Still Practice, A/Wrested Alphabet: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic

Louvinie's tongue was clipped out at the root. Choking on blood, she saw her tongue ground under the heel of Master Saxon. Mutely she pleaded for it, because she knew the curse of her native land. Without one's tongue in one's mouth or in a special spot of one's own choosing, the singer in one's soul was lost forever to grunt and snort through eternity like a pig.

—Alice Walker, Meridian

In *Between the Acts* Woolf uses Ovid's telling of the Procne and Philomel myth as an appropriate metaphor for the silencing of the female, for rape and the male violence against women which are part of patriarchal and fascist wars. I see her as Procne to Philomel's text, the socialist feminist critic as reader of the peplos, the woven story of her silenced sister's rape. The reading of the weaving is a model for a contemporary socialist feminist criticism. It gives us an aesthetics of political commitment to offer in place of current theories based in psychology or in formalism.

The voice of the nightingale, the voice of the shuttle weaving its story of oppression, is the voice which cries for freedom; an appropriate voice for women of color and lesbians, it speaks from the place of imprisonment as political resistance. The voice of the swallow, however, Procne's voice, is the voice of the reader, the translator, the middle-class feminist speaking for her sisters: in a sense, the voice which demands justice. The socialist feminist critic's voice is a voice of revenge, collaboration, defiance, and solidarity with her oppressed sister's struggle.
She chooses to attend to her sister's story or even to explicate its absence, as Virginia Woolf told the story of Shakespeare's sister. *A Room of One's Own* is the first modern text of feminist criticism, the model in both theory and practice of a specifically socialist feminist criticism. The collective narrative voice of *A Room of One's Own* is a strategic rhetoric for feminist intellectuals. It solves the problem, moral and intellectual, of being one's sister's keeper, one's voiceless sister's voice. Woolf has transformed the formidable lecture form into an intimate conversation among female equals. Men are excluded. Shakespeare is important to *A Room of One's Own* because he is used as a barrier to the text for the male reader. In order to gain entry to the closed circle of female readers and writer, the male reader must pass a test, give the correct password; he must agree that Shakespeare's gender has nothing to do with his greatness. Shakespeare himself retold the story of Procne and Philomel in *Titus Andronicus*, and in it there is an even clearer statement of the role of the critic.

In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare explores the rape victim as a "speaking text" and the problem of how to read her to its bloodiest degree. Lavinia is a "map of woe" to be read by her father and nephew. She is gang-raped by the sons of her father's captive in war. Not only is her tongue cut out but her arms are cut off to prevent her writing her tale. Her "peplos" is a bloody napkin (a reminder of the bridal sheet stained only the night before), and she makes bodily gestures and signs to her father: "But I, of these, will wrest an alphabet,/And by still practice learn to know thy meaning" (3.2.44–45). With her stumps, Lavinia points to the Procne and Philomel story in her nephew's Ovid and writes the names of her rapists in the sand with a stick held between her teeth. The story is not a pretty one, but it does give us a vivid image for the feminist critic and her relation to oppressed women. *A Room of One's Own* is *still practice*, a reading of the signs, the dumb show of silence of all the women between Sappho and Jane Austen who wrote in sand with a stick between their teeth. It tries to "wrest an alphabet" from the "speaking text" of women's bodies. This concept of "still practice," the patient struggle to "read" the body of the text of the oppressed and silenced, is a
model for feminist criticism. It demands the suppression of the critic’s ego in a genuine attempt at explicating the signs of the subject, her body, her text. It is a frustrating activity which must include, as in the case of Titus, a recognition of one’s own complicity in the silencing of the subject. The focus of the critic must fix on forms foreign to the common practices of communication and art, as Titus reads Lavinia’s sand-writing and Procne interprets Philomel’s message in the tapestry. The white woman critic must be careful not to impose her own alphabet on the art of women of color; the heterosexual critic must not impose her own alphabet on the lesbian writer. She must learn to read their languages. The alphabet she wrests from these signs may spell out Woolf’s “little language unknown to men.” Lavinia’s lament written in the sand, the picture in Procne’s peplos, not only ask for interpretation, they demand action. Thus, the socialist feminist critics’ desire to change the world as well as the hearts and minds of readers is included in their challenge. Reading that “map of woe,” the history of women artists and makers, in this way reverses the current practice of much literary criticism, where the initial act of the critic is an aggressive forced entry into the text of the writer with a reading of one’s own, and a subsequent silence regarding the impulse to political action as a result of one’s reading. “Still practice” is not always still, not entirely pacifist, for certainly Procne and Titus, on reading these texts of sister and daughter, are moved to violent revenge. A revolutionary criticism would perhaps insist that it is the critic’s role to follow Procne and Titus in redressing the wrongs committed against the violated victim. We are at the very least forced to recognize that the suppression of women’s writing is historically and psychologically directly related to male sexual violence against women, that men have cut out the tongues of the speaking woman and cut off the hands of the writing woman for fear of what she will say about them and about the world. If we arrest the alphabet we wrest from the tapestry and translate the voice of the stick in the sand, the poem is a four-letter word, R A P E. The unwritten poems of Philomel and Lavinia, the stories of their lives before they were brutalized as women and as poets, are tragically lost. Woman is thus imaginatively fixed on a point
which conflates her art with man's perception of her sexuality. Because man wishes to repress her power to accuse him and to remake the world, he has also repressed all her powers of celebration and limited her expression to the depiction of the scene of raping and the naming of her oppressors. Male patriarchal writing, in its aggressiveness, often rings with guilt for its history of robbing women of language and art. These stories reinforce a vision of one primal scene in the history of woman in which both her sexual power and her creative power are attacked and destroyed. Her desire and her art are intimately related in their suppression. She writes on sand or weaves cloth for the reader who can see something other than the printed page as a text.

In "Aristotle's Sister," Lawrence Lipking laments the lack of a woman's poetics, imagining Aristotle's sister Arimneste and inventing a poetic for her, as well as reintroducing us to Madame de Staël's radical proposals for a community of readers reading society as well as literature. Lipking is sympathetic to such a project, but his "poetics of abandonment" merely fits his women's "theory" into the existing male hierarchical structure, where it is clearly less important than men's. It does have the advantage, however, of extending, the range of the male critic's possibilities for study into the fiction of feeling and the reading practice of women. Like the ubiquitous recreations of the androgyne in art (always as a feminized male) in the 1890s in response to the last wave of European feminism, this proposal extends the range of male critical action into the female. The opposite figure, the mannish woman, was given no such liberating exposure, in life or art. Yet the feminist critic who concentrates on male texts, like Nina Auerbach, is often seen as a trespasser on male territory.

Elaine Showalter, in her discussion of Jonathan Culler and Terry Eagleton's attempts at feminist criticism, asks "But can a man read as a woman?" and points out their essentialist bind in trying to imitate a woman's reading practice, as if this were an eternal Platonic state undetermined by class, time, history, gender, ethnicity, or place, as well as their confusion about what has become clear to feminist critics, that any number of women's readings may not be feminist readings. Showalter asks the male would-be feminist to confront what
reading as a man entails, to surrender his “paternal privileges.” Otherwise, she claims, “we get a phallic ‘feminist’ criticism that competes with women instead of breaking out of patriarchal bounds” (143). The unexamined paternal privilege of Lipking’s poetics of abandonment leads him into this trap. We valorize the victim at our own peril. The suffering posture of the abandoned woman is appealing to the phallic feminist because the absent male is at the center of the woman writer’s text. But, as Judith Newton argues, feminist criticism has abandoned the posture of seeing history as a story of “individual and inevitable suffering.” Literary texts are, for this kind of committed criticism, “gestures toward history and gestures with political effect,” and feminist criticism is “an act of political intervention, a mode of shaping the cultural use to which women’s writing and men’s will be put.”

