

INTRODUCTION

Carol J. Singley and
Susan Elizabeth Sweeney

Virginia Woolf says of Shakespeare's sister in *A Room of One's Own*, "a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty" (49). This book is about those "contrary instincts" and their effect on the way women write. It argues, more precisely, that language itself evokes conflicting feelings of anxiety and empowerment in women; and that women's literature manifests this "anxious power," this ambivalence toward the very acts of reading and writing.

When women use their gifts to write or read narrative, in particular, how do they respond to language's alienating but compelling power? This book draws upon feminist literary theory, narrative theory, and reader-response criticism to answer that question. It examines anxious power in narratives by a variety of female writers; in a range of narrative genres; and from different historical, cultural, and theoretical perspectives. *Anxious Power* is the first collection of essays to address issues of ambivalence in narrative by women, trace those issues from the medieval period to the present, and outline a theoretical framework for understanding them.

Some essays in this volume examine British and American writers, both familiar figures in feminist criticism (Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Doris Lessing) and those who are less well known (Jane Barker, Mary Guion, Caroline Lee Hentz, Susan Warner, Sarah Grand, and Fanny Howe). Other

essays examine European, Canadian, African American, South American, Latin American, and Asian American writers (Christine de Pizan, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, Harriet Jacobs, Toni Morrison, Clarice Lispector, Sandra Cisneros, and Maxine Hong Kingston). The collection also considers various forms of women's narrative: narrative poetry; fairy tales; the oral tradition; diaries and autobiographies; novels and romances; ghost stories; *Bildungsromane*, *Künstlerromane*, epistolary fiction, and dystopic fiction; and cross-genre writing, which combines narrative with autobiography, poetry, and criticism. *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women* thus expands and further defines a rich female literary tradition.

Our four headings—"Anxieties of Authorship," "'My Book My Pen and My—Lover': Reading, Writing, and Romance," "Developing Narratives of Differences," and "Reading and Writing Empowerment"—trace the development and theoretical implications of anxious power in female literary history. Women who wrote during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the eighteenth century are best characterized by their anxious authorship; nineteenth- and turn-of-the-century women, on the other hand, often expressed literary desire through the metaphor of romance. Modernist and contemporary women confront the power of discourse more directly; they also confront the important differences in color, class, ethnicity, or sexuality which lie within the common experience of female reading and writing. Experimental and postmodernist female writers continue to revise masculine discourse, even as they try to articulate an alternative feminist literary tradition.

In the opening essays, we explore what it means to experience anxious power and express it in narrative. We review relevant scholarship, provide a theoretical basis for the study of anxious power, and describe the nature of female identity and female narrative strategies. Carol J. Singley's essay, "Female Language, Body, and Self," argues that female ambivalence toward reading and writing is rooted in the concept of self, which in turn derives from women's biological and cultural roles. Traditionally, women have been thought innately incapable or unworthy of literature; not surprisingly, female writing is often experienced as unnatural and painful. In relationships

with men—and especially in the roles of wife, mother, and daughter—women have also served others rather than the muse. Many female readers and writers, however, are actively redefining female identity in order to overcome the anxiety attendant upon gender. They celebrate writing through the body; find alternatives to masculine models of creativity; propose fluid or communal notions of self; and practice collaboration, a feminist enterprise whereby notions of solitary reading or writing—of knowledge as individually discovered and owned—are replaced by cooperation and mutuality. By these and other means, Singley concludes, women strive to make the power of language self-affirming rather than anxious.

