

upfront



FASHION 101:
CLIMBING THE
IVORY TOWER IN
STILETTOS
REQUIRES EQUAL
PARTS STYLE
AND SUBSTANCE.

the professor wore prada

Is it possible to live the life of the mind while minding the length of your skirt? Elaine Showalter examines a career of literature and lipstick.

ave you got something a little more . . . feminist?" a thoughtful shopper asks the saleswoman in a William Hamilton cartoon. Is she after (a) Versace (b) Prada or (c) ground grippers and a granny dress? As a longtime feminist, and a university professor as well, I know many people expect me to dress more like Susan B. Anthony than Diane Sawyer, but I just can't seem to adjust. I'm a woman who never saw an carrying I didn't like, who has as many back copies of *Vogue* as *Victorian Studies*, whose idea of bliss is an afternoon in the makeup department at Saks. I can remember what I wore to my Ph.D. orals (little white Courrèges boots) as well as the questions I aced. I was once so desperate for a shopping fix at a Salzburg seminar on gender that I visited a dirndl factory. For years, I've been trying to make the life of the mind coexist with the day at the mall, and to sneak the *femme* back into feminist. From Mary Wollstonecraft

to Naomi Wolf, feminism has often taken a hard line on fashion, shopping, and the whole beauty Monty, but for those of us sisters hiding *Welcome to Your Facelift* inside *The Second Sex*, a passion for fashion can sometimes seem a shameful secret life. But I think it's time I came out of the closet, or at least had some new shelves put in. Actually, off duty, most of the feminist intellectuals I know are far from being the "hangdog dowdies" spitefully caricatured by Camille Paglia. I know label feminists who can tell you the shortest route from the School of Criticism and Theory to the Armani outlet. I know kitsch feminists, like the critic Jane Gallop, who lectures in symbolic outfits such as a skirt made out of men's ties. I know diva feminists who make power dressing political, like Duke University professor Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who told a conference audience that she had dreamed of a store full of "luscious-looking clothes," all in her size, and then saw they carried a pink triangle instead of a price tag. I've heard about *Voyage* from Erica Jong. *up front* ▶ 86