Lipking’s tragic essentialism focuses on eternal victimization, ignoring the fact that the power relations which construct gender do change over time. Victimization here seems to be woman’s natural condition. Elevating sexual victimization as a woman’s poetics is a political act of phallic feminism which robs women of a sense of agency in history. Women have certainly gnashed their teeth and torn their hair and written good poems about it, but one could offer instead a feminist aesthetics of power with, say Judith beheading Holofernes and Artemisia Gentileschi’s depiction of the scene as its paradigm. Or an aesthetics of maternal protection, an aesthetics of sisterhood, an aesthetics of virgin vengeance (from the Amazons to Joan of Arc to Christabel Pankhurst), an aesthetics of woman’s critique of male domination. Any one of these structures of literary history would have the virtue of melting the current thinking of the virtuous subjugated woman and the eternally dominating male. Such a brilliantly overdetermined and insistently feminist reading of men’s female literary monsters as powerful, in Nina Auerbach’s Woman and the Demon, is far more valuable as a political tool for changing gender relations, however much she may resist the intended meanings of Victorian men, than the ethos of suffering and romantic love which haunts Lipking’s nostalgic vision. Auerbach’s re- and misreadings urge her own readers to similar subversive acts.
Challenging and revising the canon is often an effective weapon in a campaign of criticism as political intervention. The most challenging critique of the canon comes from feminism, hence one’s shock at the omission of such a critique from the *Critical Inquiry* canon issue. (Lillian Robinson’s essay, invited but not published by that journal, appears in *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*). The use of four new texts in my women’s studies course leads me to believe, perhaps too optimistically, that our students’ intellectual lives will be less shadowed by Milton’s and other patriarchal bogeys than our own. Barbara Taylor’s *Eve and the New Jerusalem* makes clear that there always was a feminism at the heart of British socialism, but male historians left it out. Marta Wiegle’s *Spiders and Spinsters* exposes the ethnocentricity of our cultural studies. How deflated is Greek myth when seen in the context of world mythology, how interesting the place of women and goddesses in non-Western cultures or the lore of American Indians. And the Bankier and Lashgari *Women Poets of the World* gives any would-be poet a rich and exciting heritage in which to place herself. Any young woman dipping into this extraordinary volume has a poetic past of glorious words belonging to her sex, perhaps a *cliterologos* to think and write back through her many singing mothers. At her age I had only Sappho, Emily Dickinson, and Amy Lowell, and felt I had to choose an ethnic heritage for a writing identity rather than a gendered one. An important event in the history of women’s literature is the publication of *Inanna*. It may take several generations before Inanna as the cliterologos becomes flesh in the hearts and minds of readers or on the pages of a Norton Anthology of Literature, but her advent is a prologue to an emancipation proclamation for a whole sex. Scholars are not satisfied with the popular paperback text, but it has caused such a stir that a more authentic scholarly version of these fragments is sure to emerge from the controversy. It is Inanna’s anteriority which is part of her aura, many centuries before the Hebrew biblical narrative. Given the chronological nature of patriarchal thinking, an authentic *Inanna*, when read before Homer or the Hebrew and Christian biblical narratives, will cause Eve’s firstness to fade, and young women will read aloud
to one another Inanna's stirring celebration of the power of her vulva under the apple tree: "Rejoicing at her wondrous vulva, the young woman Inanna applauded herself." The celebration of female sexuality is one of the wonders of this text. No guilt, no blame, no bearing of children in sorrow. In fact, this first written female epic has little to say about either motherhood or chastity; it stresses instead a powerful ethos of sisterhood and a sexuality both oral and genital. It presents a heroine who is politically powerful and sexually free. When Inanna demands that her brother fashion for her both "a throne and a bed" from the wood of the tree of life, which she has saved from the flood, female sexuality speaks as a blessing, not a curse, a sign of power, not a sin. Our students may then see the Greeks and Judeo-Christian biblical scribes as patriarchal revisers of a reality and a literature in which women were powerful. They will start to explore this first hanged goddess who descends into hell and rises again after three days as a prototype and will begin to ask why succeeding cultures inscribed, over and over again, female sexuality as evil.\textsuperscript{12}

To return to Lipking's Arimneste, it appears probable that she could not read. However sympathetic male critics are to women, they never seem able to acknowledge that throughout history patriarchy has denied women (and many men) access to the tools which make it possible to create written works of art or written criticism of culture. Women have nevertheless produced and reproduced culture. Until male critics acknowledge their own patriarchal privilege, built on centuries of violent suppression of women's art, they will see Arimneste as a shadow of Aristotle. Her fate was doubtless the fate of Freud's female patients or Marx's daughters or Tolstoy's wife—Woolf's Shakespeare's sister is less a fiction than we suppose.

Let us imagine a different scene. Let us suppose that Aristotle and his ilk were unhappy in the communal culture of family and kinship; unhappy with their roles as sons and husbands and fathers; that to escape a culture in which art, work, religion, ritual, and community life were intertwined, they separated themselves out by gender and class from women, slaves, and children; they then defined an art and a way of thinking which denied the connection between art and work,
as higher and better than the household arts, and made themselves its priests. Women continued to make pots, weave cloth, cook and serve food, prepare religious festivals, and sing the songs of their oral tradition among themselves in their own space. Lipking’s most shocking statement is the one he puts into Arimneste’s mouth, that she achieves “a momentary sense of not being alone,” “through sharing the emotions of loneliness and abandonment” (77). If I read this correctly, he means that the woman artist achieves the radical sense of intimacy between speaker and listener and the effect of the interconnected nature of human relations because and only because her lover has left her. Certainly women have written great poems on this theme, but to define a specifically female poetics in these terms seems to deny the very existence of a female culture.

We could imagine another aesthetics, call it Penelope’s, which grew out of a female culture. Lipking says that Arimneste’s “cannot compete, of course, with her brother’s tradition.” Penelope’s aesthetics doesn’t wish to compete: is antihierarchical, antitheoretical, not aggressively exclusionary. A real woman’s poetics is a poetics of commitment, not a poetics of abandonment. Above all, it does not separate art from work and daily life. Penelope weaves her tapestry by day and takes it apart by night. Could Aristotle destroy his lectures and start over again each day? This model of art, with repetition and dailiness at the heart of it, with the teaching of other women the patient craft of one’s cultural heritage as the object of it, is a female poetic which women live and accept. Penelope’s art is work, as women cook food that is eaten, weave cloth that is worn, clean houses that are dirtied. Transformation rather than permanence is at the heart of this aesthetic, as it is at the heart of most women’s lives.

History is preserved not in the art object, but in the tradition of making the art object. Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” is the perfect modern example of Penelope’s poetic in practice. Penelope’s poetic is based on the celebration of the intimate connection between art and the labor which produced it. The boeuf en daube or the embroidered robe is not produced to survive eternally. It is eaten, it is worn; culture consists in passing on the technique of its making. Stories are made
to be told, songs to be sung, and in the singing and the telling they are changed. Both "Penelope's aesthetics" and Procne's role as reader of her sister's text are rooted in the material base of female experience. A formalist criticism privileging the printed text cannot deal with the basic premises of this practice. The physical production of the work of art, studies of textual revision, censorship (by the poet and her editors, publishers, etc.), the historical conditions of the writing, biography, all the old-fashioned methodologies of literary history—as well as the new ones that deal with maternal subtexts in women's fiction, or mother-daughter relations—can contribute to a new criticism which presumes that a female culture has been produced and reproduced throughout history. As Dale Spender writes of women's ideas:

We can produce knowledge, we have been doing so for centuries, but the fact that it is not part of our traditions, that it is not visible in our culture, is because we have little or no influence over where it goes. We are not the judges of what is significant or helpful, we are not influential members in those institutions which legitimate and distribute knowledge. We are women producing knowledge which is often different from that produced by men, in a society controlled by men. If they like what we produce they will appropriate it, if they can use what we produce (even against us) they will take it, if they do not want to know, they will lose it. But rarely, if ever, will they treat it as they treat their own.13

The same is true for women's works of art. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have written eloquently on the anxiety a woman writer feels in a patriarchal society when the pen is equated with the penis. Ovid's Procne and Philomel and Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus give us a mythos which explains the female artist's fear. Here is a poem by a sixteenth-century French woman, Catherine des Roches, who overcomes her anxiety, as I would argue most modern women writers have, by keeping a hand in both worlds. Penelope's spindle protects the writer as she attempts the pen:
To my Spindle

My spindle and my care, I promise you and swear
To love you forever, and never to exchange
Sweet domestic honor for a thing wild and strange,
Which inconstant, wanders, and tends its foolish snare.

