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# TOWARD A FEMINIST NARRATOLOGY

(1986)

Spch Acts (6/17)

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What you choose and reject theoretically, then, depends upon what you are practically trying to do. This has always been the case with literary criticism: it is simply that it is often very reluctant to realize the fact. In any academic study we select the objects and methods of procedure which we believe the most important, and our assessment of their importance is governed by frames of interest deeply rooted in our practical forms of social life. Radical critics are no different in this respect: it is just that they have a set of social priorities with which most people at present tend to disagree. This is why they are commonly dismissed as 'ideological,' because 'ideology' is always a way of describing other people's interests rather than one's own.

TERRY EAGLETON (211)

Feminist criticism, like narratology and all good theories perhaps, is an optimistic enterprise, eager to account for the whole of its relevant universe. For nearly two decades it has not only offered new ways of seeing a vast range of texts by both women and men, in virtually every genre and language; it has also scrutinized the assumptions, theories, and methods of literary scholarship, from biography and history to deconstruction and psychoanalysis, from archetypal criticism to reader response. Yet in the sometimes sharp debates both within feminist criticism (especially between "American" and "French" approaches) and between feminism and other critical modes, structuralist-formalist methods have been virtually untouched. In consequence, narratology has had little impact on feminist scholarship, and feminist insights about narrative have been similarly overlooked by narratology. The title of this essay may therefore seem startling, as if I am trying to force an intersection of two lines drawn on different planes: the one scientific, descriptive, and non-ideological, the other impressionistic, evaluative, and political (a false opposition that I hope my opening epigraph helps to dissolve).

Although feminism and narratology cannot really be said to have a history, there have been a few gestures of synthesis. While narratological studies are absent from nearly all of the otherwise eclectic and wide-ranging collections of feminist approaches to literature, the excellent volume *Women and Language in*

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*Literature and Society* (1980) does incorporate essays of structuralist bent.<sup>2</sup> The only direct efforts to link feminism and narratology of which I am aware are Mária Minich Brewer's critique of narratology in "A Loosening of Tongues," Mieke Bal's application of it in "Sexuality, Symbiosis and Binarism" and the recent *Femmes imaginaires*<sup>3</sup> my own attempt to forge a feminist poetics of point of view in *The Narrative Act*; and the very recent essay of Robyn Warhol.<sup>4</sup> Even feminist critics who acknowledge considerable debt to their formalist or structuralist training have sharply criticized its limitations. Naomi Schor vows that she could not practice feminist criticism at all in the "subtle oppression exercised [in American departments of French] by structuralism at its least self-critical and doctrinaire" (ix); Josephine Donovan, speaking from an Anglo-American perspective, rejects "the dissection of literature as if it were an aesthetic machine made up of paradoxes, images, symbols, etc., as so many nuts and bolts easily disintegrated from the whole" ("Women's Poetics" 108).<sup>5</sup> It would be safe, I think, to say that no contemporary theory, whether Anglo-American or continental, has exerted so little influence on feminist criticism or been so summarily dismissed as formalist-structuralist narratology.

In part, of course, this coolness toward narratology—both the practice and the word<sup>6</sup>—is characteristic of the profession as a whole. At the end of her excellent book on narrative poetics, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan feels compelled to ask whether she has written "an introduction . . . or an obituary" to the field (130). Terry Eagleton uses even stronger death imagery when he likens structuralism to "killing a person in order to examine more conveniently the circulation of the blood" (109). To psychoanalytic critics like Peter Brooks, a formalist narratology, however valuable, cannot grasp "our experience of reading narrative as a dynamic operation" (316).<sup>7</sup> And there is perhaps no surer barometer of professional sentiment than David Lodge's brilliant satire, *Small World*, in which Morris Zapp says of a Sorbonne narratologist, "Hasn't his moment passed? I mean, ten years ago everybody was into that stuff, actants and functions and mythemes and all that jazz. But now . . ." (134). Those Anglo-American scholars who were never comfortable with structuralism in general or narratology in particular have probably been relieved at its decline, while most critics grounded in Continental thinking have moved on to post-structuralist theories that offer an exhilarating openness against which narratology may seem mechanical, empirical, hardly conducive to the *plaisir du texte*.

Given a literary climate at best indifferent to narratology, my desire to explore the compatibility of feminism and narratology is also a way to think about what narratology can and cannot do, what place it might have in the contemporary critical environment of American departments of literature, and how it might enrich the hermeneutical enterprise for critics who are not themselves theorists of narrative. My immediate task, however, will be more circumscribed: to ask whether feminist criticism, and particularly the study of narratives by women, might benefit from the methods and insights of narratology and whether narratology, in turn, might be altered by the understandings of feminist criticism and the experience of women's texts. It is in the frank desire to say yes to both these questions that this essay has been conceived. It is in the supposition that the readers of this journal are more involved with narratology than with feminism that my emphasis will be on the second question rather than the first.

