Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel

Nancy Armstrong

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS New York Oxford

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York Toronto Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi Petaling Jaya Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town Melbourne Auckland

and associated companies in Berlin Ibadan

First published in 1987 by Oxford University Press, Inc., 198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016-4314

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1989

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Armstrong, Nancy. Desire and domestic fiction.

Includes index. 1. Domestic fiction, English—History and criticism. 2. English fiction—Women authors—History and criticism. 3. Feminism and literature—Great Britain. 4. Women and literature—Great Britain. 5. Women in literature. 6. Sex role in literature. 7. Home in literature. 8. Family in literature. I. Title. PR830.D65A7 1987 823 .009 86-16482 ISBN 0-19-504179-8 (alk. paper) ISBN 0-19-506160-8 (pbk.)

8 10 9 Printed in the United States of America

For L. T.

Acknowledgments

This project was supported by grants from the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Association of University Women, and the Josephine Nevins Keal research fund of Wayne State University. I am grateful to the Fawcett Museum and particularly to its assistant director, David Doughan, for giving me access to the educational literature for women described in Chapters 2 and 3. A section of Chapter 1 appeared under the title of The Rise of Feminine Authority in the Novel (in Novel, 15 , no. 2 [1982], 127 -45), and I would like to thank the editor Mark Spilka for his kind attention to my work. My book owes much to William Sisler and Marion Osmun of Oxford University Press whose expertise and good humor saw it through publication.

I could never have written this book without the personal encouragement and professional support given to me through the years by Homer Obed Brown, Jerome J. McGann, Marjorie Perloff, Thomas A. Sebeok, Wendy Steiner, and Jane P. Tompkins. I owe just as much to those who read this manuscript at various stages of its production and who helped to make it say what I wanted it to say: Susan Kirkpatrick, John Kucich, Vassilis Lambropoulos, and Clifford Siskin. I am especially grateful to Michael Davidson, Juliet MacCannell, John Maynard, and William Tay for their knowledgeable readings of the completed manuscript. Each stage of my argument was vigorously contested and revised in graduate seminars at the State University of New York at Buffalo (spring 1984) and the University of California, San Diego (fall 1984). To the students in those seminars I extend my gratitude for making the whole project far more complicated and pleasurable than I had any reason to expect. Allon White read the completed manuscript for Oxford University Press, and his expert suggestions guided its revision. He has my enduring affection.

Much as my book has intellectualized the middle-class family, I cannot allow the contributions of certain members of my own family to go un–

acknowledged. I wish to thank my mother Jeanne Bowes for providing an example of domesticity that was more arduous to realize than an academic career; my brother John Bowes for redeeming certain moments of family life with irony; and my three sons, Scott, Mark, and John Armstrong, for finding amusement in my deviation from most of the domestic norms. Finally, in tracing the history of domestic fiction, I am most indebted to Len Tennenhouse, Kathy Ashley, Homer Brown, and Don Wayne —old friends whose convictions at crucial turns of the process seemed indistinguishable from my own and whose thinking has shaped the places of this argument in which I take greatest satisfaction.

Solana Beach, California N. A. *July 1986*

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Introduction:
The Politics of Domesticating Culture, Then and Now

> Thus towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write.
>
> VIRGINIA WOOLF , A Room of One's Own

From the beginning, domestic fiction actively sought to disentangle the language of sexual relations from the language of politics and, in so doing, to introduce a new form of political power. This power emerged with the rise of the domestic woman and established its hold over British culture through her dominance over all those objects and practices we associate with private life. To her went authority over the household, leisure time, courtship procedures, and kinship relations, and under her jurisdiction the most basic qualities of human identity were supposed to develop.

To consider the rise of the domestic woman as a major event in political history is not, as it may seem, to present a contradiction in terms, but to identify the paradox that shapes modern culture. It is also to trace the history of a specifically modern form of desire that, during the early eighteenth century, changed the criteria for determining what was most important in a female. In countless educational treatises and works of fiction that were supposedly written for women, this form of desire came into being along with a new kind of woman. And by representing life with such a woman as not only desirable but also available to virtually anyone, this ideal eventually reached beyond the beliefs of region, faction, and religious sect to unify the interests of those groups who were neither extremely powerful nor very poor. During the eighteenth century, one author after another discovered that the customary way of understanding

social experience actually misrepresented human value. In place of the intricate status system that had long dominated British thinking, these authors began to represent an individual's value in terms of his, but more often in terms of *her*, essential qualities of mind. Literature devoted to producing the domestic woman thus appeared to ignore the political world run by men. Of the female alone did it presume to say that neither birth nor the accoutrements of title and status accurately represented the individual; only the more subtle nuances of behavior indicated what one was really worth. In this way, writing for and about the female introduced a whole new vocabulary for social relations, terms that attached precise moral value to certain qualities of mind.

It was at first only women who were defined in terms of their emotional natures. Men generally retained their political identity in writing that developed the qualities of female subjectivity and made subjectivity a female domain. It is fair to say that Sterne's heroes, like Fielding's Joseph Andrews, clearly declared themselves anomalous when they inverted the model and, as males, experienced life as a sequence of events that elicited sentimental responses. In this respect, they came to the reader in a form considered more appropriate for representing a female's experience than that of a male. In nineteenth century fiction, however, men were no longer political creatures so much as they were products of desire and producers of domestic life. As gender came to mark the most important difference among individuals, men were still men and women still women, of course, but the difference between male and female was understood in terms of their respective qualities of mind. Their psychological differences made men political and women domestic rather than the other way around, and both therefore acquired identity on the basis of personal qualities that had formerly determined female nature alone. During the course of Wuthering Heights, for example, one can see Heathcliff undergo a transformation that strips away the features of a Gypsy from Liverpool at the turn of the century and attributes all his behavior to sexual desire. By a similar process, Rochester loses his aristocratic bearing by the end of Jane Eyre to assume a role within a purely emotional network of relationships overseen by a woman. It is only by thus subordinating all social differences to those based on gender that these novels bring order to social relationships. Granting all this, one may conclude that the power of the middle classes had everything to do with that of middle-class love. And if this contention holds true, one must also agree that middle-class authority rested in large part upon the authority that novels attributed to women and in this way designated as specifically female.

