

PATRICIA DUNCKER

# SISTERS & STRANGERS

An Introduction to  
Contemporary Feminist Fiction



# Sisters and Strangers

*An Introduction to Contemporary  
Feminist Fiction*

PATRICIA DUNCKER



BLACKWELL  
*Oxford UK & Cambridge USA*

Copyright © Patricia Duncker 1992

*Patricia Duncker* is hereby identified as author of this work in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 1992

Blackwell Publishers  
108 Cowley Road, Oxford, OX4 1JF, UK

Three Cambridge Center  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Duncker, Patricia, 1951–

Sisters and strangers: an introduction to contemporary feminist fiction/Patricia Duncker.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-631-14492-7: \$55.00. — ISBN 0-631-14493-5 : \$19.95

1. English fiction—Women authors—History and criticism.

2. Feminism and literature—Great Britain—History—20th century.

3. Women and literature—Great Britain—History—20th century.

4. English fiction—Black authors—History and criticism.

5. English fiction—20th century—History and criticism.

6. Lesbians' writings, English—History and criticism. 7. Lesbians in literature. 8. Blacks in literature. I.—Title.

PR88.F45D86 1991

823'.914099287—dc20

91-12053  
CIP

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10 on 11 pt Ehrhardt

by TecSet Ltd, Wallington, Surrey

Printed in Great Britain by T. J. Press Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

*For S.J.D.*

*At home, my mother said, 'Remember to be sisters in the presence of strangers.' She meant white people, like the woman who tried to make me get up and give her my seat on the Number 4 bus, and who smelled like cleaning fluid. At St. Catherine's they said, 'Be sisters in the presence of strangers,' and they meant non-catholics. In high school, the girls said, 'Be sisters in the presence of strangers,' and they meant men. My friends said, 'Be sisters in the presence of strangers,' and they meant the squares. But in high school, my real sisters were strangers; my teachers were racists; and my friends were that color I was never supposed to trust.*

Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

# Preface

The decision to write a critical account of my reading was made while I was active in many feminist groups and campaigns within the British women's movement. I was involved with the Greenham peace actions and taught feminist writing both in an academic context and to groups of women, many of whom would not describe themselves as feminists. I therefore make no apologies for the bias in this book towards British writing and British experience. Certainly there have been many American texts published in Britain – theory, fiction, and writing that breaks down the distinction between the two. I have written about these American books when they have been widely read and influential within British feminism and when I myself was influenced by them, but we all have our own battles to fight, because we have all been shaped by different histories, and the women's liberation movement in Britain has been significantly different from the women's movement in America.

I have concentrated on fiction, in the broadest sense, because that is the genre which interests me most as a writer and as a reader. However, in the chapter 'Writing Against Racism' I have referred, at length, to poetry written by Blackwomen. This is because a good deal of Black feminist – or Black Womanist – political theory is written as poetry, for reasons I have tried to describe in that chapter. Writing by Lesbians, Blackwomen (both Asian and Afro-Caribbean) and Blacklesbians who live and work in Britain has never received careful critical attention, even within the political frontiers of feminist literary criticism. This is a project that is just beginning and of which this book is a part. I do not believe that the sexual or racial identity of a writer constitutes a theoretical category or even necessarily marks a certain kind of writing; but the experience of being forced into a particular marginal position does have implications for a woman who finds herself writing from the rim of the circle. Her relationship to the languages she uses, to the forms she inhabits, will be different from that of the acknowledged legislators of literary traditions. Her position will affect how she is published or why she remains unpublished – and how she is read. The knowledge that her work will be judged by an audience, some part, or even the majority, of which will certainly be both racist and anti-Lesbian does affect how a woman writes. And I, as a white woman, am

faced with the inescapable, insoluble difficulty of how I should discuss writing by Blackwomen. Not to make Black writing central to my arguments, which is where that writing so clearly belongs, on the grounds that whatever approach I choose will be racist, would be to silence and obliterate Blackwomen's work and energy. White culture in Britain must be prepared to address the emerging Black writers in this country – and be prepared for the inevitable, and long overdue, transformation and change. I wish to be part of that process. I have tried to write honestly.

I have addressed myself to all these difficulties in chapters 6 and 7, 'Writing Lesbian' and 'Writing Against Racism'; but I have also discussed work by women who might wish to define themselves as Blackwomen writers, or Lesbian, elsewhere in the book, wherever it was appropriate to do so. In other words, I have refused to transform chapters into ghettos.

