Proposing a Model: Feminism and Narratology
Introduction: Why Don't Feminists 'Do' Narratology?

Reader, if you are interested, as I am, in the history of narrators' attitudes toward their readers; if you adopt the models of narratology in your attempt to differentiate among the various strategies authors can use in narrative interventions; and if, in your research into nineteenth-century realist novels, you discover that passages of earnest direct address (like the one you are reading now) occur more frequently and more prominently in novels by women than in novels by men, you will run into an interesting theoretical dilemma. Why is there no “feminist narratology” that could help account for such a difference? Until recently, narratology has not asked questions about gender, and feminist criticism, which by definition always asks the gender question first, has not inquired into narrative discourse. Before embarking on a theory of gendered interventions, then, I want to consider the reasons why these two theoretical approaches have resisted coming together.

Narratologists, Feminists, and Feminist Narratology

Narratology, in its original forms, seems to be gender-blind. Gérard Genette, using Proust as the primary example for his “essay in method” and referring to scores of other novelists in passing, mentions only half a dozen
women writers in *Narrative Discourse*, and never hints at the possibility of any gender-based differences or patterns among narrative structures. Neither Gerald Prince nor Mieke Bal, in their less specific and more comprehensive presentations of narratology, mentions gender as a factor influencing the models they describe.¹ The oversight is not a sexist one: not only gender, but all variables of context remain outside of classical narratology’s realm. As proponents of structuralism, the first practitioners of narratology lifted texts out of their contexts in order to distill from them the essential structures that characterize all narrative. If a general theory of narratology were to consider the influence of gender on the production of certain kinds of narrative structures, for instance, it would depart from the basic premises of a study that—in its earliest, strictest forms—purported to operate ahistorically, outside the restrictions imposed by consideration of the period and circumstances in which a text is written. For this reason, we cannot be surprised that a feminist critic such as Bal has shifted the emphasis of her scholarship to semiotics, where she can study recurring textual signs and structures in the context of the cultures that produce them.²

Not all critics who apply the tools of narratology have maintained this pure distinction between narrative structures and their contexts. A critic who looks at the ways in which ideology shapes narratives—as Susan Suleiman has in *Authoritarian Fictions* (1982), her study of the French roman à thèse during the first half of the twentieth century—returns the text to its place in history. Combining descriptive poetics with interpretive criticism, Suleiman proposes a model for the genre of the ideological novel, then reads individual texts against the model. Proceeding from structuralist methods, she offers various charts and diagrams to illustrate her assumptions. The most useful of these—a map of the “Principal Constituents of the Narrative Text” (157)—most clearly reveals the current intersection between narratology and contextual criticism.

This “schema,” as Suleiman calls it, is “based chiefly on the works of A. J. Greimas and Gérard Genette,” with slight modifications of their terminology (156): it divides the narrative text’s main components into the “Level of Story” and the “Level of Discourse.” Under “Discourse” are listed “Narration” (the functions of the narrator, that is, to tell the story, to signal the organization, to address the narratee, to provide “testimonials,” and to interpret the story); “Focalization” (Genette’s useful term for describing narrative perspective); and “Temporal Organization” (the “order, duration,
and frequency" of occurrences in a story). Under "Story" appear the components one would expect: "Characters" (both in terms of what they are and what they do in the story); "Events" (including the sequences of actions); and "Context" (including historical, geographical, cultural, and "local"). I have reproduced the substance of Suleiman's chart to illustrate a point: narratology typically regards context as a component of story, rather than discourse. In other words, context has been a factor in narratological analysis of what fiction depicts, but not in discussions of how fictions' contents get rendered in language.

Neither Suleiman nor Genette says anything to rule out the possibility of considering narrative discourse within its historical or ideological context. To study, as Suleiman does, the narrator's testimonial function (that is, the ways in which the narrator explicitly accounts for what he or she "knows") or, more strikingly, the narrator's interpretive function (especially instances where the uncharacterized or "omniscient" narrator analyzes, interprets, or judges characters, events, or situations within the story) is necessarily to look at the narrator's utterances within a context. This context might be the historical period and setting that a narrative voice shares with the story, as in Dickens's *Hard Times* or Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*, or it might be the context of a narrative voice that places itself in a time different from that of the story, as in Scott's Waverly novels, Cooper's Leatherstocking tales, or—for a much more explicit example—John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. To take the possibilities a step further in the direction Suleiman's book beckons, away from purely formalist consideration of structures, we might look at the narrator's utterances in the context in which they were literally produced, that is, in terms of the categories of the novelist's own experience—historical, social, or even personal. Nothing prohibits us from asking, among other questions about the role of social factors in shaping narrative strategies, what part the writer's gender plays in the kinds of interventions he or she uses in narrative.