In demonstrating that the rise of the novel hinged upon a struggle to

say what made a woman desirable, then, I will be arguing that much more was at stake. I will consider this redefinition of desire as a decisive step in producing the densely interwoven fabric of common sense and sentimentality that even today ensures the ubiquity of middle-class power. It is my contention that narratives which seemed to be concerned solely with matters of courtship and marriage in fact seized the authority to say what was female, and that they did so in order to contest the reigning notion of kinship relations that attached most power and privilege to certain family lines. This struggle to represent sexuality took the form of a struggle to individuate wherever there was a collective body, to attach psychological motives to what had been the openly political behavior of contending groups, and to evaluate these according to a set of moral norms that exalted the domestic woman over and above her aristocratic counterpart. I am saying the female was the figure, above all else, on whom depended the outcome of the struggle among competing ideologies.

For no other reason than this could Samuel Richardson novel Pamela represent a landowner's assault upon the chastity of an otherwise undistinguished servant girl as a major threat to our world as well as to hers. And Richardson could have Pamela resist such an assault only by confronting and then overthrowing the reigning notion of sexuality as articulated by Mr. B's subservient housekeeper. Scoffing at Pamela's claim that "to rob a person of her virtue is worse than cutting her throat," the housekeeper regards Mr. B's assaults as perfectly natural and states, "how strangely you talk! Are not the two sexes made for one another? And is it not natural for a gentleman to love a pretty woman? And suppose he can obtain his desires, is that so bad as cutting her throat?" [1] Clearly representing a minority position, Pamela prevails nevertheless through the novel's most harrowing scene where her master, with the help of the housekeeper, slips into bed and pins her naked body beneath him. Rather than yielding up even momentary satisfaction, this scene constitutes one of the least erotic bedroom encounters between male and female in literature:

> he kissed me with frightful vehemence; and then his voice broke upon me like a clap of thunder. Now, Pamela, said he, is the dreadful time of reckoning come, that I have threatened—I screamed out in such a manner, as never anybody heard the like. But there was nobody to help me: and both hands were secured, as I said. Sure never poor soul was in such agonies as I. Wicked man! said I; O God! my God! this *time*! this one *time*! deliver me from this distress! or strike me dead this moment! (p. 213)

Pamela escapes with her virtue as she becomes a creature of words (she protests) and of silence (she swoons). Mr. B's attempt to penetrate a

servant girl's material body magically transforms that body into one of language and emotion, into a metaphysical object that can be acquired only through her consent and his willingness to adhere to the procedures of modern love. That this is indeed the Pamela Mr. B eventually desires calls into question the whole notion of sexuality on which the housekeeper's common sense had been based.

In opening the argument of this book, I can only suggest how such a transformation occurred on a mass basis and how it revised the entire surface of social life. The nature and extent of its historical impact is only implicit in the one scene from Pamela that does seem genuinely erotic. In this scene, we may observe the transfer of erotic desire from Pamela's body to her words. When Richardson at last allows Mr. B to have his way with the girl, erotic desire makes its brief reappearance in the novel, not on their wedding night, but at the climax of their courtship, as Mr. B forcibily takes possession of Pamela's letters:

> Artful slut! said he, What's this to my question?—Are they [the letters] not *about* you?—If, said, I, I must pluck them out of my hiding-place behind the wainscot, won't you see me?—Still more and more artful! said he—Is this an answer to my question?—I have searched every place above, and in your closet, for them, and cannot find them; so I *will* know where they are. Now, said he, it is my opinion they are about you; and I never undressed a girl in my life; but I will now begin to strip my pretty Pamela. (p. 245)

As he proceeds to probe her garters for a few more precious words, Pamela capitulates and, in a shower of tears, delivers up what he desires. Thus having displaced the conventionally desirable woman onto a written one, Richardson infuses the new body with erotic appeal. The pleasure she now offers is the pleasure of the text rather than those forms of pleasure that derive from mastering her body.

However inadequate this substitution may seem to us today, readers remain thoroughly enchanted by narratives in which a woman's virtue alone overcomes sexual aggression and transforms male desire into middle-class love, the stuff that modern families are made of. As the heirs to a novelistic culture, we are not very likely to question the whole enterprise. We are more likely to feel that the success of repeated pressures to coax and nudge sexual desire into conformity with the norms of heterosexual monogamy affords a fine way of closing a novel and provides a satisfactory goal for a text to achieve. Novels do not encourage us to doubt whether sexual desire already existed before the strategies were devised to domesticate it. Nor do novels often question the premise that such desire, if it is not so domesticated, constitutes the gravest danger—

and root of all other threats—to society. And I know of no major criticism of the novel which does not at some point capitulate to the idea that sexual desire exists in some form prior to its representation and remains there as something for us to recover or liberate. It is this dominant theory of desire, I believe, that authorizes domestic fiction and yet conceals the role such fiction played in modern history. More to the point, in ignoring the historical dimension of desire, this theory—at once psychological and literary—has left us no way of explaining why, at the inception of modern culture, the literate classes in England suddenly developed an unprecedented taste for writing for, about, and by women.

