Appealing particularly to a generation still in the process of divorcing itself from the New Critics’ habit of bracketing off any text as an entity in itself, as though “it could be read, understood, and criticized entirely in its own terms,” Harold Bloom has proposed a dialectical theory of influence between poets and poets, as well as between poems and poems which, in essence, does away with the static notion of a fixed or knowable text. As he argued in A Map of Misreading in 1975, “a poem is a response to a poem, as a poet is a response to a poet, or a person to his parent.” Thus, for Bloom, “poems . . . are neither about ‘subjects’ nor about ‘themselves’. They are necessarily about other poems.”

To read or to know a poem, according to Bloom, engages the reader in an attempt to map the psychodynamic relations by which the poet at hand has willfully misunderstood the work of some precursor (either single or composite) in order to correct, rewrite, or appropriate the prior poetic vision as his own. As first introduced in The Anxiety of Influence in 1973, the resultant “wholly different practical criticism . . . give[s] up the failed enterprise of seeking to ‘understand’ any single poem as an entity in itself” and “pursue[s] instead the quest of learning to read any poem as its poet’s deliberate misinterpretation, as a poet, of a precursor poem or of poetry in general.” What one deciphers in the process of reading, then, is not any discrete entity but, rather, a complex relational event, “itself a synecdoche for a larger whole including other texts.”

"Reading a text is necessarily the reading of a whole system of texts," Bloom explains in Kabbalah and Criticism, “and meaning is always wandering around between texts” (KC, pp. 107–8). [. . . ]

What is left out of account, however, is the fact that whether we speak of poets and critics “reading” texts or writers “reading” (and thereby recording for us) the world,
we are calling attention to interpretive strategies that are learned, historically determined, and thereby necessarily gender-inflected. As others have elsewhere questioned the adequacy of Bloom's paradigm of poetic influence to explain the production of poetry by women, so now I propose to examine analogous limitations in his model for the reading—and hence critical—process (since both, after all, derive from his revisionist rendering of the Freudian family romance). To begin with, to locate that “meaning” which “is always wandering around between texts” (KC, pp. 107–8), Bloom assumes a community of readers (and, thereby, critics) who know the same “whole system of texts” within which the specific poet at hand has enacted his misprision. The canonical sense of a shared and coherent literary tradition is thereby essential to the utility of Bloom’s paradigm of literary influence as well as to his notions of reading (and misreading). “What happens if one tries to write, or to teach, or to think or even to read without the sense of a tradition?” Bloom asks in A Map of Misreading. “Why,” as he himself well understands, “nothing at all happens, just nothing. You cannot write or teach or think or even read without imitation, and what you imitate is what another person has done, that person’s writing or teaching or thinking or reading. Your relation to what informs that person is tradition, for tradition is influence that extends past one generation, a carrying-over of influence” (MM, p. 32).

So long as the poems and poets he chooses for scrutiny participate in the “continuity that began in the sixth century B.C. when Homer first became a schoolbook for the Greeks” (MM, pp. 33–34), Bloom has a great deal to tell us about the carrying over of literary influence; where he must remain silent is where carrying over takes place among readers and writers who in fact have been, or at least have experienced themselves as, cut off and alien from that dominant tradition. Virginia Woolf made the distinction vividly over a half-century ago, in A Room of One’s Own, when she described being barred entrance, because of her sex, to a “famous library” in which was housed, among others, a Milton manuscript. Cursing the “Oxbridge” edifice, “venerable and calm, with all its treasures safe locked within its breast,” she returns to her room at the inn later that night, still pondering “how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and, thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer.” And, she might have added, on the mind of a reader as well. For while my main concern here is with reading (albeit largely and perhaps imperfectly defined), I think it worth noting that there exists an intimate interaction between readers and writers in and through which each defines for the other what s/he is about. “The effect . . . of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer” will communicate itself, in one way or another, to her readers; and, indeed, may respond to her readers’ sense of exclusion from high (or highbrow) culture. [. . . ]

From the 1850s on, in America at least, the meanings “wandering around between texts” were wandering around somewhat different groups of texts where male and female readers were concerned. So that with the advent of women “who wished to be regarded as artists rather than careerists,” toward the end of the nineteenth century, there arose the critical problem with which we are still plagued and which Bloom so determinedly ignores: the problem of reading any text as “a synecdoche for a larger whole including other texts” when that necessarily assumed “whole system of texts” in which it is embedded is foreign to one’s reading knowledge.