

Voicing Criticism in Eighteenth-Century Novels by Women: Narrative Attempts at Claiming Authority

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To combine the topics of criticism and authority in eighteenth-century novels by women may seem surprising; after all, someone in a position of authority does not have to worry about voicing criticism. For female novelists of the eighteenth century, however, the mere attempt at claiming authority was anything but unproblematic. Denied access to grammar schools and universities, they were as a rule less educated than their male counterparts, and they were certainly not expected to express their opinions in public. Even though the situation slightly improved during the course of the eighteenth century,¹ women had difficulties laying claim to a position of authority. They were supposed to be modest, chaste and inexperienced as far as the important facts of life are concerned; and this, of course, clashed with the writing of literary works, which were expected to both instruct and delight their readers. On the one hand, the brazenness of the assumption of the 'Amazons of the Pen', whom Samuel Johnson criticised for entering a male dominion,² was meliorated by the fact that they chose to write novels. This new genre had a bad reputation anyway, and since there were no established classical rules which writers had to follow, the lack of education did not matter so much. On the other hand, this lack of acceptance posed a problem for authors who wanted their work to be read (and sold); the repeated claims in prefaces that this particular work was an exception in so far as it really did teach moral values and good behaviour had to be borne up by the content at least superficially. Any

1 See Vera Nünning, "Changes in the Representation of Men and Women in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century." *REAL: The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 20 (2004): 183-207.

2 See Samuel Johnson's unfavourable opinion in "The Adventurer." *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*. Ed. Donald J. Greene. Vol. 2. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963, 339-498. No. 115. 11.12.1753. 456-61, 457f., where he denigrates the "generation of Amazons of the pen, who [...] have set masculine tyranny at defiance, asserted their claim to the regions of science, and seem resolved to contest the usurpations of virility". At the same time, however, Johnson helped a number of young female writers.

kind of fiction that was meant to be taken seriously by the majority of literary critics and readers had to be didactic.

Moreover, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, female authors suffered from a poor reputation: the suspect morals of a few successful female writers rendered the writing of novels a morally dubious endeavour. Admitting to publishing novels was equivalent to throwing one's chastity into doubt. Aphra Behn had famously written juicy Restoration Comedies as well as love poetry and the notorious *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684-87). Even worse, Mary Delarivière Manley had styled herself as a very alluring, sexually attractive persona in her novels *The New Atalantis* (1709) and *The Adventures of Rivella* (1714); and Eliza Haywood had established a reputation as a writer of amorous novels – in her stories, she had even created an 'authorial' narrator who assumed the role of an 'expert on love' and commented knowingly on the affairs he or she was delivering.³ While such novels could find interested readers during the 1710s and the 1720s, the situation got more difficult in the 1730s, when the growing moralisation of society led to a sharp decline in their readership, and when women who wanted to preserve a good reputation refrained from writing novels. It was only in the 1740s that a new generation of women writers published morally unexceptionable works which slowly changed the image of female authors. During the second half of the eighteenth century, therefore, women had to make doubly sure to adhere to existing moral standards and to teach the socially sanctioned values in their works. There are thus a whole number of reasons why we should not expect any criticism of established norms in works written by women; the restrictions of the newly emerging market place, the danger of a threat to one's own reputation, the lack of acceptance of the genre of the novel, the necessity to conform to the didactic function of literature: all these aspects made it obligatory to adhere to cultural values. Similar to historical works, novels had to teach by way of example; they had to depict models of good behaviour and make quite sure that villains were not only duly punished but also painted in the darkest colours in order to appear as unattractive as possible.⁴

3 Even Haywood's first novel, *Love in Excess* (1719), features an overt narrator who extensively comments on the nature of love in a way that does not conform to the alleged sexual reticence and chastity of women, which was held to be so important at the time; see, for instance "and tho' all those kinds of desire, which the difference of sex creates, bear in general, the name of love, yet they are as vastly wide as heaven and hell; [...] love *there* is a divinity indeed, because he is immortal and unchangeable, and if our earthy part partake the bliss, and the craving nature is in all obeyed, possession thus desired, and thus obtained, is far from satiating [...] the different powers [sense and reason] become pure alike." *Love in Excess*. Ed. David Oakleaf. 2nd ed. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000, 33-266, 224; see also *ibid.* 225.

4 See, for instance, Samuel Richardson's "Preface" to *Pamela* (1740), where he refers to the doctrine of the just distribution of sympathy.

It has often been observed, however, that, in spite of these expectations and restrictions, female novelists did not conform as strictly to the social rules as we should expect. There are, of course, any number of novels which embody and teach established values, which confirm the subordination of women and subscribe to the newly established image of women as weak, pure, pious, tender, docile, obedient, dependent and inefficient creatures who passively waited to be married to the right man. Quite often, however, there is an implicit criticism of social norms: the experiences of women are foregrounded, we are led to see society and their inability to act as they want to from their eyes, and we concur with their, partly rebellious, thoughts and feelings. As Jane Spencer asserted as early as the 1980s, the ending is sometimes undercut by the bulk of the work, which deeply involves us in the plight and the critical attitudes of heroines, who are then briefly 'reformed' and rewarded at the end of the book.⁵ Spencer, however, focuses mainly on the content of novels, and although some later critics take into account some formal features, they do not do so in a pronounced or coherent, let alone systematic way.

In this paper, I will concentrate on the modes of writing novels and try to show that implicit criticism of social conventions was possible by the skilful use of narrative techniques. Female novelists did not only meekly conform to public opinion; they also tried to enlarge the horizon of readers by making them aware of the tensions and difficulties inherent in female life, by alerting them to the problematic situation of women, to the impediments they had to contend with, and to their feelings with regard to a society dominated by masculine values. At the same time, they tried to establish a position of authority, which lends weight to their point of view and the implicit criticism they voice. Why, after all, should anyone but a young, inexperienced girl listen to a more or less uneducated and fallible woman writing about other women? Female novelists who wanted their work to be taken seriously were therefore faced with the task to search for strategies which might help them to establish a position of authority.

5 Cf. Jane Spencer. *The Rise of the Female Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, 140-180. The impact of presenting the female point of view in eighteenth-century fiction by women is also emphasised by Ansgar Nünning. "Mimesis und Poiesis im englischen Roman des 18. Jahrhunderts: Überlegungen zum Zusammenhang zwischen narrativer Form und Wirklichkeitserfahrung." *Neue Lesarten, neue Wirklichkeiten: Zur Wiederentdeckung des 18. Jahrhunderts durch die Anglistik*. Ed. Gerd Stratmann and Manfred Buschmeier. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1992, 46-69.

