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Circa 1959

I forced myself to keep my own figure fictitious; legendary. If I had said, Look here am I uneducated, because my brothers used up all the family funds which is the fact—Well theyd have said; she has an axe to grind; and no one would have taken me seriously.

—Virginia Woolf (letter to Ethel Smyth, June 8, 1933)

I

The Con: A Fable

I didn't go to Stratford-upon-Avon to study Shakespeare. That's not true either. I did want to study Shakespeare. I was an English major, after all. But mainly I wanted to get away from my parents and impress my boyfriend. David had given me a brown leather-bound diary with gilt-tipped pages for a going-away present. As soon as the boat pulled out of the harbor, I started recording my feelings and impressions. After some twenty pages, the diary abruptly stops with an arrow pointing toward Oxford. Not another line. And yet what happened at Oxford was the beginning of everything, which of course I couldn't possibly have known then. It was 1959, and I was eighteen—a literary girl in love with books (her boyfriend was an English major too).

The Shakespeare Institute offered a six-week summer course for

foreign students. I had begun reading Henry James and admired Isabel Archer. It took a while for me to understand that being an American in England was being a foreigner. I knew this; I just hadn't made the connection. Famous Shakespeareans gave lectures at the institute every morning. On performance nights we would go to The Dirty Duck, the pub across the road from the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and wait for the actors to turn up. Our teachers chatted with them about the performance, almost casually over rounds of lager. We watched them out of the corner of our eyes. Was I impressed? I note my views in my diary, on July 25, 1959: "Stratford: is a phony, artificial, contrived TOURIST TOWN. It is quaint but this really isn't enough." Bored by school from the beginning, I wrote home daily aerograms complaining to my parents. Couldn't I please drop my classes and travel all summer?

Dearest Doll, my father begins. Then comes a summary of paternal permissions and prohibitions:

1. The fees have been paid. Receipt is dated July 6.
2. You may rent a bike and ride it.
3. You may travel week-ends. Be discreet.
4. Tuition covers whole period. Don't judge course by partial early performance.
5. Passage back has been assured and extension of stay is out of question.

My father was one of the last patriarchs and a lawyer to boot.

One weekend my parents, who were touring Northern Europe, came to England, and I took the train to meet them in London. There's a picture my father snapped on an excursion to Whitechapel we made together that weekend. I'm standing with my mother, wearing a navy blue print sleeveless dress that has a tight dropped waist with a matching bolero jacket (fig. 3.1). My frizzy hair (the bane of my existence) is pulled back tight in a bun, and I'm wearing prescription sunglasses, light green lenses with pale, almost transparent pink harlequin frames that cast a V-like shadow on my cheeks. In the diary I describe the unsmiling girl in



FIG. 3.1. My mother and me.
Photograph by my father, Louis Kipnis.

the picture as she appeared a few weeks earlier that summer on the SS *Rotterdam* where I documented my experiments in shipboard romance. "Tonight I feel ugly. I've noticed this for some time. My figure looked quite good in the navy dress but there is something wrong with my face." I seemed to be having a hard time having fun, even without the company of my parents.

One day toward the end of the summer course, Judy, another American girl in our group at Stratford, and I hitchhiked to Oxford. The Bodleian and the Radcliffe Camera were high on the list that David had compiled for my instruction, though he had not yet crossed the ocean himself (not that we were rivalrous). A large part of my desire to visit Oxford was to report on what I had seen with as much architectural detail as I could muster (though never as much as he required). In the late afternoon, standing morosely under our umbrellas in the parking lot of one of the colleges, Judy and I were approached by a man in a long trench coat who asked if we needed help. A lecturer at King's College, just back from teaching in the States (Yale, no less), with an invitation to return was how Peter Bradshaw presented himself. Americans had been very kind to him during his stay, he said, and he wanted to repay their generosity. Besides, he casually added on the way to the car, his family had their ancestral home, a castle, in Warwick, a town not far from Stratford. As we drove back in the rain, we made plans for the following week. Judy and I were to visit his chateau and meet his family. (Our children, I thought happily in the backseat, will have an English accent.) One night, after a week of meals and drinks, we all went back to one of the student's rooms to drink Scotch, a newly acquired taste for me. Peter explained that he couldn't drive back to Warwick that night because his car was being repaired. I eagerly offered him my room, proposing to sleep with Judy and her roommate in theirs.

Flash forward. Reader, please remember this is the fifties, we cut away from the bedroom to which I returned in stealth later that night. (It's also true that I can't see into that room anymore, beyond twin beds, a tall dresser, and a proliferation of ruffles and anti-macassars.) The next morning, unable to concentrate on the lec-

ture, and fantasizing about our romantic adventures to come—the castle, the moat—I reread the week's mail. My parents had finally sent me the money I'd been pleading for, and I wanted to count it again. The envelope was empty. A small rush of panic made me sweaty. I turned to Judy: look in your wallet, I signaled wildly in pantomime. She gestured back that her money was gone too. Abandoning Coriolanus to his fate, we jumped up in tandem, hopped on our bikes, and raced back to our rooms at the Barwyn. No money anywhere. It wasn't quite 1 p.m.