I know of no history of the English novel that can explain why women began to write respectable fiction near the end of the eighteenth century, became prominent novelists during the nineteenth century, and on this basis achieved the status of artists during the modern period. Yet that they suddenly began writing and were recognized as women writers strikes me as a central event in the history of the novel. Ian Watt classic study The Rise of the Novel ties the popularity of such writers as Defoe and Richardson to an economic individualism and Puritan ethic they shared with a substantial portion of the new reading public. But Watt's historical explanation fails to consider why "the majority of eighteenth-century novels" were written by women. When it comes time to account for Jane Austen, historical explanations elude him, and he falls back on a commonplace claim: "the feminine sensibility was in some ways better equipped to reveal the intricacies of personal relationships and was therefore at a real advantage in the realm of the novel." [2] Of late, it seems particularly apparent that such attempts to explain the history of the novel fail because—to a man—history is represented as the history of male institutions. Where women writers are concerned, this understanding of history leaves all the truly interesting questions unasked: Why the "female sensibility"? How "better equipped"? What "intricacies"? Whose "personal relationships"? Why an "advantage in the realm of the novel"? And, finally, how did all this become commonplace?

As if in response, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar The Madwoman in the Attic at least attempts to account for a tradition of female writers. While Watt is concerned with just how fiction played to the interests of a changing readership, Gilbert and Gubar concentrate on the authors themselves and the conditions under which they wrote. They argue that women authors, in contrast with their male counterparts, had to manage the difficult task of simultaneously subverting and conforming to patriarchal standards.[3] But when understood within this gendered frame of reference, the conditions for women's writing appear to remain relatively

constant throughout history because the authors in question were women and because the conditions under which they wrote were largely determined by men. Thus, like Watt, Gilbert and Gubar virtually ignore the historical conditions that women have confronted as writers, and in so doing they ignore the place of women's writing in history. For Gilbert and Gubar, too, history takes place not in and through those areas of culture over which women may have held sway, but in institutions dominated by men. Because both these definitive histories of the novel presuppose a social world divided according to the principle of gender, neither of them can possibly consider how such a world came into being and what part the novel played in its formation. Yet these are the very questions we must consider if we want to explain why women became prominent authors of fiction during the nineteenth century in England. So long as we assume that gender transcends history, we have no hope of understanding what role women played—for better or worse—in shaping the world we presently inhabit.

To describe the history of domestic fiction, then, I will argue several points at once: first, that sexuality is a cultural construct and as such has a history; second, that written representations of the self allowed the modern individual to become an economic and psychological reality; and third, that the modern individual was first and foremost a woman. My argument traces the development of a specific female ideal in eighteenth and nineteenth century conduct books and educational treatises for women, as well as in domestic fiction, all of which often were written by women. I will insist that one cannot distinguish the production of the new female ideal either from the rise of the novel or from the rise of the new middle classes in England. At first, I will demonstrate, writing about the domestic woman afforded a means of contesting the dominant notion of sexuality that understood desirability in terms of the woman's claims to fortune and family name. But then, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, middle-class writers and intellectuals can be seen to take the virtues embodied by the domestic woman and to pit them against working-class culture. It took nothing less than the destruction of a much older concept of the household for industrialization to overcome working-class resistance. In time, following the example of fiction, new kinds of writing— sociological studies of factory and city, as well as new theories of natural history and political economy—established modern domesticity as the only haven from the trials of a heartless economic world. By the 1840 s, norms inscribed in the domestic woman had already cut across the categories of status that maintained an earlier, patriarchal model of social relations.[4] The entire surface of social experience had come to mirror those kinds

of writing—the novel prominent among them—which represented the existing field of social information as contrasting masculine and feminine spheres.[5]

This book, which links the history of British fiction to the empowering of the middle classes in England through the dissemination of a new female ideal, necessarily challenges existing histories of the novel. For one thing, it insists that the history of the novel cannot be understood apart from the history of sexuality. In dissolving the boundary between those texts that today are considered literature and those that, like the conduct books, are not, my study shows that the distinction between literary and nonliterary was imposed retrospectively by the modern literary institution upon anomalous works of fiction. It shows as well that the domestic novel antedated—was indeed necessarily antecedent to—the way of life it represented. Rather than refer to individuals who already existed as such and who carried on relationships according to novelistic conventions, domestic fiction took great care to distinguish itself from the kinds of fiction that predominated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most fiction, which represented identity in terms of region, sect, or faction, could not very well affirm the universality of any particular form of desire. In contrast, domestic fiction unfolded the operations of human desire as if they were independent of political history. And this helped to create the illusion that desire was entirely subjective and therefore essentially different from the politically encodable forms of behavior to which desire gave rise.

At the same time and on the same theoretical grounds, my study of the novel challenges traditional histories of nineteenth century England by questioning the practice of writing separate histories for political and cultural events. Rather than see the rise of the new middle class in terms of the economic changes that solidified its hold over the culture, my reading of materials for and about women shows that the formation of the modern political state—in England at least—was accomplished largely through cultural hegemony. New strategies of representation not only revised the way in which an individual's identity could be understood, but in presuming to discover what was only natural in the self, they also removed subjective experience and sexual practices from their place in history. Our education does much the same thing when it allows us to assume that modern consciousness is a constant of human experience and teaches us to understand modern history in economic terms, even though history itself was not understood in those terms until the beginning of the nineteenth century. We are taught to divide the political world in two and to detach the practices that belong to a female domain from those that gov–

ern the marketplace. In this way, we compulsively replicate the symbolic behavior that constituted a private domain of the individual outside and apart from social history.

In actuality, however, the changes that allowed diverse groups of people to make sense of social experience as these mutually exclusive worlds of information constitute a major event in the history of the modern individual. It follows, then, that only those histories that account for the formation of separate spheres—masculine and feminine, political and domestic, social and cultural—can allow us to see what this semiotic behavior had to do with the economic triumph of the new middle classes. In effect, I am arguing, political events cannot be understood apart from women's history, from the history of women's literature, or from changing representations of the household. Nor can a history of the novel be historical if it fails to take into account the history of sexuality. For such a history remains, by definition, locked into categories replicating the semiotic behavior that empowered the middle class in the first place.