With you at my side, dear, I feel much more secure
Than with paper and ink arranged all around me,
For, if I needed defending, there you would be,
To rebuff any danger, to help me endure.

But, spindle, my dearest, I do not believe
That, much as I love you, I will come to grief
If I do not quite let that good practice dwindle
Of writing sometimes, if I give you fair share,
If I write of your goodness, my friend and my care,
And hold in my hand both my pen and my spindle.¹⁴

Reading as Desire I

Virginia Woolf believed that a woman's reading group was revolutionary; and in her edition of *Virginia Woolf's Reading Notebooks*, Brenda Silver describes a lifetime of intellectual and political obsession with reading and notetaking which belies the biographers' portrait of a lady.¹⁵ Her attitude (reading as desire) is perhaps best expressed in this letter to Ethel Smyth:

Sometimes I think heaven must be one continuous unexhausted reading. It is a disembodied trance-like intense rapture that used to seize me as a girl, and comes back now and again down here, with a violence that lays me low... the state of reading consists in the complete elimination of the ego; and its the ego that erects itself like another part of the body I dont dare to name. [L 2915]

It seems pointless to argue whether women are better readers than
men because of their receptiveness and openness to the text. What is important is that Woolf saw gender as determining the roles of writer, speaker, and reader and privileged the female versions of these acts as more democratic than the male. Given contemporary male critics' descriptions of ravishing the text and deconstructionists' search for points of entry into the text, Woolf's critical “still practice” as the enraptured reader, egoless and open to the text, rather than aggressively attacking it, is consistent with the goals of feminist philosophy. The reader's desire to be enraptured by the writer, which Woolf celebrates, is very different from contemporary criticism's assertion of intellectual superiority over writers and books. It is difficult to imagine an American formalist deconstructive critic being laid low by a book. Woolf's imagined embrace of the common reader and the common writer comes from a desire for shared pleasure.

By the use of obscurantist language and labeling, formalist critics batter the text and bury it. They assert their egos and insult their own readers by making them feel ignorant. Much as they criticize anti-intellectual bourgeois society, they add to popular contempt for art and thought by alienating readers even further. Their jargon, the hieroglyphics of a self-appointed priesthood, makes reading seem far more difficult than it is. In an age of declining literacy, it seems suicidal for the supposed champions of arts and letters to attack and incapacitate readers.

The language of current theoretical writing is a thicket of brambles; the reader must fight her way into it, emerging shaken and scratched. Those survivors in the central clearing congratulate themselves on being there and class everyone on the other side of the bushes as a coward or an intellectual weakling. Bleeding and exhausted from their struggle, they invent a new hierarchy, with theorists at the top, vying to be scientists and philosophers. Literary criticism and theory are somehow tougher and more rigorous than other forms of literary study. It is an ironic turn of events when one declares that a socialist feminist criticism should defend its old enemies, the very bibliographers, editors, textual scholars, biographers, and literary historians who wrote women writers out of history to begin with. But without
the survival of these skills and the appropriation of them, women will again lose the history of their own culture. Theory is necessary and useful, but it is not superior to other literary practice or immune to historical forces. Despite its birth in the left-wing beds of Europe, it has grown in practice to be an arrogant apolitical American adolescent with too much muscle and a big mouth. As theorists constrict the world of readers and writers to ever-tinier elites, the socialist feminist critic must reach out to expand and elasticize that world to include the illiterate, the watchers of television, the readers of romances, the participants in oral cultures—in short, our students.

When male theorists practice a feminist criticism, as Elaine Showalter brilliantly argues in “Critical Cross-Dressing,” they are giving their abstract theory a body. One is as reluctant to lend them the materiality of our reading practice as ballast as one is to see good feminist critics throw that materiality overboard to soar in the high ether of theory with the men. If we are good enough to steal from, we are good enough to get published, get tenure, get grants. The male critics who find our work so interesting have put remarkable little effort into seeing that we survive professionally to write it. When a famous Yale professor who is the establishment refuses to recognize his power, in fact defines himself as an outsider, feminist critics have little hope of institutional comfort. I agree with Gayatri Spivak that our marginality is important—but there is very little room in the margins when that space has been claimed by Marxists and theorists of all stripes. With all this jostling in the margins, who is in the center? Shari Benstock, discussing the appendixes to Joanna Russ’s How to Suppress Women’s Writing, suggests that academic feminist critics are not marginal in the least, compared to black outsiders or writers excluded from the academy. Yet a hierarchy develops within feminist criticism itself. Are certain forms of feminist criticism more acceptable to the patriarchy? Obviously, yes. Are certain forms of feminist criticism more marginal than others? Obviously, yes. Note that Elizabeth Abel’s feminist issue of Critical Inquiry contains essays by several left-wing women. Yet none of them explicates a theory of socialist feminist or Marxist feminist criticism. Women of color and lesbians are working
on their own theories of feminist criticism. A socialist feminist criticism which wishes to include them must overcome separatist notions of "more marginal than thou," and offer an umbrella of sisterhood under which to shield many writers who feel that their privileged, straight, white sisters are not sisters at all. Yet it must also have the courage to explicate its own tenets and assert its presence in public.

Shari Benstock challenges us: "Feminist criticism must be willing to pose the question of the differences within women's writing... Feminist criticism must be a radical critique not only of women's writing but of women's critical writing." She calls for us to "inscribe the authority of our own experience" (147) and to question the assumptions of that authority. I am not sure that she realizes how dangerous this project can be. My own career began with such critiques of feminist criticism, and I am sure that old-girl networks exist. Some feminist journals have "better" reputations than others. Star feminist critics perform their acts on platforms all over the country. The only difference is that we like what they have to say, and fall asleep less easily than at a male critic's lecture. Judith Newton says that she wouldn't have the "hubris" to criticize Gilbert and Gubar. It is not hubris but a pledge to our collective future as practicing critics to point out differences in theory and practice. I am sure that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar would be the first to insist that such sisterly criticisms of their work be offered, for they continue to write, to grow, and to change. If feminist criticism has taught us anything, it has taught us to question authority, each other's as well as our oppressors'.

Benstock assumes a willingness on the part of feminist critics to change their practice which may be as utopian as my wish for a historically sound, materially based, theoretically brilliant socialist feminist criticism. I assure her that several of my feminist colleagues who agree with my analysis have nevertheless urged me to delete some of the following remarks. Standing on tipoe, under an umbrella, in the margin of the margin, can we really engage in dialogue with each other? But there are some cases in which theorists ignore scholarship at their peril.

In "Making and Unmaking in To the Lighthouse," Gayatri Spivak
places a Derridian box over the text and crushes and squeezes everything to fit. Like Cinderella's stepsister cutting off a piece of her foot to fit the glass slipper, this technique distorts the text. This reading cannot encompass Woolf's celebration of celibacy in Lily Briscoe. So the text is distorted to allow Spivak to see Lily's painting as analogous to gestation, with Mr. Ramsay an agent to complete the painting. That the text actually exults in Lily's refusal of Mr. Ramsay is ignored. The sexual and grammatical Derridian allegory of the copula, in which the painting is the predicate of Mrs. Ramsay, imposes a male structure which simply doesn't fit on a female text. The biographical reading of the "Time Passes" section as Woolf's "madness" depends entirely on Quentin Bell and is not only not an accurate picture of Woolf's mental states, but far from feminist criticism. The footnotes do not cite a single feminist reading of Woolf. Yet there is no more perfect example of "still practice" than Spivak's essay on, and translation of, an Indian revolutionary writer's story in *Critical Inquiry*.