Although narratology itself has not addressed gender, and though gender has not yet been a factor in many narratological studies of the level of discourse, structural analysis on the level of story has proven very useful for feminist criticism. Nancy Miller's *The Heroine's Text* (1980), a study of the two basic plots that characterize novels about women's experience written in France and England during the Enlightenment, shows the potential usefulness of narratology to a feminist project. Her study of "feminocentric"
novels includes only texts written by men, and her analysis of strategy remains on the level of story, restricting itself to interrogating what happens to the female protagonists of these novels. Miller's approach carries her far into a critique of the culture that produced the novels: as she observes, "The plots of these feminocentric novels are of course neither female in impulse or origin, nor feminist in spirit, . . . despite their titles and their feminine 'I'" (149). The narratological analysis of these plots allows Miller to conclude that the feminocentric novel was written by men in the interest of men: women may be "its predominant signifiers, but they are also its pre­text" (150). Narratology has obvious advantages for a project like Miller's, among them the way in which categorical descriptions of plots can lend an evidently objective authority to potentially inflammatory conclusions about male writers and masculine-centered culture.

Despite its sophisticated theoretical apparatus, Miller's book belongs to the "images of woman" movement in feminist criticism, that is, the study of how women are portrayed in texts. This emphasis keeps her analysis focused on the level of story. To date, no feminist critic has taken a detailed look into gender's effect on the level of discourse in fiction, using "discourse" strictly in the sense established by Genette, Chatman, Suleiman, and other narratologists. I think that stepping past the level of story to analyze the level of discourse within a framework of questions about gender can bring narratology to the service of a later moment in feminist criticism.

THEORIES OF GENDER DIFFERENCE IN WRITING

Elaine Showalter has recently summarized the brief but rapidly developing history of feminist literary theory, tracing the roles that questions of gender have played in critical discussions during the past three decades. According to Showalter, criticism of women's writing originally took the form of an androgynist poetics, denying female literary specificity. The women's movement initiated both a feminist critique of male culture and a Female Aesthetic celebrating women's culture. By the mid-1970s, academic feminist criticism entered a new phase of gynocritics, or the study of women's writing. With the impact of European literary and feminist theory by 1980, gynetic or poststructuralist feminist criticism,
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dealing with "the feminine" in philosophy, language, and psychoanalysis, dominated the field. And in the late 1980s, we are seeing the rise of gender theory, the comparative study of sexual difference. ("A Criticism of Our Own," 21)

Questioning Showalter's account of the history of feminist theory on the grounds that it treats the field as a linear series of advances over previous approaches, Jonathan Culler has challenged the implication that each kind of feminist criticism has been superseded by the next. As Culler pointed out during a panel at the 1986 Modern Language Association convention (and, for that matter, as Showalter's essay explicitly acknowledges), the debates among the various schools of feminist thought continue as a conversation that operates synchronically, even if some voices have joined in more recently than others. Still, the appeal of "narrativizing" critical movements diachronically, as Showalter had done, is strong: to tell the story of feminist criticism is to account, if only experimentally, for why and how the field expands as it does. If we consider the position of narratology within Showalter's historical frame, we can more clearly see its potential and its limitations as a prospective aid to feminist literary criticism.

Clearly, narratology originally belonged to the moment in literary history that assumed an "androgynist poetics." If Prince, in the English translation of his "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee," uses more than seventy-nine examples and only two of them are from female-authored works, this is not merely because he is concerned with describing the features of a canon that is traditionally dominated by male writers. The very existence of that canon is predicated on an assumption that Prince naturally shares: regardless of whether any differences exist among the forms and strategies that male and female authors choose to employ in fiction, to ask questions about such differences would be to depart from the structuralist enterprise. As Showalter points out, some women writers (for instance, Joyce Carol Oates and Gail Godwin) continue to embrace an androcentric poetics, understandably wishing not to be "separate but equal" to male writers, but simply to be comparable, on precisely equal terms, to their male counterparts. From their point of view, the gender-blindness of narratology's descriptions of discourse would still be welcome.

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*The Heroine's Text* is an important example of narratology's contributions to the feminist cultural critique. As I have already mentioned, using an androcentric tool like narrative analysis in the service of such a critique gives feminist projects such as Miller's an extra-persuasive edge. It allows the critic to confront the masculine biases of feminocentric novels in terms that the male critical community has already created and, to some extent, adopted. In the meantime, the Female Aesthetic mode of criticism was carrying analysis of women's writing equally deep into the level of story. Inquiries into depictions of women's experience, of female communities, of mother-daughter bonds, and of biological differences between women and men concentrated on questions of plot, imagery, genre, and language in the broadest sense, but resisted the apparently androgynous orientation of narratology. Never addressing discourse per se, feminist aestheticians have not looked at such narrative conventions as "voice," "perspective," "focalization," or "intervention." They have developed instead theories of the preferred styles for women's writing, insisting that women's sentences should be shaped differently from men's.

While feminist aestheticians have tried valiantly to establish grounds for evaluating female styles that would not be bound by masculine critical assumptions, the movement suffers from two problems that are endemic to any aesthetic approach to literature. The first problem is that the theorists who try hardest to determine what a female style would look like can hardly describe what the formal features of such a style would be. The problem goes back to Virginia Woolf’s provocative attempt in *A Room of One's Own* to propose a "woman's sentence" whose nature would differ fundamentally from a man’s prose. But Woolf, like the aestheticians who take their inspiration from her suggestion, cannot really say what kind of sentence it would be. Is femininity in a sentence a function of syntax? Of vocabulary? Of imagery? Of punctuation? Of some combination of these and other elements?