It is one thing to call for a study that considers the rise of the novel and the emergence of a coherent middle-class ethos as being one and the same as the formation of a highly elaborated form of female. It is quite another to account for phenomena such as writings for, by, and about women that have so far steadfastly resisted every effort of literary theory to explain their production and relevance to a moment in history. I have drawn upon the work of Michel Foucault —relying, in particular, on The History of Sexuality, Volume I , as well as Discipline and Punish —to identify the problem inherent in all but a few discussions of sexuality in literature. Foucauldian histories break up the traditional modes of historical causality in order to focus our attention on the place of language and particularly writing in the history of modern culture, as well as on the very real political interests that are served when certain areas of culture— those I am calling sexuality—remain impervious to historical investigation. I want to stress the relationship between the sexual and the political. I want to isolate some major historical changes in this relationship because—as the studies of Watt and of Gilbert and Gubar demonstrate particularly well—it is very possible to situate women's writing in history without showing the political interests that such writing served, just as it is very possible to show the politics of women's writing without acknowledging how those interests changed radically with the passage of time. Foucault, on the other hand, makes it possible to consider sexual relations as the site for changing power relations between classes and cultures as well as between genders and generations.

He offers a way out of the problem plaguing the studies of Watt and

Gilbert and Gubar —the inability to historicize sexuality—by means of a double conceptual move. The first volume of his History of Sexuality makes sex a function of sexuality and considers sexuality as a purely semiotic process. Sexuality includes not only all those representations of sex that appear to be sex itself—in modern culture, for example, the gendered body—but also those myriad representations that are meaningful in relation to sex, namely, all the various masculine or feminine attributes that saturate our world of objects. Sexuality is, in other words, the cultural dimension of sex, which, to my way of thinking, includes as its most essential and powerful component the form of representation we take to be nature itself.[6] Thus we can regard gender as one function of sexuality that must have a history. My study of the novel will demonstrate that, with the formation of a modern institutional culture, gender differences—though one of many possible functions of sexuality—came to dominate the functions of generation and genealogy, which organized an earlier culture.

Most studies of the British novel more or less consciously acknowledge the difference between sex and sexuality, referent and representation. With almost flawless consistency, however, criticism of the novel has made this distinction only to imbed a modern truth in the referent. I find it difficult to think of a single study of the novel that does not posit an opposition between writing and desire in which desire, when written, loses at least some of its individuality, truth, purity, or power, which is nevertheless there for critics to recover. But Foucault does not accept this opposition. He asks us to think of modern desire as something that depends on language and particularly on writing. It is on this ground that his History of Sexuality assaults the tradition of thinking that sees modern sexuality as logically prior to its written representation. And, I should add, Gilbert and Gubar's approach to the novel resembles Watt's by positing a specific form of sexuality as natural, that is, as sex. Both studies assume this prior and essential form of sexuality is what authors subsequently represent or misrepresent (it is all the same) in fiction. It is as if their opposing accounts of the production of fiction have agreed to disagree on the relatively minor issue of whether writing operates on the side of culture to repress nature or, alternatively, brings us closer to the truth of nature. Either way sex is situated historically prior to sexuality. According to Foucault, however, sex neither was nor is already there to be dealt with in one way or another by sexuality. Instead, its representation determines what one knows to be sex, the particular form sex assumes in one age as opposed to another, and the political interests these various forms may have served.

Any representation of sex as something that has been misunderstood and must be known, something that has been repressed and must be liberated, Foucault would argue, itself operates as a component of sexuality. More than that, such representations give modern sexuality its particular political thrust, which produces rather than represses a specific form of sexuality. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Foucault has observed, the discovery of the fact of desire hidden within the individual prompted an extensive process of verbalization that effectively displaced an eroticism that had been located on the surface of the body. The discourse of sexuality saw such forms of pleasure as a substitution for some more primary, natural, and yet phantasmagorical desire. The discovery of this repressed sexuality thus provided justification for reading and interpreting sexual behavior wherever one found it, always with the Enlightenment motive of discovering truth and producing freedom, always consequently with the very different result of enclosing sex within an individual's subjectivity.

"The notion of repressed sex is not, therefore, only a theoretical matter," Foucault insists.

> The affirmation of a sexuality that has never been more rigorously subjugated than during the age of the hypocritical, bustling, and responsible bourgeoisie is coupled with the grandiloquence of a discourse purporting to reveal the truth about sex, modify its economy with reality, subvert the law that governs it, and change its future.[7]

It is not to wag the finger at middle-class hypocrisy that Foucault represents modern sexuality as behaving in this apparently contradictory way. Instead, he would have us see how the modern tendency that opposes desire to its verbal representation reproduces the figure of repressed sexuality. Any attempt to verbalize a form of sexuality that supposedly has been repressed in fact reproduces the distinction between essential human nature and the aspects of individual identity that have been imposed upon us by culture. This distinction does not allow us to examine culture and nature as two mutually dependent constructs that are together a political function of culture. Foucault alone shifts the investigation of sexuality away from the nature of desire to its political uses. He rejects the opposition between desire and writing in order to consider modern desire as something that depends on writing. "The question I would like to pose," Foucault explains,

> is not, Why are we repressed? but rather, Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed? By what spiral did

we come to affirm that sex is negated? What led us to show, ostentatiously, that sex is something we hide, to say it is something we silence? (pp. 8 -9)

Foucault asks us, in other words, to understand repression at once as a rhetorical figure and as a means of producing desire.