Ideas are always produced collectively and so I have many women to thank: Caro Marsh, Lizzie Batten and Rose Buxton – whoever they are and wherever they are now; and the women who read some of the books with me in my feminist fiction classes and women's writing tutorials, and shared their responses and ideas. I would also like to thank my teachers, Jean Gooder, Sita Narasimhan, Hilda Brown and Marilyn Butler, while making it perfectly clear that they are in no way responsible for what follows. The men's corner in radical feminist acknowledgements is never very large, but I would like to thank James Read.

Blackwell asked three readers to comment on the typescript. Kath Burlinson and Kathleen Wheeler read the book critically, helpfully and honestly. I have tried to profit from their advice. The third reader clearly found this book both a painful and unpleasant read and therefore decided to remain anonymous.

To the women who have been both on my side and by my side in difficult times a simple word of thanks is hopelessly inadequate; but here it is anyway. Thank you to Dominique Rondi and Noëmi Neumann for writing to me and ringing me up. Noëmi Neumann died on 25 April 1988; she was and is very much loved. My most inarticulate thanks – as always – to Nasim Kassam and Sheila Duncker.

P. D.  
France, 1991

# Acknowledgements

The author and publisher are grateful to the following for permission to reprint copyright material.

To Elizabeth Wilson for excerpts from *Mirror Writing*, © Elizabeth Wilson, published by Virago Press, 1982. To Frauenoffensive Verlag and The Women's Press for excerpts from Verena Stefan, *Shedding*, © The Women's Press 1979. To Van Gennep, Amsterdam and The Women's Press for Anja Meulenbelt, *The Shame is Over*, © English translation, The Women's Press, 1980. To The Women's Press for permission to reprint excerpts from: Gillian Slovo, *Death by Analysis*, 1984; Jen Green and Sarah Lefanu, *Despatches from the Frontiers of the Female Mind*, 1985; Michèle Roberts, *The Visitation*, 1983; Mary Wings, *She Came too Late*, 1986; Merle Collins, *Angel*, 1987; excerpts from Merle Collins's poem 'No Dialects Please' and Meiling Jin, 'Hurt', both printed in *Watchers and Seekers*, 1987; Marion Molteno, *A Language in Common*, 1987; Ravinder Randhawa, *A Wicked Old Woman*, 1987; Sistren, *Lionheart Gal*, 1986; Jane Palmer, *The Planet Dweller*, 1985; Ellen Galford, *The Fires of Bride*, 1987; Anna Livia, *Accommodation Offered*, 1985; Caeia March, *Three Ply Yarn*, 1986; Suniti Namjoshi, *The Conversations of Cow*, 1985, and *The Blue Donkey Fables*, 1988; Isabel Miller, *Patience and Sarah*, 1979; Valerie Miner, *Murder in the English Department*, 1984; Jill Miller, *Happy as a Dead Cat*, 1983; Nicky Edwards, *Mud*, 1986; Sharan-Jeet Shan, *In My Own Name*, 1985. Copyright in the above is held by the individual authors, The Women's Press, London. To David Higham Associates for permission to print excerpts from Alice Walker, *Meridian*, © Alice Walker, published by The Women's Press, 1982. To The Charlotte Sheedy Literary Agency, New York for excerpts from Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, © Audre Lorde, published by The Crossing Press, 1984. To Sara Maitland for excerpts from *Telling Tales*, © Sara Maitland, published by Journeyman Press, 1983. To Judith McDaniel, literary executor of The Estate of Barbara Deming, for permission to use excerpts from *A Humming Under my Feet*, © The Estate of Barbara Deming, published by The Women's Press. To Wallace Literary Agency for excerpts from Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, © 1976, Marge Piercy and Middlemarsh Inc. Published by Alfred A.