Peggy Kamuf's suggestive essay "Penelope at Work: Interruptions in *A Room of One's Own*" also fails to keep faith with its subject. The politics of the footnote is the subject of another essay, but it is clear from Kamuf's reading of Woolf through Foucault, Descartes, and *The Odyssey* (like Spivak's reading through Derrida and Freud), that the critics reject the role of common reader to Woolf's common writer, and that they also reject the notion of a community or collective of feminist criticism. It is not "still practice," and it does not try to wrest a woman's alphabet from the woman writer but spells her message in the letters of canonical criticism. More important, Spivak and Kamuf reject explicitly Woolf's role as foremother of feminist criticism in *A Room of One's Own*. There she outlines "thinking back through our mothers" as writing practice for feminist critics as well as novelists, and shows us how to do feminist criticism. By refusing to accept their role as inheritors of this tradition established by Woolf, seeing her only as a writer whose texts are decoded with male tools, whose premises they dare not enter without the support of male systems, they assert themselves as superior and isolated from their subject as well as from those other critics who have seen themselves
as descendants of Woolf, the feminist critic. In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf stakes out the territory for the practice of feminist criticism, includes the history of women writing before her, and prophesies the future. But these critics deny the authority of female text. By taking father-guides to map the labyrinth of the female text, they deny the motherhood of the author of the text. These readings reinforce patriarchal authority. By reading Woolf through Foucault, Kamuf names Foucault's critique of the history of sexuality as more powerful than Woolf's. By reading Woolf through Derrida, Spivak serves patriarchy by insisting on a heterosexuality which the novel attacks by privileging chastity in the woman artist. The critic takes a position which is daughter to the father, not daughter to the mother. Is Woolf so frightening to the female critic, are her proposals so radical, that she must provide herself with a male medium through whom to approach the text? What they seem unable to accept is their own daughterhood as critics to Woolf's role as the mother of socialist feminist criticism. One of the major points of *A Room of One's Own* is the clear injunction to the audience of female students to avoid male mentors, the assertion with the story of Oscar Browning that the British academic world is a male homosexual hegemony which needs to deny women to stay in power. Woolf says when turned back from the university library, "Never will I wake those echoes again." Why does the female critic wake those echoes? What one asks of Peggy Kamuf is an interrogation and revision of the methods of her male mentors from the perspective of feminism, an effort to include her work in the feminist dialogue with theory and criticism, to historicize and contextualize her compelling readings of texts.

I suggest that the course Woolf proposes, if taken seriously as intellectual and political action, is often too difficult for women trained by men to do. In effect, the critic says to the writer, "I cannot face your female authority without a male guide; I cannot face the historical fact, the interrupted woman writer, without interrupting the woman telling me the story of woman's oppression." There is a way of being a feminist critic without insisting on the role of daughter of Derrida *or femme de Foucault*, a way of accepting and exploiting the margi-
nality of women and of feminist literary criticism. It is a way described in *Three Guineas* as the alternative institution built by women and working-class men. The critic must join the Outsiders’ Society. I am not denying the brilliance of Spivak and Kamuf as critics. It is because I have learned from them that I want to ask them to reject male formalist models for criticism. I do not even claim that a pragmatic historical feminist criticism is the only way to read a text. Yet I am hopeful that a materialist “still practice” may emerge.

I would also like to see a more sisterly relationship develop between feminist theorists and feminist scholars. At present the scholars generously acknowledge the theorists, but the theorists, like their brothers, follow the fashionable practice of minimalism in footnoting, often slighting the years of scholarship, textual editing, and interpretation without which their own work could not begin. This is a denial of the place of one’s own work in literary history, asserting as virgin births interpretations which have ancestry. As Virginia Woolf claimed of art that “masterpieces are not single and solitary births,” so one may claim that criticism itself has a familial and cultural history. Perhaps theorists, like the characters in Oscar Wilde’s plays, want to be orphaned. It increases the cachet of avant-gardism. A look at feminist interpretations of Virginia Woolf’s madness would have altered Spivak’s reading of the “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse*. It does not seem necessary for Peggy Kamuf cavalierly to dismiss the importance of the historical authenticity of Héloïse’s letters to Abelard in her brilliant *Fictions of Feminine Desire*. That their authenticity is questioned is surely part of the historical suppression of the idea or evidence of female desire. Whether Héloïse wrote the letters or the Portuguese Nun was a man is of interest to the argument about female desire. Why this defensive bristling at the historical nature of our enterprise as well as its collectivity? Who profits when departments of literature reward theorists more than scholars? As Virginia Woolf wrote, one must beware of the headmaster with a measuring rod up his sleeve. Who set us in competition with one another, and for such small stakes? The prize is only, as Woolf dryly remarks, an ornamental pot. There is also a real problem, which I do not wish to minimize,
for left-wing feminist critics, regarding whether our Marxism or socialism is mediated through men. Certainly Jameson, Said, and Eagleton do not make things any easier for us. (Eagleton has now added feminism to his repertoire, and Elaine Showalter has discussed his appropriation and Jonathan Culler's in "Critical Cross-Dressing." Said's critique of racism can only benefit from a concurrent reading of sexism and their interrelation. Jameson's Marxism resists feminism from its presentation as a totalizing system. While one does not wish to supplant it with an equally totalizing feminism, this remains a fruitful area of inquiry, as opposed to recent moves toward the totalizing of Lacanian psychoanalysis.)

What would a truly socialist feminist criticism look like? We do have some examples in Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Townsend Warner. What Sylvia Townsend Warner calls the "backstairs or pantry-door" marginality of the feminist critic is a position to be prized and protected. Yet the practice and recent production of theory professionalizes the feminist critic and makes her safe for academe. But I am not sure if it is worth giving up Procne's Bacchic vine leaves for an academic robe. The writing practice of some new theory is often heavily authoritarian, deliberately difficult, and composed in a pseudoscientific language which frightens off or intimidates the common reader. If criticism is reading, then contemporary theorists often move too aggressively and too fast for "still practice." If we are really worried about how few of our students read, how can we write essays which deny our own readers the pleasures of reading? A new feminist alphabet which we wrest from the text and arrest in our criticism should not be an imitation of the Greek or Latin by which older generations of critics declared themselves priests of art and culture, superior to the mass of ordinary readers. As feminisms proliferate, it is clear that there is no monolithic feminist practice. We are still in struggle with language and theory, as the "wrest" in my title suggests. Where we "arrest" the logos from a phallocentric alphabet, we are stopping it in its tracks, fixing it in a female gaze, as the male has fixed the female image. Yet as we are also taking this alphabet into our own custody, we need not make an unreadable criticism. A demotic female tongue
may surely be spelled out in which criticism is conversation, as in *A Room of One's Own*. Let yourselves go, feminist critics. Wind Bacchic vine leaves in your hair, as Procte did when she went to find her sister. How can we read the message of the tapestry, the words scraped on the sand, if our own tongues practice patriarchal criticism, wars of words? Openness to the text and sharing conversation with our readers is not as intellectually safe as a formal practice, distanced from the desire Woolf sees embodied in the act of reading. Here is a critic speaking in such a voice, aware of her place in the history of feminist criticism. Intimacy between the woman writer and reader, reproduced by that reader for her reader, is not always easy. The white heterosexual critic often fears such an intimacy with black, Chicana or lesbian writers, and class can constitute a serious obstacle. It is not surprising that it is in nonacademic works where the principle of "still practice" or reading as desire is beautifully practiced, most recently in Rachel Brownstein's *Becoming A Heroine*, Joanna Russ's *How To Suppress Women’s Writing*, and Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*.25