Susan Elizabeth Sweeney's essay, "Formal Strategies in a Female Narrative Tradition: The Case of *Swann: A Mystery*," draws upon feminist theory, narrative theory, and reader-response criticism to show how women's narratives represent ambivalence toward reading and writing. In her reading of *Swann*, Carol Shields' satirical novel about the posthumous discovery of a female poet, Sweeney introduces narrative strategies discussed throughout this collection: interrupted, indirect, or dialogic narration; embedded texts (particularly ones that are hidden, lost, or illegible); self-reflexive depictions of a work's composition, publication, and interpretation; and ambiguous endings. These narrative strategies resemble the characteristics of women's contemporary experimental fiction, discussed in the last section of this volume and also illustrated by Shields' novel: dialogics, cross-genre writing, metafiction, and open endings. Women have consistently used such strategies to express their ambivalence toward language—a fact which suggests a distinctly female narrative tradition.

PART I ANXIETIES OF AUTHORSHIP

Historically, woman's place is outside written discourse, excluded from the entitlement that acts of reading and writing confer. When women dare to break this silence and access the power of language, they often do so with profuse apologies and complicated strategies of indirection, substitution, and negation.

Although the phrase “anxiety of authorship” was coined to describe nineteenth-century women (Gilbert and Gubar 48–49), this section suggests that earlier female readers and writers also struggled with the appropriation of linguistic power. Do these women hide their literary talent so successfully that they reinforce the very power structures they would subvert? And despite their search for feminine modes of expression, are they still inscribed within masculine models of discourse? Essays in this section show how female writers in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries developed elaborate means to speak as subjects, even as they tried to disavow that empowerment.

Writing within a powerfully misogynist medieval tradition, Christine de Pizan—subject of Christine Moneera Laennec’s essay, “Christine *Antygrafe*: Authorial Ambivalence in the Works of Christine de Pizan”—adopts strategies which simultaneously disguise and express her desire for authorship. Laennec appropriates the term “antygraphie,” defined as “writing-without-having-written,” to describe de Pizan’s narrative method. By disguising her signature in anagrams and attributing her work to allegorical superiors, de Pizan denies her own authority as a writer. While the rhetorical and poetic brilliance of these disclaimers attest to her narrative skill, they also serve only too well as models of the very misogynist discourse that she refutes. The result, Laennec argues, has been de Pizan’s relative obscurity. In light of contemporary theory, however, we may see her resistance to claims of authority as a particularly modern anxiety about the relationship between language and signification.

In “Our Bodies/Our Texts?: Renaissance Women and the Trials of Authorship,” Wendy Wall analyzes the female body’s relation to discourse, detailing how Mary Sidney’s “To the Angell Spirit...” and Amelia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* respond creatively to cultural prohibitions against female authorship. Male writers overcame social stigmas associated with publication by adopting strategies in which women’s bodies served as tropes for writing. Wall argues that Sidney and Lanyer exploit those very strategies, “imagining the male body so as to renegotiate the relationship between writer, text, and reader.” Sidney casts her late brother Philip as male muse by naming him the origin of her translation; she gains authority by

figuring her text as his wounded body. Exploiting the socially approved role of woman as mourner in her retelling of Christ's passion, Lanyer becomes the object mourned, comparing herself to Christ, her text to the Word Incarnate, and infusing her narrative with religious authority. Both Sidney and Lanyer, Wall argues, forge a discourse of power and the body that alleviates the female writer's anxiety about literary production.

Patricia Hannon examines seventeenth-century French fairy tales in her essay, "A Politics of Disguise: Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's 'Belle-Etoile' and the Narrative Structure of Ambivalence." Hannon shows how Aulnoy's narration amplifies a conventional fairy-tale plot by embedding *mises en abyme*, inscribing contemporary allusions, and disrupting narrative sequence—what Hannon calls "writing by addition." While these strategies occasionally endanger the story's coherence, Hannon argues that they direct the reader's attention from the traditional fairy-tale plot and create an open space in between the story and the act of storytelling, wherein the writer can assert her own identity.