Knopf and The Women's Press. To Rebecca O'Rourke for excerpts from *Jumping the Cracks*, © Rebecca O'Rourke, published by Virago Press, 1987. To Lis Whitelaw for excerpts from Rosemary Manning, *A Corridor of Mirrors*, © The Estate of Rosemary Manning, published by The Women's Press, 1987. To Rachel Barton and Sita for excerpts from *The Scarlet Thread*, © Rachel Barton, published by Virago Press, 1987. To W. W. Norton and Company Inc., for excerpts from May Sarton, *Recovering: A Journal*, © 1980 May Sarton. To Suzette Haden Elgin for excerpts from *Native Tongue*, 1985 and *The Judas Rose*, 1988, © Suzette Haden Elgin, published by Daw Books Inc. New York, and The Women's Press, London. To Curtis Brown Group Ltd for excerpts from Joan Riley, *The Unbelonging*, 1985, *Waiting in the Twilight*, 1987, and *Romance*, 1988 © Joan Riley, published by The Women's Press. To Routledge for excerpts from Elizabeth Wilson, *Hidden Agendas*, © Elizabeth Wilson, published by Tavistock, 1986. To Karnak House for excerpts from Grace Nichols, *i is a long-memoried woman*, © Grace Nichols, published by Karnak House, 1983. To Gower Publishing Group for excerpts from Jack Zipes, *Don't Bet on The Prince*, © Jack Zipes, 1986. To Barbara Wilson of The Seal Press, Seattle for excerpts from *Murder in the Collective*, © Barbara Wilson, published by The Women's Press, 1984, and Becky Birtha, *Lover's Choice*, © Becky Birtha, published by The Women's Press, 1988. To Judy Holland and Sarah Burton for excerpts from Hannah Wakefield, *The Price You Pay*, © Hannah Wakefield, published by The Women's Press, 1987. To Fyna Dowé for permission to reprint in full her poem 'The Word', © Fyna Dowé, originally published in *Watchers and Seekers*, The Women's Press, 1987. To Savi Hensman for her poem 'Black is Not a Skin Colour', originally published in her collection *Flood at the Door*, with illustrations by Sarah Moriarty, Centerprise Trust Ltd, 1979. To Bloomsbury for excerpts taken from *Mothers and Lovers* by Elizabeth Wood, published by Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd (1988). To Pluto Press for excerpts from Lauretta Ngcobo (ed.), *Let it be Told*, © individual authors, Pluto Press, 1987. To Alyson Publications for excerpts from Sally Miller Gearhart, *The Wanderground*, © Sally Miller Gearhart, published by The Women's Press, 1985. To Simon & Schuster for excerpts from Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds), *New French Feminisms*, © each individual author, published by Harvester-Wheatsheaf (now part of the Simon & Schuster International Group), 1981. To A. M. Heath & Company Ltd for excerpts from Darcia Maraini, *Letters to Marina*, © Darcia Maraini, © translation by Dick Kitto and Elspeth Spottiswood, published by Camden Press Ltd, 1987. Extracts taken from Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, © Jeanette Winterson, published by Pandora Press, 1985, and Jane Rule, *This is not for You*, © Jane Rule, published by Pandora Press, 1987, are reproduced by kind permission of Unwin Hyman. To Chatto and Windus for excerpts taken from Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, © Toni Morrison, published by Chatto and Windus, 1987. To Posy Simmonds for permission to reproduce her cartoon, 'The World Turned Upside Down', first published in *The Guardian* and reprinted in *Pure Posy*, Jonathan Cape, 1987. To Alison Ward for permission to use excerpts from *The Glass Boat*, published by Brilliance Books, 1983. To Éditions Gallimard for excerpts from *Moi Rigoberta*

*Menchú*, edited and narrated by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, 1983, © English translation by Ann Wright, published by Verso, 1984. To Prism Press for excerpts from Gail Chester and Julianne Dickey (eds), *Feminism and Censorship: The Current Debate*, 1988. To Virago Press for permission to include excerpts from the following publications: Christina Roche, *I'm not a feminist, but...*, 1985; Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, 1986; Grace Nichols, *Whole of a Morning Sky*, 1986; Aileen La Tourette, *Cry Wolf*, 1986; Zoë Fairbairns, *Stand We at Last*, 1983; Maureen Duffy, *That's How It Was*, published by Virago, 1983; Beatrix Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited*, 1984, copyright held by the individual authors; Violette Leduc, *La Bâtarde*, © Editions Gallimard, translated by Derek Coltman, first published in Great Britain by Peter Owen Ltd in 1965, published by Virago Press, 1985. To Sheba Feminist Publishers for excerpts from Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, 1980; *Zami*, 1984; *Our Dead Behind Us*, 1986; Suniti Namjoshi, *Feminist Fables*, 1981; Barbara Burford, *The Threshing Floor*, 1986 (© held by individual authors). To Naiad Press for excerpts from Claire Morgan (Patricia Highsmith), *The Price of Salt*, published by Naiad Press in 1984. To Blackwomantalk for an excerpt from 'I'd also like to say...' by Adjoa Andoh in *Black Women Talk Poetry*, © Blackwomantalk, 1987. To Onlywomen Press for excerpts from Lilian Mohin (ed.), *One Foot on The Mountain*, 1979; Anna Wilson, *Cactus*, 1980; and *Altogether Elsewhere*, 1985; Anna Livia, *Relatively Norma*, 1982, and *Bulldozer Rising*, 1988; Caroline Forbes, *The Needle on Full*, 1985; and Lilian Mohin and Sheila Shulman (eds), *The Reach*, 1984 (© held by the individual authors). To Methuen for excerpts from Toril Moi, *Textual/Sexual Politics*, 1985; Elizabeth Wilson, *Prisons of Glass*, 1986; Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, 1987; Sara Maitland, *A Book of Spells*, 1987; and Michèle Roberts, *The Wild Girl*, 1984, and *The Book of Mrs Noah*, 1987 (© held by the individual authors).

# Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
1 On Writing and Roaring	1
2 A Note on the Politics of Publishing	39
3 On Autobiography	55
4 On Genre Fiction	89
5 Fables, Myths, Mythologies	132
6 Writing Lesbian	167
7 Writing Against Racism	210
8 Afterword: An Old-Fashioned Politics	260
Bibliography	269
Index	283

# On Writing and Roaring

*'... a woman's power and charm resides in mystery, not in muscular rant. But possibly rant is a sign of vitality: it mars the beautiful creature, but shows that she is alive.'*

E. M. Forster, *A Room With A View*

This book is an autobiography of reading. It is about the books, written by women to women, which I have read; books which gave me good cause for anger, recognition and pain, books which changed the way I saw the world and the way I lived my life. It is therefore impossible for me to write an impartial survey of feminist achievements in the Great Field of Literature; that is not how these books were written, nor how they were received. I have watched the extraordinary explosion of feminist writing in every part of the world since the late 1960s. In these years we have been able again to write for one another, to write assuming that there is a political community there to be addressed, to write knowing that there is a women's liberation movement. I must necessarily tell the story of my own reading, reveal my particular politics of reading, and offer my perspective on the politics of the British women's movement over the past years. What I have to say will therefore be partial, opinionated and unfinished. We have only just begun to make up our own culture, invent our own stories. Feminism is a raw politics, still being shaped and made by the communities of women who are the divisive edge of revolutionary change.

I first called myself a feminist in 1970, though I must have had visible nascent tendencies before then: one of the boys in my year at school used to call me The Suffragette. But it was in 1970, when I first went up to Newnham College, Cambridge to study literature, that I first joined a women's group, Scarlet Women, and first read Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, which I reviewed for the first and only issue of our feminist magazine, *Bloody Women*. I took good care not to read Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* because, at that time, I was wedded to a politics of literature which embraced the Great Tradition. This consisted of a long string of supposedly lonely, isolated geniuses, creating order out of chaos, shaping the world in their own image, and in the course of their heroic struggles coming up with Eternal Truths and Everlasting Values. The lonely genius was more or less always male and usually a poet, but there were good fellows like Henry Fielding who wrote jolly fiction about equally good fellows enjoying the roast beef of old England and wenches in taverns. Kate Millett turned on my heroes, the gods of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and made them out to be a pack of violent misogynists. I was very anxious

that I might have to stop reading – or at least stop enjoying reading – D. H. Lawrence.

I am white and middle-class, but not entirely English. My father is Jamaican, and I was born and brought up in a woman-dominated household on an island which has been exploited by the British for over a hundred years. I was educated largely in England. My parents bought me an expensive education at public school where I learned how to sound like one of the ruling class even if I never had the money to back up the accent. This background is very important to me and my writing. I am implicated in the political structures of white, racist Britain, but I am also an observer. I still have my Jamaican passport; I had to apply for British nationality and resident status. There were no difficulties, of course, because the British immigration laws are overtly racist, and I am white. But I was not born here. This is not my country. When I first read Wordsworth I had never seen a daffodil. In St Andrew's High School for Girls, Kingston, Jamaica, we looked at a picture. 'This is a daffodil,' said the teacher. English literature was an alien culture, one that I was anxious to acquire. I wanted to belong. It was therefore not surprising that I put up a good fight when asked to be savagely critical of a tradition within which I had taken such pains to find a place.