There are compelling reasons why feminism (or any explicitly political criticism) and narratology (or any largely formal poetics) might seem incompatible. The technical, often neologicistic, vocabulary of narratology has alienated critics of many persuasions and may seem particularly counterproductive to critics with political concerns. Feminists also tend to be distrustful of categories and oppositions of "a conceptual universe organized into the neat paradigms of binary logic" (Schor ix)<sup>2</sup>—a distrust which explains part of the attraction of feminist theory to Derridean deconstruction. But there are (at least) three more crucial issues about which feminism and narratology might differ: the role of gender in the construction of narrative theory, the status of narrative as mimesis or semi-osis, and the importance of context for determining meaning in narrative.

The most obvious question feminism would ask of narratology is simply this: upon what body of texts, upon what understandings of the narrative and referential universe, have the insights of narratology been based? It is readily apparent that virtually no work in the field of narratology has taken gender into account, either in designating a canon or in formulating questions and hypotheses. This means, first of all, that the narratives which have provided the foundation for narratology have been either men's texts or texts treated as men's texts. Genette's formulation of a "Discours du récit" on the basis of Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, Propp's androcentric morphology of a certain kind of folktale, Greimas on Maupassant, Iser on male novelists from Bunyan to Beckett, Barthes on Balzac, Todorov on the *Decameron*—these are but evident examples of the ways in which the masculine text stands for the universal text. In the structuralist quest for "invariant elements among superficial differences" (Lévi-Strauss 8), for (so-called) universals rather than particulars, narratology has avoided questions of gender almost entirely. This is particularly problematic for those feminist critics—in this country, the majority—whose main interest is the "difference or specificity of women's writing" (Showalter, "Women's Time" 38). The recognition of this specificity has led not only to the rereading of individual texts but to the rewriting of literary history; I am suggesting that it also lead to a rewriting of narratology that takes into account the contributions of women as both producers and interpreters of texts.

This challenge does not deny the enormous value of a body of brilliant narrative theory for the study of women's works; indeed, it has been applied fruitfully to such writers as Colette (Bal, "The Narrating and the Focalizing") and Eliot (Costello) and is crucial to my own studies of narrative voice in women's texts. It does mean that until women's writings, questions of gender, and feminist points of view are considered, it will be impossible even to know the deficiencies of narratology. It seems to me likely that the most abstract and grammatical concepts (say, theories of time) will prove to be adequate. On the other hand, as I will argue later in this essay, theories of plot and story may need to change substantially. And I would predict that the major impact of feminism on narratology will be to raise new questions, to add to the narratological distinctions that already exist, as I will be suggesting below in my discussions of narrative level, context, and voice.

A narratology for feminist criticism would also have to reconcile the primarily semiotic approach of narratology with the primarily mimetic orientation of most (Anglo-American) feminist thinking about narrative. This difference reminds us that "literature is at the juncture of two systems"; one can speak about it as

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(Furman 64-65)

Traditionally, structuralist narratology has suppressed the representational aspects of fiction and emphasized the semiotic, while feminist criticism has done the opposite. Feminist critics tend to be more concerned with characters than with any other aspect of narrative and to speak of characters largely as if they were persons. Most narratologists, in contrast, treat characters, if at all, as "patterns of recurrence, motifs which are continually recontextualized in other motifs"; as such, they "lose their privilege, their central status, and their definition" (Weinsheimer 195). This conception could seem to threaten one of feminist criticism's deepest premises: that narrative texts, and particularly texts in the novelistic tradition, are profoundly (if never simply) referential—and influential—in their representations of gender relations. The challenge to both feminism and narratology is to recognize the dual nature of narrative, to find categories and terms that are abstract and semiotic enough to be useful, but concrete and mimetic enough to seem relevant for critics whose theories root literature in "the real conditions of our lives" (Newton 125). System

The tendency to pure semiosis is both cause and effect of a more general tendency in narratology to isolate texts from the context of their production and reception and hence from what "political" critics think of as literature's ground of being—the "real world." This is partly a result of narratology's desire for a precise, scientific description of discourse, for many of the questions concerning the relationship of literature to the "real world"—questions of why, so what, to what effect—are admittedly speculative. Thus "when narratology does attempt to account for the contextual, it does so in terms of narrative conventions and codes. Yet their capacity to account for social, historical, or contextual differences always remains limited by the original formalist closure within which such codes and conventions are defined" (Brewer 1143). This is why early in the history of formalism, critics like Medvedev and Bakhtin called for a "sociological poetics" that would be dialectically theoretical and historical: "Poetics provides literary history with direction in the specification of the research material and the basic definitions of its forms and types. Literary history amends the definitions of poetics, making them more flexible, dynamic, and adequate to the diversity of the historical material" (30). My insistence on writing women's texts into the historical canon of narratology has precisely this aim of making it more adequate to the diversity of narrative.

