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Edited by Robin Truth Goodman

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction**Robin Truth Goodman*

Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory looks at the development of feminist theory through literature. It traces the literary careers of feminism's major thinkers in order to explore the connection of feminist theoretical production to literary work. It starts from the Enlightenment, analyzing how the literary was embedded within feminism's versions of the rational, in fact, how the literary was necessary for thinking like a feminist. Besides mainly considering particular authors who move from literature to theory and back, this volume also reflects on areas of literary study (like postcolonialism), genres (like science fiction and poetry), and central thematics (like liberalism, individualism, and work) in terms of how feminism constitutes itself and formulates its positions by thinking through the literary.

This book moves between contexts ranging from the United States to Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia, broaching fields from minority and ethnic studies to queer studies, area studies, philosophy, performance studies, pedagogy, sexuality studies, transnationalism, race studies, translation studies, and postcolonialism, examining genres from the novel to poetry, science fiction, theater, short stories, the essay, testimonial memoirs, travel memoirs, experimentalism, and romance. *Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory* will focus on the literary trajectories of feminism's noted contributors; it will offer a new perspective on feminism's theoretical histories, bringing into view an under-considered line of influence for feminism: the effects of literary form and content on the development of feminist thinking.

It is impossible to conceive of contemporary critical theory without referencing the feminist contributions that, at various moments, popularized it, deepened it, and politicized it. In fact, feminism has become so pervasive in graduate and undergraduate curricula as well as in scholarly research in the humanities and the social sciences that it is virtually impossible to avoid it in any academic context today. Yet, perhaps less

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remarked: unlike any other theoretical enclave, feminist theory has had a particularly fervent relationship with the production of literary texts. Novels, poems, memoirs, and other fictive and non-fictive literary practices can be said to complete what is incomplete in theoretical critique and argument in feminism, and literary language and literary form can be said to inhabit and even influence the possibilities of feminist theory from inside its own design.

Feminist literary and theoretical writers have remarked on this combination in various ways. Virginia Woolf, most famously, explains, “[A]ll the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room” (*A Room of One’s Own*, 70). Then again, Simone de Beauvoir speculates that “assuming the roles of housekeeper, wife and mother” (“Women and Creativity,” 23) limits a woman’s freedom rather than freeing up her powers of observation as Woolf claims, and the practice of the literary, in contrast, changes the limitations her situation imposes, allowing her to develop “the conditions most necessary for what we call genius to flourish” (23). Literature for Beauvoir is linked to freedom and, in particular, freedom from the worldly conditions that women absorbed in their social roles. Michèle Le Doeuff, meanwhile, notes that women can only gain entry into philosophy by acknowledging the incompleteness of traditional knowledge, that knowledge is always in debate, in dialog, and in context – an idea that resonates with the difference that literary language interjects within philosophical reasoning.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison argues that literature is a particularly fertile ground for recognizing difference. For Morrison, literature “prompts and makes possible [the] process of entering what one is estranged from” (4) and helps us see omissions, contradictions, and conflicts that register the presence of the excluded, the marginalized, the subordinated, and the non-hegemonic. Discourse and common sense are constructed to make these elisions and erasures seem normal, acceptable, even natural. Yet literary writers also have the ability “to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar” (15). They can visualize identities that may not directly inhabit recognizable norms. Although Morrison is particularly interested in how the repression of race makes certain concepts of race visible within the American literary canon, she also sees that discourses with a willful and hysterical blindness to feminism affect the way women’s issues are read into literature (14), and that nationalism takes shape in literature’s mobilization of the limits to

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the national. Orienting nationalist rubrics like individualism, guilt and innocence, life and death, and gender often appear in response to a structuring absence that Morrison calls “a dark, abiding, signing African presence” (5) but that can equally – or differentially – be applied to other forms of what falls outside the dominant understanding. Such moments of unformed presence start to acknowledge alternative languages as instabilities and dynamisms that disturb accepted social realities. Literature is the place where such eruptions of incoherence open narratives up to noise and illogic, exhibiting the processes of social becoming that exist inside narrative forms. Narrative structures are constructed by plotting out the differences between what they hide and what they reveal.