The afternoon dragged on. I felt sure my prince would return. So when the police arrived at tea time, called in by one of the other students who had disapproved of "Peter" from the start, I refused to talk. (Once back in Stratford, Peter had shared meals with us, sometimes treating us to drinks, all the while politely cadging small sums of money from the students in our little group; quietly, one-by-one, each promising not to tell the others.) The officers were polite and kind—they were English, after all, but unbending. They threatened to tell our parents if we didn't cooperate. My parents will kill me, I thought, and in my case this was barely a figure of speech. I nodded when I had to admit in front of everyone that there were "intimacies" between Peter and me, but I did not confess that he had proposed to me; the marriage proposal seemed the final humiliation rather than a mitigating excuse. We traipsed down to the police station at the edge of the village and grudgingly flipped through an album of mug shots, convinced that this was a huge, not to say, unjust waste of our time, that Peter would reappear as promised—a gentleman's word.

We begged the policeman to phone him. But there was no Bradshaw teaching at King's College. Not only was the family not titled, its name didn't exist in Warwick. The worst was yet to come. I turned a page, and my heart, as they say, stood still. Full face or in profile, I don't remember which, there was the face I had spent the night in bed with; but despite the evidence I still would not admit to myself that I had been caressed by a criminal. "Peter" had recently been released from prison. I was a nice Jewish girl from New York who went to midnight concerts at Carnegie Hall and

saw only foreign movies in black and white. How could I have day-dreamed about life with a man who had spent most of his doing time for conning little old ladies?

Reader, did I really want to marry him? True, I wanted an adventure, but then I couldn't manage to separate it from fairy tale—lords, castles, being picked up out of your boring middle-class life and carried away to reign as the princess (eventually queen) you really were. The professor would have to stand in for the prince, the white car for the horse. I was still in the world of fifties' girls where, whatever your ambition—to be smart, learn about Shakespeare, travel the world—that desire was usually harnessed to the marriage plot. I don't remember leaving Stratford, but once I got to Paris, I closed the door on England and my stupid American girl secret and changed my major to French. In the summer of 1959 I had already found my emotional style—a kind of desperate unknowing.

II

Black Stockings

Sexual intercourse began
 In nineteen sixty-three
 (Which was rather late for me)—
 Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban
 And the Beatles' first LP.

—Philip Larkin, "Annus Mirabilis"

At the beginning of the 1990s I was invited to contribute to an anthology that asked its contributors to answer the question: How did you become a feminist literary critic?¹ The editors describe the project as "an effort of remembering and historicizing, a collection of individual stories that, taken together, comprise a collective story—histories that make a history" (1). These stories form an intellectual memoir emerging from a generation of American women with literary aspirations for whom the 1950s were "the

decade that produced us and produced feminism" (2)—“us,” that is to say, academics, at various points on the graph of their middle age; most straight and white and writing in the nineties from tenured positions. My piece of the group memoir was titled “Decades,” where the sixties’ prelude to my seventies’ coming-to-feminism story began, as it happened, in Paris. Ten years later I found myself writing what feels like the prequel to “Decades”; but this time returning to the native grounds of my New York fifties, to the years and yearnings that directly preceded the official narrative.

But which fifties and whose? If there is a rough consensus about how to date the moment at which the fifties seemed over, it’s of course in large part due to the magnitude of the presidential assassination in 1963. Less easy to pinpoint as traumatically, the beginning of its end. We could take the 1957 launching of Sputnik or, on the literary scene, the stunning success of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. For autobiographical reasons, as we’ve seen, I’m partial to 1959, when I first went to Europe and began, unbeknownst to me, of course, my feminist odyssey—fear of flying when we were still crossing the ocean by boat. The crossing changed my life. In 1959 the Barbie doll, weird harbinger of feminine futures and bodies, appeared on the scene. In 1959 Castro became premier of Cuba. Such are the intimacies of the time line.