Female narrators and 'authorial narrators' in the eighteenth century

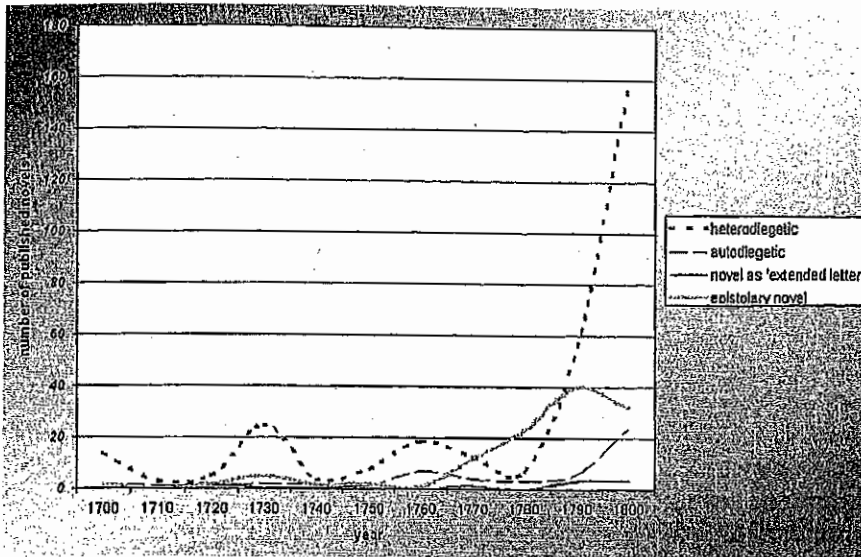
There are, of course, a whole number of ways to lay claim to a position of authority. Popular strategies in the eighteenth century included the use of prefaces or titles which illustrate the seriousness or morality of a work, or the shaping of a 'private' persona which embodies values like chastity or self-restraint. In the following, however, I will focus on the texts themselves and concentrate on the choice of narrators and the use of narrative strategies.

Susan Sniader Lanser, who was very aware of the problem female writers had with regard to establishing a position of authority (for her, the mere attempt at publication implies such a claim to authority which had to be dealt with in some way), assumes that most female authors tried at least in so far to conform to prevailing opinions that they employed a 'personal voice', that is autodiegetic narration, in which the hero/ines tell their own story, or the epistolary style.⁶ This way of writing can be related to social norms and values, according to which the 'personal sphere' was held to be the proper place of women; mothers were accepted in their role of teaching their children, and women were encouraged to write (spiritual) diaries and letters.

At least with regard to the British novel, the assumption that the majority of women adhered to expectations by using the 'personal voice' is not true; apparently women were more daring and put in a more pronounced claim to authority than has been realized before. Only about thirty-five percent of the roughly 500 British novels by women published in the eighteenth century (which have survived today) employ these modes; if one discounts the use of letters, which was very popular in most non-fictional genres and used by any number of male authors as well, one finds that only about 10% of British novels written by women during the eighteenth century had 'autodiegetic' female narrators. Instead, a vast majority of female novelists employed heterodiegetic narration in their novels, thereby assuming a position of authority generally not conceded to women in the eighteenth century.⁷

6 Cf. Susan Sniader Lanser. *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992, 45f. See also "the project of self-authorization [...] is implicit in the very act of authorship", *ibid.*, 7. Judith Lowder Newton. *Women, Power and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778-1860*. 1981. New York; London: Methuen, 1985, 45, also assumes that letter writing is "traditionally feminine".

7 I owe this important number to Irina Bauder-Begerow, whose book on this subject is to appear in 2011; its working title is *Weibliches Erzählen im 18. Jahrhundert (1680-1800): Eine diachrone Betrachtung des Wandels von Erzählformen im englischen Roman*. I have reflected on the reasons for the use of heterodiegetic narrators in: "Gender, Authority and Female Experience in British Novels



To present such a chart which suggests that we are dealing with exact numbers is, of course, tricky, given many uncertainties: we have to bear in mind that we do not know how many novels got lost, we do not know whether male authors used female names for some works (or vice versa), and the identity of the authors of some novels which were published anonymously have not been ascertained as yet. But even if one allows for 10% or 20% variation, the numbers are still impressive and the result seems to be valid: women did prefer the 'public' voice of 'authorial' narration. I would like to argue that this can be explained with recourse to the necessity of acquiring – and establishing – a position of authority, which female authors had to achieve in order to validate their demand to be listened to and popularise modes of female experience. But let me first point out the advantages of 'autodiegetic narration', which made this mode of writing a favourite mode of expression for many male writers.

As Daniel Defoe demonstrated at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the use of the autodiegetic narrator had the great advantage of allowing the author to fulfil contradictory expectations: On the one hand, one could show a character who deviates from conventional norms and leads an exciting, adventurous life that generates suspense and captures the reader's interest. On the other hand, it allows the mature, reformed narrator to comment on his youthful self, and cen-

sure his earlier thoughts and actions. On the surface, it seems an ideal way of highlighting unconventional experiences, making readers share – and perhaps identify with – unusual thoughts and feelings, and at the same time ostensibly conforming to established moral rules. In Great Britain, however, women used this opportunity to both privilege an unconventional view by positing an ‘experiencing I’ that experiences uncommon, but understandable emotions and at the same time to act in accordance with contemporary norms by providing short comments which criticise this stance only rarely before the second half of the nineteenth century.⁸

This may have several reasons. If the female experience transgresses the limits of the acceptably female, it would have to be criticised by the more mature ‘narrating I’ – and in this case the story would not only have been contradicted by the ending, but in addition have been undercut continuously by critical comments of the older and allegedly wiser narrator, who would have to admit that her former emotions were ‘wrong’. To forego this criticism and to endorse and sympathise with the unconventional feelings and perceptions of the character would, on the other hand, run the risk of contradicting contemporary expectations – with the concomitant hazard with regard to the publication of the book. It was therefore nearly impossible at the time for a female author to use this narrative device in order to evoke sympathy for an unconventional point of view.

But there may be a much more simple reason than this: I think that women mostly shunned autodiegetic narration or a ‘personal voice’ until the nineteenth century because they needed a more authoritative way of fostering understanding for an unconventional perspective than the use of a narrator telling the story of her own life could provide. After all, a female voice had no authority in the eighteenth century, and its support of the female perspective would have carried only little weight.⁹ If authors wanted to make sure that an unconventional view on female experiences would be taken seriously, they had better not have recourse to autodiegetic narration. I would like to argue that female novelists preferred the use of the heterodiegetic (‘omniscient’) narrator, because he could implicitly claim a position of authority – an important aspect of lending credibility to the female perspective which will be analysed in greater detail later on.

8 Two earlier examples of works which use the ‘private voice’ and project a narrator who comments on her earlier experiences are Sarah Fielding’s *Ophelia* (1760), who is, however, a perfect embodiment of the ideals of womanhood, and Mary Brunton’s *Discipline* (1815).

9 Susan Sniader Lanser also agrees that a personal voice is less formidable for women “than authorial voice, since an authorial narrator claims broad powers of knowledge and judgement, while a personal narrator claims only the validity of one person’s right to interpret her experience” (1992, 19).