According to the same way of thinking, writing actively conceals the history of sexuality by turning repression into a narrative form. The history so produced constitutes a myth of progressive enlightenment. According to the Foucauldian hypothesis, however, our thinking is most completely inscribed within middle-class sexuality when we indulge in this fantasy, for the repressive hypothesis ensures that we imagine freedom in terms of repression, without questioning the truth or necessity of what we become with the lifting of bans. When, on the other hand, we abandon the practice of putting knowledge in a domain of nature outside of and prior to representation, we stand a chance of avoiding the tautology inherent in the notion of repression. No longer assuming that, when written, desire loses some of its individuality, truth, purity, or power, we may no longer feel strangely compelled to discover the truth about desire. Instead, we may understand desire as inseparable from its representation and understand its representation, in turn, as part of political history. In Foucault's account of the triumph of middle-class culture, the discovery of sexual repression provides an entirely new basis for understanding the relationship between one individual and another. Following his example, we can say that modern sexuality (for example, the middle-class idea that desirable femaleness was femininity) gave rise to a new understanding of sex (as the female was defined first by Darwin and then by Freud). We can also say that the representation of the individual as most essentially a sexual subject preceded the economic changes that made it possible to represent English history as the narrative unfolding of capitalism. Thus what began chiefly as writing that situated the individual within the poles of nature and culture, self and society, sex and sexuality only later became a psychological reality, and not the other way around. Foucault makes us mindful of this inversion of the normal relationship between forms of desire and the writing that represents them when he refers to the whole apparatus for producing modern individualism as "the discourse of sexuality."

But in order to describe the formation and behavior of such a discourse of sexuality in England, one must, I believe, refine Foucault's productive hypothesis to include the issue of gender. A semiotic capable of explaining virtually any form of human behavior in fact depended above all else

on the creation of modern gender distinctions. These came into being with the development of a strictly female field of knowledge, and it was within this field that novels had to situate themselves if they were to have cultural authority. Even where poetry was concerned, the female ceased to represent the writers' muse and, with the Romantics, became instead a function of imagination that provided figurative language with a psychological source of meaning. And if a single cultural reflex could identify what was Victorian about Victorianism, and thus could isolate the moment when the new class system that distinguished landowner from capitalist and these from the laboring classes was securely entrenched, it was the insistence that a form of authority whose wellsprings were the passions of the human heart ultimately authorized writing. Therefore, while strategies of gender differentiation play little role in Foucault's writing, they must be considered paramount in a study that considers the history of the British novel as the history of sexuality.

My point is that language, which once represented the history of the individual as well as the history of the state in terms of kinship relations, was dismantled to form the masculine and feminine spheres that characterize modern culture. I want to show that a modern, gendered form of subjectivity developed first as a feminine discourse in certain literature for women before it provided the semiotic of nineteenth century poetry and psychological theory. It was through this gendered discourse, more surely than by means of the epistemological debate of the eighteenth century, that the discourse of sexuality made its way into common sense and determined how people understood themselves and what they desired in others. The gendering of human identity provided the metaphysical girders of modern culture—its reigning mythology. The popular concepts of subjectivity and sensibility resembled Locke's theory that human understanding developed through an exchange between the individual mind and the world of objects, an exchange that was mediated by language. But instead of a "soul"—Locke's word for what exists before the process of self-development begins—the essential self was commonly understood in terms of gender.[8] Conduct books for women, as well as fiction in the tradition of Richardson, worked within the same framework as Locke, but they constructed a more specialized and less material form of subjectivity, which they designated as female. If the Lockean subject began as a white sheet of paper on which objects could be understood in sets of spatial relations, then pedagogical literature for women mapped out a field of knowledge that would produce a specifically female form of subjectivity. To gender this field, things within the field itself had to be gendered. Masculine objects were understood in terms of their relative

economic and political qualities, while feminine objects were recognized by their relative emotional qualities. At the site of the household, family life, and all that was hallowed as female, this gendered field of information contested a dominant political order which depended, among other things, on representing women as economic and political objects.

Such a modification of Foucault allows one to see that sexuality has a history that is inseparable from the political history of England. To introduce their highly influential Practical Education in 1801, for example, Maria Edgeworth and her father Robert announce their departure from the curriculum that reinforced traditional political differences: "On religion and politics we have been silent because we have no ambition to gain partisans, or to make proselytes, and because we do not address ourselves to any sect or party."[9] In virtually the same breath, they assure readers: "With respect to what is commonly called the education of the heart, we have endeavored to suggest the easiest means of inducing useful and agreeable habits, well regulated sympathy and benevolent affections" (p. viii). Thus their proposal substitutes the terms of emotion and behavior for those of one's specific sociopolitical identity. Basing identity on the same subjective qualities that had previously appeared only in the curricula designed for educating women, the Edgeworths' program gives priority to the schoolroom and parlor over the church and courts in regulating all human behavior. In doing so, their educational program promises to suppress the political signs of identity. But, of course, to render insignificant the traditional way of naming and ranking individuals is a powerful political gesture in its own right. Perfectly aware of the political force to be exercised through education, the Edgeworths justify their program for cultivating the heart on the political grounds that it constituted a new and more effective method of policing. In their words, "It is the business of education to prevent crimes, and to prevent all those habitual propensities which necessarily lead to their commission" (p. 354).

To accomplish their ambitious political goal, the Edgeworths invoke an economy of pleasure in which the novel has been implicated since its inception in the late seventeenth century, an economy that cannot in fact be understood apart from the novel or from the criticism that grew up around the new fiction to censor and foster it simultaneously. To begin with, the Edgeworths accept the view that prevailed during the eighteenth century, which said fiction behaved subversively and misled female desire:

> With respect to sentimental stories, and books of mere entertainment, we must remark, that they should be sparingly used, especially in the education of girls. This species of reading cultivates what is called the heart

prematurely, lowers the tone of the mind, and induces indifference for those common pleasures and occupations which, however trivial in themselves, constitute by far the greatest portion of our daily happiness. (p. 105)

But the same turn of mind recognizes the practical value of pleasure when it is harnessed and aimed at the right goals. Convinced that the "pleasures of literature" acted upon the reader in much the same way as the child's "taste for sugar-plums" (p. 80), the Edgeworths along with other forward- thinking educators began to endorse the reading of fiction that made social conformity seem necessary, if not entirely desirable. Although they name *Robinson Crusoe* as capable of leading immature minds astray, the Edge- worths also grant the book practical value. But they grant the book more value, curiously enough, for the very readers whom fiction most endangered: "To girls this species of reading cannot be as dangerous as it is to boys: girls must soon perceive the impossibility of their rambling about the world in quest of adventures" (p. 111). This is one of many statements that suggest how socialization was fixed to gender. It considers Robinson Crusoe educational for the expressed reason that women would never imagine undertaking Crusoe's economic adventures. There is also a strong possibility that early educational theorists recommended Crusoe over Defoe's other works because they thought women were likely to learn to desire what Crusoe accomplished, a totally self-enclosed and functional domain where money did not really matter. It was no doubt because Crusoe was more female, according to the nineteenth century understanding of gender, than either Roxana or Moll that educators found his story more suitable reading for girls than for boys of an impressionable age.