Whatever shape you give to the arc of postwar culture, there’s evidence in this period of transition pointing to a palpable if undefinable sense that in the realm of the social relations between men and women, but especially for American women, things were changing. *The Presidential Report on the Status of Women*, the result of the work of Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women established in 1961, made front-page news in 1963. With predictable ambiguity the report addressed questions about what were not then called gender roles and the social implications of women’s work. And furtively but surely, ideas about what sex might mean for women were in the air. In 1960 the Pill was approved by the FDA. By 1963 more than two million American women were taking the Pill, and their numbers were rising. The “problem without a name”

described by Betty Friedan had everything to do with sex: “Sex,” she argues, “is the only frontier open to women who have always lived within the confines of the feminine mystique. In the past fifteen years, the sexual frontier has been forced to expand perhaps beyond the limits of possibility, to fill the time available, to fill the vacuum created by denial of larger goals and purposes for American women” (261).² A radical social refiguration for girls took place in this window between Kerouac and Kennedy, Barbie and Betty, but what road could an adventurous girl follow? Sylvia Plath—an emblematic though not perhaps exemplary figure of the drama lived by ambitious girls of this era—Sylvia Plath left for England with Ted Hughes at the end of 1959 and killed herself in London in February 1963.

In the spring of 1959 I was a sophomore at Barnard College, Columbia University’s college for women. This was the year that Allen Ginsberg and his friends read their new poetry at Columbia University and got lots of attention. When she described the event in the *Partisan Review*, Diana Trilling looked down disdainfully from her perch as faculty wife with reserved seats at the girls who turned out for Ginsberg’s performance—“the always-new shock of so many young girls, so few of them pretty, and so many dreadful black stockings.” She did not think much of our male counterparts either—“so many young men, so few of them—despite the many black beards—with any promise of masculinity” (224). Nonetheless, she was forced to admit that the audience of such poor specimens didn’t smell bad!³

This was one of two major national events related to the Columbia scene that year. The second had to do with the famous literary Van Doren family. Mark Van Doren was retiring, but the possibility of continuity was present in the form of his son Charles, who was just finishing his Ph.D. and had been newly promoted to the rank of assistant professor. Father and son had shared an office; now Charlie was to be on his own. But Charlie let the family down in a big way. He allowed himself to be seduced by a deal with NBC television to appear on the enormously popular quiz show, *Twenty-One*. Van Doren’s dazzling success as a contestant conferred instant

national celebrity. But when his picture appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine in October 1959, it was not just because he was smart. *Twenty-One* had been rigged, and Van Doren admitted his guilty role before a House subcommittee in Washington. Because it was about television—a young medium that inspired both fear and enchantment—and because Van Doren was a Van Doren, exposure was relentless. Charles Van Doren withdrew from Columbia and, for a long while, from the public eye. (This story was revived in the nineties by the movie *Quiz Show*.)

What does this American fable of lost innocence have to do with my own, you might be wondering? For one thing, Charlie's "last and favorite" student (his words) was none other than David, my very own Renaissance man, whom we saw from afar in the Stratford episode, a senior at Columbia, forever ahead of me. Let these few degrees of separation provide a metaphorical bridge to the snapshot of an era. That connection, I figure, makes it my story too. I seem to have been close to what turned out to have mattered, what made history; but somehow I was always at an oblique (girl's?) angle to the real thing. David went to the poetry reading, he says; why didn't he take me? I thought we went everywhere important together. Suddenly this event that I don't remember seems symptomatic. What else did I miss?

The *Life* magazine photo spread on the Van Dorens shows a clan of WASP (*avant la lettre*) entitlement where, whatever else women may have accomplished—and many of the Van Doren women were "literary" too—they are of course called "Mrs. Charles Van Doren" or, my favorite, "Mrs. Spencer Klaw." Babies are ubiquitous, even when the women have professional activities to their names. The men are the professors. In one photo Charlie is sitting around a seminar table, index finger raised ominously, warning the class of all male students "to expect a question on Milton in the M.A. exam." In another father and son bond in a book-lined office, talking of literature and baseball. Under the photo of Charlie's wife "dandling" their baby daughter, the caption explains that he "hired her as secretary to answer his *Twenty-One* fan mail and married her three months later."

Life or *Life* magazine? If marrying literary royalty was not the destiny that the girls in their “dreadful black stockings” had in mind, it’s what framed their universe. Female ambition was rarely on display in its own form or even visible to ourselves—not that we saw ourselves self-consciously as a group. On the contrary. This was the era of individual rebellions. The contingency that links the Van Doren scandal to the scene at the poetry reading makes another kind of sense when replaced in a retrospective narrative about a piece of Manhattan culture in the 1950s. But what is memory, if not a reconstruction?

In her memoir about coming of age in this urban landscape, Hettie Jones recalls Trilling’s *Partisan* article with an amused edge: “She didn’t find us pretty, and hadn’t liked our legs at all. ‘So many blackest black stockings,’ she wrote with distaste.” But there’s a nice twist to this recollection. A year later Hettie, who worked as a subscription manager at the magazine, encounters Mary McCarthy at a party. “‘I like your stockings,’” McCarthy says with a smile. Jones couldn’t keep herself from telling the writer where she could buy them herself: “on Fourteenth Street, at the Bargain Hosiery Center next to the Catholic Church” (129).⁴

III

*Did “Bad” Sex Produce “Good” Feminism?
Or, How Did We Get to the Seventies?*

So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state.

—Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

What if you didn’t want to marry the prince, or anyone else for that matter?

Looking, in a short history of literary criticism, at the sixties as

they modulate into the seventies, Catharine Stimpson returns to the period in which Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* came into existence, evoking that era as a personal witness to it, the mid-sixties when both Kates were teaching at Barnard.

Kate and I wanted to be accepted in the academy that we treasured, to have our degrees and lecterns. We also wanted to be different. Ambition, not the desire to marry the boy next door, had taken Kate out of Saint Paul, Minnesota, and me out of Bellingham, Washington. Within a few weeks, we were sharing an office at Barnard. She looked more conservative than I, in her long skirts, pumps, and hair drawn back in, yes, a bun. I jumped around the corridors in miniskirts, tights, and unruly, unkeyed, naturally curly locks. The discrepancy between a woman's decorous appearance and flaring subjectivity—in a *Jane Eyre*, for example—was to become a theme for feminist criticism. I might have looked the more radical, but I was, intellectually, the more conservative, prudent, and buttoned-up. (252)

Her account, Stimpson notes half-apologetically, while “autobiographical,” nonetheless “reflects some of the cultural ferment in which feminist criticism developed” (251).⁵ But for me, it's precisely the personal details of skirts, hair, shoes that make cultural history come alive: the inclusion of those daily issues of *style* that define a moment in a collective social pattern; pantyhose and tights have replaced the black stockings. (Hettie Jones dates the discovery of tights as part of the all-black uniform to the post-Sputnik fall of 1961, to “Goldin Dance Supply on Eighth Street,” where you could buy “dirt-defying, indestructible tights . . . made only for dancers then and only in black—which freed you from fragile nylon stockings and the cold, unreliable, metal clips of a garter belt” [46]). I love having the hair and the skirts in my line of vision.

Writing in the 1990s and providing the intellectual history of a young feminist from a post-fifties' generation, Jane Gallop person-

alizes the sexual in sexual politics. She describes the effect of reading *The Second Sex* in the early 1970s; she learned from Beauvoir's essay, she says, that women could masturbate. Then she went on to be fired up by her studies in college and graduate school; not surprisingly, she wrote her dissertation on Sade (4).⁶ (Female perversions, we know, often begin in school.) What turned Beauvoir on? In the spring of 1997 the love letters Simone de Beauvoir wrote in English to Nelson Algren were published in France—translated into French by Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, Beauvoir's adopted daughter and literary executor. The letters, now available in the original English, begin in 1947 after Beauvoir's visit to America during the early stages of writing the essay that was to become *The Second Sex*.⁷ In France the importance of the letters was discussed in a popular television program ("Bouillon de Culture," March 6, 1997) devoted to contemporary writers—all men. A woman editor (and the only woman on the screen, including the host) from Gallimard, the publisher, who assured the viewers that men could be interested in this aspect of Beauvoir's life too, presented the letters. Philippe Sollers, the ubiquitous French man of letters, remarked with his usual authority that we would now be able to understand *The Second Sex* in a new way since we can see that it was thanks to her love for Algren that Beauvoir was empowered to write *The Second Sex*—thus proving that the book wasn't the "catechism for feminists" it had been made out to be. In 1947 Beauvoir discovers America, orgasm, and writes a major book. "We must put dates on things," Sollers remarks, as though he had just discovered America himself.

Reviewers were especially enchanted by places in which Beauvoir showed she was "just a woman" like all the rest of us, a hot heterosexual woman, not an amoral existentialist and lesbian. "But for myself, I just know that I could not sleep with another man now until I meet you again. . . . I'll be as faithful as a dutiful and conventional wife just because I could not help it—that is the way it is" (69). A few years later the good wife model still prevails, despite the serious problems the two had already encountered in their transatlantic affair. "Oh Nelson!" Beauvoir writes in 1950, "I'll be

so nice and good, you'll see. I'll wash the floor, I'll cook the whole meals, I'll write your book as well as mine, I'll make love to you ten times at night and as much in the day, even if I feel a bit tired" (324). So was Sollers right? It's true that Algren had encouraged Beauvoir to expand her "essay on women" into a book. Deirdre Bair, Beauvoir's biographer, fleshes out the picture: Algren and Beauvoir "had discussed the situation of women when they were in New York in May, sitting and smoking in the twin beds of their hotel room after they made love." Bair notes that Algren "had been fascinated to learn that French women had only just received the vote, and as his questions became more probing they had settled on the topic of 'women's status throughout the world' as [her] possible theme" (353).⁸ But if Beauvoir discussed the project that became *The Second Sex* as pillow talk with her lover in New York, Sartre too had played a catalytic (though less orgasmic) role earlier in the story by convincing Beauvoir to write about something he thought she knew about very well—"the condition of women in its broadest terms" (in Bair 325).