In "Galesia, Jane Barker, and a Coming to Authorship," Kathryn R. King studies authorial ambivalence in Barker's early eighteenth-century Galesia trilogy. Galesia's conflicts, and to some extent their resolutions, are expressed in patchwork analogies in the trilogy's central novel. Lacking a tradition of female novelists, and uncertain of her relationship to the masculine print culture, Barker seeks legitimacy by comparing the work of the pen to that of the needle. Her patchwork analogies also imply her desire for a sympathetic audience; her coming to authorship involves the double process of imagining a writing self *and* finding a rhetorical context in which that self can be heard. Barker does not simply valorize a female tradition, King argues; she also engages in the kind of revisionary, collaborative project that still occupies female writers today.

PART II

"MY BOOK MY PEN AND MY—LOVER": READING, WRITING, AND ROMANCE

The next section describes a different kind of ambivalence, as nineteenth- and turn-of-the-century women attempt to resolve the

apparent tension between independent reading, writing, and thinking, on the one hand, and a culture that emphasizes romance and marriage, on the other. Rather than simultaneously announcing and disguising their authorship, these women try to integrate linguistic power with traditional romance—whether in the texts they read and write or the lives they lead.

In “The Word as Battleground in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*,” an essay that complements Hannon’s analysis of ambivalent narration, Julia Giordano extends the theory that free indirect discourse developed as a means for early female novelists to establish narrative authority. Giordano shows, in particular, how Austen’s use of free indirect discourse in *Persuasion*—which enables the narrator to identify with Anne Elliott and yet remain distant from her—undermines her heroine’s apparent credibility and makes the novel more subversively ironic than it first appears. This irony explains why Anne’s speech (illustrated by her accounts of her romance with Captain Wentworth) is so ambiguous, evasive, and ultimately unreliable: it reflects the same anxieties about feminine discourse that produce Austen’s own indirect narrative strategy.

Martha Tomhave Blauvelt reads Mary Guion’s diary in the context of American social history. The title of her essay quotes a phrase—“this altogather precious tho wholly worthless book”—which encapsulates Guion’s ambivalence toward her diary. She felt that her diary was invaluable to her, yet meaningless to anyone else—an ambivalence poignantly expressed by her mingled fear and desire that someone might read it. However, Guion also saw her diary as a source of education, even empowerment. Another phrase from the diary that provides the title for this section, “my book my Pen and my—Lover,” lists the most important things in her life: reading, writing, and the ideal husband she imagined. Guion’s diary exemplified all three simultaneously. It allowed her to connect these aspects of her life, and to resolve differences between literature and life, between romance and reality. Blauvelt shows how Guion describes her suitors in terms borrowed from sentimental fiction, and practices with her diary the emotional and intellectual intimacy that she hoped to find in marriage. Complementing the analysis of prose fiction in other essays, Blauvelt’s study in cultural criticism provides provocative evidence of the ambivalence toward reading and writing that ordinary women felt.

Debra Humphreys' essay, "Power and Resistance in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," provides another glimpse of the complex relationship between sentimental fiction and women's lives. Using Foucault's theories about power, spatial configurations, and narrative strategies, Humphreys examines tensions between private and public places in *Incidents*. She argues, in particular, that Harriet Jacobs exposes the instability of such dichotomies—private and public, inside and out, black and white—by redefining the ambivalent space between them to empower her narrative. In the same way, Jacobs positions her autobiography within the sentimental romance tradition so as to resist both its conventions and its ideology. Humphreys' essay concurs with other essays about the considerable ambivalence with which a nineteenth-century woman compares her life to its fictional version. Humphreys suggests, however, that such ambivalence can be a source of power—especially for those excluded by race as well as gender.

In "Mirroring the Mother-Text: Histories of Seduction in the American Domestic Novel," Elizabeth L. Barnes also examines the influence of the sentimental romance. She argues that the nineteenth-century domestic novel is the child of the eighteenth-century seduction novel, and that it acknowledges this origin in its treatment of mothers and daughters. More specifically, Barnes shows how mothers and daughters struggle for narrative control in Caroline Lee Hentz's *Ernest Linwood*. The story of the mother's seduction, echoing seduction novels of the preceding century, is an embedded text which both frightens and seduces her daughter—who is paralyzed by her mother's story and the literary history it evokes. Establishing connections between two major genres of women's narrative, Barnes suggests a new paradigm for female literary influence.