We are now fortunate to have in print, tucked away in the back of her *Collected Poems*, Sylvia Townsend Warner’s 1959 Peter Le Neve Foster Lecture delivered to the Royal Society of Arts as a sequel to *A Room of One’s Own*.26 The year 1959 was a low point for Woolf’s reputation, and Townsend Warner was reviving a “lost” book by her imitation of it, and by asking to have Leonard Woolf introduce her. Sylvia Townsend Warner was a poet, novelist, historian of early music, a lesbian, and a leftist (a long-time member of the Communist Party). Her feminist fantasy novel *Lolly Willowes* (1929) is as brilliant as *Orlando* and has had a small but faithful audience of admirers. "Women as Writers" is not a seductive sapphistry like *A Room of One’s Own*, but in its own dry, wryly ironic way it continues the work of its predecessor as feminist criticism. It modestly apprentices itself (we might say daughters itself to its mother text) and brings up to date the history of women writers. Like Woolf, Warner opens with doubts about the subject chosen for her, a technique which forces the audience to participate in the lecture and makes them responsible for the subject.
"Even when people tell me I am a lady novelist, it is the wording of the allegation I take exception to, not the allegation itself. . . . Supposing I had been a man, a gentleman novelist, would I have been asked to lecture on Men as Writers? I thought it improbable." "It would appear," she goes on to say,

that when a woman writes a book, the action sets up an extraneous vibration. Something happens that must be accounted for. It is the action that does it, not the product. It is only in very rare, and rather non-literary instances, that the product—Uncle Tom's Cabin, say, or the Memoirs of Harriet Wilson—is the jarring note. It would also appear that this extraneous vibration may be differently received and differently resounded. Some surfaces mute it. Off others, it is violently resonated. It is also subject to the influence of climate, the climate of popular opinion. In a fine dry climate the dissonance caused by a woman writing a book has much less intensity than in a damp foggy one. Overriding these variations due to surface and climate is the fact that the volume increases with the mass—as summarized in MacHeath's Law:

One wife is too much for most husbands to hear.
But two at a time sure no mortal could bear.

Finally, it would appear that the vibration is not set up until a woman seizes a pen. She may invent, but she may not write down. MacHeath's Law explains why the early women writers caused so little alarm. They only went off one at a time. [Collected Poems of Sylvia Townsend Warner, pp. 256, 266]

Townsend Warner adds her own footnotes to A Room's of One's Own's name-dropping (the lecture's oblique purpose was to supply students with the names of women writers) from Mother Goose to Lady Murasaki. Her iconoclastic opinions are "I doubt if Pope would have laid so much stress on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu being dirty if she had not been inky"; too much is made of Dr. Johnson on women preachers and not enough of his support of Fanny Burney; Jane Aus-
ten's "immediacy" keeps a bookful of rather "undistinguished charac-
ters" alive; George Eliot is a lecturer and an edifier—"it seems to me
that George Eliot insisted upon being a superlative Mrs. Trimmer" (270). Like Woolf's socialist insistence on the importance of money
and the material circumstances of the artist, Townsend Warner's
analysis emphasizes class and economics. She sees the difference
between the nineteenth-century writer and the modern writer in terms
of the first's being hampered by an attribution of moral superiority,
while the second is hampered by "an attribution of innate physical
superiority." "There is, for instance, bi-location. It is well known that
a woman can be in two places at once; at her desk and at her
washing-machine. . . . Her mind is so extensive that it can simultane-
ously follow a train of thought, remember what it was she had to tell
the electrician, answer the telephone, keep an eye on the time and
not forget about the potatoes" (267-68).

Her one positive assertion about women as writers is that they are
"obstinate and sly." (267) Her examples of good clear writing are
Florence Nightingale's medical reports, a recipe for custard (perhaps
in tribute to Woolf's descriptions of the dinners in her lectures), a
fifteenth-century letter about apoplexy, a fourteenth-century Norfolk
mystic's "I Saw God in a Point," and Frances Cornford's poem, describ-
ing a Cypriot mother breastfeeding her baby. Obstinate and sly as the
writers she discusses, Sylvia Townsend Warner equates women outsid-
ers with Shakespeare, climbing into the castle of literature through
the pantry window. "It is a dizzying conclusion, but it must be faced.
Women, entering literature, entered it on the same footing as William
Shakespeare" (271). That's as daring a rhetorical trick as any Virginia
Woolf ever penned. Because they have had no training, women writers
share with Shakespeare a "kind of workaday democracy, an ease and
appreciativeness in low company," and an ear for common speech.
She advocates the tradesman's door as an alternate entrance to liter-
ature, citing the success of Aphra Behn. Writing is now an acceptable
trade, except among the upper classes. "Suppose that a royal princess
could not tear herself from the third act of her tragedy in order to
open a play-centre. People would be gravely put out, especially the
men who had been building the play-centre, men who have taught
their wives to know their place, and who expect princesses to be
equally dutiful" (273).

Since most women writers are middle class, she says, their writing
reflects middle-class virtues. She longs for a woman Clare or Burns
or Bunyan. Like Woolf, she urges the working-class woman to write:
"A working class woman may be as gifted as all the women writers
I have spoken of today, all rolled into one; but it is not part of her
duty to write a masterpiece." Like Woolf's eloquent peroration to the
women absent from her lecture because they are washing up the
dishes, Townsend Warner ends with a leap out of the cozy class and
cultural world of her audience:

It may well be that the half has not yet been told us: the
unbridled masterpieces, daring innovations, epics, tragedies,
works of genial impropriety—all the things that so far women
have singly failed to produce—have been socially not sexually
debared; that at this moment a Joan Milton or a Françoise
Rabelais may have left the washing unironed and the stew
uncared for because she can't wait to begin.

In twenty-five years feminist critics have shown that indeed the
half was not told us of our heritage in women writers. Princesses are
not yet writing plays, but the works of black people and other minorities
are being rediscovered, written, and read. But Some of Us Are Brave
and the Mexican-American collections published by Arte Publico Press
at the University of Houston make clear that both artists and critics
of subject peoples have voices. Many a stewpot has burned, and many
a man has learned to iron or gone unpressed to his job since then.
We all have our own candidates for Joan Milton and Françoise Rabelais.
My Joan Milton is Mary Daly; yours may be the early mystic Jane
Lead. My candidate for Françoise Rabelais is June Arnold; yours may
be Zora Neale Hurston. Because Judith Shakespeare is not only
Radclyffe Hall but all the silenced women of history, the continuing
work of the critical task of keeping this heritage alive and broadening
its base across race, class, and national prejudice is part of what Woolf
meant by “thinking back through our mothers.”

After Townsend Warner, A Room of One’s Own was rewritten and reinterpreted by Mary Elliman in Thinking about Women, Adrienne Rich in On Lies, Secrets and Silence, Tillie Olsen in Silences, Carolyn Heilbrun in Reinventing Womanhood, Lillian Robinson in Sex, Class and Culture, Joanna Russ in How To Suppress Women’s Writing, and Alice Walker in In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens. They consciously paid tribute to Woolf and pushed the barriers further back to include as many women writers as possible. It was less than a decade ago that Lillian Robinson read a working woman’s diary to an audience of outraged scholars and called it literature. What these writers have in common with Woolf and Townsend Warner as well as the mute inglorious Joan Miltons whose writing they value is obstinacy and slyness. They speak intimately to the reader, and they are amusing and witty. One after the other they have climbed in the pantry window of literary criticism, taking note of the muddy footprints of their predecessors. In this way literary criticism moves from one generation to the next, affirming its mothers’ works and moving them along.

Reading as Desire II

Virginia Woolf’s description of the rapture she experienced in “a state of reading” with its “elimination of the ego” equates reading with the female erotic. Reading is desire, and in To the Lighthouse, Woolf explicates a practice of gender-different experiences in descriptions of Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay as readers. There was, of course, a special thrill associated with reading in Woolf’s mind, since she had been so often forbidden to read, assured that it had contributed to her mental instability and might cause further breakdowns. Books, both erotic and dangerous, were also material objects to be treated with care. Woolf often bound books, set type, and performed all the other physical tasks in the making of books. Such an intimate relationship to the material production of one’s work is rare for novelists, though poets have often stayed close to type and paper. Woolf suggests that there is clearly a female aesthetic of reading (very different from
contemporary feminist arguments about the resisting reader or even Nina Auerbach's claim, in *Woman and the Demon*, that Victorian women deliberately misread portraits of evil, witchlike women (as figures of power), opposed to a male, aggressive, egotistical and abstract aesthetic, which desires to conquer and control the book or use it for the aggrandizement of the self.

