Preface

The first draft of the introductory chapter of this book began by recounting exhaustively—and rather dryly—the history of feminist criticism between 1975 and 1985. I tore it up. Instead, by way of preface to the chapters that follow, it seems appropriate, because I am writing about women writers, to offer some account of myself as a woman writer and, because I am writing about feminist theory, to offer a brief history of my own encounters with a developing and dynamic feminist theory during those years. But like the medieval saints’ lives that are the subject of my third chapter, this brief autobiographical excursion is meant to function emblematically: my political situation is, I think, characteristic of a generation of female scholars who entered graduate school before there was such a thing as feminist theory and who, having been trained in the patriarchal traditions of careful scholarship, found by 1980 or so that the tradition to which we had pledged our fealty had been exposed, to varying degrees, as a procession of false idols. In this respect, my experiences in the profession disclose a political (and generational) history that I hope will focus attention on the institutional consequences of my analyses of feminist theory.

I spent the years between 1974 and 1978 in Philadelphia as a graduate student training in medieval studies. I sweated, willingly, over at least nine dead languages, from Old Irish to Middle High German. Except for learning those languages, I was not really doing anything I had not already done as an undergraduate. The restlessness and boredom I experienced during those years was
symptomatic of the ennui of a profession that was growing disenchanted with New Criticism but had nothing else to “do” to justify its existence except to spawn “newer” and “newer” readings of the same canonical texts or ever more arcane and esoteric dissertations and monographs on inaccessible ones. In the 1970s feminist criticism was neither required nor recommended reading for field exams in Old or Middle English. Upon completing a dissertation on *Piers Plowman* which I had little desire to revise for publication, I tried to get a job. I spent the years between 1979 and 1984 during the worst period of the job crunch in English in a series of temporary and underpaid positions (in Virginia and Oklahoma) and unemployed (in Lubbock, Texas); I taught freshman English and wrote dozens of applications each year for tenure-track positions.

During those years I made two discoveries that changed (or perhaps I should say confounded) my sense of professional purpose. I read Gayatri Spivak’s translation of Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* and, shortly thereafter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic*. My discovery of feminist literary criticism thus became inextricably intertwined in my own mind with my discovery of literary theory. My understanding of each has been, from the start, informed by the other; I do not think even now I could easily separate the two. I began reading in both feminist criticism and literary theory, spending five years literally retraining myself in new fields that in graduate school I had not even known existed—and indeed, at least in the institution where I studied, did not exist. Although always a politically committed feminist, I had assumed that, except for such workplace issues as discrimination and harassment, my feminism was separate from my scholarly work. My specialized areas of expertise had always seemed remote from women’s issues, irrelevant to contemporary debates about abortion or comparable worth. Soon, however, my reading began to politicize my teaching and research. Like many of my contemporaries, I began to recognize that the political circumstances that created what we glumly referred to as “the job market” might be related to the restlessness that seemed evident in so much American theory during this time. If the New Criticism, as some have argued, was a response to the need to find pedagogical methods adaptable to the influx of new students into the universities
after World War II, it was equally plausible that the “new theoriz- 
ing,” including feminist theorizing, might be a response to the 
dilemma facing literary faculties in the 1970s—a vicious circle that 
created a surplus of new Ph.D.s trained for a very few tenure-track 
jobs, coupled with a lack of turnover in mostly tenured-in depart- 
ments that required more and more graduate students to fill 
classes. My reading in feminist criticism satisfied my desire to re- 
contextualize and to subvert the orthodoxies I had been taught as 
an undergraduate and graduate student. I began to forge connec- 
tions, to think about the intersections and conflicts among my 
personal, political, and professional lives and among the several 
disciplines I encountered as a teacher of writing. Like many of my 
generation—victims of the same peculiar forms of late capitalist 
logic—I had discovered that feminism, along with literary theory, 
offered a means to bring the political idealism of the 1960s into 
academic institutions by transgressing the boundaries between 
politics and the separate “disciplines” that divided knowledge in 
the university.

In the midst of this excitement of discovery, however, I found 
myself once again marginalized, an outsider, this time because of 
the field I had chosen. I had known all along that most medieval- 
ists did not really have much use for feminism. I soon learned that 
feminism had as little use for medieval studies, or for any literature 
before 1800, unless it was to catalog images of women as portrayed 
by the canonical male writers. The more feminist criticism I read, 
the more it seemed clear that, as a practice, feminist literary crit- 
icism had been created from a canon of works by women written 
during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in England and 
America. Rarely did feminists venture on the other side of a great 
divide erected around 1800, when, as Virginia Woolf comments in 
A Room of One’s Own, women supposedly first became writers. If, 
as many critics complained, Western feminism had excluded and 
silenced women of other races and other cultures, it had also ex- 
cluded its own history before the nineteenth century.