If the reading of fiction came to play an indispensable role in directing desire at certain objects in the world, it was not because such narratives as Robinson Crusoe administered a particularly useful dose of didacticism. Instead, I would like to pose the possibility that moral hegemony triumphed in nineteenth century England largely through consent rather than coercion; it was precisely because they were leisure-time reading that such books as Robinson Crusoe were important to the political struggle between the ruling classes and the laboring poor. In his study of the impact of Sunday schools on working-class culture during the nineteenth century, Thomas Walter Laqueur contends that it was through their manner of inculcating literacy and a hunger for books, not through their overt promotion of certain behavioral norms, that English Sunday schools ensured docility in regions where we would expect to find violent resistance to industrialization.[10] But these new forms of literacy seemed to intrude upon the cultural stage brandishing a double-edged sword. Education did not necessarily make newly impoverished laborers safe for an industrial–

izing world; it could in fact have made them extremely dangerous. If education helped to produce a more tractable working class, working- class radicalism was predicated on literacy too—that is, on political pamphlets, on alternative programs for education, and even on a literature that spoke to their needs and desires rather than to those of their employers. Thus, Laqueur concludes, literacy did not simply indoctrinate the poor in the values and practices that would make them fit to inhabit an industrial world. More importantly, the total appropriation of the time during which the poor carried on traditional collective activities was essential in disarming the subversive potential of working-class literacy. Laqueur reasons that Sunday schools became an effective means of socialization not because they taught the necessity of self-sacrifice and respect for authority, but because they offered recreational programs that occupied many of the idle hours when people gathered in their customary fashion and when political plans might otherwise have been hatched.

The same principle extends, I believe, to the reading of fiction. As education became the preferred instrument of social control, fiction could accomplish much the same purpose as the various forms of recreation promoted by Sunday schools. The period following 1750 saw a new effort to regulate the free time of children and, by extension, the free time of their parents. Removing the stigma from novel reading no doubt conspired with activities promoted by Sunday schools to combat historically earlier notions of self, of family, and of pleasure. To unregulated time and pleasure was attributed the possibility of undermining the political order, as if, in the words of one concerned citizen, idleness alone could "fill the land with villains, render property insecure, crowd our jails with felons, and bring poverty, distress and ruin upon families."[11] But chief among the practices that the new cast of educators sought to criminalize and then to suppress were drinking, violent sport, and profligacy. The reformist policies were particularly effective in controlling the discontented laborer because those aspects of working-class culture that, in purely moral terms, most threatened the laborer’s hope for salvation were also the practices that best fostered political resistance.[12]

Allon White has argued persuasively that the successful effort to push carnival and popular culture to the margins of social life was related to the victorious emergence of specifically bourgeois practices and languages, which were reinflected within a framework where they indicated an individual’s degree of socialization.[13] And the novel is implicated in this process. If the production of a specifically female curriculum was an important moment in our cultural history, then the inclusion of novels within the female curriculum was also significant. Until well into the

eighteenth century the reading of fiction was considered tantamount to seduction, but in the last decades of that century, certain novels were found fit to occupy the idle hours of women, children, and servants. At that point, the novel provided a means of displacing and containing longstanding symbolic practices—especially those games, festivities, and other material practices of the body that maintained a sense of collective identity. Certain novels in particular transformed all they contained into the materials of a gendered universe. And once they did so transform the signs of political identity, such signs could, as the Brontës' madwomen demonstrate, include forms of desire that challenged the norms distinguishing gender. Reading such works of fiction would still have the desirable effect of inducing a specific form of political unconscious.[14]

In formulating a theory of mass education in which fiction had a deceptively marginal role to play, the Edgeworths and their colleagues were adopting a rhetoric that earlier reformers had used to level charges of violence and corruption against the old aristocracy. They placed themselves in an old tradition of radical Protestant dissent, which argued that political authority should be based on moral superiority. At issue in the way that sexual relations were represented, according to Jacques Donzelot, "was the transition from a government of families to a government through the family."[15] Sexual relations so often provided the terms of argument that no representation of the household could be considered politically neutral. To contest the notion of a state that depended on inherited power, Puritan treatises on marriage and household governance represented the family as a self-enclosed social unit in whose affairs the state could not intervene. Against genealogy the treatises posited domesticity.[16] But in claiming sovereignty for the father over his home, they were not proposing a new form of political organization. According to Kathleen M. Davis, the Puritan doctrine of equality insisted only upon the difference of sexual roles in which the female was certainly subordinate to the male, and not upon the equality of the woman in kind. "The result of this partnership," Davis explains, "was a definition of mutual and complementary duties and characteristics." Gender was so clearly understood in oppositional terms that it could be graphically represented as such:[17]

Husband	*Wife*
Get goods	Gather them together and save them
Travel, seek a living	Keep the house
Get money and provisions	Do not vainly spend it
Deal with many men	Talk with few

Husband	*Wife*
Be "entertaining"	Be solitary and withdrawn
Be skillful in talk	Boast of silence
Be a giver	Be a saver
Apparel yourself as you may	Apparel yourself as it becomes you
Dispatch all things outdoors	Oversee and give order within

In representing the family as the opposition of complementary genders, Puritan tracts enclosed the domestic unit. If they wanted to cut it off from the genealogical tree of state and so use it to authorize the household as an independent and self-generated source of power, their moment had not yet arrived. The hegemonic potential of the model had yet to be realized at that point in time. For the Puritan household consisted of a male and female who were stucturally identical, positive and negative versions of the same attributes. The female did not offer a competing form of political thinking.