Adrienne Monnier, who owned the Paris bookshop *Les Amis des Livres*, across from Sylvia Beach's *Shakespeare and Co.*, described women's reading as enacting the desire to recall the mother's voice reading to one as a child. This is certainly true for Woolf and for Colette. One may argue then, that the female reading experience is *erotic, dangerous, and expressive of the desire to merge with the mother*. The book, which a woman treats with such care, is the mother's body. Adrienne Monnier described a woman's attitude toward books and reading:

> She will not experience the need, like a masculine reader, to own her favorite authors in beautiful and lasting editions. . . . She will prefer to keep the ordinary editions that were the very ones she read first, and she will surround them with kind attentions; she will cover them with fine patterned paper . . . it is not she who will have the nasty habit of writing in the margins. . . . The fact of writing in the margins is furthermore specifically masculine. Yes, it is curious, a man . . . often corrects the author, he underlines, he denies, he opposes his judgment; in fact, he *adds himself to it*. A woman remains silent when she does not like something, and when she detests something *she cuts it out.*

Colette describes the book-lined shelves of her mother's house as like the protective lining of the womb. She recalls choosing books in the dark as if feeling along the keyboard of a piano, taking sensuous delight in the colors and textures of the bindings. As a child she chose her fairy tales by their illustrations, and she compares the text of a story to Walter Crane's illustrations: "The large characters of his text linked up picture with picture like the plain pieces of net connecting
the patterns in lace."^30 Her pleasure in books was physical, and like Woolf she took special delight as a writer in beautiful paper and well-designed pens. She uses the female images of sewing, embroidering, or lace-making to describe books: "Beautiful books that I used to read, beautiful books that I left unread, warm covering of the walls of my home, variegated tapestry whose hidden design rejoiced my initiated eyes." Jean Rhys also associated reading with her mother's sewing, the reading eye with the eye of a needle and the "I" of identity:

Before I could read, almost a baby, I imagined that God, this strange thing or person I heard about, was a book. Sometimes it was a large book standing upright and half open and I could see the print inside but it made no sense to me. Other times the book was smaller and inside were sharp flashing things. The smaller book was, I am sure now, my mother's needle book, and the sharp flashing things were her needles with the sun on them.^31

When Rhy's nurse, Meta, caught her reading the Arabian Nights, she told her that her eyes would fall out if the kept reading so much, leaving only the pupils, "like heads of black pins." Rhys's most persistent memory of her mother captures her stirring jelly with one hand and reading Marie Corelli's sensational The Sorrows of Satan with the other. Anna reads Nana in The Voyage in the Dark, its lurid jacket depicting a dark girl sitting on the knee of a bald gentleman as much of a context to the story as her clothes are to her body: "The print was very small, and the endless procession of words gave me a curious feeling—sad, excited, frightened. It wasn't what I was reading, it was the look of the work, blurred words going on endlessly that gave me that feeling." (Voyage, p. 9) The male text (God/Phallus/Logos) remains illegible even when it tells in such graphic detail the fate of Anna's own female body.

Colette was forbidden to read Zola by her father, though her mother said "There are no such things as harmful books" (My Mother's House and Sido, p. 37). She stole a Zola novel and fainted with shock at its graphic description of childbirth. Her mother comforted her, telling
of her own difficult birth and reassuring her that she was loved more
because she had caused so much pain and had been so reluctant to
leave the womb. Colette wrote:

Books, books, books. It was not that I read so many. I read and
re-read the same ones. But all of them were necessary to me.
Their presence, their smell the letters of their titles and the
texture of their leather bindings. Perhaps the most hermetically
sealed were the dearest. I have long forgotten the name of the
author of a scarlet-clad Encyclopedia, but the alphabetical refer­
cences marked upon each volume have remained for me an
indelible and magic word: Aphbicecladiggalhymaroid­
phorebstevanzy. [35]

This practically unpronounceable neologism (perhaps Colette is the
mother of feminist critical neologisms) recalled for Colette the magic
experience of reading. It is a grunt or groan of pleasure, a made-up
word like the little alphabets mothers create when they teach their
children to speak and to read, a secret sound of baby-talk, the little
language never translated from their privacy by mothers and children.
If we use Kristeva’s concept of the difference between the symbolic
and the semiotic, in which the semiotic is laughter, rhythm, sounds
without meaning, that which is outside of discourse, and attribute the
semiotic (as she does not) to the babble of babies and mothers, to
erotic sighs and to fearful gasps of breath, we may define a female
aesthetic of reading as “semiotic” as opposed to a male “symbolic”
aesthetic, with fixed meanings and “correct” orderly relations between
words and meanings. Colette’s word Aphbicecladiggalhymaroid­
phorebstevanzy could well stand for the recovery of the mother’s
body in a book, a cliterologos for speaking in the female tongue.52

Perhaps the most disturbing evocation of the difference between
men and women reading is chapter 19 (“The Window”) of To the
Lighthouse. The polarized reading experiences reflect the polarization
of the sexes in Victorian marriage, each partner living and feeling at
the furthest possible point from the other, each desiring confirmation
but expecting denial. In the total dialectic of sex the denial is given—he
will not speak to her; she will not tell him she loves him—"Say anything, she begged, looking at him, as if for help. He was silent" (184). "A heartless woman he called her; she never told him she loved him. . . But she could not do it; she could not say it" (185). He, however, needs her to be inarticulate (for that is how he defines the feminine) as much as she needs his gruff, negative criticism (for that is how she defines the masculine): "That is what she wanted—the asperity in his voice reproving her" (184); "He could say things—she never could. So naturally it was always he that said the things, and then for some reason he would mind this suddenly, and would reproach her" (185). The polarization of silence and speaking as female and male respectively seems to privilege the male voice of Mr. Ramsay as he paces, reciting male poets, while in fact the text privileges Mrs. Ramsay's silence as more humane and intelligent. In chapter 19 her silence allows her to read not only her husband's mind, but the minds and motivations of all the other characters as well, from their point of view, not as a projection of her own desires or ego. Mr. Ramsay has no such insight into others' feelings. Mr. Ramsay "reads" the sight of his wife reading to James as "fortifying" and "satisfying" his energy for work: "He was safe, he was restored to his privacy" (52, 53). His reading is accompanied by many physical actions, like his pacing, gesturing, and reciting aloud. He weeps; he fidgets, twirls his hair, slaps his thigh, and laughs. Both his reading and his projection of a voice which speaks only to himself into the space and hearing of others are aggressive, self-dramatising performative activities, reassuring himself of his dominance and mastery over his wife, children, and guests. Their silence gives him a great space in which he may hear the echo of his own voice and shore up his ego. Lily thinks "he was acting, this great man was dramatising himself," and "it was horrible, it was indecent" (277). Mrs. Ramsay thinks "all this phrase-making was a game . . . for if she had said half what he said, she would have blown her brains out by now" (106).

Mr. Ramsay's readings of people and books are aggressive, intrusive male actions meant to take all he needs into himself, with no thought for others' needs. Mrs. Ramsay's readings go out of the self into the
mind of the author or sympathize with the feelings of others. Her reading is a privileged female way of being, and the narrator suggests that her mental experiences are far deeper and more profound than Mr. Ramsay's logical progression along the alphabet, with his intense fear of rational "blundering" and his habit of mind which compares doing philosophy with the misplaced valor of a military massacre.

