A book on the novel of development might seem a book invested, by definition, in notions of linear progress and coherent identity. Certainly the form and most discussions of the form have tended to invoke a purposeful youth advancing toward some clarity and stability of being. "Development," it has been said, emerged as a dominant idea in relation to Enlightenment confidence in human perfectibility, to Romantic views of childhood as prelude to creative manhood, and to the nineteenth-century general preoccupation with historicity. Out of these ideological contexts, and from the influence they continue to exert in the twentieth century, arose what English-language critics have variously named the "novel of development," "novel of formation," "apprentice novel," or "Bildungsroman." It is one project of this book to raise questions about these generic formulations and the understanding of development on which they rely. The *unbecoming* of my title is intended to push back against conventional assumptions about becoming and stories of becoming, and this pressure is obtained in large part by focusing on women.

The women I discuss—Frances Burney, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and several conduct-book authors—wrote in
England during the Georgian and Victorian periods. My readings of their variations on growing up female suggest that a heroine's progress toward masterful selfhood is by no means assured, even in apparently comic texts. What Burney's subtitle calls "a young lady's entrance into the world" might be more accurately described as a young lady's floundering on the world's doorstep. Yet if Bildung in the classic sense proves difficult for my female protagonists, it cannot simply be shrugged off so as to map a girl's destiny along altogether different lines. The improbability of the Bildung plot may even serve to heighten its appeal, for the heroine and for female writers and readers alike. In critical terms, I would say its aggressive trajectory continues to inform the texts under discussion, to be relevant as both foil and goal; in theoretical terms, I would argue that "progressive development" and "coherent identity" are, to some extent, enabling fictions whose limited availability to women has hurt us, and I therefore hesitate to give them up entirely. At the same time, the tendency of these fictions to exclude the female does mean that women may be less apt to see them as natural or inevitable, may be more apt to treat them ironically, and must of necessity formulate the developmental process in other ways.

I would like to imagine the way to womanhood not as a single path to a clear destination but as the endless negotiation of a crossroads. Women take various routes depending on what class of woman they are; each woman, at the same time, is divided among several routes, so that she lives her gender as a continuous movement in contradictory directions, some more sanctioned than others. Thus becoming a woman may be thought of as, in Judith Butler's rephrasing of Simone de Beauvoir, "an incessant project, a daily act of reconstruction and interpretation" (131). It is a lifelong act continuing well past any discrete season of youth, and it involves a struggle among diverse narratives: official and also oppositional stories of arriving at adult "femininity." (While something similar may be said of achieving "masculinity," the single, surging story line remains nevertheless more plausible for men.) I hope to get from this formulation more than a sense of how painfully confusing it is to apprentice for womanhood: the mixed signals one receives, the double standards for women in different social positions and for the same woman at different times, the residual criteria for femininity at odds with emergent ones. I want, in addition, to derive a sense of how
confused and inconsistent, how partial and basically shoddy the construction of femininity is—in a way that leaves room for alternative formations, for some degree of rude and rebellious agency within a complex set of constraints.

With this view of becoming female in mind, the following chapters turn to women's novels and conduct books in search of the divergent narratives, the rival ideologies, that constitute femininity at a specific place and moment. I look to these texts not for a female version of one figure's private formation but for a wrestling with the range of discursive possibilities for becoming a woman in a given culture. While I am offering above all a way of reading for development—a postmodernization of the Bildungsroman, if you will—the texts I discuss may yield all the more readily to this approach for having been written during that extended period in the course of which development as a notion, the novel as a genre, and gender as a ruling social category were all being defined and, in the process, debated. It is also significant to my choice of texts that the novel and conduct book were both immensely popular forms in these years, and that each of the novels I treat (with the possible exception of The Mill on the Floss) was, in its author's lifetime, her most popular book; the centrality of these works to their culture's discourse about femininity is inseparable from my purposes. Yet the popularity, say, of Pride and Prejudice and Jane Eyre should not be taken to imply that these works are inherently more conservative than the less beloved and more openly defiant Persuasion or Villette. I hope my readings will dispute this common assumption by putting special emphasis on the "counternarratives" of these novels—those dissenting stories that cut across and break up the seemingly smooth course of female development and developmental fiction. As the following chapters will demonstrate, these counternarratives involve "unbecoming women" in two related senses. First, they account for growing up female as a deformation, a gothic disorientation, a loss of authority, an abandonment of goals. Second, they tell this story—alongside conventional stories—in what I see as a spirit of protest, challenging the myth of courtship as education, railing against the belittlement of women, willing to hazard the distasteful and indecorous.

This book, then, addresses and attempts to complicate the issue of female development in a number of overlapping ways. It is about the
embattled development of female characters; it is about the novel of development as a genre and how women writers might challenge received definitions; it is also very much about the development of feminist criticism in the United States—its recent controversies and many contributions. The gynocritical readings at the heart of the book and each of its chapters could not have been written without the gorgeous explosion of feminist theories and interpretations that occurred throughout the 1980s as this project was taking shape. These analyses of women’s writing are framed, as the entire book is framed, by metacritical considerations most fully elaborated in chapters 1 and 5. There I explore differences among feminist approaches as well as the differences made by feminist interventions into genre criticism and literary studies generally. This book is, finally, also bound up with my own development as a woman and feminist in the academy, and here I would like briefly to describe some of the critical assumptions and agendas underlying my arguments in the pages to come.

