

A history of feminist literary criticism

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



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A HISTORY OF FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

Feminism has transformed the academic study of literature, fundamentally altering the canon of what is taught and setting new agendas for literary analysis. In this authoritative history of feminist literary criticism, leading scholars chart the development of the practice from the Middle Ages to the present. The first section of the book explores protofeminist thought from the Middle Ages onwards, and analyses the work of pioneers such as Wollstonecraft and Woolf. The second section examines the rise of second-wave feminism and maps its interventions across the twentieth century. A final section examines the impact of postmodernism on feminist thought and practice. This book offers a comprehensive guide to the history and development of feminist literary criticism and a lively reassessment of the main issues and authors in the field. It is essential reading for all students and scholars of feminist writing and literary criticism.

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Cambridge University Press. First published in print format 2007 eBook (NetLibrary) ISBN-13 978-0-511-34237-0 ISBN-10 0-511-34237-3 eBook (NetLibrary) hardback ISBN-13 978-0-521-85255-5 hardback ISBN-10 0-521-85255-2 Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of urls for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate. Contents Acknowledgements Notes on contributors Introduction Gill Plain and Susan Sellers PART I PIONEERS AND PROTOFEMINISM page vii viii 1 5 6 11 27 46 66 85 101 102 105 v Introduction to Part I Gill Plain 1 Medieval feminist criticism Carolyn Dinshaw 2 Feminist criticism in the Renaissance and seventeenth century Helen Wilcox 3 Mary Wollstonecraft and her legacy Susan Manly 4 The feminist criticism of Virginia Woolf Jane Goldman 5 Simone de Beauvoir and the demystification of woman Elizabeth Fallaize PART II CREATING A FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM Introduction to Part II Gill Plain and Susan Sellers 6 Literary representations of women Mary Eagleton vi 7 8 9 Helen Carr Contents A history of women's writing 120 138 154 169 187 209 210 214 235 263 282 301 322 Autobiography and personal criticism Linda Anderson Black feminist criticism Arlene R. Keizer 10 Lesbian feminist criticism Caroline Gonda 11 Men and feminist criticism Calvin Thomas PART III POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND BEYOND Introduction to Part III Gill Plain and Susan Sellers 12 Feminist criticism and poststructuralism Claire Colebrook 13 Feminist criticism and psychoanalysis Madelon Sprengnether 14 French feminist criticism and writing the body Judith Still 15 Postcolonial feminist criticism Chris Weedon 16 Feminist criticism and queer theory Heather Love

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flaming feminism? Susan Gubar 336 342 Index Acknowledgements Our
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inspired us over the years. vii Contributors A N D E R S O N is Professor of

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within and without the academy forget the debt they owe to a critical and political project that undid the hegemony of universal man. The result of this amnesia is a tension in contemporary criticism between the power of feminism and its increasing spectrality. Journalists and commentators write of ‘post-feminism’, as if to suggest that the need to challenge patriarchal power or to analyse the complexities of gendered subjectivities had suddenly gone away, and as if texts were no longer the products of material realities in which bodies are shaped and categorised not only by gender, but by class, race, religion and sexuality. This is not a ‘post-feminist’ history that marks the passing of an era, but rather a ‘still-feminist’ one that aims to explore exactly what feminist criticism has done and is doing from the medieval era to the present. It is a history that both records and appraises, examining the impact of ideas in their original contexts and their ongoing significance for a new generation of students and researchers. Above all, *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* regards the feminist critical project as a vital dimension of literary studies, and it aims to provide an accessible introduction to this vast and vibrant field. Feminist literary criticism properly begins in the aftermath of ‘secondwave’ feminism, the term usually given to the emergence of women’s movements in the United States and Europe during the Civil Rights campaigns of the 1960s. Clearly, though, a feminist literary criticism did not emerge fully formed from this moment. Rather, its eventual selfconscious expression was the culmination of centuries of women’s writing, of women writing about women writing, and of women — and men — writing about women’s minds, bodies, art and ideas. Woman, as Virginia

Woolf observes in *A Room of One's Own*, her formative text of feminist literary criticism, is 'the most discussed animal in the universe' (1929/1977: 27).¹ Whether misogynist or emancipatory, the speculation excited by the concept of woman, let alone by actual women and their desires, created a rich history upon which second-wave feminism could be built. From the beginning feminist literary criticism was keen to uncover its own origins, seeking to establish traditions of women's writing and early 'feminist' thought to counter the unquestioning acceptance of 'man' and male genius as the norm. *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* thus begins by illustrating the remarkable 'protofeminist' writing that would eventually form the basis of modern feminist thought. As the title of the book indicates, in this history of feminism our principal emphasis is on literary criticism and textuality. However, as the reader progresses through the volume, it will become clear that the boundaries between literature and politics, activism and the academy, are fluid and, consequently, can be difficult to determine. Although these blurred boundaries are frequently productive, we would argue that feminist literary criticism can be distinguished from feminist political activism and social theory. Most obviously, the difference lies in the dimension of textuality. From Carolyn Dinshaw's account of medieval symbolism, to Mary Eagleton's consideration of patriarchal critique, to Heather Love's analysis of queer bodies, debates around representation underpin all the chapters in this book. Across the centuries woman has been the subject of innumerable reconfigurations, and with every reinscription comes the necessity of rereading. In the space of the text woman can be both defamed and defended, and it is here that the most persuasive

possibilities can be found for imagining the future of the female subject.