The letters shed new light, too, on Beauvoir both as a literary critic and as a reader during the complicated climate of postwar France (she identified herself in public as politically feminist only in the early 1970s). Beauvoir writes to Algren about D. H. Lawrence in November 1948, reporting on her research:

Among lot of tedious or silly books I am reading about women, I read over Lawrence's novels. It is rather tedious: always the same sex-story, the woman brought to submission by a lover who looks like Lawrence himself, has to kill her own self so they can both be happy. Well, you didn't kill my self and we were pretty happy, were we not? Still, sometimes he speaks with real warmth about love life, of such things in love life nobody dares to speak about; it should be more simple, so it could be moving and good. The beginning of *The Plumed Serpent* is a story of a bull fight in Mexico, but he doesn't feel it the way I did, nor the way you did neither. Tell me if you think anything about Lawrence? (236)

What's striking here is the explicitly autobiographical way Beauvoir describes her critical views on Lawrence. Unlike the forceful but abstract analysis of Lawrence's novels in *The Second Sex*, the letters to Algren reveal a Beauvoir present in the flesh as a physical and sexual being. In the correspondence Beauvoir clearly separates her personal experience with Algren from the ideology that shapes Lawrence's apprehension of sexuality. In other words, she perceives, names, and analyzes in literature what Millett later, without acknowledging the insights of her precursor, would come to call "sexual politics." But unlike Millett, Beauvoir also turned to women writers throughout *The Second Sex* as precious testimony to other views of the female condition.

The ten years that preceded the publication of *Sexual Politics* were, as we might expect from the decade of the sixties, full of sex. But what kind? Or put another way, to what extent did seventies' feminism emerge from reading—or trying to read—literary texts that were banned or newly unbanned in the immediately preceding decades? D. H. Lawrence's 1928 *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was first brought out legally and completely in the United States in 1959 (1960 in England); in 1959 Olympia Press published William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* in Paris. Like Virginia Woolf, who refers in *A Room of One's Own* to the obscenity trial for Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, and Sylvia Plath, who writes home to her mother in America about the trial for *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in England, the early feminist critics of sexual politics made literary theory from contemporary readings of male writers famous, not to say infamous, for their views on sex and women: Miller, Lawrence, Kerouac, Mailer, to name the usual suspects (the views were not identical but were not incompatible either). On November 6, 1960, Plath writes that she was lucky enough to have been given a ticket "for the last day of the Lady Chatterley trials at the Old Bailey—very exciting—especially with the surprising verdict of 'not guilty.' So Penguin Books can publish the unexpurgated edition—a heartwarming advance for D. H. Lawrence's writings!" (399).⁹ Like all politics, literary ones make for odd bedfellows. Lawrence also drew Beauvoir and Millett to his work, though in

now, not while New York is the best place in the world. Nothing could tempt me away" (42). But across the Atlantic, Sheila Rowbotham, restless in the provinces, sets out for Paris from Leeds, inspired by Kerouac and Ginsberg, Burroughs and Mailer published in the *Evergreen Review*, as well as Lawrence unbanned in Penguin. She hoped her reading would help her find what she was seeking, even though, as she puts it in *Promise of a Dream*, Lawrence didn't fit the "dilemmas we faced about how to behave as young women" (10).¹⁰ Rowbotham (two years younger than I) sees her story as part of the sixties.

Fifties or sixties, we were the last generation to get our ideas, if not information about sex from books rather than movies. Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* was published in the United States in 1961, *Capricorn* in 1962. I have a copy of *Cancer* in an Obelisk Press edition published in Paris in 1960. Purchased in Paris (the price is written in francs on the cover), the book serves as the memento of a boy I dated in the spring of 1961, whose name is on the flyleaf. Was this part of his not inconsiderable seduction arsenal, a sexy book to go along with his red MG convertible? In the book approach, he was not alone. In her memoir *Manhattan, When I Was Young*, Mary Cantwell, who came to New York in 1953, describes being introduced to Miller's novel by her husband-to-be: "like everyone who spent his junior year abroad, he came out of Paris with a copy of *Tropic of Cancer* hidden under his train seat. He gave me a copy of *Tropic of Cancer* to read and I tried, really tried, but he may as well have asked me to dash a communion wafer to the floor" (23).¹¹ I must have tried harder; but I also had less to overcome. If I can still see myself being driven downtown to hear Charlie Mingus and learning to drink Manhattans, I don't remember reading Miller that spring. But I vividly recall my introduction to *Capricorn* in Paris at the suggestion of the man whom I was to marry (he also recommended the work of Georges Bataille—I should have known). In any event, in New York or Paris, barely past virginity and virtually orgasmless at the time, I was floored by Miller's descriptions—mainly of women's sexual appetite.