When critics have tried to apply Woolf’s idea, they have fallen into the second problem that aesthetic criticism invariably poses: it can become as prescriptive as any previous critical tradition, and continues to marginalize some women writers on the basis of their style. Josephine Donovan, for example, in trying to apply Woolf’s notion of a "woman's sentence," pronounces George Eliot's prose "turgid, uncomfortable, and inappropriately suited to her context" (348), while finding the sentences of Jane Austen, Kate Chopin, and Woolf "appropriate" for rendering hero-
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ines’ inner lives (349, 352). If it was unreasonable for androcentric critics to dismiss from the canon women’s writing that strayed too far from implicitly acceptable masculine norms of style, surely it is equally unreasonable to object to some women authors for sounding less stereotypically “female” than others. Like the prescriptive critical traditions it emulates, feminist-aesthetic stylistic analysis adheres more closely to models of what women’s writing should be than to inquiries into what it has been.

Moving away from prescriptive theories of women’s writing to a more descriptive approach, the next phase of feminist criticism, which Showalter christened “gynocritics,” sought to avoid the sexist implications of essential sexual difference implied by the Female Aesthetic. Gynocritics tried to return feminist literary criticism to an arena that could address male colleagues, as well as female scholars and critics. The impetus behind gynocritics was to alter the literary canon to include more works by women; in order to do this, the gynocritic adapts critical approaches from the mainstream tradition and applies them to texts signed by women. In projects such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic or Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own, this practice has led to the alteration of prevailing masculine models of influence, intertextuality, and conventions of story, resulting eventually in the construction of feminine literary traditions that presumably developed alongside the mainstream masculine canon, in continual response to and conflict with what male writers were doing. Like the Female Aesthetic, gynocritics has often led to the seemingly inevitable conclusion of feminist criticism: Women write differently from men.

Explication of the problems raised by such a conclusion can be traced back to Simone de Beauvoir’s basic observation about what constitutes a “second sex.” To say that women don’t write like men is to place men at a normative center and women in the margins; to say that women write differently from men is to decenter the observation slightly, but this formulation still retains men’s writing as the standard against which the difference of women’s writing must be defined. To avoid perpetuating traditional, binary assumptions, feminist theory has recently embraced the approach of deconstruction, which offers a helpful strategy for focusing on difference while simultaneously dismantling conventional oppositions. In the hands of a practitioner of gynocritics like Elizabeth Meese, deconstruction becomes a powerful tool for interpreting texts with an eye to gender, even though—as Meese observes in Crossing the Double-Cross (1986)—
originators and early proponents of deconstruction tended to ignore women's writing.

For Meese, as for Helene Moglen and others who deconstruct texts with an emphasis on the gendered aspect of difference, deconstruction does not limit its goals to the ultimately purposeless, anti-ideological game playing that Terry Eagleton decries in Anglo-American deconstructive criticism. Eagleton observes that deconstruction

frees you at a stroke from having to assume a position on important issues, since what you say of such things will be no more than a passing product of the signifier and so in no sense to be taken as "true" or "serious." A further benefit of this stance is that it is mischievously radical in respect of everyone else's opinions, able to unmask the most solemn declarations as mere dishevelled plays of signs, while utterly conservative in every other way. Since it commits you to affirming nothing, it is as injurious as blank ammunition. (145)

As Eagleton acknowledges, however—and as Meese, for one, demonstrates—deconstruction can nevertheless help feminist critics who want to emphasize "how, though historically speaking the conflict between men and women could not have been more real, the ideology of this antagonism involved a metaphysical illusion" (Eagleton 150).4

Indirectly addressing the appeal of deconstruction for feminist criticism, Alice Jardine has pointed to the irony of the feminist's position in a poststructuralist age: whatever else it may do, feminist theory proceeds from a belief (in the fact that women have been oppressed), but it operates in a world from which Truth has disappeared. As Jardine remarks, the result of this dilemma may be for the feminist to experience a "vertigo of reading strategies" from the dizzyingly relative heights of infinite possibilities (31). According to Jardine, feminists experiencing this vertigo can avoid responding with mere silence by paying "a continual attention—historical, ideological, and affective—to the place from which we speak" (31). To combine feminist goals with deconstructive strategies is necessarily to attend to the "situation of enunciation" of the readings the approach will produce. And, too, deconstruction is not the only poststructuralist system which can yield this result: gynesic and Lacanian theories that adapt psy-
choanalysis also exemplify the ways in which feminists can transform interpretive strategies for their projects' purposes.