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The book is divided into three parts, each of which is prefaced by an introduction explaining the rationale behind the territory covered. The chapters themselves have been produced by experts in the diverse fields of feminist literary criticism, and have been written in an accessible manner to provide orientation in the subject area for the beginner. However, because each chapter has been freshly commissioned for this project, and the contributors asked to return to the original sources, the resulting essays do more than provide an overview — they also offer new insights into the material, its history, reception and ongoing relevance, and these new readings will be of interest to scholars working in all areas of literary practice. Feminist literary criticism is a field characterised by the extensive cross-fertilisation of ideas. A number of key thinkers and their essays will appear in different contexts, and it is important to acknowledge these productive overlaps. Texts such as Adrienne Rich's 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', Helene Cixous' 'The Laugh of the Medusa' and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* did not simply influence one school of feminist thought, but rather resonated across the entire spectrum of critical activity. The index will guide readers to the multiple locations in which discussions of key thinkers, essays, articles and books can be found. We recommend reading 'across' the book as well as through it in order to experience the divergent, dissonant and challenging encounters that characterise the feminist enterprise. Despite the battles and the bad press, feminist literary criticism is a source of pleasure, stimulation, confirmation,

insight, self-affirmation, doubt, questioning and reappraisal: it has the potential to alter the way we see ourselves, others and the world. A History of Feminist Literary Criticism is indebted to the many wonderful studies of women, gender and writing that have enriched our understanding of the potentialities of feminist enquiry. In looking afresh at this material we are both taking stock and embracing the emergence of new critical possibilities. Feminist literary criticism is a subject with a future and it deserves the considered reflection of a substantial history. We hope this volume will contribute to that process. NOTE 1. Virginia Woolf (1929/1977), *A Room of One's Own*, London: Grafton. PART I Pioneers and protofeminism Introduction to Part I Gill Plain The history of feminist literary criticism properly begins some forty or fifty years ago with the emergence of what is commonly termed second-wave feminism. The history of this critical movement and its impact on culture and society will be charted in the second and third parts of this volume, but it is important to recognise that this story has a prequel. To write of pioneers and protofeminism is to explore the diverse texts, voices and lives that articulated feminist ideas and feminist critical positions before such categories existed. Medieval women were not 'feminists' and they had few opportunities to be critics, but as Carolyn Dinshaw observes in the opening essay, 'texts affect lived lives, and . . . if women had relatively little opportunity to author texts, they nonetheless felt their effects' (Dinshaw, 15). The history of women's engagement with texts and textuality far exceeds the parameters of second-wave feminism, and this history is integral to contemporary understandings of feminist practice. Yet the history of the representation of women, their writing, their reading and their literary

critical acts would in total need not a single volume but a library of texts, and in consequence Part I of this book sets out a combination of overview and example that indicates the complexity of feminism's origins without attempting an exhaustive survey. The overview begins with the first two chapters, Carolyn Dinshaw's 'Medieval Feminist Criticism' and Helen Wilcox's 'Feminist Criticism in the Renaissance and Seventeenth Century', which together establish the conditions of preEnlightenment female subjectivity. These chapters illustrate that 'woman' was a site of intense literary and critical activity that examined the power of the feminine as symbol even as it worked to contain and constrain women in practice. For Dinshaw, the tension between literary embodiments and lived reality is at the heart of the often fraught debates that surrounded narrative practice. These debates in many cases prefigured the concerns of contemporary feminist enquiry, but ultimately Dinshaw concludes that 'medieval critical gestures' cannot straightforwardly be regarded as '6 Introduction to Part I 7 as ' protofeminism'. Nonetheless, there are important historical continuities that need to be acknowledged, and a recognition of the relationship between gender and textuality is integral to understanding the literature and culture of the medieval period, from Chaucer's iconic Wife of Bath to Margery Kempe's autobiographical acts of self-construction. By the early modern period, however, it is possible to trace a significant shift in women's relationship to textual culture. Helen Wilcox observes that it is now possible to describe women as 'feminists', and to define a range of 'phenomena' that might be termed feminist literary criticism. Indeed, she argues that a woman writer could 'play the part of a protofeminist simply by virtue of her

decision to write' (Wilcox, 31). This was a period in which 'continuing constraints as well as new freedoms' provoked 'an outburst of writing by women' (37), and although in general women's literacy levels remained low, they nonetheless acquired far greater visibility as both producers and consumers of texts. From pamphlets to poetry and from devotional literature to advice books, women became active participants in literary culture. Their position, however, was not uncontested, and Wilcox traces the dominant debates that circulated around women's character, her writing, her place in society and her relationship to the legacy of Eve. Drawing on a remarkable range of often anonymous publications, Wilcox finds a dynamic political engagement taking shape in women's licensed and unlicensed engagement with the practices of reading and writing. Dinshaw and Wilcox together provide a crucial mapping of the often evasive and unexpected territory of women's textual encounters, and their work gives a clear indication of the historical embeddedness of literary critical practice. The remaining chapters of Part I, however, adopt a contrasting but supplementary approach. Across the historical expanse of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many women could have stood as pioneers of 'protofeminism': writers and activists whose thinking, writing and 'living' challenged the tenets of patriarchal social organisation and questioned the prescriptive norms of gender. In Britain " writers such as Mary Shelley, Maria Edgeworth, Charlotte Bronte, Mrs Gaskell and George Eliot produced unconventional texts — and in some cases lived unconventional lives — which have long since been recognised as prefiguring the concerns of later feminist enquiry. Similarly political 'feminist' activists from Frances Power Cobbe to Millicent