Sexual Politics opens (how could we forget?) with an excerpt from Henry Miller's novel *Sexus*, set in a bathroom, with the narrator in the bathtub. Ida, the sex partner in question, enters the scene wearing a silk bathrobe and silk stockings. Millett then produces an explication de texte, focusing pedagogically on a crucial detail in the description of the woman as she brings the narrator towels. Here Millett makes an even bolder critical move than starting her book in medium coitum with a woman's pubic hair ("muff") viewed at eye level; she invokes the existence and reaction of a female reader: "The female reader," Millett writes, "may realize that one rarely wears stockings without the assistance of other paraphernalia, girdle or garters, but classic masculine fantasy dictates that nudity's most appropriate exception is some gauze-like material, be it hosiery or underwear" (5).¹² Girdle or garters, ultimately the impact of the passage is not limited to the plausible or implausible detail of undergarments. It's the recognition that reading as a man or a woman might not be the same experience, especially in the face of sexual representation. "What the reader is vicariously experiencing at this juncture is a nearly supernatural sense of power—should the reader be a male. For the passage is not only a vivacious and imaginative use of circumstance, detail, and context to evoke the excitations of sexual intercourse, it is also a male assertion of dominance over a weak, compliant, and rather unintelligent female. It is a case of sexual politics at the fundamental level of copulation. Several satisfactions for the hero and reader alike undoubtedly accrue upon this triumph of the male ego." (6).

And should the reader be not only female but lesbian?

Like Woolf's fictionalized "I" in *A Room of One's Own*, Millett's hypothetical reader is biographically present in the argument. But despite the personal-is-the-political ethos of the late sixties, Millett, again like Woolf in the thirties, was not willing to run the risk of an autobiographical avowal about her own sexual desires in print. The step of imagining an embodied, desiring reader was dangerous enough. During the launch of *Sexual Politics*, moreover,

Millett represented herself as rather publicly married, kissing her husband for the benefit of cameras. Doubtless, the reception history of *Sexual Politics* (like Foucault's later *History of Sexuality*) would have been radically different had personal material entered the author's arguments directly and explicitly, regardless of the fact that those in the know, knew. In *Flying*, Millett's first autobiography (1974), Millett revisits the aftermath of *Sexual Politics*, the pressure on her to confess.¹³ Millett recounts her public outing at Columbia in *Flying* with Joycean echoes: "Yes I said yes I am a Lesbian. It was the last strength I had" (15).

In an introduction to the new edition of the autobiography in 1990, Millett describes *Sexual Politics* as a "Ph.D. thesis composed in Mandarin mid-Atlantic to propitiate a committee of professors of English, a colonial situation" (x). This version of history echoes the earlier language of *Flying* where Millett returned in time to the Bowery, to the "red table where I wrote a book, so long ago—writing for professors. Writing when I did not even want to be a writer, just burning with an idea that could make me do a book, call it a thesis, rip off a Ph.D." (43). After the fact of the book for professors, Millett revels in her well-earned autobiographical freedom. "I'd never yet written," Millett admits in the introduction to *Flying*, "in my own voice" (ix).

In 1970 *Sexual Politics* landed Kate Millett on the cover of *Time*, as *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* had done for Alfred Kinsey in 1953, because she too had hit an exposed nerve in the contemporary culture, a national culture obsessed with sex. This was a moment in American history when ideas about social change and new citizens were shot through with sexual fantasies. *Playboy* published its first issue in 1953. Critics have asked what would have happened if Millett had chosen other literary works through which to ground her claims for sexual politics. Wouldn't she have had to write a different book? Maybe. But that's like saying that Henry Miller would have written the bathtub scene differently if pantyhose had been invented in the 1920s.

Did "bad" sex lead to "good" feminism? Yes and no.

In a conversation published in the *Women's Studies Quarterly* at the beginning of the nineties entitled "Sexual Politics: Twenty Years Later," Kate Millett, Alix Kates Shulman, and Catharine Stimpson reflect on the anniversary of the book and celebrate the publication of a new edition.¹⁴ Millett recalls the historical context of the book's production: "It happened because I got fired. . . . I'd been doing the reading for years; a whole summer for Lawrence. But what I mean is that this became the book it is, even that it became a book at all, taking off with that 'to hell with it' first chapter, rather than another Ph.D. thesis, because at the end of 1968 I was fired from . . . a job [at Barnard College] I would have worked at gladly the rest of my life" (37). (Millett's participation in the Columbia strike eliminated that possibility—given Barnard's institutionally dependent relation on Columbia.) Looking back, Millett emphasizes the collective nature of the thinking that went into the book: "I was the scribe of many" (39). Shulman wishes hopefully that in a postmanifesto era reissue of the book might "provide a certain timely kick" (36). But perhaps the book is too much of its time.

