criticism]”).²² Their projects belonged to the same, new category but were received in vastly different ways. While Ellmann’s work was well-received for an academic text, it was not met with anything like the readership that purchased fifteen thousand copies of *Sexual Politics* in just two months after its publication. Nor was Ellmann ever featured on the cover of *Time* magazine. The difference between the impact the two texts made revealed the extent to which Millett’s text was seen as a work of social criticism, and not an academic work of literary criticism.

In addition, *Sexual Politics* was linked to Greer and Friedan’s general feminist

¹⁹ Jane Gallop, *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 77. Here Gallop also points out that the “honor” of being “the first book of feminist literary criticism” is “probably” due to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. I concur with Gallop’s assessment.

²⁰ Patricia Ticineto Clough, “The Hybrid Criticism of Patriarchy: Rereading Kate Millett’s ‘Sexual Politics,’” *The Sociological Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1994): 473.

²¹ Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 27.

²² Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970, 329.

texts, and not Ellmann's work of literary criticism, as a result of the media's insistence on connecting Millett to the developing feminist activist movement. By the early 1970s, the mainstream media had a tendency to hail the authors of feminist non-fiction texts as the leaders of the emerging second wave of feminism, in many cases before the movement could even name its own leaders, or in spite of its desires to remain free of leaders. Occasionally, the media's treatment of feminist non-fiction writers as movement leaders was accurate: Friedan, for instance, willingly took on this public role and founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, three years after the publication of her non-fiction best-seller made her a well-known name in the US.²³ Friedan's text was immediately and intimately connected to the development of an organized women's movement: it gave voice to the "strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States" that the media connected to the growing women's movement. In writing publicly of "the problem

²³ In his biography of Friedan, Daniel Horowitz traced the ways in which Friedan deliberately manipulated her presence in the media to support a narrative within which she was thrust into the public eye and into a leadership position in the women's movement as a result of the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*. As Joanne Boucher described it, "Friedan's self-presentation in *The Feminine Mystique* is that of a rather naïve and apolitical albeit bright and university-educated suburban housewife who stumbles onto a startling discovery—that America's housewives are, in fact, miserable. Friedan depicts herself as sharing in all the experiences of her fellow housewives. She is one of them and has experienced their plight." "Betty Friedan and the Radical Past of Liberal Feminism," *New Politics* 9, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 23. Contrary to this narrative, however, Friedan was actually an active student, labor union, and communist organizer prior to the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* and was intentionally seeking a leadership role within the women's movement. She de-emphasized and even obscured these activities in order to maintain her role in the media as a former housewife whose political activism was a response to the sheer necessity of creating an organized women's movement. According to Horowitz, "her claim that she came to political consciousness out of a disillusionment with her life as a suburban housewife was part of her reinvention of herself as she wrote and promoted *The Feminine Mystique*... Friedan's version of her life, which historians and journalists readily accepted, hid from view the connection between her union activity of the 1940s and early 1950s and the feminism she articulated in the 1960s. Her story made it possible for white suburban women readers to identify with its author and thereby enhanced the book's appeal." *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 2.

that has no name”²⁴ (which she described as “simply the fact that American women are kept from growing to their full human capacities”), Friedan attempted to speak for the voiceless. Her call for a “drastic reshaping” of culture in order to counter the forces that kept women from their potential came with specific prescriptions for change.²⁵ As such, the media’s representation of her text as a call to feminist action, with Friedan herself as leader, was correct.

The media’s transformation of Millett as a writer into a feminist leader was more forced. The early claims about her authority within the women’s movement quoted above, combined with intense scrutiny of Millett’s personal life, resulted in an uneasy tension between Millett, the media, and a variety of feminist groups.²⁶ For some feminists, collusion with the mainstream media was seen as incompatible with the anti-establishment goals of radical feminism, and as Kristan Poirot put it, “Millett’s media emergence...raised considerable suspicions over her devotion to radical politics,”²⁷ particularly within feminist groups where “issues of who should or could not speak FOR the movement and who should be seen [if anybody] as leaders of the movement were

²⁴ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963), 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 364.

²⁶ Millett encountered intense pressure to publicly identify her sexuality. In *Flying*, her 1974 memoir, she described the experience of being publicly confronted on this issue during a panel discussion at Columbia University: “Sidney warned there’d be trouble, the place full of Radical Lesbians wanting me to clear things up, contradict the press image of nice married lady. Straight. O.K.... Time stops: the felt pen recording, the magazine, the tape recorders, my terrified mind stops remembering it, while Teresa Juarez’s voice loud butches me from a floor mike center of the room, a bully for all the correct political reasons. Five hundred people looking at me. Are you a Lesbian? Everything pauses, faces look up in terrible silence. I hear them not breathe. That word in public, the word I waited a lifetime to hear. Finally I am accused. ‘Say it! Say you are a Lesbian.’ Yes I said. Yes. Because I know what she means. The line goes, inflexible as a fascist edict, that bisexuality is a cop-out. Yes I said yes I am a Lesbian. It was the last strength I had.” *Flying* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 15.

²⁷ Kristan Poirot, “Mediating a Movement, Authorizing Discourse: Kate Millett, Sexual Politics, and Feminism’s Second Wave,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 208.

issues that were very problematic.”²⁸ When Millett resisted lionization and refused to pose for the cover of *Time* magazine, the media persisted. In that case, *Time* commissioned Alice Neel to paint a portrait of Millett and published it on the August 31st, 1970 cover in lieu of the photograph for which Millett refused to pose.²⁹ *Time* was persistent in its description of Millett as a representative of the women’s movement, despite her protestations.³⁰ The caption under the portrait read “Kate Millett of Women’s Lib,” and the article stated, “until this year...with the publication of a remarkable book called *Sexual Politics*, the [women’s] movement had no coherent theory to buttress its intuitive passions, no ideologue to provide chapter and verse for its assault on patriarchy.”³¹ In naming Millett as that ideologue, articles like it further aligned *Sexual Politics* with Greer and Freidan’s works which did in fact offer coherent theories to the women’s movement at the same time as they explained feminism to a mass audience. This grouping of the three works together obscured the fact that Millett’s text had a different object and a different aim: *Sexual Politics* followed Ellmann’s feminist critique of literature, literary representation, and literary criticism. It was not strictly a critique of sexual politics; it was a feminist critique of sexual politics in *literature*.

²⁸ Bernadette Barker-Plummer, “News as a Political Resource: Media Strategies and Political Identity in the U.S. Women’s Movement, 1966-1975,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12 (1995): 316.

²⁹ Alice Neel, “Kate Millett,” *Time*, August 31, 1970.

³⁰ For more discussion of Millett’s unwilling role in her own fame, see for example: Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Sheila Jeffreys, “Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*: 40 Years on,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 34, no. 1 (January 2011): 76–84; Janet Badia, “‘Dissatisfied, Family-Hating Shrews’: Women Readers and Sylvia Plath’s Literary Reception,” *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 19, no. 2 (2008): 187–213; Poirot, “Mediating a Movement, Authorizing Discourse”; Victoria Hesford, “Becoming Feminism: The Emergence of the Feminist-as-Lesbian Figure and the Forgetting of the Women’s Movement” (Emory University, 2001).

³¹ “Nation.”

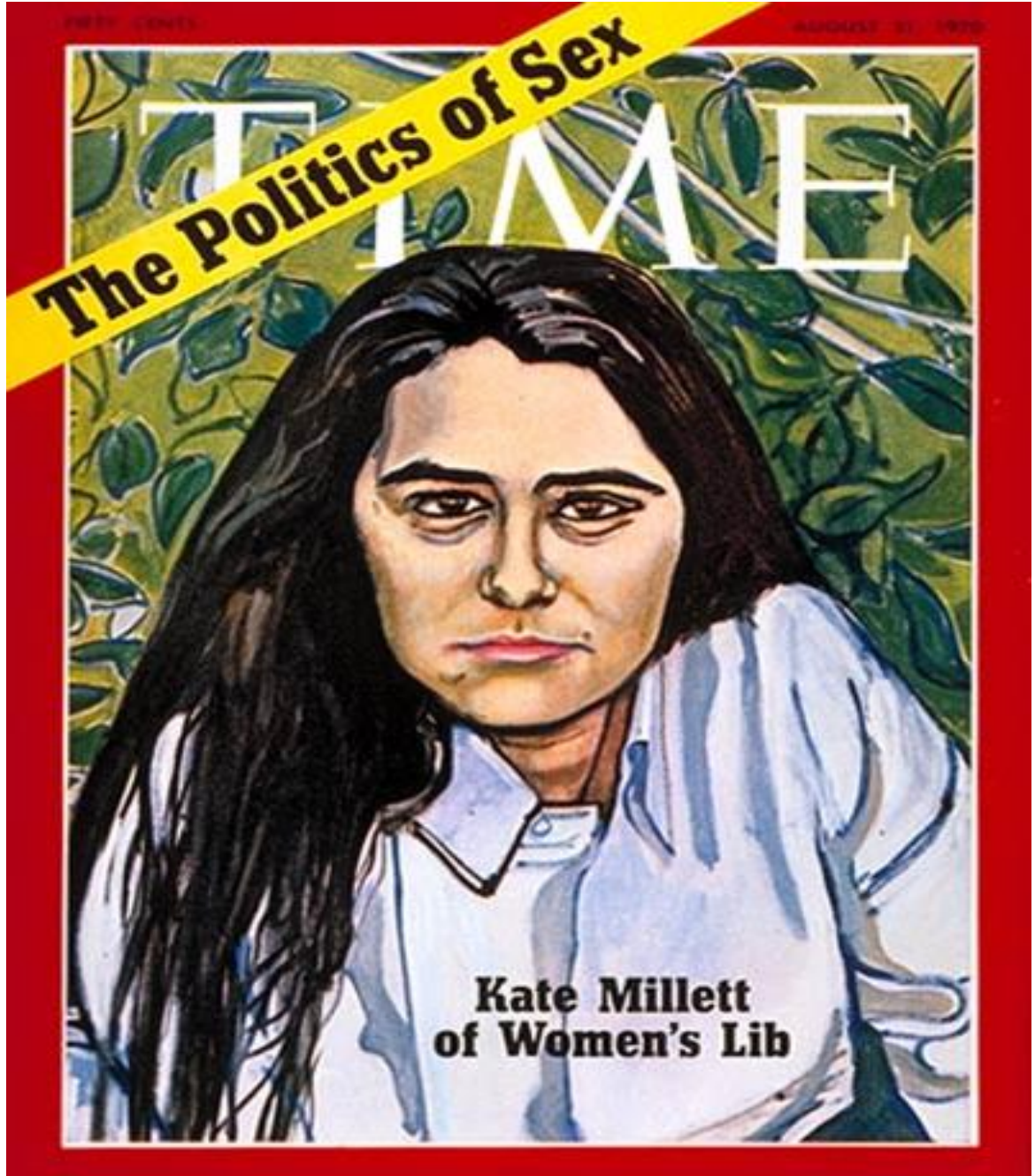


Figure 1: August 31, 1970 cover of *Time* magazine

New Criticism and Millett's Radical Theory of Literary Practice

Sexual Politics challenged the foundational assumptions of the dominant form of literary criticism which preceded it. Millett saw existing forms of literary criticism as

emerging from a tradition of phallic interpretation which reflected the patriarchal values of the literature it read. Following Ellmann, Millett interpreted the institutionalized practices of literary criticism as both a reflection and also a constitutive component of patriarchy. She reacted to the methods of New Criticism which used a formalist approach to see texts as aesthetic objects stripped of their context, author, and history. Graff noted that “the very term ‘New Critical’ would become synonymous with the practice of explicating texts in a vacuum.”³² In direct contrast, Millett saw literary works as products of the patriarchal culture they reproduced, and as highly situated in that culture. Rather than treat novels, plays, and poetry as aesthetic objects to be appreciated on the basis of their success at replicating the values that enshrined them as important literature, Millett broke with the practices and pedagogies of New Criticism and de-aestheticized the literary objects she read. Millett treated literary works as cultural data which could be interpreted alongside sociological, biological, economic, anthropological, and psychological data. The fact that novels, plays, and poetry were fictional was almost irrelevant to Millett: they had no mysteriously literary or aesthetic qualities that separated them from the other realms in which patriarchal values were plainly visible, such as wage disparities between men and women³³ or bias in the construction of scientific assessments of sex role³⁴ (both are examples that she treats in some detail in her text). Her conflation of the literary and the cultural represented a direct attack on New Criticism. As Millett put it in the preface to the first edition of *Sexual Politics*, “I have operated on the premise

³² Though, as his phrasing suggested, “this is what it became in institutional practice, but decidedly not what it was for the founding generation.” As this chapter is concerned with the institutional practice of New Criticism, I focus on the former part of Graff’s statement. *Professing Literature*, 146.

³³ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970, 40.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

that there is room for a criticism which takes into account the larger cultural context in which literature is conceived and produced. Criticism which originates from literary history is too limited in scope to do this; criticism which originates in aesthetic considerations, 'New Criticism,' never wished to do so."³⁵ With this single statement, Millett contested well over a hundred years of literary study.

Millett's reference to "criticism which originates from literary history" was to New Criticism's precursors: New Criticism was itself a reaction to the historical focus of the forms of literary study that occurred prior to New Criticism. At this time, between 1915 and 1930, "linguistic philology ceded further prominence to literary history."³⁶ Linguistic philology had prevailed in literary study in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century, and only began to lose ground at the very end of the 1890s when many, but not all, English departments began to abandon their intensive emphasis on grammatical and linguistic study of literature.³⁷ Graff quoted an 1895 University of Chicago report which exemplified this shift and stated that "the study of the most charming of the English classics has too often been made a mere starting-point for laborious investigations into antiquities, history, geography, etymology, phonetics, the history of the English language, and general linguistics."³⁸ The dissatisfaction with such a wide-ranging approach to literary study clearly prefigured New Criticism and its emphasis on the text in and of

³⁵ Ibid., xii. Interestingly, Eva Figes's *Patriarchal Attitudes*, published in 1970, was also a hybrid of cultural and literary criticism. In this chapter, I chose not to group Figes's work with Ellmann and Millett's because I interpret it as primarily a work of social criticism which uses some literary examples, rather than a work of literary criticism. I will discuss the role Figes's work played in the feminist canon debates of the 1970s and early 80s in Chapter Two of this dissertation. *Patriarchal Attitudes* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970).

³⁶ Graff, *Professing Literature*, 121.

³⁷ Ibid., 100.

³⁸ Ibid., 101.

itself, divorced of precisely those contexts from which it was only beginning to be removed in 1895.

As a reaction against the philological and historical forms of criticism that constituted literary study prior to its emergence, New Criticism aimed to prioritize the text itself while subordinating the study of biography, linguistics, and history that surrounded the text. John Crowe Ransom, one of the field's main founders, argued in 1938 that "the students of the future must be permitted to study literature, and not merely about literature."³⁹ Along with Ransom, other New Critics such as Monroe Beardsley, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, William Wimsatt Jr., and T.S. Eliot (whose 1928 text *The Sacred Wood* has been called the origin of New Criticism⁴⁰) aimed to shift the object of literary study to, quite literally, the literary object. They also aimed to redefine literary criticism as a meaningful act of interpretation.

Their attempt to legitimize literary criticism as an objective, almost scientific, method was behind the three major interventions that New Criticism made into the existing literary landscape. First, New Criticism eradicated previous reliance on authorial intent as an important means for assessing the meaning of a text. As Wimsatt and Beardsley wrote in their significant 1946 article which entrenched the shift away from

³⁹ John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 330. Perhaps indicating Ransom's importance through the 1960s, this 1968 edition was the first widely-available paperback printing of his relatively inaccessible 1938 text.

⁴⁰ Garrick Davis, "The Golden Age of Poetry Criticism," in *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism*, ed. Garrick Davis (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 2008), xxi. According to Davis, New Criticism "sprang" out of Eliot's "rather drab statement, almost a banality," that "it is an artificial simplification, and to be taken only with caution, when I say that the problem appearing in these essays, which gives them what coherence they have, is the problem of the integrity of poetry, with the repeated assertion that when we are considering poetry we must consider it primarily as poetry and not another thing." Davis's decision to cite this particular statement as the origin of New Criticism was of course a contentious claim, given the aforementioned debates about the precise timeline of its ascendancy and decline.

considerations of authorial intent, “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.”⁴¹ According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, when critics considered the author’s role and intentions in creating a text, they fell prey to the “intentional fallacy,” resulting in “confusion between the poem and its origins, a special case of what is known to philosophers as the Genetic Fallacy. It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological *causes* of the poem and ends in biography and relativism.”⁴² This fallacy was combatted in New Criticism with its focus on the work of literary art rather than the circumstances of its production, and its strict edicts against biographical criticism.

The second major intervention which New Criticism effectively implemented was also aimed at objectivizing literary criticism. Closely aligned with the notion of the intentional fallacy, Wimsatt and Beardsley defined the “affective fallacy” as an erroneous focus on a work’s impact at the expense of the work as an isolated object. The affective fallacy “is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*)...It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome of either Fallacy, the Intentional or the Affective, is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear.”⁴³ Here, Wimsatt and Beardsley outlined New Criticism’s separation of the reader’s response or reaction from the critic’s interpretation, distancing

⁴¹ William Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (July 1, 1946): 468.

⁴² William Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe Beardsley, “The Affective Fallacy,” *The Sewanee Review* 57, no. 1 (January 1, 1949): 31.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

the critic from the reader and thus giving the critic further legitimacy as one who was not influenced by the subjectivity of his own readerly response to the work.

Third, New Critics discouraged the consideration of the subject matter of a work. As Allen Tate put it, “from my point of view the formal qualities of a poem are the focus of the specifically critical judgment because they partake of an objectivity that the subject matter, abstracted from the form, wholly lacks.”⁴⁴ For a work to be considered on the basis of its form, the work had to be removed not just from its author and reader but also from its subject matter. Taken together, these three aims revealed New Criticism’s main contributions. It subordinated the author and reader to the text itself, and in so doing produced a method of interpretation which relied on critical judgment of texts isolated from the circumstances of their production and reception.

The triumph of New Criticism over the historical criticism that preceded it would have been complete by the time Millett began her literary training at the University of Minnesota and the University of Oxford in the 1950s and Columbia University in the 1960s.⁴⁵ It certainly was at Radcliffe University, where literary critic Marianne DeKoven was an undergraduate student. In a retrospective account of her training, she wrote that “when I tried, in 1969, to write my senior honors thesis on the detectability of fascism in T.S. Eliot’s form, I was told that I could if I really wanted to, and if I didn’t mind risking a lower grade, but why not write instead about something truly important.”⁴⁶ Alastair

⁴⁴ Allen Tate, “Miss Emily and the Bibliographer,” *The American Scholar* 9, no. 4 (Autumn 1940): 449.

⁴⁵ Millett, *Flying*.

⁴⁶ Marianne DeKoven, “The Politics of Modernist Form,” *New Literary History* 23, no. 3 (July 1, 1992): 679, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/469225>. DeKoven’s personal recollection of the dominance of New Critical formalism was quoted in Alastair Morrison’s essay on the early history of New Criticism, “Eliot, the Agrarians, and the Political Subtext of New Critical Formalism,” 47.

Morrison interpreted this incident as consistent with the fact that “New Critical formalism evokes no adjective so powerfully as ‘stifling.’ The focus on ‘the poem itself’ is generally understood to have come at the cost of personal meaning, and more to the present purpose, of political insight.”⁴⁷ The political insight that Millett sought to access, at precisely the same time DeKoven did with her senior honors thesis, was unavailable through focus on “the poem itself,” and yet this formalism governed established literary practice at that time. In Richard Ohmann’s 1976 text which reflected on the study of literature in the US from 1965-1976, and which posed literary study against the highly political backdrop of the Vietnam war, he began his summary of the history of New Criticism by writing that

at the outset of any retrospective on the New Criticism, it should be acknowledged that this school made its greatest impression on our day-to-day lives and work, not through the literary and cultural theory with which many of the chief figures occupied themselves, but through the style and method of close reading displayed in a relatively small number of essays, primarily by Cleanth Brooks, William Empson, R. P. Blackmur, and the I. A. Richards of *Practical Criticism*, and in the sacred textbook, *Understanding Poetry*. These essays taught us how to write papers as students, how to write articles later on, and what to say about a poem to *our* students in a 50-minute hour. Surely we absorbed the cultural values inherent in close reading—exactness, sensitivity to shades of feeling, the need to see pattern and order, the effort to shut out from consciousness one’s own life-situation while reading the poem, and to pry the words loose from their social origins—surely we absorbed these values as we imitated the models before us.⁴⁸

While Millett would have been immersed in those values, which were absorbed and imitated in the “day-to-day” life and work of students and professors of English, the literary criticism she developed in *Sexual Politics* stood directly at odds with the focus on

⁴⁷ Morrison, “Eliot, the Agrarians, and the Political Subtext of New Critical Formalism,” 47.

⁴⁸ Richard Ohmann, *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 70–71.

“the poem itself” and deliberately grafted politics to literature. Of course, this put Millett in opposition to the main formalist principles of New Criticism and the historical criticism to which it was a reaction, which she claimed were “too limited” to account for a text’s political context.⁴⁹ In stripping literary objects of their aesthetic value and turning more attention to the political implication of their context, authors, and production than to their internal workings, Millett accomplished a completely radical departure from the methods of literary study that had dominated both the US academy and popular interpretive practices before the publication of *Sexual Politics*.

Millett’s statement in her preface that *Sexual Politics* “takes into account the larger cultural context” of a literary object was an enormous understatement: the degree to which she privileged a text’s context represented a complete and total break with what were then understood as the fundamental practices of literary criticism and interpretation. In her approach, all texts were *always* political and had to be read in relation to sexual politics. Within this framework, even a text’s aesthetic qualities could have political implications, and a critic’s judgment of its aesthetic value was insignificant in relation to its political meaning. Millett inverted New Criticism’s emphasis on the internal workings of a text and deliberate exclusion of its context, and created a new way of interpreting literary texts that foregrounded the circumstances under which texts were created, received, and interpreted. In so doing, she upended New Criticism’s prevailing wisdom about the role and importance of the author.

Millett’s treatment of literary objects wholly apart from their aesthetic qualities

⁴⁹ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970, xii.

was such a radical departure from established critical practice that it was often not even understood as such: Norman Mailer, for instance, whose work both Ellmann and Millett critiqued at length, dismissed Millett as a “literary lawyer.”⁵⁰ In 1971, Mailer published “The Prisoner of Sex,” a critical response to *Sexual Politics*. Originally published as a lengthy article in *Harper’s Magazine*⁵¹ and then expanded for publication as a book, in the article and the book Mailer denigrated Millett and defended the main authors she critiqued in *Sexual Politics*: Jean Genet, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and, of course, himself. Mailer’s response, one year after the publication of *Sexual Politics*, certainly registered Millett’s threat to his authority. In the text Mailer described Millett as a “pure Left totalitarian.”⁵² He contended that Millett’s analysis of his novels amounted to an ideological prosecution of Mailer the man, not his characters as artistic creations. Mailer argued that Millett (who he referred to as “Kate” as often as he did “Millett”) failed as a literary critic because first, she approached her objects from an ideological standpoint, second, her interpretation took into account the broader cultural context in which texts were produced, and third, she engaged with the authors of the works she read, rather than their protagonists. In a stylistically representative passage that is necessary to quote at length, given that Mailer made his point slowly, he objected to her work on the following grounds:

Well, it could be said for Kate that she was nothing if not a pug-nosed wit, and that was good, since in literary matters she had not much else. Her lack of fidelity to the material she read was going to be equaled only by her authority in characterizing it...and the yaws of her distortion were nicely hidden by the

⁵⁰ Norman Mailer, *The Prisoner of Sex* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 109.

⁵¹ Norman Mailer, “The Prisoner of Sex,” *Harper’s Magazine*, March 1971, 41–92.

⁵² Mailer, *The Prisoner of Sex*, 1971, 173.

smudge pots of her indignation. So her land was a foul and dreary place to cross....Everywhere were signs that men were guilty and women must win. What then has happened to our promise of a varied terrain of mountains and jungles, of explorations into the work of novelists known for their preoccupation with the needs of men? Has it disappeared altogether, or is it that any trek across this bog of flatland, swamp, and grinding sands of prose is no more than a skitter across a rhetorical skin, a steamy literary webbing whose underneath, once upturned, reveals another world, a circus of subterranean attractions which can be viewed only by digging up each quotation buried in her book? For each corpse was so crudely assassinated, then so unceremoniously dumped, that the poor fellows are now as martyrs beneath the sod, and every shroud is become a phosphorescence of literary lights, a landscape of metaphorical temples. Yet if we are to find such a literary world, when entrance requires no less than the resurrection of the corpses in her graves, what is to be said of her method? Can she be an honor student in some occult school of thuggee (now open to ladies via the pressures of Women's Liberation)? It is possible. For Kate is the perfect gun. It is as if she does not know why she kills, just senses that here the job is ready to be done, and there the job must be done. It is almost as if some higher tyrant has fingered the quotes, has said, 'They are getting too close to a little divine sense here—bury 'em deep in shit, Kate-baby.'⁵³

Here Mailer objected to the fact that, as he saw it, Millett's literary readings existed to serve a larger ideological point, that "men were guilty and women must win." In Mailer's reading, the men she assassinated (Mailer himself, along with Genet, Lawrence, and Miller) were martyrs—killed by feminist ideology. In this passage, as throughout *The Prisoner of Sex*, it was clear that Mailer had not fully comprehended the ways in which Millett *deliberately* departed from the prevailing methods of New Criticism: he interpreted her formation of a new form of political literary criticism as a failure to live up to the standards of existing forms of criticism.

Mailer's misapprehension of the impact and import of Millett's reading was also apparent in a 1971 public panel on the women's liberation movement held in New York

⁵³ Ibid., 95–96.

City by the Theater of Ideas, which Mailer moderated.⁵⁴ Throughout the discussion Millett's name was mentioned frequently though she was not a member of the panel. Mailer made it clear that he held a low opinion of Millett's scholarship, and made statements such as "if Kate Millett is the one who's done the work that establishes that men control women in a political class system, then we are all doomed."⁵⁵ At one point during the question and answer period after the debate, audience member and journalist Lucy Komisar paraphrased Millett's argument about Mailer's conflation of sex and violence in his novels. She asked panel member Germaine Greer to comment on the role of dominance in human sexual relations. Komisar repeated Millett's commentary in *Sexual Politics* about Mailer's reference to a penis as "the avenger" in one of his novels. Komisar said, "in Norman's book *The Naked and the Dead* I recall a passage where he goes back in forth from one metaphor to the other to describe a shell that is blowing something up. And, sometimes he describes it in sexual terms and sometimes he talks about it, when he's talking about sex he talks about it in terms of war...at one part he talked about his penis as the avenger."

⁵⁴ This panel was convened in response to the publication of the article-length version of "The Prisoner of Sex." The panel members were Jacqueline Ceballos, Germaine Greer, Jill Johnston, and Diana Trilling. Audience members who asked questions during the question and answer period included Betty Friedan, Susan Sontag, and Lucy Komisar.

⁵⁵ The event was recorded and turned into a documentary film by directors D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hedegus. First released in 1979 on VHS, in 2004 the film was transferred to DVD and re-released. All quotations from the event used here are transcriptions from the DVD recording. Pennebaker and Hedegus, *Town Bloody Hall: A Dialogue on Women's Liberation*.



Figure 2: Audience member Lucy Komisar asking Germaine Greer a question with panelist Diana Trilling in background

Mailer responded instead of Greer, and said:

I look forward very much to the advance of women's liberation because the women are finally going to have to come into contact with the best aspect of the male brain, which is its modest accuracy. I didn't. Dear Lucy Komisar, I did not make those remarks, I had characters who made them. I had a general who was a profoundly latent homosexual, in his own right, *in his own right*, not my latent homosexuality, *his* latent homosexuality, and he, he had these wonderful images about the shell as a phallus. And I had a great deal of fun at the time I was writing it, I was thinking, oh that shows how homosexual those generals are. So I wasn't saying that for me.

Later on, in response to another audience question, Mailer returned to this point:

If you quote something that we say, you've got to learn to say that we didn't say it in our own voice, we said it in the voice of one of our characters. Which means

next that we may or may not have meant it ourselves. We may have meant the opposite of it. *Don't you know the simple functions of the novel?* In the novel you have characters who tend to represent your point of view and characters who represent the opposite of your point of view. And characters who represent some passing facet of your point of view. And if you ladies are not going to go in for that, but are just going to go in for a lot of baseball abuse...[Mailer goes on to another thought without finishing this sentence].



Figure 3: Mailer responding to Komisar's question with panelists Jacqueline Ceballos and Germaine Greer in background

Mailer's incredulous comment, "*don't you know the simple functions of the novel?*" perfectly encapsulated both how Millett's work was so remarkably different from the forms of literary criticism which preceded it, and also how this difference failed to

register with those who, like Mailer, persisted in their allegiance to the prevailing forms of literary criticism. Millett was not, in fact, unaware that author and protagonist were “supposed” to be separate entities, but rather deliberately argued that the two were connected in service of her argument about the patriarchal functions of the novel. Mailer called her critiques of his work “baseball abuse” because they were directed at him, the author, rather than at his characters. But this was precisely Millett’s point: in the form of feminist criticism she was developing, the author himself was a counterrevolutionary sexual politician and there was therefore no polite distance between him and his characters.

While Mailer accused Millett of missing the point of literary criticism, in fact he was as yet unable to see the way in which she had already shifted the ground underneath the field. Mailer clung to Wimsatt and Beardsley’s claim that “even a short lyric poem is dramatic, the response of a speaker (no matter how abstractly conceived) to a situation (no matter how universalized). We ought to impute the thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic *speaker*, and if to the author at all, only by a biographical act of inference.”⁵⁶ This core tenet of New Criticism was so deeply enshrined in understandings of literary critical practice that even feminist literary critic Toril Moi, well aware of Millett’s deliberate break with New Criticism, described one of the main flaws of her text as follows: “as a literary critic, Millett pays little or no attention to the formal structures of the literary text: hers is pure content analysis. She also

⁵⁶ Wimsatt Jr. and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” 470.

unproblematically assumes the identity of author, narrator and hero when this suits her case, and statements like ‘Paul Morel is of course Lawrence himself’ abound.”⁵⁷

Of course, Millett’s radically new form of literary criticism was not simply characterized by its political nature. Rather, her “new mutation” was a specifically feminist literary criticism, a means for politicizing texts and textual readings with reference to sex. The “larger cultural context” Millett considered was always that of patriarchal society and criticism.⁵⁸ Like Ellmann, Millett was engaged in a form of literary criticism which both politicized the practice of literary criticism (by making it a feminist criticism) and considering texts in their larger context (by naming that context patriarchy). Millett’s ability to reshape the ground of literary criticism in this manner, imperceptible to Mailer and other contemporaneous reviewers of her text, was connected to the feminist claims her text made in the process of engaging in literary criticism.

Political Sex, Political Literature

Sexual Politics’ most radical claim was its central one: that sex had a political dimension, or in Millett’s words, that “sex is a status category with political implications.”⁵⁹ According to Millett, the politics of sex were in fact the politics of patriarchy, which structured and was reflected in all levels of cultural discourse. A theory of sexual politics was in effect a theory of the patriarchal world and a program for feminist inquiry into the newly politicized realm of sex. In the second chapter of her text, Millett explained how, despite appearing as though it was a biological and physical

⁵⁷ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 30.

⁵⁸ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970, xii.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

activity, “coitus” was in fact “set so deeply within the larger context of human affairs that it serves as a charged microcosm of the variety of attitudes and values to which culture subscribes.” While this insight is currently so well-accepted it might even be considered feminist cant, at the time the text was published Millett was correct in her statement that “this transition from such scenes of intimacy to a wider context of political reference is a great step indeed.” Given the enormity of this move, Millett justified each step along the way, even including the manner in which her theory expanded the definition of politics from “that relatively narrow and exclusive world of meetings, chairmen, and parties” to “power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another.”⁶⁰ Millett went about this by explaining that “the word ‘politics’ is enlisted here when speaking of the sexes primarily because such a word is eminently useful in outlining the real nature of their relative status, historically and at the present.” In other words, politics dealt with inequality, dominance, and subordination, examples of which abounded in the relationship between the sexes. She referenced race as an analogous system of organized “general control of one collectivity, defined by birth, over another collectivity, also defined by birth” and remarked that “the study of racism has convinced us that a truly political state of affairs operates between the races to perpetuate a series of oppressive circumstances.”⁶¹ At the same time, she noted that “groups who rule by birthright are fast disappearing, yet there remains one ancient and universal scheme for the domination of one birth group by another—the scheme that prevails in the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁶¹ Ibid., 24.

area of sex.”⁶² *Sexual Politics* offered, in essence, qualitative proof of the prevalence of this scheme, patriarchy, in all forms of human life and culture. The vast scope of this assertion was reflected in the wide-ranging interdisciplinarity of Millett’s theory of sexual politics: while the bulk of the text was dedicated to literary and historical instances of sexual politics, the short second chapter in which Millett laid out the groundwork of her theory of sexual politics was comprised of descriptions of the way patriarchy structured ideology, biology, sociology, class, economics, education, force, anthropology (in which she included myth and religion), and psychology.

In all these realms, Millett connected sex and politics with reference to culture: her consistent argument was that sex and sex roles had a political dimension because they were not natural or biological and therefore were culturally determined. Her definition of “sex” as a cultural status category anticipated what we now call “gender.” In defining sex as a category pertaining to social status and role rather than biology, Millett made a distinction between sex (pertaining to biology) and gender (pertaining to culture) that was not captured in her language but was essential to her argument. In order to explain the meaning of the word “sex” as a social category, Millett frequently turned to the term “sexual role” or “status.” For instance, in talking about Jean Genet’s novels, she made the statement that “sexual role is not a matter of biological identity but of class or caste...” further separating an ascribed or variable sex role from biologically determined sex.⁶³ At other points, Millett provided an early sketch of the current definition of gender without

⁶² Ibid. Note that this is the passage which Phyllis Jacobson, in her 1970 review, pointed out as the text’s greatest “threat.”

⁶³ Ibid., 17.

actually using the term: early on in the text, she wrote “the temperamental distinctions created in patriarchy (‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ personality traits) do not appear to originate in human nature, those of role and status still less.”⁶⁴ “Temperament” was another word that appeared frequently as Millett attempted to add nuance to the definition of “sex.” For example, she wrote that “it must be admitted that many of the generally understood distinctions between the sexes in the most significant areas of role and temperament, not to mention status, have in fact, essentially cultural, rather than biological bases.”⁶⁵ She continued: “the present social distinctions of patriarchy” are “status, role, temperament.”⁶⁶

At the same time as sex was political because it was not natural, politics had a sexual dimension because it inflected sex with the power dynamics of patriarchy, a political system. Her contention that sex and sex roles were political because they were cultural was yet another insight that now functions as a commonsensical feminist statement, but for Millett it had to be explained at length. In a section on ideology, she wrote that “sexual politics obtains consent through the ‘socialization’ of both sexes to basic patriarchal polities with regard to temperament, role, and status.”⁶⁷ She built this claim upon a delineation of sex and gender, and in so doing established the social function of gender as a set of culturally, and not biologically, mandated roles. She

⁶⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 26. Millett’s use of quotation marks around the word “socialization” here was in itself an interesting and implicit illustration of the way in which her then-radical argument has now been widely accepted. The social construction of gender roles, temperament, and status is arguably the foundation of all contemporary feminist thought on sex, gender, and sexuality. In contrast, here the crucial concept of “socialization” must be typographically marked as radically new and controversial.

bemoaned this state of affairs, as she did the very politicization of sex, and wrote that “unalterably born into one group or another, every subject is forced, moment to moment, to *prove* he or she is, in fact, male or female by deference to the ascribed characteristics of masculine and feminine. There is no way out of such a dilemma but to rebel and be broken, stigmatized, and cured. Until the radical spirit revives to free us, we remain imprisoned in the vast gray stockades of the sexual reaction.”⁶⁸ This bleak understanding further cemented the political character of sex and yet did not, in itself, disrupt the patriarchal politics of sex or remove sex from the realm of politics, defined as the workings of power. Rather, as Millett wrote, “the arbitrary character of patriarchal ascriptions of temperament and role has little effect upon their power over us... Politically, the fact that each group exhibits a circumscribed but complementary personality and range of activity is of secondary importance to the fact that each represents a status or power division.”⁶⁹ Here her tremendous insight that sex roles were arbitrary was almost buried by her focus on their social impact. It is important to pause and note how important this revelation was both to her argument in *Sexual Politics* and to second and even third wave feminism: if sex roles did not follow from natural characteristics, then it was possible to investigate, and possibly change, how the construction of these roles was a project of the prevailing political system.

In the process of showing that sex roles were arbitrary and thus not natural, Millett revealed her implicit contention that all forms of human sociality were cultural because they were all patriarchal. As she showed throughout the entire text, patriarchy

⁶⁸ Ibid., 233.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 32.

was manifest everywhere, informing the micro level of human interaction from its underlying position as social structure. Nearly all was cultural, and not natural. The existence of this argument, even, belies the difficulty it must have faced in coming into being. As Millett noted at the end of the second chapter on the theory of sexual politics, “perhaps patriarchy’s greatest psychological weapon is simply its universality and longevity. A referent scarcely exists with which it might be contrasted or by which it might be confuted. While the same might be said of class, patriarchy has a still more tenacious or powerful hold through its successful habit of passing itself off as nature.”⁷⁰ When patriarchy disguised itself as nature, as for instance when women were culturally assigned passive traits and then subordinated because of a mythic connection between these traits and their biological sex, this served to naturalize sex, which kept sex from being recognized for its properly political functions. In effect, Millett was engaged in the challenging project of wrenching sex from the natural realm, and it is certainly this element of her work that was responsible for some of its contemporaneous controversy. To accomplish that project, she made the implicit claim that anything that was not natural was political, and she would likely have said that nature scarcely exists. Because patriarchy obfuscated the processes by which biology was interpretable through culture, even nature itself was cultural and political. Also, patriarchy and its representatives, the “sexual politicians” Millett read, would often explicitly and deliberately characterize that which was cultural as natural. Hence: on all fronts, from all directions, *all sex was always* political.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 58.

Given the now nearly-canonical status of Millett's argument that sex must be treated in the realm of the politics of pervasive patriarchy, and the amount of contemporaneous controversy that occurred around this claim, the above gloss of her theory of sexual politics serves to justify why this chapter accepts her connection of sex and politics at face value. Much less attention has been paid, however, to Millett's connection of literature and politics. Unlike the claims detailed above, the connection between literature and politics was not quite as meticulously argued throughout the text. Millett's reader could be readily convinced of her argument that sex is political, yes, but why was literature a relevant realm in which sex was politicized? The answer to this question must be read into Millett's use of literary examples. *Sexual Politics* began with a short chapter titled "Instances of Sexual Politics." These instances were in fact long passages of text from novels by Genet, Mailer, and Miller. Almost all of the passages described sex acts. Millett interpreted these acts as narrative components of the novels to which they belonged, but also in and of themselves, stripped of their context and status as fiction. And yet, at all times her criticism remained grounded in the literary. For instance, in an analysis of a sex scene in Miller's novel *Sexus*, Millett took care to point out to her reader where the line between literature and reality was crossed. After quoting the passage at length, she wrote "the passage is not only a vivacious and imaginative use of circumstance, detail, and context to evoke the excitations of sexual intercourse, it is also a male assertion of dominance over a weak, compliant, and rather unintelligent female. It is a case of sexual politics at the fundamental level of copulation." In this example, Millett transitioned from a literary analysis (noting such literary qualities as imaginative use of

detail to evoke particular emotions) to a social analysis of the influence of male dominance on sexual intercourse. Interestingly, her analysis at this point returned to the fact that she was reading a fictional text: she wrote “several satisfactions for the hero and reader alike undoubtedly accrue upon this triumph of the male ego...”⁷¹ Her return to the dynamic of reader and author was relevant to her conception of the didactic function of literary texts, wherein the authors both represented and prescribed patriarchal culture. While she read literary representations of sex acts for their replication of structures of dominance and subordination, she was also attentive to the way in which their inclusion in well-respected novels reflected the perspectives and biases of their authors. This dual treatment of the real and fictional consequences of particular sex acts formed the basis of Millett’s approach to sexual politics as manifested in literature.

Patriarchal Fiction and Reality

In the first chapter of *Sexual Politics*, it was not clear whether Millett made a distinction between the fictional realm in which the acts described took place and the reality from which the male authors narrated them. But what was clear is that the connection between the two further supported the politicization of sex. Sex acts and the representation of sex acts had meaningful political consequences that could be made visible through feminist interpretation. These consequences materialized and were important whether the acts in question took place in reality or were representations of reality within the diegetic world of a novel. Following Millett’s aforementioned definition of “politics” as “power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one

⁷¹ Ibid., 6.

group of persons is controlled by another,” the passage from *Sexus* was political because it was an assertion of male dominance, or power *over*, in the form of sexual strength.⁷² This power was manifest between the characters depicted in the scene and also in Miller’s representation of the scene. As Millett put it, “Miller’s educational intentions are abundantly clear. Females who are frigid, e.g., not sexually compliant, should be beaten.... Rather more informative than this sober doctrine of the cave is the insight it provides into Miller’s sexual/literary motives and their undeniably sadistic overtones. They are closer to the vicarious politic of the cock-pit than of the boudoir, but the former often casts considerable light on the latter.”⁷³ This connection of Miller’s sexual and literary “motives” perfectly encapsulated Millett’s understanding of the relationship between the literary texts she quoted at length in her first chapter and the circumstances of their existence as literary records of a patriarchal reality: not only did they share the same politics, but a fictional novel might even function as patriarchal pedagogy.

Ultimately it became clear that Millett chose literature as a site of sexual politics because extant literary criticism played an important role in the politicization of sex. If sex was political because it was not natural or biological, literature was political because it was a site where this fact was often disguised through misrepresentation. Literary

⁷² Ibid., 23. This pithy definition of politics was elaborated only slightly when Millett continued that, “by way of parenthesis one might add that although an ideal politics might simply be conceived of as the arrangement of human life on agreeable and rational principles from whence the entire notion of power *over* others should be banished, one must confess that this is not what constitutes the political as we know it, and it is to this that we must address ourselves” Ibid., 23–24. This offhand remark revealed two interesting elements of Millett’s definition of politics, which was so foundational for second wave feminism: first, it accepted a vast gulf between a patriarchal and a feminist notion of politics, thereby rendering the latter essentially utopian. Second, this notion of an ideal politics as the absolute antithesis to existing politics foreshadowed Millett’s conclusion in the final sentence of the book that the second wave of the sexual revolution might succeed such that “we” might be able to “retire sex from the harsh realities of politics” Ibid., 363.

⁷³ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970, 9.

criticism dealt precisely with these dynamics of reality and representation. It was through interpretation that the deceptive processes of patriarchal ideology could be seen.⁷⁴ Millett described this approach to literary criticism in the preface to the first 1970 edition of the text, when she wrote that in her view, criticism “is capable of seizing upon the larger insights which literature affords into the life it describes or interprets, or even distorts.”⁷⁵

Patricia Clough analyzed the results of this approach as follows:

while Millett suggests that coitus is a charged microcosm that speaks the truth of sex and therefore the truth about patriarchy, she nonetheless proposes that in order to hear this truth, an understanding of literature’s larger cultural context is needed; and for this, theory is needed. If then, the literary text is to be used to evidence the brute facts of sexuality in patriarchal society, theory is to be used for providing a true or correct view of that evidence. To put it another way, if the literary text offers a politically incorrect view of sexuality as natural, theory offers a correct or true view of it as political.⁷⁶

As Clough astutely pointed out, for Millett it was literary criticism or interpretation that gave access to a more accurate assessment of the realities of what was truly being represented in literature. Thus, for Millett, literature was not necessarily always just a representational practice. The literature she read, rather, distorted reality because it was imbricated in a cultural context of patriarchy, which itself was a politically motivated misrepresentation of the realities of sex.

Not coincidentally, all the literature Millett included in her study was written by men. Male authors like Lawrence, Mailer, and Miller were “counterrevolutionary sexual politicians,” which meant that they manipulated and distorted the representations of sex

⁷⁴ Millett used the word “ideology” frequently throughout the text, and it is interesting to note that in almost every instance she was referring to the ideology of patriarchy, perhaps because, as she said, “sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power” Ibid., 25.

⁷⁵ Ibid., xii.

⁷⁶ Clough, “The Hybrid Criticism of Patriarchy,” 475–6.

they offered in their fiction.⁷⁷ They were also “cultural agents” who “both reflected and actually shaped attitudes” as they helped to build and bolster the ideological structures of patriarchy.⁷⁸ Sometimes, these authors engaged in the practice of misrepresenting culturally-mandated sex roles as though they were innate and natural. At other times, their distortions of reality were simply expressions of their male perspectives. In all cases, what mattered was the fact that for Millett, interpretation and literary criticism was needed to show the political reality of sex. Texts written by male authors did not just contain politically motivated lies about women, men, and sex roles but were actually expressions of those same power imbalances between the sexes. The feminist literary critic’s role was to uncover or unmask these prevarications that, first, came from patriarchal culture and second, eventually came to constitute that culture.