A psychological and political split ensued. I was involved daily in various feminist campaigns: against the Cambridge League for the Preservation of Gentlemen's Colleges (now, I believe, defunct); in support of a woman in town whose supplementary benefit had been cut off and whose children had been taken into care because she had indulged herself with the occasional boyfriend; demanding a women's bar in College; buying the bread, cheese and Branston pickle for the Women's Lunch. But for the rest of my time I studied the Grand March of Great White Male Writers, subconsciously convinced that if I started asking questions it would all end in tears. So I studied my Great Tradition: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, George Eliot, Henry James, D. H. Lawrence. I did notice that there was something wrong with the list. But George Eliot, surely, only gave herself a man's name because she had to keep quiet about not being adequately married. Or perhaps she thought that it would get her a better reception from the critics and a more serious response from her publishers and other writers. I took great care not to ask the next question: Why were women writers not taken seriously? Of course they were. Look how seriously everybody takes Jane Austen. And I wrote essays about how Jane Austen might be narrow and limited in scope, but, after all, she was drawing on a woman's experience. And yet, what depth! Ah, what penetration! What an ear for dialogue! What insight into women's psychology! The critical significance of their little concerns with match-making, materials, stuff, jams, bonnets, balls, soldiers, visits. Admirable. And how wise to concern herself with courtship rather than marriage, of which, as a spinster, she would have had no experience. Such is the power of literary ideology and the anxious desire of a young student to do well that I never appreciated the matrimonial relationship of Mr and Mrs Bennett, nor saw beyond the end of Jane Austen's final sentences to the inevitable woe that there is in marriage.

I did ask myself why there were not any female Shakespeares. And Virginia Woolf told me why.<sup>1</sup> How could there be? Women were not taught to read. If Miss Shakespeare had set off to make her fortune in London she would certainly have been raped and murdered. In any case, she would not have been able to earn her living as an actress. Boys played women on Shakespeare's stage.<sup>2</sup> And so the rationalizing went on. I never asked the second set of questions in my literature supervisions. I kept my feminist sexual politics and my literary studies in two separate boxes. The women's liberation movement meant to me then what it means to me now: feminism is a political analysis of women's oppression by men and a political response to the conditions of that oppression. And I take women's oppression to mean the suffering, disadvantage and deprivation women endure precisely because of their sex. Which is not to say that women do not suffer other disadvantages and other oppressions; but all women are oppressed as women. There are, notoriously, many feminisms. The women's liberation movement was then, and still is, a broad and heterogeneous movement. But it is grounded in a struggle that is not solitary, but collective. And that collective struggle has a common aim: to transform society, all societies, so that the accident of sex is not oppressive to women. In *Gossip: A Journal of Lesbian Feminist Ethics* Kris, a Blackwoman, movingly describes her experience of sexual abuse and the racism she encountered among white feminists while trying to come to terms with her own grief within the Lesbian community.<sup>3</sup> Kris's response was brave, practical and politically acute. She set up a phone line and support group for other black women who were child abuse survivors. And she dedicated her testimony to the women who did not survive. This response – a critical political analysis of her own experience and, in the light of that analysis, an astute, loving commitment to other women – is at the core of feminist theory and feminist practice at their very best.<sup>4</sup>

Feminism is therefore about the forging of bonds between women, even across our differences. It is about challenging the assumptions and expectations which bolster up male power and male privilege and cluster like barnacles around the fact of sexual difference. Even to speak of sexual difference masks the facts of privilege; it is nonsense to discuss sexual difference without confronting male power.

Sex is a biological fact. Some of us are irrefutably women and some of us are men.<sup>5</sup> But that is not the end of the story. Upon that fact we have built the most peculiar edifice of social expectations and constructed a host of institutions, which as often as not confine women to the kitchens, the caring professions, the service industries and the ranks of the wickedly low-paid or unemployed. A key word deployed in the process is 'natural'; and the concept of nature, is, I find, usually mobilized to end the discussion. You must have heard it said: it's only natural for women to want children. Women are natural wives and mothers. Women are naturally passive, or naturally emotional, intuitive, irrational. Women are naturally faithless and fickle: or, oddly enough, naturally devoted, loyal and faithful. Women are naturally lustful and lascivious. Women are naturally frigid. Feminists have always challenged this unstable concept of nature, because the social and cultural norms which suit the status quo often



masquerade as eternal, immutable differences. But we are not locked into biological prisons and the breaking point of nature is human being itself.<sup>6</sup>