Poststructuralist theories, then, have served gynocritics well in the enterprise of interpreting texts "signed by women" as well as texts in which women operate as the signifiers. Deconstruction especially is a useful way for the feminist critic to answer the question, What does this text mean? or, more accurately perhaps, What does this text signify? But to what extent has poststructuralist criticism combined with feminism to ask, How does this text mean? Why has feminist theory avoided a systematic study of the conventions of literary discourse in women's writing, to parallel the models that phallocentric and androcentric criticism have produced? Annette Kolodny has claimed that

A largely male-dominated academic establishment has, for the last 75 years or so, treated men's writing as though it were the model for all writing. In other words, the various theories on the craft of fiction, and the formalist and structuralist models that have been based on this closed tradition but have been offered up as "universals" of fictive form or even (under the influence of the psycholinguists) as emanations of yet deeper structures within human cognitive processes may in fact prove to be less than universal and certainly less than fully human. ("Some Notes" 89)

Kolodny concedes that feminist critics should "use what we can from the past." The directions that feminist criticism has taken since Kolodny offered her manifesto suggest that feminist critics want to avoid merely rectifying the narrowness of the prevailing models, as though that would mean simply tinkering with "the tools and methods already available," as Kolodny has implied. Are "formalist and structuralist models" gender-biased in their essence, as well as their details? Does structural analysis have to be discarded, and replaced with feminist-inspired strategies of reading and interpretation?

Looking at the most recent feminist literary theories from the perspective implicit in such questions, I find it significant that Jardine, for example, concludes her important study, Gynesis (1985), by jubilantly describing the exhilaration she felt at having discovered that
the differences between the male-written and female-written texts of modernity were not, after all, in their so-called "content," but in their enunciation: in their modes of discourse ("sentimental," ironic, scientific, etc.); in their twisting of female obligatory connotations, of inherited genealogies of the feminine; in their haste or refusal to use the pronouns "I" or "we"; in their degree of willingness to gender those pronouns as female.

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The differences Jardine names are precisely the material from which structural analysis of texts is made: these are categories that careful attention to patterns of discourse might help to define and describe in detail. Yet nowhere does Jardine attempt such definitions or descriptions: her book, like other contemporary applications of gynesic theory and studies of écriture féminine, veers away from participating in so overtly structuralist an enterprise.

WHY FEMINISTS DON'T: POTENTIAL CHALLENGES TO NARRATOLOGY

The fact that feminists in the late 1980s tend not to "do narratology" per se, but prefer to concentrate on deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and semiotics, may be partly attributable to the objection Kolodny raises to merely adapting standard models of criticism that already exist. If feminism’s first goal is radical subversion of an existing order, then making minor adjustments in well-established critical systems seems unlikely to promote that goal. Of course, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and semiotics are all established critical systems today, but each of them—despite Kolodny’s misgivings—has revealed its own fundamentally radical potential in feminist hands. And, too, feminists do "use narratology," particularly in semiotics, in the course of pointing to the various signifiers in texts; literary conventions of story and discourse are signs, too.

Perhaps feminists avoid the study of narratology as a system because they share poststructuralist assumptions about the basic conservatism of structuralist approaches. Implicit in the structuralist notion that certain systems will repeat themselves—from text to text, or from culture to culture—is the idea that the way things are is the way they must inevitably
be. A feminist proceeding (as Jardine says) from a belief that the way things are is that women are oppressed would necessarily find this idea antipathetic. In addition, narratology, as a system within structuralism, shares that movement's faith in the possibility of scientific, orderly classification of data, in the idea that at one deep level—at least—phenomena can be known, named, and thus distinguished as real. The structuralists themselves recognize the potential challenges to such a faith. As Genette so memorably phrases it,

This is the paradox of every poetics, and doubtless of every other activity of knowledge as well: always torn between those two unavoidable commonplaces—that there are no objects except particular ones and no science except of the general—but always finding comfort and something like attraction in this other, slightly less widespread truth, that the general is at the heart of the particular, and therefore (contrary to the common preconception) the knowable is at the heart of the mysterious. (Narrative Discourse 23)

Because it embraces constructs of truth, structuralism participates in the Western intellectual tradition of binary oppositions that Derrida has sought to deconstruct (sometimes in the name of "woman") and that some theorists would say has always been undermined by that otherness that constitutes gynesis. Orderliness, whether in systems of metaphysics, politics, or literary criticism, has too often implied hegemony and hierarchy for radical critics to operate comfortably within it.

But orderliness has its advantages, too. What I find appealing about the narratology that Genette, Greimas, Prince, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, and Bal have elaborated is the way it expedites communication about texts. Narratology provides a precise language for describing the features of texts within a genre and delineating the differences between any given text and others of its kind. It can do what feminist aesthetic criticism, for example, cannot do: describe exactly what the conventions of fictional discourse are and how they operate. Narratology has given us names for literary conventions that formalist terminology made very difficult to discuss. (For example, consider the complications of describing the narrative techniques of Henry James or Jane Austen without the concept of "focalization"; consider the absurdity of referring to "Fielding" in Tom Jones as a "third-person
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narrator" when his "I" is so omnipresent.) What makes narratology so useful is that it can take gender studies a step further into a tangible, arguable position on particular texts: instead of simply talking in generalities about "women's styles," it can genuinely point to the features that constitute those styles in narrative.