Unlike the Puritan authors, the educational reformers of the nineteenth century could look back on a substantial body of writing that had represented the domestic woman in a way that authorized such a political alternative. Before it provided a common ideal for individuals who would otherwise see themselves in competition or else without any relationship at all, the household had to be governed by a form of power that was essentially female—that is, essentially different from that of the male and yet a positive force in its own right. Although certainly subject to political force, the domestic woman exercised a form of power that appeared to have no political force at all because it seemed forceful only when it was desired. It was the power of domestic surveillance. The husband who met the standards listed above passed into oblivion well before the aristocratic male ceased to dominate British political consciousness, but the domestic woman enjoyed a contrary fate. In the centuries intervening between our own day and that of the Puritan revolution, she was inscribed with values that addressed a whole range of competing interest groups and, through her, these groups gained authority over domestic relations and personal life. In this way, furthermore, they established the need for the kind of surveillance upon which modern institutions are based.

Indeed, the last two decades of the seventeenth century saw an explosion of writing that proposed to educate the daughters of numerous aspiring social groups.[18] The new curriculum promised to make these women desirable to men of a superior rank and in fact more desirable than women who had only their own rank and fortune to recommend them. The cur–

riculum aimed at producing a woman whose value resided chiefly in her femaleness rather than in traditional signs of status, a woman who possessed psychological depth rather than a physically attractive surface, one who, in other words, excelled in the qualities that differentiated her from the male. As femaleness was redefined in these terms, the woman exalted by an aristocratic tradition of letters ceased to appear so desirable. In becoming the other side of this new sexual coin, the aristocratic woman represented surface instead of depth, embodied material instead of moral value, and displayed idle sensuality instead of constant vigilance and tireless concern for the well-being of others. Such a woman was not truly female.

But it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the project of gendering subjectivity began to acquire the immense political influence it still exercises today. Around the 1830 s, one can see the discourse of sexuality lose interest in its critique of the aristocracy as the newly organizing working classes became the more obvious target of moral reform. Authors suddenly took notice of social groups who had hardly mattered before. Reformers and men of letters discovered that politically aggressive artisans and urban laborers lacked the kind of motivation that characterized middle-class individuals. Numerous authors sought out the causes of poverty, illiteracy, and demographic change, not in the rapidly changing economic circumstances that had impoverished whole groups of people and torn their families asunder, but within those individuals themselves whose behavior was found to be at once promiscuous and insufficiently gendered. In analyzing the condition of the working classes, authors commonly portrayed women as masculine and men as effeminate and childlike. By representing the working class in terms of these personal deficiencies, middle-class intellectuals effectively translated the overwhelming political problem caused by rapid industrialization into a sexual scandal brought about by the worker's lack of personal development and self-restraint. Reformers could then step forward and offer themselves, their technology, their supervisory skills, and their institutions of education and social welfare as the appropriate remedy for growing political resistance.

In all fairness, as Foucault notes, the middle classes rarely imposed institutional constraints upon others without first trying them out on themselves. When creating a national curriculum, the government officials and educators in charge adopted one modeled on the educational theory that grew up around the Edgeworths and their intellectual circle, which can be considered the heir to the dissenting tradition.[19] It was basically the same curriculum proposed by eighteenth century pedagogues and reformers as the best way of producing a marriageable daughter. For one thing,

the new curriculum drew upon the female model in requiring familiarity with British literature. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Edgeworths were among those who had already determined that the program aimed at producing the domestic woman offered a form of social control that could apply to boys just as well as to girls. And by the mid-nineteenth century, the government was figuring out how to administer much the same program on a mass basis. In forming the conceptual foundation upon which the national curriculum was based, a particular idea of the self thus became commonplace, and as gendered forms of identity determined more and more how people learned to think of themselves as well as of others, that self became the dominant social reality.

Such an abbreviated history cannot do justice to the fierce controversies punctuating the institution of a standard curriculum in England. I simply want to locate a few sites where political history obviously converged with the history of sexuality as well as with that of the novel to produce a specific kind of individual, and I do so to suggest the political implications of representing these histories as separate narratives. As it began to deny its political and religious bias and present itself instead as a moral and psychological truth, the rhetoric of reform obviously severed its ties with an aristocratic past and took up a new role in history. It no longer constituted a form of resistance but distinguished itself from political matters to establish a specialized domain of culture where apolitical truths could be told. The novel's literary status hinged upon this event. Fiction began to deny the political basis for its meaning and referred instead to the private regions of the self or to the specialized world of art, but never to the use of words that created and still maintains these primary divisions within the culture. Favored among kinds of fiction were the novels which best performed the operations of division and self-containment that turned political information into the discourse of sexuality. These novels made the novel respectable, and it is significant that they so often were entitled with female names such as Pamela, Evelina, or Jane Eyre. With this transformation of cultural information came widespread suspicion of political literacy, and with it, too, a mass forgetfulness that there was a history of sexuality to tell.

In this way, the emergence and domination of a system of gender differences over and against a long tradition of overtly political signs of social identity helped to usher in a new form of state power. This power— the power of representation over the thing represented—wrested authority from the old aristocracy on grounds that a government was morally obliged to rehabilitate degenerate individuals rather than to maintain their subjection through force. After the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, it was clear

that the state's capacity for violence had become a source of embarrassment. Overt displays of force worked against legitimate authority just as they did against subversive factions. If acts of open rebellion had justified intervention into areas of society that the government had never had to deal with before, then the use of force on the part of the government gave credence to the workers' charges of oppression. The power of surveillance came into dominance at this moment, displacing the traditional uses of force. Like the form of vigilance that maintained an orderly household, this power did not create equality so much as trivialize the material signs of difference by translating all such signs into differences in the quality, intensity, direction, and self-regulatory capability of an individual's desire.