Even more disheartening, literary theorists—who also did not 
seem much interested in literature written before the eighteenth 
century—often seemed only marginally concerned with what was 
happening in feminist criticism, while many feminists seemed
downright hostile to literary theory, which they characterized as obscurantist and elitist. This hostility between literary and feminist theory, which began to be addressed only in the late 1980s, struck me as so shocking that around 1985 I began to explore it as a starting point for a series of investigations into feminist literary theory. To dismiss the theoretical insights of the previous decade—or to claim that theory is tangential, even hostile, to the processes of resurrecting or celebrating women writers—seemed to me to force feminist criticism into a single-voiced, authoritarian mode of discourse, which domesticated the subversive, demystifying potential of the feminist theory I found so exciting. As I suggest in Chapter 1, the challenges posed by contemporary theory have begun to spur feminists, including myself, to articulate a dialogic concept of what feminist theory might accomplish by encouraging a decentralized, polyvocal alternative to the dominant discourses of Anglo-American literary criticism and theory.

This book, which examines feminism’s ambivalent and often conflicted relationships with the institutions of literary study, was begun during my own somewhat rocky initiation into the profession. In 1984, months after giving birth to my first child, I landed my first tenure-track job at Lewis & Clark College, moved from Texas to Oregon, began a commuter marriage, and settled into both mothering and teaching. Hired to teach primarily Chaucer and medieval literature, I found myself teaching linguistics, literary theory, and feminist theory as well. I became involved in designing and administering an interdisciplinary gender studies minor, one of the first programs in the country to take seriously the insight that gender is a relational system and that “women” cannot be studied in isolation from the forces that shape gender relationships in any social formation. As I worked on this book, I found myself juggling several commitments—teaching schedules, cross-country commutes, baby sitters, a second child, day care, and committee meetings. I discovered that I no longer had the luxury—if I had wanted it—of separating my personal, political, and professional lives. Circumstances brought them into sharp and often painful juxtapositions. But these juxtapositions also revealed any number of intersections among feminist political activism, the structures of everyday life, the specialized periodization that organizes the
teaching of English literature, and the linguistic and cultural theory that is challenging those structures. These issues have inevitably found their way into the chapters that follow.

I originally conceived of this book as a means to bring together three fields that have been designated as “specialties” and compartmentalized by literary studies: feminist literary criticism, literary theory, and literature before 1800. I would not pretend that I am the first to look at the effect of literary theory or early English literature on feminist literary criticism. I could not have written this book without engaging the important feminist scholarship on both subjects. I hope to contribute to this scholarship not simply by demonstrating how the concerns of these three areas are compatible but by exploring their conflicts as well. This project grew out of my dissatisfaction with the antipathy of many (though certainly not all) feminists to the theoretical criticism—including poststructuralism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and cultural hermeneutics—that, along with feminist criticism, prompted a rethinking of traditional literary scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s. For this reason, and because it is intended to initiate new debates rather than to command assent, the book articulates no single overriding theory or pat thesis; instead it stages a series of encounters between theoretical issues that have figured prominently in critical discussions since 1980 and several texts that illuminate those issues in new and, I hope, disruptive ways. Rather than focus exclusively on the earlier texts in which I specialize, I have chosen to include both modern and premodern texts to dismantle the ideologies of specialized “periods” which dominate professional writing by investigating the historical multiplicity of texts by and about women, their difference for feminist theorizing, and the dialogues they generate.

I want to criticize those assumptions—both explicit and implicit—that have guided feminist criticism, for they have walled feminism off from important historical and theoretical concerns. Feminist literary critics, in an attempt to counter the marginal status of women writers and women critics in the study of literature, have championed several concepts as the bases for new approaches to literary and cultural evaluation. These include “female oppression,” “women’s experience,” “women’s language,” and
even "the woman writer." The assumptions, however, about gender, the self, language, and the text which underwrite these notions—and the methodologies that have been adapted to explicate them—have been generated by scholars specializing primarily in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction and poetry. These concepts depend heavily on the New Criticism, a theoretical model that paradoxically emphasizes the independence of literary texts from the very social and political concerns feminists are trying to raise. These are the assumptions that I challenge in this book. Through specific readings of disparate historical texts—those of contemporary feminist theory, linguistic theory, and medieval mysticism, as well as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Kate Chopin’s *Awakening*—I offer a critique of conventional feminist notions of women’s language, women’s experience, and women’s writing. My purpose is to analyze some intellectual currents of the 1970s and 1980s and to offer both a means of working through the theoretical problems of feminism and a reevaluation of the achievements and limitations of feminist literary criticism since 1975. The key concepts that have structured feminist literary criticism need to be reexamined both within the historical context in which they were raised and within the larger framework of contemporary theoretical formulations about language, representation, subjectivity, and value.

This book is a record of my dialogues with many people whose words are inextricably intertwined with mine. Some are published words and are recognized in the footnotes and bibliography. Others are less tangible and must be acknowledged, as is customary, in the preface. First and foremost are my students at Lewis & Clark College, past and present, who have been a constant source of inspiration and stimulation. There is hardly a sentence in this book which has not been informed by their often trenchant questions and their unwillingness to be fobbed off with conventional answers. Several seminars in literary theory and feminist theory, as well as several linguistics classes, helped me to think through the theoretical problems of language, subjectivity, and literary value this book addresses. Students in “Women Writers before 1800” showed me why the medieval mystics and the trobairitz are important for feminism and made me think for the first time about the
histories of such apparently ahiistorical phenomena as love and pain. My Feminist Literary Theory seminar in 1986—Bonnie Anderson, Lisa Hoesel, and Jill Marts in particular—helped me to think through the initial organizational principles of this book, and though the book has been reorganized several times since then, I could not have begun it without their input.

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