Gerd Brantenberg's *The Daughters of Egalia* is a fantastical allegorical novel which reverses the biological mirror of Nature.<sup>7</sup> Menwim, crushed by and dependent upon the powerful, violent wim, are kept in their place by the demonstrably ridiculous assertion that 'after all, it is menwim who beget and receive children'. Brantenberg is a Norwegian Lesbian feminist. She knows that there is nothing natural about heterosexuality, nor about the system of sexual oppression. It is man-made. Brantenberg's text has moments of high comedy as the lordies, beards in anxious curlers, cultivate their rolls of fat to attract the heartless, magnificent wim. The sexual encounters she describes, revealing her whole-hearted political commitment to the clitoral (as opposed, of course, to the vaginal) orgasm, blow the whistle on any natural aspects we might have imagined inherent in current heterosexual practice. There is no natural expression of sexuality, and we would be wise to remember that. But the book becomes alarming and uncanny when it does affirm the apparently unchangeable: that is, the superior physical strength of men. One of the menwim, Spinnerman Owlman, smashes his desk to pieces in front of his mixed class. The menwim's liberation movement begins with an act of violence. Violence is often glamorized and eroticized in popular novels by men. Brantenberg herself has worked in refuges for women who have been battered by men. Violence usually has a very different political meaning in feminist writing: it becomes a sinister force for social control. Brantenberg's novel polarizes her readers into women and men, or in this case wim and menwim; this is a characteristic tactic within feminist fiction.

Men seldom challenge the social construction of masculinity, which is also often trumpeted forth as a natural fact, because they do not perceive it as being in their interest to do so. But masculinity too is fraught with contradictions. Here is John Bowen, writing in the *New Statesman*:

The experience of masculinity for all men is one of violence, of heterogeneous groupings and alliances against ourselves, other men, women. Our task is first to make clear what these contradictions are, to celebrate that they exist and then to exploit them. It is perhaps here that a politics of masculinity differs from a feminist politics. A feminist politics is often concerned with the forging of alliances, of stressing the common experience of oppression, of uniting women in that common knowledge. A progressive politics of masculinity has to be primarily concerned with destroying alliances between men against others, and founding other alliances, both within and more importantly outside the traditional forms of male organisation, from the sports club to the trade union.<sup>8</sup>

Men who read or study literature are in an interesting position with respect to the debates of sexual politics, because literature is inescapably concerned with the relations between the sexes – indeed, this is the classic territory of fiction – with the construction of gender and with what it means to be of one sex or the other within particular social circumstances. But in those first years as a professional student of literature I made, as I say, an absolute separation



between my sexual politics and my textual sexual politics.<sup>9</sup> I must have fused brain cells in the process.

I had my doubts, of course, and these suddenly surfaced when I was studying John Donne. I knew Donne was wonderful. T. S. Eliot said he was. I even knew why. One of his contemporaries, Thomas Carew, wrote an elegy on his death in 1631, in which he praised Donne's 'line of masculine expression'. The garden of Elizabethan poetry, was, according to Carew, 'with Pedantique weeds o'erspred'; but Donne had changed all that. Like a gigantic phallic mower he had put poetry in good order; and many of the metaphors used to describe him doing just that were couched in terms of masculine sexual aggression. Donne, apparently, 'committed Holy Rapes upon our Will'. Rape has a radically different meaning for a woman reader than for a man, and it was disconcerting to move from the streets, where I was busy taking direct action in defence of a woman's right to control her own body, into the library, to use 'bold Rape' and 'ravishment' as terms of critical approbation.

But I persevered. I knew most of Donne's remorselessly heterosexual love poems off by heart. One in particular used to haunt me: 'The Sunne Rising'. This is a rant against the sun for coming into the room while the poet and his mistress are still making love. In the last verse he supposedly celebrates the woman.

She is all States, and all Princes, I,  
Nothing else is.

I wrote cautious essays about how the poet-lover's arrogance carries absolute conviction. What I did not challenge then was the assumption in the poem that the man was an absolute sexual ruler and that the woman was the ruled subordinate; or that Donne was praising a system of sexual oppression that actually existed in seventeenth-century England, and still exists in England now. The topical metaphors of imperialism and conquest applied to sexual love litter his love poems. Here is a passage from 'Elegie: To His Mistress Going to Bed' (Donne speaking, of course):

O my America, my new founde lande  
My kingdome, safeliest when with one man mann'd  
My myne of precious stones, my Empiree  
How blest I am in this discovering thee.

So, imperialism was a legitimate metaphor for the ownership and control of women's bodies. I noticed that the women never answered back in Donne's poems. Occasionally they did things – slept with someone else, died or killed fleas in the bed – but Donne got all the good lines and he did all the talking. One of his poems opened with a great shout: 'For Godsake hold your tongue and let me love . . .' Then Donne became a priest and started telling God what to do. I gave up writing about John Donne and wrote about George Herbert instead.