One could easily regard this history as yet another "just so" story were it not for the way it implicates literature and literacy in political history. Foucault's preoccupation with the power of "discourse" distinguishes his narrative from those of Marx and Freud, but the real targets of his anti- disciplinary strategies are the traditional historians who ignore the hegemony of which modern literature is only one function. It is certainly possible to take issue with the way in which he collapses such categories as "history," "power," "discourse," and "sexuality." It is also right to be troubled by his failure to mention those topics that seem most germane to his argument. In the case of "sexuality," for example, there is his virtual disregard for a mode of gender differentiation that enables one sex to dominate the other, just as, in his epic study of "discipline," we must ask where is there mention of ideology or of the collective activities that resisted it? Even though he explains the formation of institutions that exercise power through knowledge, and even though he takes steps to call those institutions into question by making the political power of writing visible as such, the history Foucault tells is nevertheless a partial one.

No history of an institution—whether that of prison, hospital, and schoolroom, as Foucault describes them, or of courts, houses of parliament, and marketplace, as more conventional historians prefer—can avoid the political behavior of the disciplinary model because these histories necessarily diminish the role of the subject in authorizing the forces that govern him. Moreover, such histories tend to ignore the degree to which forms of resistance themselves determine the strategies of domination. Thus we find, in Foucault Discipline and Punish , that the dismembered body of the subject composing half the scene on the scaffold disappears as the modern penal institution closes around it. The same can be said of the body of the plague victim in Foucault's account of "the birth of the clinic."[20] The history of domination over the subject's material body

seems to come to an end as the state begins to control individuals through strategies of discourse rather than by means of physical violence. But to say that this body is no longer important to the history of domination does not mean that other cultural formations disappear. The panopticon, Foucault's most completely articulated figure of power, is incomplete in itself as a model of culture. It requires something on the order of "carnival," Mikhail Bahktin's figure for all the practices that, with the growth of disciplinary institutions, were entirely cast out of the domain of culture.[21]

I think we need to create other ways of talking about resistance as well, for literary criticism too easily translates carnival—and all the material practices of the body that are tolerated within its framework—into the simple absence or inversion of normative structures. If one could allow for such heterogeneity—the overlapping of competing versions of reality within the same moment of time—the past would elude the linear pattern of a developmental narrative. In the model I am proposing, culture appears as a struggle among various political factions to possess its most valued signs and symbols.[22] The reality that dominates in any given situation appears to be just that, the reality that dominates. As such, the material composition of a particular text would have more to do with the forms of representation it overcame—in the case of domestic fiction, with its defiance of an aristocratic tradition of letters and, later on, with its repudiation of working-class culture—than with the internal composition of the text per se. I would pursue this line of thought one step further and say that the internal composition of a given text is nothing more or less than the history of its struggle with contrary forms of representation for the authority to control semiosis. In this respect, there is no inside to the text as opposed to the outside, no text/context distinction at all, though we must make such distinctions for purposes of copyright laws and traditional literary analyses.

The chapters that follow demonstrate this point by constructing a history of the domestic woman as she was represented, not only in the great domestic novels, but also in texts that never developed such literary pretensions. In reading these materials, I aim neither to discover forms of repression nor to perform acts of liberation, although my argument has a definite political goal. Rather, I am committed to a productive hypothesis. I want to show how the discourse of sexuality is implicated in shaping the novel, and to show as well how domestic fiction helped to produce a subject who understood herself in the psychological terms that had shaped fiction. I regard fiction, in other words, both as the document and as the agency of cultural history. I believe it helped to formulate the ordered

space we now recognize as the household, made that space totally functional, and used it as the context for representing normal behavior. In so doing, fiction contested and finally suppressed alternative bases for human relationships. In realizing this, one cannot—I think—ignore the fact that fiction did a great deal to relegate vast areas of culture to the status of aberrance and noise. As the history of this female domain is articulated, then, it will outline boldly the telling cultural move upon which, I believe, the supremacy of middle-class culture has rested. Such a history will reenact the moment when writing invaded, revised, and contained the household by means of strategies that distinguished private from social life and thus detached sexuality from political history. On the domestic front, perhaps even more so than in the courts and the market- place, the middle-class struggle for dominance was fought and won.

While others have isolated rhetorical strategies that naturalize the subordination of female to male, no one has thoroughly examined the figure, or turn of cultural logic, that both differentiates the sexes and links them together by the magic of sexual desire. And if we simply assume that gender differentiation is the root of human identity, we can understand neither the totalizing power of this figure nor the very real interests such power inevitably serves. So basic are the terms "male" and "female" to the semiotics of modern life that no one can use them without to some degree performing the very reifying gesture whose operations we would like to understand and whose power we want to historicize. Whenever we cast our political lot in the dyadic formation of gender, we place ourselves in a classic double bind, which confines us to alternatives that are not really alternatives at all. That is to say, any political position founded primarily on sexual identity ultimately confirms the limited choices offered by such a dyadic model.[23] Once one thinks within such a structure, sexual relationships appear as the model for all power relationships. This makes it possible to see the female as representative of all subjection and to use her subjectivity as if it were a form of resistance. By inscribing social conflict within a domestic configuration, however, one loses sight of all the various and contrary political affiliations for which any given individual provides the site. This power of sexuality to appropriate the voice of the victim works as surely through inversion as by strict adherence to the internal organization of the model. It was doubtless because such a form of transgression affirmed their normative structure that middle-class intellectuals were the first to produce an extensive vocabulary of sexual crimes and perversions.

Still, there is a way in which this book owes everything to the very academic feminism it often seems to critique, for if reading women’s