As diverse as these reflections are, they share a sense of the literary as key to feminist critique. In other words, the literary within feminist subjectivity allows for the development of a feminist positioning, a feminist critique, outside of the reality that denies women the means and spaces of creativity. The literary frames feminist critique as the opening to a difference, a creative resistance. It de-solidifies the real, separating the claims of empiricism from the objects that it describes. For this – for the possibility of envisioning alternative social relations, outside of the dominant common sense – feminist theory *needs* literature, and feminist literature gives rise to feminist theory. Feminism blurs the difference between rational argument and literary form, as narrative and poetics invade critical articulations while theory itself breaks through from within, disrupting conventions and genres of the literary. The “apartness” or “distortions” of the literary show, first, feminist alienation from the world; second, how descriptions of the real disjoin from subjective experience; and third, how that alienation is necessary for the construction of a transformed imaginary.

At the peak of cultural theory’s ascendance, many of the most referenced theories noted the border between fiction and philosophy to be problematic, dissolving, or untenable at best and incomprehensible at worst. Much poststructuralism conflated the literary as part of the philosophical, making literature but a continuation, an example, or a proof of philosophical argumentation without any identity of its own. Trends in historicist criticism tended toward dismissing the specifics of the literary as counterfactual. Meanwhile, popular culture critique dismissed the particularity of the literary as “disinterested,” disembodied, ideological, and elite and promoted a type of analysis of all writing as equal to all other writing in its signifying or discursive role. These perspectives gave rise to fervent and exciting debates and new understandings of the cultural,

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the textual, the semiological, and their relationship, but at the expense of thinking about how literature as literature does what it does. *Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory* wants to address this issue, returning to the question of what literature is and what it does: how literature differentiates from the philosophical, the historical, and the contextual as well as how it feeds these other dimensions; what is specific about literature and why it persists; and why it is that literature as a theoretical discourse was particularly alive for feminism, that is, what feminism achieved by constructing itself in literary form.

This “return” to literature is important and vital. Cultural theory’s evaluation of literature as equivalent to language use in general happened simultaneously (although not necessarily in conjunction) with a political attack on the humanities and an equally constructed promotion of education as exclusively preparation for the workforce, as well as a widespread acceptance that educational institutions, practitioners, and professionals were responsible for the economic downturn and the loss of global competitiveness, unresponsive to economic needs, and should be forced to justify their existence based on predictable outcomes and empirically measured accountabilities. Science, math, and engineering degrees, we have heard, create jobs, while humanities degrees cannot translate into social utility, wealth, or wealth-producing, marketable innovation.

It is not too outrageous to say that people with degrees do not create jobs, but economic policy, versatility, inspiration, investment, expansion, distribution, and activity do, and so the charges levied on the traditions of academic culture and in particular on the humanities are just targeting the humanities as a scapegoat for the failures of the captains and authors of economic change. The responses directed against such attacks have been many, from the obvious but accommodationist claim that creativity and knowledge of how narratives function are central to the new media economy, to the less obvious, Kantian claim that free and conceptual thinking – innovative thinking – cannot be codified, cataloged, or made obedient; it resists becoming an instrument of preconceived uses, systems, and methods or a data point that does nothing but repeat a preordained conclusion or ideology. It is not just an example that repeats some preordained understanding of the way things work. Literature, in particular, expresses dissatisfaction with the way things are in its insistence on imagining the way things might be different.