By convention, a heterodiegetic narrator is not involved in the fate of his characters; he stands aloof, knowing everything about them in the present, past and future; as Catherine Belsey states, he does "not require verification", but rather "verifies all other statements"¹⁰. A heterodiegetic narrator could therefore be put to good use by women in the eighteenth century. But women novelists as a rule did not follow the example of Henry Fielding, who had introduced the full range of functions the 'overt' heterodiegetic narrator could fulfil. Fielding had self-confidently attempted to imbue the novel with dignity, describing it as a "comic epic-poem in prose"¹¹ and linking it to the genre of history, then thought to be the 'mistress of wisdom'. His definition of his alleged "new province of writing"¹², however, implicitly excluded female writers, for he claimed that a good novelist had to bring with him a background that was more or less outside the range of women in the eighteenth century: according to him, a competent novelist had to have a thorough classical education, very good knowledge of literature, and widespread experiences with members of all social groups.¹³ The narrators in Henry Fielding's fictions make ample use of their prerogative and act according to their elevated position by commenting extensively on the status and worth of the narrative, evaluating and explaining the motives and fates of the characters, addressing the narratee numerous times, making generalisations that include the state of the world at large, showing off their learning by quoting from – preferably classic – authors in the original (but providing a translation for his less knowledgeable readers) and commenting on the act of narrative.¹⁴

From the 1740s onwards, the stance of the 'overt' heterodiegetic narrator was therefore well known – but to my knowledge the full extent of its use and the implied claim to authority is only very rarely found in the works of British women novelists. In a society in which the mere fact of publishing was thought to be 'unwomanly', it was probably flying in the face of providence to claim such a pronounced 'omniscient' position. In addition, an overt narrator provides

10 See Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*. London: Methuen, 1980, 70-72.

11 Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*. 1742. Ed. Martin C. Battestin. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967, 4. Susan Staves, *A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789*. Cambridge: CUP, 2006, 250, regards this as a display of the "tactics of a male writer struggling to create a hierarchy of writers that elevates male writers like himself".

12 Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*. 1749. Ed. Martin C. Battestin. 2 vols. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1975, 77.

13 Cf. Fielding, *Tom Jones*, 1975 [1749], 487ff., 523-26, 567, 739ff., 832. Laura L. Runge, *Gender and Language in British Literary Criticism 1660-1790*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 115, stresses that Fielding's claim to build on classical traditions was not as new as he would like to have us believe.

14 All of these speech acts are also recognised as ways to claim a position of authority by Sniader Lanser (1992, 48).

information about his opinion and standards of judgement – thereby also endangering his position of authority, since his evaluations or generalisations might be objected to by the reader.¹⁵ This risk becomes especially pertinent when an unconventional view on female experience is to be advanced and supported by the narrator. An added drawback was that authors could not rely on their anonymity.¹⁶ A pronounced claim to authority with the full use of extra-representational privileges might therefore prove to be a double-edged sword.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, female authors preferred a more unobtrusive way of exploring female experience: Instead of making full use of the range of opportunities open to the 'overt' narrator, they employed various degrees of 'covert' heterodiegetic narrators, who mainly restrict themselves to the task of narration and use their additional privileges either only sparingly or make sure that their judgements are in accordance with contemporary values.¹⁷ An extensive female use of the privileges of the 'overt' narrator in Great Britain that dares to utter unconventional opinions – or at least tries to change the reader's point of view – is mainly a feature of the nineteenth century and can be found quite extensively from the 1840s onwards, in the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Mary Braddon or in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*. Though the degree to which heterodiegetic narrators in works by women overtly take charge of the story and use the full range of their possibilities varies, one can safely conclude that, compared to Henry Fielding, they decline a pronounced position of authority.¹⁸ This, however, is only to be expected, since the mere use of 'omniscient' narrators was in itself a subversive act which did not conform to general expectations concerning 'proper' female behaviour.

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- 15 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Methuen, 1983, 103, also stresses that when a narrator "becomes more overt, his chances of being fully reliable are diminished, since his interpretations, judgements, generalizations are not always compatible with the norms of the implied author."
- 16 Especially after the publication of successful novels, authors were often identified – and as late as the nineteenth century, some critics changed their formerly favourable opinion of a novel when they found out that the book was really written by a woman.
- 17 See, for instance, a typical comment by the narrator in Penelope Aubin's *The Life of Charlotta DuPont* (1723): "I wish Mankind would but reflect how barbarous a deed it is, how much below a Man, nay how like the Devil 'tis, to debauch a young unexperienc'd Virgin, and expose to Ruin and an endless train of Miseries, the Person whom his Persuasions hath drawn to gratify his Desire" (quoted after Staves 2006, 194). Haywood's narrator, who in her amatory early novels pronounces on the 'irresistibility' of true love, may be held to be an exception – but within the context of the genre, readers had to accept this position.
- 18 A notable exception is Sarah Fielding's *Countess Dellwyn*. It has to be taken into account, however, that the heterodiegetic narrators of other female authors do use quite a number of generalisations and evaluations, particularly with regard to the behaviour of the heroine.

Moreover, from the 1740s onwards, the rather rare and interspersed judgements or evaluations by heterodiegetic narrators usually do not deviate from commonly accepted sentiments. Female misconduct is not explicitly condoned; on the contrary, narrators make sure that they overtly censure it – mostly, however, reserving that blame for minor characters who serve as a foil to enhance the real heroine's innate virtue. The authority of the 'authorial' narrator is thus not employed in order to bolster up deviating female views; on the contrary, the voice of narrative authority concurs with social authorities in upholding prevalent norms and values.

The fact that female authors did not make full use of the possibilities of an 'overt' narrator does not preclude their more covert attempts at establishing authority and voicing at least subdued criticism. This is quite often done by the gentle use of irony. In her novel *Belinda* (1801), for instance, Maria Edgeworth manages the tricky business of establishing her heroine as a good and benevolent character, who, however, is influenced by self-serving ladies who have no claim to virtue. When Mr Hervey, who is admired by Belinda and the ladies, is first introduced, the narrator employs irony in order to ridicule this 'hero'. At first sight, the description of Hervey seems to be quite neutral, for the narrator summarizes the topics of his conversation and his mimicking and ridiculing another (absent) character only very briefly. He talks about

the nature of ladies' promises – on fashionable bracelets – on the size of the arm of the Venus de Medici – on Lady Delacour's and Miss Portman's – on the thick legs of ancient statues – and on the various defects and absurdities of Mrs. Luttridge and her wig. On all of these topics Mr. Hervey displayed much wit, gallantry, and satire, with so happy an effect, that Belinda [...] was precisely of her aunt's opinion, that he was a most uncommonly pleasant young man.¹⁹

The staccato mentioning of the topics is seemingly neutral, but, considering their obvious banality, which is only surpassed by the arrogance and malevolence towards Mrs Luttridge, who is syntactically set on a par with her wig, the implicit criticism of the narrator is easy to detect. The praise of the "happy effect" of Hervey's talk therefore already shows an ironic stance, a stance that is even more pronounced in the following sentence, in which the criticism is rather explicit: "Clarence Hervey might have been more than a pleasant young man, if he had not been smitten with the desire of being thought superior in every thing"²⁰. Here the detached handling of the characters' affairs is quite obvious; after the reader has been allowed to form his own judgement of the character on the basis of the topics of his discussion, his opinion is reinforced by the comment of the

19 Maria Edgeworth. *Belinda*. Ed. Eva Figs, London: Pandora, 1986, 7f.

20 *Ibid.*, 8.

narrator, who can therefore be trusted to act as a competent guide through the narrative. This mode is brought to perfection by Jane Austen, but she had many (if more clumsy) predecessors in the eighteenth century.