Garrett Fawcett produced groundbreaking journalism, polemics and cultural criticism. Much of this work has slipped from view, but it stands as a pertinent reminder of the symbiotic relationship between feminist politics and textual practice. 1 Even the seemingly conventional Jane Austen can be seen as a 8 GILL PLAIN contributor to a history of pre-feminist writing, producing in *Northanger Abbey* (1803/1818) both a witty demonstration of the value of women's education and a powerful defence of that most 'female' of literary forms, the novel. Fiction, then, was a crucial means through which women engaged with politics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in America too the literary and the political were inescapably intertwined. As Elaine Showalter has observed, 'there were few novels by English women in the nineteenth century as radical or outspoken with regard to the woman question as those by their American counterparts' (1991: 3): from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Louisa May Alcott, from Margaret Fuller to Sojourner Truth, American women wrote, articulated and embodied a discourse that acknowledged the agency and independence of the female subject. The plenitude of ` pioneers around the world continues into the fin de siecle and the early twentieth century. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Olive Schreiner and Winifred Holtby were just some of the influential writers whose textual practice was profoundly political and whose fictions constituted vital acts of cultural criticism, women who left a legacy of argument and ideas that would enrich the later practice of feminist literary criticism. Yet, from this wealth of women writers and early feminist activists, one woman stands out as exemplary. The influence of Mary Wollstonecraft on over two hundred years of feminist enquiry cannot be overstated, and Susan Manly's chapter

offers a detailed analysis of Wollstonecraft as a literary critic and advocate of reason, who eloquently anticipated the concerns of second-wave feminism. At the heart of Wollstonecraft's work is an attack on the authority of Edmund Burke, John Milton and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'fellow authors of a fictitious femininity, and patriarchal enemies in league against female emancipation' (Manly, 49). Manly demonstrates the critical strategies through which Wollstonecraft exposed Burke's sentimental 'aestheticisation of beauty', Rousseau's construction of an ideal, objectified woman, and the flawed misogynistic construction of Milton's Eve. In her detailed readings of these texts, Wollstonecraft reveals herself adept at the deployment of what would later be termed feminist critique. But this is not the limit of her achievement. As Manly illustrates, Wollstonecraft also struggled to escape the confines of gendered subjectivity by exposing 'the fictionality of both femininity and masculinity' (50). Wollstonecraft's argument for the constructed nature of gender was a strategic one: if writing and thinking could demonstrably be seen to transcend the body, then there would be no argument for excluding women from the public sphere. Yet her eloquent exposure of gendered textuality makes more Introduction to Part I 9 than a transient political point: it also makes explicit the extent to which textual constructions shape subjectivities. Wollstonecraft viewed the woman writer as rational, ethical and humane, the antithesis of 'false sensibility' (49), an achievement which, over a century later, would see her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* acclaimed by Winifred Holtby as 'the bible of the women's movement in Great Britain' (1934: 41). Manly's chapter traces the legacy of Wollstonecraft across the nineteenth century, exploring her often unacknowledged

influence on writers from Maria Edgeworth to George Eliot. But it would not be until the twentieth century that another writer would leave a legacy of feminist thought and critical enquiry to rival that of Wollstonecraft. Our second ‘pioneer’, then, is Virginia Woolf, ‘the founder of modern feminist literary criticism’ (Goldman, 66). As Jane Goldman demonstrates, Woolf’s groundbreaking essay *A Room of One’s Own* constitutes a ‘modern primer’ for feminist criticism, and her influence on later generations of feminist thought has been immense. Woolf matters to feminist literary criticism not simply as a writer and critic, but also as a subject of critical enquiry. The rescuing of Woolf from the apolitical prisons of Bloomsbury and madness was one of the formative projects of second-wave feminist literary criticism (see Carr, Chapter 7), giving rise to a constructive relationship between the writer, her criticism and her critics. It is Woolf we must thank for the provocative concepts of thinking back through our mothers, the woman’s sentence and the androgynous mind. It is Woolf who wrote of killing the angel in the house and demanded the adaptation of the book to the body. Goldman’s chapter illustrates how, in Woolf’s creative contradictions and her disruptive boundary-crossing imagination, we find sources for the many, often conflicting, theoretical positions of contemporary feminist thought. Finally, Part I of this book examines the legacy of Simone de Beauvoir. Like Woolf, Beauvoir has left feminism with a rich lexicon of images and ideas, not least of which is her definitive assertion that ‘one is not born a woman’. This concept is implicit in the work and debates surrounding all our protofeminists and pioneers, but in Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* this fundamental idea receives explicit articulation. As discussed in the general