In addition to the descriptive power conferred by its terminology, narratology has another important advantage over the traditional formalist methods that contemporary feminists eschew: it seeks to describe texts, not to evaluate them, in terms of their formal features. In spite of the justifiable anxieties about the Western intellectual tradition that poststructuralist theories have made explicit, order does not have to involve hierarchy. Certainly, the critic who selects texts for narratological study necessarily privileges those texts: this fact of scholarly life is practically as explicit, though, in such projects as Genette's or Suleiman's as it is in the work of a critic such as Stanley Fish. Any narratological system that presents itself as comprehensive while being based on a privileged selection of texts will necessarily contain gaps that studies of other, unconsidered texts could fill. But, as most narratologists would probably agree, if a particular text does not "work" within a narrative model, the limitation is in the model, not the text. After all, narratology acknowledges that no text can be entirely described by any model. The specificity of every text resists duplication in any description of how it works: the only really comprehensive account of all the structures that operate in a text is the text itself. The continuing study of narratology has sought only to test and expand the models, in the interest of making them more comprehensive. As a branch of descriptive poetics, narratology does not set out to exclude narrative texts of any kind from the parameters of its inquiry.

Narratology's desire to be comprehensive, rather than exclusive, is what makes it especially suitable to feminist criticism. And the flexibility of its models is narratology's answer to any objection that might be raised about the method's being too orderly or too systematic to be (as Kolodny might put it) "fully human." By testing the models of discourse (not story) against women's texts, we can sketch in some of the gaps in models that are based almost exclusively on men's writing; by placing the narratological analysis of those texts in a historical context that takes into account the circumstances in which they were produced, we can use narratology as a bridge to cross over from gynocritics into what Showalter calls "gen-
nder theory, the comparative study of sexual difference.” (“A Criticism of Our Own” 21).

GENDER THEORY AND TEXTUAL STRATEGIES

When it takes the form of studying gynesis, gender theory can emphasize essential differences between the sexes—between their psychological natures, or between their operation as subjects or signifiers in history and philosophy. Gender theory can also be useful in the study of culturally determined differences between the sexes, or differences between the biological and cultural signs of gender. The subjects of gender theory may be the distinctions between male and female, masculine and feminine, or even male and masculine, female and feminine.

Since this last application of gender theory may seem paradoxical in the abstract, I will borrow an illustration from Susan Brownmiller: female humans grow hair in their armpits, but American culture insists that it is not feminine to leave that hair unshaven. As social critics such as Brownmiller have emphasized, cultural constructs of gender differences are often based entirely on convention, rather than on biological realities. (The fantasy of the hairless “feminine” body, for instance, can be traced back through the idealized portrayal of nudes in Victorian painting to the smooth surfaces of Greek sculpture.) Whether such conventional conceptions of gender are grounded in politics (does the desire to deny that women’s bodies grow hair inhere in a wish to emphasize the biological differences between the sexes in order to perpetuate patriarchy?) or psychology (does the fantasy of the hairless female body betray a repressed cultural inclination for pedophilia?) or metaphysics (does the idealization of smooth feminine bodies, in denying part of the physical reality of femaleness, participate in an attempt to separate women from material nature, and to align them with the “spirit”?) is grounds for interesting speculation. Narratology traditionally has not trafficked in such speculations, for we need not inquire into the causes of cultural concepts of gender to study their effects. Unlike gynesic or psychoanalytic theory, narratology alone would not be helpful in determining the original causes of differences that might occur among the structures in men’s and women’s texts. What narratology can do is to help describe such differences when they occur, which would be the first step in developing a poetics of gendered discourse. The second step
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would be to augment narratology with history, by placing those differences in context: that is, to consider their relation to the culture's concept of gender differences at the time the text in question was written.

Cultural signs of gender—unlike biologically determined sex characteristics—develop more or less arbitrarily within societies, and are subject both to general change and individual choice. Masculine and feminine norms for dress, hair length, or use of jewelry and makeup change fairly rapidly, as any comparison of Western fashions over the past thirty years will show. One of the hallmarks of twentieth-century fashion has been that cross dressing no longer signifies the kind of radical rejection of gender roles that it would have a century ago. While it is still strictly feminine to wear a skirt and nylon stockings, a woman who dons a pair of khaki chinos and an Oxford-cloth, button-down shirt from Brooks Brothers is no longer treading the dangerous ground that George Sand risked when she put on a man-style suit. Nor is the man who wears an earring necessarily making a statement about his sexual orientation or his gender identity. Opportunities for ambiguously displaying one's gender identification are much more widely available today than they were in the 1950s, let alone the 1850s.

That cultural norms for outward signs of gender distinctions were stricter in nineteenth-century England and America than they are today is perhaps too obvious to point out, at least insofar as they concern clothing, personality traits, and social roles. What may be less obvious is that writing could take on the same kinds of gender differentiation in a culture where gender lines were as distinctly drawn as they were in the mid-Victorian Anglo-American world. Feminist linguists have investigated differences among twentieth-century men's and women's oral and written language, and even in the relatively androgynous era of the Women's Movement, they have discerned differences ranging from sentence length, to use of parallelism, to vocabulary choice. (Of course, linguistic analysis often finds differences, as Mary Hiatt's did, that subvert received assumptions about what masculine or feminine writing should be like.)

