From her girlhood in her father’s library to the end of her life, Virginia Woolf read widely and with passion. She was also an unusually subtle feminist thinker. These, for me, are the two most important facts about her. This book investigates the relation between these two facts—her reading and her feminism—arguing that her revisionist reading constitutes the fundamental shaping force of her feminism. That Woolf was a great reader needs little qualification; she is one of the best-read writers in the history of English literature. The publication of annotated editions of her novels, of her letters, diaries, and reading notebooks, of studies cataloguing her allusions, and the ongoing project of publishing a scholarly edition of her works have all made it possible to trace the appearance of the history of literature in her work.¹ My other central focus, on Woolf’s feminist thought, does need further explanation in spite of the continuing stature of A Room of One’s Own (1929) and Three Guineas (1938). It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the feminist Woolf emerged as central to critics. The work of American feminists, Carolyn Heilbrun and Jane Marcus prominent among them, challenged the stereotype of Woolf as a delicate aesthete. At the same time, the publication of Woolf’s complete letters and diaries made the details of her life, including her many feminist alliances and activities, available to all. Soon after, Alex Zwerdling’s still essential Virginia Woolf and the Real World (1986) and the essays of Gillian Beer advanced our grasp of Woolf’s engagement in the social and political world.² Still, even those persuaded by the sincerity of Woolf’s feminist commitments must account for insensitive and snobbish remarks. I contend that what critics have seen as inconsistencies in Woolf can more properly be explained by our unease with her ambitions as an artist (and her consequent willingness to make less than sisterly judgments about women writers whose work she did not admire) and our imprecision about the extent and kind of contribution Woolf made to feminism. Initially, critics were inclined to see Woolf as an aesthete and an apolitical snob. It is easy to see why.
Her bourgeois upbringing gave her a somewhat narrow, even Arnaldian, aesthetic that she never fully escaped. Furthermore, the intellectual milieu of Bloomsbury encouraged the intense individualism that she made central to her feminism. Woolf, who once wrote an essay entitled “Am I a Snob?” (1932), was indeed a snob, and her snobbery persisted to the end of her life: she nourished this quality even as she acknowledged more communitarian ways of knowing and connecting. Yet her snobbery was not only—or even mainly—about class; part of her unforgiving judgments of others emerges also from her effort to distinguish good writing from bad and, more importantly, good from great. Woolf’s desire to be a great writer with no humiliating qualification of “for a woman” not only conflicts with contemporary feminism’s communitarian aspirations, but also marks the first time in English literature that a woman stated her ambitions without apology, the screen of a persona, or the protection of a pseudonym.

In an essay published in 2000, Beth Rosenberg laments the lack of scholarship on Woolf as a literary historian. She attributes this neglect, accurately I think, to the necessary emergence of a more political version of Woolf and goes on to suggest that it may be time to return to the literary, to reexamine what kind of literary historian Woolf was. In doing so, she calls for a new literary history, one that attends to historical context without encasing Woolf in her own era, like a fly in amber.

I share Rosenberg’s desire to return to literary history, but, in doing so, I do not want to leave the political Woolf behind. My book seeks to bridge the divide between the literary and the feminist Woolf. As one critic argues, “Woolf figured the sheer pleasure of reading . . . as the most potent of forces in humanity’s long struggle toward civilization, sociability, and peace.” In short, Woolf experienced literature and feminist politics as continuous; more importantly, her political stance derives from her reading and remaking of the literary past. Understanding the durable connection between feminism and art may help us develop a feminist literary history that is subtle and committed enough to welcome the unexpected, the experimental, and the original without compromising either feminist goals or artistic ambitions.

In examining the aspects of Woolf’s feminism as they are manifest in her responses to her reading, this book presents a model of feminist literary history that benefits from and moves beyond the strict historicism of Margaret J. M. Ezell and the feminist psychoanalytics of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Until quite recently critics have had only a few models through which to explain writers’ relationship to