There is no rule without exceptions, however, and in a stylistically very puzzling and complex novel, Eliza Haywood does employ a very outspoken and explicit heterodiegetic narrator who seems to delight in criticising female behaviour and uphold current standards of morality. In her novel *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751), the narrator establishes himself as a persona who does not mince words and employs his heightened position in order to hold up the mirror to the wrongdoings of women. One reason for this firm and overt establishment of a position of moral authority may be that Haywood was already very well known and had to get rid of her reputation as the writer of – commercially very successful – amatory romances and miscellaneous writings in the 1720s and early 1730s, in which the narrator had loudly proclaimed the irresistibility of ‘Love’.²¹ Because of the changed expectations of an audience which set more and more store by virtue and morality, she fell into disgrace, remained silent for nearly a decade and staged her ‘comeback’ as a didactic novelist in the early 1740s. In *Betsy Thoughtless* she affirmed this new self-image – which, given her former fame and ongoing notoriety, may have called for rather drastic means. The text begins with two sentences which serve to distance the narrator from “the ladies”, thus by implication suggesting that the narrator is a man:

It was always my opinion, that fewer women were undone by love than vanity; and that those mistakes the sex are sometimes guilty of, proceed, for the most part, rather from inadvertency, than a vicious inclination. The ladies, however, I am sorry to observe, are apt to make too little allowances to each other on this score, [...] and it is not above one, in a greater number than I will presume to mention, who, while she passes the severest censure on the conduct of her friend, will be at the trouble of taking a retrospect on her own.²²

The narrator begins very confidently with a generalisation that may deviate from the individual opinion of readers (though misdemeanours due to both love and vanity were at the core of many stories from antiquity onwards, which makes it quite safe to rank them) and thus explicitly renounces – and at the same time

21 See, for instance, “till *Love*, that sweet Destroyer, that stealing Poyson of a Woman’s Peace [...]. That litte Regard which *Love*, especially in a young Heart, leaves for Reputation”. Eliza Haywood. *The Tea-Table; or, a Conversation between Some Polite Persons of Both Sexes*. 1725. *Fantomima and Other Works*. Ed. Alexander Pettit, Margaret C. Croskery and Anna C. Patchias: Broadview Press, 2004, 73-106, 88f. See also Eliza Haywood. *Lasselia. The Injur’d Husband and Lasselia*. Ed. Jerry C. Beasley. Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1999, 103-150, 119.

22 Eliza Haywood. *Miss Betsy Thoughtless*. 1751. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 9.

alludes to! – the opinion the author voiced in her earlier popular romances. The narrator then goes on to criticise the female sex at large, claiming that they are, on the whole, censorious, prone to misconduct themselves, but devoid of self-criticism. This rather harsh judgement establishes him as a judge of the whole sex and makes it quite clear from the beginning that the history of his heroine should teach ladies to be more benevolent towards other women. This is a double-edged device, because while it fosters the authority of the narrator and, by implication, the author, it demeans the female sex as a whole. It is, moreover, very unusual with respect to the practices of other narrators of novels by women, which refrain from criticising women in general, and the heroine in particular. Moreover, such passages, uttered by the authority of the 'omniscient' narrator, contradict instances of social criticism which can be found in this novel.

The narrator, however, seems to fully endorse prevailing opinions on morality in general and on women in particular, and even subscribes to the double standard. Thus he harshly criticises the young friend of Betsy, who lures the heroine into dangerous situations even while they are both at school. Later on, the aptly named 'Miss Forward' slips into prostitution because of economic necessity;²³ but instead of trying to raise the reader's pity or sympathy for this young woman, the narrator takes great pains to lay the blame for her fate entirely on her:

[A]s few women who have once lost the sense of honour, ever recover it again, but [...] devote themselves to vice [...]; Miss Forward could not content herself with the embraces nor allowances of her keeper, but received both the presents and caresses of as many as she had charms to attract.²⁴

Instead of economic reasons, moral faults are put in the limelight and current prejudices are confirmed. The men, in contrast, get off scot-free; when the good Mr. Truworth, for instance, seduces and ruins another woman, this is only mentioned in passing; he is not even criticised for what he has done. Instead, the narrator shows understanding for his position; after all, he has to overcome his former love for Betsy, and "the amour with this fond girl [Flora] afforded him a

23 Cf. Nestor, Deborah J. "Virtue Rarely Rewarded: Ideological Subversion and Narrative Form in Haywood's Later Fiction." *Studies in English Literature* 34.3 (1994): 579-598, 583.

24 Haywood (1997 [1751], 191f.). Mary Anne Schofield. "'Descending Angels': Salubrious Sluts and Pretty Prostitutes in Haywood's Fiction." *Fettered or free? British Women Novelists, 1670-1815*. Ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1986, 186-200, 189, argues that Haywood's prostitutes "become healthier figures than the docile, pale heroines [...]. They 'tell' women that it is all right to be angry, that it is right to sell out for the female self." None of the three types of prostitutes Schofield discusses seems to fit the prostitutes in *Betsy Thoughtless*, a novel which is not mentioned in the article.

pleasing amusement for a time"²⁵. However, even Haywood's narrator is not consistently critical of women in general and of his heroine in particular. In spite of some rather harsh judgements about Betsy, which establish a distance to his protagonist, he sometimes tries to engage the reader's sympathy for her and stresses that she has a good heart.²⁶ Moreover, there are some implicit self-characterisations which show that he does not approve of all the cultural norms concerning the behaviour of women. Thus he implies that wives have to behave in ways that run counter to reason and morality in some instances – why should he otherwise make that distinction in the following praise of Betsy, when the heroine, for once, is "not uttering a single word unbecoming of her character, either as the woman of good understanding, or the wife"²⁷.

Strategies for privileging female experiences at the level of the story

Even though most female authors from the 1740s onwards refrained from an extensive use of the functions of overt narrators, they employed a number of more unobtrusive strategies on the level of the fictional world in order to highlight female experience. In the following, I want to introduce ten strategies which were quite common in female texts and served to subtly criticise general mores. The strategies themselves are not specifically female; they are used – albeit to different ends – by male authors as well, and they can be found in British novels from the last four centuries. In the eighteenth century, however, they were often employed by women in order to voice subdued criticism; a form which might just as well be employed with the aim of confirming the established social hierarchy is here used to different ends.²⁸

25 Haywood (1997 [1751], 272). Andrea Austin. "Shooting Blanks." *The Passionate Fictions of Eliza Haywood*. Ed. Kirsten Saxton and Rebecca Bocchicchio. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000, 259-82, 266, however, stresses that there is a lot of evidence in "a miscellany of episodes, heaped up in insistent detail, that undercut Truworth's role by subtly contradicting the narrator's view of him", see also *ibid.*, 267, 276-277. Austin gives a few examples, some of which may not have been as averse to contemporaries as to modern readers.

26 See, for instance, "Miss Betsy, who had a great deal of good-nature, and somewhat extremely engaging in her manner of behaviour [...]" (Haywood 1997 [1751], 4). See also Paula R Backscheider. "Literary Culture as Immediate Reality." *A Companion to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel*. Ed. Paula Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 504-38, 514f.