In "Charlotte Brontë and Desire (to Write): Pleasure and Prohibition," Patricia E. Johnson provides a reading of Brontë's novels which links authorship, audience, and romance. Brontë's heroines do not seek true love, she argues, so much as self-expression and a sympathetic male audience. Johnson analyzes Brontë's narration, imagery, and embedded texts in order to trace a progression from *Jane Eyre*, in which desire to write is sublimated as sexual desire, to *Shirley*, in which writing and sexual desire express each other, to *Villette*, in which desire to write is unveiled

as the heroine's true object. Johnson's essay provides a new interpretation of Brontë's oeuvre, and describes another way in which female writers express anxiety about authorship and interpretation through the medium of the romance.

Terri Doughty's essay, "Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book: The New Woman and the Ideology of the Romance Ending*," uses Anglo-American feminist theory to assess a complex relationship between fictional heroine, authorial persona, and an actual person—Frances Elizabeth McFall, the British feminist, "New Woman," and novelist. Doughty argues that both her heroine, "Elizabeth Caldwell Maclure," and her pseudonym, "Madame Sarah Grand," are in some sense wishful projections of McFall's real identity. *The Beth Book* was intended as feminist fiction about the life of a female writer and "woman of genius." However, although the novel resists the traditional romance ending, it finally and clumsily reinscribes it—a flaw that Doughty links to the romance ending's powerful ideology and to McFall's own ambivalence about her artistic career.

In "Forbidden Reading and Ghostly Writing in Edith Wharton's 'Pomegranate Seed,'" Carol J. Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney draw on psychoanalytic theory, reader-response criticism, and feminist theory to explain the ambivalence toward reading and writing that haunted Wharton since childhood. The purloined love letter in "Pomegranate Seed" represents the power of language and generates the same series of triangular relationships that Lacan finds in Poe's "The Purloined Letter," with the important difference that all of Wharton's major characters are female. Along with the story's ambiguous plot and title, the "barely legible" letter—which is fearfully read by two women and written from beyond the grave by another—reveals Wharton's worry about becoming a writer. In this and other narratives, Wharton overcomes her ambivalence, purloining both the "letter" and the power it represents. But her anxiety remains—and turns the romance into a ghost story.

PART III DEVELOPING NARRATIVES OF DIFFERENCES

In cultures that define subjectivity as masculine, to be female is already to be other. How is this attribution altered by a

woman's added marginalization by sexuality, class, race, or ethnicity? Essays in this section explore differences among female writers, celebrate diversity, and suggest that there can be no universal theory of female creativity. Twentieth-century women no longer imagine themselves as literary transgressors, and they even recount stories other than the familiar one of husband, home, and children; but the pressing matter of one's identity remains, especially in contexts that pay only lip service to difference. These essays consider women who write sometimes subversively, always heroically, about the struggle to break old narratorial and ideological boundaries and claim new territories for themselves and their characters. Accordingly, several essays consider narratives of adolescent as well as literary development.

In her essay, "Willa Cather and the Fiction of Female Development," Judith Fetterley explores Cather's apparent rejection of the mothering that is so common in the female regionalist tradition. Fetterley argues that the ostensible misogyny in novels like *The Professor's House* reveals the high cost of Cather's male identification and her inevitable ambivalence about her development as a writer. This dissociation from gender poses an insoluble dilemma for the female artist. Fetterley finds possible exception, however, in *The Song of the Lark*, a novel of successful female development and a countertext to *The Professor's House*, a novel of failed male development. In *The Song of the Lark*, Fetterley argues, physical desire merges with the passion of art; the memory of foremothers creates a productive model of self-mothering; and irrepressible desire overcomes ambivalence toward successful artistic development. "Willa Cather and the Fiction of Female Development" complements Barnes' analysis of maternal legacies in the domestic novel and Gutiérrez-Jones' essay on gender and ethnicity in the *Bildungsroman*.