Analysis of narrative discourse, too, sometimes approaches the boundaries of a theory that would distinguish modern women's writing from men's. Susan Sniader Lanser's analysis of the ways in which ideology shapes narrative point of view sets up a contrast between the techniques in a woman's text ("The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin) and a man's ("The Killers," from Ernest Hemingway's Men Without Women). Lanser's applica-
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tion of her formulation of point of view certainly points out differences between the woman's text and the man's, but it stops short of distinguishing on that basis between women's texts and men's. Her more recent work "Toward a Feminist Narratology" takes bolder steps in the direction of uncovering gendered differences in discourse.¹⁰

As Lanser has observed, strategies of narrative perspective change over time, varying according to literary period and according to the ideology that informs each text. At any given historical moment, certain techniques may be associated with male writing, while others are associated with female texts. Feminist critics often assume that women writers—like all female activists, and, for that matter, like the principle of gynesis itself—have always strained against convention, subverting the expected or traditional literary codes. I would suggest—along with most practitioners of gynocritics, I suppose—that women's writing in the nineteenth century had codes and conventions of its own. Comparison of narrative techniques at the middle of the century in realist novels written by men and women shows that certain narrative strategies dominate texts according to the writer's gender. The difference, described in the next chapter, between what I call the "distancing" strategies that dominate novels signed by men and the "engaging" strategies that dominate novels signed by women in the mid-nineteenth century is an example of one such instance of gendered writing.

The "tests" for my models of distancing and engaging interventions in Part II should show, however, that this study departs from gynocritics and moves toward gender theory in that I would not claim that engaging strategies are specific to women's texts, nor that distancing strategies occur exclusively in men's. Every realist novel of the nineteenth century contains some ironic narrative interventions that seek to distance the actual reader from the fiction, by addressing a narratee with whom the reader should be reluctant to identify or by drawing attention to the fictionality of the text; similarly, every realist novel of the period contains some passages of earnest interventions that attempt to engage the actual reader, to encourage him or her to take the narrative commentary seriously and to take the novel's story to heart. The difference between the novels written from 1845 to 1865 by the women writers in this study (Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Harriet Beecher Stowe) and those written by the men (William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Kingsley, Charles Dickens, and Anthony Trollope) is

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that engaging interventions dominate the women's texts and distancing interventions dominate the men's. When I say they dominate I mean that instances of one kind of strategy occur more frequently and in more rhetorically prominent positions than do instances of the other type of intervention. Although no novel is perfectly consistent in its strategies, the texts in this study use techniques of intervention that color the overall rhetorical effect of the novels and that are, for the most part, consistent with their author's stated theories of how the texts should operate. As I show in Part III, there are historical reasons why women and men in the mid-nineteenth century would use the discourse of realist fiction to differing ends. Whereas men had ample opportunity to exert serious, didactic influence over others, women had few forums in which they could publicly "say something"; the realist novel provided one of the few socially acceptable and effectual outlets for their reforming impulses.  

This is not to say that men's novels of the period are not earnestly didactic; they often are. Nor is it to claim that women's realist novels are never ironic or metafictional. My analysis of novels that don't fit the model of feminine-gendered engaging interventions and masculine-gendered distancing interventions shows how novelists could, if only momentarily, "cross dress," usually for specific rhetorical purposes. Up to now, reader-centered critical theory that focuses on gender has asked the question that Judith Fetterley so effectively raises in The Resisting Reader (1978): What happens if the reader of a text whose narratee is implicitly male happens to be a woman? Jonathan Culler, making the almost chivalrous gesture of treating this subject first (before deconstruction proper) in his On Deconstruction (1982), summarizes the work of several feminist theorists to extend that question a step further toward gender theory. Speaking as a male critic and following the examples of Showalter, Peggy Kamuf, Shoshana Felman, and Gayatri Spivak, he transposes the question into: What happens if the reader is reading as a woman?  

Gynocritics has been asking the corollary of Fetterley's question: What happens to a text when the writer is a woman? In analyzing the strategies in nineteenth-century texts, I want to follow the direction that Culler's approach implies. My question for the novels I study is: What happens to a text when the writer is writing as a woman? Although the question is not at all a strictly biographical one (since male writers borrowed feminine-gendered techniques, and vice versa), I consult authors' personal
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circumstances and historical contexts, as well as textual signs of the kinds of interventions they use, in considering the “situation of enunciation” that their texts reproduce. In this respect, what I am doing is not, strictly speaking, semiotics, which would inquire into textual codes exclusively as products of their textuality. I am trying instead to extend narratology’s usefulness to a more literally historical analysis of literature.