27 Haywood (1997 [1751], 448).

28 I owe my reflection on the relation between these narrative forms and gender to a suggestion from Cindy Hall, who commented on a lecture in which I gave this paper in June 2010. I intro-

Even Eliza Haywood employs these strategies, which serve to counteract the voice of the narrator. I will refer to her novel in my attempt to illustrate the use of the narrative conventions I want to introduce; I hope that this will illustrate the fruitfulness of looking closely at narrative strategies and working with the tools that narratology provides. After all, it has often been said that Haywood's novel is somehow critical of social mores, but I know of no detailed analysis of her ways of writing; what we are faced with are either scattered statements by critics who do not argue how they have arrived at their opinion, or detailed analyses of the content. In an article concerned with a more abstract topic, for instance, Paula Bakscheider emphasises that the narrator criticises Betsy, and postulates that the novel is nonetheless ambivalent, partly criticising social hierarchies. She claims, however, that this criticism is voiced by a kind of 'author-function' which allegedly establishes a dialogue with the narrator. What this author-function is, how we can recognize it and the way in which it speaks to the narrator is not explained.²⁹

In the following I will argue that there are at least ten strategies, which are used to highlight female experience and justify the female point of view on the diegetic level: (1) quantity of female perspective(s), (2) explaining the reasons for deviant behaviour; (3) presenting (nearly) perfect heroines, (4) the use of ideal characters (whom readers should identify with), who admire and understand the heroine, (5) presenting criticism of the heroine and pejorative opinions about women by way of unattractive, unworthy characters (the reader cannot identify with), (6) focussing on the heroine's feelings, and not on those of her 'victims', (7) appealing to the reader's pity and sense of justice by punishing the heroine to an unwarranted degree; (8) staging conflicts between the sexes and emphasising female powerlessness, (9) highlighting the narrow range of choices by the use of contrasts and mirrors, which includes the constellation of characters and stock characters, (10) the choice of focalisers and the depiction of con-

duced these ten strategies in an earlier article, in which, however, I restricted myself to more general remarks and did not tackle the ambivalent strategies in Haywood's novel.

29 See Bakscheider (2005, 514-515). In some statements, Bakscheider seems to equate the narrator with the author; some remarks are very astute, emphasising the intertextual parody of Haywood's style in her earlier novels in that of *Betsy Thoughtless* or her reworking of well-known scenes of literature. It does not become clear, however, how this serves to establish an author function that is set in "diagonalized relationships" with author and narrator. Nonetheless, Bakscheider's approach seems to be rather similar to the one pursued here. For a detailed analysis of the implied criticism inherent in the content of the novel (as seen against the background of conduct literature), see Shea Stuart. "Subversive Didacticism in Eliza Haywood's *Betsy Thoughtless*." *Studies in English Literature* 42 (2002): 559-75.

sciousness. Usually, many of these techniques are to be found in one novel – albeit in varying degrees – and more often than not they reinforce one another.

(1) As in many other novels subtly criticising patriarchal values, the female perspective dominates the story in *Miss Betsy Thoughtless*. Though there are a host of characters, both male and female, the fate, actions and opinions of the heroine are at the centre of the story. The protagonist mostly serves as the main focalisor, which means that we get more insight into her thoughts and feelings than into those of the other characters – thus privileging a particular female point of view in a quantitative and a qualitative way. Betsy's thoughts are quite often rendered as direct quotations in her own words or via free indirect discourse, she is present in nearly every scene and given ample opportunity to explain her motives and reasons in dialogues with her relatives, her friends and suitors. Even though the narrator is at best ambivalent as far as his comments on Betsy are concerned, the heroine's thoughts and feelings are the centre of attention throughout the book.

(2) Moreover, the narrator presents the story in such a way that the reasons for Betsy's behaviour become quite clear, thus inducing understanding for her strange behaviour. The heroines' misconceptions or slips of behaviour are explained by the circumstances and, while not explicitly condoned and often criticised by the overt narrator, are presented in a mode which invites empathy with the heroine. We are given a reason which is often used to explain female foibles: the death of her mother. This left Betsy prone to bad influences first at school, and then at the house of her guardian, Mr. Goodman, who has unfortunately married the wrong woman, the scheming, avaricious, hypocritical and deceiving Lady Mellasin.

(3) As just about every other heroine at the time, Betsy's character traits are basically in accordance with current values: she is innocent, benevolent and beautiful; she has good intentions and wants to help others. Apart from her one (minor) fault, she can be held up as a model of female behaviour. She wants to do well, has a good heart, is an expert in the art of polite behaviour, is graceful as well as witty, if just a bit too lively and adventurous. Her only faults are her desire to prolong the period of courtship and her tendency to play the coquette. But since the main focus is on Betsy, we see how innocent her desires are; and when we see how badly she is treated when she has finally been forced to marry, we can see that it was quite reasonable to postpone this period and to prolong the only phase in the life of a young (middle class and wealthy) woman in which she enjoys a modicum of power. Other heroines differ from Betsy in many ways, but all of them are beautiful, innocent and good-natured – even though they are sometimes wilful and naïve, providing easy prey for false friends or evil councillors. But the good qualities dominate, ensuring that the characters are allowed sentiments and

feelings that contradict current values and broaden the understanding of readers. Concomitantly, any negative characteristics which would impair this good image and render the heroine unsuitable for the reader's sympathy are conspicuous by their absence.

(4) One of the most important implicit devices of fostering sympathy and understanding for the heroine's feelings is the use of positively depicted characters who are in full accordance with social norms and who think well of the heroine. Quite often, ideal characters excuse her blunders and her misbehaviour. In *Betsy Thoughtless*, the heroine is esteemed and loved by the ideal Mr. Truworth, whose very name indicates that he deserves the respect and admiration that is accorded to him by the other characters; he is the descendant of an old family, has a large estate "unincumbered with debts, mortgages, or poor relations" (67), and, above all, he is reasonable and good natured. He only agrees to fight a duel because of his sense of honour, for instance, but then refrains from killing his opponent twice.³⁰ As in other novels – i.e. Orville in *Evelina*, or Glanville in *Arabella* – the character who commands the respect of all the other characters provides a model for the reader's supposed reaction to the heroine: rather than align him- or herself with the negatively portrayed characters who censure the heroine, the suggested mode of reacting to the protagonist is that of this character.³¹

(5) The counterpart to this strategy is introduced in one of the first novels by women, in Mary Davys' *The Accomplish'd Rake: or, Modern Fine Gentleman* (1727), in which this author, as Susan Staves has recognised, "inaugurates a tactic of women's fiction: characterizing undesirable male characters by allowing them to pontificate foolishly on their mistaken ideas about women's nature".³² This tactic presents the other side of the coin and achieves more than just the kind of negative characterisation already mentioned by Staves: These unattractive, unworthy characters and their opinion about the negative features of women provide models readers are meant to disagree with. This 'tactic' therefore serves to render their (often exaggerated) truisms and criticism of the heroine suspect.

(6) In order not to impair the positive image of the protagonist, the focus of the narrative remains firmly on the heroine; possible negative consequences of her behaviour on others are played down. The only one who is shown to be endangered by her actions is Betsy herself: When she kindly visits her old friend, Miss Forward, for instance, she falls prey to a 'gentleman' who said he would drive her home; when he lets on that he is about to abduct and rape her, she feels

30 Haywood (1997 [1751], 67, 142f.).

31 This strategy is quite common, but it was used with some discretion even at the beginning of the eighteenth century in Mary Delarivière Manley's *The Adventures of Rivella* (1714).

32 See Staves (2006, 186).

sheer terror and is barely able to escape.³³ The havoc that Betsy might have caused in her partly less than kind behaviour to her suitors, the unfulfilled hopes or the adjustment of financial expectations, are not even mentioned in passing. Usually, the story focuses on the heroines and the negative results their actions have for themselves; whatever consequences there are for other characters lies in obscurity. Even when Arabella realizes that others were inconvenienced by her actions, she is shown to be 'mortified' by feelings of regret; what the others feel is passed over.³⁴ The ideal characters may understand and defend the heroines' actions, but the protagonists usually solely blame themselves.