In "How Do We [Not] Become These People Who Victimize Us?: Anxious Authorship in the Early Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates," Brenda O. Daly explores the metaphor of "leaving home" to describe both Oates' efforts to flee the patriarchal house of fiction and her characters' attempts at self-authorship. Oates' early novels express her anxiety in the personae of suicidal adolescent men; she imagines authorship as masculine, dangerous, and even deadly. Later novels feature adolescent women—often young

and poor as well as female—and envision ways for them not only to survive, but to redefine their relationship to self and world through alternatives to the romance plot. For Oates and her characters, however, the power of language still causes anxiety. Oates' dilemma remains the same: how to become self-authoring without exploiting others; how to tell her characters' stories without victimizing them.

Deborah J. Archer's essay, "Receiving the Other: The Feminine Economy of Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star*," addresses the *écriture féminine* of a Brazilian novelist whose feminism has been overlooked until recently. Drawing on the theories of Cixous and Irigaray, Archer reads Lispector's novel in terms of a libidinal economy which reveals her self-consciousness about writing. In an essay that complements Daly's analysis of the relationship between author and character, Archer identifies Lispector's feminine modes of expression: hesitancy over speaking for the other, and uncertainty about the proper distance between herself and her protagonist. Lispector also reflects postmodernist concerns over the inadequacy of language, as she struggles to make words fit her heroine's reality without appropriating it. Archer's own essay replicates this struggle, as she strives to recreate Lispector's text in a way that leads readers beyond aesthetic appreciation to political and personal revelation.

Deborah L. Clarke considers women's ambivalence toward reading and writing in the context of black orality and white literacy in her essay, "What There Was before Language': Preliteracy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." Clarke shows how Morrison mediates the African American desire for a voice (which led Frederick Douglass to equate literacy with freedom) with women's hesitation to appropriate the conventions of white patriarchy. Clarke uses both feminist and narrative theory to demonstrate that Morrison upholds "prediscursive reality," in Irigaray's phrase, as an alternative to the written word. But whereas Irigaray identifies this prediscursive reality with feminine discourse, Morrison relates it to men as well as women: nature seems androgynous, and child's play, common to both sexes, transforms the masculine Bible into a simple alphabet from which a new language can be made. Although *The Song of Solomon* reveals Morrison's own ambivalence—it is a literate text that empowers an oral tradition—Clarke argues that it cre-

ates a new paradigm to replace the written discourse which has long kept African Americans from power.

Bonnie TuSmith explores the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and creativity in "Literary Tricksterism: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*." Noting that the novel should be read as neither sociology nor history, TuSmith addresses the literary, rather than literal, issues that it raises about the individual and the community. Unlike those who read this text as conventional autobiography, TuSmith argues that Kingston's "memoir" challenges the optimistic, static assumptions of American autobiography in order to better represent the distinctive stories of ethnic women. Kingston's new form of autobiography replaces the notion of self as already constituted with the notion of self as continuity through change. Moreover, in the tradition of literary tricksterism, Kingston uses a "strategy of ambiguity" which engages readers in reconstructing appropriate contexts for the complexity of Chinese American life.

In "Different Voices: The Re-Bildung of the Barrio in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*," Leslie S. Gutiérrez-Jones reads Cisneros' novel in the context of Carol Gilligan's revisionary theories of psychological development and Michel de Certeau's analysis of the art forms of the disempowered. For Cisneros and other Chicana and marginalized writers, consumption of available literary genres can become a form of production: in *Mango Street*, Cisneros' narrator abandons the familiar pattern of adolescent rebellion and accession to a calm social order, so common to the *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* traditions, by returning to the barrio. Like Kingston, Cisneros revises the American mythology of the self-sufficient individual to envision a communal self involved with others. This reconceptualization of identity and development radically transforms the *Bildungsroman* into a novel of what Gilligan calls "identity as relationship." Attendant on this new model, however, is the anxiety with which women experience their individual creativity as alienation from the culture that fosters it. Gutiérrez-Jones argues that Cisneros, like other contemporary female writers, overcomes this anxiety by creating multiple narrative voices to balance the needs for connection and separation.