introduction, the recognition of the social construction of gender and the coercive nature of gendered subjectivities has been at the centre of feminist literary criticism, enabling it as a discourse to challenge humanist assumptions about identity, nature and progress, and to scrutinise the potent mythical formations of femininity and masculinity. From Kate Millett to Judith Butler, feminist critics have been inspired by Beauvoir, but, as Elizabeth Fallaize argues, the full substance of her monumental work is 10 GILL PLAIN hardly known. Since the 1990s, a new generation of feminist literary critics have been working to revise the limited perceptions of Beauvoir's work, and Fallaize contributes to this vital process through a study of Beauvoir's analysis of myth. Myth, claimed Beauvoir, was instrumental in 'persuading women of the naturalness of their fate', and Fallaize traces her examination of feminine archetypes from Stendhal to Sade, in the process finding an ecumenical methodology that anticipates later literary-critical movements from Marxism to structuralism to psychoanalysis. The Second Sex prefaces the point at which A History of Feminist Literary Criticism more obviously begins and, as with Wollstonecraft and Woolf, the echoes of Beauvoir's influence will resonate throughout its pages. NOTE 1. See Barbara Caine (1997), *English Feminism 1780–1980*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. BIBLIOGRAPHY Holtby, Winifred (1934), *Women and a Changing Civilization*, London: John Lane. Showalter, Elaine (1991), *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. CHAPTER 1 Medieval feminist criticism Carolyn Dinshaw MEDIEVAL FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM? Was there such a thing as feminist literary criticism in the Middle Ages? Given that 'feminism'

is the ideology of a modern social movement for the advancement of women, taking shape (in its Western European and US forms) in the eighteenth century and based on principles of equality and emancipation in secular societies, it could not have been known in, say, late fourteenth-century England in the forms in which it is known in the United States or Britain today — to say the very least. Moreover, given that ‘literary criticism’ is as well a modern invention, in English dating back to perhaps Alexander Pope, perhaps John Dryden, perhaps Sir Philip Sidney, it is hard to say what relation ‘medieval critical attitudes’ (Copeland, 1994: 500) might have to literary criticism — especially in its postmodern, feminist form in which the modernist pretence of analytical objectivity is abandoned for an ideologically based and politically committed project. Yet writers in the late Middle Ages did reflect on the activities of reading, interpreting and writing, in a vigorous commentary tradition in Latin and a vibrant vernacular literary practice as well as in the prescriptive tradition of Latin rhetorical artes. ¹ Since originality was not the sine qua non of literature that it later became — a main priority of medieval thought was to articulate a tradition — a great deal of late medieval writing can be seen in fact to be rewriting. As Chaucer retells the Aeneid, for example, in his House of Fame and Legend of Good Women, or translates Boccaccio’s Filostrato in Troilus and Criseyde, his literary acts are first and foremost literary critical acts. Criticism here is not separate from creation, but is rather built into the creative process; in this way, medieval writing has much in common with postmodern notions of writing and criticism (Allen and Axiotis, 1997). Moreover, the fact that postmodern literary practices like feminist critique are ideologically based

does not only distance them from medieval ones but joins them as well (Minnis and Scott, 1988: ix): if writers of the Christian Middle Ages presumed that reading should ultimately lead to greater understanding of God's plan, feminist critics of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries presume that reading can lead to an enlightened, progressive politics or, indeed, a world view. Clearly in the late medieval period there was some awareness of texts' potential to harm women, harm that should be avoided. Why else would the translator of the late fifteenth-century *Spektakle of Luf* (*Spectacle of Love*) back away from responsibility for the 'displeasure' his text might cause to 'all ladies and gentlewomen' offended by its representation of women (Wogan-Browne et al., 1999: 207)? If we strip down the term 'feminist literary criticism' to some basic elements, then, and allow for historical change therein, we can build up a concept and explore its usefulness for the late medieval period in England — a period without a concept of civil rights as understood today, a period in which the victim's consent in rape law was 'irrelevant', a period in which sexual activity was seen in terms less of reciprocal relations than of acts done by one person to another (Cannon, 2000: 76; Karras, 2005). We shall see that medieval feminist analysis not only engages the category of 'woman' but also traces its relations to a range of intersecting concepts including gender, empire and embodiment, and we can begin to envision a genealogy of the modern phenomenon of feminist literary criticism. Let us start with an infamous medieval literary episode involving a woman and a book: a woman is tormented night and day by her husband's gleeful reading aloud from an anthology of stories of horrible wives. Finally, in desperation, she tears pages

out of the book as he reads it, then slugs him in the face with her fist. This little episode is, of course, part of the denouement of the Wife of Bath's Prologue, the long autobiographical introduction to her tale on the road to Canterbury. Written by Geoffrey Chaucer, an English civil servant, around the years 1390–5, it is a fiction, but while the Wife of Bath never existed as a living being, she is larger than her framing in the Canterbury Tales. What concept of 'medieval feminist literary criticism' might we develop if we take this gesture of defacing a hateful text as our starting point? This chapter will first explore the paradigmatic facets of this episode and will then extend its view to further acts of literary criticism by male and female authors. For starters, then, this fictional figure was created by a male writer. Higher education and official (Latin) culture were closed to women, but women, both lay and religious, did read and write in the vernacular languages (English and French in later medieval England), and a very few may have gained sufficient learning to make them *litteratus* — literate in Medieval feminist criticism 13 Latin. Women in England in fact were intimately and pervasively involved with textual culture, as readers and owners of books, which they circulated amongst their acquaintances; as writers and addressees of letters; as audiences of sermons, romances, and devotional and liturgical literature; and as patrons of writers or manuscripts, to name a few textual possibilities. Women formed 'textual communities' through dense networks of personal relations, wherein textuality was 'of the spoken as well as the written word', as Felicity Riddy demonstrates: 'it begins in the book, which may have been read aloud by a clerk, but is then transmitted among the women by word of mouth'. Such active reading exerted a profound influence on what was