In her section on Lawrence (which was representative of the reading strategies she applied to all texts, both fiction and non-fiction), Millett gave him the dubious title of “the most talented and fervid of sexual politicians” because of his success in disguising his particularly male motives under the cover of catering to universal interests. Her critique of this deceitful method was as follows:

Lawrence uses the words ‘sexual’ and ‘phallic’ interchangeably, so that the celebration of sexual passion for which the book is so renowned is largely a celebration of the penis.... While insisting his mission is the noble and necessary task of freeing sexual behavior of perverse inhibition, purging the fiction which describes it of prurient or prudish euphemism, Lawrence is really the evangelist of quite another cause—‘phallic consciousness.’ This is far less a matter of ‘the resurrection of the body,’ ‘natural love,’ or other slogans under which it has been advertised, than the transformation of masculine ascendancy into a mystical

⁷⁷ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970, 233.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

religion, international, possibly institutionalized. This is sexual politics in its most overpowering form.⁷⁹

Much about Millett's approach to literature as political was revealed in this passage: first, her reading of Lawrence's supposed universalism exemplified her view of criticism as a suspicious practice with revelatory aims. Without feminist literary criticism to uncover the gendered specificity of claims to a general sexuality, Lawrence had previously been interpreted as speaking of and to "human" experience. Millett provided a method for revealing the many ways in which Lawrence defined humanity as male, and often simply as a representation of what Millett termed a "phallic consciousness." Here feminist criticism took the position of demanding a more specific understanding of what Lawrence was "really" doing in his novels. Of course, this claim was the origin of the idea that there could be such a thing as a feminist critic who was able to access the truly political meaning of a text, a hermeneutic problem that I will discuss later in this chapter. Second, this passage revealed how Millett saw the move from literature to reality. Lawrence's "celebration of the penis" in *Lady Chatterley* (the novel under discussion in this passage) moved nearly seamlessly from the fictional realm of the novel to the outside world as it became institutionalized in culture. This easy slippage from one world to another began to explain how and why Millett did not in fact see much difference between fiction and the world within which it was written and appeared. Rather, as a sexual politician Lawrence created didactic treatises that, like Miller's works, had educational impulses. Novels functioned as records of and prescriptions for patriarchal culture. Finally, this passage revealed what sexual politics meant for Millett in the context of literature: sex

⁷⁹ Ibid., 238.

became political when its realities were intentionally distorted to suit a male agenda, and literature was a location in which these distortions could be pinned down and analyzed.

For Millett, literature was a site of political struggle because male texts were cultural products of patriarchy which passed themselves off as records of accurate sex roles, often disguising these misrepresentations as innate or natural. It follows that the feminist critic's duty, then, was to assess the validity of the stories that were told about men and women both within literary texts and in relation to the authors who wrote them. This duty extended to the ways in which authors themselves were interpreted. In the section of *Sexual Politics* on Miller, his reputation as a writer was given the same corrective treatment Millett turned on the content of Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Millett was equally suspicious of the "popular image of Henry Miller the liberated man" and the scholarly attention to his work as representative of "the much acclaimed 'sexual freedom' of the last few decades."⁸⁰ Instead, she said, "Miller's genuine originality consists in revealing and recording a group of related sexual attitudes which, despite their enormous prevalence and power, had never (or never so explicitly) been given literary expression before."⁸¹ The sexual attitudes recorded in his novels were those of "the disgust, the contempt, the hostility, the violence, and the sense of filth with which our culture, or more specifically, its masculine sensibility, surrounds sexuality."⁸² Crucially, Millett did not believe that Miller was aware of the ways in which his texts functioned to record such attitudes (she even quoted another critic's comment that

⁸⁰ Ibid., 295; 294.

⁸¹ Ibid., 295–96.

⁸² Ibid., 295.

Miller's novels would be "better" if they were in fact parodies of these attitudes). Rather, she said that Miller's "attitudes do constitute a kind of cultural data heretofore carefully concealed beneath our traditional sanctities."⁸³ This was a critical point in her argument: Miller's novels let the feminist critic see the patriarchal "truth" of male perspectives on sexuality, but that truth was itself a lie.

Millett saw feminist literary criticism as a deeply investigative practice which was constantly positioned against the texts it read. This approach conditioned the feminist literary criticism which followed *Sexual Politics*, particularly those forms which trained their sights on male texts. This antagonistic approach to literary texts shaped feminist literary criticism to such an extent that it later inflected even criticism of texts written by women (Chapter Two of this dissertation discusses what happened when this approach collided with the project of creating new canons of women's writing). Its roots in Millett's work are worth reiterating: because a text reflected the cultural conditions of its production at all levels, the distorting dynamics of patriarchy had to be "read out" of a text. The feminist literary critic had to disprove the vision of reality depicted in the works of the male authors she read. This negation was easily linked to an actual dismantling of the ideologies of patriarchy and it followed that, for Millett, literary criticism was a political act itself since literature was a site of sexual politics. This political form of literary criticism made several foundational assumptions. First, it depended on the idea that a truth or reality of gendered existence was real. Second, since Millett contended that a distorted male reality or consciousness was represented in literature, she necessarily

⁸³ Ibid., 296.

assumed that a more accurate or a “real reality” could be unveiled only through the potentially unbiased lens of feminist literary criticism. This had important implications for the nature of subsequent literary criticism. Finally, as I will discuss in more detail in relation to the semi-autobiographical nature of many of Miller and Lawrence’s texts, Millett deliberately paid no heed to the ways in which the texts she read were in fact artistic representations of reality, and not documentary evidence of so-called “real life.” Millett was not interested in the specifically literary nature of novels, but rather placed them alongside other political evidence of patriarchy.

Autobiography and Memoir in Male Fiction

While Millett’s disregard for the formal, literary qualities of the novels she read was part of her radical departure from established critical practice, it was also arguably to some extent a function of the particular authors and novels she chose for her study. Genet, Lawrence, Mailer, and Miller were all known for their semi-autobiographical writing, and each author maintained a somewhat mythic status in the popular imagination where their personas as authors were connected to their characters. Of course, as I have suggested throughout this chapter, Millett’s deliberate inattention to the aesthetic elements of literary objects was a profoundly feminist contribution to literary criticism. Her description of the novels she read as the didactic treatises of sexual politicians was an extension of her refusal of the ways in which New Criticism and its methods could be used to defend misogyny in literature under the guise of fictionality. At the same time, however, it must also be noted that when read alongside the lives and personas of their authors, the texts themselves did exhibit memoir-like qualities which lent themselves well

to biographical readings. These readings subsequently emphasized the texts' subject matter and context rather than their specifically literary qualities. Interestingly, Millett's acceptance of the authors' biographies in relation to their works could be seen as a return to the forms of historical criticism which preceded New Criticism. It is necessary to point out that Millett's radical de-aestheticization of literary works was built on an archive of specifically male literary texts which bore a complicated relationship to fictionality: they were certainly not purely autobiographical, but nor were they complete fictions. At the same time, these works all shared a particular type of author: Genet, Lawrence, Mailer, and Miller were all notorious public figures who commented on politics and adopted exaggerated forms of masculinity.

The slippage between fact and fiction seen in Genet, Lawrence, Mailer, and Miller's works bolstered their public status as nearly mythological figures (Lawrence, of course, died in 1930 and so was not an active participant in this myth-making during the same decades as the others, but his posthumous reputation was treated similarly in the 1960s and 1970s). Their status as hero-writers was relevant to the way in which Millett divorced their work from its aesthetic or formal qualities. It could be argued that her move toward biographically-influenced contextual readings of their work was in part motivated by their public status as male authors who had access to the forms of masculine authority Millett critiqued in culture at large. As Andrea Dworkin put it, when *Sexual Politics* was published, the four authors were "the sages of sexual liberation. These writers were primary influences on the generation that came of age in the 1960s. It is hard now to understand the grip these writers had on the imagination. For the left and

the burgeoning counter-culture, these were the writers of subversion.”⁸⁴ All four authors held public authority as sexual dissidents rebelling against the mainstream, particularly Lawrence and Miller, whose works were involved in high-profile censorship trials that were only settled by the US Supreme Court.⁸⁵ Their works challenged definitions of obscenity in the US, and set new standards for sexual freedom and liberation. As a result, their authors were seen as politically engaged arbiters of culture, and they represented a coalescing of literary and cultural power in the political realm.

All four authors truly embodied the pinnacle of the “god-like authority” that Moi attached to the figure of the author in general when she wrote that *Sexual Politics* represented Millett’s “assault on hierarchical modes of reading, which posit the author as a god-like authority to be humbly hearkened to by the reader/critic.” For Moi, the fact that Millett’s framework for literary criticism was based on an attack on these authors in particular functioned to limit her work, and meant that *Sexual Politics* “can hardly be taken as a model for later generations of feminist critics” because Millett “can produce this admirably iconoclastic form of reading only because her study treats of texts that she rightly finds deeply distasteful: those written by male authors positing and parading male sexual supremacy.”⁸⁶ In Moi’s analysis, the fact that Millett’s reading strategy was founded on these hyper-masculine texts limited its applicability to other texts, specifically

⁸⁴ Andrea Dworkin, “Great Thinkers of Our Time: Kate Millett,” *The New Statesman*, July 14, 2003, www.newstatesman.com/node/145869.

⁸⁵ For more on their censorship trials, see: Charles Rembar, *The End of Obscenity: The Trials of Lady Chatterley, Tropic of Cancer, and Fanny Hill* (New York: Notable Trials Library, 1991).

⁸⁶ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 31.

those written by women.⁸⁷ In my reading, in contrast, Millett's assessment of literature as a location where masculinity and culture could be actively interpreted through the lens of sexual politics reflected an overall rejection of the practices of criticism which previously emerged from patriarchy. This denunciation was formed around and based upon the creation of a particular critical practice, rather than the texts it critiqued. Millett's interpretive strategies were aimed at manifestations of patriarchy in culture *through* and *as interpreted in* literature and could therefore be applied to texts written by men or women. Their force rested in their relation to critical practice, rather than to texts themselves. As Moi's analysis suggested, however, this was not how subsequent feminist literary critics responded to the framework Millett laid out, perhaps due to the excesses of stereotypical masculinity seen in the works she chose to read (I will discuss this issue at length in Chapter Two). The slippage between Millett's treatment of author and narrator in her reading of semi-autobiographical texts by notorious male authors, an element of her work which has so often been derided, was the key to understanding her contention about literary and cultural authority. In the case of Lawrence's novel *Women in Love*, for example, Millett explicitly treated it as autobiography, based on Lawrence's claim in the preface that "the novel pretends only to be a record of the writer's own desires, aspirations, struggles, in a word, a record of the profoundest experiences in the self."⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Moi stated, "since Millett avoids any feminist or female-authored text (except *Vilette*), she is not confronted with the problem of how to read women's texts. Can they be read in the same splendidly anti-authoritarian fashion? Or must women reading women's texts take up the old, respectfully subordinate stance in relation to the author? Kate Millett's criticism, wholly preoccupied as it is with the abominable male, can give us no guidance on these matters." Ibid. This very question, how to read women's texts, is the subject of the second chapter of this dissertation.

⁸⁸ Lawrence, qtd. in Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970, 262.

Millett saw Genet, Lawrence, Mailer, and Miller as sexual politicians who promoted masculine consciousness through their fictional texts (Miller's "educational intentions" come to mind here).⁸⁹ Millett went so far as to say that "the most fascinating problem in dealing with [Norman Mailer's] writing is to establish the connection between his fiction and his other prose writings, for ideas one is convinced are being satirized in the former are sure to appear with straightforward personal endorsement in the latter."⁹⁰ When speaking of sexuality as the "diet of flesh" on which Mailer's characters subsisted, Millett wrote that "Mailer the ideologue recommends [this diet] in the didacticism of his essays quite as much as in the overstated feasts of his fictive heroes."⁹¹ Put directly, according to Millett the authors were advancing an ideological agenda through their work, and their characters did their bidding. Here, with this assumption, Millett harkened back to her often-unacknowledged predecessor, Simone de Beauvoir.⁹² A short fifty-page section of *The Second Sex* was devoted to de Beauvoir's reading of "the myth of woman" in five authors, one of whom was D.H. Lawrence (this section was titled "D.H. Lawrence or Phallic Pride"). Not coincidentally, de Beauvoir treated the male authors she read similarly to Millett. Working outside of the US and the reach of New Criticism, de Beauvoir's short section of literary criticism did not make a strict, if any, separation between author and protagonist. Just as Millett saw her authors speaking through her

⁸⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 328.

⁹¹ Ibid., 328.

⁹² Millett had often been criticized for not acknowledging her debt to de Beauvoir, both when her text was published, as in Irving Howe's scathing 1970 review, and later by Moi in 1985 who stated that a central flaw of the text is Millett's "extreme reluctance to acknowledge any debt to her own feminist precursors," de Beauvoir and Ellmann centrally included. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 25. It is interesting to note that while Millett only cited de Beauvoir twice, both instances occurred during her discussion of D.H. Lawrence.

characters, so too did de Beauvoir: in one instance, for example, she wrote “through Mellors’s mouth, Lawrence cries aloud his horror of lesbians.”⁹³ At another point, she said that “the heroes of Lawrence” have “a god who speaks through them: Lawrence himself.”⁹⁴ Beauvoir also presaged Millett’s point about Lawrence’s didacticism. She wrote that his novels were, “above all, ‘guidebooks for women.’”⁹⁵

Millett built upon this argument that authors spoke through their characters in their didactic moments, and also ascribed an unconscious slippage between author and protagonist to the authors she read. For example, in a description of a character’s action in *Sexus*, she wrote, “Miller, alias Val...”⁹⁶ Likewise, she analyzed the life experiences of the authors in relation to the development of their work, and wrote that in Mailer’s work, “the sexual animus behind reactionary attitude erupts into open hostility. It is hardly surprising that a man whose most formative adult experiences took place in the men’s-house culture of the army might tend to see sexual belligerence in the terms of actual warfare.”⁹⁷ Beauvoir, too, engaged in this type of analysis, and wrote that “the life of Lawrence shows us that he suffered from an analogous though more purely sexual complex: in his works woman serves as a compensation myth, exalting a virility that the writer was none too sure of; when he describes Kate at Don Cipriano’s feet, he feels as if he had won a male triumph over his wife, Frieda.”⁹⁸

⁹³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 220.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* This statement is one of the two quotes which Millett took from de Beauvoir.

⁹⁶ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970, 4.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁹⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 250.

At other times, Millett made a separation between author and narrator only insofar as she saw a separation between the author and his own unconscious. Her analysis of *The Naked and the Dead* proceeded by locating the moments when Mailer's "secret admiration"⁹⁹ for the "cancerous personalities"¹⁰⁰ of his most sexually violent characters "intrudes"¹⁰¹ into the novel. In her reading of *The Deer Park*, "the author's own admiring preoccupation with Faye's mastery of sex as manipulative power continues to grow..."¹⁰² In Henry Miller's case, the relationship is incredibly complex. Millett criticized Miller the author for identifying too closely with the cultural fiction of Miller as author, and then translating this identification into the literal fiction of Miller the character. She wrote "the major flaw in his oeuvre—too close an identification with the persona 'Henry Miller'—always operates insidiously against the likelihood of persuading us that Miller the man is any wiser than Miller the character."¹⁰³ These identifications, invisible to the author himself, occurred throughout an author's history and were visible to Millett as growth or change in an author's perspective between his novels. For instance, Millett wrote at one point that, "*Aaron's Rod* is a watershed, the book where Lawrence formally renounced love for power, a decision he held to until *Lady Chatterley's Lover*." In some senses, Millett took the role of analyst, uncovering the hidden meanings of her 'patients' waking dreams. Further on in her discussion of *Aaron's Rod*, she concluded that "this novel is a long, hesitating romance between two versions of Lawrence himself..."¹⁰⁴ In Miller's

⁹⁹ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970, 317.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 316.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 317.

¹⁰² Ibid., 318.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 295.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 269.

case, Millett was even able to diagnose his lies to himself throughout his oeuvre, such that *Nexus* was “his one honest book,” in which he accidentally revealed how deeply he was affected by his wife’s affair with another woman. Millett noted “it would be fascinating to speculate on how much of Miller’s arrogance toward ‘cunt’ in general is the product of this one lacerating experience.”¹⁰⁵ Of course, Millett did not pretend to objectivity, nor offer the analyst’s blank face. As she neared the end of her lengthy section on Lawrence (the longest of the four sections on individual authors), she turned to outright mockery of her ‘patient.’ She wrote that the hero of Lawrence’s novel *Kangaroo* “is so transparently David Herbert Lawrence, the famous writer, visiting Australia with his wife, that a measure of circumspection is necessary, and thankfully, a bit of humor, to prevent the novel’s still more pretentious fantasies from being utterly ridiculous.”¹⁰⁶ In the two novels mentioned above, “one sees how terribly Lawrence strained after triumph in the ‘man’s world’ of formal politics, war, priestcraft, art and finance.”¹⁰⁷

The ways in which the author’s motivations were often opaque even to the author himself could only be revealed through the type of revelatory criticism in which Millett was engaged. And yet, her work was not to uncover, but rather to simply reveal what was already there: the patriarchal ideology that undergirded all aspects of the authors’ psyches and thus their works. Her analysis was designed to consider literature as a nearly unmediated *reflection* of culture, and therefore she was deliberately unwilling to approach the meaning of fictional or artistic representation. This is precisely what made

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 304.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 280.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 281.

Millett difficult to defend as a literary critic. In the face of criticism of her literary methods, like those criticisms levelled against her from readers as vastly divergent as Norman Mailer and Toril Moi, Millett was unable to respond in literary critical terms. New Criticism's hold on the US academy began to wane after the publication of *Sexual Politics* and it would seem, therefore, as though Millett's work might have then been understood more thoroughly (and thus be defensible as literary criticism). The 1970s, however, saw an intense interest in the figure of the hero-author as a mythical public figure. This interest was bolstered by the semi-autobiographical nature of the novels of the decade's literary heroes: Genet, Lawrence, Mailer, and Miller. As such, it would take the complete death of the author and his authority, alongside a shift toward post-structuralism and cultural studies (which Millett anticipated), for her work to be legible as literary criticism "proper." Unfortunately for the continued relevance of *Sexual Politics*, feminist conversations in literary criticism shifted toward canon critique in the long 1970s, before post-structuralism and cultural studies could fully take hold in the US academy.

Conclusion

Despite its lofty origins chronicled in this chapter (both in terms of its reception and its radical, if initially misunderstood, contribution to literary study), *Sexual Politics* has more recently fallen out of critical favor and went out of print for seven years in the 1990s. This huge gap between the text's celebrated origins and its more contemporary status has resulted in extensive speculation about why the text lost its relevance. Articles

with titles such as “Shelf Life”¹⁰⁸ and “The Feminist Time Forgot”¹⁰⁹ asked questions like “how forgotten is Kate Millett?”¹¹⁰ While this question was posed in 1999, a year before the 2000 University of Illinois edition of *Sexual Politics* brought the text back into print, other articles which came out after 2000 continued to echo these questions and attempted to explain Millett’s fall from feminist fame. For instance, Laura Ciolkowski’s article, which marked the thirtieth anniversary of the text’s publication and its reissue in 2000, claimed that at the time of her writing a common question among third-wave feminists was “who is Kate Millett?”¹¹¹ Millett herself has participated in the speculation about the reasons for the difference between the text’s reception in the 1970s and its more recent irrelevance. In an article aptly titled “Out of the Loop and Out of Print,” she juxtaposed the fact that she received a four thousand dollar advance to write the book in the late 1960s with the offer she received from The Feminist Press in 1997 to reprint the entire text for just five hundred dollars.¹¹² Continuing on this theme, in the foreword to the 2000 edition of *Sexual Politics*, she told the story of “the surreal experience of being informed by Doubleday, the origin [sic] publisher of *Sexual Politics*, that it was one of the ten most important books it had published in its hundred years of existence” at nearly the same time as she was given “the bad news that they could not consider doing a reprint

¹⁰⁸ Laura Ciolkowski, “Shelf Life,” *Ms.* 10, no. 3 (May 2000): 83–5.

¹⁰⁹ Kate Millett, “The Feminist Time Forgot,” *The Guardian*, June 23, 1998.

¹¹⁰ Leslie Crawford, “Kate Millett, the Ambivalent Feminist,” June 5, 1999, <http://www.salon.com/1999/06/05/millet/>.

¹¹¹ Ciolkowski, “Shelf Life,” 83.

¹¹² Millett, “Out of the Loop and Out of Print,” 40. Millett did not accept this offer, which she said took the press a year to make and which would not have seen the book reprinted for three years following the offer. In this article she wrote quite bleakly about her financial situation as a result of her obscurity as a writer, and stated “I cannot get employment. I cannot earn money. Except by selling Christmas trees, one by one, in the cold in Poughkeepsie. I cannot teach, and have nothing but farming now. And when physically I can no longer farm, what then? As for publishing, I cannot even publish reprints...” *Ibid.*, 39.

of the book itself because *Sexual Politics* was ‘not at all right’ for the ‘present market in women’s studies.’”¹¹³

The obscurity Kate Millett and *Sexual Politics* faced has not seemed to accrue around Greer and Friedan, or their major works with which Millett’s text was originally grouped. Millett is certainly not the only significant feminist critic whose most famous text went out of print: as she noted herself in “Out of the Loop and Out of Print,” Ti-Grace Atkinson and Jill Johnston’s works were both out of print in 1998.¹¹⁴ And yet neither *The Female Eunuch* nor *The Feminine Mystique* has ever gone out of print, and two major biographies on Betty Friedan were published in the late 1990s.¹¹⁵ As I have suggested throughout this chapter, Millett’s oblivion can in large part be explained by the original miscategorization of *Sexual Politics*, as well as the misapprehension of her contribution. Its status is most often tied to the rise and fall of feminism in general, precisely because it has usually been categorized with other general works of feminist social criticism which were deeply linked to the feminist movement and its historically variable social impact. I posit instead that the narrative of *Sexual Politics*’ immediate prominence in the 1970s followed by obscurity in the 1990s has far more to do with the nature of the mode of literary practice it offers than with the differing public interest in feminism during the 1970s and the 1990s. When Millett is read as offering a critique of New Criticism, as I have, she is then responsible for anticipating cultural studies and

¹¹³ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 2000, ix–x.

¹¹⁴ Millett, “Out of the Loop and Out of Print,” 40.

¹¹⁵ Judith Adler Hennessee, *Betty Friedan: Her Life* (New York: Random House, 1999); Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique*.

post-structuralist literary theory, fields which are not necessarily eager to claim their origins in a work of feminist literary criticism.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, Millett was not a major figure in the canon debates which followed the publication of her text. Despite the fact that the canon debates centered on the role of the feminist critic and the creation of specifically feminist forms of literary criticism and study, at that time Millett was not yet seen as the author of the inaugural work of feminist literary criticism. She can only recently and retrospectively be said to have founded this field, alongside Mary Ellmann. It is perhaps only in the recent past and the present that feminist literary criticism has been able to consider the ways in which feminist literary criticism was formed around Millett's framework and drew upon the forms of reading she put into place. Millett's mode of ideological critique was overtaken in the later 1970s through the early 1980s when aesthetic readings of literary objects proliferated as feminist literary critics sought to establish legitimacy in the academy and aimed to work within the framework of New Criticism so as to avoid Millett's miscategorization and illegibility. As well, the canon criticism and the canon debates which dominated feminist discussion in the decade following *Sexual Politics* saw feminist literary critics turn their focus to the works of women authors and abandon Millett's radical deaestheticization of male texts. Feminist literary criticism from 1971 to the early 1980s, the subject of the next chapter, rejected Millett's approach in favor of more sympathetic readings strategies designed to cultivate a canon of woman writers.

Chapter Two: “Still in the egg life, chafing the shell”¹: Feminist Literary Criticism in the Long 1970s

Introduction

Following Kate Millett’s misrecognized contribution to feminist literary criticism in 1970, feminist literary scholarship began to take on a recognizable form within the academy. Feminist scholars working with literature deliberately named their work *literary criticism* and began to be interpreted as literary critics by the mainstream literary establishment. The forms of feminist literary criticism which emerged after *Sexual Politics* accepted Millett’s premise that sex and literature were political, but they did not necessarily follow her method of de-aestheticizing male-authored texts to focus on their ideological implications. Rather, they turned their focus to the works of women writers and expanded Millett’s emphasis on the author to include other questions about the role of the reader and critic in the practice of literary interpretation. In the process, they sought to develop a sympathetic critical practice which would encourage female authorship, enable a feminist re-reading of historical women authors, and value writing styles and forms that were previously derided as feminine. Less than a year after the publication of *Sexual Politics*, Annis Pratt accurately represented this shift in focus when she wrote that “it would seem better to turn one’s attention from attack to defense, from examples of distorted images of women to examples of healthier representation.”² This

¹ “Still in the egg life, chafing the shell” is Tillie Olsen’s 1978 description of feminist literary criticism from 1971-1976, and is a slight modification of a line in Emily Dickinson’s poem “Let Us Play Yesterday,” published in 1863, which reads: “Still at the Egg-life—/Chafing the Shell.” Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1978), 181.

² Annis Pratt, “The New Feminist Criticism,” *College English* 32, no. 8 (May 1, 1971): 877, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/375625>. By 1980, this shift was noticeable enough that Annette Kolodny was able to remark that “the variety and diversity of all feminist criticism finally coheres in its stance of almost defensive rereading.” “Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and

move was perfectly encapsulated, Pratt noted, in the decision by a women's liberation journal to juxtapose a section on "The Men Who Wrote About Us" with a second called "Discovering Our Sister Authors."³

The methodological shift from attack to defense, from condemnation to exploration, from "them" to "us," was a crucial part of the birth of a self-conscious feminist literary practice. Whereas Millett made a singular and misunderstood intervention into an existing field, feminist literary critics in the long 1970s worked in conversation with one another to claim authorship of a new academic field of study. In what follows, I seek to capture the productivity of the inaugural decade by focusing on the debates that shaped it, as feminist literary critics worked hard to negotiate the standoff between Millett's brand of ideology critique and the traditional emphasis on the aesthetic that had long grounded literary studies.⁴ In her 1971 article "The New Feminist Criticism," Pratt referenced Millett and *Sexual Politics* as a cautionary tale and insisted

Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 1 (April 1, 1980): 5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3177648>.

³ Pratt, "The New Feminist Criticism," 877.

⁴ A wide variety of critics have produced monographs, edited collections, anthologies, and encyclopedias which outline the history of feminist literary criticism, and this chapter adds to those histories by breaking down the central concerns of the 1970s into four parts. For existing scholarship on the development of feminist literary criticism, see: Gill Plain and Susan Sellers, eds., *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Ellen Rooney, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Shari Benstock, Suzanne Ferriss, and Susanne Woods, eds., *A Handbook of Literary Feminisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Elaine Neil Orr, *Subject to Negotiation: Reading Feminist Criticism and American Women's Fictions* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997); Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, eds., *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Vèvè A. Clark, Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres, and Madelon Sprengnether, eds., *Revising the Word and the World: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1991); Andrea Lebowitz, *Star Gazing: Charting Feminist Literary Criticism* (Ottawa: CRIAW/ICREF, 1991); Mary Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Criticism* (New York: Longman, 1991); Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, eds., *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (New York: Blackwell, 1989); Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*; Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, eds., *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

that “a good critic will not withdraw her attention from a work which is resonant and craftsmanlike even if it is chauvinistic.”⁵ Other feminist critics countered Millett by demonstrating the value of women’s writing and the importance of reading and interpreting such work within the formal protocols of literary study. Whereas Millett needed to “deauthorize” the male authors she read and remove them from their vaunted social positions as the sages of the sexual revolution, the feminist literary critics who followed her aimed to proclaim the literary value of works written by women. In order to resist the subordination of women writers, then, these critics engaged with the aesthetic values of a text (Pratt’s “resonance” and “craftsmanship”) at the same time that they refused to abstract literary texts from the real world. In so doing, feminist literary critics constantly came up against the central mechanism for determining aesthetic value: the canon. While some critics defended the canon and others disavowed it, no one could pursue the project of studying women’s literature without engaging the principles of aesthetic judgment that inflected notions of canonicity, reading, writing, and criticism.

This chapter is organized according to the four major preoccupations of feminist literary criticism that characterized the long 1970s: the canon, the woman reader, the woman writer, and the critical act. I attend first to the canon debates, and discuss how they were structured by a critique of objective standards of literary value, which depended on the idea that artistic merit could be judged dispassionately. Second, I examine the emergence of feminist attention to the reader, which roughly divides into two trajectories: one that focuses on the woman reader and one that considers the specific project of *feminist* reading. Both trajectories emerged from the feminist belief that the

⁵ Pratt, “The New Feminist Criticism,” 877.

woman reader occupied a distinct subject position separate from that of the theretofore presumptively male reader.⁶ Third, I turn to the important category of the woman writer, and the literary critical work that was done to value women's particularly feminine modes of writing and cognition. The proliferation of so-called "alternative canons" of women's writing, including canons of writing by lesbians and women of color, occurred under this heading. Finally, I turn to the critical act, and outline how the feminist critic's role was newly linked to the production of women's literature and also to political change in the academy and the world at large.

In producing this anatomy of the inception of feminist literary criticism, I have avoided a linear narrative that would plot a smooth shift from Millett's *Sexual Politics* to the "new feminist criticism" that Pratt and others helped to define.⁷ Their story is more complex and contradictory. Feminist literary critics occupied conflicting positions on multiple issues, and all four of the concerns delineated in this chapter crisscrossed one another throughout the period. Feminist interest in the figure of the woman writer, for

⁶ Of course, this insight in the field of feminist literary criticism shared much with Laura Mulvey's work on film, specifically her use of a psychoanalytic framework for understanding female spectatorship. While feminist literary critics did not necessarily conduct psychoanalytic interpretations of women readers in the same way, many drew on Mulvey's important text as they made distinctions around gender and readership. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

⁷ While I resist it in this chapter, this narrative could certainly be told in this way: it is possible to group together work from the early 1970s and label it as "on the attack." Such a group would include Millett's *Sexual Politics* (which vilified male authors), Dolores Barracano Schmidt's "The Great American Bitch," *College English* 32, no. 8 (May 1, 1971): 900–5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/375628> (which traced male literary productions of distorted views of women), and the entire field of 'Images of Women' criticism, perhaps best represented by Susan Koppelman Cornillon's edited collection *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972). This collection took apart the male inventions of women in literature. In contrast to this group, in the late 1970s criticism which could be labelled "defensive" included titles like Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977). Their book valued women novelists through close consideration of their work. Likewise, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979) aimed to uncover previously hidden tropes of women's writing.

example, was just as important in 1971 as it was in 1981, if not as often articulated. And while many feminist critics framed their interpretive practice as a defense of texts written by women, others took issue with the ideological presumptions and narrative conventions used by women writers themselves.⁸ For these and other reasons, this chapter focuses instead on *both* attack and defense as part of the work of the inaugural decade of feminist literary criticism in order to track the newly formed generation of scholars who followed Millett in considering the politics of literature. Dealing with a large amount of critical material, this chapter aims to illustrate what Kolodny called “the variety and diversity” of feminist literary criticism in its first decade as a formalized literary critical practice.⁹

The Canon Debates

Emphasizing the fact that there is no linear narrative of the development of feminist literary criticism, this chapter begins near the end of the 1970s when the constitutive concerns of the canon debates began to coalesce under this heading. Much like Millett’s work, feminist canon criticism implicitly saw literature as the privileged cultural form for revealing the politics of sex and the canon as the instantiation of a specifically male vision of knowledge creation. Millett had focused on the way that the

⁸ For example, Annette Kolodny noted in 1976 that Millett’s experimental novel/memoir *Flying* received a dismal reception, and that many of the feminist reviewers who disparaged her text belied “the currently fashionable notion that women will naturally be receptive or sympathetic to another woman’s writing.” “The Lady’s Not for Spurning: Kate Millett and the Critics,” *Contemporary Literature* 17, no. 4 (October 1, 1976): 541, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1207624>. Of course, the fact that Kolodny was talking about a work by Millett in particular complicates her statement, since, as I have shown, many feminist literary critics wished to distance themselves from Millett’s position within the academy as a “bad critic,” which might explain negative feminist reaction to the text. As well, as Victoria Hesford points out in a chapter titled “Fear of *Flying*,” that text in particular drew the ire of critics who saw “Millett’s excessive unassimilability” as laying “bare the limitations of her self-fashioning.” *Feeling Women’s Liberation*, 204–5. Regardless of whether or not Kolodny’s documentation of feminist literary critical resistance to a woman’s text applied only when that woman happened to be Kate Millett, the point stands: women critics attacking women writers does not fit in the linear narrative of a shift from attack to defense that Pratt, in 1971, had hoped to see.

⁹ Kolodny, “Dancing through the Minefield,” 877.

male author's authority emerged from his command over his characters and the diegetic world of his text. In contrast, canon criticism argued that authors drew their authority primarily from the location of their work in a canon of critically valued literary work, and that the canon was itself masculinist. As Judith Fetterley put it 1978, "American literature is male. Our literature neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate. It insists on its universality at the same time that it defines that universality in specifically male terms."¹⁰ She argued that literature's political nature had been deliberately obscured: "one of the main things that keeps the design of our literature unavailable to the consciousness of the woman reader, and hence impalpable, is the very posture of the apolitical, the pretense that literature speaks universal truths through forms from which all the merely personal, the purely subjective, has been burned away or at least transformed through the medium of art into the representative."¹¹ When literature's ability to access these apolitical, universal truths was defined as its greatness, then Fetterley's statement, which she repeated twice, became a feminist literary critical truth: "American literature is male."¹² By American literature, of course, she referred to the established canon that was read and taught under this heading.

In the face of the ostensibly apolitical canon which actually only valued masculinist writing, Fetterley stated quite directly that "literature is political. It is painful to have to insist on this fact, but the necessity of such insistence indicates the dimensions of the problem."¹³ The problem was quite simple: established modes of literary study,

¹⁰ Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), xii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xi.

¹² *Ibid.*, xii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xi.

such as those which created and confirmed canons of great literature, did not accept what was a most obvious fact for the growing field of feminist literary criticism. For Fetterley, it was “painful” to persist in highlighting the fact that literature was political eight years after Kate Millett ended *Sexual Politics* with the hope that we might eventually be able to “retire sex from the harsh realities of politics.”¹⁴ Feminist literary critics of the long 1970s aspired to a literary object untainted by the politics of patriarchy. Of course, patriarchy was the structure that allowed a canon, biased by its maleness, to flourish under the pretense of objectivity. For Fetterley and others, the politics of literature were a masculinist extension of patriarchy precisely because of the false objectivity that determined the shape of the pre-existing canon.

If American literature was male, and its politics were those of patriarchy, then how could feminist literary critics enter into established forms of literary study? Feminist canon critique began by dismantling the systems and structures of canonicity that led Fetterley to conclude that American literature was male. Joanna Russ, a major figure in the feminist critique of canonicity, focused on the supposed objectivity of canon formation and attempted to reveal the subjective, contingent, and ideological basis of any notion of literary value. As she phrased this effort in 1983, “what is frightening about black art or women’s art or Chicano art—and so on—is that it calls into question the very idea of objectivity and absolute standards: This is a good novel. Good *for what?* Good *for whom?*”¹⁵ In 1983, Christine Froula described feminist challenges to the established canon in a similar fashion. She wrote that feminist literary criticism “points to the need to transform a pedagogy which conceives ‘Great Books’ on the model of sacred texts into

¹⁴ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970, 363.

¹⁵ Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women’s Writing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 118.

one which calls into question the unexamined hierarchies invoked by the Arnoldian ideal, ‘the acquainting ourselves with the best that has been thought and said in the world.’¹⁶ Froula’s statement represented the aims of feminist canon critique at the same time as it gestured toward the ambivalent openness of feminist challenges to the canon; the goal was to transform approaches to the canon from a static pedagogy toward an active questioning of its hierarchies. Rather than accept the notion that an objective basis for assessing literary merit existed and had been achieved, feminist literary critics thematized that objectivity itself. At all times, feminist literary criticism challenged the idea that aesthetic value could ever be judged dispassionately or objectively.

In confronting the Arnoldian ideals of ‘Great Books,’ ‘sacred texts,’ and even the idea of ‘the best that has been thought and said,’ feminist literary critics Fetterley, Froula, Kolodny, and others disputed not only the idea of objective aesthetic value, but also the motivated nature of literary criticism. They refused the notion of objectivity and the idea that the aesthetic value of a text could be separated from its political meaning. The ‘enduring’ Arnoldian model to which Froula referred was not one that applied solely to literary value, but also to the labor of criticism. Matthew Arnold included both concepts in his contentions about literary study which continued to influence literary study in the US academy for over a hundred years after he set out prescriptions for English criticism.¹⁷ In 1865, Arnold wrote that the one rule which should govern criticism was disinterestedness.

¹⁶ Froula, “When Eve Reads Milton,” 343.

¹⁷ It is important to note that in the US academy, the realm with which this dissertation is concerned, the American literary canon was developed as a reaction against the British canon, and the dominance of English writers and critics in the new world. In 1981, Nina Baym offered a feminist narration of this development, and wrote that “from its historical beginnings, American literary criticism has assumed that

And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from practice; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches; by steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, which perhaps ought often to be attached to them, which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism has really nothing to do with. Its business, as I have said, simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas.¹⁸

The forms of literary study into which feminist literary critics intervened were deeply inflected by Arnold's attempt to divorce criticism from practical concerns (by which he primarily meant British politics and religion) in order to ensure its objective right to evaluate "the best that is known and thought." His ideas influenced the mainstream understanding of canonicity and objective scholarly reading which ensured that the canon was composed of heterosexual white men.¹⁹ Arnold's influence was deeply resolute: as Barbara Herrnstein Smith noted, even in 1988, the academic canon was never at issue in debates about literary value, and "where evaluative authority was not ringingly affirmed, asserted, or self-justified, it was simply assumed."²⁰ Vestiges of the evaluative criticism founded on Arnoldian disinterestedness persisted even following the feminist

literature produced in this nation would have to be ground-breaking, equal to the challenge of the new nation, and completely original. Therefore, it could not be judged by referring it back to earlier achievements. The earliest American literary critics began to talk about the 'most American' work rather than the 'best' work because they knew no way to find out the best other than by comparing American to British writing. Such a criticism struck them as both unfair and unpatriotic. We had thrown off the political shackles of England; it would not do for us to be servile in our literature." Despite such revolutionary approaches to the creation of a specifically American canon, US literary critics retained allegiance to figures like Matthew Arnold and his theory of criticism. "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," *American Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (July 1, 1981): 125, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712312>.

¹⁸ Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," in *Essays in Criticism* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1865), 18–19.

¹⁹ This point brings to mind Eve Sedgwick's later but relevant axiom that "the relation of gay studies to debates on the literary canon is, and had best be, torturous." *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 48.

²⁰ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 24.

canon debates and other concurrent challenges to the canon (such as those based on the inclusion of writers of color in the American canon). In 1988, Herrnstein Smith wrote “although evaluative criticism remains intellectually suspect, it certainly continues to be practiced as a magisterial privilege in the classrooms of the literary academy and granted admission to its journals as long as it comes under cover of other presumably more objective types of literary study.”²¹ In addition to Herrnstein Smith, other critics working on issues of race and class drew on feminist literary criticism’s insights to explain the sheer tenaciousness of the Arnoldian model of objective criticism.²²

In order to critique the way in which the Arnoldian model manifested in the long 1970s, feminist literary critics had to tackle the ideal of objectivity alongside the ideal of canonicity. This attack took the form of uncovering and explicating the specific processes by which the canon was constructed subjectively to exclude some writers, despite appearances to the contrary. In a representative example of this type of work, in 1983 Joanna Russ wrote that

in a nominally egalitarian society the ideal situation (socially speaking) is one in which the members of the ‘wrong’ groups have the freedom to engage in literature (or equally significant activities) and yet do not do so, thus proving that they can’t. But, alas, give them the least real freedom and they *will* do it. The trick thus becomes to make the freedom as nominal a freedom as possible and then—

²¹ Ibid., 23.

²² Henry Louis Gates, for instance, recorded the Arnoldian model’s tendency to exclude African American writers from the American canon as late as 1992. *Loose Canons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Likewise, in 1991 Paul Lauter wrote that evaluative criticism had its origin in the US in the 1920s, when ostensibly objective forms of criticism were linked to identity-based definitions of cultural authority. According to Lauter, “in the 1920s processes were set in motion that virtually eliminated black, white female, and all working-class writers from the canon.” When these deliberate processes were conflated with the ideal of disinterestedness, they became hidden hierarchies that presumably reflected the absence of subjective opinion, although they actually served as intentional exclusions. These exclusions were implemented through “the professionalization of the teaching of literature, the development of an aesthetic theory that privileged certain texts, and the historiographic organization of the body of literature into conventional ‘periods’ and ‘themes.’” *Canons and Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 23; 27.

since some of the so-and-so's will do it anyway—develop various strategies for ignoring, condemning, or belittling the artistic works that result. If properly done, these strategies result in a social situation in which the 'wrong' people are (supposedly) free to commit literature, art, or whatever, but very few do, and those who do (it seems) do it badly, so we can all go home to lunch.²³

The notion that women writers, the 'wrong' writers according to Russ, did their work 'badly' was not just a question of aesthetic failure but also of the judgment of that failure. Russ implicated the literary critic in that judgment: the presumably male critic who just wanted to go home for lunch, as she provocatively put it.²⁴ This critic resisted the emergence of women writers in large part because of the breakdown in judgment that would necessarily occur should a variety of the 'wrong' writers be included in the canon. Russ described it as a "nightmare" for the critic, "that the privileged group will not recognize that 'other' art, will not be able to judge it, that the superiority of taste and training possessed by the privileged critic and the privileged artist will suddenly vanish."²⁵ This fear stemmed directly from the hierarchical forms of judgment that had previously supported the notion of objective standards of literary and aesthetic value.

In the process of showing that all definitions of value, aesthetic judgment, and notions of canonicity were always motivated by ideology, always connected to politics, and always subjective, feminist literary criticism grappled with the effects of these

²³ Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, 4–5. Russ was a major figure in the canon debates, and this 1983 monograph was an extension of her earlier article "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write," which appeared as the first article in Susan Koppelman Cornillon's influential 1972 anthology *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, which will be discussed at length in this chapter.

²⁴This passage is stylistically representative of Russ's entire text: throughout, she adopted a sardonic and often playful tone that did not conform to the typical form of literary criticism, though it is representative of the way in which many feminist literary critics disrupted the conventions of academic writing. Mary Ellmann, for instance, in *Thinking About Women* and Tillie Olsen in *Silences* likewise adopted similarly unconventional tones and, for example, occasionally addressed the reader directly. Even Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader*, a fairly academic text, did not include a full bibliography and the scant notes it did include certainly did not encompass all of the sources used and quoted in the text.

²⁵ Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, 118.

revelations. Where could feminist literary critics go once they acknowledged, as Russ did, that there was “no single center of value and hence no absolute standards”?²⁶ When Russ posed this formulation in 1983, she was both summing up a decade of contention with this new reality and setting an agenda for the work that would continue into the next decade. Many forms of canon critique attempted to acknowledge the fact that no single center of value existed by integrating women writers into the existing canon and extolling their literary merit. In the process, they created explicit pathways for valuing women’s writing within the existing framework of canonicity. In 1971, for instance, Elaine Showalter included syllabi for classes on women writers at the end of the published version of “Women and the Literary Curriculum.”²⁷ Later, in 1977, she published a lengthy list of women writers in a biographical appendix in the back of her critical text, *A Literature of Their Own*.²⁸ Other scholars published entire monographs dedicated to highlighting less prominent historical women writers, such as Barbara Christian’s 1980 *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*²⁹ and Dale Spender’s 1986 *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers Before Jane Austen*.³⁰ In 1987 Nellie McKay similarly did the work of adding previously under-theorized works to the American canon when she traced black women’s writing in the US from the mid-eighteenth century to the then-present. McKay’s work exhibited a strong allegiance to the additive model of canonicity, and she ultimately concluded that “black women writers

²⁶ Ibid., 120.

²⁷ Elaine Showalter, “Women and the Literary Curriculum,” *College English* 32, no. 8 (May 1, 1971): 860–62, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/375623>.

²⁸ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*.

²⁹ Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

³⁰ Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers Before Jane Austen* (New York: Pandora, 1986).

project a dynamic 'I' into the canon, one that makes more complete the reality of the multi-faceted American experience."³¹ These approaches reflected Russ's contention that "for the linear hierarchy of good and bad it becomes necessary to substitute a multitude of centers of value, each with its own periphery, some closer to each other, some farther apart."³² Christian and Spender's texts, for example, reflected new centers of value in that they prioritized work which previously would have been classified as "bad." In 1983 Lillian Robinson described these efforts cogently: "it is an undeniable fact that most feminist criticism focuses on women writers, so that the feminist efforts to humanize the canon have usually meant bringing a woman's point of view to bear by incorporating works by women into the established canon."³³

Many feminist literary critics, however, did not see inclusion in the canon as a meaningful goal. They disagreed with the basic premise of canonicity, and aimed their work at dismantling the idea that canonization bestowed value. In 1980, Rosalind Coward described the motivating impulse for such inquiry. She explained the continued need to "examine other institutional practices which determine *how* we come to read a piece of writing in a particular way. Thus we need to consider how the institution of 'literary criticism' ...determines how certain pieces of writing are designated as 'literature' or 'potboiler,' making distinctions on the basis of nebulous notions like 'quality.'"³⁴ For Coward, and others who argued against the simple expansion of the canon to include

³¹ Nellie McKay, "Reflections on Black Women Writers: Revising the Literary Canon," in *The Impact of Feminist Research in the Academy*, ed. Farnham (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 187.

³² Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, 120.

³³ Lillian S. Robinson, "Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 1983): 86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/464208>.

³⁴ Rosalind Coward, "This Novel Changes Lives: Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?," *Feminist Review* 5 (1980): 54.

women writers, canons were always representative of the structures of power that determined and evaluated quality. As such, even a feminist canon which could hold multiple centers of value at once would not differ significantly from the exclusionary practices of the existing canon. Like Coward, Kolodny highlighted the role of judgment in literary critical practice. In 1980, she wrote that

in challenging the adequacy of received critical opinion or the imputed excellence of established canons, feminist literary critics are essentially seeking to discover how aesthetic value is assigned in the first place, where it resides (in the text or in the reader), and, most importantly, what validity may really be claimed by our aesthetic 'judgments.' What ends do those judgments serve, the feminist asks; and what conceptions of the world or ideological stances do they (even if unwittingly) help to perpetuate?³⁵

Feminist literary critics not only asked these questions of the established literary canon, but also of the new, alternative, and inclusive canons of women's writing that Christian, McKay, Showalter, and Spender advanced.

A crucial amount of tension existed between arguments to dismantle the canon structure altogether and the desire to create alternative canons of women's writing. Since feminist canon critique had always worked against the notion of objectivity in evaluative criticism, it was impossible for many feminist literary critics to ignore the fact that alternative canons of women's writing were similarly politically motivated. In 1980 Deborah McDowell, for example, warned feminist critics of the "dangers of political ideology yoked with aesthetic judgment," even when such ideology was in the service of black feminist criticism.³⁶ Looking back at the canon debates, in 1987, Hazel Carby

³⁵ Kolodny, "Dancing through the Minefield," 15.

³⁶ Deborah E. McDowell, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," *Black American Literature Forum* 14, no. 4 (1980): 190. Hazel Carby quoted this important warning, which McDowell issued both in general and also in response to Barbara Smith's earlier article "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *The Radical Teacher*, no. 7 (March 1, 1978): 20–27, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20709102>.

praised McDowell for this warning, and at the same time rebuked Christian for her allegiance to the idea of a canon of black women's writing. According to Carby, Christian divorced "what she considers to be sound critical practice from political practice when she states that what irks her about 'much literary criticism today' is that 'so often the text is but an occasion for espousing [the critic's] philosophical point of view—revolutionary black, feminist, or socialist program.'"37 In Carby's view, seven years removed from McDowell, Christian failed as a good feminist critic because of her desire to validate the works of black women authors within an accepted canon structure, rather than dismantle that structure altogether.

This significant disagreement was also visible in concurrent debates about including marginal male voices in the literary canon, and in broader discussions about canonicity in general. In 1984, Charles Altieri framed the quandary between dismantling existing canons and finding new ways to value previously excluded writers like so:

if the analytic attitude of critical historicism makes us suspect that canons have always served specifiable social interests, its accompanying political lesson is clear: any desire to put literature to work as a social force would require us self-consciously to build canons that serve our concrete, 'political' commitments. Since the valuing dimension of criticism is inescapably ideological, we could either hope to impose a single canon that we see as favoring our own concerns, or we could take a more complex stance emphasizing the liberal play of interests in society.³⁸

The "inescapably ideological" valuing dimension of criticism spoke directly to the heart of the feminist literary critical concerns that Kate Millett revealed in *Sexual Politics*. If literature was political, and reading literature was a political practice, then how could

³⁷ Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 14.

³⁸ Charles Altieri, "An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon," in *Canons*, ed. Robert Von Hallberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 43.

feminists advance an agenda without replicating the same structures of value that excluded women in the first place? Many feminist literary critics echoed Altieri's dismal view of the potential of alternative canons and shied away from the kinds of projects Christian, McKay, Showalter, and Spender developed. In 1980, Kolodny described these two impulses, one toward inclusion/expansion and the other toward destruction of the canon, as a contrast between the "recurrent tendency in criticism to establish norms for the evaluation of literary works" and "developing standards for evaluating the adequacy of our critical methods."³⁹

While Christian and McKay, among others, clearly believed that inclusion in the canon accomplished something that destruction of the canon could not, both sides of the canon debate implicitly argued that a consideration of women's writing, inside or outside canons, would lead to social change. In recuperatively *rereading* women's texts in order to reveal either how they did or did not function as 'Great Books,' feminist literary critics participated in the larger feminist effort to illuminate the previously hidden operations of literary study which marginalized women's texts. These efforts to evaluate critical methods rather than texts led feminist literary critics to *reread* women's texts with the primary goal of locating them in relation to new or existing canons. The concept of *rereading* was consistent with other contemporaneous tropes of feminism as revelation: revising, recovering, rewriting, and so on were not just slogans or metaphors but also methods.⁴⁰

³⁹ Kolodny, "Dancing through the Minefield," 15.

⁴⁰ These methods were especially visible in History departments, where the notion of uncovering women's history and rewriting history gained ground around the same time as feminist canon critique flourished. In 1983, Joan Wallach Scott described "the last decade" as a time when "Virginia Woolf's call for a history of women—written more than fifty years ago—has been answered." Scott wrote that "women's history enters

Feminist literary critics who engaged in the method of *rereading* shared the belief that alternative canon building would shift the terrain under literary study and, by extension, the patriarchal structure that had dominated it. In 1984, Froula wrote that the effect of feminist canon criticism “has been not simply to balance male bias with female (or marginal) bias—the ‘opening’ of the canon—but to disrupt the canonical economy as such, the dynamics of cultural authority.” According to Froula, “feminists have moved from advocating representation of voices formerly silenced or ‘marginalized’ by the established curriculum to recognizing that such representation implies and effects a profound transformation of the very terms *authority* and *value*—cultural and aesthetic or literary—that underwrite the traditional idea of the canon.”⁴¹ Froula’s description of the feminist challenge to the canon’s core concepts of authority and value, objectivity and judgment, accurately described the product of the debates, and also highlighted the extent to which the feminist literary criticism of the long 1970s shifted critical focus onto the woman and the feminist reader, and away from the male author and his works.

the terrain of political history and inevitably begins the rewriting of history.” In other words, uncovering women’s history was a politicized process of rewriting history. In the context of the History department, Scott noted that “most scholars working in women’s history assume their work will transform history as it has been written and understood; they differ on the question of how that will be accomplished. Some see the recovery of information and the focus on female subjects as sufficient to the task. Others use their research to challenge received interpretations of progress and regress.” “Women’s History and the Rewriting of History,” in *The Impact of Feminist Research in the Academy*, ed. Christine Farnham (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 34; 45; 36. The title of Sheila Rowbotham’s 1974 monograph exemplified two of the main tropes of such work: *Hidden from History: Rediscovering Women in History From the 17th Century to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974). The debate between supplementing the historical record with information about women versus the necessity of completely rewriting history to adequately include women clearly paralleled the two positions staked within the canon debates.

⁴¹ Froula, “When Eve Reads Milton,” 323.

The Woman and the Feminist Reader

In the period under consideration, feminist literary critics used the concept of the woman reader as both a descriptive and an analytic category. The very idea of the “woman reader” was antithetical to contemporaneous attempts to divorce sex from occupation such as “woman doctor,” and yet feminist literary critics introduced the term to perform an important task. The concept of the woman reader signaled a fact that was both obvious and yet simultaneously obscured: women had a very different relation to the texts they read than men did. When Showalter and others highlighted this fact, they were able to critique the positions women had no choice but to occupy when they read and absorbed literature that spoke about male themes from a male perspective to a presumptively male reader. While the canon debates focused on the realm of literary texts themselves, they were informed by the concurrent growth of the woman reader as an analytic concept. The focus on the woman reader served to replace notions of objective authority with the observation that all assessments of literary value were deeply subjective, since even reading differed by sex. Feminist literary critics needed an entirely new subject position to illuminate and address the consequences of male universality. The very fact that the category of the woman reader was necessary revealed a problem about the study of literature in general. The category itself protested the patriarchal structures of literary study, mainly by exposing what happened to women psychically when the literary establishment presumed that all audiences and readers were universally male. In the process of advancing and deploying the category of the woman reader, feminist literary critics argued that women were split apart from their experiences as they read. This section discusses the feminist literary critics who built the category of the

woman reader upon an assessment of the academic canon as actively harmful to women. In addition, it introduces the related yet distinct category of the feminist reader, or what Judith Fetterley called the “resisting reader.” Fetterley and others used the concept of the feminist reader to indicate a reader who was aware of, and actively struggled against, the coercive universality of male texts.

Showalter and others evinced a degree of rage at the consequences of the historical presumption that canonical literary objects were written for, and read by, male audiences. They argued that this assumption, made by authors, critics, and pedagogues alike, had an impact on the psyche of women readers. In December of 1970, Showalter read a paper titled “Women and the Literary Curriculum” at the Modern Language Association (MLA) Forum on the Status of Women in the Profession in which she laid the groundwork for the concept of the woman reader as a distinct and meaningful category.⁴² In her talk, she stressed the sheer *maleness* of the curriculum that students of literature encountered in the academy at the undergraduate and graduate levels. She spoke of a hypothetical woman student majoring in English encountering, in her first year in college, texts such as *The Responsible Man*, *Conditions of Men*, *Man in Crisis: Perspectives on the Individual and His World*, *The Young Man in Literature: The Initiation Theme*, and, of course, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. “By the end of her freshman year,” Showalter said, “a woman student would have learned something about intellectual neutrality; she would be learning, in fact, how to think like a man.”⁴³ Showalter compiled titles and statistics that revealed an overwhelming proportion of men

⁴² This talk was subsequently published in *College English* in 1971. Showalter, “Women and the Literary Curriculum.”

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 855.

to women on reading lists, curricula, and in anthologies. She argued that as a result of immersion in such texts, “women students will therefore perceive that literature, as it is selected to be taught, confirms what everything else in the society tells them: that the masculine viewpoint is considered normative, and the feminine viewpoint divergent.”⁴⁴ The woman reader, consequently, was actively damaged by her engagement with literary objects in the context of the university as an institutional extension of patriarchy. According to Showalter, an undergraduate education in English for a woman student was a “long apprenticeship in negative capability.” She said that “women are estranged from their own experience and unable to perceive its shape and authenticity, in part because they do not see it mirrored and given resonance by literature.” In addition to this effacing of their own position, Showalter argued, women students were also “expected to identify as readers with a masculine experience and perspective, which is presented as the human one.”⁴⁵ This problem of a split identification in readership was an important element of the category of the woman reader as it began to take shape in feminist literary criticism in the early 1970s: while Laura Mulvey explored women’s split subjectivity in the realm of film and viewership in 1975, by 1971 it was already a prominent theme in feminist literary criticism’s creation of the category of the woman reader.⁴⁶

Working later in the decade than Showalter, and building on her insights, Fetterley also considered the coercion women readers faced when reading male texts in her hugely influential 1978 text *The Resisting Reader*.⁴⁷ In narrating the early history of the woman reader, Fetterley discussed literary works she considered representative of the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 856.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

⁴⁷ Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*.

existing canon, such as Washington Irving's 1819 short story "Rip Van Winkle" and Norman Mailer's 1965 novel *An American Dream*.⁴⁸ Fetterley noted that "in such fictions the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her; she is required to identify against herself."⁴⁹ This self-negation had practical and material results: according to Showalter's talk, women students of literature were "timid, cautious, and insecure" and lacked "the happy confidence, the exuberant sense of the value of their individual observations" enjoyed by their male classmates.⁵⁰ These emotional and behavioral consequences occurred as a result of the power women readers lost when they minimized their own selfhood. As Fetterley noted,

power is the issue in the politics of literature, as it is in the politics of anything else. To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one's identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness—...the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male—to be universal, to be American—is to be *not female*. Not only does powerlessness characterize woman's experience of reading, it also describes the content of what is read.⁵¹

Powerlessness was deeply linked to the psychic division of self that women experienced as they read male literature that spoke only to male themes. As such, the solution was not

⁴⁸ Both Mary Ellmann and Kate Millet also critiqued *An American Dream* at length, along with other novels by Norman Mailer. Mailer's popularity as a target for feminist literary critics of the late 1960s and 1970s did not go unnoticed: in "The Prisoner of Sex," his response to the emerging body of feminist literary criticism, Mailer traced his growing awareness of his role in the field. At first, he was informed by a reporter from *Time* magazine that, "you may as well face it. They seem to think you're their major ideological opposition." Later, he received a copy of Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* with a letter attached to it stating that it "had more references to his own name in the index than any other writer—could he comment?" Ultimately, Mailer decided to embrace his status as antagonist to feminist literary critics, "better to be the devil in the fire!" as he put it, and engage with Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*—"of course he would use her book," he wrote, "it had twenty-five pages on him!" Interestingly, Mailer continues to haunt feminist literary criticism, as can be seen in this dissertation, which engages of necessity with Mailer throughout, based on his prominence in the feminist literary criticism discussed herein. "The Prisoner of Sex," March 1971, 43; 45; 46.

⁴⁹ Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, xii.

⁵⁰ Showalter, "Women and the Literary Curriculum," 857.

⁵¹ Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, xiii.

as simple as restoring power to women in the classroom “by sympathetic attention to individuals, or by coercion, or by emphasizing...the need for some dependable academic Betas.”⁵² Rather, the problem went far deeper and was a consequence of the supposed universality and objectivity of literary production.

In identifying against herself, the woman reader was forced to collude with patriarchy in her own self-negation and powerlessness. This required what might be described as a kind of psychic violence, or a non-consensual psychic split. As Fetterley put it, “the final irony, and indignity, of the woman reader’s relation to American literature, then, is that she is required to disassociate herself from the very experience the literature engenders.” That disassociation was a part of the very form, or design, of literary objects: “powerlessness is the subject and powerlessness the experience, and the design insists that Rip Van Winkle/Frederic Henry/Nick Carraway/Stephen Rojack speak for us all.”⁵³ Obviously, the category of the powerless woman reader was inadequate to the aspirations feminist literary critics held for the literary object and literary criticism: feminists placed far too much emphasis on the socially transformative effect of literature and interpretation for that to be the case. Certainly in a society where, “as readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny,” a shift in consciousness was required to create feminist readers who could, first, recognize their role as women readers and, once that was accomplished, reject that role.⁵⁴

⁵² Showalter, “Women and the Literary Curriculum,” 857.

⁵³ Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, xiii.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xx.

The resisting feminist reader wholly embodied this shift in consciousness. Fetterley's text was the most prominent contribution to the creation of the category of the feminist reader. She paid careful and deliberate attention to delineating the specific attributes of the feminist reader. The feminist reader was separated from herself not by the forcible universality of male texts, but rather by her choice to occupy an "outsider" consciousness. Her externality allowed her to step outside of a text in order to question its ideological construction. This process was similar to the way in which feminist criticism entered male literature "from a point of view which questions its values and assumptions and which has its investment in making available to consciousness precisely that which the literature wished to keep hidden."⁵⁵ The feminist reader was equipped to separate herself from the texts she read in a productive, rather than violently minimizing, fashion. Feminist reading strategies often took the form of suspicious reading practices meant to change the terms of the psychic split women readers encountered. If women readers had no choice but to distance themselves from the texts they read, then feminist readers would do so on their own terms: they turned their separation from a text into a critical detachment, and used the space between themselves and the text to question the text's values. As a result, the feminist reader was an investigator of sorts, a suspicious reader who took nothing at face value in texts written by both men and women.

The bulk of suspicious feminist reading, however, was directed toward male authors and their images of women, since it was male authors whose work had required the creation of the category of the woman reader in the first place. In 1971, for instance, Dolores Barracano Schmidt's article "The Great American Bitch" offered a prescription

⁵⁵ Ibid.

for feminist reading of male texts. In her short article, she traced the “evolution of the Great American Bitch as literary archetype.”⁵⁶ In a representative reading of the types of novels and authors feminist readers were critiquing in the early 1970s, she found that

the Great American Bitch is that anti-heroine of a thousand faces, one example of whom is Margot, the taut, unhappy wife of Francis Macomber, a type emerging in American literature in the post-World War I era and still very much alive and constantly kicking in the literary suburbias of Herbert Gold, Roth, Cheever, and Updike. She is Martha in Albee’s “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” and all these first wives who provide so convenient an excuse for infidelity and divorce in today’s domestic novels... The bitch is no laughing matter; she is a man-eater.⁵⁷

She established her own critical category and superimposed it on the works of male authors, and in so doing clearly took up a different position than the woman reader. Rather than split her own subjectivity to identify with Francis Macomber in deriding his wife, Barracano Schmidt developed a feminist critical position and instructions for a feminist reading methodology. In this sense, her work was similar to Millett’s, and yet she was careful to separate herself from Millett’s ideological and cultural critique, perhaps in order to avoid the same fate as Millett.⁵⁸ Unlike Millett, Barracano Schmidt did not dismiss the larger literary value of the authors she read, and followed Annis Pratt’s definition of a “good critic.”⁵⁹ Despite her suspicious reading of the category of “the great American bitch,” she wrote, “I do not mean in any way to denigrate the literary accomplishments of the authors referred to: Hemingway, Lewis, Fitzgerald are giants of

⁵⁶ Schmidt, “The Great American Bitch,” 900.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Although, it is interesting to note that Barracano Schmidt’s article was not often cited throughout the decade, nor has it figured significantly in discussions about the feminist reader, or feminist literary criticism in general. I turn to it in this section regardless, in order to highlight an early formation of the feminist reader and to indicate that the concerns I address in this chapter were in operation all throughout the long 1970s, even those which were most prominent toward the end of the period.

⁵⁹ Pratt, “The New Feminist Criticism,” 877.

twentieth-century fiction, here and abroad.”⁶⁰ In addition, she posed as a question what Millett would have stated as fact: she described Hemingway, Lewis, Fitzgerald, and Anderson as “the writers who created the Great American Bitch archetype (or did they merely record social history?).”⁶¹ The question of whether male writers were simply faithful recorders of a biased, patriarchal social reality or actively engaged in creating inaccurate stereotypes about women was a central concern for the feminist reader: it was up to her to distinguish the author’s intention, a clear departure from New Criticism and its derision of the intentional fallacy.⁶² In this sense, Barracano Schmidt’s feminist reader followed Millett in repudiating New Criticism’s foundational tenets, though she tempered her argument by posing it as a question, and by retaining some allegiance to evaluative criticism. Despite this veneer, Barracano Schmidt’s article was met with obscurity that can perhaps be attributed to the way in which she followed Millett, the quintessential feminist reader, before Fetterley formalized this reading strategy as a category.

Occasionally, some feminist literary critics directed their feminist reading strategies toward works written by women. In another inheritance from Millett, the same critics periodically conflated author and protagonist when reading women’s writing. Koppelman Cornillon, for instance, was highly critical of the sexist images in Joyce Carol Oates’s 1969 novel *Them* because, she argued, “one is uncertain, while reading the works of Miss Oates, whether or not she does, in fact, separate her own attitudes and

⁶⁰ Schmidt, “The Great American Bitch,” 904–5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 901.

⁶² Wimsatt Jr. and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy.”

opinions on the issue of sex role from her characters.”⁶³ According to Koppelman Cornillon, “it is possible for a writer to present fictionally the kind of sexist child-rearing that [the characters in *Them*] obviously undergo without allying herself with it. In other words, a writer can portray the unconscious perpetration of socialization on her characters without herself reinforcing the attitudes being internalized by her characters.”⁶⁴ She doubted that Oates had done so, and in the process critiqued her work for its perpetuation of sexist stereotypes. In contrast, Koppelman Cornillon praised “Mary Ann Evans,” who had an “ability to separate herself from the attitudes of some of her major characters” both because of the conventions of the Victorian fiction she wrote and also because “it was a clear-minded knowledge in her own head that, indeed, she did not share those ideas.”⁶⁵ Koppelman Cornillon clearly defied the New Critical injunction to ignore an author’s intentions in creating a work, and at the same time remarkably positioned herself as a resisting reader of a *woman’s* text. These two positions were seemingly quite aberrant, particularly in light of Pratt’s injunction in 1971 that feminist literary criticism should shift from attack to defense.

How can these positions be explained? Koppelman Cornillon’s critique of a woman writer on the basis of her failure to separate herself from the patriarchal reality she was depicting evinced a preoccupation with the dynamics of fictional representation. Throughout the long 1970s, feminist literary critics urged feminist readers to seek reality in representation and argued that some form of truth could be represented in fictional

⁶³ Susan Koppelman Cornillon, “The Fiction of Fiction,” in *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972), 119.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

texts. Koppelman Cornillon, for example, constructed a mode of reading as a pedagogy to create feminist readers who would seek accurate representation of women in fictional texts. The idea of realistic representation depended on the belief that a reality of women's experience first existed in the world, and second that it could (or should) be accessed via literature. As Koppelman Cornillon went on to say in her critique of Oates, "in the fiction of even our most talented women novelists, the writers fail to communicate this secret, usually shame-filled, inner life of women on an overt, artistically self-conscious level. They reinforce female shame by not discussing women's deviation from the cultural myths of what is supposed to be feminine."⁶⁶ This failure to represent the hidden and covert aspects of women's lives resulted from the fact that, she wrote, "in the male culture the idea of the feminine is expressed, defined, and perceived by the male as a *condition of* being female, while for the female it is seen as *an addition to* one's femaleness, as a status to be achieved."⁶⁷ As a consequence, Koppelman Cornillon instructed feminist readers to look for both male-authored obfuscations of images of women and women's own minimization of their lives and realities in the texts they read. Feminist readers, according to Koppelman Cornillon, "must seek for this level of reality in their fiction in a manner similar to that applied by psychoanalytic critics who chase Oedipus through Shakespeare."⁶⁸ In other words, feminist literary critics instructed feminist readers to search literary objects for representations of a reality that may have even been opaque to its own author: a level of reality which women authors were unable to express even in their own words. This was the prerogative of the feminist reader; she

⁶⁶ Ibid., 114.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 113.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 114.

projected a truth about women that might be concealed even beyond the consciousness of the author.

Many feminist literary critics evinced a preference for a realistic depiction of the circumstances of women's lives, and demanded that women authors indicate when they separated themselves from those depictions. At the same time, as later critics have argued in hindsight, they exhibited a conviction that it was possible for truths about women to exist outside of culture and representation. Later critical historians of the feminist reader, such as Toril Moi and Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, have seen the feminist literary critical tendency to posit a reality outside culture or representation as a major theme of the field which stretched until the end of the century. In their 1997 assessment of the status of the feminist reader, for instance, Belsey and Moore wrote that most critics working on images of women in fiction clearly argued that "the patriarchal account of life was false, a distortion of the truth about women." While this statement was uncontentious at all points in the development of feminist literary criticism, Belsey and Moore pointed out the perhaps unintentional consequences of such an insight. They wrote that:

of course, in some instances this has been the case: motherhood is not inevitably a serene experience; housework is not necessarily fulfilling; clitoral orgasm is not immature. But in general the insistence that a political practice, the subordination of women, is based on falsehood, seems to imply that there is a truth about women which is outside culture, outside language and meaning, a question of nature.⁶⁹

In other words, the feminist reader's suspicious conviction that literature concealed truths about women which could not be represented gave rise to a conflicting and contradictory desire to see literature as both a record *and* a critique of culture (recalling Barracano

⁶⁹ Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, "Introduction: The Story So Far," in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (New York: Blackwell, 1989), 7–8.

Schmidt's question about whether the male authors she read prescribed or merely recorded social reality). At the same time, feminist literary critics faced institutional pressures to remain "good critics," as measured by New Criticism's detachment from the author's intentions and the reader's affective response.⁷⁰ These competing needs led many feminist critics to argue that texts could be judged on the basis of their success in representing the real and concealed realities of women in the world outside literature.⁷¹

In the feminist literary criticism of the long 1970s, realism was defined as the accurate representation of an undistorted image of women. While many feminist literary critics grappled with how, or if, this was even possible, it was undeniable that feminist critics evinced a preference for what they would have called "realistic" depictions of women, sexism, and patriarchy in literary texts. This partiality was visible in the vast amount of criticism that worked in the same vein as Koppelman Cornillon's agenda-setting anthology. *Images of Women in Fiction* aimed to trace, through literature, "the roles women have been forced to assume in society and are now beginning to occupy, beginning with the most desiccated and lifeless traditional stereotypes of woman as heroine, and as invisible person, progressing through an awakening to reality, wherein the woman is treated as person, and ending with the newest insistence by women that we are equal in all respects to men."⁷² Koppelman Cornillon and the many critics collected in her volume aspired to a politics of representation that would see women depicted as fully and completely as men: they resisted the simplification of women to lifeless stereotypes

⁷⁰ Wimsatt Jr. and Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy"; Wimsatt Jr. and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy."

⁷¹ This classification of "good" literature as that which was able to represent women's experience is precisely what led Moi to argue that Anglo-American feminist literary criticism suffered from a realist bias. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 45–49.

⁷² Koppelman Cornillon, *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, x.

and images. They saw this flattening out of women in fiction as a function of patriarchal attempts to suppress the truth of women's real, complex existence in the world.

Feminist literary criticism was founded on observations about truth, reality, and distortion. Koppelman Cornillon's desire for the full depiction of women by women emerged from these observations, as did a variety of related work. Eva Figs's 1970 *Patriarchal Attitudes*, for instance, set out the primary basis for what would later become the foundational assumption of the feminist reader's suspicion: "the first thing that strikes one about the image in the mirror to which we dance is the fact that it was created by man... One could say that this is the real difficulty: the fact that the mirror is distorted. Man's vision of woman is not objective, but an uneasy combination of what he wishes her to be and what he fears her to be, and it is to this mirror image that woman has had to comply."⁷³ For Figs, the artificial depictions of women in male-authored texts were false obfuscations of the realities of women's nuanced lives. Many others shared this assessment. In 1976, Annette Kolodny noted that "women have come more and more to protest the fact that they themselves appear to be 'an artful invention'—in most recent years, having been defined, framed, restricted, and simplified (for their own purposes) by everyone from Norman Mailer to Madison Avenue advertising executives."⁷⁴ Figs and Kolodny contended that male images of women were false, and thus could be replaced by more accurate representations. Koppelman Cornillon agreed, but worried that patriarchy permeated women's consciousness so deeply that even women might not be able to produce alternatives. These perspectives were tied together by a concern with the

⁷³ Figs, *Patriarchal Attitudes*, 17.

⁷⁴ Kolodny, "The Lady's Not for Spurning," 543.

dynamics of representation, a concern initiated by Millett, who took a slightly different view of the same problem.

Millett had argued that the sexist images of women presented in male texts were not fictions at all, but rather accurate representations of how women were perceived and located in the world. Figs and Kolodny contended that these images were false because the truth about women had yet to be revealed, since women were still modeled after patriarchal constructions. The need for the feminist reader's suspicion was clear: these dynamics of truth and falsity were many-layered and feminist investigation was required in order to strip away the patriarchal fictions and access a complex truth about women. In adopting a position of suspicion and positing the reality of her own experience, the feminist reader was equipped to assess the falsities and truths of literary representations and measure them against her own life and experience.⁷⁵ This understanding of reality and fiction was founded on the distinctions made between the woman reader and the default universal of the male reader, or, more accurately, the presumptively genderless reader. Barracano Schmidt echoed this understanding when she wrote that "we must reconsider our critical judgments and be particularly careful how we apply such sweeping critical terms as 'realistic,' 'acute social observers,' 'universal in theme and values.' They present a specifically *male* view, and in these particular cases, a threatened male view of their times."⁷⁶

While the category of the woman reader was founded on the realization of the psychic harm that was caused when texts and literary pedagogy presumed a male reader,

⁷⁵ And, subsequently, write more accurate narratives, as will be discussed in this chapter's next section on the woman writer.

⁷⁶ Schmidt, "The Great American Bitch," 905.

the preference for a reality that would be “more real” also stemmed from a critique of universal visions of women’s experiences. Both formulations depended on a vision of literature as a mystification of reality, and gave rise to the idea that the feminist reader sought the “truth” in literary texts. The woman and the feminist reader, therefore, were both engaged in an attempt to find more accurate representations of reality, by which feminist literary critics meant non-misogynist depictions, narratives, and representations of women’s lives. They aimed to replace what they saw as actively harmful distortions of reality with “real” images of women. This search, of course, required that feminist literary critics turn their attention to the works of women writers.

The Woman Writer

Many feminist critics believed that women’s writing allowed access to women’s previously un-representable experiences, and that these experiences could be accurately depicted in literature created by women. In the process of staking a literary critical claim to the representability of women’s experience, some feminist critics came to value women’s writing on an aesthetic basis, and tried to valorize it through similar systems of canonicity that had previously enshrined men’s texts as accessing the pinnacle of human experience. Often, when feminist literary critics turned their attention to the works of women writers, they used reading strategies that depended less on suspicion and more on a sense of mutual support and elevation of previously derided feminine forms of writing. Feminist literary critics turned increasingly to women writers who reflected the version of female reality that they, as feminist readers, hoped to see. Of course, this did not mean that feminist literary critics always issued favorable readings of women writers. To the contrary, they decried the works of women authors who did not depict women in a way

they believed to be accurate, as can be seen in the responses to Kate Millett's *Flying* and Joyce Carol Oates's *Them*, discussed above. As a result, "the woman writer" as a category was not determined simply based on the sex of the author. Rather, "women writers" were only those writers who presented a particular vision of female experience, one which feminist literary critics would have described as accurate or real.

Feminist literary critics also linked their own work as critics to the increase in production of contemporaneous works by women. In 1981, Nina Baym noted that one of the causes of the total exclusion of women from the canon had been the fact that "women have not written the kind of work we call 'excellent' for reasons that are connected to their gender though separable from it." On top of the omissions of the mainstream canon and its universally male value judgments, Baym argued that women's work had not been labeled excellent because of the fact that no consistent literary criticism existed to value women's writing.⁷⁷ It was a self-perpetuating problem with a cyclical solution: for more women writers to exist and be valued, more women writers needed to be read and therefore valued. Undoubtedly, as this section will show, feminist literary critics answered this call. In 1976, Tillie Olsen poetically described the results of focus on women writers for literature as follows:

its enlargement and vivification through reclamation of obscured writers and intensified rereading of classic ones; new insights and perspectives; an enhancement and deepening of literary scholarship, criticism, theory; an opening up and freeing for already existing writers; the coming into being and encouragement of new ones;—and an outpouring of writing in every field and form of literature.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," 124.

⁷⁸ Olsen wrote these words in a 1976 piece that was later included in her 1978 text *Silences*. Olsen, *Silences*, 181.

This outpouring was part of a larger interest in revisiting and inciting women's writing, kindled, as Olsen put it, by "the women's movement, part of the other movements of our time for a fully human life, that has brought this forum into being" which resulted in "a renewed, in most instances a first-time, interest in the writings and writers of our sex."⁷⁹

Feminist literary critics noted the barriers that kept women from writing, both historically and contemporaneously. Focus on the woman writer began with heated examination of the historical and practical forces that prevented women from writing, and kept their works from being read. This process was similar to the outrage that coalesced around the early creation of the category of the woman reader, wherein the very fact that the category existed implicated the maleness of literary history. Following that initial rage, feminist literary critics devoted time and attention to detailed examinations of what, in fact, constituted women's writing and who qualified as a woman writer. What aesthetic or generic conventions governed women's writing? Could a man write in a feminine mode? Was the novel a distinctly feminine form? Did women writers necessarily write in feminine modes, and what, in fact, was a feminine mode of writing? These questions drove feminist interest in the figure of the woman writer, and led to what Annette Kolodny described as "defensive rereading."⁸⁰

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's 1979 text *The Madwoman in the Attic* was extremely influential for critics concerned with the woman writer, and remains perhaps the most recognizable text of this form of criticism. In over seven hundred pages, their text described why women faced obstacles to writing as well as what forms, themes, and

⁷⁹ This statement is taken from a 1971 talk, which was revised and first published in 1972, and then included in *Silences* in 1978. Ibid., 23.

⁸⁰ Kolodny, "Dancing through the Minefield," 5.

modes characterized their writing.⁸¹ In their first chapter, Gilbert and Gubar argued that “as a creation ‘penned’ by man...woman has been ‘penned up’ or ‘penned in.’ As a sort of ‘sentence’ man has spoken, she has herself been ‘sentenced’: fated, jailed, for...she has been both ‘framed’ (enclosed) in his texts, glyphs, graphics, and ‘framed up’ (found guilty, found wanting) in his cosmologies.”⁸² This argument echoed Eva Figes’s earlier comments in 1970 about women being forced to dance in the mirror men created in and with their texts⁸³ and Annette Kolodny’s 1976 description of women as an “‘artful invention.’”⁸⁴ Gilbert and Gubar brought these insights together and applied them to women as writers. At the same time, they set the agenda for feminist literary critical concern with the figure of the woman writer.

According to Gilbert and Gubar, “since both patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt that pen which is so rigorously kept from them they must escape just those male texts which...deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen.”⁸⁵ In this particular understanding of what they called “literary psychohistory,”⁸⁶ Gilbert and Gubar gave the two concerns of representation and authorship equal weight: they addressed the ways in which it was only questionably possible for women to write at all when literary authority was always defined in a

⁸¹ This substantial text is dwarfed in length only by Gilbert and Gubar’s later three-volume work, which is almost eleven hundred pages. *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁸² Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 13.

⁸³ Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes*, 17.

⁸⁴ Kolodny, “The Lady’s Not for Spurning,” 543.

⁸⁵ *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 13.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

patriarchal fashion.⁸⁷ At the same time, they examined how the tropes, subjects, and actual content of women's writing were influenced by the extreme images of, for example, angels and monsters that defined the possibilities for women literally inside texts written by men (Germaine Greer called these images "the Great Bitch and the Poison Maiden,"⁸⁸ and they were similarly reminiscent of Barracano Schmidt's "The Great American Bitch"⁸⁹). As feminist literary critics illustrated through the 1970s and early 1980s, women were influenced by these images and then, as Gilbert and Gubar argued, they were prevented from creating alternative images.

Many feminist critics attempted to specifically delineate the particular prohibitions that kept women from writing. In her 1983 text *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, which was adapted and expanded from her 1972 article in Koppelman Cornillon's anthology, Joanna Russ both uncovered those prohibitions and revealed how they were deliberately disguised and became the status quo. She wrote

if certain people are not supposed to have the ability to produce 'great' literature, and if this supposition is one of the means used to keep such people in their place, the ideal situation (socially speaking) is one in which such people are prevented from producing any literature at all. But a formal prohibition tends to give the game away—that is, if the peasants are kept illiterate, it will occur to somebody sooner or later that illiteracy absolutely precludes written literature, whether such literature be good or bad.⁹⁰

Russ's statement evinced the degree of anger and resentment that many critics bore toward women's position (or lack thereof) in literary history. The comparison of women to peasants, along with Dale Spender's 1980 remark that "it is males of a particular class who have decreed what constitutes good writing and they have done so without reference

⁸⁷ Ibid., 45–47.

⁸⁸ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 186.

⁸⁹ Schmidt, "The Great American Bitch."

⁹⁰ Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, 4.

to females of any class,”⁹¹ indicates the extent to which feminist literary critics saw women in a practically feudal system in which they had no ability to transcend their subordinate position.⁹² Tillie Olsen wrote in similar terms of the circumstances of women who were prevented from writing when she spoke of “the silences where the lives never came to writing.” Among those silences and lives, she placed “the mute inglorious Miltons: those whose waking hours are all struggle for existence; the barely educated; the illiterate; women. Their silence the silence of centuries as to how life was, is, for most of humanity. Traces of their making, of course, in folk song, lullaby, tales, language itself, jokes, maxims, superstitions—but we know nothing of the creators or how it was with them.”⁹³ In this description, Olsen reveals the consequences of what Russ would have called informal prohibitions against women writing: mute, inglorious *women* who she placed alongside and among the illiterate and barely educated. The language of class, struggle, and labor these critics used was not accidental; at this point in feminist literary criticism, the woman writer was engaged in a kind of gender-based class warfare.

The insidiousness of informal prohibitions against women writing, combined with the devaluation of women’s work when they did write, created a context in which, as Dorothy Smith put it, quoted by Spender, ““the forms of thought we make use of to think about ourselves and our society originate in special positions of dominance,”” those occupied by men, and ““this means that our forms of thought put together a view of the

⁹¹ Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 199.

⁹² And, in fact, Russ went on to say that the questions that arose from the suppression of women’s writing were the same questions that “were asked over and over again in Europe in recent centuries, and eventually reforms were made.” *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*, 4.

⁹³ Olsen, *Silences*, 10. These words were originally written in 1962, and then published as the first piece in Olsen’s 1978 text.

world from a place women do not occupy.”⁹⁴ Women were not even able to write back to the literary establishment, or to write their own experiences in their own language. In this view, women were truly trapped. Should a woman attempt to write, even her words were not a subversive escape from men’s texts and language but rather were inflected by male forms of thought. Further, women internalized these forms of thoughts, and the censure they faced implanted itself into the very way they wrote. These distortions were compounded by the reactions women novelists received to their work. As Koppelman Cornillon evocatively phrased it, when the work of “female novelists” who actually attempted to write failed

to be recognized or is criticized harshly, or is recognized only by other women whom the female artists cannot respect because, after all, they are only other women, then the kinds of self-doubt, self-torture they suffer as artists are endless and unanswerable. There are those female novelists who write about the things that happen in their lives, in their guts, to their bodies as things that happen in their minds. They report on the places that their bodies go as spiritual trips.⁹⁵

This torture and suffering was compounded by the indignity of failing to achieve success even by the standards of other women. In this wrenching view, there was no recourse, no world-changing social transformation to be had via the writing of literature, as women’s literature simply reproduced the values and modes of male literature and values.

For some critics, the fact that there was no available form of women’s writing or thought outside of patriarchy meant that women simply could not write. In 1972, Russ wrote that because “popular literature tends to support society’s ideas about itself, and therefore is subject to the same inability to see the full complexity of the truth about its social reality as society is subject to that inability,” women effectively could not write

⁹⁴ Spender, *Man Made Language*, 199.

⁹⁵ Koppelman Cornillon, “The Fiction of Fiction,” 129.

texts that departed in any meaningful way from the stories men told and the myths about women that men created in their texts.⁹⁶ As she put it, “our literature is not about women. It is not about women and men equally. It is by and about men.”⁹⁷ According to Russ, whose text was subtitled “Why Women Can’t Write,” women could not really write their own works because they could not write from their own point of view. For Russ, even when a woman wrote she wrote with a man’s pen, in a man’s voice. Other critics, however, challenged this (perhaps intentionally) defeatist perspective. In 1982, Lorraine Bethel grafted one particular solution onto a literary object and wrote that Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “exemplifies the immense potential contained in the Black female literary tradition for the resolution of critical aesthetic and political problems common to both the Afro-American and the American female literary traditions.” Interestingly, Bethel saw a literary tradition and an individual novel written by a woman as sites within which such critical problems could be resolved. She elaborated that, “foremost among these problems is the question of how Black/female writers can create a body of literature capable of capturing the political and cultural realities of their experience while using literary forms created by and for white, upper-class men,” the same problem which Russ said was unanswerable.⁹⁸ Alongside Bethel, Koppelman Cornillon also exemplified a challenge to arguments like Russ’s when she wrote that “if I claim that women internalize the male idea of the feminine and create

⁹⁶ Joanna Russ, “What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can’t Write,” in *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972), 27.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁸ Lorraine Bethel, “‘This Infinity of Conscious Pain’: Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition,” in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, ed. Patricia Bell-Scott, Gloria T. Hull, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982), 177.

themselves in the shape of that idea, then it would appear to follow that there would be no difference between perceptions of the female by male and by female novelists, and that there would be no difference between the idea of the feminine and the reality of the female. But there *are* differences in both cases.”⁹⁹ It was that insistence that led feminist literary critics to devote themselves to recognizing and cataloging those differences.

Gilbert and Gubar, for instance, believed that while women’s “literary subculture”¹⁰⁰ had been negatively marked by an anxiety of authorship, when freed from this relational dynamic, women writers would and did emerge “out of the texts defined by patriarchal poetics into the open spaces of their own authority.”¹⁰¹ For Gilbert and Gubar, women’s writing was its own independent form with its own conventions separate from those of male writing, and the realities of women’s lives could, in fact, be seen and accessed through women’s texts. Women were able to achieve their own authorial authority by producing “female writing” about particularly feminine themes.¹⁰² Their vision of “female writing” as an “open space” stood in deep contrast with the narrow, limited space that Russ contended confined women and their modes of expression. Ironically enough, however, Gilbert and Gubar focused precisely on the themes of confinement that women writers concealed in their novels. Their optimistic view of the future potentialities of women’s writing emerged from a historical survey of confined women’s writing. As they wrote in the preface to their study of nineteenth-century women’s texts, the “distinctively female literary tradition” that they observed in “the works of writers who were often geographically, historically, and psychologically distant

⁹⁹ Koppelman Cornillon, “The Fiction of Fiction,” 113.

¹⁰⁰ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 50.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 80.

from each other” coalesced around “images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors.”¹⁰³ While their vision of the potentialities of women’s writing posited an open future, it emerged from a closed past. Gilbert and Gubar attributed this drastic shift to “a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society.”¹⁰⁴ As they put it, “the female artist makes her journey into what Adrienne Rich has called ‘the cratered night of female memory’ to revitalize the darkness, to retrieve what has been lost, to regenerate, reconceive, and give birth.”¹⁰⁵

Gilbert and Gubar saw a female unity which transcended geography and temporality in the works of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Virginia Woolf. In their novels, stories, and poems, their characters struggled against patriarchy within the diegetic worlds of the texts. Gilbert and Gubar therefore structured their theory of women’s writing around the content of the novels and poetry they read, which they saw as faithful records of the circumstances women faced in the world. They argued that women’s creative potential was equal to men’s, but had been repressed whereas men’s had been celebrated throughout literary history. In the first part of their text, titled “Toward a Feminist Poetics,” Gilbert and Gubar opened with the question “is the pen a metaphorical penis?”¹⁰⁶ They began their extensive study by answering that, yes, according to the literary establishment, “male sexuality...is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power. The poet’s pen is in some sense

¹⁰³ Ibid., xi.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., xii.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 99.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 3.

(even more than figuratively) a penis.”¹⁰⁷ One hundred pages later, they concluded Part One of their text by quoting “the sibylline voice of Jane Lead’s Virgin-Wisdom, or Sophia, the true goddess of the cave: ‘for out of my Womb thou shalt be brought forth after the manner of a Spirit, Conceived and Born again.’”¹⁰⁸ In Gilbert and Gubar’s evocative terms, representative of the language of many works of feminist literary criticism in the late 1970s, what the female artist “gives birth to is in a sense her own mother goddess and her own mother land.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, women writers got their creative power precisely from their sex, and in writing they opened a potentially limitless terrain for other women writers.

In contrast to Gilbert and Gubar’s open vision for the future of the woman writer, other critics such as Fetterley continued to read women’s writing as relational, and looked to the works of male authors to locate the genesis of the woman writer. Fetterley’s reading of Norman Mailer’s *An American Dream*, for instance, argued that Mailer’s novel represented a “kind of end point,” the apex (or perhaps, the nadir) of male literary power that was so extreme it provided an opening from which something entirely different could be created. Fetterley wrote that

in Mailer’s work the effort to obscure the issue, disguise reality, and confuse consciousness is so frantic that the antitheses he provides to protect his thesis become in fact his message and his confusions shed a lurid illumination... *An American Dream* induces a desire to eliminate Mailer’s conceptual framework altogether and start over. Beyond his frenzy is only utter nausea and weariness of spirit and a profound willingness to give up an exhausted, sick, and sickening struggle. In Mailer, the drama of power comes full circle; at once the most sexist writer, he is also the most freeing, and out of him it may be possible to create anew.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 104.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 99.

¹¹⁰ Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, xviii.

In this view, women's writing could emerge out of "the frenzied commitment to the maintenance of male power" that Mailer exhibited, rather than being suppressed by it.¹¹¹ While the directionality of Fetterley's assessment of the origin of women's writing is completely opposed to Gilbert and Gubar's understanding, the desire to "create anew" out of social and literary confinement was precisely the same. Six years earlier, in 1972, Adrienne Rich described women writing in a manner that clearly informed Fetterley's understanding of the relationship between the "most sexist writer" and new forms of women's writing. She wrote that "until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society."¹¹² This refusal, or desire to create anew, was the origin of women's writing more so than any male text or author.

Once this desire was named and located, feminist literary critics attempted to define women's writing. As Showalter put it in 1977, "there is clearly a difference between books that happen to have been written by women, and a 'female literature'... which purposefully and collectively guides itself 'by its own impulses' to autonomous self-expression."¹¹³ But what, exactly, was that difference? Did an aesthetic form of women's writing exist, or could it exist? Silvia Bovenschen gave two answers to this question in 1976: "is there a feminine aesthetic? Certainly there is, if one is talking about *aesthetic awareness* and *modes of sensory perception*. Certainly not, if one is

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *College English* 34, no. 1 (October 1, 1972): 18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/375215>.

¹¹³ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 4.

talking about an unusual variant of artistic production or about a painstaking constructed theory of art.”¹¹⁴ Bovenschen said that women’s writing was always relational and wrote that “feminine artistic production takes place by means of a complicated process involving conquering and reclaiming, appropriating and formulating, as well as forgetting and subverting.”¹¹⁵ This gesture toward some of the specific conditions of the production of women’s writing presupposed, at the very least, some grounds for the particularity of women’s writing as, almost, a genre.

