Introduction

Changing the Subject

There is only one subject
and it is impossible to change it.
—Laura (Riding) Jackson

For several years readers, students, and colleagues have urged me to collect these essays, which appeared in earlier forms in academic and feminist journals. "What do they have in common?" I asked. A book has a thesis, a sustained argument. And while there is certainly a polemical tone to these pieces, I was reluctant to name the argument inherent in the history of their writing: the wish to change the subject of literary study. In rereading and rethinking these essays I have looked at the growth of feminist criticism, specifically at attempts to "change the subject" of an academic training in American New Criticism and intellectual history from the study of canonical texts to those of feminist male writers and Virginia Woolf, the thesis topic expressly forbidden by my mentor. These essays are clearly marked as written by a member of the generation of self-trained American materialist feminist critics in that they are innocent of contact with contemporary theory. Such theoretical statements as they do provide, and it is surprising to see that they do, were entirely derived from the texts under discussion in relation to their historical context, as well as to a problematizing of the issue of reading by gender gained from reading Virginia Woolf’s fiction. In view of the remarkable production of literary theory over the last decade, both feminist and other, to revitalize our discipline, it is embarrassing to explain that the notions of "the collective sublime" and the performative role of the reader demanded by Woolf in "Thinking Back through Our Mothers" were arrived at without benefit of Barthes, or Wolfgang Iser, or any of the reader-response critics. Like much feminist scholarship in the seventies in America,
these essays seemed to situate themselves in a sociology of literary criticism, a literary version of the British empirical E. P. Thompson school of social history. But they had changed the subject of that discourse, which concentrated on working-class writers, and did not fit standard patterns. Hence their air of "homelessness." For the British at that point found Woolf impossibly elitist and lacking working-class credentials; Wilde was decadent and Meredith too dense. Feminists were gynocritically studying women, not male feminists, and Woolf was rejected as elitist.

It may be difficult in these days of dazzling theory, with so many brilliant new ways to analyze texts being produced, to imagine a practice without theory (though, of course, not produced outside of ideology). Recently, in fact, so many competing theories have been announced that the practice of literary criticism has hardly caught up with them. There aren't enough readings to enable a student to see if they work. In rereading these essays I begin to see that specifically female trope of prolepsis at work. Certainly in the ten years since "'No More Horses" and "Art and Anger" were written, their aims have been accomplished. Readers are paying attention to Woolf's politics. A Room of One's Own has been read in classrooms all over the country, and Three Guineas has become the bible of a new generation of pacifists. The particular conjunction of socialism, feminism, and pacifism which so attracted me to her role as a theorist and model for my own kind of feminist criticism has become a subject for serious discussion. Little about "'No More Horses" strikes me now as radical or worth the uproar it caused at the 1975 MLA. It seems too polite and well-mannered, now that Woolf is the subject of so much critical debate.

Now that Nina Auerbach's Woman and the Demon has been published, these studies of the heroines of Ibsen, Meredith, and Wilde do not seem so far-fetched. Because Auerbach has so radically "changed the theoretical subject" regarding Victorian women, my own practical readings seem proleptically vindicated. Meredith has been reinstated in the canon by Judith Wilt, but he still deserves more feminist analysis. If I were to rewrite the essay on Oscar Wilde, I would use not only
the arguments of Nina Auerbach, but also the feminist revision of the Freudian concept of fetishism recently undertaken by Naomi Schor. Deconstruction and feminism should ensure a revival of Oscar Wilde, because in Salomé he destabilizes the project of critical exegesis itself. The Christian practice of reading the Old Testament only as a prophecy of the New appears ridiculous when Salomé is created as the precursor of the Precursor. The narrative of desire is similarly unsettled as we read Wilde's identification with Salomé as like Flaubert's with Emma Bovary, with the lesbian position of woman.