written: the devout hermit Richard Rolle, for example, shifted from an exclusive and ‘fantastical’ Latin to straightforward English as his female friends’ spiritual needs and desires obliged ‘the elusive and eccentric solitary to discover his own capacity for teaching in English on the contemplative life’ (Riddy, 1993: 111, 107). Gender differences were at times explicitly responsible for differences among the intentions of various readers: in a brief literary critical reflection on its potentially diverse audiences, for example, the translator of *The Knowing of Woman’s Kind in Childing* (*Knowledge of the Nature of Woman in Childbirth*) acknowledges that English women know English best of any language and can thus read to and counsel unlettered women about their maladies; men are advised not to read the treatise in the spirit of malice or in order to slander women (Wogan-Browne et al., 1999: 157–8). If the vernacular is feminised here and ‘in this way doubts about its authority vis-a-vis Latin registered, it is nonetheless the linguistic basis of these potentially powerful social groupings and cultural innovations; indeed, ‘the vernacular may have the potential to feminize its male audience by aligning them with non-Latin-literate women’ (Wogan-Browne et al., 1999: 121–2). So women were textually engaged, but they were still in the minority: late medieval English literary culture was certainly dominated by men. This is reflected in the paucity of extant works by women: Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love* (Short Text, c. 1382–8) is ‘the earliest work in English we are sure is by a woman’ (Watson, 2003: 210), while even the women’s names that appear to be signatures in the *Findern Manuscript* (late fifteenth to early sixteenth century) cannot be definitively assigned to the anonymous lyrics therein (Summit, 2003: 94; McNamer,

2003: 197). More profoundly, gender hierarchy was expressed in the very structure of literary activity: drawing on long traditions in classical and biblical discourses, medieval literary creation was figured as a masculine act performed on a surface gendered feminine — writing, for example, with pen on parchment 14 CAROLYN DINSHAW (Dinshaw, 1989: 3—27). The Bible enjoined women to keep silent, and medical writings confirmed women's secondary, derivative and frail nature; presumptions of feminine weakness and inferiority were widespread, expressed by women authors (sometimes quite cleverly: see Julian of Norwich's protestation that ' I am a woman, unlearned, feeble and frail', a commonplace that perhaps allowed her to spread her vision more persuasively) and assumed to be shared by women readers (WoganBrowne et al., 1999: 18). And most generally, the broad and unremitting tradition of medieval anti-feminist writing performs, as it were, feminine subordination in the literary as well as in every other realm. Chaucer, as a man writing in the voice of a woman opposing this tradition, explores the impact of writing in creating gender itself. The anthology defaced by the Wife of Bath is in fact a knowing compilation of anti-feminist literature, and the Wife's gesture is feminist insofar as it opposes this entrenched discourse of anti-feminism. Her husband Jankin's ' book of wicked wives' consists of the classics of this long and ungenerous tradition, and in its movement from the Bible (the Parables of Solomon, Proverbs 10: 1—22: 16 [Vulgate]) to antiquity (Ovid's Art of Love) to the Patristic era (the writings of Tertullian and Saint Jerome) to the later Middle Ages (Trotula, the woman who allegedly authored medical texts; Heloise, ill-fated lover of Abelard), it shows the chronological range of this discourse of woman-hating.

It exemplifies, too, its intensely textual nature: Jerome in his treatise against the married monk Jovinian quoted a book by the classical philosopher Theophrastus, but the Theophrastus work is not extant and perhaps never existed at all; Jerome's immediate source may have been Seneca or Tertullian, but whatever the reality, this putative work, precisely because it was thought to be a written authority, was endlessly cited or quoted by just about everyone from Abelard onward — including Heloise (Blamires, 1992: 64; Mann, 2002: 39—45). Abelard's exegesis of famous verses of the Canticles ('I am black but [var. and] beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem . . .') in his second letter to Heloise demonstrates a corollary to this discourse of misogyny. Intimately intertwined with the discursive 'othering' of women are other varieties of discursive othering — all available for social use and each depending on particular circumstances for deployment; women, blacks, Jews, Muslims, heretics, sodomites and 'the East', these categories emerge in relation to one another, creating a white male Christianity purged of any and all dangerous threats. 2 As David Wallace keenly analyses the letter, Abelard likens Heloise and her nuns to the black woman, then passes 'from one racialized discourse to another' in a reflection on his fellow monks behaving exhibitionistically, Medieval feminist criticism 15 as 'Jews' (Wallace, 2004: 245—8). A dense mesh of misogyny and orientalism can be seen in the representation of the vile Syrian mother-in-law in Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale as well as in the courtly representations in his Squire's Tale, and we will see orientalising tropes in the thorough gendering of empire, including the politics of linguistic translation from Latin to the vernacular, in Chaucer's treatment of the Aeneid. The fact that both Abelard and Heloise

