Early literary criticism was undisciplined. Unlike the staid essays and monographs of later academic scholarship, English criticism first appeared in the contentious world of the London theater: dramatists and other poets argued about their craft in contending prefaces and dedications, and their disputes spilled into the public sphere in pamphlet wars, mock epics, lampoons, and even novels. Across these forms, criticism was personal, political, and unconcerned with analysis for its own sake. Yet this unruly discourse laid the groundwork both for modern literary criticism and for the discipline of literary studies. *The Invention of English Criticism* explores the earliest uses of criticism and the attempts by some to convert a field of literary debate into an archive of useful knowledge. Criticism’s undisciplined past thus illuminates its contested, ambivalent, and never fully disciplined present.

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THE INVENTION OF
ENGLISH CRITICISM

1650–1760

BY MICHAEL GAVIN
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Acknowledgments

One of the greatest pleasures of completing a first book is that you get to thank the people who helped along the way. Foremost among these are my teachers. I owe a special debt to Roxann Wheeler, whose sterling professional example and timely mentorship transformed my career. Without her I could not have written this book nor, perhaps, any book. At Rutgers I learned from a diverse, energetic, and brilliant group of scholars: Jonathan Kramnick, Meredith McGill, Michael McKeon, Paula McDowell, and Michael Warner. As director of my dissertation, Jonathan’s guidance was unfailing. Faculty associated with the Rutgers Seminar for the History of the Book – Thomas Fulton, Lorraine Pioux, and Marija Dalbello – provided an inspiring second intellectual home. I also benefited from long conversations with my fellow graduate students. Mark Vareschi, Natalie Roxburgh, and Joshua Gang, in particular, kindly endured my fascination with early literary criticism. A year-long fellowship with the Center for Cultural Analysis, spearheaded by Meredith McGill, helped mold this fascination into a scholarly project, and another fellowship provided by the Mellon Foundation helped see it through completion. (That same year, the Huntington Library paid for me to spend a month reading from their collection of eighteenth-century books.) During a postdoctoral appointment in the Humanities Research Center at Rice University, Sarah Ellenzweig’s careful reading brought shape and clarity to a manuscript that lacked both. Her assistance was transformative. So, too, was the camaraderie of my fellow postdocs: Olivia Banner, Wilson Will, Sarah Levin-Richardson, and, not least, Jenn Tyburczy, whom I’m now thrilled to call my colleague. Support from new friends at the University of South Carolina helped usher this work through its final stages. David Miller’s advocacy on my behalf deserves special thanks. Throughout all of these transitions, Kathleen Lubey has shared with me her sharp wit and capacious intellect. It would be vain to name all the other scholars I’ve learned from through the years, most of whom would be surprised to appear here,
but I must mention Adrianne Wadewitz. You did not need to know Adrianne long to feel as if you knew her well. I am grateful to have known her at all. Lastly, the editorial staff and anonymous reviewers at Cambridge University Press have been patient with my faults and greatly improved the final result. I am especially grateful to copy-editor Caroline Howlett, whose careful attention to detail prevented many potentially embarrassing errors.

Some of this book is based on work that has appeared elsewhere. Earlier versions of chapters 4 and 6 first appeared, respectively, in *ELH*, 78, 3 (Fall 2011) as “Critics and Criticism in the Poetry of Anne Finch,” and *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 50, 3 (Summer 2010) as “James Boswell and the Uses of Criticism.” I thank the editors and publishers of those journals for supporting my work in its earlier stages, and for allowing me to present it here.

There are others to whom I owe a deeper and more tender kind of thanks than is possible on this page. I will not commit the common sin of dedicators – presenting as a gift to others that which is really a gift to oneself. Instead, I’ll offer this book by way of apology and dedicate myself to you elsewhere.