The essay on Elizabeth Hardwick and Ibsen is included within the section on reading men because of the particular problem to feminist criticism of prominent antifeminist women critics. Her cultural role on the editorial board of the New York Review of Books deserves careful study. The journal's policy of choosing a well-known woman to attack a feminist (Helen Vendler on Adrienne Rich, for example) or the periodic demolishing of a feminist work (Germaine Greer's The Obstacle Race or Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party) while maintaining a general policy of ignoring feminist debate as the major vitalizing force in American intellectual life, is worth a full investigation. The New York Review of Books has its own causes. If the historian of the future takes it as an index of American thinking, it will assume that the plight of Soviet dissidents was the most important issue in the U.S. in the 1980s. Female defense of patriarchy is not a new problem at either the intellectual or political level. Elizabeth Hardwick has an ancestress in Mrs. Humphry Ward.

The last essays in this volume constitute a decade-long dialogue with Virginia Woolf scholarship, the literary estate, and the editors of her diaries and letters, from a feminist perspective. They are a written historical record of opposition and objection to the official view of her work. But it is necessary to point out that these review essays are also separate from the "Virginia Woolf cult" which has flourished at the same time in the U.S., where she has become uncritically sainted almost because of her suicide and supposed madness. Because of the nature of their origin as essays, these pieces sometimes repeat points for different audiences.
“Still Practice” is offered here as a step toward a definition of a feminist aesthetic as materially grounded in process rather than exclusively concerned with the work of art as a finished product. It also discusses gender and reading and the idea of a specifically socialist feminist criticism.

Something ought to be said here about the distinguishing features of my own practice. I am concerned about the formalist element in most European-born theories, which does not consider the text to be a text until it is published and pays little or no attention to drafts or revision, or contextualizes, as in some Marxist theory, only the moment of production of the text. Derrida holds that the text constantly interacts with culture and so is changed with each reading, by translation, in new contextualizations and revisions of literary history. Why aren’t the changes made in the author’s conception and gestation equally important?

Deconstruction, even feminist or Marxist deconstruction, with its exclusive reliance on the published text, its religious adoration of the word, can become a new formalism which fails to account for the extremely important role of censorship and self-censorship in the work of women, radicals, blacks, homosexuals, and lesbians. There is no sacred text in these cases to which the critic can be priest or priestess, bowing and praying over it in a mysterious language which only initiates can understand. As in the case of Virginia Woolf’s first novel, *The Voyage Out*, the drafts were more radical than the published version. She succumbed to her critics and her own fears. If we study only the final version, we perpetuate for our students the elitist notion of genius and discourage the writers in their midst.

I owe a great deal to teachers who trained me in British social history and American studies. Like most feminist critics of my generation, I had no female mentor beyond wistful memories of the term the distinguished Helen White taught at Harvard and tried to be a role model for innumerable literary young women. My colleagues in Woolf studies, feminist “lupine critics,” have acted as mentors; the work of Adrienne Rich, Tillie Olsen, Alice Walker, and other feminist writers has meant a great deal. The Newberry Library Feminist Criticism
Seminar was a crucible for this work. Lillian Robinson's *Sex, Class and Culture* made it clear what the position of socialist feminist criticism is, and the work of others—Julia Lesage, Judith Kegan Gardiner, Moira Ferguson—has continued it. But from a historical perspective one can see that this line of specifically socialist feminism was "the road not taken," as many American critics turned to French models and psychoanalysis. Annis Pratt's feminist myth criticism has had a similar lack of followers. The work of Kristeva, Irigaray, and Spivak has enormously enriched the practice of feminist criticism. But we are not reduced to a choice between formalism and romanticism, psychoanalysis or politics in feminism criticism, despite this development, and we ought to encourage eccentricity in our writers and critics.

What, in any case, is a socialist feminist criticism? The answer is a simple one. It wants to change the subject. The critic is committed to social change in her workplace, the university, as well as to political activism in the world. Her perspective on literature brings those concerns to scholarly practice and teaching. She wants to reinterpret the "classics" from the perspective of ordinary people and women. She wants to make the canon of great books elastic enough to include those who have been excluded or labeled minor, and she insists on seeing literary labor in its social context. She has no ideological commitment to any one critique of phallocentric culture. Having been denied opportunity herself, she will, one hopes, not deny others the means of expression. Literary criticism is inescapably political, often when it most vigorously denies its politics. A socialist feminist position openly affirms its values while keeping a weather eye out for formalism, essentialism, or any totalizing systems.