Feminist theory takes it for granted that everything a woman does, she does “as a woman”; gender distinctions, whether biologically or culturally imposed, color our experience so deeply as to take part in our every move. Many feminist critics have lamented the “immasculation” of such canonical writers as George Eliot, who seems so often to adopt a man’s writing to suit her man’s pseudonym. A phenomenon that is even closer to home is the immasculation of female scholars and critics who are trained to read as men (in the sense that Fetterley and Kolodny have described) and, of course, to write as men. When I was a graduate student in the late 1970s, I took a seminar called “Authorial Voice in Verse and Prose.” Gender’s relation to written “voice” was one of the professor’s interests, and he asked us one day to submit unsigned samples of our writing, specifying that the samples should represent what we considered to be our characteristic styles. Reading through the dozen or so samples, he felt he could determine the gender of only two or three writers. He was absolutely sure he could identify the gender of the person who wrote my sample. The ironic tone, the scrupulously correct punctuation, the parallel sentences, and the logical structure of my paragraphs convinced him the writer was male. I confess that I was proud to have fooled him: still in the grip of an androcentric attitude toward literature and scholarship, I was glad to be able to “pass.” But I realize today that when I choose to write an academic “man’s prose” in order to address a mainstream critical audience, I am imitating the gestures of George Eliot and Harriet Beecher Stowe (who sometimes borrowed masculine-gendered strategies in their fiction) and of Dickens and Trollope (who also sometimes borrowed feminine-gendered writing to suit their novelistic ends). Gender in writing strategies arises, I believe, from the writer’s making a series of rhetorical choices, whether or not those choices are consciously intentional.

Doubtless, the texts in this study contain material for other distinctions that could be drawn on the basis of gender. Narratological analysis on the level of story, for instance, might reveal gendered differences between
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treatments of relationships among characters, shapes of plot, or influence of ideology. I restrict my attention, however, to an examination of gendered interventions. I look at those moments in realist novels where (as Eliot put it in *Adam Bede*) "the Story Pauses a Little" while the narrator explicates, evaluates, or comments upon the materials of the text. The interventions that I see as being most clearly gendered are those in which the narrator establishes his or her attitude toward the reader, toward the characters, and toward the act of narration itself. My analysis of texts focuses upon the degree to which the narrators present themselves as distancing or engaging, and the ways that they play the two kinds of strategy off against each other in individual novels. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* has the definitively feminine-gendered engaging narrator; Charles Kingsley’s *Yeast* and William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* exemplify two extremes of the masculine, distancing approach. To reveal the interplay among strategies in texts by novelists who “cross dress,” I look at George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, both earnest, realistic novels whose narrators sometimes make moves to distance the actual reader from the fictional world, as well as Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* and Anthony Trollope’s *Can You Forgive Her?* two more self-consciously metaliterary novels that nevertheless rely, in certain rhetorical moments of crisis, on engaging techniques.

SOME REMARKS ON METHODOLOGY: DOING NARRATOLOGY TODAY

Pointing to narrators and declaring them distancing or engaging tends to look like a critical reversion to a period of theoretical innocence when we could accept binary oppositions without blinking. Indeed, the poststructuralist problematization of the subject raises many questions that a narratological study simply cannot address: Is it really possible for the scholar to stand outside a text, conducting critical operations on it that are unaffected by the operations the text conducts on the scholar herself? Can anything in a literary text transcend its textuality—is it possible for the fictive “you,” the narratee, to have any relation to an “actual reader”? Does an individual “reading subject” even exist, independent of the text? Can a critic ever propose oppositional labels for textual phenomena without dis-
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torting the text through the lens of ideological bias? Does the very act of finding binary categories in a text imply the imposition of a hierarchy? How can hierarchy be justifiable in literary study? Such questions could paralyze any narratologist who was to take them as central to all studies of literature.

The theory of distancing and engaging narrative strategies cannot refute the philosophical arguments that motivate such questions. But it can, I believe, provide one example for the reasons why these are not the only questions at the heart of every critical inquiry. Granted, if I claim to find differences among the rhetorical strategies in texts, what I am reporting are the results of one person's subjective/selective reading, as are the products of all literary criticism. But finding a textual difference and trying to account for it raises questions that interpretive reading strategies such as deconstruction or psychoanalysis do not often address. What, specifically, does the difference look like? Where is it to be found?—that is, in which texts? in what parts of those texts? How did it get there? A narratological approach that draws on contextual criticism can seek answers to these questions that refer more specifically to texts and to literary history than other approaches have so far allowed.

This is not to say that a narratological study must aspire to a "scientific" stance, as though untouched by poststructuralist inquiries. Like most specific applications of narratology, the theory of engaging and distancing strategies does not prescribe hard-and-fast categories into which narrators must discretely fit. On the contrary, the ground between the most extremely distancing narrator (perhaps Fielding's in Tom Jones) and the most engaging one (probably Gaskell's in Mary Barton) is not an empty space, but rather a spectrum of techniques. Like Seymour Chatman and Susan Sniader Lanser, I see the terms I am proposing as the extremities of a continuum that includes countless combinations of distancing and engaging strategies. In fact, the combinations occur within the oeuvre of each nineteenth-century novelist, within any single novel, and even in some instances within a single passage from one novel. I have constructed models to describe the features of the two extremes, and following the examples of the classical structuralists (for instance, Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Fernand Braudel) I play off individual examples against those models in my analysis of specific cases. The purpose is not so much to learn which novels fit the models and which do not, as it is to recognize the models'
limitations as well as their power to describe the functioning of individual
texts. Inevitably, I look at those texts through a subjective lens, but the
focus it provides reveals, I believe, genuine differences.