As in Rhys's memory, the mother's needles are a set of nonphallic pens for the woman writer. Woolf recovers her mother as Mrs. Ramsay knitting the brown stocking and reading Shakespeare's sonnets. The text of *To the Lighthouse* is tricky in its representation of reading by gender, and this is one of the reasons it so vividly seems to represent Victorian relations between men and women, that idealization whose subtext was a fear of woman's deep relation to eros and death. Like Mr. Ramsay, who reads to judge, the critic must be open to rereading: "That's fiddlesticks, that's first-rate, he thought, putting one thing beside another. But he must read it again. He could not remember the whole shape of the thing. He had to keep his judgment in suspense" (180). His reading is analytical, while hers is experiential. The reader suspends judgment when the narrator describes Mrs. Ramsay not reading but speculating about reading. (How ironic is this passage, we ask? Irritably, we fidget like James being measured for the stocking; what is the tone of this passage?):

Books, she thought, grew of themselves. She never had time to read them. Alas! Even the books that had been given her and inscribed by the hand of the poet himself: "For her whose wishes must be obeyed" . . . "The happier Helen of our days" . . . disgraceful to say, she had never read them. And Croom on the Mind and Bates on the Savage Customs of Polynesia ("My dear, stand still," she said)—neither of these could one send to the Lighthouse. [43]

She is inscribed as a siren. The inscriptions claim Mrs. Ramsay romantically from the male point of view as tyrant and femme fatale, as muse, the inscribed, not the inscriber. Just how "disgraceful" is it that she does not read contemporary male poets? She is the practical
housewife, but the stocking she knits is too short. She is idealized by poets, but Mr. Carmicheal is not in the least taken in by her. The ellipses, the quotation marks, the capitalization of Mind and Savage Customs, the parenthetical "My dear, stand still,"—all work to claim complexity and irony as part of Mrs. Ramsay’s image, to ask us to “suspend judgment,” to reread her seemingly casual choices about what to read and what not to read. As one who interrupts herself thinking, she is one of Woolf’s privileged characters. The whole issue of rereading the canonical texts is at stake here since both are rereaders, aptly pointing attention to a major concern of feminist critics at the moment, whether to reread the classics from a feminist perspective or to read new work by women. Mrs. Ramsay’s reading practice is certainly not “feminist.”

Later, as Mr. Ramsay watches her reading, “he wondered what she was reading, and exaggerated her ignorance, her simplicity, for he liked to think that she was not clever, not book-learned at all. He wondered if she understood what she was reading. Probably not, he thought. She was astonishingly beautiful” (182). The reader knows what Mr. Ramsay does not know, that she has been reading Elizabethan and Jacobean poetry, that she is astonishingly sensual and astonishingly bright. While he has been reading Sir Walter Scott and thinking “The whole of life did not consist in going to bed with a woman,” she has had an erotic, almost orgasmic experience in reading:

“No praise the deep vermilion in the rose,” she read, and so reading she was ascending, she felt, on to the top, on to the summit. How satisfying! How restful! All the odds and ends of the day stuck to this magnet; her mind felt swept, felt clean. And then there it was, suddenly entire; she held it in her hands, beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the essence sucked out of life and held rounded here—the sonnet. [181]

Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay, and the reader are united in this chapter, in that we are all rereading. Mrs. Ramsay comes into the room where her husband is reading. “First she wanted to sit down in a particular
chair under a particular lamp. But she wanted something more, though she did not know, could not think what it was that she wanted" (176). “So she turned and felt on the table beside her for a book... And she opened the book and began reading here and there at random...” (178; italics added). The irrationality of her instinctual desire for Shakespeare (rather than modern poets, philosophers, or anthropologists) is stressed. But her pleasure in the text seems in part due to its familiarity. She goes to it almost blindly like a lover, as she responds to the third stroke of the lighthouse beam, anticipating both pain and pleasure. Mr. Ramsay returns to Scott to reaffirm his faith in his own work, upset that Charles Tansley “had been saying that people don’t read Scott any more.” He is “weighing, considering, putting this with that as he read” (177). But he is really worried about his own books: “will they be read, are they good, why aren’t they better, what do people think of me?” The experience of rereading is comforting to his ego. It makes him feel “vigorous.” Louise De Salvo and Maria Di Battista have written about the importance of Scott to Leslie Stephen and analyzed Woolf’s relation to misreading “poor Steenie’s drowning and Mucklebair’s sorrow.” But what interests me here is that Mr. Ramsay “forgot himself completely (but not one or two reflections about morality and French novels and English novels...” (180). But he does not really forget himself. His pleasure (laughing, crying, arguing) is as melodramatic as the text he is reading, a heavily plotted romantic historical novel. Reading is performing in a drama whose lines he knows by heart, and he also knows its conclusion: “Well, let them improve upon that, he thought as he finished the chapter. He felt that he had been arguing with somebody, and had got the better of him.” When a man rereads the patriarchal plot, the text seems to say, “his own position [becomes] more secure.”

When the feminist critic, the third rereader of this triangular text, rereads To the Lighthouse, she is confronted by many problems. Recursive reading for both genders reaffirms their most stereotypical qualities. Mr. Ramsay reads like a soldier on the battlefield, emerging “roused and triumphant.” Mrs. Ramsay reads “like a person in a light sleep... She was climbing up those branches, this way and that,
laying hands on one flower and then another" (181), in a sensual trance. Does the text simply represent extreme gender polarization through reading? Does the text merely privilege Mrs. Ramsay’s erotic reading experience? Don’t we admire Mr. Ramsay in some way for being able to mend his wounded ego by reading Scott? Don’t we sympathize for a second with the fragility of the male ego? Don’t we fear that the total self-annihilation of Mrs. Ramsay’s submission to the text may be very dangerous?

Though Woolf does describe reading, in her diary, as an erotic experience, the pleasure of “being laid low by a book”; as a critic she also forgot herself completely, like Mr. Ramsay, while remembering to exercise her critical faculties on the question of the difference between the French and the English novel. Mr. Ramsay is a very public reader. One can read him reading by watching his gestures, but Mrs. Ramsay reading “grew still like a tree which has been tossing and quivering and now, when the breeze falls, settles, leaf by leaf, into quiet” (177). This kind of private sensual experience is her secret life. Her reading of poetry is a form of “still practice.” As a public reader, a mother in the patriarchy, she reads aloud the sentence of her own doom and that of all women, to James, in the story of “The Fisherman and His Wife,” while everyone “reads” her picture in the window with James as the classic madonna and child of Western patriarchy. There is only one moment which suggests that she is aware of her own role in helping James through his oedipal stage by teaching him to reject her. As she finishes the story she begins to worry about her other children and imagines their deaths. Then, in a new paragraph, the text reads ambiguously, “But she did not let her voice change in the least as she finished the story, and added, shutting the book, and speaking the last words as if she has made them up herself, looking into James’s eyes: ‘And there they are living still at this very time’ ” (94).

While in this passage Mrs. Ramsay plays the public reader for a patriarchal audience, she feels guilty throughout the story about the power she exercises over everyone. Not only does the fairy tale crudely tell James that fathers are sensible and women are power-mad—the housewife, Ilsabil, wants to be God—it brings out Mrs. Ramsay’s guilt
at playing god by arranging marriages and dominating the lives of everyone around her—her family, her guests, and the sick people she visits. Her hesitation, "She did not let her voice change in the least" over the housewife's punishment, the return forever to the hovel of her powerlessness, suggests that she is aware of her own hunger for power, and is willing to learn a lesson as well as to teach one to James.

As private reader, Mrs. Ramsay lets herself go completely, and is preparing for a lover:

And dismissing all this, as one passes in diving now a weed, now a straw, now a bubble, she felt again, sinking deeper . . . and she fell deeper and deeper . . . and those words . . . began washing from side to side of her mind rhythmically, and as they washed, words, like little shaded lights, one red, one blue, one yellow, lit up the dark of her mind, and seemed leaving their perches up there to fly across and across, or to cry out and to be echoes . . .