What gets lost in the erasure of literature’s specificity is public memory: the tradition of thinking that literature allows. Literature provides a space for thinking about how the world might have been different

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and might be different still, or, as Theodor Adorno said, it “is the antithesis of that which is the case” (“Reconciliation under Duress,” 159), the “negative knowledge of the actual world” (160). Literature in its specificity is in contrast to this instrumentalized thinking that has overtaken the academy; rather than chronicling the actual, it releases pure potential, even forgotten potential. Even within the limits of the twentieth century, the idea of literature in its specificity underlies essential social and political concepts. For all the criticism launched against Jürgen Habermas, for example, his insight that literature framed a way of speaking and living together – a structure for coming to agreement and critique that was autonomous from public regulations and state authority – is still worth considering. Literature, according to Habermas, “provided the training ground for a critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself – a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness ... [C]ritical debate ignited by works of literature and art was soon extended to include economic and political disputes, without any guarantee ... that such discussions would be inconsequential” (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 29–33).¹ Hannah Arendt, too, sees literature as necessary for politics because literature testifies to the presence of others, giving recognition to the “who” rather than the “what” that connects individual acts to social existence: “Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling” (*The Human Condition*, 50). For Arendt, an action cannot be historically or politically significant unless it appears to be recognized before others, and literature is necessary for that process.

One might also note Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of novelistic discourse, where the literary word is in tension with itself, pulled in multiple directions, formative of the expressive dynamics of social conflict, unified in style and yet diversified in its sociopolitical purposes and individual origins, producing a dynamic of social intercourse: in his words, “polyphonic.” Bakhtin understands literature as “a diversity of social speech types ... and a diversity of individual voices” stratified by “social dialectics, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages

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that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day” (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 262), living in unresolvable struggle.² The insinuation that a particularly feminist shaping of politics and public life would rely on its continual literariness might have become emblemized, for example, when eighty-year-old feminist novelist Nawal El Saadawi appeared in a *Democracy Now!* interview, protesting in Tahrir Square in 2011 during the Arab Spring, having survived political incarceration at the hands of both the Sadat and Mubarak regimes.

These five examples – Adorno, Habermas, Arendt, Bakhtin, and El Saadawi (and there could be others) – raise the question for feminism of whether the insufficient attention to literature’s specificity corresponds to a parallel demise of attention to feminism’s politics. Does the neglect of a specifically literary feminism foreshadow and explain the humanities’ defenselessness before the social forces that seek to instrumentalize all thought while refashioning thought itself as the repetitive production of quantifiable knowledge units and skills with no acknowledged connection to explicit philosophical or political judgments? Does the loss of a specifically literary concept correspond to social impoverishment, conformism, and dis-identification with politics? Is literature crucial to developing the ideas of social difference, consequential critique, dialog, conflict, autonomy, social interaction, emancipation, and opposition that feminism requires? Is it through its literary expression that feminism has developed its approaches to its formative political questions like: “What am I?” “What is experience?” “What is good?” “How do I relate?” “How do I live with others?” “How do I speak?” “How do things mean?” “How do I know?” “How do I belong?” “What form does power take?” “What is to be done?” and “What might the future look like?” Is the peripheralizing of the literary but another version of the loss of a critical vocabulary with which to address “the human” – with all its flaws and historical misuses – and the corresponding turn of the political away from considerations of “the human”? Does the persistence of a specifically feminist literary project allow the imagination of a type of “living together” that jars, distorts, challenges, exceeds, and innovates current unaccountable, disconnected, dystopic, even despotic social, political, and economic formations?

Feminist literature also is an integral component of the unapologetic cosmopolitanism of feminist thought. The “worlding” of women, their politics, their aesthetics, and their expression is not self-evident: feminism can be contentious, conflictual, even obnoxious when it tries to move its concepts between nations, classes, and contexts. It can display itself as the arm of power and, in its fervor, it can deny or usurp the cultural

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differences it hopes to explain and the particular lives it hopes to affect. However, the connection of feminism to literary practice demands that feminist ideas must make their way toward phenomena they were not necessarily constructed to experience or to note. Although formulated through reference to nationalities and language communities, the literary exists, in the words of Pascale Casanova, “as a worldwide reality,” “having to abandon all the habits associated with specialized historical, linguistic and cultural research . . . to break with the national habits of thought that create the illusion of uniqueness and insularity” (*The World Republic of Letters*, 5) even as it adheres, in some sense, to those spaces, those meanings, and those customs. From literature, feminism adopts this posture toward the world. The literary calls out feminist ideas to travel and to translate; it reveals how ideas carry context from place to place; it shows how it is possible to re-narrate events and moments in a setting in which they did not originate, perhaps a discordant one, and develop meaning there. In their literary condition, feminist ideas are never really at home.