And those differences signify more than the authors' gender. As I
illustrate throughout the descriptions of the two models in the next chap­
ter, distancing techniques generally characterize metafiction and engaging
techniques occur in realism. Initially, I was surprised to realize (and almost
reluctant to admit) that the mid-nineteenth-century metafictional novels
relying on distancing strategies are most often written by men, and the
engaging, realist novels by women. It is already a critical commonplace to
think of the story in nineteenth-century women's fiction as typically be­
longing to the genre of realism, with its emphasis on domestic settings,
financial concerns, and psychological detail, but the reasons for women
novelists to wish to exploit realist discourse are less obvious.

"Realism" signifies various literary matters: depending on the context
in which the term is used, it is the dominant mode of Victorian fiction, a
philosophical stance, a critical construct, or a genre of fiction that seeks to
be representational by employing strategies of verisimilitude. Those strate­
gies may be functions (narratologically speaking) of story or of discourse.
The story in each of the seven novels in this study conforms to the generally
current definition of what realist fiction would contain. The move away
from realism and into metafiction that I see in distancing novels is mainly
located in the discourse of some of the novels. No nineteenth-century novel
in the canon is as explicitly metafictional in its discourse as Sterne's and
Diderot's were in the eighteenth, or John Barth's and Italo Calvino's are in
the twentieth century. Still, some Victorian novelists seem to have taken
more delight in playing at the boundaries of the fictional illusion than oth­
ers; not coincidentally, the more playful novelists of the period are the men.

If we were to think of metafiction as the more advanced form of novel
because of its resurgence in the postmodern period, we could easily assume
that the nineteenth-century female novelists' adherence to earnest, serious
realism betrays a naive literary conservatism on the women's part. But self­
conscious self-reference in fiction that is explicitly "about" fiction, and that
draws attention to its own structures of artifice, is as venerable a tradition
as the English novel itself. No twentieth-century narrator could pay more
attention to the fiction's frame than Fielding, with his elaborate arrange­
ment of *Tom Jones* into "Books," each containing a prefatory essay that
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discusses the protocol for writing and reading the comic-epic-poem-in-prose. Part of what made the form "epic" in the first place was the distance Fielding's narrative establishes between the narrator, the narratee, and the fictional material. Metafiction is nothing new, and even if it were, one could hardly defend privileging more "modern" fictional techniques over traditional ones: it makes more sense simply to examine literary forms within their own historical contexts. The women novelists of the mid-nineteenth century in England and America strove for a heightened realism in their novels, not because of a straitened imagination or a conventionally limited vocabulary of techniques, but rather (as I argue in chapter 7) because the novel was their one public opportunity to exert some political or moral influence on the "real world."

Discriminating among male and female writers is, at best, a risky business for any critic who seeks to base a theory on textual evidence, rather than arguing from essentialist principles of gender difference. Selecting and analyzing a corpus of works becomes a problem for the literary historian interested in narratology, through difficulties that do not arise for theorists of essential difference. Proponents of "écriture féminine" like Monique Wittig or Hélène Cixous are not troubled by any necessity to find examples of women's writing that illustrate their theories—they simply generate original texts that exemplify what they are talking about. Supporting arguments about gendered differences in literary history is simultaneously simpler and more problematic than what the new French feminists do: simpler, in that discussing differences within a historical context obviates the necessity of making universal claims about essential differences between the sexes; more problematic, in that the potential samples for analysis exist in daunting numbers and at prohibitive length.

In choosing texts for analysis, I face only obliquely the problem of whether my theory of gendered differences in writing strategy is "generalizable": my conclusions about engaging and distancing uses of direct address, and their relation to gender in writing, are strictly limited—as is my corpus—to novels written in England and America at mid-century. Some colleagues, more statistically inclined than I, have suggested that I might strengthen this study's claims by using a computer to scan hundreds of novels looking for the word you outside of quotation marks (and therefore occurring in interventions, rather than dialogue), or by randomly sampling pages from dozens of texts and reading for instances of intervention a
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computer could not recognize. Such an approach might determine that a phenomenon existed, but it could not begin to account for how direct address functions in individual texts, how distancing and engaging strategies strain and play off against each other within a novel, or how they got there in the first place. I have therefore limited myself to the number of novels I could analyze without a computer's assistance, and have chosen a sample that represents the range of possibilities I perceive.

The questions that motivate this project are not How do women write? or How do men write? but rather, What are the conventions of narrative discourse in nineteenth-century realist fiction? In what respects do realist novels, seen through the lens of narratology, depart from conventional critical notions about their techniques? Why has the engaging narrator been omitted from the formalist, narratological, and phenomenological models of fiction? Can it be a coincidence that the few canonized novels relying on engaging strategies (that is, Gaskell's, Eliot's, and—more recently included in the canon—Stowe's) are written by women?

To this last question, my answer is obviously no. I focus here on male- and female-written novels that are concerned with some kind of political, moral, or social reform. Having didactic goals in common, the novels might be assumed to share techniques as well: the fact that their strategies diverge is evidence of a gendered difference reflecting the relative positions of mid-nineteenth-century men and women in public life. My ultimate goal is not only to point to this gendered difference in writing strategies but also to expose the gender bias in literary theories that have overlooked the engaging narrator as a convention central to realist fiction. As I "do narratology" toward that end, my question to feminists is: Why don't we?