Finally, feminist criticism would argue that narratology itself is ideological, indeed in an important sense fictional. One need not agree wholeheartedly with Stanley Fish that "formal units are always a function of the interpretive model one brings to bear (they are not 'in the text')" (13), to recognize that no inter-

goal

pretive system is definitive or inevitable. But as Fish also reminds us, every theory must believe itself the best theory possible (361). Formalist-structuralist narratology may "know" that its categories are not immanent, but it proceeds as if there were "a stable and immediately knowable text, directly available to classificatory operations that are themselves neutral and innocent of interpretive bias" (Chambers 18-19). Feminist criticism has simply not had this luxury: in its critique of masculine bias, it has of necessity taken the view that theory sometimes says more about the reader than about the text.

A narratology for feminist criticism would begin, then, with the recognition that revision of a theory's premises and practices is legitimate and desirable. It would probably be cautious in its construction of systems and favor flexible categories over fixed sets. It would scrutinize its norms to be sure of what they are normative. It would be willing to look afresh at the question of gender and to reform its theories on the basis of women's texts, as Robyn Warhol's essay on the "engaging narrator," just published in *PMLA*, begins to do. In both its concepts and its terminology, it would reflect the mimetic as well as the semiotic experience that is the reading of literature, and it would study narrative in relation to a referential context that is simultaneously linguistic, literary, historical, biographical, social, and political. Granted, narratology might have to be willing to cede some precision and simplicity for the sake of relevance and accessibility, to develop terminology less confusing, say, than a series like analepsis, prolepsis, paralepsis, and metalepsis. The valuable and impressive work that has been done in the field would be opened to a critique and supplement in which feminist questions were understood to contribute to a richer, more useful, and more complete narratology. For as I have been trying to suggest, a narratology that cannot adequately account for women's narratives is an inadequate narratology for men's texts as well.

A re-formed narratology should be of particular interest to feminist critics because fiction is the dominant genre in the study of women and literature. The necessarily semiotic nature of even a revised narratology will help to balance feminist criticism's necessarily mimetic commitments. The comprehensiveness and care with which narratology makes distinctions can provide invaluable methods for textual analysis. As Mieke Bal argues, "The use of formally adequate and precise tools is not interesting in itself, but it can clarify other, very relevant issues and provides insights which otherwise remain vague" ("Sexuality" 121). Narratology and feminist criticism might profitably join forces, for example, to explore the teleological aspects of narrative, which have concerned narratologists like Ann Jefferson and Marianna Torgovnick and feminist critics like Rachel Blau DuPlessis. I can imagine a rich dialogue between Armine Mortimer Kotin's and Nancy K. Miller's analyses of the plot of *La Princesse de Clèves*. And a major benefit of narratology is that it offers a relatively independent (pre-textual) framework for studying groups of texts. It could, for example, provide a particularly valuable foundation for exploring one of the most complex and troubling questions for feminist criticism: whether there is indeed a "woman's writing" and/or a female tradition, whether men and women do write differently. For given the volatile nature of the question, the precision and abstraction of narratological systems offers the safety for investigation that more impressionistic theories of difference do not. This kind of research would demonstrate the particular responsiveness of

narratology to certain problems for which other theories have not been adequate and hence illustrate its unique value for feminist scholarship.

I would like to begin the movement toward a feminist narratology by identifying some of the questions a feminist reading might raise for narratology. I will emphasize here not so much the fruitful applications which narratology could currently offer but the questions that it does not yet seem to have addressed. I have chosen, instead of a typical piece of fiction, a far more anomalous work because it presents many complexities in a short space of text and allows me to examine several aspects of women's writing and writing in general. The text is a letter, allegedly written by a young bride whose husband censored her correspondence. It appeared in *Atkinson's Casket* in April 1832, sandwiched between a discussion of angels and directions for "calisthenic exercises."<sup>10</sup> No indication is given of the letter's source, authenticity, or authorship. I am assuming, but cannot be certain, that it is apocryphal; I make no assumptions about the author's sex. Here is the text as it appears in the *Casket*:

FEMALE INGENUITY

*Secret Correspondence*.—A young Lady, newly married, being obliged to show her husband, all the letters she wrote, sent the following to an intimate friend.