In fact, this volume itself is an example of feminism’s cosmopolitanism. In light of feminism’s inherent and unapologetic cosmopolitanism, the writers included in this volume hail from universities in multiple countries and from an even wider array of national origins, and write about authors who identify through various regional and national locales. In addition, it foregrounds the necessity of calling out inputs from a spectrum of disciplinary sites in order to ask questions of feminism, to consider its political momentum, and to work out its interpretive strategies. Approaches vary from assessing a particular author’s life and career to analyzing a particular text to situating a genre or a theme within a feminist articulation or social movement. The essays participate in the feminist project of building an intergenerational and intercontextual field of influence, a type of lineage where a historical moment borrows, inserts, reflects on, cites, and manipulates the ideas that brought it into being.

Most readers of most thinkers addressed in this volume are mainly concerned with their theoretical contributions. In her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theory*, Ellen Rooney comments that “literariness inhabits theory; that theory is, in fact, a genre of literature and not a metalanguage, that reading transacts an exchange between theoretical texts and literary works, rather than simply applying theory to an abject text the better to illustrate theory’s profundity” (2). Nevertheless, this *Companion*, usefully organized according to the subfields through which feminist theory operates, focuses predominantly on texts and topics that sit squarely in the generic space of theory, the politics of texts and the

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politics of reading, the literary works serving mainly as marginal examples of theoretical argument. The relationship between literature and theory is not transparent and needs further interrogation. Is literature always but an example or an application, is it the signified to theory's mastery, the proof of theory's abstraction, and if not, as Rooney implies, than how else might it relate? Why does literature matter?

Cambridge's other feminist critical anthology, *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, illustrates critical thought as a conversation among literary critics about certain issues and thematics across time, privileging a backstory that develops into and deepens contemporary theoretical interests. The *History* clearly demonstrates that Second Wave theoretical concerns like the relationship between gender and textuality, between subjectivity and history, and the problem of representing "women" in writing about writing had moorings in pre-feminist criticism dating back to the medieval. As the editors explain in the general introduction, feminist criticism's "eventual self-conscious expression [in the Second Wave] was the culmination of centuries of women's writing, of women writing about women writing, and of women – and men – writing about women's minds, bodies, art and ideas" (Plain and Sellers, "Introduction," 2). Cambridge has also published *Companions* to particular authors who cross feminist theory with literature – for example, Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf. Although contextualizing these authors through their philosophical, aesthetic, and sociopolitical influences (in Simone de Beauvoir's case, with only one chapter devoted primarily to the novels that harvests them for their philosophical offerings), these volumes do not place the authors inside of a particularly feminist literary tradition or focus predominantly on the contributions to feminist thought made by specifically literary content.

Some of these concerns take up debates that have been framing feminist writings since the surge in interest in the Second Wave during the 1970s and 1980s but have recently changed direction, broadening the ways that the literary can be engaged. Most famously, Toril Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics* read Virginia Woolf and Julia Kristeva as using some styles and techniques of fiction and poetic language – for example, their "use of mobile, pluralist viewpoints" (8); their call for "'the spasmodic force' of the unconscious [to] disrupt their language" (11), creating a deferral of meaning – to dislodge, disrupt, and interrogate the totalizing humanist subject that grounded patriarchy. Moi saw feminist theorists like Elaine Showalter as falling into a "bourgeois realism" (4) that would separate aesthetics from politics and the real (and form from content) because it