If women’s writing was a genre, which perhaps emerged from women’s situation as a class, then it was a genre marked by the author’s struggle which had to be considered in reading women’s texts. In 1981, Myra Jehlen elaborated on the generic form women’s writing might take, and stated that women

must deal with their situation as a *precondition* for writing about it. They have to confront the assumptions that render them a kind of fiction in themselves.... It hardly matters at this prior stage what a woman wants to write; its political nature is implicit in the fact that it is she (a ‘she’) who will do it. All women’s writing would thus be congenitally defiant and universally characterized by the blasphemous argument it makes in coming into being. And this would mean that the autonomous individuality of a woman’s story or poem is framed by engagement, the engagement of its denial of dependence.¹¹⁶

An entire decade of feminist literary critical thought can clearly be seen leading into this idea that women’s writing was “congenitally defiant” and always, of necessity, political. Jehlen’s description of women as a fiction in and of themselves is built on the scaffolding of ‘Images of Women’ criticism set up by Figs, Kolodny, Koppelman Cornillon, and others. Next, her statement that women’s writing must make a “blasphemous argument”

¹¹⁴ Silvia Bovenschen, “Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?,” *New German Critique*, no. 10 (January 1, 1977): 136, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/487675>.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹¹⁶ Myra Jehlen, “Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism,” *Signs* 6, no. 4 (July 1, 1981): 582, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173733>.

simply to come into being echoes Olsen, Russ, and Spender's insights into the effect of prohibitions against women's writing. The blasphemy of women's writing shaped it such that it was difficult for many critics to imagine how, in Bovenschen's words, the "specifically feminine modes of perception" might be communicated while using specifically masculine language.¹¹⁷ Finally, Jehlen's perspective on the relationality of women's writing answers the tension between Fetterley and Gilbert and Gubar's views on the origin of women's creative expression, all the while posing the same resolution: that women's writing was characterized by its ability to "create anew."¹¹⁸

The Critical Act

Concurrent with the canon debates and consideration of the role of the woman reader and writer, feminist literary critics questioned the implications of the critical act, the interpretive action that feminist literary critics took as they engaged in literary analysis.¹¹⁹ When feminist literary critics turned their attention to the critical act, they dismantled the concepts of objectivity and disinterested critique which had already been challenged by feminist canon criticism. Feminist literary critics had always worked from the assumption that literary practice could, and should, not be divorced from the world (and, in fact, they argued that it was this link between the critical act and the world that made their work feminist). Fetterley and Russ extended this assumption and implicitly

¹¹⁷ Bovenschen, "Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?," 124.

¹¹⁸ Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, xviii.

¹¹⁹ In the context of canons, aesthetics, and criticism, the term "the critical act" has its origin in a fascinating 1966 article by Edmund Feldman which argues for critical performance in the realm of aesthetic education while digressing through some speculations on the role "mythical computers and scanners" might play in teaching art without, as he notes at the beginning of his article, "dragging LSD into the discussion" of how the "human organism, with its specially developed biological capacities, constitutes the stage against which any critical drama is enacted." Given Feldman's commitment to reconsidering "the business of valuing, of establishing the worth of things," I am comfortable repurposing his term to describe the moment of feminist literary critical action. "The Critical Act," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 1, no. 2 (October 1, 1966): 94; 85; 83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3331316>.

saw their critical role as arbitrating between women's experiences in the real world and their depiction in literature.¹²⁰ This role was a major shift in emphasis from the history of literary criticism from Matthew Arnold on, where the critic objectively judged a literary object's success in speaking to universal aesthetic values. Instead, feminist literary critics judged the object's success in speaking to a political reality. As I discuss in this section, such judgment was *itself* constituted as a political act with political implications. I use the term "the critical act" to indicate the extent to which feminist literary critics engaged with literary texts outside the realm of their contents and characters, and considered their own work as critics in the material world in their assessment of literary texts.

Some feminist literary critics such as Josephine Donovan, who wrote in 1975, went so far as to state that "feminist criticism is a moral and political criticism" because "the ethics and the aesthetics of a text are congruent" and are therefore "coterminous with the political."¹²¹ The establishment of a feminist moral criticism bothered many feminist literary critics who aspired to upend the ideals of evaluative criticism, rather than re-make it with new, albeit feminist, values. The debate between supplanting patriarchal morals with feminist morals clearly worked within the same terms and asked the same questions as the canon debates. In the context of the critical act, Lillian Robinson wrote in 1971 that "along with spurious objectivity" she wished "to discard the notion of critical 'disinterestedness' that is one of Matthew Arnold's legacies to our profession....to

¹²⁰ Again, Moi noted this role in 1985, and criticized it as the realist bias in Anglo-American feminist literary criticism, specifically in the realm of 'Images of Women' criticism. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 42–49.

¹²¹ Josephine Donovan, ed., *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), ix–x. Donovan made the statement quoted above in the preface to the second edition of this text, which was originally published in 1975. In her 1989 comments about the aesthetic and moral realms as coterminous with the political, she drew on Terry Eagleton's *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: NLB: Humanities Press, 1976).

Arnold a disinterested approach [is] one that treats ideas in their 'proper' intellectual sphere and does not attempt to involve them in the realm of practical political action... I do not believe there is a separate domain of ideas and I think that it is dangerous to behave as if there were."¹²² Here, as throughout feminist inquiry into the critical act, Robinson focused on the Arnoldian separation of criticism from politics.

Like other critics working on the critical act, Fetterley deliberately highlighted the ways in which their critical acts of reading, interpreting, and even publishing works of criticism were imbricated in the realm of political action. In the introduction to *The Resisting Reader*, Fetterley evoked the sentiment that defined feminist reflection on the critical act:

My book is for me more than an academic matter, more than an act of literary criticism, more than a possible text for courses on women in American literature, more even than the source of dialogue; it is an act of survival... At its best, feminist criticism is a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read. In this sense I want my book to be, in the words of Suzanne Juhasz, 'itself an event and not a comment upon an event.'¹²³

Fetterley went on to quote from Andrea Dworkin's 1974 introduction to *Woman Hating*:

'I want writers to write books because they are committed to the content of those books. I want writers to write books as actions. I want writers to write books that can make a difference in how, and even why, people live. I want writers to write books that are worth being jailed for, worth fighting for, and should it come to that in this country, worth dying for.'¹²⁴

Dworkin's idea of a book worth dying for could not have been further removed from Arnold's prescriptions for criticism, or further from the tenets of New Criticism. Many contemporaneous critics shared this hope that writing literary criticism was a politically

¹²² Lillian S. Robinson, "Dwelling in Decencies: Radical Criticism and the Feminist Perspective," *College English* 32, no. 8 (May 1, 1971): 888, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/375626>.

¹²³ Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, viii.

¹²⁴ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 24.

engaged activity, and this belief was plainly visible in the prefaces, introductions, epilogues, footnotes, and asides of the critical texts discussed in this section.¹²⁵ In these marginal spaces, feminist literary critics wrote comments like Ellen Moers's statement in the preface to her 1976 text *Literary Women* that "the new wave of feminism, called women's liberation, pulled me out of the stacks and made the writing of this book much more of an open-air activity than a bookish person like myself could otherwise have expected."¹²⁶ Another example of this belief asserting itself in marginal spaces is exemplified by the last page of Susan Koppelman Cornillon's important anthology. Following the book's index, she included a drawing by her three-and-a-half year old child. Captioned "a hat can't tell if it's on a boy or a girl or a hamburger," the drawing (reproduced below) decisively inserted Koppelman Cornillon's personal presence into the text at the same time as it invoked her child's claim as a gesture toward a genderless future.

¹²⁵ It is interesting that this work so often occurred sites like these, "in the margins" of feminist literary criticism. The closest any feminist literary critic discussed in this section got to an explicit mention of this fact was Fetterley, who in the preface to *The Resisting Reader* noted that "one part of my deepest debt has been realized by the dedication; another part has been realized in my introductory chapter, where the extensive quoting serves not simply to establish points or to share important perceptions but to express the degree of my indebtedness to the work of other women" *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, x.

¹²⁶ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), xiii.

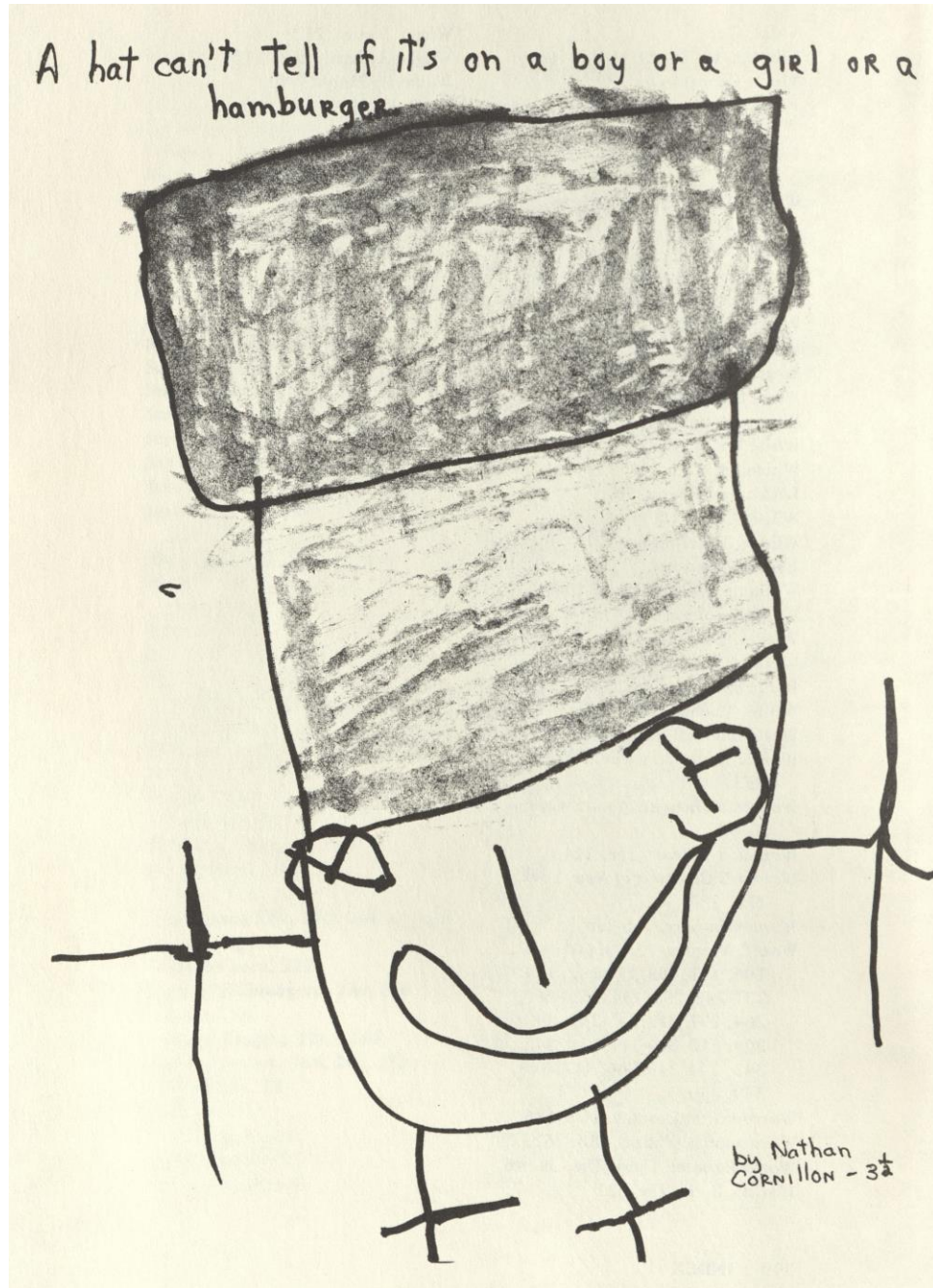


Figure 4: Final page of Koppelman Cornillon's 1972 anthology *Images of Women in Fiction*

While in some cases intentional, as for Dworkin, Fetterley, and Juhasz, and in others unexpected, as for Moers, this relation to the broader, political world was completely opposed to Arnold's idea that the critic should keep aloof from "the practical

view of things.”¹²⁷ Feminist literary critics saw literary objects and literary criticism as agents of social, sexual, and political transformation. Fetterley wanted to change the world, not simply interpret it, while Dworkin wanted to make a difference in how and why people lived. Fetterley’s portrayal of a book as an ‘event’ and Dworkin’s description of a book as an ‘action’ echo the way feminist and New Left movements of the 1960s and 1970s referred to demonstrations, political theater, and public protests as ‘actions,’ as well as contemporaneous uses of the term ‘direct action,’ which itself had feminist roots.¹²⁸

The link to the personal experience of the critic alongside the larger social experience of the feminist movement and its practical changes was not coincidental. As Ellen Cantarow described, for her and many other feminist critics, the rise of the women’s movement in the long 1970s made it obvious that connections between literature and personal, political experience existed. In 1972, she wrote that

a group of young women had broken away from SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] and SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] and had begun taking stock of their treatment at the hands of their supposed comrades. The writing that appeared over the next few years reflected the attempt on the part of us all to put the circumstances of our own lives into historical, political, and economic perspective. This rational reassessment of facts we had earlier conceived to be personal, or biologically determined, permanently changed our lives. In my own case, it changed the way I regarded literature and culture. If my own life was subject to historical and political influences, so was literature; and if my deepest feelings and responses were not mere whims, idiosyncratic and negligible, then I might begin to accept them and to examine their larger implications.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Arnold, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” 39.

¹²⁸ Voltairine de Cleyre, “Direct Action,” *Mother Earth*, 1912.

¹²⁹ Ellen Cantarow, “Why Teach Literature? An Account of How I Came to Ask That Question,” in *The Politics of Literature: Dissenting Essays on the Teaching of English*, ed. Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 70–71. I include her personal narrative at this juncture, rather than one of the many more academic descriptions of the same events, to illustrate that explicit subjectivity seeped into feminist literary criticism at every level, in opposition to the Arnoldian ideal of objectivity but also as a critical and literary practice.

This narrative, which followed a similar trajectory as broader second wave feminist narratives about the role of organized consciousness-raising groups in individual women's political awakenings, somewhat simplified but did justice to the hope shared by Dworkin and Fetterley.¹³⁰ Literature had a politics, that politics could be personal and social, and both literature and criticism should look toward meaningful change on a practical, social level. Or, in Fetterley's words, "consciousness is power. To create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects."¹³¹ Note that here, unlike in the canon debates, Fetterley's focus was not on creating a new literature, but rather a new *understanding* of literature. Through that understanding, she also aimed to create a new culture entirely.

For critics who shared this vision of social change through literary criticism, criticism and politics implicated the relationship between academic scholarship and the women's movement. For Robinson, for whom feminist criticism was "criticism with a Cause, engaged criticism," this meant that critics had to be vigilant about their participation and collusion in the structures of the university.¹³² In 1971, she warned that "some people are trying to make an honest woman out of the feminist critic, to claim that every 'worthwhile' department should stock one. I am not terribly interested in whether feminism becomes a respectable part of academic criticism; I am very much concerned

¹³⁰ For representative examples of this genre, see: Susan Brownmiller, "'Sisterhood Is Powerful': A Member of the Women's Liberation Movement Explains What It's All About," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 15, 1970; Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.

¹³¹ Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, xix–xx.

¹³² Robinson, "Dwelling in Decencies," 879. Robinson lived this engagement herself, writing in 1970 that she was facing trial and a possible sentence for two political crimes. "Who's Afraid of a Room of One's Own?," in *The Politics of Literature: Dissenting Essays on the Teaching of English*, ed. Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 354–411.

that feminist critics become a useful part of the women's movement."¹³³ In Robinson's view, feminist commitment to the political realm of the women's movement superseded its academic investments. As she put it, "to be effective, feminist criticism cannot become simply bourgeois criticism in drag. It must be ideological and moral criticism; it must be revolutionary."¹³⁴

What did it mean for feminist criticism to serve as "moral criticism?" Kate Millett had clearly explained and exemplified what it meant for criticism to be ideological, and in the process she returned at least in part to some of the biographical and historical modes of criticism that preceded New Criticism. But in invoking morality in criticism, were feminist critics returning to a Platonic idea of good literature as that which taught the "right" values? Could a revolutionary criticism adopt such a moral program? Clearly, feminist literary critics saw misogyny as immoral¹³⁵ and feminism as a movement working toward a "fully human life" for all, which could be described as a moral project.¹³⁶ And yet, many feminist critics were hesitant to define an explicit moral program for feminism. Instead, their desire for a feminist literature was directed away from moral questions just ever so slightly, and came to rest in questions of how accurately authors could *represent* moral realities in their works. Feminist critics found themselves interpreting texts based on how well the text accurately depicted an emerging feminist reality. This strategy originated in the feminist tendency to prioritize texts that

¹³³ Robinson, "Dwelling in Decencies," 889. In fact, in this warning Robinson mentions a *mésalliance* between feminism and established critical modes. She said, "it might be amusing to extend the conceit to speak of oppressive relationships, bourgeois mind-fuck and foredoomed offspring. A more exact simile, however, would be the shotgun wedding."

¹³⁴ Ibid., 879.

¹³⁵ See, for example, any of the feminist readings of Norman Mailer that abound throughout this dissertation.

¹³⁶ Olsen, *Silences*, 23.

could represent women's experiences. It required the suspicious approach of the feminist reader, coupled with a hyper-awareness of the critical act as a process of reading "against" a text. For Fetterley, who worked with the stated aim of providing conditions under which social change could occur, the work of feminist criticism could "be carried on only by a consciousness radically different from the one that informs the literature." As Fetterley put it, the closed system of "that complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men which exist in our society and are confirmed in our literature" could not be "opened up from within but only from without. It must be entered into from a point of view which questions its values and assumptions and which has its investment in making available to consciousness precisely that which the literature wishes to keep hidden. Feminist criticism provides that point of view and embodies that consciousness."¹³⁷ The feminist critical act judged male texts on their "values and assumptions" by setting the critic apart from those beliefs. Occasionally, the feminist critical act also occupied a similarly suspicious relation to women's texts, when critics argued that they failed to accurately represent women's realities.

Fetterley's analysis depended upon an ideological critique of a text's hidden values, or morals, which presupposed that the critical act was one of uncovering and that the text attempted to deceive its reader. If the system of power which literature encoded, and which was visible to the critic as context, could be revealed, it could only be done by an antagonistic reader. Annis Pratt offered a similar view of the critical act which hinged, unsurprisingly, on whether the author whose work was being interpreted was a man or a woman. For Pratt, feminist criticism as of 1971 should "involve two critical skills: the

¹³⁷ Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, xx.

textual analysis necessary to determine which works are novelistically successful, and the *contextual analysis* which considers the relevance of a group of works, even if artistically flawed, as a reflection of the situation of women.”¹³⁸ Pratt’s system of textual and contextual analysis offered the ability to read women’s texts aesthetically and yet maintain a posture of suspicion in relation to male authors, whose texts she de-aestheticized. In fact, Pratt said, “the new feminist critic should be a ‘new critic’ (in the aesthetic rather than the political sense) in judging the formal aspects of individual texts; she should be ‘feminist’ in going beyond formalism to consider literature as it reveals men and women in relationship to each other within a socio-economic *context*, that web of role expectations in which women are enmeshed.”¹³⁹ Pratt remained deeply committed to close reading, but argued that it could be applied judiciously and with reference to context.

The hybrid element of Pratt’s understanding of the critical act was contentious. In 1971, Robinson dismissed most of Pratt’s categories and, in a pointed critique, said that, “the mode she calls ‘contextual’ was the only one I thought might be feminist at all.”¹⁴⁰ In other words, for Robinson, any recourse to judging novelistic success was not in fact feminist because it retained connections to evaluative criticism. Fairly sarcastically, Robinson wrote that “I think I understand what ‘context’ might mean when freed of sociological terminology, but I cannot deduce what kind of literary criticism it might inspire....we are apparently being asked to regard the book as an historical artifact revealing its ‘context’ and at the same time a product of a context that we should

¹³⁸ Pratt, “The New Feminist Criticism,” 872.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 873.

¹⁴⁰ Robinson, “Dwelling in Decencies,” 883–84.

somehow ‘take into account’ as we read.”¹⁴¹ Robinson’s insistence on the need for a literary criticism to accompany a contextual analysis without relying on textual analysis and all its patriarchal pitfalls is apparent here. Later in her critique, she wrote “we must construct a method that applies radical insights about culture and politics, but does so in the context of a coherent feminist analysis.”¹⁴² Robinson argued that this coherent analysis was lacking from the feminist critical act with its insistence (she might have said ‘reliance’) on politics as the *raison d’être* of feminist literary criticism. Whereas Pratt saw a radical, revolutionary method developing from textual and contextual analysis, and even wrote that “we can expect the outcry of our colleagues against the idea of a new feminist criticism to be immediate and scathing. The mere term will provoke the petulance not only of those in our profession who resent critical attention paid to the humanity of women, but also of those who feel that the discipline will be sullied by contextual analysis,”¹⁴³ Robinson saw a counter-revolutionary adherence to older standards of literary criticism and aesthetic judgment.¹⁴⁴

Many feminist literary critics theorized the complex relations between the critical act, literature, and the “real world” of the patriarchy and the women’s movement in a variety of different ways. Critics such as Barbara Smith and Bonnie Zimmerman conceptualized the relationship between criticism and literature as a dependent one. In other words, the very existence of some forms of women’s writing depended on the existence of critical tools and methods with which to read it. Smith, for example, wrote in 1978 that “the politics of feminism have a direct relationship to the state of Black

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 883.

¹⁴² Ibid., 879.

¹⁴³ Pratt, “The New Feminist Criticism,” 878.

¹⁴⁴ Robinson, “Dwelling in Decencies,” 879.

women's literature. A viable, autonomous Black feminist movement in this country would open up the space needed for the exploration of Black women's lives and the creation of consciously Black woman-identified art.”¹⁴⁵ Smith argued that the relationship between feminist criticism and feminist literary production was necessary, interdependent, and cyclical: criticism capable of understanding certain objects had to exist in order for these objects to be created and understood. She took this connection even further and argued that “a Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity. Until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not even know what these writers mean.”¹⁴⁶ Obviously, for Smith criticism was necessary for the understanding of literary objects, and as such the literary object was not a document which could exist independently of culture. Rather, the literary object had meaningful and necessary links to the forms of interpretation which must develop alongside, or even before, it.

Other feminist literary critics advanced differing visions of the relationship between the feminist critical act and literary objects. In 1981, three years after Smith wrote “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” Bonnie Zimmerman argued that lesbian feminist literary criticism had a dependent relationship to literary objects. Zimmerman described the relationship between criticism and lesbian texts as a parallel one, where the development of lesbian feminist literary criticism made it possible to speak a previously

¹⁴⁵ Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” 20.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 21.

“unspeakable” lesbian reality.¹⁴⁷ In a similar vein but from the slightly later vantage point of 1987, Hazel Carby summarized Smith’s argument that without an autonomous black feminist movement, “there was no black feminist political theory to form a basis for a critical approach to the art of black women.”¹⁴⁸ What these contentions shared was a belief in a necessary relationship between criticism and literary objects. This relationship was not about the aesthetic specificity of those objects (as Pratt said it could be) but rather was about how social movements and politics might influence literary critics. Within this framework, the text’s connection to the external, contextual world was of almost singular importance. For these critics, the literary object was contingent: its value existed mainly in relation to criticism and politics.

The ultimate aim of including considerations of the critical act in feminist literary criticism was to recognize and acknowledge the subjectivity of all forms of literary study, interpretation, and evaluation of texts. As they defined and described the actual process of constructing criticism as a subjective act, feminist literary critics of the long 1970s worked toward a new form of literary study that would revolutionize established forms, while continuing to remain legible as literary criticism. In 1972, Adrienne Rich gestured toward this hope when she wrote that “a radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh.”¹⁴⁹ Her vision of the feminist critical act, like many others discussed in this section, privileged the

¹⁴⁷ Bonnie Zimmerman, “What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism,” *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 3 (October 1, 1981): 451, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3177760>.

¹⁴⁸ Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 8.

¹⁴⁹ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” 18.

literary object's relation to real life, life as lived by women in the material, political, and social world. Rich's statement also perfectly encapsulated the trajectory of feminist focus on the critical act through the decade that followed her claim, as well as this section's description of, first, what the critical act was thought to mean, second, what the critical act was thought to do, and finally, how the critical act understood its relation to its literary objects. Through feminist criticism, a new mode of relating and living emerged, one which reached far beyond the realm of the text, the critic, or even the reader. For Rich, and others, "seeing," that is, *interpreting*, and living could become one and the same.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the development of feminist literary criticism in the decade of its inception as a criticism of its own. The constituent components of this shift, anatomized here, were the canon debates, the woman reader, the woman writer, and the critical act. These elements were currents which flowed through the decade, occasionally crossing and contradicting one another, but ultimately resulting in the creation of a new form of politically engaged, socially motivated feminist literary criticism. As Tillie Olsen described the flow of feminist literary criticism in 1976, the new field

shaped a swelling indictment of literature, in its beginnings around Images of Women in Literature. Virginia Woolf had once called it 'Women in Fiction—And in Fact.' *Sexual Politics* is how Kate Millett defined the difference in 1969. Tentatively phrased, exploratory questions in the beginning...became arraignment...A search began for different (truer) Images of Women in Literature...Five years later, it is unmistakable that out of the sense of wrong has come substantial yields for literature.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Olsen, *Silences*, 179–81.

These substantial yields included the growth of a form of canon critique which identified and decried false universality, allowing feminist literary critics to thematize their involvement in literary study. At the same time, they developed the categories of women readers and writers and debated how best to engage with their work while retaining a link to the world outside literature and the academy. In maintaining connections to aesthetic forms of criticism which paid attention to the artistic value of “female writing” while they built relationships with authors, feminist literary critics also propelled the growth of a wide range of literary objects and forms throughout the long 1970s and beyond.

When looking back on the period, feminist literary critics found that, while these elements defined the field at the moment of its inception and development, their impacts were not necessarily positive for the time period following the long 1970s. Some later critics, including Moi in particular, have struggled with the decade’s emphasis on realist texts, which my next chapter will discuss as the legacy of 1970s feminist literary criticism. Writing in 1985, Moi argued that in retaining connections to aesthetic reading practices, and valuing women’s ability to narratively record specific details of their lives, feminist literary critics of the long 1970s occupied an “almost absurd ‘ultra-realist’ position” and were guilty of “extreme reflectionism” in their demands for realistic depictions of women’s realities.¹⁵¹ Moi was concerned that, as a result, experimental fictional forms were left off the feminist literary critical agenda of the long 1970s. It is true that the most influential criticism of the period, such as Koppelman Cornillon’s anthology and Gilbert and Gubar’s lengthy work, emphasized narratively cohesive works and conventional novels. In addition, Moi argued that feminist literary criticism’s

¹⁵¹ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 45.

attachment to a realist aesthetic served to reaffirm a potentially regressive vision of art.

This vision, Moi said, believed that

art can and should reflect life accurately and inclusively in every detail. ...Such a view resolutely refuses to consider textual production as a highly complex, 'over-determined' process with many different and conflicting literary and non-literary determinants....Instead, writing is seen as a more or less faithful *reproduction* of an external reality to which we all have equal and unbiased access, and which therefore enables us to criticize the author on the grounds that he or she has created an *incorrect* model of the reality we somehow all know. Resolutely empiricist in its approach, this view fails to consider the proposition that the real is not only something we construct, but a controversial construct at that."¹⁵²

In this view, by advocating for a vision of the literary text as a record of existence, rather than an artistic creation, feminist literary critics not only prioritized legible forms of literary production but also failed to consider the complexity of any construction of reality. It was this particular aspect of Moi's critique of feminist literary criticism that would take hold in the 1980s, as Moi's concerns about the conflation of reality and art were pulled into a broader discussion of feminism's ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy in the realm of pornography.

As I will discuss in the following chapter, many anti-pornography feminists in the long 1980s deliberately argued that there was no separation between artistic or literary representations and reality. They drew on the theories of representation that were first articulated through the canon debates, theories of the woman reader, the woman writer, and the critical act. As feminist literary critics were called upon to comment on the relation between sexual practices depicted in literature and images, some feminist critics such as Andrea Dworkin staked the claim that art and literature could not be separated from reality. Others such as Dorothy Allison and Gayle Rubin contended that artistic

¹⁵² Ibid.

representation belonged to its own realm, separate from reality. As I discuss in Chapter Three, Moi's critiques of the feminist literary criticism of the long 1970s anticipated the central issue which divided feminists following that period: representation. Moi suggested that the feminist literary criticism anatomized in this chapter failed to consider the role of artistic selection and production in the creation of representations of reality that were specifically literary, and thus bore a non-representational relation to real life. For those who supported pornography as a representational practice, the aesthetic preference for realism honed as a liberatory political practice throughout the long 1970s took on a repressive cast throughout the sex wars, the subject of my next chapter.

Chapter Three: “No one said that sisterhood was easy”¹: The Sex Wars, Pornography, and Andrea Dworkin’s Literary Criticism

Introduction

In the 1980s, movement-based and academic feminist conversations were dominated by debates about pornography, representation, censorship, and sex practices. Now known as the “sex wars,” the 1980s saw the development of a variety of movement-based groups such as the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT), Women Against Pornography (WAP), the Lesbian Sex Mafia, and the New York Radical Feminists. These groups virulently debated each other over pornography’s relation to a range of issues including prostitution, rape, and sadomasochism. These debates infamously entered the academy at a 1982 Barnard College Women’s Center conference titled “The Scholar and the Feminist IX: Towards a Politics of Sexuality.” This conference, often cited as ground zero of the sex wars, was an attempt to articulate a feminist politics of sexuality in academic terms, and mainly featured speakers in the pro-sex, anti-censorship camp. WAP protested the conference, and the controversies stemming from the event have been enshrined in the history of both feminism and feminist thought, particularly through the publication of the conference proceedings in Carole S. Vance’s 1984 *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*.² In addition to the many primary documents like Vance’s anthology that make up the published history of the sex wars,

¹ Andrea Dworkin, *Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 32.

² Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984).

numerous critical retrospectives exist. The history of the sex wars is exceptionally well-documented. Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter's 1995 anthology *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, for instance, is representative of several texts that constructed a nuanced and historically detailed timeline of the sex wars and the many controversial groups, events, task forces, and newsletters that now appear as skirmishes in the broader war over who had the right to articulate a dominant feminist position on representations of sex and sex practices.³

Critical historians of the sex wars have focused mainly on social, political, and legal events in describing the sex wars. They emphasize the formation of radical and liberal feminist activist groups; particular events such as conferences and protests; legal actions such as the 1985 US Attorney General's Commission on Pornography (usually referred to as the Meese Commission); the creation of anti-pornography city ordinances, censorship trials; and high-profile conflicts between major feminist figures.⁴ These retrospective views, along with the huge archive of primary materials that both constituted and were the product of the sex wars (newsletters, personal letters, book reviews, event fliers, consciousness-raising manuals, etcetera), present a view of the sex

³ Nan D. Hunter, "Contextualizing the Sexuality Debates: A Chronology," in *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, ed. Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter (New York: Routledge, 1995), 16–29. Many other critical histories of the sex wars exist, such as Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh's vast edited collection *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

⁴ Accounts of the sex wars that focus on these types of events can be found in a huge variety of sources which look back on the 1980s, including: Kathleen Martindale, *Un/popular Culture: Lesbian Writing After the Sex Wars* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Lisa Duggan, Nan D. Hunter, and Carole S. Vance, "False Promises: Feminist Antipornography Legislation," in *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, ed. Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter (New York: Routledge, 1995), 43–67; Mandy Merck, "From Minneapolis to Westminster," in *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*, ed. Mary McIntosh and Lynne Segal (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 50–62; Alison Assiter, *Pornography, Feminism, and the Individual* (Winchester, MA: Pluto Press, 1989).

wars as a cultural debate that occurred on a public stage. The historical record bears this perspective out: countless articles on feminism and pornography appeared in the 1980s in publications such as *Harper's Magazine*⁵ and *The Washington Monthly*,⁶ and major feminist figure Andrea Dworkin was interviewed in visible locations such as *Penthouse* magazine⁷ and on William F. Buckley's popular interview television show *Firing Line*.⁸ It would appear that the public interest in feminist social criticism in the 1970s, as discussed in Chapter One, continued into the 1980s as mainstream publications took significant interest in the activities of feminist activists and academics, paying special attention to schisms between individual feminist personalities and positions.

While the history of the sex wars as a form of social criticism is extensively documented in academic texts and in the massive archive of primary materials that exists from that period, the sex wars have not often been considered in terms of their relation to feminist *literary* criticism. When literature is figured into the debates about pornography and representation, it is most often in the context of censorship. Critical historians of the sex wars, and those who were engaged in the contemporaneous debates about pornography, have certainly considered pornography as a representational form and practice, but the literary history of the debates is rarely discussed. Few historians of the debates have reflected on the literary specificity of written and narrative forms of

⁵ Lewis Lapham et al., "The Place of Pornography: Packaging Eros for a Violent Age (a Forum Discussion)," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1984.

⁶ Art Levine and Kathleen Currie, "Whip Me, Beat Me and While You're at It, Cancel My N.O.W. Membership: Feminists War Against Each Other Over Pornography," *The Washington Monthly*, June 1987.

⁷ "Penthouse Interview: Andrea Dworkin," *Penthouse*, April 1987.

⁸ Warren Steibel, "Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.," *Guests Andrea Dworkin and Harriet Pilpel* (New York: PBS, February 25, 1985).

pornography, even though many feminists during the sex wars used literary history to explain pornography's social role. As well, the major feminist figures of the sex wars, in particular Andrea Dworkin, were not understood as literary critics during the sex wars, nor are they analyzed this way in more recent scholarship. In this chapter, I consider the major debates and figures of the sex wars through the lens of literary criticism, and contend that the sex wars played out against the backdrop of feminist canon criticism discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

How does it change the accepted history of both feminist literary criticism and the sex wars to consider the debates as part of a conversation about *literary* representation? What happens when Andrea Dworkin is analyzed as a literary critic, as I do in this chapter? I see the history of the sex wars as part of the development of feminist literary criticism as a form and field of literary interpretation. I argue that the sex wars drew heavily on the reading strategies and methodologies that feminist literary critics developed through the 1970s and into the early 1980s, from Kate Millett onward. Feminists on all sides of the debates about pornography and censorship *read* pornography. That is, they deployed interpretive strategies borrowed from literary criticism to interpret it, and they based their understanding of the dynamics of pornographic consumption on the relationship between author and reader that was established through the feminist canon debates. I justify this interpretation first and foremost by noting the obvious: their work was concerned with print, and not filmic, pornography. Of course, debates about pornography in the later 1980s and early 1990s

dealt with the role of pornographic film following technological changes in mass distribution of film and video, but throughout the bulk of the sex wars the pornography at issue was in print form. In addition to the large archive of pornographic novels and text-based pornography they interpreted, when feminist critics analyzed pornographic images that appeared in sites like *Hustler*, *Penthouse*, and *Playboy* magazines (the most common targets of anti-pornography critics), they approached those images within the historical context of debates about narrative crafted by male authors and female readership.

At stake in this shift to considering pornography, the sex wars, and Andrea Dworkin's work in particular within the framework of literary criticism is the continuity of feminist concern with literary objects. In placing the sex wars within the history of literary criticism, and vice versa, I argue that feminist preoccupation with literary texts and their relation to the world around them was not interrupted or supplanted by debates about sex and pornography. Rather, those debates were an extension of feminist concern with authorship, the impact of texts created by men on women, and, most importantly, with the dynamics of representation in relation to "real life." As well, my interpretation shows that the mode of ideological reading which Kate Millett developed in *Sexual Politics* was not, in fact, abandoned by feminist critics, even though so many feminist literary critics distanced themselves from her work following its publication in 1970. Instead, participants in the sex wars returned to Millett's vision of the relationship between literature and the real world as they grappled with the material consequences of pornographic texts. In other words, this chapter suggests that it is possible to see an

overarching continuity in the history of feminist criticism. This is not a project of reconciliation, however, and my aim is not to minimize the productive and often vicious debates that made up the sex wars, nor to suggest that feminist critics and theorists erred as they attacked one another's positions throughout the sex wars. The rancor of the sex wars was a necessary and defining feature of one of feminism's hugely prolific periods. Part of feminism's evolution during the sex wars was the acknowledgment that women might say to one another, in Andrea Dworkin's own words, "eat shit, bitch. No one said that sisterhood is easy."⁹

This powerful form of dialogue and disagreement between feminists characterized the sex wars, and this chapter respects that intensity. At the same time, I suggest that paying attention to the origins of these disagreements in literary criticism allows us to notice the historical continuities that are lost when historians focus exclusively on the social and public forms of criticism that were an important part of the sex wars. I make this argument by re-reading Dworkin, one of the most public and inflammatory figures of the sex wars, as a literary critic and by returning to her literary sources to explicate the literary infrastructure of her positions on pornography, censorship, and sex practices. In the process, I draw on other significant feminist figures who are usually considered social

⁹ Dworkin, *Heartbreak*, 32. In her 2002 memoir, Dworkin directs these lines to her antagonistic "eighth or ninth grade" English teacher, Miss Fox, writing that "I knew I'd get her someday and this is it." While Dworkin wrote this statement in that particular context, it can be extrapolated to usefully characterize the tone and aim of much of her own work, as well as other work during the sex wars. It is an understatement to note that the differences between Dworkin's statement and the feminist literary critical project of creating sympathetic reading strategies to encourage the production of women's writing are obvious.

critics, such as Susan Sontag, to demonstrate how readily the sex wars and conversations about pornography can be read through the lens of literary criticism.

First, this chapter addresses Andrea Dworkin as she has usually been read: as a social critic and activist. Rather than subordinate this important part of her identity in service of my argument about the strength of her literary criticism, I begin with her social and cultural criticism to explain the many compelling reasons why her contributions to literary study have been ignored. Second, the bulk of this chapter considers Dworkin as a literary critic and early cultural studies critic. I argue that her first non-fiction work, *Woman Hating*, was predominantly a work of literary criticism, and that the theories she developed through the course of her life's work stemmed from the literary analysis in which she was engaged in 1974. Finally, this chapter reads the presence of literature in the sex wars more generally in order to return to the questions of reality and representation that dominate this dissertation.

Andrea Dworkin as Social Critic

Over the course of her lifetime, from 1946 to 2005 when she died at age fifty-eight, Andrea Dworkin published over a dozen works of non-fiction, several works of fiction, memoir, and poetry, and wrote and delivered countless speeches and public statements on pornography.¹⁰ Her strongest ties to an organized activist group were to Women Against Pornography, which she founded in the late 1970s along with Susan

¹⁰ Cindy Jenefsky and Ann Russo, *Without Apology: Andrea Dworkin's Art and Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 1; Ariel Levy, "The Prisoner of Sex," *New York Magazine*, May 29, 2005, <http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/people/features/11907/>.

Brownmiller, Robin Morgan, and several other feminist activists, scholars, and New York community members.¹¹ In 1980, she began a deeply productive working relationship with the attorney, legal scholar, and activist Catharine MacKinnon. By 1984, MacKinnon wrote a statement in a *Yale Law Review* article that exemplified the relation between the two writers and their work: “many of the ideas in this essay were developed and refined in close collaboration with Andrea Dworkin. It is consequently difficult at times to distinguish the contribution of each of us to a body of work that—through shared teaching, writing, speaking, organizing, and political action on every level—has been created together.”¹²

In addition to her significant collaboration with MacKinnon on legal work, her participation in WAP, her non-fiction writing, and her activities as a speaker, organizer, and public intellectual, Dworkin kept close tabs on developments in public debates about pornography. She corresponded regularly with other major feminist figures throughout the 1970s and 1980s, such as Adrienne Rich and Robin Morgan, often writing to others to express outrage at their activities and positions. For example, when Adrienne Rich, who had originally been a member of WAP and an ally in the anti-pornography movement, changed some of her positions on pornography and signed a Feminist Anti-Censorship

¹¹ Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York: Dial Press, 1999), 303–5.

¹² Catharine A. MacKinnon, “Not a Moral Issue,” *Yale Law & Policy Review* 2, no. 2 (April 1, 1984): 321–45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40239168>. The close relationship between Dworkin and MacKinnon has led to their work and positions often being considered one and the same: anecdotally, in my first year in university, my “Introduction to Political Science” professor derisively referred to feminist anti-pornography work as “MacDworkinsim.” Today, that term appears all over a slew of anti-feminist websites and serves to conflate a huge range of feminist positions into a monolith of an apparently regressive and anti-male perspective.

Taskforce brief opposing censorship, Dworkin wrote her a personal letter in which she said,

stand with the girl lawyers, who have what they need; or stand with those people who are doing the dirty work of fighting sex and race inequality by fighting those who profit from it (the profit being both money and pleasure). You cant [sic] stand with both. If this FACT brief really represents you, I am happy to sever all political affiliation with you. If the FACT brief does not represent you, you had better do something about the fact that you have signed it. Playboy, by the way, will particularly enjoy the use of yr [sic] name. The rest of the slime, not so brazenly literary, will like it too.¹³

This letter, representative of many she wrote to other feminists, including fellow WAP founder Robin Morgan, evinced Dworkin's strong positions and penchant for incendiary dialogue. Her important presence in the public eye along with her strength of conviction meant that she was often characterized as representing the entirety of anti-pornography, pro-censorship positions in the sex wars, especially by those outside the feminist movement who supported pornography and/or opposed censorship. In its introduction to an interview with Dworkin, *Penthouse* magazine wrote under the heading "Dworkin's Squawking" that "she's one of our most implacable enemies. A grotesque effigy of intellectual slime and hypocrisy who has devoted all of her not inconsiderable energies to try to outlaw the very magazine you are now reading."¹⁴ Clearly, a significant

¹³ Andrea Dworkin, "Personal Letter to Adrienne Rich," Personal Correspondence, (n.d.), Box S17, Robin Morgan Papers, Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture Archives.

¹⁴ "Penthouse Interview: Andrea Dworkin," 8. In a 2006 interview published only online on andreadworkin.net, Dworkin's husband John Stoltenberg stated that *Penthouse* had obtained this interview under false pretenses and without Dworkin's consent. In the interview, Stoltenberg remembered that "there was the time that *Penthouse* magazine sent a writer to interview her posing as a journalist for a Hebrew-language newspaper in Israel. Andrea gave the interview, and she was talking to me afterwards and said there was something off about the interview, it didn't seem right to her. Sure enough, one day I stopped at a newspaper stand after a jog and saw the current issue of *Penthouse* with her name on the cover." Beth

amount of acrimony accrued around Dworkin as a person and as a figure, particularly when her positions were understood as representative of all forms of anti-pornography, pro-censorship feminism, and, in some cases, all of feminism in its totality.

Despite the reduction of her positions that often occurred in venues from *Penthouse* to FACT and its public briefs, Dworkin's original mandate with WAP had been quite specific. At its inception the group's stated goals were "(1) to claim pornography as a national feminist issue; (2) to educate the American public about pornography and its misogynist ideology; and (3) to change the climate of opinion in the country so that pornography is no longer viewed as socially acceptable or sexually liberating."¹⁵ All three of its founding goals were directed at the public, national, and social level. Dworkin, with and as a part of WAP, saw pornography as a social issue with political implications that could be addressed in the court of public opinion, as well as within the actual justice system. Early anthologies of anti-pornography work consolidated Dworkin and WAP's perspective. Laura Lederer's 1980 *Take Back the Night*, which was dedicated "to the thousands of women in this country and abroad who recognize the

Ribet, "First Year: An Interview with John Stoltenberg," March 11, 2006, <http://www.andreadworkin.net/memorial/stoltinterview.html>. *Penthouse* admitted in its introduction that Dworkin had not given the interview directly to the magazine, but skirted around the issue of whether they commissioned it, stating that Michelle Mayron conducted the interview for an Israeli daily newspaper and, "after writing her article, Mayron sold the interview transcript to *Penthouse*." Throughout the interview, the interviewer's questions are preceded by "*Penthouse*:" "Penthouse Interview: Andrea Dworkin," 52.
¹⁵ Women Against Pornography, "Women Against Pornography Press Information Packet," December 2, 1981, 7, Box 16, Dorothy Allison Papers, Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture Archives.

hatefulness and harmfulness of pornography, and who are organizing to stop it now,”¹⁶ included three contributions by Dworkin.¹⁷ In all the essays in the important volume, which other feminist critics regarded as a collective manifesto of the feminist anti-pornography movement, pornography was dealt with on a practical, social level. Lederer constructed the text itself as a manual for change, ending it with two sections titled “Taking Action” and “Looking Ahead.”¹⁸ In many ways, the anthology can be read as an extension of WAP’s original founding aims: it contains essays defining pornography, outlining why pornography is a social issue with impacts on real individuals (including children and “pornography models”), and educating its readers on the material effects of pornography.¹⁹ The anthology succeeds as a work of social criticism, and Dworkin’s significant contribution to it, and others like it, cemented her status in the public and feminist imagination as a major figure aligned with, and responsible for, WAP’s original anti-pornography goals.

Dworkin’s social criticism and activism occurred in several important realms, from the academic-activist territory of *Take Back the Night* (whose title, even, directly alluded to public movement-based activism on the streets) to the world of legal action.

¹⁶ Laura Lederer, ed., *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: Morrow, 1980).

¹⁷ Andrea Dworkin, “Why So-Called Radical Men Love and Need Pornography,” in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: Morrow, 1980), 148–54; “For Men, Freedom of Speech; for Women, Silence Please,” in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: Morrow, 1980), 256–58; “Pornography and Grief,” in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: Morrow, 1980), 286–92.