Like Cam in the drafts of To the Lighthouse and the narrators of "Professions for Woman" and A Room of One's Own, Mrs. Ramsay is a mermaid, and reading is swimming into the unconscious. She is submerged in water, but her mind is also a body of water with the words washing back and forth. Words (which are fish in the other texts) are here both lights and birds. Illogical as the possibility of birds or lights flying around in the depths of the ocean is, the passage does convey a rhythmic, rocking, womblike atmosphere, as if the reader were a baby, flying and swimming inside the womb, returning physically to the womb, as Mrs. Ramsay reads:

she felt that she was climbing backwards, upwards, shoving her way up under petals that curved over her, so that she only knew this is white, or this is red. She did not know at first what the words meant at all.

Steer, hither steer your wingèd pines, all beaten Mariners

She read and turned the page, swinging herself, zigzagging this way and that, from one line to another as from one branch to
Like William Browne's figure of the "wingèd pines" ("The Siren's Song" is by William Browne of Tavistock, 1591–1643), the boat as a flying tree, Woolf's image of Mrs. Ramsay reading as a flying mermaid, fish/woman/bird, swimming and flying from word to word in the text, is extremely original. She is the siren-mermaid. She is also moved by the lines "Yet seemed it winter still, and, you away, / As with your shadow I with these did play" (182), and yet the shadow in Shakespeare takes an ominous shape as it relates to her husband: "But through the crepuscular walls of their intimacy, for they were drawing together, involuntarily, coming side by side, quite close, she could feel his mind like a raised hand shadowing her mind" (184).

While one reads this passage as Mrs. Ramsay feeling threatened by her husband's mind, it also suggests that she is attracted by it. And, given the predominance of Shakespeare in Virginia Woolf's life as a reader, as well as the number of Elizabethan references in her written texts, we may read the shadow mind as the one which most threatened and challenged her. "Shakespeare," the name for the poets in the anthology, was Mrs. Ramsay's secret lover, whom she met clandestinely when opening the pages of his poems. "Shakespeare," as the figure of the collective historical artist, was also Virginia Woolf's secret lover. How different from Harold Bloom's description of the relationship between a male writer and his great predecessor as a struggle for mastery is Woolf's description of swimming down into "Shakespeare's" text and flying out of it as a winged mermaid. But Shakespeare is here significantly contextualized with other poets of his age. He is not an individual but an historical period in English literature, foreshadowing the invention of Shakespeare's sister in *A Room of One's Own* and Woolf's claim that "There is no Shakespeare" in her attack on individual genius toward the end of her life.

The female reading aesthetic as we have been reading it in women's texts is erotic, a sensual experience of return to the mother's womb, and a dangerous secret experience of loss of self, a *joutissance* of profound desire. Crudely put, Mr. Ramsay reads to find himself; Mrs. Ramsay reads to lose herself.
Yet, we ask, are these kinds of reading necessarily derived from gender? What are the moral implications of their reading? Is the secret reader a better person? William Empson was disturbed by To the Lighthouse. He wrote in 1931: "If only (one finds oneself feeling in re-reading these novels), if only these dissolved units of understanding had been co-ordinated into a system; if only, perhaps, there was an index, showing what had been compared with what, if only these materials for the metaphysical conceit, poured out so lavishly, had been concentrated into crystals of poetry that could be remembered, how much safer one would feel." The male critic or rereader of texts places himself outside the triangle of reading in To the Lighthouse. He wants the figure to work like William Browne's—winged pines = boat, not like the complex diving and flying mermaid. He wants to know what is what, and for it to stay permanently fixed in a reading. He wants To the Lighthouse to be Ulysses, and the critic's role the matcher of exact resemblance to exact resemblance. Woolf is thrilled by the lack of safety she feels as reader, reproduces this excitement as a woman's experience of reading in her novel, and encourages her reader to enjoy a similar unsafe reading. Thus the quotations are not identified, and Shakespeare merges into William Browne. She dissolves differences between great and minor texts, defining the reading pleasure in the sensuous experience of words, not in the knowledge of who authored them. She deliberately shatters the "crystals of poetry" and does not allow even the polarities of gender to form a set of perfect opposites from which the reader may make a metaphysical conceit. Obviously she read Mr. Empson, for she provided a wonderful mock index to Orlando. But an index to To the Lighthouse such as Empson desired might put it on the patriarchy's Index of Feminist Books, to be conveniently lost at some future point in history. It seems somehow a condition of their marriage that Mr. Ramsay cannot read Mrs. Ramsay. So it seems somehow fitting that Mr. Empson could not remember Virginia Woolf. There is an index to To the Lighthouse. It is, as Lily Briscoe says, "nothing that can be written in any language known to men." It is the narrative of merger with the mother, the lost object of desire, a semiotic sound like Colette's "Aphbicecladdig-"
Reading it is perhaps what Shakespeare meant by “still practice.” And yet the reader remains troubled by the dialectics of reading and rereading in this now canonical text for feminist critics. Valorizing Mrs. Ramsay may cause us as much trouble as it does Lily Briscoe. Mrs. Ramsay’s emotional reading practice and Mr. Ramsay’s rational performative reading may stall us again in essentialist categories of female and male. Perhaps that old Neptune figure, Mr. Carmichael (Shakespeare’s brother? a modern William Browne of Tavistock?), can help us out here, as he could always see through Mrs. Ramsay. Is the gender question really a genre question? Perhaps the text is merely privileging anthologies of poetry over Scott’s novels as “better reads.” Why does Mrs. Ramsay not experience the “immasculation” of Judith Fetterley’s resisting reader? Does she recognize that these poems use her against herself to denigrate female difference? Nina Auerbach might argue that she enjoys being monster/mermaid because it gives her an experience of power. What about the reader who cannot distinguish the origin of the quotations? Was Woolf a snob in league with well-educated minds, appealing to a select group of “rereaders,” superior to those who are simply common readers and cannot trace the allusions? William Browne’s “The Siren’s Song,” which causes Mrs. Ramsay to swoon and submerge is about the very seductive role into which the male poets’ dedications (which she won’t read) have cast her. Does she identify with the siren-speakers to entrap the sailors in love/death? Or is Mrs. Ramsay’s reading reverie Virginia Woolf’s “love/death by drowning,” an enactment of reunion with her dead mother by reading? If so, Cam’s sub/merging reverie on the boat in the last chapter, imagining a glorious underwater world, is a reading of her mother’s death. Mrs. Ramsay may also be working out, in the “real” context of the delayed trip to the lighthouse, what women’s role has been in relation to the epic tradition, both literary and historical, to men and their voyages in ships, their attribution of shipwreck to female sexuality (as in The Odyssey), and the accusation that Mr. Ramsay’s career would have been more brilliant if not for her. If woman cannot travel on the sea in flying trees, does she make her
own "voyage under" as a mermaid? Are those "winged pines," like the triple stroke of the lighthouse beam, signs of submission to the phallus or a sign of her role as phallic mother in the Victorian family? Any of these readings is "unsafe," and perhaps To the Lighthouse in its gendered reading scenes enacts a reading practice which is not like Shakespeare's "still practice" at all, but rather like the seductive dynamic between the sirens and the sailor in the poem. Reading beckons us to unsafe experience:

Then come on shore,
Where no joy dies till Love hath gotten more.

Mrs. Ramsay unsetles and destabilizes both reading and rereading despite the emphasis on gender difference in the text, as if difference itself and gendered reading are as "historical" and outdated as the madonna and child Lily remakes in her abstract triangle of the family romance. The critic is reminded that the very "still practice" she has privileged must certainly be deconstructed.

In To the Lighthouse Woolf unsetles private and public reading practices and destabilizes them at the personal and cultural levels (reading versus rereading) by setting up a gender dichotomy, which also is a genre dichotomy, between the novel and the poem. If fiction is for the male public reader and poetry for the female private reader, which is privileged? Since Mr. Ramsay reads as we do as critics, he is also a producer of texts as well as a reader. The text which Mrs. Ramsay produces is James's safe passage through the oedipal complex. Mr. Ramsay reads against desire, to suppress its urges. Mrs. Ramsay reads to desire, "till love hath gotten more." This reader is haunted by the word "more." Does it signify death?