position themselves within misogynistic discourse suggests not only that gender is a system of hierarchised positions (which, like the racial and religious differences noted above, can be occupied by anybody, but with widely varying stakes, costs and effects) but also that there is a critical or dialectical element built into such discourse. Writers who penned works brutally abusive of women turned around and defended women from those self-same attacks: Jehan ` Le Fevre, for example, in the late fourteenth century translated the bitter Lamentations of Matheolus and then wrote the *Livre de Leesce* (The Book of Joy), in which ‘dame Leesce’ responds one by one to Matheolus’ sorry theses. Andreas Capellanus’ late twelfth-century treatise *De Amore* (On Love) contains within it both gestures: in a work that might join these others as medieval anti-feminist literary criticism, the first two sections are a guide to courting women, the final section a ruthless deterrent from associating with them (Blamires, 1992). Indeed, scholars have not missed the ludic aspect of these exercises, the way in which ‘woman’ seems at times merely to provide writers with a site of philosophical abstraction, a rhetorical topic to be treated either positively or negatively (or both), or a locus for more complex othering. 3 Yet the Wife of Bath’s gesture indicates that women are not just rhetorical playthings in schoolmen’s or clerics’ discursive games. ‘Now who could imagine, or could suppose,/ The grief and torment in my heart, the pain?’ (1992: 221), the Wife seethes as she is subjected to this hatred. As we shall see, Christine de Pizan suffers from her own reading of Matheolus, and she reports that another woman has suffered as a consequence of the *Romance of the Rose*. Texts affect lived lives, and the Wife’s feminist criticism demonstrates this: if women had

relatively little opportunity to author texts, they nonetheless felt their effects. However, the Wife not only shows that texts have effects on lives; as a fiction she herself is made up of texts. She is in fact the anti-feminist stereotype of a nightmare wife come to life: she says to her husbands, for example, exactly what Theophrastus said bad wives say to their husbands. But even as she thus confirms the stereotype, the Wife in her mimesis takes a stand in subversion of it: she repeats the anti-feminist discourse with a difference, finally seizing that book and ripping it up. 16 CAROLYN DINSHAW

Chaucer's creation of her is an act of feminist literary criticism. It is a deep and complex critical gesture indeed: her very life, constituted as it is by texts, is itself represented as a feminist literary critical act (cf. Dinshaw, 1989: 113–31). Acts of medieval feminist literary criticism, then, consist of several intertwined characteristics. They are embedded in masculine literary culture and may respond explicitly to that condition. They focus on the estate of women or the nature of gender systems without in the first instance seeking to vilify women or femininity; they may, further, oppose antifeminist writings outright — they may be anti-anti-feminist, that is — and they may be interrelated with other 'othering' discourses as well. 4 They may highlight the effects of texts on women's lives, and they often consist of women's engaging texts in their lives, living their responses even in the fashioning of their very selves. CHAUCER AS FEMINIST LITERARY CRITIC

The Wife of Bath is but one of Chaucer's feminist literary critical creations: in his representation of her as well as of other characters, he manipulates the gendered structure of literary activity in order to critique that structure. This is not to say that his representations are somehow out of his time, an era

characterised by the official subordination, not liberation, of women and the feminine; rather he sees the costs to both women and men of antifeminism, imagining reform of patriarchal structures, not revolution. The characterisations are powerfully effective toward this reformist end: the Wife of Bath is figured as knowing in her bones that literary history exhibits a male bias — ‘ My God, had women written histories/ Like cloistered scholars in oratories/ They’d have set down more of men’s wickedness/ Than all the sons of Adam could redress’ (Blamires, 1992: 218) — and that clerks write against women once their own manly powers have failed. Proserpina in the Merchant’s Tale, like the Wife of Bath, detests the oppressive use of textual authority by men, and her actions within the tale reverse the conventionally gendered structure of masculine interpretation of feminine matter: as David Wallace puts it, ‘ men will see, but women will explain what men see’ (Wallace, 1997: 294). Chaucer’s creation of Griselda in the Clerk’s Tale brings the gender politics of vernacular translation to the fore and explores, moreover, what it feels like to a woman to be allegorised as matter to be interpreted. And in the Pardoner, Chaucer created a character who is patently and frighteningly outside of this gendered structure of literary activity altogether; neither fully masculine nor feminine, he threatens the possibility of interpretation itself. Medieval feminist criticism 17 Criseyde, a woman traded between groups of men at war in Troilus and Criseyde, is well aware that subsequent literary criticism will not be kind to her. Chaucer’s representation of her reveals that literary history — like war — is a man-to-man affair, and women readers are without any other narrative or interpretive resources. ‘ Alas’, wails Criseyde at the end of her sad story: of