¹⁸ Lederer, *Take Back the Night*, 259; 293.

¹⁹ Laura Lederer, “An Interview with a Former Pornography Model,” in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: Morrow, 1980), 57–70; Florence Rush, “Child Pornography,” in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: Morrow, 1980), 71–81.

Dworkin collaborated with MacKinnon on a variety of legal actions, most notably the anti-pornography ordinances they created in 1983 in Minneapolis, in 1984 in Indianapolis, and their participation in the 1986 Meese Commission. This work began while Dworkin and MacKinnon were co-teaching a course on pornography at the University of Minneapolis in the 1982-83 academic year, and subsequently collaborated on proposing an anti-pornography ordinance to the City Council of Minneapolis which claimed pornography violated women's equality and freedom from discrimination under the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution.²⁰ The ordinance was passed by the Minneapolis City Council but was not ratified by the city's mayor. Dworkin and MacKinnon then proposed a second ordinance in Indianapolis which was enacted into law but was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1986. The Supreme Court maintained it was unconstitutional under the First Amendment.²¹ While their ordinances were not met with success in legal terms, it is clear from Dworkin and MacKinnon's collection of the written text of the ordinances and the testimony of all those who presented information during the lengthy hearings that they believed that simply entering testimony on the harmful nature of pornography into the public record was itself a success.²²

²⁰ In feminist histories of this proposal, the fact that the two were actually hired by the City of Minneapolis to draft the ordinance is often omitted, particularly by those who opposed their positions and the ordinances that resulted from them. Duggan, Hunter, and Vance, "False Promises: Feminist Antipornography Legislation," 45.

²¹ Merck, "From Minneapolis to Westminster," 53-54; Duggan, Hunter, and Vance, "False Promises: Feminist Antipornography Legislation," 43-44; "Penthouse Interview: Andrea Dworkin," 52.

²² As well, Dworkin said in 1985 on national television that, "we never expected this law to be upheld on the federal district level. So for us this is simply part of the process that we know we have to go through. No one has ever looked at pornography before and tried to analyze it in terms of how it's made and the impact that it has on women. Obscenity law does not do that." Steibel, "Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr."

In 1997, Dworkin and MacKinnon published *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings*, a nearly five hundred page work about which MacKinnon wrote, “until the publication of this volume, the public discussion of pornography has been impoverished and deprived by often inaccurate or incomplete reports of victims’ accounts and experts’ views.”²³ The “victims’ accounts” included in the volume are quite graphic—MacKinnon described the hearings as “bringing forward festering human pain that had been denied”—and it is clear that Dworkin and MacKinnon saw their goals met by the hearings themselves, since they “had a substantial impact on consciousness, politics, scholarship, theory, and policy” despite the fact that the ordinances were not permanently enacted into law.²⁴ In other words, Dworkin and MacKinnon were engaged in a kind of legal activism which directly engaged the legal system and yet deployed it to their own ends, which were consistent with WAP’s goals of educating the general public about the harm of pornography and changing the general social climate in which pornography was produced, distributed, and consumed.

Dworkin’s activism, from her public legal work with MacKinnon, her collaboration with WAP, to her prominence in mainstream media, was highly contentious. In addition to the resistance to her activist work chronicled in locations like *Penthouse*, other feminist scholars and activists strongly disagreed with the basic, foundational premise of her work. As Duggan, Hunter, and Vance put it in 1995 when

²³ Andrea Dworkin and Catharine A. MacKinnon, *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8–9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

looking at the continued legal legacy of the Minneapolis and Indianapolis ordinances, “one is tempted to ask in astonishment; How can this be happening? How can feminists be entrusting the patriarchal state with the task of legally distinguishing between permissible and impermissible sexual images?”²⁵ The strong theoretical, ideological, and methodological disagreement between Dworkin and scholars such as Vance and feminist groups like FACT propelled the sex wars, and was representative of a fruitful irreconcilability between the positions pro- and anti-pornography feminists took throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike many anti-censorship feminists who shared Duggan, Hunter, and Vance’s 1995 astonishment that feminists might advocate for state-sanctioned censorship, Dworkin and MacKinnon argued that the causal relationship between pornography and violence against women was so deep as to require the complete legal eradication of the form. In *In Harm’s Way*, they summarized the testimony heard at the Minneapolis and Indianapolis as follows: “woman after woman used by consumers of pornography recounts its causal role in her sexual violation by a man close to her.... A brother holds up pornography magazines as his friends gang-rape his sister, making her assume the poses in the materials, turning her as they turn the pages.”²⁶ For Dworkin and MacKinnon, clearly, pornography had a one-to-one relationship with the real world, and therefore its consequences had to be dealt with in the real world of politics and the law. Dworkin and MacKinnon answered the question of “how can this be happening?” with reference to the fact that women were “in harm’s way” and urgently needed public, legal

²⁵ Duggan, Hunter, and Vance, “False Promises: Feminist Antipornography Legislation,” 44.

²⁶ Dworkin and MacKinnon, *In Harm’s Way*, 6–7.

action to address their pain and suffering. As well, by meeting their goals simply by exposing the results of pornography on real women, men, and children, they deployed the patriarchal state to their own ends. Thus, they had a specific, though implicit, response to the anti-censorship feminists who decried their involvement with the state and legal system.

In addition to her legal activism, many of Dworkin's publications through the 1980s supported her status as a social critic. Two of her most well-known texts, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (published in 1981)²⁷ and *Intercourse* (1987)²⁸ were both aimed at a general and a feminist audience. The two works were interdisciplinary and blended history with philosophy to create an argument about the prevalence and prominence of male power over time. Cindy Jefensky and Ann Russo have called both texts works of "feminist theory," but clearly that label can only be applied either in retrospect or with reference to a historical moment when the general public was reading feminist theory.²⁹ *Intercourse*, described in *Ms.* magazine in 1987 as "a theoretical work that examines the social, legal, and political meanings of sexual intercourse"³⁰ was also read as a practical text: it inspired the radical feminist activist Melinda Vadas to write a letter to WAP member and feminist activist Dorothy "Cookie" Teer in which she said, "forgot to tell you my latest great idea. I envision you as orchestrating this whole thing – a Woman's (or Women's) March Against Intercourse.

²⁷ *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: Women's Press, 1981).

²⁸ Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

²⁹ Jeneffsky and Russo, *Without Apology*, 3; 4.

³⁰ "...And Dworkin's Treatise on Intercourse," *Ms. Magazine*, April 1987, 28.

Millions of women doing a street action, marching against intercourse, perhaps each carrying a copy of *Intercourse*. Yes?”³¹ While Vadas likely wrote about her “great idea” in jest, the sense that *Intercourse* represented a powerful and controversial threat to society was quite serious, and was felt both in feminist circles and amongst its general readership.

Intercourse challenged not just heterosexual intercourse on the basis of men’s power over women, as Dworkin had done in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, but also the idea that sexual intercourse could ever be a consensual act between individuals.³²

In *Intercourse*, Dworkin wrote that sexual intercourse

is intense, often desperate. The internal landscape is violent upheaval, a wild and ultimately cruel disregard of human individuality, a brazen, high-strung wanting that is absolute and imperishable, not attached to personality, no respecter of boundaries; ending not in sexual climax but in a human tragedy of failed relationships, vengeful bitterness in an aftermath of sexual heat, personality corroded by too much endurance of undesired, habitual intercourse, conflict, a wearing away of vitality in the numbness finally of habit or compulsion or the loneliness of separation. The experience of fucking changes people, so that they are often lost to each other and slowly they are lost to human hope.³³

³¹ Melinda Vadas, “Personal Letter to Dorothy ‘Cookie’ Teer,” Personal Correspondence, (Thurs), Box 35, Cookie Teer Papers, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture Archives. The letter, dated only “Thurs,” is addressed to “Cookola,” one of the many seemingly-diminutive nicknames the prominent feminists discussed in this chapter gave one another in the period under discussion. For example, Catharine MacKinnon is referred to as “Kitty” throughout many of both Dorothy Allison and Robin Morgan’s papers, which collect personal, business, and activist correspondence from the 1940s to 2010.

³² Throughout the book, of course, she does discuss the particular effects of sexual intercourse on women, and ultimately argues that “in a world of male power—penile power—fucking is the essential experience of power and potency and possession... Alone together, a man fucks a woman; he possesses her; the act is an act of possession in and of itself; the man and the woman experience it as such.” For Dworkin, sexual intercourse by definition “remains a means or the means of psychologically making a woman inferior.” And yet, at the same time, in this text she also introduces the idea that men, too, suffer as a consequence of sexual intercourse. *Intercourse*, 79; 137.

³³ *Ibid.*, 21.

The idea that sexual intercourse itself was so deeply harmful to all who engaged in it, not just women, was such a radical position that it further cemented Dworkin's status as a social critic who aimed to inflame public debate. Surely, anti-censorship feminists might have said, she was acting as a provocateur? Her argument about the dismal nature of sexual intercourse was shocking to both feminists and the general public. As she pointed out in her text, her position on sexual intercourse was even anti-American (or, as she consistently spelled the word, "Amerikan") because, "in Amerika, there is the nearly universal conviction—or so it appears—that sex (fucking) is good and that liking it is right: morally right; a sign of human health; nearly a standard for citizenship."³⁴ If enjoying sex was truly a standard for citizenship in a post-sexual revolution America, then her work went against the very foundations of American society, as well as civilization itself since, taken to its logical extreme, the eradication of sexual intercourse would result in the eradication of humanity.³⁵

In addition to this subversive challenge to mainstream culture, Dworkin also issued difficult critiques of the feminist movement. In 1974 in *Woman Hating*, she articulated an early vision of intersectionality, and pointed out that most feminist work

³⁴ Ibid., 47.

³⁵ Of course, some feminists, particularly in the 1970s, argued that reproductive technologies could be created to reproduce human beings without sexual intercourse, particularly Shulamith Firestone who, in 1970, suggested that reproduction and childbearing could be taken over by technology in order to end the tyranny of the nuclear family and free women from their biology. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Morrow, 1970), 270. Dworkin, however, did not specifically discuss such technologies or explain what might happen to humanity should sexual intercourse be eradicated, other than in two brief sentences in *Intercourse* where she wrote that "new reproductive technologies have changed and will continue to change the nature of the world. Intercourse is not necessary to existence anymore." *Intercourse*, 138.

had at that point been done by white, middle-class women. She noted that “because of our participation in the middle-class lifestyle we were the oppressors of other people, our poor white sisters, our Black sisters, our Chicana sisters—and the men who in turn oppressed them. This closely interwoven fabric of oppression, which is the racist class structure of Amerika today, assured that wherever one stood, it was with at least one foot heavy on the belly of another human being.”³⁶ This prescient understanding of the intersections of race and class in gendered oppression was threatening to the women’s movement and to middle-class feminists, whose refusal, she said, to deal with this “bread-and-butter issue” was the movement’s “most awful failure.”³⁷ She argued that middle-class women had failed to take any action which would result in the loss of their own economic privilege, which was deeply connected to the oppression of other women. A feminist analysis of the role of class and race in gender oppression would result in the redefinition of “family, church, power relations, all the institutions which inhabit and order our lives,” and would mean that “there is no way to hold onto privilege and comfort.”³⁸ Dworkin’s intersectional analysis threatened middle-class feminists, and rebuked their claims that they were in fact already engaged in a consideration of class and race.

In 1970, four years before Dworkin’s comments about feminism’s “most awful failure,” Robin Morgan wrote in the introduction to her important anthology *Sisterhood is*

³⁶ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 21.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

Powerful that “the Women’s Liberation Movement is the only radical movement I know of today which is dealing with the issue of class—on a concrete as well as a theoretical basis.” Dworkin obviously disagreed with Morgan’s assessment of what the women’s movement had been able to do in the intervening four years. Morgan attempted to explain why the women’s movement had been mainly dominated by young middle-class white women, and in the process she used an additive model of race and class, where racial and class discrimination were added to the oppression women faced on the basis of their sex. As Morgan put it in 1970, “black women, who are obviously doubly oppressed, have, for the most part, chosen to fight beside their black brothers, fighting racism as a priority oppression.”³⁹ While Morgan admitted that women from working-class backgrounds had been alienated from the movement, she described a variety of strategies that various activist organizations had taken to rectify this situation on a case-by-case, group-by-group basis. Clearly, Dworkin felt that these attempts had not been adequate, and also that they did not address the ideological basis of the intersection of race, class, and gender oppression, as her intersectional model did.

Interestingly, while Dworkin has often been characterized as arguing that women’s primary oppression was always based on their sex, in *Woman Hating* she acknowledged that women carried multiple identities which intersected in different ways at different times. As she put it, “the analysis in this book applies to the life situations of all women, but all women are not necessarily in a state of primary emergency as women.

³⁹ Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1970), xxvi.

What I mean by this is simple. As a Jew in Nazi Germany, I would be oppressed as a woman, but hunted, slaughtered, as a Jew. As a Native American, I would be oppressed as a squaw, but hunted, slaughtered, as a Native American. That first identity, the one which brings with it as part of its definition death, is the identity of primary emergency.”⁴⁰ Just as Dworkin critiqued feminism’s failure to deal with race and class in its exclusive focus on gender, she offered an intersectional model of identity that challenged the feminist positions that were emerging in the 1970s. Unlike Morgan, who saw women’s primary oppression as always gender-based, Dworkin argued that there was only one situation in which gender identity was *always* the identity of primary emergency: that of transsexuality. She wrote that “there is no doubt that in the culture of male-female discreteness, transsexuality is a disaster for the individual transsexual. Every transsexual, white, black, man, woman, rich, poor, is in a state of primary emergency as a transsexual...that means that every transsexual is entitled to a sex-change operation, and it should be provided by the community as one of its functions.”⁴¹

Dworkin was able to account for the multiplicity and intersectionality of identity in ways other contemporaneous feminists were not because of her bleak view of human existence: the specter of death was at the forefront of all her analyses, and she believed that problems of race, class, and gender were constantly life-threatening. As a result, the category of “primary emergency” let her analyze human existence at its most basic level, and she held no allegiance to gender-based oppression over other forms of subjugation.

⁴⁰ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 23–24.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

Given that Dworkin's most well-known texts contained radical, subversive, and unprecedented claims which disrupted both mainstream patriarchy and the feminist movement, it is not surprising that many of her readers failed to notice or to deeply engage with the way in which she built her arguments on an archive of literary texts, both traditionally pornographic and traditionally literary.⁴² *Intercourse*, for example, opened with an entire chapter in which Dworkin melded her reading of Leo Tolstoy's 1889 novella *Kreutzer Sonata* with descriptions of Tolstoy's life, taken mainly from Countess Sophie Andreyevna Tolstoy's diaries. Throughout the text, Dworkin referred to the work of a wide range of authors and their novels, including James Baldwin, Gustave Flaubert, Issac Bashevis Singer, Tennessee Williams, and several others. *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* opened with extensive plot summaries of two explicitly pornographic books, *Whip Chick* and *I Love a Laddie*,⁴³ and analyzed several other pornographic books, such as *Black Fashion Model*.⁴⁴ Across her many non-fiction texts, Dworkin extensively read and critiqued the works of a huge range of authors from Norman Mailer to Gabriel García Márquez to the Marquis de Sade. It is clear that Dworkin, whose Bachelor's degree from Bennington College was in Literature, constructed her theories

⁴² While these categories were quite blurry for Dworkin throughout *Woman Hating*, as she made little to no differentiation between explicitly pornographic works and literary novels in the text itself, the text's bibliography was quite clear on what was a work of pornography and what was not. In the bibliography, "Works of Pornography Analyzed in This Book" was a distinct category from "Books," and the works of traditionally literary authors such as D.H. Lawrence and the Marquis de Sade are included in the latter category. While it is impossible to ascertain whether Dworkin herself constructed the bibliography or if it was done by the publishing house, the bibliography does bear her own stamp and voice: at the end of the category of works of pornography, she wrote "in addition to the works listed above, I have read or looked at thousands of pieces of pornography: photographs, books, magazines, and films." *Pornography*, 239.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 30–45.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

about pornography in tandem with theories about literature. Despite this fact, most of her critics and her proponents primarily focused on her real-world, practical activism and social criticism, which were in fact a huge and important part of her work.

Andrea Dworkin as Literary Critic

Reading Dworkin as a literary critic in no way diminishes her status as an important, radical social critic, though it does expand the definition of what a literary critic might do, and engages the questions about the critical act that feminist literary critics brought up during the long 1970s. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Dworkin wanted writers to “write books as actions.” In *Woman Hating*, she explained her preoccupation with the social role of books when she stated that two problems were “crucial to the development of revolutionary program and consciousness. The first is the nature of the women’s movement as such, and the second has to do with the work of the writer.”⁴⁵ For her, the work of the writer had been diminished, held in contempt, and was ultimately ruined by an “authoritarian consciousness” that had the power to render words meaningless.⁴⁶ Instead, she saw her writing, and *Woman Hating* in particular, as “a political action where revolution is the goal. It has no other purpose. It is not cerebral wisdom, or academic horseshit, or ideas carved in granite and destined for immortality....It is part of a planetary movement to restructure community forms and human consciousness so that people have power over their own lives, participate fully in

⁴⁵ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

community, live in dignity and freedom.”⁴⁷ The work of the writer was to tell “the truth. It means bring incorruptible. It means not being afraid, and never lying.”⁴⁸ Dworkin posed this vision of the writer’s work against the bulk of existing literature: for her, books lied as they constructed a prescriptive representation of life “about women and men, the roles they play, the violence between them.”⁴⁹ Writing was itself real, and therefore books and stories had practical implications in the real world. For Dworkin, there was no realm of artistic representation separate from the real world. In other words, representation was materially *real*.

Part of the reason Dworkin has not often been read as a literary critic rests with her commitment to books as practical actions with immense social power, which they drew from their ability to represent and influence the social world. Certainly, Dworkin’s disdain for “academic horseshit” set her work at odds with other contemporaneous feminist literary critics who believed that academic work had the power to restructure the university, and were thus less focused on the community as Dworkin defined it. While Dworkin considered the writing, reading, and interpreting of a book as part of its existence as a social action, she did not confine these activities to the university. Ironically, given feminist literary criticism’s devotion to institutional and ideological change, it may have been Dworkin’s description of herself as a “writer with a

⁴⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 26.

revolutionary commitment” that kept her from the annals of feminist literary criticism.⁵⁰ In addition, she spoke strongly against the kinds of books her literary critical cohort was writing: she wrote, “books are for the most part in Amerika commercial ventures. People write them to make money, to become famous, to build or augment other careers....Academics lock books in a tangled web of mindfuck and abstraction. The notion is that there are ideas, then art, then somewhere else, unrelated, life.”⁵¹

While many of Dworkin’s non-fiction texts include elements of literary criticism, particularly *Intercourse* and *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, in this section I focus on *Woman Hating*. It was her earliest work, quite completely a work of literary criticism, and the text in which she outlined the framework she used to consider literature and/as pornography throughout the rest of her life and work. It is what Jeneffsky and Russo called her “first ‘serious’ book as a writer.”⁵² It was so patently a work of literary criticism that it is almost shocking that it has so rarely been read as such.⁵³ *Woman Hating* set out Dworkin’s vision of the relationship between literature, pornography, and

⁵⁰ Ibid., 24.

⁵¹ Ibid. I would argue that her assessment of the way contemporaneous academics understood ideas, art, and life was incorrect: as detailed in Chapter Two, most feminist literary critics throughout the long 1970s in fact saw “life” as a crucial element of ideas and art to the extent that the representation of life in literature was the main rubric by which other texts were measured.

⁵² Jeneffsky and Russo, *Without Apology*, 11.

⁵³ One of the few instances of Dworkin being read as a literary critic occurred in 1992 when Jane Gallop critiqued Susan Suleiman’s use of Dworkin’s analysis of Georges Bataille’s *The Story of The Eye* in Suleiman’s own work on the same subject. Gallop pointed out the Suleiman, a literary critic, failed to contextualize Dworkin’s use of specific quotes from the story. While this mention is brief, Gallop does seem to implicitly accept Dworkin as a literary critic when she places her work in oppositional conversation with Suleiman’s interpretation. *Around 1981*, 68–70.

what Stuart Hall would later call “the dirty outside world.”⁵⁴ It was this relationship that has determined how Dworkin has been read and where she has been placed in the history of feminist activism, criticism, and theory. Both pro- and anti-pornography feminists have criticized her conflation of reality and representation as well as her refusal to see pornography and/or literature as an artistic construction. *Woman Hating* was the text in which she explained her insistence on this conflation, and it was also the foundation for the deliberate refusal to see pornography as fantasy that characterized subsequent forms of feminist anti-pornography writing and activism.

Woman Hating began at what Dworkin considered the “primary information of the culture”: fairy tales. She said that these narratives “delineate the roles, interactions, and values which are available to us.”⁵⁵ Fairy tales were “the beginning, where we learn who we must be, as well as the moral of the story.”⁵⁶ Her first two short chapters, titled “Onceuponatime: The Roles” and “Onceuponatime: The Moral of the Story,” outlined “the precise moment where fiction penetrates into the psyche as reality, and history begins to mirror it.”⁵⁷ In the introduction, she explained that fairy tales are “the first scenarios of women and men which mold our psyches, taught to us before we can know differently. We go on to pornography, where we find the same scenarios, explicitly sexual and now more recognizable, ourselves, carnal women and heroic men.”⁵⁸ Quite

⁵⁴ Stuart Hall, “The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities,” *October* 53 (July 1, 1990): 12, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778912>.

⁵⁵ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 34.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

obviously, fairy tales are stories: they are narratives, artistic representations of life which include fantastical elements. Crucially, fairy tales are often pedagogical in their advancement of particular morals. As fairy tale scholar Maria Tatar pointed out, fairy tales are stories that transcend culture, national origin, and even authorship and yet every element of a tale is subject to changes in translation and locality.⁵⁹ In other words, the origin of a given tale is both everywhere and nowhere. In the 1999 introduction to her foundational text *The Classic Fairy Tales*, Tatar quoted feminist literary critic Carolyn Heilbrun on how “the stories circulating in our culture regulate our lives and fashion our identities:”

Let us agree on this: that we live our lives through texts. These may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us of what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories are what have formed us all, they are what we must use to make our new fictions...Out of old tales, we must make new lives.⁶⁰

Tatar agreed with Heilbrun that fairy tales were prescriptive, and that they influenced whatever forms life and narrative might take as we experience ourselves through and in relation to these texts. She directly disagreed, however, with Dworkin’s extension of that realization, and took issue with the way “Andrea Dworkin refuses to countenance the possibility of preserving tales that were more or less forced upon us and that have been so effective in promoting stereotypical gender roles.” Tatar included Dworkin in the group of critics who were “convinced that we need to sound the tocsin and make fairy-tales off-limits to children,” and ultimately dismissed Dworkin’s

⁵⁹ Maria Tatar, ed., *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism* (New York: Norton, 1999), ix.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xii–xiii.

interpretation and use of fairy tales in *Woman Hating*.⁶¹ Interestingly, Tatar did so by looking to the positions of other authors, not literary critics: she marshalled Margaret Atwood and Alison Lurie, for example, in defense of the continued use of fairy tales and juxtaposed those authors' positions with Dworkin's. Despite the fact that Tatar did not recognize Dworkin as a literary critic or agree with her conclusions about what should be done about the didactic nature of fairy tales, the fact that Dworkin appears in Tatar's short introduction to such a classic text of fairy tales is quite telling. *Woman Hating's* vision of the primacy of fairy tales in culture persisted in a variety of literary fields and forms.

Dworkin's bleak vision of human existence, as laid out in *Woman Hating*, saw "the culture" as determining the lives we lead and the actions we take. She argued that fairy tales were the strongest and most persistent form of culture that predetermined human possibilities and behavior. She wrote that

the culture predetermines who we are, how we behave, what we are willing to know, what we are able to feel. We are born into a sex role which is determined by visible sex, or gender. We follow explicit scenarios of passage from birth into youth into maturity into old age, and then we die. In the process of adhering to sex roles, as a direct consequence of the imperatives of those roles, we commit homicide, suicide, and genocide.⁶²

The "explicit scenarios of passage" that led us into atrocity emerged, she said, from the cultural paradigms that were predetermined through fairy tales. We forget the terrifying content of fairy tales as we age, and remember only the romantic paradigms, even though

⁶¹ Ibid., xiii.

⁶² Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 34.

“the terror remains as the substratum of male-female relation—the terror remains, and we do not ever recover from it or cease to be motivated by it.”⁶³ As such, fairy tales—a literary form—determined the entire realm of gendered human relations and existence. Dworkin’s selection of fairy tales as the primary and original location of culture was no accident. As Tatar noted, telling fairy tales has been considered a “‘domestic art’ at least since Plato” and despite the fact that they were usually collected, compiled, and written down by men, fairy tales were typically ascribed to women narrators.⁶⁴ For this reason, Tatar said, “it is not unusual to find them deemed of marginal cultural importance and dismissed as unworthy of critical attention.”⁶⁵ Dworkin’s ascription of such vast cultural importance and deep critical attention to a previously devalued feminine form of narrative could be read as part of the project of recovery of historical women authors discussed in Chapter Two.⁶⁶ If fairy tales so deeply constituted the culture that predetermined men and women’s relations to one another, and instilled those relations with terror, then for Dworkin fairy tales were not marginal at all. In fact, they were the precise center of any theory of sex and sex practices. That fairy tales were a literary form meant that, again, Dworkin’s theory of sex was a theory of literature. Like Kate Millett,

⁶³ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁴ Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales*, x.

⁶⁵ Ibid., xi.

⁶⁶ It is perhaps not coincidental that her book was published during a period of feminist interest in re-telling fairy tales. Anne Sexton’s *Transformations*, dark poetic re-tellings of a variety of fairy tales, was published in 1971 (interestingly for this discussion, one of the poems in the volume was originally published in *Playboy* in 1970). Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*, which Sharon Rose Wilson has read as a re-telling of “The Robber Bride,” was published in 1969. These examples of feminist reinterpretations of fairy tales in the late 1960s and early 1970s are only a few among many. Anne Sexton, *Transformations*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971); Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969); Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1993).

whose book she praised as “extraordinary,” Dworkin saw the sexual politics of life and the sexual politics of literature as one and the same.⁶⁷ For Millett, and then for Dworkin four years later, there was nothing outside of or before culture, and the literary culture of fairy tales both reflected and prescribed the realities of human life.

Did Dworkin, like Millett, see herself as critiquing male authors when she constructed her theory of sexuality based on fairy tales? The ambiguously gendered provenance of fairy tales, coupled with her lack of comment on the authorship of the tales beyond “the culture” makes it difficult to speculate. But certainly she saw in the tales “the cardinal principles[s] of sexist ontology” such as the principle she found in *Hansel and Gretel*: “the only good woman is a dead woman.”⁶⁸ In a sense, the fact that she saw these principles as fundamental facts about culture and society suggests that she read fairy tales as beyond authorship and that to Dworkin it was irrelevant whether the original authors and narrators of fairy tales were men or women since they would both express precisely the same principles: women were victims of the same culture that benefited men.

As a literary critic, Dworkin used many of the same strategies in interpreting fairy tales that she would later use to interpret pornography. These strategies bore a resemblance to Millett’s method of presenting long passages from the novels she read for her reader almost without comment. Millett’s strategy was to highlight the most misogynist or violent passages from a text and simply allow the reader to see it for

⁶⁷ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 18.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

herself. Dworkin did almost the same in her presentation of long plot summaries and descriptions of the events that took place in the fairy tales she read, though she added asides and interpretations into her lengthy textual summaries. A representative example can be seen in her interpretation of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, where she wrote:

the dwarfs, who loved Snow-white, could not bear to bury her under the ground, so they enclosed her in a glass coffin and put the coffin on a mountaintop. The heroic prince was just passing that way, immediately fell in love with Snow-white-under-glass, and bought her (it?) from the dwarfs who loved her (it?). As servants carried the coffin along behind the prince's horse, the piece of poisoned apple that Snow-white had swallowed 'flew out of her throat.'⁶⁹

The parenthetical comments, “her (it?),” clearly injected her reading of the narrative into an otherwise dispassionate repetition of a familiar story. She offered her reader an experience of reading a fairy tale, and only briefly interrupted that experience to propose her suggestion about the implications of the tale. Jenefsky and Russo, who interpreted Dworkin as an artist, described this approach as a “palimpsestic style—a layering of ideas on top of one another like oil paints on a painter’s palette—that is itself a disruption of the bipolarity and dis-integration structuring gender relations.”⁷⁰ This method, with variations, was characteristic of her literary critical practice throughout all of her non-fiction works. Seven years later, when she published *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, she devoted page after page to summaries of the plots of pornographic novels in short, curt sentences.⁷¹ Much like Millett’s strategy of simply placing long passages of the novels she interpreted in front of her reader, Dworkin decontextualized the fairy tales

⁶⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁰ Jenefsky and Russo, *Without Apology*, 13.

⁷¹ Dworkin, *Pornography*, 30–45.

and pornography she read by repeating them in her texts and, for the most part, allowed her reader to deduce the power and influence of the narratives she re-told through the context of her own work.

The bridge that Dworkin created to link fairy tales to pornography can be located precisely between Part One and Part Two of *Woman Hating*. In Part Two, titled “The Pornography,” she read three texts: Pauline Réage’s *Story of O* (translated into English and published in the US in 1965)⁷² Jean de Berg’s *The Image* (which appeared in English in the US in 1966),⁷³ and *Suck*, a “sex newspaper” founded in 1969 in Amsterdam and edited in part by Germaine Greer.⁷⁴ In her reading of all three texts, she contended that fairy tales bled into literary pornography because they provided the backdrop that informed pornography and gave it its cultural resonance. Where fairy tales told children what and how to think about who they were in relation to sex, pornography told adults what and how to think about sex and selfhood. Adults believed the “truth” about sex they found in pornography because it resonated with what they had been told repeatedly in fairy tales. In the beginning of Part Two, Dworkin wrote that “literary pornography is the cultural scenario of male/female. It is the collective scenario of master/slave. It contains cultural truth: men and women, grown now out of the fairy-tale landscape into the castles

⁷² Pauline Réage, *Story of O*, trans. Sabine d’Estrée (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

⁷³ Jean de Berg, *The Image* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

⁷⁴ Robert Greenfield, “Germaine Greer: A Groupie in Women’s Lib,” *Rolling Stone*, January 7, 1971. It is interesting to note that all three texts were first published in Europe, and that Dworkin read *Story of O* and *The Image* in translation. In part, this has to do with the differences in censorship laws in the US and Europe, but it also speaks to the way in which texts originally published in Europe (including those by American authors such as Henry Miller) reached the US as part of the vanguard of the sexual liberation and promoted a new form of ostensibly sexually liberated literature in the US, as I will discuss shortly.

of erotic desire....Pornography, like fairy tale, tells us who we are.”⁷⁵ In her literary analysis of the three texts in Part Two, she found that they all gave women exactly the same answer to the question of who they were: victims. The three chapters in Part Two all made the same point, and they were titled “Woman as Victim: *Story of O*,” “Woman as Victim: *The Image*,” and “Woman as Victim: *Suck*.” Dworkin saw the literary texts she read as examples of the overall cultural narrative of women as victims which originated in fairy tales. Clearly, the novels were not artistic creations or aesthetic objects, but rather didactic manuals for the punishment, debasement, and victimization of women. Tellingly, she referred to *Story of O* as having a “thesis.”⁷⁶ Literary texts could have theses because they were pedagogical, much like fairy tales with their explicit morals. Their artistic or fantastical elements were of little interest to Dworkin, who contended that literary pornography primarily presented a vision of the world that its readers were told to emulate.

For Dworkin, *Story of O* was particularly problematic as a pedagogical text, and out of her three examples was perhaps the most useful to her overall argument. The novel, which was originally published in France in 1954 under a pseudonym, told the story of a young woman named in the text only as O, a Parisian fashion photographer “whose work resembles that of men.”⁷⁷ Her lover brought her to a secret sadomasochistic society in a château at Roissy where she was beaten, tortured, and placed in a collar and

⁷⁵ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 53.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁷⁷ Réage, *Story of O*, 60.

chains. O served and had sexual intercourse with many of the men at the château, where she slept at night in a cell. Eventually, she left Roissy but wore a ring that marked her as sexually available to any man who recognized the ring. Her lover became her master, and possessed and controlled her completely. Her lover gave her to his step-brother, Sir Stephen, who compelled O to recruit other women to stay at Roissy and join the secret society. As well, Sir Stephen sent her to be permanently branded with his monogram. He likewise required that she have her labia pierced with a metal ring to which was attached a heavy iron disk bearing O's name and title alongside his and the insignia of the society. In the final chapter, Sir Stephen took O to a party naked but for an owl mask, and led her through the party by a leash attached to her labial piercing. The book ends with a claim that it had an additional chapter which had been suppressed, in which when O saw "that Sir Stephen was about to leave her, said she would prefer to die. Sir Stephen gave his consent."⁷⁸ In Dworkin's reading of the novel, O is "a clear mythological figure: she is woman, and to name her O, zero, emptiness, says it all. Her ideal state is one of passivity, nothingness, a submission so absolute she transcends human form (in becoming an owl).

⁷⁸ Ibid., 201. I echo Dworkin's comment about her own summary of the text: following her matter-of-fact plot summary, she wrote, "of course, like most summaries, the above is somewhat sketchy. I have not mentioned the quantities of cock that O sucks, or the anal assaults that she sustains, or the various rapes and tortures perpetuated on her by minor characters in the book, or the varieties of whips used, or described her clothing or the different kinds of nipple rouge, or the many ways in which she is chained, or the shapes and colors of the welts on her body." Dworkin's point, which I share, is that the book is composed primarily of details which are difficult to capture in a summary: part of its intent as a pornographic text is to linger on the specifics of precisely what type of whip was used to beat O, precisely where and how the marks from a particular beating appeared on her body, the texture and color of the fabrics of the furniture on which she was laid out, and so on. As well, in the book O goes through indignity after indignity, one beating or humiliation after another, the length of which is impossible to capture in any summary. In a sense, the plot is secondary to these details and sense of repetition, and the only way to summarize the text for a reader would be to present them with the entire book. In Dworkin's words, "Q.E.D., pornography is never big on plot." *Woman Hating*, 57.

Only the hole between her legs is left to define her, and the symbol of that hole must surely be O.”⁷⁹

Essentially, *Story of O* collected and revealed all of the themes and acts which Dworkin saw as the logical conclusion of fairy tale narratives of captive women with no option but to collude in their own victimization. In Dworkin’s reading of *Story of O*, O is the ultimate empty, passive, female object with no literal or figurative agency. Dworkin took it for granted that O’s masochistic desires were produced by the patriarchal society in which she existed: both society in general and the smaller secret society within it, which was a distillation of cultural attitudes toward women. In Dworkin’s reading, the secret society, O’s initial lover, and Sir Stephen represented and made visible how men would prefer the entire world be run. Because her reading focused so extensively on the ways in which the men in the novel exerted their power over women, Dworkin found it unnecessary to contemplate whether or not O’s avowed consent to her degradation might be a sign of some personal or subjective agency. Certainly, in the novel O claimed to desire the treatment she received, and reported taking pleasure in it. On her first night at Roissy, after having been beaten, chained, and having vaginal and anal intercourse with four masked men, when she was alone in her cell and tied with chains so she was “of necessity motionless,” O reflected on the evening, and she

tried to figure out why there was so much sweetness mingled with the terror in her, or why her terror seemed itself so sweet. She realized that one of the things that most distressed her was the fact that she had been deprived the use of her hands; not that her hands could have defended her (and did she really want to

⁷⁹ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 57.

defend herself?), but had they been free they would at least have made the gesture, have made an attempt to repel the hands which seized her, the flesh which pierced her, to protect her loins from the whip.⁸⁰

Her question, “did she really want to defend herself?” marked the first point in the novel where O considered her total lack of physical agency as a potentially desirable state of being. As the novel progressed, O began to take pleasure and pride in her condition as Sir Stephen’s property. In a passage near the end of the novel where O revealed her status as a sex slave to another woman as part of a plan to recruit her to Roissy for Sir Stephen’s use, O thought to herself that she “was pleased to think that she would deliver Jacqueline by an act of betrayal, because she had felt insulted at seeing Jacqueline’s contempt for her condition as a flogged and branded slave, a condition of which O herself was proud.”⁸¹ Throughout the novel, O transitioned from recognizing the “sweetness” of the brutal acts she engaged in (or, as Dworkin would say, had forced upon her) to taking explicit pleasure in her condition as a sex slave. For Dworkin, however, O was the ultimate unreliable narrator, as any women would be who claimed to take pleasure in masochistic acts. In Dworkin’s reading, it was categorically impossible and thus not worthy of consideration that O’s reported pleasure could be authentic. O was a victim of false consciousness, “totally possessed. That means that she is an object, with no control over her own mobility, capable of no assertion of personality. Her body is *a* body, in the same

⁸⁰ Réage, *Story of O*, 23.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

way that a pencil is a pencil, a bucket is a bucket, or, as Gertrude Stein pointedly said, a rose is a rose.”⁸²

Just as it was unnecessary to consider whether or not Snow White might have consented to her purchase by the prince while she lay unconscious under glass, it was unnecessary to consider whether O’s claims to full participation in her life were real or meaningful. In the world outside of fairy tales, novels, and literary criticism, however, the question of whether or not women could consent to violent sexual intercourse was beginning to become a major dividing line between feminists in 1974, when *Woman Hating* was published, as it continued to be throughout the sex wars. Dworkin’s analysis of *Story of O* therefore staked a claim about sex practices not just as depicted in literary pornography, but also in the world at large. She denied that O, and by extension the everywoman the character represented and encapsulated, could have any ability to consent to or take pleasure in violent or masochistic sexual acts.

Andrea Dworkin as Cultural Studies Critic

As Dworkin followed in the footsteps of Millett’s 1970 *Sexual Politics*, she made the claim that the cultural context of a novel was highly relevant to its content. Just as she created a bridge between fairy tales and pornography, she forged a relation between pornography and the world at large. For her, literature was culture. She interpreted culture through literary forms of reading and analysis. As a result, like Millett, Dworkin was engaged in a form of cultural studies where feminist ideology meant that objects of

⁸² Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 58.

study such as novels were open to interpretation in ways that affirmed the importance of the idioms of literary study. Early examples of the relation between literature and culture, or pornography and the real world, appeared in her analysis of *Story of O*. She gave important consideration to *Story of O*'s publication history and the context in which it had been read in the US between 1965 and 1974. *Story of O* was very similar to many other explicitly sexual novels that appeared in the US in the 1960s. The novel was written and originally published in Europe but only released in the US following changes to American censorship laws in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁸³ Like Jean de Berg's *The Image* and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, it was first published in the US by Grove Press, a publishing house which saw itself at the forefront of the anti-authoritarian sexual revolution. The publication of these texts signaled a change in morality standards in the US, which the growing Left welcomed. As Millett and Dworkin both noted, the writers whose work was praised for its frank depiction of sex were "the sages of sexual liberation... For the left and the burgeoning counter-culture, these were the writers of subversion."⁸⁴ The subversive nature of these writers and texts were appealed to counter-cultural readers, a group which originally included feminists. Exemplifying this brief moment, Dworkin noted that "O is particularly compelling for me because I once believed it to be what its defenders claim—the mystical revelation of the true, eternal, and sacral destiny of women... I experienced O with the same infantile abandon as the

⁸³ For a fascinating description of these trials written by Grove Press's lawyer who defended the "literary merit" of many of these novels in front of the Supreme Court, see: Rembar, *The End of Obscenity*.

⁸⁴ Dworkin, "Great Thinkers of Our Time: Kate Millett."

Newsweek reviewer who wrote: ‘what lifts this fascinating book above mere perversity of self is its movement toward the transcendence of the self through a gift of the self...’⁸⁵

Those who defended texts like *Story of O*, those with whom Dworkin once felt a kinship, were part of a growing movement that linked the consumption of sexually explicit novels to an anti-authoritarian ethos that had an ideological component beyond mere prurient interest in sex and sexuality. In the US context, books like *Story of O* hailed this readership directly. In the middle of the first English paperback edition of the book, between pages eighty-four and eighty-five, sat a postcard, designed to be torn out of the book and mailed to the publisher, Grove Press. Its heading read “do you have what it takes to join The Underground?” and it continued: “if you really know what the Underground is all about; if you’re adult, literate and adventurous; then keep reading. Grove Press and Evergreen invite you to join the only club of its kind for people like you.” The postcard, an advertisement for the press’s book-of-the-month club, clearly addressed and cultivated this audience.⁸⁶ Similarly, the blurbs that prefaced the paperback edition, taken from publications such as *The New York Times Book Review*, *Newsweek*, *Chicago Literary Review*, *Choice*, and *Psychiatric Quarterly* all specifically praised the book’s literary worth and emphasized that it had artistic value beyond the pornographic. *The New York Times Book Review*, for example, stated “that Pauline Réage is a more

⁸⁵ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 55–56.

⁸⁶ “The Underground” book subscription service offered titles such as *The Image*, described on the advertisement as “a frankly erotic love story involving three Parisians, which has much in common with *Story of O*,” *Games People Play*, *Barbarella*, *The Olympia Reader*, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, *My Secret Life*, *Ecce Homo*, and *491*, “the book that inspired the Swedish movie which recently won a censorship battle.”

dangerous writer than the Marquis de Sade follows from the fact that art is more persuasive than propaganda....” while *Choice*’s review stated that “one can...build a case for the book as a significant work of literature.” The *Newsweek* review which Dworkin quoted in *Woman Hating* also appeared in the front of the book: “what lifts this fascinating book above mere perversity is this movement toward transcendence of the self through a gift of the self...”⁸⁷ The marketing and presentation of *Story of O* as an object cemented its status as a subversive and anti-authoritarian text within a group of such formerly censored and sexually explicit texts.

The counter-cultural appeal of such texts (which were predominantly authored by men) quickly wore off for feminists even as it built momentum among the Left, as the existence of Dworkin and Millett’s critical literary analyses of these types of texts clearly illustrated. In fact, even before the publication of *Sexual Politics*, feminist activist groups such as the New York-based Redstockings distributed material which argued that “one of the more sophisticated forms of control has been identified by the women’s liberation movement as pseudo-sexual emancipation.”⁸⁸ While reviewers of *Story of O* and *The Image* lauded their content as emancipatory, movement-based feminists such as Redstockings and feminist literary critics pointed out that the particular vision of sexual liberation presented in these texts occurred at the expense of women. By 1985, in a television interview, Dworkin bemoaned the fact that “a lot of the pornography industry

⁸⁷ Réage, *Story of O*, np.

⁸⁸ Redstockings, “The Politics of ‘Free Love’: Forced Fornication (Reprinted from The Guardian),” June 14, 1969, Box 23 c. 1, Irene Peslikis Papers, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture Archives.

now has very strong support, and in fact participation, from people who were in the counterculture in the '60s on the left. It is for us something that is deeply distressing for feminists that pornography is ideologically defended by the left and promoted by the left and protected by the left. This is extremely distressing to us.”⁸⁹ The concurrence between sexual liberation and sexually explicit novels that propelled writers on the new American Left such as Norman Mailer was particularly distressing to Dworkin because of her contention that literary pornography bore a meaningful relationship to reality, and that it was a pedagogical form which led to real harm in real life. The fact that these texts appealed to men who might answer Grove Press’s question “do you have what it takes to join The Underground?” affirmatively meant that the values of pornography were not just the values of avowed misogynists, but of all men and culture together.

While Dworkin used Part Two of *Woman Hating* to link fairy tales to pornography, she used Part Three to link pornography to real life. Part Three documents “herstory,” which she described as “the underbelly of history.”⁹⁰ For Dworkin, this underbelly consisted of acts of genocide against women. In Part Three, she constructed a critical history of Chinese foot binding and of the persecution of witches as two “gruesome, grotesque expression[s]” of a “war, planetary in its dimensions—the war, more declared than we can bear to know, that men wage against women.”⁹¹ In her chapter on Chinese foot binding, which she termed a form of gynocide, she described the practice

⁸⁹ Steibel, “Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.”

⁹⁰ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 93.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

as “mass attitude, mass culture—it was the key reality in a way of life lived by real women—10 centuries times that many millions of them.”⁹² Much like her literary analysis, her description of foot binding stated and repeated the bare facts of the practice in order to impress upon her reader the magnitude of the process she documented. For example, after a lengthy and graphic description of precisely how women’s feet were bound, she wrote

Millions of women, over a period of 1,000 years, were brutally crippled, mutilated, in the name of erotica.

Millions of human beings, over a period of 1,000 years, were brutally crippled, mutilated, in the name of beauty.

Millions of men, over a period of 1,000 years, reveled in love-making devoted to the worship of the bound foot.

Millions of men, over a period of 1,000 years, worshipped and adored the bound foot.

Millions of mothers, over a period of 1,000 years, brutally crippled and mutilated their daughters for the sake of a secure marriage.