Bad sex, sex driven by male domination, as the phrase went, produced one strand of literary feminism, the one embodied first by Beauvoir then by Millett—the ideological critique of male-authored literature. It was paralleled, of course, by another critically important current in the feminist tide, the resistance to the canonical sexual plot expressed in the work of women reading women's writing—"gynocritics."¹⁵ By the time Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, published under a pseudonym in England in January 1963, was republished eight years later in the United States, feminism was underway. In the month of April 1971 both *The Bell Jar* and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* were favorably reviewed in the *New York Times*. Seen through feminist eyes, the doomed girl of the 1950s suddenly made another kind of blinding sense both to reviewers and to readers. Not that the sex was so great, but at least Plath's heroine was, as we said in those days, the subject of desire. However.

IV

A Sentimental Journey

These are the tranquillized *Fifties*,
and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?

—Robert Lowell, “Memories of West Street
and Lepke”

At the end of “Decades” I resisted the urge to predict the future of feminism, the feminism I had been involved with throughout my academic life. I had begun that meditation when I was looking hard at fifty and thinking fearfully about aging—my own and that of my cohort in feminism. I ended then on an anxious note about no longer wishing to *represent* feminism through my own involvement as a literary critic, turning instead to an autobiographical writing freed from what I took to be that burden and leaving the future of redescribing feminism to new generations. I’m not any more willing now to judge the evolution of second- and third-wave feminism in the nineties.

Rather, as I face down sixty, I’m irresistibly drawn back to the time of youth, to the girl who got conned in 1959. When I examine the girl in my father’s snapshot, I read the fifties writ large, a decade in which stories like this happened—me thinking I was on the road when I was still waiting for the prince. I mean Grace Kelly married one, didn’t she? A photograph in an October 1959 issue of *Life*, the same number in which the fallen Van Doren prince appears on the cover, features Princess Grace of Monaco engaged in conversation with Charles de Gaulle, her smooth blond hair bound up in a splendid beehive. Conceivably the hairdo could be emulated even with dark hair, but the total picture was a girl’s American dream come true.

So what finally is my relation to that girl who sees the world through harlequin glasses? The girl and I both belong to a genealogy that links in an uneasy chain, backward and forward, seventies’ feminists to fifties’ girls and nineties’ professors. I know by the doc-

uments that the girl is me, or at least that her pastness is *in* me (the dumbness and unknowing); and when I revisit that time I wish equally to reclaim and disown her. Part of my autobiographical shame is remembering another episode from earlier in the summer of 1959 when I exchanged passionate kisses with a handsome stranger on the ferry from Calais to Dover—another Englishman. Sadly, he was met at the ferry by his beautiful, blonde fiancée. Don't you ever learn, my mother used to sigh with an edge of exasperation. I guess that's the thing about the girl: it took her so long to learn. As always, it's in the private stories behind the public statements, as much as in the collective pronouncements and manifestos, that the history of feminism continues to remain—however embarrassingly—alive. Autobiographical moments provide keys to the emotional logic at work in the culture, and that supplies the juice for any political movement. Stories such as these have a special place in a collective feminist past, for they speak volumes about the brainless furtiveness of prefeminist consciousness.

When I remind myself how thoroughly I was trained, I have more compassion for my younger self and I turn off the critical gaze. I manage to work up some sympathy for her, as I hope you will, if only as exhibit A of this archive. I like myself better as a generic girl true to her time than as “myself.” Or rather a certain kind of girl, mostly American but sometimes also English, an adventurous girl on a quest. Reading Sheila Rowbotham's memoir, I discover that in 1961 we might have sat through the same boring Cours de Civilisation at the Sorbonne—French culture packaged for foreigners. Her memories of the crowds of students “spilling out over the pavements of the Boulevard St Michel” (13) send me hunting for a photograph taken that year by the roving photographers who would snap your picture without asking—and sell it to you for a small sum (fig. 3.2). Rowbotham describes unchic English students in duffel coats and there I am in my (American) boyfriend's dark blue duffel coat strolling down the boulevard with a friend. True, not up to the standards of Parisiennes who in winter like spring would wear thin suede jackets, straight skirts, and heels (often without stockings) and not seem to feel the



FIG. 3.2. Me with a French friend, Paris 1961.

cold. But my appearance has improved—with contact lenses and straightened hair.

Still, I can't quite close the gap that separates us whenever I encounter the girl face-to-face; I cringe—or at least wince—when I have to acknowledge our resemblance. But maybe it's time to give her a break. Maybe I can lure her into the more forgiving arms of academic memoir. (After all, I'm not her mother, am I?)