I have shared with my feminist colleagues the excitement of a decade of work in theory and practice. So much has been done that one can hardly do justice to the pioneers. These essays are a contribution to our common practice, the result of struggles not entirely intellectual, with enormous debts to other workers in the field, especially when their work has caused me to argue with them: Elaine Showalter, Martha Vicinus, Carolyn Heilbrun, Annette Kolodny, Ellen Moers, Kate Millett, Lillian Robinson, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Nina Auer-
bouch, Louise De Salvo, Shari Benstock, Blanche Cook, Catherine Stimpson, Nancy K. Miller, and many other feminist critics whose work is a historical necessity for my own.

Art and Anger is in part concerned with the curious origins of one kind of modern feminism in the writings of nineteenth-century men: Wilde, Meredith, and Ibsen. Yet the feminist need not apologize for studying men. Nina Auerbach has recently very wittily asserted her right to read men, that feminist practice should be decided by what she determines is worth study and not by “gynocritics” alone. They are the literary fathers and uncles of Virginia Woolf (and also of Olive Schreiner, Katherine Mansfield, Rebecca West, and several other modern feminists). In her argument in A Room of One's Own that “we think back through our mothers” if we are women writers, Woolf sought a tradition of female influence beginning with Sappho. I have explored the meaning of this female tradition in “Thinking Back through Our Mothers.” Art and Anger is not a denial of the importance of the female tradition to Virginia Woolf. "Reading Practice I" and "Reading Practice II" are meant to act in dialogue with each other, to suggest the inside/outside position of a writer like Woolf. A Room of One's Own is the great example of "changing the subject," and it is arguably addressed to both men and women readers, who each read a gendered text. In a broad sense the essays collected here give a different account of the rise of the feminist novelist in twentieth-century Britain. The plays and the life of Oscar Wilde, the novels of George Meredith and his feminist essays, poems and encouragement of women writers, the English productions of Ibsen's plays which incited a revolution of manners and morals among the English intelligentsia, and, though I do not explore his contributions here, Thomas Hardy's novels—these were a coherent literary seedbed for the flowering of Woolf's genius. The struggles of male artists to deal with culturally accepted notions of sex roles, the ambiguities of sexuality — including homosexuality, lesbianism, androgyny, and friendship — were important not only to the suffragettes of Woolf's generation who marched behind Mrs. Pankhurst, went to jail, and hunger-struck for the cause of their sex. They were also important to women like herself
who licked envelopes for the Cause but couldn’t risk the physical abuse of public demonstrations. Wilde’s life and work were important to the notions of sexual freedom championed by Bloomsbury. He also made it clear that aestheticism could be seen as morally and politically radical against the background of earnest Victorian philistinism. Meredith’s philosophy of comedy was based on an acute analysis of sex roles. His feminist attempt to educate the conservative Julia Stephen in the raising of daughters has a poignant irony. From Louise De Salvo’s detailed study of the manuscript drafts of *The Voyage Out*, we now know how important Ibsen was to the young Virginia Stephen. Her half-brother, Gerald Duckworth, was the treasurer of the avant-garde theater group which produced the Ibsen plays to ferocious reviews and the enormous excitement of feminists, Fabians, and intellectuals.

Ibsen, Wilde, and Meredith were the literary fathers of much modern early feminist writing. Rebecca West shed her real name, Cicily Fairfield, which would have been suitable for a sweet young thing in a Shaw play, or even a Wilde comedy, for the name of the heroine of Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*. Virginia Woolf’s life seems modeled on Meredith’s *Diana of the Crossways*. Forster’s rejection of Meredith’s demand for political commitment seems part of the reason his novels read so thin and watery compared with Woolf’s. Oscar Wilde’s comedies are the perfect illustration of Meredith’s dictum that comedy depends on the author’s belief in the equality of the sexes. That is why they still amuse audiences, while the topical “New Woman” plays are lost in oblivion. It seems to me now, rereading my essays on Salome and the Ibsen heroines, that feminist scholars might begin to look at Salome and Hedda Gabler in terms of Freud’s concept of hysteria, using the exciting revisionist work of feminist psychoanalytic criticism.