(7) Though many novels provide a happy ending for the heroines, most of them are punished in a most unwarranted and harsh way during the course of the story. As far as the plot is concerned, many novels run counter to the principle of refraining from "cruel and unusual punishments".³⁵ *Betsy Thoughtless* is a case in point; not only is she wrongly suspected of a lack of virtue by Truworth, who temporarily rejects her, she is also forced to marry a cruel and despotic husband, who mistreats her in any number of ways. The years of marriage to him can surely be judged to be 'excessive punishment' for her minor faults. From the 1720s onwards, female novelists presented heroines who are ruined by their seducers, or who begin life in a comfortable position but are impoverished and have to endure extreme poverty, or even wake up in an asylum for the insane, like the heroine in Mary Brunton's *Discipline* (1815). Since the heroines have to repent and get rid of their (minor) faults, their 'correction' – induced by society or fate – is justified and conforms to contemporary values. But the punishment often by far transgresses the faults and the misbehaviour of the heroine, which invites readers to feel pity for her – and even to distance themselves from those characters who harshly punish the protagonist, or who bring about or welcome this harsh treatment. Therefore it becomes possible for readers to distance themselves from social norms and officially sanctioned behaviour that they may endorse in reality, but that appears heartless and narrow-minded in the context of the novel.

(8) Conflicts between male and female characters often focus on innocent and quite understandable wishes of the heroine – like Betsy's desire to prolong courtship or the more serious desire of Maggie Tulliver to get a better education.

33 This scene does not only illustrate the courage and power of Betsy, who convinces the gentleman that she is "of a family of some consideration in the world", it also teaches readers which kind of women are truly respected, because even the libertine admits that "I love my pleasures, and think it no crime to indulge the appetites of nature. I am charmed with the kind free woman, but I honour and revere the truly virtuous" (Haywood, 1997 [1751], 205).

34 Charlotte Lennox. *The Female Quixote, or the Adventures of Arabella*. 1752. Ed. Margaret Dalziel. Oxford: OUP, 1989, 15.

35 British 'Declaration of Rights'; the phrase is taken up in the American Bill of Rights.

Differences of opinion with regard to parents or other male characters highlight the dependence and powerlessness of female characters, who, in contrast to their male counterparts, either cannot realise their dreams or rely on male support. If it comes to a pinch, male characters do not hesitate to insist on an unwanted marriage, such as Miss Betsy Thoughtless' relatives, who force her to marry Mr. Munden, who shows in many conflicts with his wife that he is mean, dishonourable, faithless and unscrupulous; he even asks Betsy to have an affair with a nobleman, because he expects a preferment in exchange for the caresses of his wife. Such staging of conflicts, which the women are doomed to lose (though Betsy draws a line at having sex with the nobleman), emphasises both female experiences and emotional reactions to a crisis as well as the unjust distribution of power in society. Even if women reject proposals of marriage – which they do at their own peril – the men (mis)use their position of power by telling them that they have to marry and will not get a better offer, such as Mr Collins does with regard to Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, or the lower (middle) class characters Mr Branghton and Mr Smith when they propose to Evelina in Burney's novel.

(9) The range of experiences open (or closed) to women is highlighted by the means of mirroring or contrasting the heroine's experiences with the fate of other characters in roughly the same position.³⁶ Betsy, for instance, is contrasted with her cousin Flora, a woman with far less goodwill and attractions than Betsy, and both are set in relation to Miss Forward, whose social position – in conjunction with her 'forwardness' – leads her into prostitution. The only character clearly more virtuous and perfect than Betsy is Miss Harriot, who marries Truworth but dies conveniently early. However, she is introduced very late in the novel, and not described in any detail – and Betsy acquires this character's perfections in the end. On the other end of the scale are some stock characters like young prostitutes or 'mistresses', and it does not seem to be a coincidence that two of these are French. These women, who have obviously erred in fatal ways, invite comparison with the married women; the less than perfect, superficial and self-serving Lady Mellasin, who has to leave her husband Goodman in the end, and the perfect (but powerless) Lady Trusty, whose good advice during Betsy's difficulties in her first marriage turns out to be utterly useless. The choice, or rather the lack of choices, and the punishment for swaying from the way of chastity are therefore illustrated by the character constellation and relations of contrast and similarity.

36 The importance of this strategy for Haywood is rightly emphasised by Sabine Augustin. *Eighteenth-Century Female Voices. Education and the Novel*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2005, 48. This device is also mentioned by Austin (2000, 270), who sees it as a part of Haywood's technique of repetition, which allegedly "undercut[s] Betsy's supposed final reformation". Austin is one of the few authors who is concerned with formal features.

Quite a lot of novels use this device of describing the fate of other characters that are in a similar situation in order to highlight the particular characteristics that distinguish the heroine from others, to broaden the reader's understanding of the heroine's predicaments, and to widen his horizon with regard to the options and dangers of female behaviour. In the eighteenth century, those characters are sometimes introduced in a more didactic, isolated manner, when they meet the heroine accidentally and tell her the tale of their lives.³⁷ The constellation of characters is therefore an important ingredient of enlarging the point of view while at the same time privileging the female perspective.

Stock characters, however, mostly confirm existing prejudices. There seems to be a pattern of privileging female experiences in order to highlight the differences and similarities between the main characters and thus induce understanding for the heroine, but to conform to existing prejudices with regard to more unimportant characters. Perhaps this made the books more palatable to the contemporary audience, since it gave them something to recognise and hold on to; perhaps it was even reassuring for the authors themselves. The female adventuress is only (and then moderately) successful in Victorian melodrama, otherwise she ends up as a damsel in distress; the coquette has to be reformed (or ends up as a prostitute, as many 'mirror' characters show); mentors are male (though not always entirely trustworthy), while female mentors (apart from mothers, who are often conspicuously absent) play a rather negative role. It seems as if female novelists made their bid for respectability by the use of – more or less unimportant – stock characters, whom readers could recognise and (dis)approve of.

As John Richetti has demonstrated, eighteenth-century heroines were in no position to give longish explanations of their views and feelings, since this would have contradicted the ideal image of girls: voluble women were suspect; often their use of speech is criticised or ridiculed.³⁸ It is therefore rarely, and in moments of great emotion, that Betsy defends herself, either against 'gentlemen' that are too forward with her, or against Mr. Munden, who asks her to pay household expenses with her pin money. At first, Betsy is speechless, giving him room to utter a few more insults, but then "[t]he innate rage which [...] swelled her breast to almost bursting, would now no longer be confined. 'Good Heavens,' cried she, 'to what have I reduced myself! Is this to be a wife! [...] Call it rather an Egyptian bondage!'"³⁹. This is, however, only barely acceptable in moments of

37 In Sarah Scott's novel *Millenium Hall*, the embedded stories of several women even form the bulk of the novel; and Sarah Fielding's *Cleopatra and Octavia* (1757) uses the juxtaposition of two voices as a major narrative device.

38 See John Richetti, "Voice and Gender in Eighteenth-Century Fiction: Haywood to Burney," *Studies in the Novel* 19.3 (1987): 263-272, esp. 268-270.

39 Haywood (1997 [1751], 442).

extreme emotion; Lady Mellasin, by contrast, is denigrated by her passionate outbursts in front of the servants which illustrate her lack of self-restraint.