Millions of mothers, over a period of 1,000 years, brutally crippled and mutilated their daughters in the name of beauty.⁹³

⁹² Ibid., 96. At first glance, Dworkin’s use of the non-Western practice of foot binding in a book primarily about Western pornography and patriarchy may seem to fit into the racist history of feminist critics pointing to atrocities against women committed “elsewhere” in the world as part of a desire to cast the non-Western world as “backward” or “behind” in a progressive narrative of women’s increasing rights in the civilized West. An example of this tendency can be seen in Dworkin’s fellow-WAP founder Robin Morgan’s introduction to *Sisterhood is Powerful*, where she describes China as a wasteland of misogyny but concludes that the condition of women in China is improving, proving that “people *can* change.” *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, xix–xx. On closer inspection, however, three important points about Dworkin’s use of foot binding as an example become clear: first, Dworkin saw patriarchy as a totalizing trans-historical, trans-national force which consumed the entirety of all possible cultures. Second, she included Western technologies of beauty in her discussion of painful acts women underwent to meet beauty standards and ended her chapter on Chinese foot binding with a graphic titled “Beauty Hurts” which depicted an exaggerated female figure and listed a variety of notably Western interventions such as sun-tanning and silicone breast implants alongside bound feet (*Woman Hating*, 117). Third, as discussed earlier in this chapter, in 1974 Dworkin had a nuanced and early understanding of intersectionality that included an acknowledgment of the role of race in feminist criticism.

⁹³ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 111–12. I have preserved the original paragraphs in this quotation in order to reproduce Dworkin’s direct and repetitive stylistic choices which served to amplify the meaning and magnitude of the statements she made.

Dworkin clearly saw herself as documenting the war crimes committed during a never-ending gynocide, one which was deeply linked to sex practices. Her approach to describing the real implications of foot binding as a patriarchal practice paralleled her approach to describing the fictional content of the literary texts she read in the previous section of her text, which also documented crimes against women waged in a larger war. Along with her direct comments to this effect, the critical and stylistic choices she made in describing foot binding further linked the realm of fictional abuses of women to women's real oppression in the world, both historical and contemporaneous.

Dworkin's chapter on the gynocide of witches in the medieval period made similar connections. She began the chapter with a lengthy explanation of the Christian theology that she claimed undergirded and led to the persecution of witches in the fifteenth century. Once again, her analysis hinged on a book, in this case, a fifteenth-century treatise on witchcraft, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which she described as "a monument to Aristotle's logic and academic methodology (quoting and footnoting 'authorities'), catalogues the major concerns of 15th-century Catholic theology."⁹⁴ This "literal text," she said, "with its frenzied and psychotic woman-hating and the fact of the

⁹⁴ Ibid., 127. It is interesting to note that other than this primary document, the bulk of her sources for this historical chapter were secondary descriptions of witchcraft published in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Likewise, in her chapter on foot-binding in China she relied on a single text, Howard Levy's *Chinese Footbinding: The History of a Curious Erotic Custom* (New York: W. Rawls, 1966). Her sparse citational practice seemed to prioritize her own analysis or interpretation over the pretense of factual historical information she might have created by referencing a broad range of scholarly texts. Given her disdain for the *Malleus Maleficarum* and its academic methodology, not to mention her comments at the beginning of the text about "academic horseshit," it is safe to say that her minimal use of citations throughout these two deeply historical chapters, the two in which a reader might expect to find the most citations, was intentional.

9 million deaths, demonstrates the power of the myth of feminine evil, reveals how it dominated the dynamics of a culture, shows the absolute primal terror that women, as carnal beings, hold for men.”⁹⁵ It bears repeating that she saw the text itself as a location where pre-existing myths were exposed and not as a site where these myths were constructed or maintained. This was Dworkin’s position on all text-based documents of patriarchy. They were didactic, yes, but they only instructed men and women about an already extant reality. The myth of feminine evil discussed in the *Malleus Maleficarum* was the same myth visible in fairy tales, pornography, and in the practices of foot binding and witch burning. In concluding the third section of *Woman Hating*, Dworkin wrote “our study of pornography, our living of life, tells us that the myth of feminine evil lived out so resolutely by the Christians of the Dark Ages, is alive and well, here and now. Our study of pornography, our living of life, tells us that though the witches are dead, burned alive at the stake, the belief in female evil is not, the hatred of female carnality is not.”⁹⁶ Pornography and the living of life were one and the same. There was no separation between pornography as a *representation* of life and life as *lived* by men and women steeped in the violence and hatred of women.

In Part Four, the final section of *Woman Hating*, Dworkin looked to androgynous mythology as a way out of the sexism that hinged on “polar role definitions of male and female, man and woman.” Once again, she relied on mythology to make her point that androgyny could destroy patriarchal power “at its source, the family; in its most hideous

⁹⁵ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 136.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 149–50.

form, the nation-state,” and engaged in a literary reading of a variety of myths and texts.⁹⁷

She looked to androgynous mythology because

it is a question of finding the right model. We are born into a world in which sexual possibilities are narrowly circumscribed: Cinderella, Snow-white, Sleeping Beauty, O, Claire, Anne; romantic love and marriage; Adam and Eve, the Virgin Mary. These models are the substantive message of this culture—they define psychological sets and patterns of social interaction which, in our adult personae, we live out... We are *programmed* by the culture as surely as rats are programmed to make the arduous way through the scientist’s maze, and that programming operates on every level of choice and action.⁹⁸

For Dworkin, human beings were programmed by culture, and that culture was composed of models, or stories, that dictated and limited human possibilities. Stories, narratives, and myths were the source of culture and thus the very essence of cultural and behavioral programming. When Dworkin looked for an alternative model for culture, then, she looked for historical and religious myths that supported an androgynous model of human behavior since “myth still operates as the substructure of the collective.”⁹⁹ Dworkin sought androgyny in a variety of locations and temporal moments, such as ancient myths of “a primal androgyne;” the Chinese concept of yin and yang; Australian, African, Egyptian, Hindu, and Melanesian mythology; the Christian Bible; and the oral Kabbalah. In this interdisciplinary attempt to find androgynous models, she continued to privilege her literary mode of interpreting these examples. She saw even biological data as part of mythology, and read it accordingly. She defined heterosexuality as “the ritualized behavior built on polar role definition” which stemmed from literary and cultural

⁹⁷ Ibid., 153.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 155.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 163–64.

myths.¹⁰⁰ In contrast, “*androgynous fucking requires the destruction of all conventional role-playing,*” roles which emerged from those same myths.¹⁰¹ Ultimately, she concluded that “an exclusive commitment to one sexual formation generally means that one is, regardless of the uniform one wears, a good soldier of the culture programmed effectively to do its dirty work.”¹⁰² Since that programming was a result of, first, fairy tales and second, the pornography that emerged from them, the only way out of the morass of death and subjective destruction she described was through “cultural transformation.”¹⁰³ As stated at the outset of this section, her project in *Woman Hating* was a form of cultural studies. The text drew on literary modes of interpretation even as it expanded and extended the definition of a literary object. For Dworkin, the problem was cultural programming, and it could only be addressed through culture, the primary example of which was literature.

The afterword to *Woman Hating* also evinced Dworkin’s commitment to her work as an active form of cultural criticism, which I have read as a form of cultural studies. In the afterword, she described the “Great Punctuation Typography Struggle” she went through in publishing the text. She wrote, “this text has been altered in one very serious way. I wanted it to be printed the way it was written—lower case letters, no apostrophes, contractions. I like my text to be as empty as possible. only necessary punctuation is necessary. when one knows ones purpose one knows what is necessary.” Referencing the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 184.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 184–85.

¹⁰² Ibid., 185.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 192.

biblical personification of the devil, she wrote “my publisher changed my punctuation because book reviewers (Mammon) do not like lower case letters. fuck (in the old sense) book reviewers (Mammon).”¹⁰⁴ Jeneffsky and Russo saw her attempt to have her text published with non-standard punctuation and typography as part of her “political practice as an artist: a belief that disruption in standard writing forms is essential to writing that seeks meaningful, revolutionary political change.”¹⁰⁵ I would add that it was also part of her commitment to books as cultural objects and cultural objects as political actions. As Dworkin put it, “this book is about the Immoveable Sexual Structure. in the process of having it published, Ive encountered the Immoveable Punctuation Typography Structure, and I now testify, as so many have before me, that the Immoveable Structure aborts freedom, prohibits invention, and does us verifiable harm...”¹⁰⁶ Her book of literary criticism, which opened with the statement, “this book is an action, a political action where revolution is the goal” was an extension and an instantiation of her belief that literary texts, like all cultural texts, had massive social and cultural significance.¹⁰⁷ As articulated in 1974, this belief took the form of an ideological literary criticism that she built on the scaffolding Kate Millett set up in *Sexual Politics*. While Dworkin has, and can be, read as a social critic, my reading here outlines the way in which she was also engaged in a form of feminist literary criticism that held the deep belief that literary texts could be tools for social change. When this aspiration is contextualized in the history of

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 197.

¹⁰⁵ Jeneffsky and Russo, *Without Apology*, 43.

¹⁰⁶ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 203.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 17.

feminist literary criticism beginning with Millett, it is possible to understand the sex wars and their debates about representation as having also been part of wider debates about literary texts and the status of reading.

Reading Literature's Presence in the Sex Wars

While Dworkin's foundational anti-pornography work may not have been read as literary criticism during the 1970s and 1980s, literary texts were a major concern on several important fronts of the sex wars. First and foremost, literary objects were everywhere in the sex wars, even if they were not acknowledged in their literary specificity but were instead treated by critics as identical to other forms of culture. I begin this section by collecting several important examples where literature and literary objects appeared at major points in the sex wars without necessarily being presented as part of a debate about literature. Debates about representational practices hinged on often-unexplored questions about reality and representation. Kappeler's 1986 *The Pornography of Representation* was an attempt to unearth the roots of these questions and I discuss it at length.¹⁰⁸ Finally, in a return to the questions about literary value that preoccupied the feminist canon debates, feminist social critics worked to define pornography in relation to erotica and literature in a manner that relied on ideas about a given text's redeeming value beyond the pornographic. In 1990, Sheila Jeffreys summarized these debates in *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution*, and I will juxtapose her critical history with what I claim was the feminist origin of social criticism on literary

¹⁰⁸ Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

value and pornography: Susan Sontag's short 1969 essay "The Pornographic Imagination."¹⁰⁹ These texts were published across a range of dates, evincing the impossibility of constructing a progressive chronology of the sex wars.

While the 1982 Barnard conference was certainly a watershed moment in the sex wars, there is no definitive timeline of the feminist interest in sex practices and pornography. Nan D. Hunter's contextual chronology of what she called the sexuality debates, for example, began in 1966 with the creation of the National Organization for Women (NOW), and ended in 1994 with the formation of a US House of Representatives subcommittee on the regulation of rap music lyrics. Within this longer chronology that Hunter wrote in 1995, she noted that the "core of the feminist debate about pornography occurred during a ten-year bell curve" from 1976 to 1986.¹¹⁰ Other critics gave similar but slightly different timelines: in 1993 Elizabeth Wilson stated that feminist activity surrounding pornography was by far the most visible form of feminism from the late 1980s to the early 1990s.¹¹¹ In 1990 Carol Vance, who organized the Barnard conference and edited the published version of the conference proceedings, wrote of the defining significance of the Meese Commission in dividing feminists against one another,

¹⁰⁹ Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (London: The Women's Press, 1990); Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969).

¹¹⁰ Hunter, "Contextualizing the Sexuality Debates: A Chronology," 17.

¹¹¹ Elizabeth Wilson, "Feminist Fundamentalism: The Shifting Politics of Sex and Censorship," in *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*, ed. Mary McIntosh and Lynne Segal (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 16.

suggesting that 1985, and not 1982, marked the most heated moment in the sex wars.¹¹²

In 1980, before the Barnard conference had even taken place, Laura Lederer looked to the preceding four years and marked a 1976 demonstration as among the first signs “that women are claiming pornography as a feminist issue.”¹¹³ Jane Gerhard’s 2001 critical history of second-wave feminism and sexual thought *ends* with the Barnard conference and “its division of the feminist world into pro- and antisex.”¹¹⁴ It is obvious from all accounts that the events, debates, and discussions covered under the umbrella term “the sex wars” do not fit into a particular set of dates, but rather gathered momentum from conversations begun in the late 1960s, exploded into prominence at certain moments, and faded at others.

Literary objects appear at all these moments, even in sites where their existence as literature was not acknowledged, thematized, or theorized. One prominent example of literature being a part of a conversation about sex and sex practices without any discussion of its literary specificity was at the infamous 1982 Barnard conference. The closing session of the conference consisted of a paper by Amber Hollibaugh, followed by two poems by Hattie Gossett, a song by Porter Grainger written for the blues singer Ida Cox, five poems by Cherríe Moraga, and six poems by Sharon Olds.¹¹⁵ The poems followed Hollibaugh’s paper which was subtitled “Radical Hope in Passion and

¹¹² Carole S. Vance, “Negotiating Sex and Gender in the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography,” in *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture*, ed. Faye D. Ginsburg and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 118–34.

¹¹³ Lederer, *Take Back the Night*, 15–16.

¹¹⁴ Jane F. Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 9.

¹¹⁵ Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*, 411–30.

Pleasure,” and demanded a feminism which “must be an angry, uncompromising movement that is just as insistent about our right to fuck, our right to the beauty of our individual female desires, as it is concerned with the images and structures that distort it.”¹¹⁶ The poems that followed were similar in intent, in that they included poetic and experimental discussions of sex practices and violence. Vance prefaced her 1984 publication of the conference proceedings with a poem that had not been read at the conference, Muriel Rukeyser’s *Despitals*. This poem, originally published in a 1973 volume of poetry titled *Breaking Open*,¹¹⁷ told its reader

Never to despise in myself what I have been taught
to despise. Nor to despise the other.
Not to despise the *it*. To make this relation
with the it : to know that I am it.

Vance’s selection of the poem for the publication of the conference proceedings spoke volumes about how those involved in the conference (either as participants or protestors) conceptualized the role of literary works in debates about sex, sex practices, and sexuality. The poem encapsulated the conference’s perspective on sex and reprimanded the protestors, particularly the stanza which read:

In the body’s ghetto
never to go despising the asshole
nor the useful shit that is our clean clue
to what we need. Never to despise
the clitoris in her least speech.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Amber Hollibaugh, “Desire for the Future: Radical Hope in Passion and Pleasure,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984), 409.

¹¹⁷ Muriel Rukeyser, *Breaking Open* (New York: Random House, 1973).

¹¹⁸ Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*, xx.

Vance chose a poem, a literary work, to serve this purpose for the same reason the conference concluded with poetry readings: in 1982 and in 1984 when the proceedings were published, many feminists such as Dworkin and Vance saw literary objects as accomplishing the same work as didactic, theoretical texts. In addition to predominantly pro-sex, anti-censorship feminists who spoke at the conference, those who protested the conference saw literature and literary texts in a similar light. In a document titled “We Protest” signed by the groups Women Against Violence Against Women, Women Against Pornography, and New York Radical Feminists and circulated around the conference, a stated reason for protesting the conference was that the San Francisco-based lesbian feminist group Samois was represented at the conference, and that the group was “named after a house of torture in *The Story of O*.” In addition, the protestors objected to the presence of No More Nice Girls at the conference, “a group of women writers who publish in *The Village Voice* and contend that pornography is liberating. No More Nice Girls believes that...feminists should simply make their own pornography.”¹¹⁹ Clearly, the coalition of protestors believed that literary works had an important and agenda-setting role in feminist discourse.

¹¹⁹ “We Protest: A Statement by Women Against Violence Against Women, Women Against Pornography, and New York Radical Feminists,” n.d., Box 16, c. 1, Dorothy Allison Papers 1965-2000, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture Archives.

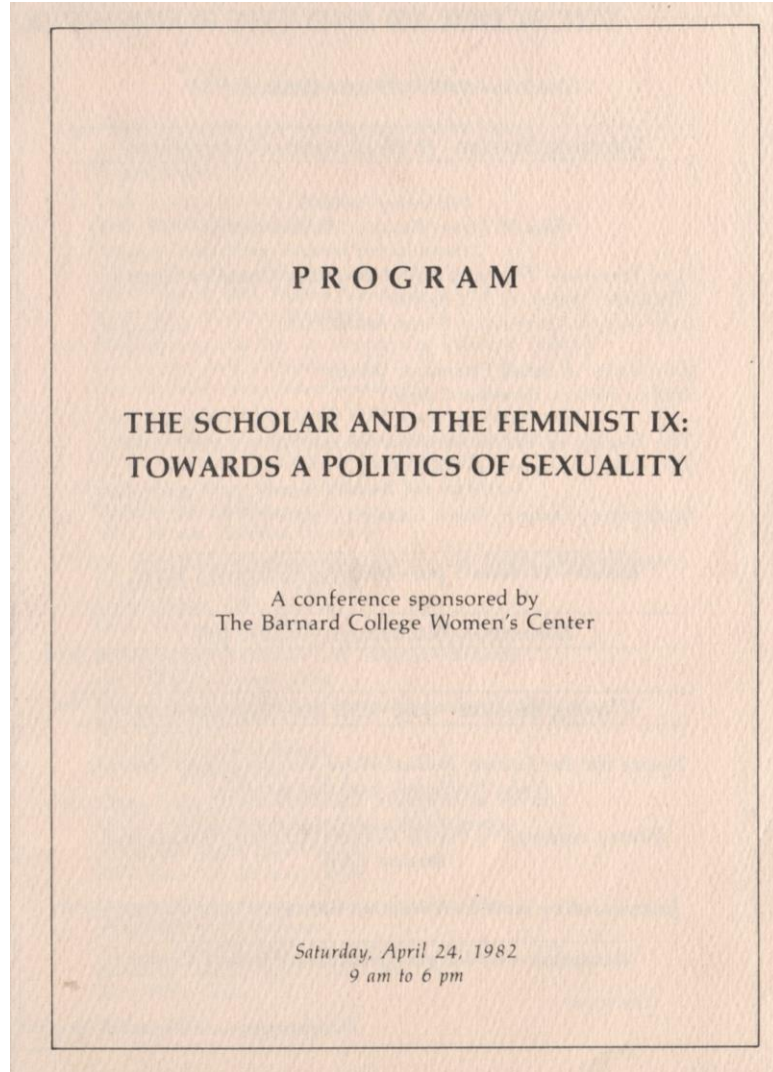


Figure 5: Dorothy Allison’s copy of “The Scholar and the Feminist IX” program¹²⁰

¹²⁰ “The Scholar and the Feminist: Towards a Politics of Sexuality (Conference Program),” April 24, 1982, Box 17, c. 1, Dorothy Allison Papers 1965-2000, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture Archives.

THE SCHOLAR AND THE FEMINIST IX: TOWARDS A POLITICS OF SEXUALITY

Check-in—9:00-9:45 am—Barnard Hall

Morning Session—9:45-12 noon—Gymnasium

Welcoming Remarks

Ellen V. Fuller, President, Barnard College

How Feminists Thought About Sex: Our Complex Legacy

Ellen Carol DuBois, SUNY-Buffalo

Linda Gordon, University of Massachusetts-Boston

Interstices: A Small Drama of Words

Hortense Spillers, Haverford College

The Taming of the Id: Feminist Sexual Politics 1965-1981

Alice Echols, University of Michigan

Moderator, *Carole S. Vance, Columbia University*

Lunch—12 noon-1 pm—McIntosh Student Center

Afternoon Workshops—1:15-3 pm

Closing Session—3:30-4:30 pm—Gymnasium

Desire for the Future: Radical Hope in Passion and Pleasure

Amber Hollibaugh, Socialist Review

Poetry readings by Hattie Gossett, Cherríe Moraga and Sharon Olds

Introduced by Janie L. Kritzman, Barnard Women's Center

Reception—4:30-6 pm—McIntosh Student Center

This conference is made possible by a grant from the Helena Rubinstein Foundation

Afternoon Workshops

1. Power, Sexuality and the Organization of Vision
Mary Ann Duarte, Brown University
Barbara Kruger, Artist
2. Lacan: Language and Desire
Maira Kurrik, Barnard College
3. Political Organizing Around Sexual Issues
Cheryl Adams, Lesbian Feminist Liberation
Noreen Connell, NYC Planned Parenthood
Brett Harvey, No More Nice Girls
4. Pornography and the Construction of a Female Subject
Bette Gordon, Hofstra University
Kate Silverman, Simon Fraser University
5. Teen Romance: The Sexual Politics of Age Relations
Camille Brisson, The Center for Public Advocacy Research
Sharon Thompson, The Center for Open Education
6. Everything They Always Wanted You to Know: Popular Sex Literature
Meryl Altman, Columbia University
7. Beyond the Gay/Straight Split: Do Sexual "Roles" (Butch/Femme) Transcend Sexual Preference?
Eshler Newton, SUNY-Purchase
Shirley Walton, Djuna Books
8. Sexuality and Creativity—A Theatre Workshop
Shirley Kaplan, Barnard College
9. Aggression, Selfhood and Female Sexuality: Rethinking Psychoanalysis
Dale Bernstein, psychotherapist
Elsa First, psychotherapist
10. Class, Cultural and Historical Influences on Sexual Identity in the Psychotherapeutic Relationship
Olivia Espin, Boston University
Pat Robinson, clinical social worker
11. Beyond Politics: Understanding the Sexuality of Infancy and Childhood
Mary S. Calderone, M.D., Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS)
Kate Millet, writer

(continued)

Figure 6: Dorothy Allison's copy of "The Scholar and the Feminist IX" program

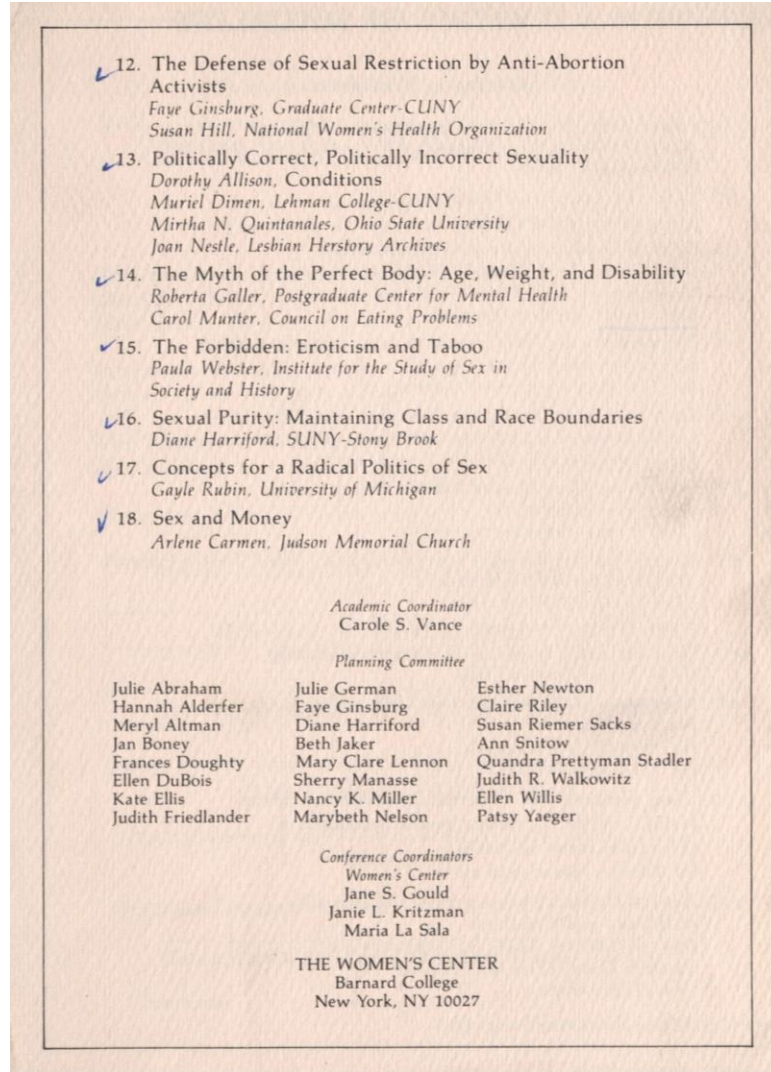


Figure 7: Dorothy Allison's copy of "The Scholar and the Feminist IX" program

Traces of the belief, both explicit and implicit, that literature was inseparable from politics and reality can be found all throughout the sex wars. One year after the Barnard conference, the December 1983 issue of *off our backs* was devoted to women writers and featured a lengthy interview with Ann Bannon, the author of several lesbian pulp fiction novels published in the late 1950s and early 1960s. *off our backs*, a feminist newspaper

characterized by its anti-pornography stance, endorsed Bannon as “the queen of the lesbian pulps” and described her texts as “erotic,” not pornographic.¹²¹ In the same issue, Denise Kulp reviewed Dorothy Allison’s then-recent book of poetry, *The Women Who Hate Me*.¹²² In addition to speaking at the Barnard conference, Allison was one of the primary founders of the Lesbian Sex Mafia and had recently organized “Outlaw Women: A Speakout on ‘Politically Incorrect Sex’” in New York City one day after the Barnard conference. Her position in the sex wars was clear, and *off our backs* made a point of interpreting her pro-sex, pro-pornography position in relation to her poetry. While Kulp acknowledged that Allison “is a fine writer,” she noted that there were a few poems in the book “which some readers might find disturbing.” Kulp critiqued the ideological implications of Allison’s poems and wrote, for example, that many of the “poems deal primarily with sex—sex as powerful, sex as affirmation, sex as lust...But the poems are often a clear celebration of lust, and sex becomes pure desire.”¹²³ In contrast to Ann Bannon’s pulp fictions whose “heliotrope”¹²⁴ lesbian sex scenes were the height of eroticism, Kulp both implicitly outlined the scope of female eroticism and dismissed Allison’s vision of the erotic when she wrote, “for many women, the idea or reality of sex with a woman who can ‘fuck like a man’ is hardly erotic.” Kulp interpreted the poems, which were quoted at length in the review, both in relation to Allison’s status in the sex wars and also in relation to her politics: Kulp wrote that the volume’s “title is

¹²¹ “Ann Bannon: A Writer of Lost Lesbian Fiction Finds Herself and Her Public,” *Off Our Backs*, December 1983, 13.

¹²² Dorothy Allison, *The Women Who Hate Me* (Brooklyn: Long Haul Press, 1983).

¹²³ Denise Kulp, “The Woman Who Hate Me (Review),” *Off Our Backs*, December 1983, 29.

¹²⁴ “Ann Bannon: A Writer of Lost Lesbian Fiction Finds Herself and Her Public,” 13.

inflammatory, and suggests divisiveness within the women's movement, alludes to recent controversies over the role of s/m in feminism, controversies in which Allison has been at the center."¹²⁵ For Kulp, there was no space between Allison's public positions and poetry and her poetic work bore the same message as her activist work.

Laura Lederer's 1980 *Take Back the Night* exemplified a similar understanding of the connection between women writers' literary texts and their roles as public figures. The volume began with an open letter by Marge Piercy, and ended with an afterword by Adrienne Rich.¹²⁶ While neither author's contribution was particularly literary in nature, Lederer's choice to open and close her significant anti-pornography volume with the voices of two prominent authors of fiction and poetry revealed the way in which the politics of particular women writers were linked to their roles as public figures, and, significantly, their literary work. The explicit literary criticism of *off our backs* and the implicit literary criticism of Lederer's volume marked a return to Millett's view of authors as sexual politicians with a broad cultural role. For Kulp, as for Millett, there was no need to seriously engage with a poem or literary work as an aesthetic object produced by an author separate from her own work: Kulp not only interpreted Dorothy Allison's line "you can, I swear, fuck like a man" as the voice of the author herself but also primarily read it for the way in which it might offend her readers or fail as eroticism.

¹²⁵ Kulp, "The Woman Who Hate Me (Review)," 29.

¹²⁶ Marge Piercy, "An Open Letter," in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: Morrow, 1980), 7; Adrienne Rich, "Afterword," in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: Morrow, 1980), 313–20.

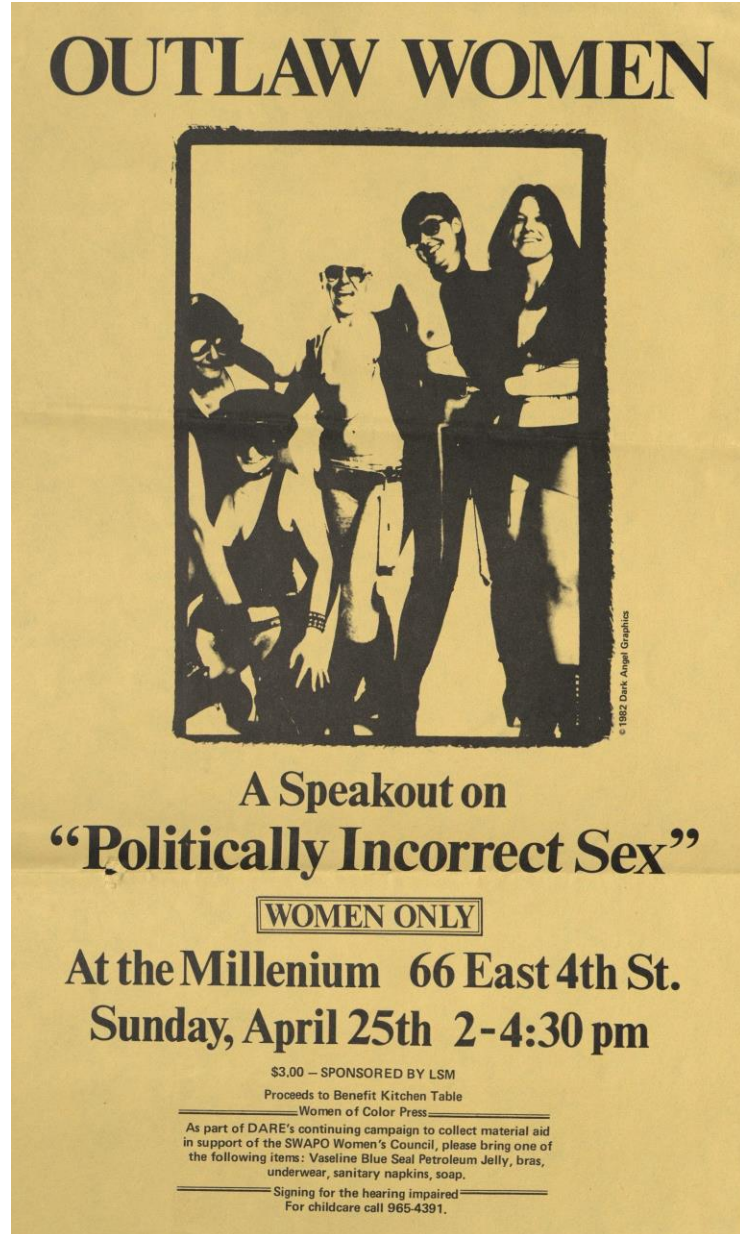


Figure 8: Flyer for 1982 “Outlaw Women” event¹²⁷

In the cases of *off our backs* and *Take Back the Night*, however, their emphasis on

“women’s culture” gave an important priority to women writers. While they followed

¹²⁷ “Flyer for ‘Outlaw Women: A Speakout on “Politically Correct Sex,”” April 25, 1982, Box 16, c. 1, Dorothy Allison Papers 1965-2000, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture Archives.

Millett's contention that the aesthetics of a literary text were less important than its political implications, they differed in that they affirmed the role of the woman writer as critic, and vice versa. Where Millett had decried Genet, Lawrence, Mailer, and Miller's influence in the public sphere, Kulp and Lederer celebrated Allison, Piercy, and Rich's connected roles as writers, critics, and activists.

Following Dworkin and Mackinnon's description of pornography as a manual for life (as in their description of a brother and his friends forcing his sister to assume positions presented in a pornographic magazine),¹²⁸ other anti-pornography feminists saw literary and pornographic objects as materially related to real life. In 1986, Susanne Kappeler noted that "feminists and anti-pornography lobbyists alike slip easily from discussing the goings-on inside pornographic representations to discussing goings-on in the world. Their concern is that practices portrayed in pornography may become practices in our lives." The other side of the argument, however, was that "censorship experts and advocates of free pornography deny that a link between pornography and criminal sexual practice in reality can be proven. They assert a fundamental difference between fantasy and reality. Pornographic representations, for them, belong to the separate realm of fantasy and fiction."¹²⁹ The core of the disagreement was whether or not a text could ever be properly fictional, that is, invented, made-up, or completely imaginary. In 1989, Susan Gubar, whose work had previously been concerned with women writers, entered the fray of the sex wars to make this observation. She echoed Kappeler's assessment of the terms

¹²⁸ Dworkin and MacKinnon, *In Harm's Way*, 6–7.

¹²⁹ Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation*, 1.

and terrain of the basic argument, and noted that “diametrically opposed, both groups [pro- and anti-pornography] are nevertheless implicitly invoking theories of representation.... Whether it is pictorial or linguistic, pornography is a description... and it therefore can be used to explore not only the politics of representation but the politics of theories of representation.”¹³⁰ Gubar, first and foremost a literary critic, saw pornography as a means of describing an existing reality, and therefore turned to theories of artistic representation to interpret it. She found that many pornographic novels could not be defended as “aesthetic constructs” because “the crudity and cruelty of their images, as well as the punitive formulas of their plots, do not enlarge or deepen our sense of what it means to be human.”¹³¹ And yet, at the same time, she noted that “in many instances art and pornography are indistinguishable” and that “given the cultural history we have inherited from Rabelais to Sade to Magritte, it would be foolhardy to think we can dismiss, segregate, or eliminate dehumanizing or violent constructions of male and female sexuality.”¹³² In this sense, Gubar extended the anti-pornography side of the debate by thinking about the history and politics of theories of representation. She followed Dworkin in her contention that, in the words of Gubar’s twelve-year-old daughter that she included in her essay, pornography was “stupid, sexist, and violent.” And yet, Gubar ultimately ended up opposing censorship.¹³³ Her nuanced view used art

¹³⁰ Susan Gubar, “Representing Pornography: Feminism, Criticism, and Depictions of Female Violation,” in *For Adult Users Only: The Dilemma of Violent Pornography*, ed. Susan Gubar and Joan Hoff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 48.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 65.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 64–65.

history to contextualize pornography as representation, subject to the author's choices in artistic depiction.

Views like Gubar's drew on and yet opposed Millett's argument in *Sexual Politics* that fiction was not a realm of fantasy but rather the exact site where patriarchal reality was most visible. As discussed at length in Chapter One, for Millett literary texts were both an instantiation and a reduplication of men's power in the patriarchal world. Millett argued that male authors and the literary critics who canonized their works were well aware of the misogynist content of their work, and that literary criticism was not a matter of unveiling a hidden reality but rather of simply highlighting what was already there, directly in front of the reader. When the sex wars are seen through the lens of the ensuing debates about literary criticism and representation, the resonances with Millett's work are obvious. For instance, in 1991, Sheila Jeffreys summarized Kappeler's view of representation as follows:

in *The Pornography of Representation* Suzanne Kappeler demonstrates that feminists have made a mistake in thinking the creators of pornography are innocent about the way in which their products degrade women. Such feminists believe that if they could only point out 'in stark irrefutable ways the mechanics and structures of the pornographic plot' then the porn producers would admit the error of their ways. In fact, she explains, the producers know very well what they are producing and are perfectly sanguine about it. The dispute, she writes, is not about whether certain literary works degrade women but 'whether there is anything wrong with the systemic degradation of women, the wholesale cultural objectification of women.' In other words, does the degradation of women matter?¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Jeffreys, *Anticlimax*, 85.

The congruence between Kappeler's assessment of "porn producers" and Millett's view of male authors is obvious and compelling: in 1986, Kappeler took it for granted that certain literary works degraded women and that this was, in fact, their intent. In 1970, Millett devoted the entirety of *Sexual Politics* to articulating this point. While the sixteen intervening years had produced a body of feminist canon criticism and contained the bulk of the sex wars, feminist debate about the politics of literary representation continued. Additionally, the debate still hinged on the very literary question of whether or not actual fiction could exist.

For Kappeler, both pro- and anti-pornography activists failed to see pornography as representation, as a potential fiction. She used this shared failure as the grounds on which to stake her own position. In the preamble to her book, she wrote that "the object of this study is pornography, that is representations, word- or image-based, or, to be more precise, representational practices, rather than sexual practices. The fact of representation needs to be foregrounded: we are not just dealing with 'contents.'" The difference between paying attention to representation and "contents" was the difference between seeing an author as someone who took artistic license in creating fiction versus someone who simply recorded the patriarchal world around him. Kappeler's insistence on examining representation depended on her observation that, contrary to Dworkin, "sex or sex practices do not just exist out there, waiting to be represented; rather there is a dialectical relationship between representational practices which construct sexuality, and

actual sexual practices, each informing the other.”¹³⁵ Kappeler added this nuance to both Dworkin and Millett’s form of literary interpretation, and in the process addressed what pro-pornography feminists such as Allison had come to see as the problem of feminist critiques of pornography: their inability to distinguish real life from fantasy.

Despite the way in which she built on Millett and Dworkin’s insights, Kappeler’s contribution in no way resolved or ended the debate. In 1991, Jeffreys was still firmly advocating against pornography, and in fact addressed her book to the task of examining “the political function of sex in maintaining the oppression of women.”¹³⁶ Working in rare sympathy with Dworkin, Jeffreys saw the eroticization of inequality at the core of women’s oppression, and her summary of feminist concern with pornography in the 1980s echoed Dworkin’s 1974 text. Like Dworkin, Jeffreys argued that

pornography could not be ignored by feminists who were concerned to end male violence....It became clear that pornography provided a textbook for and justifications of such violence. The defenders of pornography have always most consistently denied any link between pornography and male violence. They have claimed that pornography was a privileged exception to other media in that it had no effect on the way its users felt about the world. But feminists could not see pornography as an exception.¹³⁷

Clearly, Jeffreys agreed with Dworkin that pornography was not separate or different from other representational practices that enforced sex roles or stereotypes. Using the examples of biased children’s books which had been replaced in schools on the strength

¹³⁵ Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation*, 2.

¹³⁶ Jeffreys, *Anticlimax*, 2.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

of the argument that children would replicate the sex roles they saw in those books, Jeffreys asked, “why is pornography seen as a privileged category of representation?”¹³⁸

The answer to Jeffreys’ question, I argue, lies in the same debates about literary value and merit that drove the feminist canon debates. Long before the term the “sex wars” came into use, in 1969, feminist critic Susan Sontag defined pornography as “a minor but interesting modality or convention within the arts.”¹³⁹ Sontag looked at pornography “from the standpoint of art” and argued that “the ratio of authentic literature to trash in pornography may be somewhat lower than the ratio of novels of genuine literary merit to the entire volume of sub-literary fiction produced for mass taste.” In a remarkable anticipation of the concerns about representation that would come to dominate the sex wars, Sontag compared pornography to science fiction, (“another somewhat shady sub-genre with a few first-rate books to its credit”).¹⁴⁰ Her essay aimed to remedy the fact that “nowhere in the Anglo-American community of letters have I seen it argued that some pornographic books are interesting and important works of art.”¹⁴¹ Sontag championed *Story of O* as having artistic merit and value on the basis of its literary form (it has a beginning, a middle, and an end; the writing is elegant; characters have emotions, motives, and a psychology) but then dismissed the idea that a book must have an aim beyond sexually arousing its reader. “From the point of view of art,” she wrote, “the exclusivity of the consciousness embodied in pornographic books is in itself

¹³⁸ Ibid., 253.

¹³⁹ Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, 35.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 38.

neither anomalous nor anti-literary. Nor is the purported aim or effect, whether it is intentional or not—to excite the reader sexually—a defect.”¹⁴² In complete opposition to Dworkin’s view that sexual intercourse narrowed human possibilities to death and destruction, Sontag wrote that “the universe proposed by the pornographic imagination is a total universe. It has the power to ingest and metamorphose and translate all concerns that are fed into it, reducing everything into the one negotiable currency of the erotic imperative.... Ideally, it should be possible for everyone to have a sexual connection with everyone else.”¹⁴³ Sontag occupied an early pro-pornography position that depended on the classification of pornography. As she put it near the end of her essay, “in an essay on the subject some years ago, Paul Goodman wrote: ‘the question is not *whether* pornography, but the quality of the pornography.’ That’s exactly right.... The question is not *whether* consciousness or *whether* knowledge, but the quality of the consciousness and of the knowledge.”¹⁴⁴ Sontag inverted the then-dominant model of pornography as “merely obscene” and argued that good pornography could go even beyond the “merely literary.”

Sontag’s formulation remained relevant twenty-two years later, when Gubar wrote that “the judgment we make about pornography as a social phenomenon will be based on aesthetic criteria. It will depend on whether we define ‘pornography’ and ‘art’

¹⁴² Ibid., 47.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 67–68.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 72.

as mutually exclusive, comparable, or identical terms.”¹⁴⁵ The question of pornography’s aesthetic value presupposed a separation between art and life, or representation and reality. And yet at the same time, as the feminist canon debates illustrated, ideas about literary value or merit could be used to different ends, many of which were repugnant to feminists. Like Dworkin, and unlike Gubar and Sontag, Jeffreys argued that pornography was seen as a privileged form of representation, outside the realm of any question of the “merely pornographic,” because it spoke to the oppressive model of power and sexuality that subordinated women. Where Sontag saw the evaluation of pornography’s quality as opening a universe of possibility, Jeffreys noted that

when we look at some of the books which were hailed as works of art in the late 1950s it is hard to avoid the conclusion that they are classified as ‘art’ and accepted into ‘literature’ precisely because of their pornographic content. The great works of that time that have entered the canon achieved both their notoriety and their status from their portrayal of sexuality. The adulation heaped upon Nabokov did not stem from the fact that he wrote a wonderful novel which just accidentally happened to have some pornographic content. The novel was about the abduction and penetration of a young female; there was no other plot. It is difficult to believe that the male critics of the time were genuinely innocent of the fact that *Lolita* is about rape. They defined the rape of a child as great love, and the book which described it became great art because of and not despite its content.¹⁴⁶

In Jeffreys’ view, the notion of literary value was used to justify and explain patriarchal realities in real life. Under patriarchy, there could be no such thing as good pornography and no such thing as sexually explicit literature, and certainly neither could be liberating for women. Jeffreys, then, followed directly in Dworkin and Millett’s footsteps.

¹⁴⁵ Gubar, “Representing Pornography: Feminism, Criticism, and Depictions of Female Violation,” 48.

¹⁴⁶ Jeffreys, *Anticlimax*, 85.

The feminist treatment of literature throughout the sex wars bears an incredible similarity to the way feminist literary critics regarded literature during the canon debates. And yet at the same time, participants in the sex wars often returned to Millett's formulation of the relationship between literature and ideology as they instrumentalized literary objects as extensions of their creators. Ironically enough, only Sontag's 1967 view of the pornographic imagination, pre-*Sexual Politics* and pre-sex wars, deployed a notion of pornography as inherently valuable either beyond or in spite of its literary qualities. Clearly, there is no viable timeline or trajectory to the feminist use of literature in the sex wars; rather, I have read literature's presence throughout the sex wars to show that, in fact, many of the debates that were putatively about sexual practices were in fact about representation in ways that relied on and helped generate the project we now call feminist literary criticism.

Conclusion

In the 1987 interview published in *Penthouse* magazine, Andrea Dworkin lamented the fact that "the pornography industry represents a dream that people had during the sixties that has turned into a living nightmare for vast numbers of women."¹⁴⁷ In this chapter, I have shown that this dream was an extension of the feminist aspiration for literary objects and for distinctly feminist modes of interpretation that emerged in the long 1970s. The dream was that literary objects could be agents of social change, that "the writers of subversion" could alter the culture and bring about human liberation

¹⁴⁷ "Penthouse Interview: Andrea Dworkin," 72.

through the honest depiction and representation of sex. But a nightmare ensued because, according to Dworkin and Millett, an honest depiction of sex necessarily both portrayed and encouraged violence against women. Fiction could not exist apart from fact. As Gerhard put it in 2001, Dworkin “relied on the conflation of social power, sexuality, and the unconscious for her analysis of men. For her, as well as for others in the antipornography movement, no difference existed between violent pornography and unchecked, or ‘natural’ male sexuality. ‘The most terrible thing about pornography is that it tells male truths,’ she wrote.”¹⁴⁸ In Dworkin’s interpretation of the flow between fairy tales, pornography, and real life, those terrible truths were about comatose women in glass boxes, naked women on leashes, brothers raping their sisters, one horrible example after another. These truths were demonstrably not contained in a fantastical realm, but instead impinged upon women’s freedom and drastically altered and shortened their lives. Likewise, sexual intercourse could lead only to death, and was in fact an annihilation of the self. For Dworkin, this was not fiction. It was fact.

It is ironic that someone who did not believe in fiction could be a literary critic, but as I have shown, Dworkin was following the model of literary and ideological interpretation of literary texts in relation to culture that Kate Millett set out in *Sexual Politics*. Dworkin’s literary criticism was overshadowed by her social and cultural activism, and yet the sex wars were in fact part of the evolution of feminist literary criticism as a method for mediating between reality and representation. In addition,

¹⁴⁸ Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 178.

feminist contributors to the debates such as Dworkin drew on theories of culture and ideology that are now hallmarks of cultural studies. Within that framework Dworkin, like many other feminists throughout the sex wars, was a *reader* of culture, ideology, and sex practices.