I begin, and this study begins, with the investment in women’s writing so powerfully articulated in the late 1970s and early 1980s by such American critics as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Nancy K. Miller, among a great many others. My purpose in this case is less to recuperate neglected works (though such an impulse is present in my treatment of conduct materials by women) than to appreciate the peculiarity and off-centeredness of even canonical female texts: the marks of gender and gender resentment obscured by traditional readings and pointing in the direction of new interpretive paradigms. One need hardly scratch the surface to perceive the significance for the novelists I discuss of writing as women: witness Burney’s unproduced plays, Austen’s self-deprecating anonymity, and Brontë’s and Eliot’s use of male pseudonyms. For these novelists, as for the female courtesy writers of chapter 1, gender (along with class, nationality, and a host of other social positionings) was not only a symbolic construction but also a closely lived reality and material condition of their writing. This is not to imply that works by these women are simple transcriptions of their female experience—much less that they are uniformly imbued with some essentially “feminine” quality. I would say, however, that we may distinguish them by the intensity of their talk about female destiny, their dense accumulation of cultural
discourses regarding the "feminine," and above all by their stake in those discourses that construe women as active subjects. The historical particularity as well as multiplicity of these discourses, the fact that some ideologies and not others were in circulation as these women took pen in hand, sets my texts off from "feminine writing" monolithically conceived. At the same time, the special interest of these writers in testing Georgian and Victorian truisms about womanhood—their preoccupation with and ability to benefit from such an inquiry—gives their work a demonstrably gendered accent. Following Mary Poovey, Judith Lowder Newton, Hazel Carby, Cora Kaplan, and others, I am attracted, then, to a feminist historicism that counters the essentializing tendencies of some 1970s American feminist criticism even as it reclaims the referent abandoned by poststructuralism. It is, one might say, precisely an attention to history—to the details of a certain moment—that at once explodes any universal notion of Woman, and puts flesh and blood on the frame of "gender," making visible its real and specific meanings for women day to day. Such an attention is perhaps one way of (avoiding the debate over essentialism that, as Teresa de Lauretis notes, has all too often been an exercise in ranking feminisms, asserting the theoretical correctness of antiessentialist stances and disparaging others accordingly (255-70).

So I am after a poetics of women's writing, which chapters 1 and 4 begin to situate historically. This said, however, I should repeat that I look to women's writing for new modes of interpretation and see this book primarily as a model for reading as a woman—less a genealogy of the female novel of development in its historical contexts, than a critique of old explanations in favor of another instrumentality. The view I am proposing depends, I have suggested, on a poststructuralist sense of identity as conflicted and provisional, involving not one but many developmental narratives. Going further, I would say that these narratives do not simply proceed toward the destination of adulthood but go on themselves to constitute the adult self, which is always fluid and emergent. My readings in effect disperse the individual into a set of trajectories, suspend her in a series of ongoing stories. In my recasting of the novel of development along these lines I depart, however, from the poststructuralist in at least two ways. First, as I have stressed in the paragraph above, the developmental narratives I trace do not refer
only to themselves or each other but finally, in some grossly mediated way, to the plotting of women's lives in history. Second, my emphasis on open-endedness over closure, on contradiction over consistency, should be distinguished from what, in some poststructuralist readings, amounts to a favoring of indeterminacy seemingly for its own sake—a kind of aesthetics of "mess." For me, once again, the appeal of ideological disarray is the room it leaves for oppositional impulses; dissent is made possible not by entering some fourth dimension beyond ideology, but by recognizing that no ideology is singular or seamless, that there are always voices disputing the dominant view, if only we would hear them. So while I see my texts as highly ambiguous, serving as well as betraying the regime of female propriety, I choose for political reasons to tease out the feminist content, to privilege the resisting stories or counternarratives. Indeed, such a choice is arguably what defines my strategy as feminist, setting it apart both from poststructuralism and from that new historicism in which dissent is always already policed.

These are some of the personal presuppositions at work in the following chapters. They are not, of course, actually personal or original any more than the narratives I treat are merely private fantasies. The stories I tell about myself are meaningless outside the institutions, occasions, and people who have helped to shape them and who precede this book in every important sense. I am glad for the opportunity, at long last, to acknowledge them here. The Women's Studies Program at Barnard College first gave me the chance to teach students who, when they weren't out demonstrating, were pushing me to think more clearly about all kinds of women's issues. The University of Virginia granted me two Faculty Fellowships for Summer Research and a Fourth Year Research Assignment, and these were crucial to the project's completion. The University of Virginia's Regent's College Program enabled me to spend a renovative semester teaching in London and spending time in the British Library. The Jane Austen Society of North America provided an unusually well-informed audience for some of my ideas about *Pride and Prejudice*. A special session on women and the *Bildungsroman* at the 1988 MLA helped me to see where my readings were tending in theoretical terms; I am grateful to copanelists Linda Hunt, Elizabeth Langland, and particularly to Carol Lazzaro-Weis, who was responsible for the session's title, now the title of my first chapter. I am
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UNBECOMING WOMEN