Could I have known that in 1959 Godard would make *Breathless*, a new wave film starring Jean Seberg as a sexy American girl on her own in Paris with a *real* criminal?

Almost forty years later I decided to revisit the scene of the crime. I took the train from London and stopped at Oxford on my way to Stratford, looking for clues. I'm doing research, I would say when asked, on the fifties. Victoria, my student, who was writing a dissertation on gender and architecture, studying floor plans and blueprints, accompanied me. My memory work dragged her out of the library, but at least she got to see Stratford and Oxford, where she'd never been. I was spending a sabbatical year in Paris, and she was in London on a grant; it was a piece of luck that we were able to make this journey into lost time together.

When we arrived at Stratford (we stopped at Oxford on the way back), we went directly to the police station. I wanted to see the record of my experience, maybe even the face of my con man again. The police were polite but discouraging, and permission to see the files, if files from 1959 there were, would have to be pursued by the mail. The visit to the Shakespeare Institute was equally fruitless. The records had been transferred to the University of Birmingham since that summer program was now defunct; the secretaries at the institute gave me a name and an address. The last stop was the theater. We sat through a numbingly long modern dress performance of *Macbeth* at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in the company of solemn schoolchildren. Afterward, the two of us braved the clouds of smoke at The Dirty Duck and watched the actors come in, drink, unwind, flirt.

We stayed the night, still hoping for a piece of involuntary

memory to bubble up from the dirty waters of the Avon. From Paris I had asked Victoria to try and book rooms at the Barwyn, the bed and breakfast our group of students had lived in during the summer of 1959. No one at the booking agency had heard of the Barwyn, and the only room she could find was a wildly overpriced one at the Grovesnor House. When we checked out of the hotel, we inquired at the desk whether anyone knew what had happened to the Barwyn, only to learn that twenty years earlier, three hotels that had stood side-by-side—one of them the Barwyn—had been bought up and incorporated into a single entity. The Barwyn had vanished as a separate establishment, but its previous existence was marked within Grovesnor House by a meeting room dubbed “The Barwyn Room,” a refashioned trace of its former self. Without knowing it, Victoria and I had spent the night with the ghosts of the Barwyn’s old walls. Victoria took photographs of me standing in front of the hotel, pointing at the garden beds remembered from a slide my parents had taken that fateful summer (from a visit I do not remember). But what about the ghost of my former self?

In February 1997 I received two letters in response to my Stratford inquiries. The first from the Warwickshire Constabulary reads in part, “Unfortunately police records relating to that time and indeed up to more recent years, have all been destroyed as policy and procedure dictates. I can find no trace of X [I had given him the name Judy had recorded in her diary] and therefore must assume that the professional con man may also have used an alias. It is with regret that I am unable to assist you further with your memoirs however may I take this opportunity of wishing you well in your venture.” This letter is signed by a man appointed to the CRIME DESK, as he styled his function. The second arrived on my fifty-sixth birthday (a birthday I could hardly have fathomed then); it, too, closed the door on further evidential research. “Unfortunately because of storage space we do not keep records for so long: I have checked through the publicity leaflet for that year, but there is nothing there for the Stratford summer school. . . . We are sorry that we are unable to be of any help, but wish you good luck with the memoir.” Both letters promptly answered my

request for information; both correspondents courteously assured me that they found my project interesting. I still haven't written the memoir I had announced in my letter of inquiry, but somehow converting the con man fiasco into an artifact of fifties' culture has provided a small reward.¹⁶ If I started out too late to find the truth, at least I've recovered a piece of lost time. And for me, memory trumps history every time.

Did I ever learn? I'm not sure, but Reader, I didn't marry him—the con or the boyfriend. And yes, I've finally given up on the prince.

A while ago, I ran into a former student, wise beyond her years. We sat down for an espresso at a counter in a coffee shop on Broadway (before Starbucks made this a commonplace possibility)—not quite a Parisian café but a lot better than drinking permanently reheated, percolated coffee in a greasy spoon (like Tom's, the restaurant frequented by *Seinfeld* characters, and the local hangout of my graduate student days at Columbia). "So how are you?" I recited the litany of dissatisfactions, all the things that hadn't happened, and now never would. The child, the really good job. She listened, familiar with my shtick, and then said: "Didn't some things happen that you *hadn't* expected?" Caught short by the turn, I had to consider the point. So why didn't those things count; why couldn't I see that for some people they might also weigh in the balance. Beyond the hopeless calculus of my unconscious (in which other people have what I want and I, to my eternal disappointment, have nothing), I finally said that I hadn't started out wanting what I had since learned to take for granted; that because I had never dreamed about a career (one of the things) the way I had dreamed, say, about the prince, whatever it might mean, it wasn't the realization of an adolescent fantasy. But I had to admit that if what I had was not a dream come true, it was true nevertheless.