Given the problems of letting the heroine speak for herself, it became important at least to depict her consciousness. The development of free indirect discourse is often attributed to Jane Austen, though many scholars have drawn attention to the fact that we can also find it in Behn's *Love-Letters* (1684-87) and many other novels of the eighteenth century. Though, in comparison to Austen, the rendering of consciousness more often than not seems to be a little clumsy, there are many instances of quoted or narrated thought in eighteenth century novels by women. When Mr Munden shows his cruelty, unfairness and despotism once again, Betsy's thoughts are rendered by means of free indirect discourse. The narrator uses some of Betsy's alleged words and punctuates them with exclamation and interrogation marks, in order to illustrate that, in spite of her good intentions, and in spite of the good council of Lady Trusty, Betsy does not see any way out of her predicaments any more:

How utterly impossible was it for her now to observe the rules laid down to her by Lady Trusty! Could she, after this, submit to put in practice any softening arts she had been advised, to win her lordly tyrant into temper? Could she, I say, have done this, without being guilty of a meanness, which all wives must have condemned her for?⁴⁰

Passages such as these reduce the distance between narrator and protagonist as well as that between her and the reader. The merging of the character's and the narrator's speech and thought are quite pronounced here – they both concur, and it might even be the narrator alone who is responsible for the last question. The insertion 'I say' emphasises the weight of Betsy's thoughts, and shows that the narrator is, for once, definitely on her side.

After such attempts at raising understanding and sympathy for Betsy, her conversion to docility and obedience comes as a surprise. Suddenly, we are faced with a long quoted monologue which shows us a completely different Betsy, who realises that she has been wrong all along: "'Good God!' cried she, 'what infatuation possessed me! Am I not married? Is not all I am the property of Mr. Munden?'"⁴¹ The long monologue of two pages, in which Betsy gives vent to her new insights into the rights of husbands over their wives is not only formally less convincing than the earlier attempts at depicting her consciousness; it is also dubious as far as its content is concerned. After all, few Englishmen, who prided themselves on their liberty as well as on that of Englishwomen during the eighteenth century, would agree with the statement that Betsy is the property of Mr. Munden. She is, of course, a *femme coverte*, is no legal person and represented in

40 Ibid., 448.

41 Haywood (1997 [1751], 495).

all legal, public and political matters by her husband – but she is not his property and his ‘slave’, even though he tries to treat her as such.⁴²

Even without making use of the full range of functions that an overt heterodiegetic narrator can fulfil, female authors succeeded in writing works which ostensibly met the requirements of didacticism, but conveyed subdued criticism of the position of women at the same time. Though the techniques of rendering consciousness were not as refined as those employed by later novelists, many of the strategies in use seemed to be ‘natural’ and ‘realistic’; they were less obtrusive and perhaps even more effective than explicit statements by a narrator might have been.

Claims to authority: Overt narrators in the nineteenth century

In order to highlight the particularities of eighteenth-century novels, I want to provide a brief glimpse of the changes which occurred during the nineteenth century. It is important to recognise, however, that the use of the ten strategies outlined above continued to be an important means of conveying criticism and emphasising the perspectives of young women. In Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* (1847) and in George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss* (1860), for instance, each and every strategy can be found. A very brief sketch of the features of *Jane Eyre* may serve to illustrate this:

Jane is at the centre of the story, the female perspective predominates (1), and her deviant behaviour is explained, once again, with the death of her parents and the bad treatment she receives at the hands of her relatives (as well as her love of liberty and fairness) (2). Although Jane desires independence and admits to being plain, she is nearly perfect: good-natured, forgiving, tender-hearted, upright, just, and, ultimately, worshipping domesticity in her little home with her cousins and, later, with Rochester (3). Moreover, the characters which are unanimously admired respect and love Jane: both the angelic Helen Burns, who dies of tuberculosis in Lowood, and Rochester are cases in point (4). Criticism of Jane is voiced by her despotic and cruel young cousin John Reed, who beats her in the

42 For the legal definition of wives, see William Blackstone. *Commentaries on the Law of England*. 4 vols. London: Murray, 1857. The strong prejudice against slavery was used by feminists, who compared wives to slaves in order to achieve an improvement of their situation; see, for instance, Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. 1791. Ed. Ulrich H. Hardt. Troy, NY: Whitston, 1982, 23, “[uneducated wives] may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent.”

very first scene, as well as by the hypocritical, hard-hearted and self-serving schoolmaster of Lowood and by many other figures characterised by unattractive traits (5). In addition, the focus firmly remains on Jane's feelings; when she leaves Rochester (or later on St. John), we do not come to know anything about the grief she causes (6). Like many other heroines, Jane is punished cruelly; her minor faults do not call for such suffering, neither when she is put in the 'red room', nor when she nearly dies of thirst and hunger after days without shelter (7). Conflicts with males end with Jane being beaten and punished (as in the beginning of the book), or having to run away: winning is impossible (8). The lack of choices available to women is highlighted by female characters like Jane's female cousins or the housekeeper Mrs Fairfax as well as by Jane's longing for experiences and travels that she can never get (9). Our understanding of the heroine's motives and feelings is enhanced by the fact that Jane is the only focalisor and that we get detailed access to her processes of consciousness (10).

In that respect, nothing has changed. There is a huge difference however, with regard to the persona of the narrator, as far as both heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrators are concerned. In Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, for instance, the techniques regarding the level of the story are given additional weight by the persona of the narrator, who takes great care to show that he is to be taken seriously as a judge of what is going on. His wide education and learnedness is indicated not only by his use of words and grammar, but also by a host of intertextual references to classical works of literature and science from a whole range of languages and centuries.⁴³ This illustrates the writer's erudition and is one strategy to ensure that 'mere' female experience is taken seriously; it could also serve to persuade (conservative) readers to identify with thoughts and feelings that are connected 'only' to the domestic sphere. It also suggests that reading such a work was a profitable endeavour and that the one who was telling it knew what he or she was doing. Eliot's narrator arguably projects a 'male' persona, self-confidently using strategies which are typical of male writers, who, in contrast to females, had access to a classical education. Bolstered up by this confident claim to authority, the narrator in Eliot's novel is so sure of himself that he even dares to criticise well established ideals of womanhood. He thus openly criticises the heroine's mother, who is fond of complaining that her daughter does not match her standards of womanhood and, in particular, that she has hair that refuses to curl properly:

[F]rom the cradle upwards [Mrs Tulliver] had been healthy, fair, plump, and dull-witted; in short, the flower of her family for beauty and amiability. But milk and mildness are not the best things for keeping [...]. I have often wondered whether those early Madonnas of Raph-

43 This convention was already used in the eighteenth century in some novels by Sarah Fielding.

ael, with the blond faces and somewhat stupid expression, kept their placidity undisturbed [...]. I think they must have been [...] getting more and more peevish as it became more and more ineffectual.⁴⁴

This acid criticism of prevalent ideals of womanhood, provided by an 'authorial narrator' who often refers to himself in the first person singular, shows that the narrator in this novel is quite confident with regard to his position. The use of irony ("in short, the flower [...] for beauty and amiability") shows his detached, censorious stance, and the reference to works of art by Raphael illustrates the extent of his education. This runs counter to important cultural values – and it would have been unthinkable a mere century earlier.⁴⁵