PART IV

READING AND WRITING EMPOWERMENT

Essays in the concluding section of *Anxious Power* address contemporary women's ambivalence toward reading and writing in a postmodernist (and postfeminist?) culture. In particular, these essays show that female writers of experimental fiction continue to revise patriarchal texts and masculine modes of discourse, even as they try to imagine what might take their place.

Gayle Greene's "Ambiguous Benefits: Reading and Writing in Feminist Metafiction" outlines a new literary history of recent experimental writing by women, beginning with the novels of Doris Lessing. Greene argues that feminist writers of the sixties, seventies, and early eighties used the self-reflexive strategies of postmodernism to depict the complex ways in which women are both limited and liberated by language. In a parallel to Doughty's essay on the New Woman and the ideology of romance, for example, Greene shows that these feminist writers also confronted the limitations of "happily-ever-after" endings—depicting those limitations even as they attempted to transcend them. She cites Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall*, in particular, as an example of feminist metafiction which creates an alternative to the myth of romantic salvation.

In "Letters from Nowhere: Fanny Howe's *Forty Whacks* and Feminine Identity," Johnny Payne shows how contemporary female writers try to subvert male-authored discourse about women and articulate an alternative. Reading Howe's experimental epistolary novella in the context of biography and psychoanalysis, and comparing the heroine's letters to her psychoanalyst with Howe's own letters to her mentor, Payne suggests that correspondence with male discourse tends to efface feminine identity. "Letters from Nowhere" argues that a woman's participation in such discourse—whether it be psychoanalysis or intellectual exchange—places her in the powerless position of patient or protégé. Payne's essay also complements Singley and Sweeney's analysis of the purloined letter.

Margaret Atwood is a female writer who is always intensely aware of her heroines' relationship to language. In "Scripted, Conscripted, and Circumscribed: Body Language in Margaret

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," Sheila C. Conboy examines the narrator's relationship to language at several levels. Drawing on analogies between the text and the female body (also evoked in Wall's essay on female publication in the Renaissance), Conboy shows the complicated connections between the narrator's textual and physical reproduction. In particular, Offred experiences her text—like her body—as “fragmented”; and she implies and even addresses an ideal female reader who will be able to reassemble it. Despite Offred's optimism, however, Atwood herself is ambivalent about the possibility of such sympathetic reading: Offred's actual reader, as depicted in the “Historical Notes” to her narrative, is a man who appropriates her text just as the Gilead regime appropriated her body.

The fictions of Lessing, Howe, Atwood, and other feminist writers suggest that, like their literary mothers, contemporary women are anxious about their relationship to a male literary tradition that describes their powerlessness. A new female literary tradition is clearly necessary, but it is difficult to imagine except in correspondence with male discourse. Even as feminist writers experiment with new fictional forms, then, they still reflect imprisoning endings, punitive mentors, and misogynist readers. Diane P. Freedman's essay, “Discourse as Power: Renouncing Denial,” articulates an alternative feminist literary tradition. The tradition Freedman imagines is characterized by a blending of voices (like the narration of *The House on Mango Street*), rhetorical purposes (confessional and critical), and genres (poetry, fiction, journal, essay). Moreover, Freedman's essay itself illustrates this tradition. It includes an autobiographical account of her relationship to patriarchal language as well as an analysis of Adrienne Rich and other feminist “writer-critics.” Indeed, it may be that the female writer's ambivalence—her sense of being both self and other, both writer and reader, both powerful and anxious—is the matrix for a distinctly female narrative tradition, in which voices and genres combine without cancelling each other out. *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women* traces the gradual evolution of that tradition.

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