Chapter Four: “The facts, as closely as I can gather...”¹: Feminist Memoir at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

Introduction

In 2005, the Institute for Research on Gender and Women at Columbia University organized “Writing a Feminist’s Life: Academics and Their Memoirs,” a conference that celebrated the memory of the feminist literary critic and writer Carolyn G. Heilbrun by exploring academic feminist memoirs and autobiographical writing.² Taking its title from Heilbrun’s influential 1988 text *Writing a Woman’s Life*³ the event was designed, in the words of conference co-organizer Marianne Hirsch, “to push against the limits of feminist academic writing by looking at ‘academics and their memoirs.’ Why have so many late 20th-century academic feminists turned to the memoir, we wondered? In what ways is the genre of the memoir suited for feminist appropriation? What is its relationship to feminism’s politics of the personal?”⁴ Hirsch’s questions, echoed and expanded in this chapter, emerged in response to the massive proliferation of feminist memoirs published in the 1990s and the early 2000s. While feminist memoirs were by no means a new form at the turn of the twenty-first century (Kate Millett wrote a memoir in 1974,⁵ for instance, as did Betty Friedan in 1976⁶), the appearance of a wide range of memoirs written by

¹ Gerda Lerner, *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 17.

² Heilbrun died in 2003, two years earlier. In Hirsch’s words, Heilbrun “had recently protested against available fictions by ending her own life.” “Just Writing (A Feminist’s Life),” *The Scholar & Feminist Online* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2006).

³ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman’s Life* (New York: Norton, 1988).

⁴ Hirsch, “Just Writing (A Feminist’s Life).”

⁵ Millett, *Flying*.

⁶ Betty Friedan, *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women’s Movement* (New York: Random House, 1976).

academic and activist feminists was part of a larger change within feminist criticism.⁷

This change was driven by feminist literary criticism's shifting relation to its objects. As early as 1991, Miller observed this movement toward the personal in feminist critical writing and noted that "the spectacle of a significant number of critics getting personal in their writing, while not, to be sure, on the order of a paradigm shift, is at least the sign of a turning point in the history of critical practices."⁸

The turning point Miller observed had its origins in the personal criticism that began to emerge in the literary Humanities more broadly in the mid- to late-1980s.⁹ While some critics derisively argued that this shift was motivated by fatigue with the difficulties of the poststructuralism that had come to dominate academic literary discourse, others made the case that personal writing could be informed by critical theory. Chris Anderson, for example, argued in 1988 for the re-emergence of the personal essay. In his justification of the personal essay as a critically meaningful form, he wrote that he took "the demands and the skepticism of contemporary theory seriously....I consider a certain amount of that kind of philosophizing essential. Deconstruction-bashing is too easy, and it's not entirely fair. Not all that's being written is obscure and reductive, though much of it is. What I'm trying to describe is simply the tonic rhetorical

⁷ While "academic feminist" is a complex term which, in some cases, minimizes the work of feminist scholars who also did activist work, for my purposes in this chapter it refers to feminist scholars whose primary affiliation was to a university, and who had a history of publishing monographs and/or articles with scholarly presses and journals.

⁸ Miller, *Getting Personal*, x.

⁹ See, for example, Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar's edited volume which collects autobiographical literary criticism mainly from the 1980s. *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

effect of the essay as it clears a place for me to occupy, as it offers me shelter from the rigors of the articles I try to write and have to read.”¹⁰ Anderson’s simultaneously defensive and offensive position indicated the extent to which personal or autobiographical criticism was not always taken seriously, and the ways in which literary critics placed it in opposition to presumably more sophisticated theoretical work. The editors of the 1993 anthology *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, for example, had originally conceived the topic of their volume as a special session proposal for the 1988 Modern Language Association conference. The proposal was rejected.¹¹ While autobiographical and personal criticism certainly had a small foothold in the academy in the late 1980s, they were by no means a mainstream endeavor and their early growth was not yet, as Miller put it, “a paradigm shift.” In part, the arena of personal criticism and autobiographical writing by literary critics originally remained small because these modes were met with a certain amount of disdain. Some of that disdain was external: in a 2004 summation of the effects of the turn to personal writing, Jeffrey Williams wrote that “while embraced by some, the so-called personal turn was not always met with approbation, others claiming that it did not yield legitimate scholarly knowledge or, worse, that it was narcissistic and reflected the pernicious influence of popular celebrity.”¹² Some of this derision was also self-imposed: it was visible in

¹⁰ Chris Anderson, “Essay: Hearsay Evidence and Second-Class Citizenship,” *College English* 50, no. 3 (March 1988): 301–2.

¹¹ Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar, *The Intimate Critique*, 1.

¹² Jeffrey Williams, “Writing in Concert: An Interview with Cathy Davidson, Alice Kaplan, Jane Tompkins, and Marianna Torgovnick,” in *Critics at Work: Interviews, 1993–2003* (New York: NYU Press, 2004), 39.

instances such as Miller's use of the word "spectacle" to describe critics "getting personal" in their writing, despite the fact that Miller was herself one of the leading practitioners and proponents of personal criticism.¹³ Likewise, Jane Tompkins opened her formative 1987 personal article "Me and My Shadow" by writing, in parentheses no less, that "(I have wanted to do this for a long time but have felt too embarrassed)."¹⁴

Academic work that spoke in "personal and passionate voices" and "challenged argument as the preferred mode for discussion" had a difficult time gaining ground at perhaps the most highly theoretical moment in the recent history of literary criticism.¹⁵ And yet, the feminist interest in personal or autobiographical criticism, which eventually grew into memoir, persisted. At first, it was guided by the belief that rather than being opposed to theory, personal criticism might itself be a form of theoretical writing. Tompkins's 1987 article was an origin point for feminist personal criticism, and in an expanded version in 1989 she described her work by saying it "turns its back on theory."¹⁶ In response to this characterization, Miller wrote "what I want to argue—maybe for Tompkins, maybe against her—is that to want to produce and read another kind of writing—a writing from what she will call in this essay, another *voice*, is not necessarily to turn one's back on theory. In my view the case *for* personal writing entails

¹³ Alongside Heilbrun's work, Miller's 1991 text *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* was a major reference point for feminist autobiographers and memoirists.

¹⁴ Tompkins, "Me and My Shadow," October 1, 1987, 169.

¹⁵ Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar, *The Intimate Critique*, 2.

¹⁶ Jane Tompkins, "Me and My Shadow," in *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*, ed. Linda Kauffman (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 121.

the reclaiming of theory: turning theory back on itself.¹⁷ Even when the relationship was one of resistance or denial, personal criticism maintained strong ties to more theoretical bodies of work as it formed and reacted with and against them. An affective dimension haunted personal criticism, and many wrote it with Tompkins's sense of overcoming embarrassment. This dimension was related to the fact that personal criticism was grounded in the unpredictable "I," rather than the more fixed and potentially knowable terrain of critical and literary theory.

At the same time as personal criticism exhibited anxiety over its epistemological grounding, it also reacted against the rise of critical theory. Miller summed up many similar perspectives when she wrote that the "outbreak of self-writing, which may be interpreted, no doubt, as one of the many symptoms of literary theory's mid-life crisis, also intersects with a certain overloading in cultural criticism of the rhetorics of representativity." For feminist scholarship, the "overload" was a deep concern with who could speak for whom: "the incantatory recital of the 'speaking as a's and the imperialisms of 'speaking for's" that feminist criticism had dealt with since its inception came into full force in the feminist theory that developed in conjunction with the expansion of literary theory in the 1980s.¹⁸ The rise in attention to theoretical concerns

¹⁷ Miller, *Getting Personal*, 5.

¹⁸ Ibid., ix–x. By the time Miller wrote these words in 1991, feminist fatigue with the formulation "speaking as a ..." had existed for well over a decade and could be found in a wide range of locations. In a 1977 letter to Robin Morgan, for instance, Andrea Dworkin evocatively described her sentiments on the phrase: "'As a woman,' 'As a lesbian,' 'As a Jew,' 'As a former one of those...' Uggghhhhhh. 'As a woman I just want to say...' Help. Hell will be an echo chamber with endless whispers—'As a...'" Andrea Dworkin, "Personal Letter to Robin Morgan," Personal Correspondence, (July 1, 1977), 2, Box S17, Robin Morgan Papers, Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture Archives. In another discussion

effected what Miller called a “self-conscious depersonalization” which “was increased in the mid-eighties with a certain level of institutionalization, by which I mean the construction and recognition of feminist theory as a body of knowledge, as well as by the ‘theory’ frenzy that affected most academic writing.”¹⁹ Miller’s description of this critical moment as a “frenzy,” as well as her use of quotation marks around the word “theory,” indicated the complicated relationship many critics had toward literary and feminist theory. Critical literary theory, including forms inflected by Marxism (particularly the importation of Frankfurt School forms of thought into the US academy by figures such as Fredric Jameson), poststructuralism, Derridian deconstruction, and psychoanalysis were important ways of interpreting literary and cultural texts and forces. And yet some feminist critics also saw these forms of literary theory as totalizing discourses that invalidated other modes of reading and interpretation.

The sudden popularity of literary and critical theory in the US academy in the mid- to late-1980s made “theory” the subject of some exhaustion and resistance. Baym, for instance, wrote in a 1984 article subtitled “Why I Don’t Do Feminist Literary Theory” that theory

succeeds, so far as I can see, only when it ignores or dismisses the earlier paths of feminist literary study as ‘naïve’ and grounds its own theories in those currently

of this fatigue, in a 2007 interview Miller said that “you would go to any feminist conference, and after a panel invariably someone would rise from the audience and say, ‘All very well, but it doesn’t speak to my experience as a’—fill in the blank of who or what identity was being excluded. When I wrote *Getting Personal*, it was in part because I didn’t want to have to worry about who I was speaking for—or not.” Jeffrey Williams, “A Memoir of Feminism: An Interview with Nancy K. Miller,” *The Minnesota Review*, no. 68 (Spring 2007): 83.

¹⁹ Miller, *Getting Personal*, 14.

in vogue with the men who make theory: deconstruction, for example, or Marxism. These grounding theories manifest more than indifference to women's writing; issuing from a patriarchal discourse, they exude misogyny. Mainly, feminist theorists excoriate their deviating sisters.²⁰

The “earlier paths” of feminist literary criticism were those devoted to the study of literary objects and that, as some critics pointed out, were actually still ongoing. As Christian put it in 1987, in the face of theory's “takeover in the literary world by Western philosophers from the old literary élite, the neutral humanists,” she had “more pressing and interesting things to do, such as reading and studying the history and literature of black women, a history that had been totally ignored, a contemporary literature bursting with originality, passion, insight, and beauty.”²¹ For Christian, “people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking.”²² Christian insisted that literary objects remained relevant in the face of theory's totalizing growth in the academy, and also saw the mainstreaming of literary theory as an obstacle to the continued study of such objects. She wrote that

²⁰ Nina Baym, “The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Do Feminist Literary Theory,” *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3, no. 1/2 (1984): 45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/463824>.

²¹ Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 6 (April 1, 1987): 51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354255>.

²² *Ibid.*, 52. Interestingly, this claim that theory could and was in fact already occurring in a different form than the “Western form of abstract logic” that proliferated in literary studies in the 1980s was similar to Miller's defense of Tompkins's personal criticism on the grounds that it was also theorizing, just in a manner not necessarily recognizable as such. Christian and Miller seemed to both cede a significant amount of importance to “theory,” even in non-traditional forms, as they made separate but related cases that it occurred in registers other than the abstract.

the race for theory, with its linguistic jargon, its emphasis on quoting its prophets, its tendency toward ‘Biblical’ exegesis, its refusal even to mention specific works of creative writers, far less contemporary ones, its preoccupations with mechanical analyses of language, graphs, algebraic equations, its gross generalizations about culture, has silenced many of us to the extent that some of us feel we can no longer discuss our own literature...²³

Theory’s propensity to dismiss literary objects was at the heart of many objections to its “takeover” in the academy, particularly when the literary objects it ignored were those written by previously marginalized writers. As Christian wrote, “since I am slightly paranoid, it has begun to occur to me that the literature being produced *is* precisely one of the reasons why this new philosophical-literary-critical theory of relativity is so prominent. In other words, the literature of blacks, women of South America and Africa, etc., as overtly ‘political’ literature was being preempted by a new Western concept which proclaimed that reality does not exist, that everything is relative, and that every text is silent about something—which indeed it must necessarily be.”²⁴ In Christian’s justifiably paranoid view, the growth of literary theory in the 1980s not only had a relation to literary objects, but that relation was one of active and intentional denial and exclusion of particular authors.

In addition to Baym and Christian, other feminist critics argued that literary theory depersonalized the previously highly personal realm of women’s writing and feminist critical acts. Tompkins perfectly described this complex relationship, particularly the perception that theory could not be personal, when she wrote that “you

²³ Ibid., 53.

²⁴ Ibid., 57.

have to pretend that epistemology, or whatever you're writing about, has nothing to do with your life, that it's more exalted, more important, because it (supposedly) *transcends* the merely personal."²⁵ By the late 1980s, the claim that a more sophisticated form of thinking transcended the "merely personal" was quite familiar to feminist literary critics. Many had encountered this statement in the long 1970s when they were told that the quotidian, personal details included in women's novels were unworthy of critical attention.²⁶ In response to the re-emergence of this claim in a different form, many feminist critics used personal modes of writing to return to the very foundation of second wave feminism: the belief that the personal was political. In the early 1970s, speaking in the first person was a revelation for feminists. In 1970, Robin Morgan wrote about her marital problems; her dismissal from her job; childbirth and breastfeeding; her arrest and subsequent incarceration; her personal grooming habits; her activist activities; and learning karate in the introduction to *Sisterhood is Powerful* and prefaced it all by saying "speaking from my own experience, which is what we learn to be unashamed of doing in women's liberation..."²⁷ For feminists in the long 1970s, speaking from experience was a preferred mode of theorizing. And yet, only seventeen years later, Tompkins was ashamed of "the voice of a person who wants to write about her feelings" inside her.²⁸ In

²⁵ Tompkins, "Me and My Shadow," October 1, 1987, 169.

²⁶ In 1978, Fetterley had used this very phrase, "the merely personal," when she wrote that literature was unavailable to the "consciousness of the woman reader" because of "the very posture of the apolitical, the pretense that literature speaks universal truth through forms from which all the *merely personal*, the purely subjective, has been burned away or at least transformed through the medium of art into the representative." *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, xii. (Emphasis added)

²⁷ Morgan, *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, xiv.

²⁸ Tompkins, "Me and My Shadow," October 1, 1987, 169.

the intervening time period, discussed in Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation, the status of experience and authorial voice for feminism had shifted drastically. When feminist literary critics in the long 1970s read male-authored texts, they used a critical eye to search for the ideologies of patriarchy that underpinned male representations of women. When they then looked to the works of women writers for accurate depictions of women's lived experiences, they encountered the vexed relationship between reality and representation that led to the vicious debates of the sex wars. Following those debates and their commentary on the relation between reality and representation, many feminist literary critics seemed to settle the questions of experience, authorship, and representation by depicting their *own* lives in their *own* writing. By turning to their lived experiences as both critical and narrative objects, feminist critics bypassed the problems of how to read and interpret the writing of others. When they grounded their writing in their personal lives and experiences, they also returned to the moment when, for instance, the "I" of Robin Morgan's narrative account of her daily activities was incredibly relevant to the political action of her book.

This chapter interprets the feminist literary critical return to the personal in the 1990s and 2000s first as a reaction to the irreconcilability of the sex wars and second as a response to the perception that theory had displaced literary texts as academic feminism's main object of study. Third, I read the return to the personal as an implicit commentary on experience as a primary strategy for connecting academic projects to feminist political struggles. As such, I focus on the personal criticism and memoir produced by the key

feminist literary critics of the founding generation of feminist literary criticism, and also on the memoirs of feminist academics and activists who re-staked their claim to the political through personal experience. Both academic and activist feminists (and those who occupied both positions) did so during decades when theory seemed to occlude the importance of the feminist activism that was originally linked to feminist literary criticism in the long 1970s and remained important through the sex wars. I begin with the personal and autobiographical criticism that started the shift I am tracking, and examine Tompkins's 1987 personal criticism in relation to contemporaneous forms of autobiographical criticism. Second, I examine the *scene* of the personal and autobiographical act, and compare it to the scene of the feminist critical act of the long 1970s. Finally, I turn to the vast range of feminist memoirs of the period, focusing on Dworkin, Gallop, Heilbrun, and Millett's memoirs, as they were part of the founding generation of feminist literary critics.

Personal and Autobiographical Criticism

During the 1990s and 2000s, feminist critics and writers took up the return to the personal in several different modes. During this period, personal criticism, autobiography, biography, and memoir all flourished; they were similar but distinct forms of engaging with the personal. Personal and autobiographical criticism, which often took the form of articles and essays published in academic journals and anthologies, preceded book-length memoirs. As Miller defined it, personal criticism "entails an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism," or the insertion of the author's

first-person voice into an otherwise critical text.²⁹ In contrast, the many feminist memoirs discussed in this chapter were narrative forms of life-writing which related events from the author's life while more implicitly emphasizing the importance of the "I" to feminist critical thought. Both categories, personal criticism and memoir, contained a wide variety of sub-groups. Personal criticism included narrative and autobiographical criticism, while the feminist memoirs of the period could be divided into nearly endless sub-groups on the basis of the author's main affiliation (academic feminist memoirs;³⁰ activist feminist memoirs;³¹ and the memoirs of feminist writers and poets³²) or on the subject matter (memoirs of academic life;³³ of political activity;³⁴ of aging, disease, and death;³⁵ and so on).

²⁹ Miller, *Getting Personal*, 1.

³⁰ Mary Daly, *Amazon Grace: Re-Calling the Courage to Sin Big* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *When Men Were the Only Models We Had: My Teachers Barzun, Fadiman, and Trilling* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Lerner, *Fireweed*; Kate Millett, *Mother Millett* (New York: Verso, 2001); Jane S. Gould, *Juggling: A Memoir of Work, Family, and Feminism* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1997); Phyllis Chesler, *Letters to a Young Feminist* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1997); Jane Gallop, *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Jane Tompkins, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996); Marianna Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway: Readings by an Italian American Daughter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey: The Marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993); Cathy N. Davidson, *36 Views of Mount Fuji: On Finding Myself in Japan* (New York: Dutton, 1993); Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *French Lessons: A Memoir* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

³¹ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Outlaw Woman: A Memoir of the War Years, 1960-1975* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001); Dworkin, *Heartbreak*; Robin Morgan, *Saturday's Child: A Memoir* (New York: Norton, 2001); Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation* (Basic Books, 2000); Brownmiller, *In Our Time*; Betty Friedan, *Life so Far* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Shulamith Firestone, *Airless Spaces* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1998).

³² Erica Jong, *Seducing the Demon: Writing for My Life* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2006); bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997); bell hooks, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996); Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1982).

³³ Gould, *Juggling*; Tompkins, *A Life in School*.

Personal criticism and autobiographical criticism preceded the proliferation of feminist memoir not just temporally but also theoretically. They set a precedent for the feminist critical act to take a personal turn (what Miller called “getting personal”). They also cleared a space for self-writing as a continuation of the feminist preoccupation with the role of the literary object that had begun in the long 1970s. The history of early forms of personal and autobiographical criticism in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a hugely significant component of the slightly later feminist turn to memoir, and it is impossible to discuss the meaning and implications of feminist memoir before describing these forms. This is not to say that feminist interest in personal and autobiographical criticism was a less significant development than memoir in the trajectory of feminist literary criticism. Rather, it is simply that in order to arrive at an analysis of the important questions about memoir that were asked in 2005 at the conference on Carolyn Heilbrun’s memory, with which this chapter begins and ends, it is first necessary to trace the early manifestations of the impulse toward memoir. How did the personal and autobiographical forms of criticism developed in the late 1980s and through the 1990s differ from the forms of subjective feminist literary criticism that preceded them in the long 1970s?

In Miller’s opinion, the differences between personal and autobiographical criticism were not hugely significant; as she put it, “autobiographical or personal—the

³⁴ Morgan, *Saturday’s Child*; Dunbar-Ortiz, *Outlaw Woman*; Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace*; Friedan, *Life so Far*; Brownmiller, *In Our Time*; Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Barr Snitow, eds., *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women’s Liberation* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998); Millett, *Flying*.

³⁵ Susan Gubar, *Memoir of a Debulked Woman: Enduring Ovarian Cancer* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *The Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond Sixty* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998).

distinction is important but the *effects* of the practices, I think, matter more than the nomenclature.”³⁶ Nevertheless, she mapped their operations in the context of the “crucial questions about the constitution of critical authority and the production of theory” that the two forms raised. In the process, Miller recorded some defining characteristics of personal criticism: “there is self-narrative woven into critical argument” and it “may include self-representation as political representativity.”³⁷ Inevitably, self-narrative and self-representation would take autobiographical forms, even as they presented themselves in essays or articles with explicitly critical intentions. Twenty years later, in 2011, Susan Gubar followed Miller’s definition and its easy slippage between the personal and the autobiographical. In the introduction to her edited collection *True Confessions: Feminist Professors Tell Stories Out of School*, Gubar wrote that she solicited autobiographical essays for her volume, rather than excerpts from memoirs,

a fact that has quite a bit to do with the emergence of so-called personal criticism, a form pioneered by...Nancy K. Miller and Jane Tompkins. Each, in her own way, has melded personal retrospection with critical and theoretical speculations. A hybrid genre, not unrelated to Woolf’s earlier achievement, personal criticism can veer toward pure autobiography or slip toward pure criticism...Personal criticism enables its authors to deploy autobiography in the service of critical or theoretical insights.³⁸

For Gubar, the memoir was a completely different form than personal criticism. She favored the latter form, because it could deploy autobiography to its own critical or theoretical ends (though she published her own memoir, *Memoir of a Debulked Woman*,

³⁶ Miller, *Getting Personal*, 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁸ Susan Gubar, *True Confessions: Feminist Professors Tell Stories Out of School* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011), xv.

a year later in 2012).³⁹ Clearly, the divisions between personal and autobiographical criticism have never been, and have perhaps never needed to be, particularly clear: in 1993, Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar referred to the “autobiographical literary criticism” collected in their volume as “autobiographical-critical essays.”⁴⁰ And yet, to consider their effects, as Miller urged, it is necessary to question the role of the autobiographical in the personal, and vice versa.

Was personal criticism autobiographical simply by virtue of its relation to the “I”? If so, that definition would posit a history of feminist literary criticism that had *always* been personal in its subjective resistance to the supposed objectivity of Arnoldian literary criticism. After all, the feminist critical act was in large part an acknowledgment of the role and presence of the critic as she hovered over the literary texts she read and the critical texts she wrote. Personal criticism, in Miller’s words, “is often located in a specific body (or voice) marked by gender, color, and national origin: a little like a passport.”⁴¹ That description was far from the hallmark of a form unique to the late 1980s, or one which began with Tompkins’s crucial essay; rather, Miller’s insight could also characterize the entirety of the work produced during the feminist canon debates, when the subjectivity of the critical act was a foundational assumption of feminist literary criticism. As well, autobiographical criticism echoed the shift toward defending women’s writing seen in the early moments of the canon debates. The editors of *The Intimate*

³⁹ Gubar, *Memoir of a Debulked Woman*.

⁴⁰ Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar, *The Intimate Critique*, 2.

⁴¹ Miller, *Getting Personal*, 4.

Critique, for example, opened the introduction of their volume with an epigraph from a 1984 text that read “women want to invent new types of criticism, alternate forms of cooperation...less compulsive, aggressive, lonely, competitive; more communal, caring, and integrated with love and politics.”⁴² Was personal criticism simply repeating the critical moves feminist literary criticism had taken ten years earlier, as though the intervening debates about reality and representation had never occurred? While the privileging of the ‘I’ in service of a kinder, gentler criticism may have given that impression, Miller noted that, “feminist theory has always built out from the personal: the witnessing ‘I’ of subjective experience. The notion of the ‘authority of experience’ founded a central current in feminist theory in the 1970s and continues—dismantled and renovated—to shape a variety of personal and less personal discourses at an oppositional angle to dominant critical positionings.”⁴³

Autobiography, then, must have had a stronger role in personal criticism, one which extended beyond the critic’s invocation of an “I,” since the personal criticism that Miller and others cataloged in the 1990s *did* make a new intervention into existing forms of feminist literary study. Despite the importance of “I”s like Robin Morgan’s,

most academic women in the 1970s did not articulate that as a ‘new personalism’ in their writing. In literary studies, the works of pioneering feminist literary scholars—like Kate Millett, Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Elaine Showalter, Annette Kolodny, and Judith Fetterley—were clearly fueled by a profound understanding of the consequences of taking the personal as a category

⁴² Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar, *The Intimate Critique*, 1. The epigraph is from Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo, and Sara Ruddick’s *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers, and Artists Write about Their Work on Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

⁴³ Miller, *Getting Personal*, 14.

of thought and gender as a category of analysis. But as academic feminists—and I'm talking here of white mainstream feminism—they on the whole wrote like everyone else who belongs to the third sex of 'Ph.D.'s' Carolyn Heilbrun has added to the categories of male and female readers.⁴⁴

The difference, then, between the feminist understanding of the personal in the 1970s and the 1990s is quite profound, though easy to miss in the seeming similarity between the two presentations of the critic herself in her texts. *The Intimate Critique*, the 1993 anthology, included writers “whose essays refuse to separate impetus and content, their lives and their words,”⁴⁵ Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn's 1992 *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism* “sought personal, anecdotal stories, but we asked contributors to *theorize* them so as to bring out their historical and political dimensions,”⁴⁶ and Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow's 1998 *The Feminist Memoir Project* began with a desire to find “autobiographical essays that described the experience we remembered, the feeling that, with the rise of a women's movement, we were suddenly and irrevocably living in history.”⁴⁷ All three anthologies plainly positioned the essays they contained as doing something new and different from the avowedly subjective forms of feminist literary criticism that had preceded them. The explicitly autobiographical content of their criticism went beyond the use of “I,” both as a rhetorical

⁴⁴ Ibid. The endnote which Miller placed after this citation offered another clue to the distinction between autobiographical and personal criticism. In the endnote, she wrote that “Heilbrun is in many ways an exception to the rule (of impersonal writing), and a precursor, for she has always written in a nonacademic voice for a wide audience; she also has an important autobiographical discussion in *Reinventing Womanhood* (1978) about being a feminist and an outsider in academic institutions.” For Miller, personal criticism by definition was aimed at an audience beyond the academy, and occurred in a nonacademic voice.

⁴⁵ Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar, *The Intimate Critique*, 3.

⁴⁶ Greene and Kahn, *Changing Subjects*, 2.

⁴⁷ DuPlessis and Snitow, *The Feminist Memoir Project*, 22.

strategy and a foundation for critical insight. Rather, their contributors wrote about themselves and their histories *as* criticism.

The essays in the anthologies opened with sentences such as Gayle Greene's "it's by no means clear how a girl like me, coming of age in the California suburbs in the 1950s, got hooked on Shakespeare in the first place,"⁴⁸ Gloria T. Hull's "for myself and my readers, I need to make very clear at the outset that what I am recounting here is my own personal, unique story,"⁴⁹ and Bonnie Zimmerman's "I have never written a professional essay in which I reflect directly upon my own life, although most of my scholarly writing flows more or less directly from my personal values and experience."⁵⁰ Clearly, these interventions give a completely different meaning to going beyond the "merely personal." They were autobiographical in that they presented a narrative account of the critic's life experiences as a crucial part of her critical work.⁵¹ This form of

⁴⁸ Gayle Greene, "Looking at History," in *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (New York: Routledge, 1993), 4.

⁴⁹ Gloria T. Hull, "History/My History," in *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (New York: Routledge, 1993), 48.

⁵⁰ Bonnie Zimmerman, "In Academia, and Out: The Experience of a Lesbian Feminist Literary Critic," in *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (New York: Routledge, 1993), 112.

⁵¹ The standard literary definitions of autobiography are somewhat inadequate for capturing the critical intervention made by autobiographical criticism, as they tend to define autobiography mainly in opposition to biography or memoir. The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, for instance, defines autobiography as "a narrative account of an extended period of some person's life, written by, or presented as having been written by, that person; or the practice of writing such works. Autobiography differs from biography not only in its evidently more subjective narrative point of view but in its inconclusiveness... Many autobiographies indeed restrict their scope to a phase of the author's early life and conclude at some point long before the time of writing. Autobiography also differs from other related genres of life writing: from the memoir in its focus upon the self rather than on notable people and events that the author has encountered, and from the journal or diary in its attempt to produce a connected retrospective account." Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). In a similar vein, M.H. Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines autobiography as "a biography written by the subject about himself or herself. It is to be distinguished from the memoir, in which the

autobiographical criticism included the critic's life beyond simply using a personal voice or speaking in the first person. In this sense, autobiographical criticism could be mistaken for the same strategy Robin Morgan deployed in her 1970 description of the life she lived as she edited *Sisterhood is Powerful*. And yet, autobiographical criticism put a different cast on "the personal is political": it was a response and a return to the existing history of subjective feminist literary criticism and a reaction to and replacement of the theory that had intervened and separated feminism from its own "I."

The Personal and Autobiographical Scene

While the transformation of the meaning of the personal/autobiographical from the 1970s to the 1990s was significant, the differences between personal and autobiographical criticism within the 1990s are more difficult to locate, and must be contextualized at the scene of personal and autobiographical acts. Despite her resistance to offering fully separate definitions of personal and autobiographical criticism, Miller did give some indication of the difference when she labelled Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1987 "A Poem is Being Written" an "autobiographical essay."⁵² It is notable that, in contrast to Tompkins's "Me and My Shadow" which "self-consciously sets out to embody the claims of personal writing," Miller describes Sedgwick's piece as a "mixed-genre self-portrait" which was specifically autobiographical in the schema of personal and/as autobiographical. "A Poem is Being Written" opens in both the first and the third

emphasis is not on the author's developing self but on the people and events that the author has witnessed..." *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), 22.

⁵² Miller, *Getting Personal*, 24.

person: Sedgwick writes that the essay “represents a claim for respectful attention to the intellectual and artistic life of a nine-year old child, Eve Kosofsky. But it would be fairer to admit (and I can testify to this, since my acquaintance with the person named has been continuous)...” Sedgwick’s essay, published in the same year as Tompkins’s, complicated the question of autobiographical narrative voice by separating herself in the present from herself as a child. Speaking of her nine-year old self, she wrote “she is allowed to speak, or I to speak of her, only here in the space of professional success and of hyperconscious virtuosity, conscious not least of the unusually narrow stylistic demands that hedge about any language that treats one’s own past.”⁵³ The two voices in Sedgwick’s piece are very different from the two voices of Tompkins’s article, where she wrote “there are two voices inside me answering, answering to, Ellen [Messer-Davidow]’s essay. One is the voice of a critic who wants to correct a mistake in the essay’s view of epistemology. The other is the voice of a person who wants to write about her feelings.”⁵⁴ While both sets of voices deal with the questions of professional respectability and authorization to speak, there is a marked difference in Sedgwick’s separation of her childhood self from her present self and Tompkins’s separation of her personal/emotional and professional/academic selves. Sedgwick creates a narrative of her former and present selves, but links them via “continuous acquaintance.” This narrative of a temporally divided but linked self is no doubt part of what led Miller to characterize

⁵³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “A Poem Is Being Written,” *Representations*, no. 17 (January 1, 1987): 110, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3043795>.

⁵⁴ Tompkins, “Me and My Shadow,” October 1, 1987, 169.

Sedgwick's essay as autobiographical, and Tompkins's as personal: Sedgwick narrated a life, or two lives really, while Tompkins's personal intervention was to include herself in the moment of the critical act—"just myself as a person sitting here in stocking feet, a little bit chilly because the windows are open, and thinking about going to the bathroom. But not going yet."

Tompkins wanted to include her other voice, the voice of a person, in her criticism, the voice she had been hiding "for a long time. I've known it was there but I couldn't listen because there was no place for this person in literary criticism. The criticism I would like to write would always take off from personal experience, would always be in some way a chronicle of my hours and days..."⁵⁵ Sedgwick also took off from personal experience, but rather than use the form of a diary-like chronicle, she used a childhood narrative to construct a theory of poetry and eroticism. In "A Poem is Being Written," Sedgwick wrote that "when I was a little child the two most rhythmic things that happened to me were spanking and poetry."⁵⁶ She went on to note that

both the cropped immobilized space of the lyric and the dilated space around it of narrative poetry were constructed in and by me, as well as around me and *on* me, through the barely ritualized violence against children that my parents' culture and mine enforced and enforces. The lyric poem, known to the child as such by its beat and by a principle of severe economy...the lyric poem was both the spanked body, my own body or another one like it for me to watch or punish, and at the same time the very spanking, the rhythmic hand whether hard or subtle of authority itself. What child wouldn't be ravenous for dominion in this place?⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid., 173.

⁵⁶ Sedgwick, "A Poem Is Being Written," 114.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 115.

In Sedgwick's narrative, the lyric poem of her childhood was both body and weapon, and she knew this because it was enacted on her body. She went on to analyze her own childhood poetry in her mixed use of voices, and directly addressed her reader: "you might also have picked up on the unmistakable presence, in the Kosofsky poem, of the two-beat Untermeyer rhythm with which I have said this writer was by this time completely infused."⁵⁸ In the process, the reader was witness to a poem being written *and* analyzed much like, as Sedgwick points out, the reader witnessed a child being beaten and analyzed in the "shifty passive voice" of Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten." In Sedgwick's essay, the reader watched "the scene of poetry writing, and...the tableau of the poem itself."⁵⁹ Clearly, this inclusion was more than just personal experience, though Sedgwick did include, like Tompkins, glimpses into her essay-writing process, saying for example of a word she'd previously misunderstood, "in fact I thought it until I checked my dictionary just today."⁶⁰

Others agreed with Miller's characterization of Sedgwick's essay as autobiographical criticism. In a 1994 article published in *Lingua Franca*, Adam Begley took a sarcastic and dismissive tone about the increase of personal criticism, or what he called "marching under the banner of the naked 'I.'" In the least venomous section of the article, Begley wrote that Sedgwick was "living proof that autobiography and theory can cohabitate blissfully. The foremost exponent of queer theory, author of *Epistemology of*

⁵⁸ Ibid., 116.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 110.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 116.

the Closet...and Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire..., Sedgwick, with her notorious titles ('Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,' or better yet, 'Is the Rectum Straight?: Identification and Identity in *The Wings of the Dove*') and her bizarre, exquisitely embarrassing autobiographical revelations, seems intent on giving her readers literary shock therapy."⁶¹ Begley proved Miller's point that "personal writing opens an inquiry on the cost of writing—critical writing or Theory—and its effects. The embarrassment produced in readers is a sign that it is working. At the same time the embarrassment blows the cover of the impersonal as a masquerade of self-effacement...and points to the narcissistic fantasy that inheres in the poses of self-sufficiency we identify with Theory; notably, those of abstraction."⁶² The personal and autobiographical were distinguished from prior forms of subjective literary criticism because they opposed and exposed abstraction as covering the critic's personal reality which inevitably occurred not just in the moment of the critical act, but also in her or his history.

Following Tompkins and Sedgwick's 1987 essays, other critics ventured into the linked but distinct realms of personal and autobiographical criticism. In 1993, Erica Jong published *The Devil at Large*, a book that critiqued and celebrated Henry Miller's work

⁶¹ Adam Begley, "The I's Have It: Duke's 'Moi' Critics Expose Themselves," *Lingua Franca* 4, no. 3 (April 1994), <http://linguafranca.mirror.theinfo.org/9403/moi.html>.

⁶² Miller, *Getting Personal*, 24. In a 2007 interview with Jeffrey Williams, Miller elaborated on the forms of embarrassment personal writing produced in its readers. She described a conference titled "The Poetics of Anger" where "Eve Sedgwick read 'A Poem is Being Written,' in which she talks about anal eroticism and so on. People were astonished, especially the men, who were sort of on the floor with embarrassment." Williams, "A Memoir of Feminism," 82.

and was billed as “Erica Jong on Henry Miller.”⁶³ Jong opened the volume’s first chapter “Born Hungry: Henry and Me” with a description of receiving a letter from Henry Miller a year after the publication of her first novel *Fear of Flying*⁶⁴ that read, in part, “I don’t know when I’ve read a book by a woman which has made such an impact upon me...men have so much to learn from your book, as well as women. It is a text book as well as a novel or autobiography.”⁶⁵ She recounted that she did not know much about Miller at the time, and admitted that “my image of Miller was probably almost as distorted as the banal image of the dirty-old-man writer that haunts Miller’s name in the public prints.”⁶⁶ She wrote back to Miller and the two began corresponding and meeting in person over a two-year period.⁶⁷ The narrative she told in the essay was one of gradually coming to admire and respect Miller’s work despite the fact that she did not “really *like* Henry Miller” because of his “sexism, his narcissism, his jibes at Jews. And because he’s so free....I work so hard at my writing and he’s such a slob....He’s such a *blagueur* and I try so hard to be honest. Everything is cake to him. He treats women horribly and doesn’t seem to care....Even his suffering seems like fun.”⁶⁸ Eventually, Jong revealed in the chapter that her hatred for Miller masked her complex relationship with her grandfather, and that “I also hated him for not really being my grandfather.” She found herself in the position of wanting to recuperate Miller from the feminist critics who had unofficially

⁶³ Erica Jong, *The Devil at Large: Erica Jong on Henry Miller* (New York: Turtle Bay Books, 1993).

⁶⁴ Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).

⁶⁵ Jong, *The Devil at Large*, 11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 25. One of their conversations was filmed as an interview with Mike Wallace for the CBS television show *60 Minutes* in 1974.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

censored his books, and asked “am I loving the fascist, the brute, the boot in the face? Kate Millett would probably say so.”⁶⁹ By the end of the chapter, Jong decided that “‘hating’ Henry, after all, was about my own fear of self-exposure.”⁷⁰

The rest of *The Devil at Large* consisted of favorable interpretations of Miller’s novels such as *Crazy Cock*,⁷¹ descriptions of his early childhood, and rejoinders to the “great deal of rhetorical rubbish [that] has been written on the subject of Henry Miller, sexist.”⁷² In the penultimate chapter, Jong summed up her book’s project: “I want to send you back to read him—with an open head and heart.”⁷³ She lavishly praised Miller as a writer and a man to an extent that strongly resembled Karl Shapiro’s introduction to the 1961 edition of *Tropic of Cancer*, which was titled “The Greatest Living Author” and repeatedly emphasized Miller’s status as such in increasingly florid language.⁷⁴ Throughout the book, Jong described her fear that she was becoming an apologist for Miller and working against the feminist movement. She compared herself to Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote “*The Second Sex* and then ‘repents’ with *Must We Burn Sade?*”⁷⁵ and self-deprecatingly said, “I validate women’s fantasies in six novels and seven books of poetry and then ‘atone’ with a book on Miller.”⁷⁶ For Jong, “getting personal” meant

⁶⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 36.

⁷¹ Henry Miller, *Crazy Cock* (New York, NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991). Miller wrote this novel in the late 1920s and it was published posthumously.

⁷² Jong, *The Devil at Large*, 193.

⁷³ Ibid., 245.

⁷⁴ Karl Shapiro, “The Greatest Living Author,” in *Tropic of Cancer* (New York: Grove Press, 1961).

⁷⁵ In reference to de Beauvoir’s essay “Must We Burn Sade?,” Chapter Seven of *The Devil at Large* is titled “Must We Burn Henry Miller? Miller and the Feminist Critique” Jong, *The Devil at Large*, 191.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 29.

working out, in print, her decision to write about and approve of Miller's works, which had been so contentious for feminist literary critics such as Millett in the long 1970s. In displaying her inner dialogue about Miller in asides such as: "so I had unwittingly discovered the source of the Miller animosity, discovered it in myself (where one always discovers everything, as Freud knew)," Jong used the personal, the autobiographical, and the idioms of psychoanalysis to justify her critical perspective against the perceived antagonism of other feminist critics such as Kate Millett.⁷⁷

And yet, like Tompkins, Sedgwick, and countless other critics who experimented with the sub-field of personal literary criticism in the early 1990s (including the two dozen critics whose essays were included in Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar's *The Intimate Critique*), Jong had not yet ventured into the territory of pure memoir, though she would in 2006 with the publication of *Seducing the Demon: Writing for My Life*.⁷⁸ Certainly her recollections about her grandfather and his role in her development as a person and a writer were a form of self-writing, as were Ellen Brown's italicized passages about her childhood in her essay on *Jane Eyre*.⁷⁹ Still, she retained a connection to literary objects, to Henry Miller's novels, and her use of the autobiographical mode was in service of her literary criticism. Personal criticism remained somewhat reactive as critics self-consciously and explicitly inserted their voices and "muse-ings on genre, autobiography,

⁷⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁸ Jong, *Seducing the Demon*.

⁷⁹ Ellen Brown, "Between the Medusa and the Abyss: Reading Jane Eyre, Reading Myself," in *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, ed. Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 225–35.

narrative” into their critical articles and essays that retained literary objects.⁸⁰ In this sense, personal criticism and autobiographical criticism were the first signs of a shift toward the feminist interest in memoir that would significantly influence feminist literary practice through the 1990s and 2000s.

Feminist Memoir

Following on the heels of the growth of personal and autobiographical criticism, a vast number of feminist literary critics, academics, and activists published memoirs in the 1990s and 2000s. Some, such as Cathy Davidson’s 1993 *36 Views of Mount Fuji: On Finding Myself in Japan*⁸¹ and Alice Kaplan’s 1993 *French Lessons: A Memoir*⁸² were traditional memoirs written by academic feminists. Others, including Mary Daly’s *Amazon Grace: Re-calling the Courage to Sin Big*,⁸³ Jane Gallop’s 1997 *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*,⁸⁴ Jane Gould’s 1997 *Juggling: A Memoir of Work, Family, and Feminism*,⁸⁵ and Carolyn Heilbrun’s 2002 *When Men Were the Only Models We Had: My Teachers Barzun, Fadiman, and Trilling*⁸⁶ explicitly dealt with the academic environment, and thematized the memoirist’s existence within the university. Still others, such as Susan Brownmiller’s 1999 *In Our Time: Memoir of A Revolution*,⁸⁷ Roxanne

⁸⁰ Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar, *The Intimate Critique*, 11.

⁸¹ Davidson, *36 Views of Mount Fuji*.

⁸² Kaplan, *French Lessons*.

⁸³ Daly, *Amazon Grace*.

⁸⁴ Gallop, *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*.

⁸⁵ Gould, *Juggling*.

⁸⁶ Heilbrun, *When Men Were the Only Models We Had: My Teachers Barzun, Fadiman, and Trilling*.

⁸⁷ Brownmiller, *In Our Time*.

Dunbar-Ortiz's 2001 *Outlaw Woman: A Memoir of the War Years, 1960-1975*,⁸⁸ Shulamith Firestone's 1998 *Airless Spaces*,⁸⁹ Karla Jay's 1999 *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation*,⁹⁰ and Robin Morgan's 2001 *Saturday's Child*⁹¹ recounted the memoirist's activist experiences during the heyday of second wave feminism at the same time as they provided historical detail about the 1960s and 1970s. Many feminist writers who had been active participants in the feminist movement both inside and outside the academy also wrote memoirs, such as Erica Jong's 2006 memoir, bell hooks's 1996 *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*,⁹² and her 1997 *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life*.⁹³ These works made the transition from personal literary criticism that deployed the autobiographical moments that Miller called "autographics" into full-fledged memoirs.⁹⁴ This section deals first with that transition, and then turns to the book-length memoirs published in the 1990s and 2000s by some of the feminist academics who played central roles in the creation of feminist literary criticism in the long 1970s. Reading Andrea Dworkin, Jane Gallop, Carolyn Heilbrun, and Kate Millett's memoirs in particular, I argue that they reproduced, or rather, produced again with a

⁸⁸ Dunbar-Ortiz, *Outlaw Woman*.

⁸⁹ Firestone, *Airless Spaces*.

⁹⁰ Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace*.

⁹¹ Morgan, *Saturday's Child*.

⁹² hooks, *Bone Black*.

⁹³ hooks, *Wounds of Passion*.

⁹⁴ Miller, *Getting Personal*, 2.

difference, some of the defining features of 1970s literary criticism by simultaneously shifting the objects and the subjects of their writing.⁹⁵

The vast diversity of memoirs by a variety of differently-positioned feminists on a range of topics emerged at a moment when, as Hirsch observed in her opening remarks at the 2005 conference in Heilbrun's memory, "feminist literary criticism and even feminist theoretical writing seemed to have lost some of their urgency." In planning the conference, Hirsch and her co-organizer Jean Howard "wondered if the memoir might be providing a space for feminist reflection and theorization of a different sort."⁹⁶ What was the nature of that "different sort" of reflection and theorizing? Why the memoir, and not another literary form such as the biography? Some feminists did in fact experiment with other forms of life writing: Heilbrun, for instance, published an exhaustive and fairly traditional biography of Gloria Steinem in 1995, including standards of the genre such as photographs of Steinem's grandmothers and parents as young people, Steinem as a child, and Steinem with a variety of famous politicians, actors, and writers.⁹⁷ The format of the book as biography is far from experimental, but the fact of its existence reveals that

⁹⁵ Other feminist literary critics who were key to the founding of feminist literary criticism also wrote personal or autobiographical essays that could be interpreted as memoirs, and yet cannot strictly be defined as such because they were not in book form. These critics and their articles included: Sandra M. Gilbert, "Confessions of a Culinary Transvestite," in *True Confessions: Feminist Professors Tell Stories Out of School*, ed. Susan Gubar (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011), 81–97; Barbara Christian, "Being the Subject and the Object: Reading African-American Women's Novels," in *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (New York: Routledge, 1993), 195–200; Susan Koppelman, "Excerpts from Letters to Friends," in *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, ed. Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 75–79; Zimmerman, "In Academia, and Out: The Experience of a Lesbian Feminist Literary Critic."

⁹⁶ Hirsch, "Just Writing (A Feminist's Life)."