The authority of the narrator can also be witnessed in more or less explicit appeals for sympathy with the (blundering) heroine. Eliot, for instance, employs an intertextual allusion in order to raise sympathy for "poor Maggie", for whom the harmless ride home with the mercenary gypsies is a nightmare: "Not Leonore, in that preternatural midnight excursion with her phantom lover, was more terrified than poor Maggie in this entirely natural ride on a short-paced donkey."⁴⁶ Novels by far less adept writers demonstrate how difficult it still is in the nineteenth century to evoke pity for a heroine who does not conform to the expectations of society. As Virginia Woolf said, the elegance with which problems are solved in masterpieces can be appreciated by looking at less worthy predecessors; and Mary Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*, a reworking of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, is a case in point. In this novel, the narrator tries to retain respectability and demonstrate that he himself is in full accordance with current values, while at the same time win the reader's understanding and sympathy for the heroine:

I know that [the heroine] was alike wicked and silly; I know that it must be difficult to win sympathy for a grief so foolish, an anguish so self-engendered; but her sorrow was none the less real to her [...]. It was not so long since she had lain awake for many weary nights weeping for the death of a pet spaniel; [...]. All the sterner business of life lay before her as yet, all the harder lessons yet remained to be learned.⁴⁷

44 George Eliot. *The Mill on the Floss*. 1860. Ed. Gordon S. Haight. Oxford: Clarendon, 1980, 13.

45 It is a matter of contention whether Eliot's heterodiegetic narrators project a male or a female persona. Ansgar Nünning argues with reference to the change of the respecting functions and (implicitly) self-characterising remarks of the narrator that a crucial change occurred when it became public knowledge that a woman, Mary Ann Evans, was the author of these novels. Before that point, Eliot projected a male persona, afterwards, a female one. Cf. Ansgar Nünning. *Grundzüge eines kommunikationstheoretischen Modells der erzählerischen Vermittlung: Die Funktion der Erzählinstanz in den Romanen George Eliots*. Trier: WVT, 1989.

46 Eliot (1980 [1860], 99). See also "[Tom] left poor Maggie to that bitter sense of the irrevocable which was almost an everyday experience of her small soul." (121)

47 Mary Braddon. *The Doctor's Wife*. 1864. Ed. Lyn Pykett. Oxford: OUP, 1998, 223.

The extent to which the position of female authors changed can also be exemplified with regard to *Jane Eyre*, which makes full use of the privileges of an autodiegetic narrator: On the one hand, Brontë employs the perspective of the 'experiencing I' in order to render Jane's sufferings in a very immediate way. On the other hand, there are a host of interspersed comments by the older Jane, who supposedly writes this book when she is in her thirties. Though Jane has many longings and character traits that were held to be 'unwomanly' at the time, the narrator does not distance herself from these desires; she rather justifies and explains them – thus showing that a female voice by then held enough authority to contradict social rules and conventional opinions. In a very famous passage, Jane describes how she longed for the "busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen" and repeatedly asks the question "Who blames me?"⁴⁸ – knowing full well that this was exactly what most readers could be expected to do. What is interesting here is the way in which the 'narrating I' becomes indistinguishable from the 'experiencing I' and results in a 'merging' of two voices, which enhances the importance of the generalisations.⁴⁹

Jane's very unconventional opinion on the liberty of women is not only bolstered by the harmony between 'narrating' and 'experiencing I', but also by another privilege of overt narrators: that of addressing the reader, which is used in the rather conventional way of trying to establish common ground between narrator and audience. She also uses generalisations and employs her privileged narrative position to give voice to female experience in general.⁵⁰ At least for a daring author it was possible in 1847 to use the 'personal voice' of a woman in order to criticise society. Apparently, the opinion of women had gathered weight over the preceding decades.

48 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*. 1847. Ed. Margaret Smith. London: OUP, 1973, 110; in the following sentence, Jane answers this rhetorical question: "Many, no doubt; and I shall be called discontented." (Ibid.)

49 S. Lanser (1992, 182) also states that Jane's discourse mingles past and present tense, as if "what the one did the other still supports" (Ibid., 183).

50 See, for instance: "Women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags." (Brontë 1973 [1847], 110f.).

Changes in female writing from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century

Looking at the differences between the modes of narration in Haywood and Eliot or Brontë, it is not difficult to detect a significant development in English female writing. On the one hand, there is – apart from the refinement with regard to the presentation of consciousness – little change. Strategies pertaining to the diegetic level, which were meant to ensure the identification with more or less unconventional heroines and their female point of view, were in full use by the middle of the century and continued to be employed throughout the following decades. Even though such conventions seem, in some respects, to be quite basic, they can arguably be held to be more subtle – and possibly more convincing – than explicit comments on the level of narrative transmission. After all, it is impossible to argue with a story or with a complex web of different narrative means, while it seems fairly easy to flatly contradict evaluations or generalisations by a heterodiegetic narrator. The strategies on the diegetic level may therefore serve to lead readers to disagree with characters who pronounce misogynistic truisms which they themselves would support in their daily life, and to confirm the opinion of more unconventional characters, who are idealised within the context of the story. What is presented by means of narrative techniques may change not only the way we think, but the way we feel about female experience or the (mis)use of power.⁵¹

On the other hand, there is a huge change with regard to women's ways of claiming authority as narrators. The self-confidence which female narrators developed from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards is rather astonishing. In the eighteenth century, female novelists had shied away from the full use of 'overt' narrators, which imply both self-assertion and self-confidence. Even though they had not quite given in to the public expectation concerning 'female writings' by taking recourse to the 'personal voice', they restricted themselves to the use of rather covert heterodiegetic narrators, which seems to be the most unobtrusive and efficient way to establish a 'superior', 'omniscient' and gender-neutral position. From the early nineteenth century onwards, this reticence towards overt narration diminished: By the middle of the century, authors like Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot could make extensive use of the privileges of overt narrators and thus lay claim to a position of authority.

The more modest attempts at becoming heard and listened to in the eighteenth century therefore prepared the ground for an improved position of narrators created by female authors in the nineteenth century. This development is, at least in Great

⁵¹ A similar view is held by Newton (1985, 6).

Britain, not related to a corresponding improvement of the legal or cultural position of women. On the contrary, one might even argue that the enhanced status women had gained in the second half of the eighteenth century declined after the French Revolution, when radical ideas were relentlessly repressed and it became even more important to conform to social norms.⁵² It also has to be stressed that the heightened position of women as narrators does not become visible if one looks at the content of the stories and the image of the heroine; it is only manifested in the narrative ways of exploring female experience and asserting female authority. Neither George Eliot's Maggie, nor Mary Braddon's 'doctor's wife' gain more authority, independence or freedom than the heroines of the eighteenth century. On the contrary, the latter sometimes enjoy a wider range of experience than their successors in the nineteenth century. Even Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, who is an exception in many ways, is safely and happily married in the end, when her urgent desire for independence seems to have vanished. There is thus, I would like to argue, an important change in the development of women's writing from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century; but this change only becomes visible when one looks closely at the formal features and the style, both of which testify to the increased power and self-confidence of female narrators who focus on the representation of female life.

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52 See V. Nünning (2004). It is no coincidence that there is only one author like George Eliot in comparison to numerous intellectual women in the eighteenth century with a high reputation, who excelled in fields like translations from the classics, historiography, political writing.

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