me, until the end of the world, No good word will be written or sung, For these books will disgrace me. O, rolled shall I be on many a tongue! Throughout the world, my bell shall be rung! And women will hate me most of all. (1987: 1058—63) Robert Henryson, one of the so-called Scottish Chaucerians who followed the poet in the fifteenth century, obligingly enacted the patriarchal literary critical gesture so dreaded by Criseyde: in a broad gesture of anti-feminist literary criticism, in his Testament of Cresseid he created a Criseyde so corroded by shame that she is figured as a leper. Gavin Douglas, another of the Scottish Chaucerians and first translator of the Aeneid into English, remarked famously in the first preface to his Eneados that Chaucer was ‘ evir, God wait, wemenis frend [always, God knows, a friend of women]’. This is not the feminist literary critical comment it is often presumed to be, however. As Jennifer Summit has astutely observed, Douglas considered Chaucer’s rendition of the Aeneid (in his Legend of Good Women) unVirgilian and unheroic. Chaucer’s narrator focuses not on Aeneas but rather on the pathetic and abandoned Dido; by so doing, writes Douglas, ‘ my master Chaucer greatly Virgil offended’. Heroic masculinity is key to the establishment of vernacular authority as well as to the stability and continuity of the literary canon, but Dido’s story interrupts all that; Chaucer through his representation of Dido explores ‘ literary tradition’s limits’, particularly the margins whence the female is forced to act (Summit, 2000: 23—6). The imperial project of cultural transmission, particularly the translation of the artefacts of empire — here, Chaucer’s Englishing of this literary epic — is enacted via the sad romance of Aeneas and Dido. The ‘ oriental’ woman is left behind while Aeneas moves westward to fulfil his

imperial destiny, and gender is implicated in the ideological problematics of empire (Wogan-Browne et al., 1999: 366–70). Although there thus seems to be evidence both internal and external that Chaucer's various representations were indeed feminist literary critical gestures, there is as well a sense that they were controversial. The morality of his poetry may have been up for discussion at court, if protestations (in 18 CAROLYN DINSHAW the voice of the Man of Law in the Canterbury Tales) of the uprightness of Chaucer's narratives are any indication. An explicit response to accusations of harm to women is found in the Prologue to the Legend of Good Women, a dream-vision poem begun by Chaucer in the mid-1380s and revised (perhaps because its self-defence was important) after a number of years. In this dream-vision confrontation with his reading public, the narrator of the Prologue — a fictionalised image of Chaucer — is chastised by the mythological God of Love and Alceste, themselves fictionalised (if exaggerated) images of Chaucer's audience (Dinshaw, 1989: 65–74). Cupid has two objections: first, by translating the Romance of the Rose, a 'heresy' against Cupid's law, the poet-narrator has made 'wise folk from me withdraw' (Riverside Chaucer, 1987: G. 257), and that by writing Troilus and Criseyde he has been intent on 'showing how women have done wrong' (G. 266). The poet-narrator should have concentrated on stories of good women, of which there is a whole world of authors (G. 280–310). To defend the poet-narrator, Alceste intervenes, finally ordering him to dedicate his writing only to positive images of women. The resultant Legend of Good Women is a study of misogyny intertwined with orientalism (cf. Delany, 1994); in it the poet-narrator depicts a string of women (including Dido) so passive and

distanced in their victimisation by perfidious men that he himself becomes too bored to finish his task. The work is unfinished, but may nonetheless be complete in its representation of the silencing effects of such orientalising anti-feminism: constraining women, it limits men as well and ultimately strangles literary activity altogether. CHRISTINE DE PIZAN AND THE QUARREL OVER THE ROSE Even if the poet-narrator of the Prologue to the Legend of Good Women had convincingly defended himself against the charges — instead of sputtering ineffectively about his intentions — and even if he had made a decent start on his penance in the ensuing legends, the problems with the Rose would not go away. It was, after all, one of the most influential works of the Middle Ages: well over two hundred manuscripts circulated in and beyond France. At the turn of the fifteenth century this famous work and its famous author (Jean de Meun, who developed the poem in the late thirteenth century after its first author, Guillaume de Lorris, died) were made the objects of critique in the first literary debate in France, a debate pursued with urgency among some of the most powerful intellects in the country. The Rose is a gargantuan allegorical poem with a simple narrative premise (a lover falls in love and pursues a beloved, figured as a rosebud) Medieval feminist criticism 19 forming the basis of a stream of advice and commentary on an encyclopaedic range of topics by personifications such as Reason, Nature, the Jealous Husband, the Old Woman and the Friend. The speech of the Jealous Husband tends toward the violently woman-hating; the Old Woman, too, gives advice that is deeply unflattering to women; the figures of Nature and Genius (Nature's viceroy) speak of generation and the act of procreation in baldly explicit terms; and

the final sexual consummation is only thinly veiled by allegorical figuration. As John V. Fleming succinctly puts it, ' the objections to the Roman de la Rose are two: it is anti-feminist, and it is filthy' (Fleming, 1971: 28). Christine de Pizan, an established writer born in Italy but living in France and writing in French, took exception to the poem and was joined in her opposition by Jean Gerson, a powerful theologian and Chancellor of the University of Paris. The debate apparently started in conversations between Christine and Jean de Montreuil (Provost of Lille and sometime Secretary to dukes, dauphin and king), who defended this esteemed and beloved work. He was joined enthusiastically by the brothers Pierre Col (Canon of Paris and Tournay) and Gontier Col (First Secretary and Notary to the king) (Baird and Kane, 1978). These initial conversations may have concerned some brief remarks Christine had written in the voice of Cupid in her courtly poem *L'Epistre au dieu d'Amours* (The Letter of the God of Love, 1399), a complaint by Cupid that women are being unfairly defamed and abused by male writers. In his letter Cupid cannily makes some feminist literary critical observations. The patriarchal, anti-feminist structure of education is clearly indicted, as is the personal animus of the clerks who write against women: misogynist scholars of the anti-feminist tradition base their works on books that lie, Cupid asserts, and indoctrinate young boys early in school. Echoing the Wife of Bath, Cupid assures his readers that if women had written the books they would be mighty different. Ovid's *Remedies of Love* gets special censure, as does the *Rose*: Jean de Meun's work is criticised for being bombastic (' So many people called upon, implored,/ So many efforts made and ruses found/To trick a virgin — that, and nothing more!' (Fenster and Erler, 1990:

53)) and illogical: if so much guile is needed, Cupid avers, then women obviously cannot be as fickle or inconsistent as reputed. Cupid would seem to have a point — well over 21, 000 lines are needed to ‘pluck’ a ‘rosebud’ — but Christine de Pizan’s boldness in presuming to criticise ‘that profound book’ by that ‘true Catholic, worthy master, and . . . doctor of holy theology’ may have been itself a shocking offence to some 20 CAROLYN DINSHAW of its readers (Baird and Kane, 1978: 42, 57). In the ensuing debate she saw herself as defending the ‘feminine cause’ (1978: 66), as she put it when addressing a dossier of debate documents to the Queen of France herself. Dedicated to the polemic, she refused to be intimidated by ‘anti-feminist attacks’ (63), and she aggressively revised the traditional feminine humility topos at the end of her letter to Jean de Montreuil: May it not be imputed to me as folly, arrogance, or presumption, that I, a woman, should dare to reproach and call into question so subtle an author, and to diminish the stature of his work, when he alone, a man, has dared to undertake to defame and blame without exception an entire sex. (56) Though Christine acknowledges that there is some good in the work, she maintains that ‘therein lies the greater peril, for the more authentic the good the more faith one puts in the evil’ (54). She argues that the poem’s defamation is contrary to fact — she knows via her own experience that women are not like this (though she maintains at other points that no experience is necessary when dealing with the truth) — and wonders just how much men really have suffered from the evils of women. When Pierre Col adduces an anecdote about a man saved by the Rose, she counters with a story of a woman whose husband — shades of the Wife of Bath’s Jankin — reads it and feels justified

in beating her. Books do have an effect on lived lives, Christine points out in her feminist literary critique: Not long ago, I heard one of your familiar companions and colleagues . . . say that he knew a married man who believed in the Roman de la Rose as in the gospel. This was an extremely jealous man, who, whenever in the grip of passion, would go and find the book and read it to his wife; then he would become violent and strike her and say such horrible things as, ' These are the kinds of tricks you pull on me. This good, wise man Master Jean de Meun knew well what women are capable of'. And at every word he finds appropriate, he gives her a couple of kicks or slaps. Thus it seems clear to me that whatever other people think of this book, this poor woman pays too high a price for it. (136) Numerous literary critical principles are at stake in this debate. First, theories of language are debated: picking up from the Rose itself, in which the Lover berates Reason for uttering the word ' coilles' (testicles), Christine and Pierre Col argue about the relationship between words and things. The thing makes the word shameful, not vice versa, Christine maintains, despite what Pierre Col says, and so it is not possible to name dishonourable things (like testicles, originally beautiful but now shameful after the Fall) without shame. Second, dramatic characterisation is examined: all parties agree that a writer may create characters who express ideas that may Medieval feminist criticism 21 not be the writer's own. Thus Jean de Meun creates the viciously misogynist Jealous Husband, and, according to Pierre Col, cannot be held responsible for this character's heinous opinions. But Jean de Meun is not consistent in his characterisations, Christine observes pointedly (130); moreover, under the logic of authorial irresponsibility, Meun cannot then be

defended when a character says something morally praiseworthy. As Baird and Kane put it, Christine and Gerson 'are simply unwilling to allow that such a principle [of dramatic characterisation] gives absolute licence to a writer' (1978: 20). Similarly, a writer may disclaim responsibility if he is just repeating what other authorities say in their texts; thus the defenders of the poem argue. But Gerson states, 'we censure not characters but writings (whoever made them), since one who gives a poisoned drink, even if it is mixed by someone else, must not be judged free of guilt on that account' (150). There is a sense among the poem's detractors that hateful speech simply cannot be uttered without harm, no matter what the context. Third, the effects of other poetic devices are discussed. The final allegorical representation of the sex act, maintains Christine, is 'explicit' despite the elaborate figure (124), and more seductive than a literal representation would be. Christine declares to Pierre Col flatly that satirical methods are not effective: praising evil in order to teach that it should be avoided is counterproductive. Issues of authorial intent and responsibility were indeed crucial in Chaucer's Prologue to the Legend of Good Women: there the poet-narrator pleads 'whatever my author meant,/God knows, it was entirely my intent/To further truth in love and cherish it,/And to beware of falseness and vice/By such example' (1987: G. 460—4). It is no surprise, then, that the Legend of Good Women should appear in the midst of this Rose quarrel: at the height of the debate (1402), Thomas Hoccleve, civil servant and poetic disciple of Chaucer, adapted Christine's poem into English as Lett