⁹⁷ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *The Education of a Woman: The Life of Gloria Steinem* (New York: Dial Press, 1995).

Heilbrun was exploring different genres for feminist life writing. An early pioneer of criticism on memoir and autobiography who had been dealing with these topics since at least 1983,⁹⁸ by 1995 Heilbrun wrote about autobiography with a somewhat jaded tone in the introduction to Steinem's biography. She wrote,

autobiography is not the story of a life; it is the recreation or the discovery of one... Often, of course, autobiography is merely a collection of well-rehearsed anecdotes; but, intelligently written, it is the revelation, to the reader and the writer, of the writer's conception of the life he or she has lived. Simply put, autobiography is a reckoning. Biography is another matter. A two-person dialogue, biography is the imposition of the biographer's perception upon the life of the subject. There is no truth; there are, indeed, remarkably few facts.⁹⁹

At this point, Heilbrun saw the dialogic form of biography as a potential answer to the questions feminist literary criticism had raised in the long 1970s about objectivity and representation. Heilbrun's brief turn to biography indicated that some feminists continued to explore avenues other than literary criticism for relating and understanding women's experiences in relation to their representation in text.¹⁰⁰ In this vein but earlier, in 1980, Andrea Dworkin published a book of short stories, *The New Woman's Broken Heart*, that

⁹⁸ Remarkably, in 1983 Heilbrun was already thinking and writing about when, where, and how to let her "individual voice" be heard in her academic writing. In her edited collection of selected papers presented at The English Institute at Columbia University in 1981, Heilbrun wrote that, with her co-editor Margaret Higonnet, "we have decided, in the introduction, to let our individual voices be heard, mine on the 'event,' hers on the essays themselves." And, in fact, the introduction to the volume was completely characteristic of Heilbrun's personal critical style. She recounted details such as how "the head of every woman in the Institute's audience came up" when Cleanth Brooks, one of the earliest practitioners of New Criticism, quoted a passage from a letter sent to him by Rudolf Kirk, where Kirk talked about how at the earliest meetings of the Institute, forty years earlier, his wife "acted as hostess every afternoon." *The Representation of Women in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), xiii; x. Also notable about this collection of papers was the fact that it included essays presented by Susan Gubar and Nancy Miller, though neither critic was yet working on the topic of memoir or autobiography.

⁹⁹ Heilbrun, *The Education of a Woman*, xvii-xviii.

¹⁰⁰ Heilbrun continued to explore autobiography and memoir after the publication of Steinem's biography, and in fact did so nearly until her suicide in 2003. One of her most notable memoirs, *When Men Were the Only Models We Had*, was published in 2002.

were thinly-veiled autobiographical stories starring the protagonist bertha schneider¹⁰¹ whose experiences greatly resembled the childhood Dworkin recounted in her 2002 memoir *Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant*.¹⁰² Shulamith Firestone's 1998 *Airless Spaces* was similarly a collection of short stories that were technically fiction but sometimes clearly and intentionally autobiographical.¹⁰³ And in 1982, Audre Lorde published *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, an only slightly fictionalized version of her life story which she called a "biomythography."¹⁰⁴ But these exploratory forms did not quite gain the momentum required to resuscitate the urgency of feminist literary criticism and theory that Hirsch claimed had been lost by 2005. That momentum was regained through memoir: the feminist memoirs of the 1990s and 2000s first rehashed and then reshaped the discussions feminist literary critics had had about subjectivity in the long 1970s. Much like how the personal, autobiographical 'I' had a very similar but different meaning in the 1970s than it did in the 1990s, feminist revelations about the inherent subjectivity of literary interpretation took on new life in the memoir form. In writing about one's own life, the feminist critic was able to resituate herself in relation to her object and drop any pretense of critical objectivity. She also

¹⁰¹ Her name was not capitalized, as per Dworkin's commitment against capital letters and normative typography, discussed in Chapter Three.

¹⁰² The connection between the two titles is obvious, and yet interesting considering the vastly different generic forms of the two texts. Andrea Dworkin, *The New Woman's Broken Heart: Short Stories* (East Palo Alto, CA: Frog in the Well, 1980); Dworkin, *Heartbreak*.

¹⁰³ Firestone, *Airless Spaces*.

¹⁰⁴ Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*.

offered other critics her own “reckoning” with her life, as Heilbrun would say, as a literary object with a new and nuanced relationship between reality and representation.¹⁰⁵

The quantity of book-length feminist memoirs published in the 1990s and 2000s was astounding. While Miller said in 1991 that the number of critics getting personal in their writing was not “on the order of a paradigm shift,” by 2005 that paradigm shift had in fact clearly occurred.¹⁰⁶ Interestingly for the trajectory this dissertation traces, Miller’s own participation in that shift was part of the history of feminist literary criticism. In 2007, Williams wrote that “Nancy K. Miller’s work represents, in some ways, the itinerary of contemporary criticism. She was trained as a structuralist, in the 1970s became a feminist, and since the 90s has moved to memoir.”¹⁰⁷ The outbreak of memoirs was a restating of the inherent subjectivity of the critical act and a total evacuation of objectivity from literary criticism. Miller advanced this point early, in 1986, when she wrote “I am suggesting that to maintain that ‘your texts don’t speak to our experience’ doesn’t get at a grittier problem: what is ‘your’ relation to ‘your’ experience? Or, on what grounds does your experience get to pass for the universal, for the transparency of knowledge?”¹⁰⁸ Memoirs deliberately recounted a particularized experience, and

¹⁰⁵ Although, interestingly, while many critics wrote book reviews of the memoirs discussed in this chapter, there was not an abundance of critical articles or responses to the memoirs.

¹⁰⁶ Miller, *Getting Personal*, x.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, “A Memoir of Feminism,” 75.

¹⁰⁸ Miller, *Getting Personal*, 61. Miller was speaking about the inclusion of texts by women in the core curriculum of Columbia College. She wrote, “to say, for example, that women, Asians, Hispanics, and Blacks, as well as gay men and women—to call up the minorities who are represented and who self-consciously represent themselves as minority voices in the Barnard/Columbia student population—are entitled to study works which reflect ‘their own historical experiences’ does not necessarily make the next point; or rather leaves the premise of the canon-as-course intact.” Here, Miller restated the main issue of the

complicated the memoirist's relationship to her own experience by presenting a life narrative that was obviously shaped by memory and self-creation, rather than artistic selection. Memoirs also made no claim that their author's relationship to her knowledge was transparent to herself or to their readers; in adopting a reflective first person narrative, feminist memoirists could not possibly have been more subjective in their writing. The memoirs discussed in this chapter were chock full of statements similar to feminist historian Gerda Lerner's in her 2002 *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography*: "the facts, as closely as I can gather...click, click went my memory."¹⁰⁹

Feminist memoirs confirmed, in practice, what feminist literary critics had claimed in theory about the subjective nature of literary criticism the long 1970s. Feminist memoirs side-stepped the debates about whether, and how, women's real experiences could be depicted in literature that had led into the thorny territory of the sex wars. At the same time, memoirists such as Dworkin, Gallop, Gilbert, Gubar, Koppelman,¹¹⁰ and Zimmerman who had been directly involved in the interpretation of women's literature and its role in the canon debates moved on from the fictional texts that had been critiqued at length through the long 1970s. In *Writing a Woman's Life*, published in 1988, Heilbrun described her reasons for moving away from fictional texts

canon debates, but added an interest in autobiography as she inquired into the status of experience and the "transparency of knowledge."

¹⁰⁹ Lerner, *Fireweed*, 17.

¹¹⁰ While all her work in the 1970s was published under the name "Susan Koppelman Cornillon," by 1993 when her personal essay appeared in *The Intimate Critique*, it was under the name "Susan Koppelman." "Excerpts from Letters to Friends."

written by women, and for moving away from the emphasis feminist literary critics had placed on the woman writer throughout the canon debates. According to Heilbrun,

there are four ways to write a woman's life: the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman's life in what is called a biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously, and without recognizing or naming the process. In this book, I shall discuss three of these four ways, omitting, for the most part, an analysis of the fictions in which many women have written their lives. For these stories in women's fiction, both the conventional and the subversive, have been examined in recent years with great brilliance and sophistication by a new generation of literary critics, and the work of these feminist critics has been so penetrating and persuasive that learning to read fictional representations of gender arrangements in our culture, whether of difference, oppression, or possibility, is an opportunity now available to anyone who will take the time to explore this vast and compelling body of criticism.¹¹¹

In her perspective, the work of feminist literary criticism had effectively been done by the end of the 1980s; there was no more territory to cover in terms of reading and interpreting fictional depictions of gender relations. And so the foremost feminist literary critics who had founded the field turned to their own lives, and wrote their own stories.

One of the defining features of the memoirs written by feminist literary critics was their thematization of the subjective and shifting quality of memory as manifested in narrative. Almost all of the memoirists discussed here explicitly addressed the role of memory in life-writing, and almost revealed in the instability and subjectivity of their recollections. The notable exception was Diana Trilling's 1993 memoir *The Beginning of the Journey: The Marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling* that she described as "in part an autobiography, in part a biography of my husband, Lionel Trilling, and in largest part a

¹¹¹ Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*, 11.

memoir of our marriage.”¹¹² Trilling wrote in the tone of a biographer confident in her facts, and it is perhaps this aspect of her memoir which led a *New York Times* reviewer to state of the book, “unflustered by our cheaply confessional culture, Mrs. Trilling has miraculously discovered a morally dignified yet also ruthlessly honest style of self-exposure.”¹¹³ This style, which presented itself as based in the names, dates, places, and times that made up Trilling’s marriage to her husband, stood in stark contrast to other contemporaneous feminist memoirists.¹¹⁴

Andrea Dworkin, for instance, explicitly and yet very indirectly pointed out the vagaries of memory in her memoir. Her memoir consisted of forty-one chapter-like sections which moved roughly chronologically (but often topically) from her young childhood to the then-present of 2002. The first three sections, titled “Music 1,” “Music 2,” and “Music 3,” described her childhood piano lessons down to the details of her teacher Mrs. Smith’s “white hair,” her own inability to master Tchaikovsky’s Piano

¹¹² Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey*, ix.

¹¹³ Ann Hulbert, “‘It’s Complicated. . . . It’s Very Complicated,’” *The New York Times*, October 24, 1993, sec. Books, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/24/books/it-s-complicated-it-s-very-complicated.html>.

¹¹⁴ Her tone and approach to the memoir was no doubt influenced by the fact that, as she told it, “at his death in 1975 Lionel was about to begin an autobiographical memoir. It was in these terms, as an autobiographical memoir, that he always referred to it, never as an autobiography, and I took this to mean that . . . he intended to bypass his private life, or at least not dwell upon it, and concentrate upon the way in which his experience reflected, or was otherwise connected with, the social and intellectual developments of his time.” *The Beginning of the Journey*, 23. In separating her memoir from the others discussed here, however, I am wary of participating in what Heilbrun described in her own memoir as the fact that “almost every reference to [Diana Trilling] that I have read is negative, portraying her as lacking any intellectual power, unimportant, querulous, difficult, flawed . . . She was certainly no influence, no model; if anything, she seemed to offer the opposite of any existence I might have hoped for myself.” *When Men Were the Only Models We Had: My Teachers Barzun, Fadiman, and Trilling*, 100–1. Trilling’s status as a literary critic who described herself as supporting the career of her far more prominent literary critic husband made her a complicated figure, and her seeming complicity in her role as “Lionel Trilling’s wife” has meant that she has not received favorable attention from feminist readers. I hesitate to participate in this treatment of her, but her memoir does in fact stand in marked contrast to the others discussed here and so will have to remain peripheral to this discussion.

Concerto No. 1 for which she had a “somewhat warped passion” and the “denouement” of receiving the “two terrible black stars [Mrs. Smith] gave me to mark my failure.”¹¹⁵

Then, over two hundred pages later in the memoir’s final section titled “Memory,”

Dworkin wrote,

I worked very hard for years as a writer and feminist. One night I had dinner with a distant cousin. ‘I remember when you used to play the piano,’ she said. I didn’t remember that fact of my life at all and had not for decades. My life had changed so much, I had so little use for the memory, perhaps, that I had forgotten the years of piano lessons and recitals. I sat stunned. She was bewildered. She insisted: ‘Don’t you remember?’ I was blank until she gave me some details. Then I began to remember. In fact, she had remembered my life as a pianist over a period of decades during which I had forgotten it.¹¹⁶

Much like Lerner’s statement, “the facts, as closely as I can gather...,” Dworkin

reminded her reader that what she presented as fact at the opening of the book was not

fact but memory, and reconstructed memory at that. Or perhaps it was fact, and Dworkin

did receive two “terrible” black stars from her piano teacher, but the reader was directly

reminded that she or he had no way, or perhaps no need, of knowing the difference.

While Dworkin used the fact that she forget years of piano lessons to make a larger point

about victims of sexual violence forgetting their abuse, in the context of her life-writing

her writing strategy brought the subjectivity of her narration to the forefront.

Other memoirists also emphasized the gap between the stories they recounted and

their present narrative voices, and in so doing highlighted their how their perspectives

had changed over the course of their lives. Often, this distance came in the voice of

¹¹⁵ Dworkin, *Heartbreak*, 1; 2; 5.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

hindsight, as in Heilbrun's 2002 memoir about her lifelong adoration for the literary critics and scholars Jacques Barzun, Clifton Fadiman, and Lionel Trilling. Heilbrun wrote "it is hardly too much to say they were my motivation, my inspiration, my fantasy. Theirs was the universe in which I wished to have my being. When I first encountered them, however, the fact that no woman could have her being in the world where they prevailed evaded my consciousness; the impossibility of that particular dream did not present itself to me as an inexorable fact."¹¹⁷ In Heilbrun's description of her studies with Trilling in particular, she spoke of herself in the past in a voice informed by the present: "it astonishes me now to recognize that almost from the beginning I wanted to confront him, to force him to recognize that I, a woman, was, at the least, not prevented from embodying truth, even if I could not embody it for him."¹¹⁸ In her present voice, Heilbrun separated herself from her memories of her early studies with Trilling and Barzun through her surprise at herself in the present: "the power they held over me does not seem less significant now, as I might expect it would. Why is that?"¹¹⁹ She answered her own question when she wrote "I still think of those three men as perfect in the hour when I first saw them, first recognized them, first transformed them into my models and my pattern of the intellectual life." As a result, "looking back upon them is to be transported to another world."¹²⁰ Her narrative resists the structure of the bildungsroman, and of the many feminist coming-of-age stories wherein women cast the scales of patriarchy from

¹¹⁷ Heilbrun, *When Men Were the Only Models We Had: My Teachers Barzun, Fadiman, and Trilling*, 1.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

their eyes and left behind their oppressive male teachers, fathers, and/or husbands.¹²¹ The memoir form allowed Heilbrun to render her contradictory experience in its full complexity, and yet to resist an attempt to produce an accurate record of her experience, as the feminist literary critics of the long 1970s might have asked of her.

Other feminist memoirists also experimented with the simultaneous past and present temporality of the memoir form. In her 1997 memoir, *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*, Jane Gallop recounted a particular period in her academic and personal life when two graduate students accused her of sexual harassment. In the process, she also described her time as a college student at Cornell University. The year 1971 plays a huge role in the story she told about her sexual and academic life, and then subsequently in the events leading up to the allegations of harassment in 1993. On the first page of the book, Gallop wrote that “I became a feminist early in 1971.”¹²² She recounted that “in January 1971 I read de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*, learned that women could masturbate, and had my first orgasm.”¹²³ Later on in 1971, she attended a women-only dance at which women danced bare-breasted, and in her present voice she declared “our breasts were political.”¹²⁴ At the dance, Gallop watched as a professor, “one of the campus’s best-known feminists, an early leader in the national movement for women’s studies, a published writer over six feet tall,” walked into the room “accompanied by a beautiful girl I had seen around and knew to be a senior. The teacher was wearing a dress, the

¹²¹ See, for example, Marilyn French, *The Women’s Room* (New York: Summit Books, 1977); Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.

¹²² Gallop, *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*, 1.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

student a man's suit; their carefully staged entrance publicly declared their affair.”¹²⁵ For Gallop, the event was a formative one: the teacher's “appearance at the dance became part of my image of my women's studies teacher and part of my image of women's studies.”¹²⁶

Later, as Gallop moved into a description of teaching Women's Studies as a feminist professor herself, she wrote that “my students still want a feminist education that feels like women's studies did to me in 1971. And so do I, deeply. I want it for them and I want it still, again, for myself,” although she described the academic and broader culture shifting to view even consensual student-teacher relationships as sexual harassment.¹²⁷ As the memoir moved from the scene of her college years, Gallop described her sexual history with her students, as well the events leading up to the charges of sexual harassment. She provided extensive detail of her involvement in a Graduate Student Gay and Lesbian Conference in 1991, a conference at which she stated while moderating a panel that “graduate students are my sexual preference.”¹²⁸ Later that day, Gallop danced with graduate students at a bar, and publicly kissed her advisee. As Gallop put it both remorsefully and in celebration, “I thought I was back in 1971.”¹²⁹ Without explicitly stating the connection to her experience watching her professor appear with a student lover at the Cornell dance in 1971, Gallop explained that “when I said that graduate students were my sexual preference, when I kissed my advisee in a bar for all to

¹²⁵ Ibid., 14.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 86.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 92.

see, I was making a spectacle of myself. And, at the same time, I was being a teacher.”¹³⁰ Her focus on the year 1971 throughout the memoir encouraged her reader to connect her teacher’s spectacle with hers at this crucial moment. Gallop’s memoir was an attempt to make a particular point: as she wrote in the last sentences, “when I kissed my student at a conference, I was trying to produce...a spectacle. But I failed to make myself understood. By writing this book, I thought I’d give it another shot.”¹³¹ In this sense, her memoir stands out from others in the genre as her personal history was deployed to defend herself both against the charges she faced and also against what she saw as the erroneous cultural shift toward considering erotically charged pedagogy (or, the making of a spectacle) a form of sexual harassment. For Gallop, the impulse to memoir was an attempt to contextualize and defend particular events that occurred in her life that were publicly represented in locations such as her school’s official student paper, the “local, left-leaning, countercultural weekly,” in the documents of an official university investigation, and no doubt in much academic gossip.¹³² Her memoir was an account of her side of the story. More than other memoirists, Gallop tried to fix her story in the historical record, and used her memoir to mobilize memory in the service of the present. And yet, at the same time, Gallop’s memoir shared the conflation of past and present voices that was so characteristic of the other memoirs under discussion here.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 100.

¹³¹ Ibid., 101.

¹³² Ibid., 96.

Kate Millett's 2001 memoir *Mother Millett*, for example, took place almost exclusively in the present moment of her experience returning to her birthplace of St. Paul, Minnesota to be with her mother while her family believed that her mother was dying of old age. As Millett explained in the book's introduction, "the first three sections of the book are as much about myself as about my mother: indeed as [my sister] has often observed, I rarely write about any subject except myself, so that there is a good deal of the egocentricity and ambition of the artist come home to confront her past in her parent and her town." While Millett began with this straightforward and uncontentious claim—that in writing about her mother, she was actually writing about herself—she continued with a much more complex point: "Mother Millett was of course the catalyst but not the main player yet—not until reality takes over in Part Four, halfway through the book. The turning point came when we all discovered what was killing our mother: a benign tumor pressing upon the brain..."¹³³

It is difficult to parse what Millett meant by "reality" taking over when her family realized that her mother's condition was treatable, and not simply a result of old age. Millett opposed that "reality" with what she labelled the egocentricity of the first three sections in which she wrote about herself *through* writing about her mother. It would therefore be possible to interpret her as claiming that her self-writing was "unreal" in that

¹³³ Millett, *Mother Millett*, 1. Millett went on to explain that while the tumor was not in itself life-threatening and "had no effect yet upon her intellect and the excellent faculties of her cerebellum, [it] was slowly making speech difficult and writing impossible...After this discovery, everything changed. We realized that she had been right all along about her growing infirmity and her regular physician wrong and arrogant—even culpable in dismissing her condition as mere age—and medically irresponsible, in view of her symptoms, in never prescribing a CAT scan." *Ibid.*, 1–2.

it was indulgent or overly focused on her own self while her stated, ostensible subject was her mother. Similarly, it is possible to interpret her statement as simply indicating that her mother became the true subject of the book after part four. But it was, after all, a memoir and, in fact, the self-examining quality of Millett's writing did not shift remarkably after her mother's diagnosis. Midway through part four, she wrote "I'm in this alone. There will be no respite: the duties of the wheelchair, the keys, the phone calls, the maze of agencies and informants, the leads and possibilities—I launch myself into this sea precipitously..."¹³⁴ That statement, more than her mother's diagnosis, set the tone of the second half of the memoir, where Millett began to see herself as alone, without her mother's company or her sister and nephew's support, and became increasingly frightened that her mother would be institutionalized in a nursing home against her will. Of course, Millett herself was forcibly institutionalized in psychiatric facilities twice, experiences she described in her memoir-like text, *The Loony-Bin Trip*.¹³⁵ Millett explicitly addressed this connection and near the end of the memoir projected it onto her nephew, Steven, who she said "must be thinking me paranoid or vengeful over my loony bin trip."¹³⁶ Millett's institutionalization haunted her decisions about her mother's care, and she posed the following as a statement, not a question: "have I myself not escaped the loony bin, not just the one Sal had me busted into in California, but the very Mayo wing of the University of Minnesota Hospital Mother herself had so unwisely and naively

¹³⁴ Millett, *Mother Millett*, 221.

¹³⁵ Kate Millett, *The Loony-Bin Trip* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

¹³⁶ Millett, *Mother Millett*, 259.

signed me into at the urgent behest of its chief psychiatrist.”¹³⁷ In this sense, Millett’s description of “reality” taking over halfway through the memoir, in the form of her mother becoming the “main player” of the text, is even more difficult to understand. Millett seemed even more both the subject and object of the memoir as the text progressed. Perhaps with her introductory remarks she intended to offer her reader a clue to the fact that she, like all memoirists, was unable to tell her and her mother’s stories with complete consistency and objectivity.

The four main feminist memoirists I have discussed in this section, Dworkin, Gallop, Heilbrun, and Millett, were all formative figures in the creation of feminist literary criticism, either as they made early contributions to the field, as did Millett and Dworkin, or as they commented on its main concerns: the canon, the woman reader, the woman writer, and the critical act, as did Gallop and Heilbrun.¹³⁸ As they became their own readers and writers in their memoirs, they rearticulated a politics of the personal that had to do with memory, subjectivity, and temporality. In asserting personal or autobiographical ‘I’s, they took their own experiences, rather than those of other women, as the foundation for their writing and critical interventions. Along with a vast number of

¹³⁷ Ibid., 153.

¹³⁸ Gallop is something of an outlier in this list; unlike the other three authors, she was crucial to the development of feminist psychoanalytic theory, one of the theoretical feminist discourses that the others reacted against in their return to the personal and the memoir form. And yet, Gallop remains a crucial if complex figure in the unfolding of feminist literary criticism due in large part to the significance of her text *Around 1981*. That work reacted to, rather than participated in, the founding of feminist literary criticism, but I have included Gallop in this group because of her unique position as a participant in both the debates about feminist literary criticism and theory as well as the 1980s shift toward the personal with *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). That text was published well before her 1997 memoir.

contemporaneous feminist memoirists, they theorized experience in their memoirs, and rearticulated (or differently articulated) the relationship between experience and reality. By constructing their own stories in a non-fiction genre that relied on not-entirely-factual memory, they continued the 1970s project of denying objectivity and universality in literary representation. The yearning for the urgency of the 1970s can certainly be seen in Gallop's memoir, and in other sites of feminist memoir, such as the 2005 conference in Heilbrun's memory. And yet, simultaneously, these memoirists were beginning a new, future-oriented project which separated itself from the feminist demand for truth and authenticity in literary representation by, paradoxically, looking back at the past.

Conclusion

The feminist shift toward memoir began in the late 1980s with what Miller called "biographics," a word she repurposed from Roland Barthes's "biographeme," which she described as his "term for those details of taste or inflection that function as metonymic marks—volatile signifiers of a recollected but dispersed biographical subject." Biographics were a separate variant on these signifiers, because they were "restricted to the threshold of a book, or the opening moves of an essay—after which the personal vanishes."¹³⁹ Following these early gestures, personal and autobiographical criticism were articulated in a variety of articles, most notably in 1987, in Tompkins's personal and Sedgwick's autobiographical essays. Reacting to the perceived depersonalization of literary and critical theory, Tompkins in particular aimed to re-personalize literary

¹³⁹ Miller, *Getting Personal*, 26.

criticism and sought to recapture the feminist vision of the personal 'I' as capable of tackling the complex theoretical problems and issues that had prevailed in the long 1970s. As she put it in 1989, early feminist literary criticism had paved "the way for a new personalism in literary discourse by opening literary discussion up to politics, to psychology, to the 'reader,' to the effects of style" but the literary theory of the 1980s had deflected "criticism into the impersonal labyrinths of 'language,' 'discourse,' 'system,' 'network,' and now, with Guattari, 'machine.'"¹⁴⁰

In Tompkins's early view, feminist literary criticism had gone off course, and the re-emergence of the personal (whether via personal criticism, autobiographical criticism, or, presumably, the memoirs that would follow) was a means of bringing it back on track by simply reinserting the personal into political criticism. As the 1990s went on, however, Heilbrun and Miller in particular resisted this trajectory and offered ways of thinking about memoir as a means of theorizing. Ironically, given her role in the creation of feminist psychoanalytic theory, Gallop's memoir was the least theoretical of the group in that it mainly sought to fix a particular version of events in the historical record. The feminist literary critics of the founding generation, Dworkin, Heilbrun, and Millett, participated in Miller's project of using memoir to theorize about literature. They offered their memoirs as emphatic rejections of objective universality and they accomplished a complete shift of both the subject and the object of feminist literary criticism. All the while, they remained within the idioms of feminist literary study. Gallop, who was

¹⁴⁰ Tompkins, "Me and My Shadow," 1989, 135. Nancy Miller quoted this passage at length in her chapter on autobiography as cultural criticism. *Getting Personal*, 13.

positioned slightly differently given that she worked just after the founding of the field and was also herself a psychoanalytic theorist, interestingly used the memoir form to retreat from theory and subjectivity and to establish a concrete narrative of a controversial event. Taken together, the four memoirists nevertheless all participated in the same return to the personal and affirmed its importance in relation to the political.

While some bemoaned the shift away from the feminist energy of the long 1970s (and perhaps, even, the intensity of the sex wars—though few were quick to wax nostalgic about that era), a great deal of cooperative energy cohered around the turn to memoir. In the 1990s and the 2000s, a variety of sites of collective memory emerged. *The Feminist Memoir Project*, for instance, an anthology of memoirs edited by Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow, collected short memoirs from almost forty feminists, including Roxanne Dunbar’s “memoir-in-progress” that would later be published as a book-length memoir, and contributions from Kate Millett, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Alix Kate Shulman, Barbara Smith, and others. It also included a lengthy chronology of the period from 1960-1991 that exemplified “the premise for this book: the interpenetration of local, particular, and personal decisions and events with large, historical, macro-events.”¹⁴¹ In a similar spirit of collective remembering, Susan Gubar’s 2011 anthology *True Confessions: Feminist Professors Tell Stories Out of School*, dedicated to the memory of Carolyn Heilbrun, included personal and autobiographical essays which explored the authors’ “experiences as women who were part of a massive shift in colleges and

¹⁴¹ DuPlessis and Snitow, *The Feminist Memoir Project*, 496.

universities. Their personal backgrounds fascinate in part because they function as idiosyncratic microcosms of the unprecedented entrance of women into higher education.”¹⁴² This volume featured works from feminist critics of the founding generation (including Hazel Carby, Nancy Chodorow, Sandra Gilbert, and Annette Kolodny), as well as those who had played a major role in the turn to personal criticism and memoir (such as Jane Gallop, Nancy Miller, and Jane Tompkins).

In addition to these retrospective views which recaptured the collective productivity of the long 1970s by reflecting upon it and remaking it, feminist academic memoirists also worked together in the spirit of the 1970s as they thought and wrote about memoir together. Tompkins, for instance, belonged to a memoir writing group that included her fellow Duke professors Cathy Davidson, Marianna De Marco Torgovnick, and Alice Kaplan. In the acknowledgments section of her memoir on life in Japan, Davidson thanked the group and said that they “pushed me, constantly, to make this book mine. I didn’t know what that meant when I began, but I am grateful that they did.”¹⁴³ For the group, and other memoirists, feminist memoir writing was a collective intellectual project which circulated amongst groups of feminists. One trace of this exchange can be found on the frontispiece of the Duke University library’s copy of Miller’s *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. Presumably donated to the library by Alice Kaplan who was a professor of Romance Studies, Literature, and History at Duke from 1986-2009, the book is inscribed in Miller’s handwriting in black

¹⁴² Gubar, *True Confessions*, xv–xvi.

¹⁴³ Davidson, *36 Views of Mount Fuji*, xii.

ink: “for Alice, whose example has helped me write this book and whose proximity I miss. My affection and admiration, Nancy. New York July, 1991.” This inscription hints not only at the connections between feminist scholars who participated in the turn to memoir, but also at the sense of a shared aim that permeated the memoirs written in this period and the criticism which commented on them.

In 1995, while they were still meeting, Jeffrey Williams interviewed the members of the Duke memoir writing group. Williams later reprinted the interview in a 2004 collection, and introduced it by summing up the group’s purpose and highlighting the effects of the many feminist memoirs of the period. According to Williams, “the aim of the Duke group was not confession but to revamp the staid and predictable modes of critical writing. In retrospect, this move seems part of a wider revision of High Theory, complementing ‘Against Theory’ arguments,...the New Historicism, the more ethnographic tenor of cultural studies, and the call for more publicly accessible academic work.”¹⁴⁴ Notably, Williams placed the group’s work in the trajectory of literary criticism in general, and not feminist literary criticism specifically, where “confession” was not necessarily cast in the negative light he implied in noting that it was not their aim. In a later interview with Nancy Miller, in 2007, Williams asked her “it seems like the shift to more personal modes is often cast as a kind of Saul-to-Paul conversion from theory to confession. Is it a rebellion against doing theory?” Miller responded, in the tradition of

¹⁴⁴ Williams, “Writing in Concert: An Interview with Cathy Davidson, Alice Kaplan, Jane Tompkins, and Marianna Torgovnick,” 2004, 29–30. The original interview appeared as “Writing in Concert: An Interview with Cathy Davidson, Alice Kaplan, Jane Tompkins, and Marianna Torgovnick,” *The Minnesota Review* 41–42 (1995): 53–74.

both her and Christian's insistence that theory could take many forms, "it's a different way of doing theory."¹⁴⁵ That different way was the way of the personal, the autobiographical, and the feminist use of the memoir genre. The difference was not a conversion to something wholly new but rather a return: feminist memoirists at the turn of the twenty-first century returned to the politicization of the personal and reasserted the primacy of the literary object to the long project of feminist literary criticism. The feminist 'I' regained its power through the personal and the reaffirmation of the seriousness (both theoretical and practical) of experience to feminist thought. That significance is perhaps best explained in Miller's own words: in the interview with Williams, she described the first time she gave a mixed-genre personal paper at an academic conference. She said, "someone came up to me afterwards and said, 'I really enjoyed your paper.' I thought, 'What do you mean you really *enjoyed* my paper? This personal material is not to entertain you!"¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Williams, "A Memoir of Feminism," 86.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 87. In the voice of hindsight that characterized many of the memoirs discussed in this chapter, Miller went on and said, "I was vexed. I was younger; now I'm glad if people enjoy the work."

Epilogue: In Praise of Bad Critics

When Nancy Miller was a graduate student at Columbia University in the early 1970s, she told one of her dissertation committee members that she “was very excited about *Sexual Politics* because it was a model for reading men’s writing,” which was what she planned to do in her own work. He replied, “‘don’t be a second-rate Kate Millett, she wasn’t first-rate to begin with.’”¹ This characterization of Millett as a “bad critic” launched the history this dissertation narrates. It also continues to haunt feminist literary criticism. Of course, there were important reasons for the turn away from Millett’s work in the years immediately following *Sexual Politics*, including the fact that her model of reading could not be applied to women’s texts. Nevertheless, the stigma of her reputation as a “bad” literary critic influenced her feminist reception. As early as 1971 Annis Pratt, the first among many to do so, chastised Millett for her attacks on male-authored works which were “resonant and craftsmanlike” even if they were “chauvinistic.”² Pratt, alongside others who worked in the founding generation of feminist literary criticism, tried to stay within the confines of established literary criticism. They wanted to be “good” *literary* critics who could still use New Critical methods while they expanded literary study to include women. Since Millett’s major intervention had been to de-aestheticize the novels she read, those who participated in the canon debates found the most distance from her work as they appreciated women’s writing and defined its

¹ Ibid., 76. In this interview, she named the committee member as Otis Fellows and elaborated: “people felt free to say things like that then.”

² Pratt, “The New Feminist Criticism,” 877.

aesthetic. In this sense, the crucial project of feminist literary criticism in the long 1970s depended on critics separating themselves from Millett and reinventing their field immediately following its inauguration.

Years later, in the context where feminist literary criticism came to institutional fruition, Millett's reputation changed: she became a "bad" *feminist* critic. Her books went out of print, as feminist literary critics isolated themselves from her work on the grounds of the supposed simplicity and essentialism of her attack on men and male authors. Many academic feminists wanted to tell a story where women's critical aptitude was obvious from the beginning, and therefore did not want to start with a "bad critic." More recently many of those same critics, now labelled "bad critics" by academic feminism, have tried to rescue themselves from the appellation by re-writing their own histories alongside the history of 1970s feminism. It was Millett's status as "not first-rate to begin with" that initiated this process. As Clare Hemmings argued in 2011, Western feminism has a habit of describing its own history as a narrative of progress, as if the only way to be an ethical subject of feminism is to leave the past behind.³ This narrative of triumph over the errors of the past is distinctly visible in the story this dissertation tells about feminist literary criticism. Feminist graduate students in literary studies learn that the work of the founding generation was essentialist, homogenous, largely homophobic, and racist. This narrative makes the present the scene of political transcendence.

³ Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 56–57. As Hemmings put it, in this progress narrative feminists were "enjoined to leave behind homogeneity and essentialism, which we now know are racist and homophobic as well as anachronistic. To be ethical subjects of feminism, we *must* leave the past behind, then."

I am hesitant, however, to take the language of “bad criticism” as another instance of “progress narration,” as the critical moves I have traced in this dissertation cannot be completely explained by the desire of feminist critics to frame their story as one of ethical progress. Critical turns that depended on vilifying past critics in service of the present moment *did* occur; what appeared to Millett as a path for linking the liberation of women to the reading and interpretation of literary objects became a barrier to those who participated in the canon debates. The conflation of reality and representation that Andrea Dworkin championed in the 1980s was, also, anathema to the theoretical sophistication of later modes of literary reading that questioned the representability of experience itself and denied the essentialism of her model of male power.⁴ While these moves do fit neatly into a progress narrative, I have tried to show throughout this dissertation that nearly every rupture was followed by a return. The relationship between reality and representation remained a constant preoccupation for feminist literary critics across the decades, no matter the difference in the critical vocabulary they used.

This dissertation has been interested instead in the issues, debates, and points of tension that have coalesced around the literary object in the unfolding of feminist literary criticism. In the story I have told, feminist literary critics sought to distance themselves from uses of *literary objects* within which they did not recognize their own projects and

⁴ Even taking into account the progress narrative in which the figures of the past must be seen as less ethical than those of the present, the fact that Dworkin has come to stand in for the worse excesses of feminist essentialism is somewhat bizarre: as discussed at length in Chapter Three, she articulated a very early understanding of intersectionality, championed the importance of transgender rights, and critiqued second wave feminism’s failure to account for race and class alongside gender.

political commitments.⁵ In the process, literary objects served as stand-ins for those projects. In order to understand the dominant critical paradigm of a particular moment, one had only to understand how it treated its literary objects. At the same time, literary objects carried the burden of mediating between reality and representation. Feminist literary critics asked literary objects to tell the story of women's oppression and resistance both.

And yet, was it really literary objects themselves that determined the course of feminist literary criticism? If so, that fact would be a deep irony for my dissertation; as discussed in my introduction, I initially set out with the belief that accounting for the changing status of the literary object at various moments in the development of feminist studies would be adequate to recount the field's formation and subsequent development, including its turn away from literary objects. But I found that method insufficient to deal with the complexity of the debates I encountered, which initially collated around *Sexual Politics*' reception and reputation. Ironically, at the end of this narration of the unfolding of feminist literary criticism, I find myself back where I started, with the extraordinary importance of literary objects to the history of feminist studies. All is not lost, however: this project has articulated a crucial difference from the simple story where feminists consistently turned to literary objects to fulfill different aspirations at different times. The role of reality and representation continues to complicate that story even as literary

⁵ Here I have repurposed Hemmings' discussion of academic feminism in general for the specific context of feminist literary criticism. Hemmings' astute focus in her text is on "the ways that a feminist desire to distance ourselves from uses of gender or feminism within which we do not recognize ourselves over-relies on the capacities of a feminist subject to carry the burden of that difference..." Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 132.

objects turn out to be the grounds on which feminists have staged a variety of debates and wars. Because it was Millett's arguments about reality and representation that turned her into a "bad critic" in the first place, it is possible to see the history of feminist literary criticism as one in which the gap between life and the representation of that life was consistently seen as the grounds on which women's oppression was located and could be fought against. It is that *gap*, and not the literary objects that feminists marshalled to cross and navigate it, that has determined the course of feminist literary criticism's inception and development. There will never be a politics or a mode of literary reading that can fully account for the relationship between reality and representation, nor will there be a feminism that will adequately bridge it in a manner sufficient to a desire for simultaneous legibility, credibility, and social transformation.

Many feminist literary critical desires from 1968 to 2012 have shared the faith that Robyn Wiegman hoped to interrupt in 2012 when she wrote that identity-based forms of study have consistently over-invested in the notion "that if only we find the right discourse, object of study, or analytic tool, our critical practice will be adequate to the political commitments that inspire it."⁶ In the context of feminist literary criticism, I take this salient fact about social justice-oriented projects to mean that there will *always* be "bad critics." There will always be critics like Dworkin and Millett who speak in the wrong discourse, use the wrong analytic tools, and as a result are separated from those who share the same political commitments and even objects of study. And, similarly,

⁶ Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 3.

there is a long tradition of feminists with “bad” reputations. Mary Daly, for instance, refused to allow male students in her classes at Boston College up until her retirement in 1998, a decision clearly out of step with feminism’s then-focus on gender essentialism and emerging conversations about transgendered subjectivity.⁷ As well, a year after Daly published *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* in 1978,⁸ Audre Lorde wrote an open letter to Daly in which she said that the book “feels like another instance of the knowledge, crone-ology and work of women of Color being ghettoized by a white woman dealing only out of a patriarchal western european frame of reference.”⁹ Clearly, Daly was a “bad critic” on a number of counts, both when her work was published and more recently. In a comparable fashion, Valerie Solanas, the author of the *SCUM Manifesto*,¹⁰ was “bad” for feminism from the beginning; in 1971, Norman Mailer read the manifesto in Morgan’s 1970 anthology and wrote that “it is to the honor of the editors of an anthology on Women’s Liberation, *Sisterhood is Powerful* (a title of obvious totalitarian propensities) that the SCUM Manifesto is included, since it is hardly difficult for enemies of the sisters to score points at this place. Yet the SCUM Manifesto, while extreme, even extreme of the extreme, is nonetheless a magnetic north for Women’s

⁷ Office of Public Affairs Staff, “Mary Daly Ends Suit, Agrees to Retire,” *The Boston College Chronicle*, February 15, 2001.

⁸ Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

⁹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 68. The letter was written on May 6, 1979.

¹⁰ Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (New York: Olympia Press, 1968). 1968 is the date of the first official publication of the text; Solanas self-published several editions prior to 1968, and the exact dates of those editions are unknown.

Lib.”¹¹ As Mailer correctly pointed out, Solanas’ extremist text was, and remains, an easy site for anti-feminists to “score points” and thus has been perceived as a weak point for feminism in general, turning Solanas into something of an embarrassment for feminists less radical than she. Even Solanas’ criminal activity was “bad” compared to other feminists: consider the difference between her attempted murder of Andy Warhol¹² and, for example, Robin Morgan’s arrest for protesting anti-union activities,¹³ or Lillian Robinson’s arrest for participating in student strikes.¹⁴ Obviously, some contemporary feminists would balk at the recuperation of some “bad” feminists more than others.

While the list of these critics and their crimes against feminism could go on, the point is that many of these figures can now be rescued and recuperated to varying degrees, and the work that follows in their footsteps need not define itself by the distance it can gain from these dismissed thinkers. For the current generation of feminist scholars, the history I have charted in this dissertation appears as a full, if not coherent, project. Current feminist work on the 1970s has the luxury of a temporal separation from these “bad critics” and is therefore able to perceive the decade and its effects without the affect of embarrassment that adhered to the critical work that had to establish itself as “good criticism.” In the final sentences of 2013’s *Feeling Women’s Liberation*, Victoria Hesford asks, “how can calling attention to the details of women’s liberation’s emergence... not only return us to the elusive complexity of the movement’s eventfulness but make the

¹¹ Mailer, “The Prisoner of Sex,” March 1971, 51.

¹² Valerie Solanas, *Scum Manifesto* (New York: Verso, 2004), 1.

¹³ Morgan, *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, xiv.

¹⁴ Robinson, “Who’s Afraid of a Room of One’s Own?,” 360; 409.

feelings that fuel and transmit those memories seem a little less obvious, a little less inevitable or natural? Can we feel women's liberation differently?"¹⁵

Clearly, I would answer Hesford's question in the affirmative, and argue that we are now in a critical moment where we can deeply examine the methodologies of feminist literary criticism's disavowed figures in their own context and in greater detail. I have engaged in a close investigation of these figures and their methods in this dissertation, and in the process have investigated, rather than dismissed, the aspirations of two of feminist literary criticism's prominent "bad critics." Reading their centrality to the story of feminist literary criticism's unfolding has allowed me to interpret its history without embarrassment or fear of association with "bad" critical or feminist practice. Drawing attention to "bad critics" rather than burying their histories also suggests a possible project of more closely examining the critical embarrassment that has accompanied feminist attempts at achieving distance from figures who played significant roles in the development of the field.

It is also important to ask: who are feminism's current "bad critics," and why are they labelled as such? Of course, there are many precedents for the feminists who currently hold that title because their politics are out of step with feminism's progress (narrative or real) toward inclusivity and social justice. Germaine Greer, for instance, has been the subject of many recent feminist protests as a result of her deeply transphobic

¹⁵ Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 268.

comments in her 1999 book *The Whole Woman* and a 2009 article in *The Guardian*.¹⁶ But also, the rise of feminist theory and queer theory has newly meant that some critics are considered “bad” because of the way in which they cling to their objects. Critical work that feminist theorists have deemed erroneously object-oriented can take many forms. In her 1994 article “Against Proper Objects,” Judith Butler tracked the way in which queer studies has offered a methodological distinction “which would distinguish theories of sexuality from theories of gender and, further, allocate the theoretical investigation of sexuality to queer studies, and the analysis of gender to feminism.”¹⁷ (This distinction, of course, has a history at the 1982 Barnard conference where, according to Nancy Miller, “Gayle Rubin, who was wearing a leather collar with metal studs, made the announcement that basically from here on the radical sexual liberation movement would be in charge of sexuality and feminists could have gender.”¹⁸) In her article, Butler insisted that “both feminist and queer studies need to move beyond and against these methodological demands which force separations in the interests of canonization and provisional institutional legitimation.”¹⁹ Per her title, Butler was against the retention of “proper objects” as a kind of “intellectual territory.”²⁰ For her, and for the forms of

¹⁶ Germaine Greer, “Caster Semenya Sex Row: What Makes a Woman?,” *The Guardian*, August 20, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2009/aug/20/germaine-greer-caster-semenya>; Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

¹⁷ Judith Butler, “Against Proper Objects,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2–3 (1994): 1.

¹⁸ Williams, “A Memoir of Feminism,” 81.

¹⁹ Butler, “Against Proper Objects,” 21.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

feminist and gender theory she both founded and has come to represent, the retention of a proper object was itself a kind of “bad” critical move for feminist and queer studies.

What happens to feminist literary critics in a context where even maintaining a particular object has become a problem? What of those feminists whose object remains *literary objects*? Certainly the shift toward feminist theory and away from literary study is not new; Nina Baym and Barbara Christian argued for literature and against theory in the 1980s.²¹ But in the present moment, now inflected by decades of feminist theory, a focus on literary objects often seems naïve or unsophisticated unless it is attached to some form of critical theory. As Miller noted, by 2007 many of her students were “feminists and work on women writers, even though they now automatically include other kinds of theory—they’re doing trauma theory and postcolonial theory and race theory and so on.”²² As well, feminist literary criticism’s old quandary of whether to critique the works of male authors or turn to the works of women authors is now outmoded following a moment when feminist, gender, and queer studies dissolved the relationship of gender to authorship. There is little room left for feminist literary critics and their commitments to distinctly *literary* objects. But, as this dissertation has shown, if feminist literary critics are now feminism’s “bad critics,” then this is certainly nothing new but rather a deep and even sustaining part of feminist literary criticism and its role in the founding of feminist studies more broadly.

²¹ Christian, “The Race for Theory”; Baym, “The Madwoman and Her Languages.”

²² Williams, “A Memoir of Feminism,” 83–84.

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Biography

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