The repression and suppression of anger was an absolute condition of the Victorian female’s life. Sensitive male writers could, with less fear of reprisal, express that anger of their women characters in more open ways than women writers. Even Wollstonecraft and the Brontës would not have publicly defended woman’s right to rage. What license was provided by the door-slamming of Nora, the fury of Hedda, Hardy’s Tess stabbing Alex, Salomé’s demand for John’s head on a platter,
Diana's uncontrolled revelation of state secrets! The men were, in a sense, outsiders, and Woolf would clearly have welcomed them several decades later to the Outsiders' Society of Three Guineas. Ahead of their times in expressing women's rage, Meredith, Wilde, and Ibsen offered an expanded range of heroines to young women artists, as well as sincere social criticism.

I came to understand the powerfully subversive nature of the woman artist's sense of a female literary tradition only by studying the ideas and characters of nineteenth-century feminist men. The theater and the novel of the 1880s and 1890s set the stage for the new women, human beings, and writers of the twentieth century. It does the feminist cause no harm to acknowledge the antipatriarchal art of the other sex.

Woolf belongs, in my script for changing the subject, in the role of the literary daughter of the great Victorian male feminists, Ibsen, Meredith and Wilde, at the center of the study of literature and politics. By virtue of her continuance of the reforming role of her Clapham Sect ancestors who abolished the slave trade, and her secure niche in the radical feminist transition from Mary Wollstonecraft through Olive Schreiner, she plays two other roles.

"Tintinnabulations," "Storming the Toolshed," and "Quentin's Bogey" are notes toward a practice of criticism of criticism. They record the birth and growth of American "lupine" critical work in this field as we alternated between our own work and the necessity to evaluate the work of other critics, as we wrestled with the subject. The polemics, a historical necessity, are meant to give courage to a new generation of feminist critics. Despite the anger of these essays, they cannot begin to challenge the authority of the official introductions to Woolf's diaries and letters. Their collection here will alert the next generation of historians that there was a feminist critique as these works were published, an attempt to "change the subject" in Woolf studies from the study of madness and suicide to a concentration on her pacifism, feminism, and socialism. My repeated insistence on these points throughout these essays is testimony to how stubborn the resistance is and to the fact that in many places the subject remains firmly unchanged.

In 1985, after a decade of practice, I began to "theorize" socialist
feminist criticism in "Still Practice." The theory grew out of the practice. It seems to me now that the arguments made in Gilbert and Gubar's influential *Madwoman in the Attic* and Nina Auerbach's powerful *Woman and the Demon* give a theoretical context to my readings which was not available to me at the time these essays were written. They become far less eccentric as readings in the context of feminist critical theory. I had been writing like a woman and reading like a woman, when to do so was consciously to court marginality. But feminist critics have built a community in the margins and together have pushed back the borders of the academy. Black and Chicana critics as well as lesbian critics have made serious inroads in changing the subject. Their anger, like women's anger, is a vital source of intellectual energy in changing the subject of literary discourse.

My concern with Woolf's anger clearly grew out of my own anger and the anger of my generation of feminist critics, who were trying to change the subject without yet having developed a sophisticated methodology.

Now that the subject has been changed, we can record the history of that process. Nowhere is it more clear than in the change over one decade in feminist perceptions of who owned the cultural subject we were trying to change. This is articulated here in the problem of address. The early essays address the establishment with a clenched fist, fishwife criticism, cursing the literary hegemonic fathers. The later essays address a discursive community of feminist readers engaged in the same project. Now, like June Arnold's Sister Gin, we look forward to the work of the "daughters of anger."

The essays in *Art and Anger* are intertextual readings of Virginia Woolf with Ibsen, Meredith and Wilde, performing a critical act of thinking back through one's feminist fathers while also establishing a trajectory for Woolf's conception of female tradition in "thinking back through our mothers." Versions of vulgar feminist and socialist criticism, they are marked with that vulgarity in the subtitle, "Reading Like a Woman." Unlike the "reading as a woman" of Jonathan Culler and others, which is a masquerade, a willed choice away from other reading roles, the "like" signals an inside "natural," though not biologically essentialist, woman's reading position.
READING PRACTICE I

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The Feminist Critic Reads Men:
Wilde, Meredith, Ibsen