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elided experience with knowledge, assuming experience to be transparent, accessible, predictable, and coherent. For Showalter, Moi suggested, feminism could only be located in the content of the representation, whereas the form – especially any form that distorted the clarity of the message – would be anti-feminist. Showalter was not the only critic at the time who wanted to pose literariness, at least modernist literariness, as counter to feminism. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar also wrote that “sophisticated avant-garde strategies of linguistic experimentation need to be understood in terms of male anxiety about unprecedented female achievement in both the social sphere and the literary marketplace” (*No Man’s Land*, 5). Meanwhile, Kate Millett famously posited a perfect equation between literary representation and women’s psychologies under patriarchy, as though literature was the proof of “the interiorization of patriarchal ideology” (*Sexual Politics*, 54) that translated directly into the counterrevolutionary politics of sexual inequality, oppression, and subordination. What we can learn from Moi in her debate with (Showalter’s) desire for the real in feminism is that what counts as “the literary” cannot be reduced to the content, the form, the objects of narrative, or the polemics alone, nor is it particularly sheltered in realism or guaranteed in any particular form or genre. This means that there is no easy equation between any part of the literary and its appearances, effects, and modes of connecting with the “extra-literary.” “The literary tendency” for feminism has to have within its scope simultaneously many elements such as style, form, genre, tone, dramatic presentation, ideology critique, defamiliarization, point of view, excess, linguistic choice, narrative technique, interiority, detachment, innovation, conflict, interpretation, figuration, and an array of other meaningful, effective ingredients of literariness, or rather, as Moi herself says, “the possibility of transforming the symbolic order of orthodox society” (*Sexual/Textual Politics*, 11) using language, story, and imagination.

More recently, Moi has turned her critical energies against thinking that opposes the modernism defined through reflexivity, experimentation, and skepticism against an aesthetically naïve realism with its faith in empiricism and the stability of reference. Instead, for both literature and feminism, Moi has reframed the modern literary imagination as not opposed to realism and representation but rather to idealism and naturalism – that is, necessity subjected to determining natural laws, explainable by science. In fact, she says, realism can take many guises, some of which align with modernism and might be read as politically progressive or stylistically challenging. The solution to the problem of essentialism within humanist representation is, then, for Moi, no longer

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only recourse to the unconscious, negativity, linguistic fragmentation, or French poststructuralist theory – or rather, modernist techniques – but an espousal of ordinary language, or the meanings created by use in an everyday, phenomenal “encounter with the Other (society)” (*What Is a Woman?*, 79), or “lived experience” (*What Is a Woman?*, 63). The position of those critics she now labels “ideologues of Modernism” (*Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, 28), hating realism (as she might have been said to have done in *Sexual/Textual*), tend to reduce it to its one variant of “representation” or “reference” rather than to its capacities to question the inevitability of certain physical “laws” or moral imperatives based in a (naturalistic) faith in human perfectibility.

Moi’s revisions of literary history challenge us to question how the literary responds to, inhabits, drives, or frames feminist practices and meanings within a much broader and more open-ended idea of what the literary might look like. Instead of privileging poststructuralist linguistic play or modernist representational breakages as the dominant or exclusive definitional structure of feminism’s literary, Moi’s recent analysis invites us to witness the effects on feminism of the many other historical appearances of the literary as well; it allows literary opposition to take other than modernist forms. In addition, whereas the earlier work assumes the hegemony of poststructuralist theory with its (modernist) modes of undermining reference, where the literary at its best could be conflated into the theoretical, the later work asks us always to be reconsidering the connections between the literary and the theoretical historically and redrawing their relationship, perhaps identifying the literary as, at times, working antagonistically toward theory’s limits or, at others, standing in theory’s needed defense or answering for theory’s shortcomings. Within this broadened perspective, literature can have many types of appearances, taking on different meanings, definitions, functions, and forms at different historical junctures. *Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory* debates what form feminism might take through its various encounters with the literary. Whereas in her book *Literature after Feminism*, Rita Felski poses the question “How has feminism changed the ways we think about literature?” this volume raises the alternative question of “How has literature changed the ways we think about feminism?”

As with any project of this sort, this volume is incomplete. Many writers and ideas were left out because of space and other restrictions. In consultation with the press, I decided what were to be the broad areas of focus, and then each writer, according to her specialization and interests, shaped her own chapter and chose which texts and approaches would