I cannot be satisfied, my Dearest Friend! blest as I am in the matrimonial state, unless I pour into your friendly bosom, which has ever been in unison with mine, the various deep sensations which swell with the liveliest emotions of pleasure my almost bursting heart. I tell you my dear husband is one of the most amiable of men, I have been married seven weeks, and have never found the least reason to repent the day that joined us, my husband is in person and manners far from resembling ugly, crass, old, disagreeable, and jealous monsters, who think by confining to secure; a wife, it is his maxim to treat as a bosom-friend and confidant, and not as a plaything or menial slave, the woman chosen to be his companion. Neither party he says ought to obey implicitly;—but each yield to the other by turns—An ancient maiden aunt, near seventy, a cheerful, venerable, and pleasant old lady, lives in the house with us—she is the delight of both young and old—she is civil to all the neighborhood round, generous and charitable to the poor— I know my husband loves nothing more

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than he does me; he flatters me more than the glass, and his intoxication (for so I must call the excess of his love) often makes me blush for the unworthiness of its object, and I wish I could be more deserving of the man whose name I bear. To say all in one word, my dear, and to crown the whole, my former gallant lover is now my indulgent husband, my fondness is returned, and I might have had a Prince, without the felicity I find with him. Adieu! May you be as blest as I am unable to wish that I could be more happy.

N. B.—The key to the above letter, is to read the first and then every alternate line.

For purposes of easy reference, I reproduce below the decoded subtext that this reading of alternate lines will yield:

I cannot be satisfied, my Dearest Friend! unless I pour into your friendly bosom, the various deep sensations which swell my almost bursting heart. I tell you my dear I have been married seven weeks, and repent the day that joined us, my husband is ugly, crass, old, disagreeable, and jealous[;] a wife, it is his maxim to treat as a plaything or menial slave, the woman he says ought to obey implicitly;— An ancient maiden aunt, near seventy, lives in the house with us—she is the devil to all the neighborhood round. I know my husband loves nothing more than the glass, and his intoxication often makes me blush for the unworthiness of the man whose name I bear. To crown the whole, my former gallant lover is returned, and I might have had him. Adieu! May you be as blest as I am unhappy.

Written for two readers (the prying husband and the intimate friend) this letter is in an unusually obvious sense a double construction, a blatant specimen of writing over and under censorship. The surface text and subtext are strikingly different both in story and narration, and a narrative theory adequate for describing the whole will have to account for both and for the narrative frame that binds them. In particular, such a text raises for discussion questions about narrative voice, narrative situation, and plot.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between the letters, apart from their contrasting stories, is the difference between the two voices. Some linguists have

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argued that there is a "woman's language" or a discourse of the powerless: "speech that is "polite, emotional, enthusiastic, gossipy, talkative, uncertain, dull, and chatty" in contrast to men's speech or powerful speech, which is "capable, direct, rational, illustrating a sense of humor, unfeeling, strong (in tone and word choice) and blunt" (Kramarac 58). The two letters illustrate many of the differences between these two modes of speech. The surface text is virtually a sampler of "women's language": its self-effacing narrator praises the "more deserving" husband and blushes for her own "unworthiness"; her "liveliest emotions" generate a discourse of repetition, hyperbole, convolution, and grammatical anomaly. It is the voice of one who clearly cannot "say all in one word," who can assert herself only in empty phrases and a syntax of negativity. The voice of the subtext is, by contrast, strikingly simple and direct, in the kind of language that commands (an all-too-ready) authority.<sup>12</sup> This second narrator shows herself angry, strong, decisive, sure of her judgments, acutely aware of her husband's deficiencies and of her own lost opportunities. Her speech acts—"I repent," "I know," "she is the devil," "I am unhappy"—are acts of conviction; such a voice requires enormous confidence and would probably be accorded an immediate credibility. Beneath the "feminine" voice of self-effacement and emotionality, then, lies the "masculine" voice of authority that the writer cannot inscribe openly. The subtext also exposes the surface text, and hence the surface voice, as a subterfuge, revealing the "feminine style" to be a caricature donned to mask a surer voice in the process of communicating to a woman under the watchful eyes of a man. But this also means that the powerless form called "women's language" is revealed as a potentially subversive—hence powerful—tool.

In *The Narrative Act* I called for a poetics that would go beyond formal classifications in order to describe the subtle but crucial differences between voices like these. For in structural terms the two voices are similar: both are first-person/protagonist (autodiegetic) narrators (though they are addressing different narratees). Most of the qualities that distinguish the two voices have yet to be codified by narratology. One might ask, for example, what kinds of illocutionary acts the narrator undertakes and whether she undertakes them in a discourse of "presence" or "absence," if we take "absence" to encompass such practices as "irony, ellipsis, euphemism, litotes, periphrasis, reticence, pretermission, digression, and so forth" (Hamon 99). This question, in turn, might lead to a (much-needed) theory that would define and describe tone in narrative. Tone might be conceived at least in part as a function of the relationship between the deep and superficial structures of an illocutionary act (e.g., the relationship between an act of judgment and the language in which the judgment is expressed).

This double text recalls an even sharper lesson about narrative voice, the lesson formulated by Bakhtin: that in narrative there is no single voice, that in far subtler situations than this one, voice impinges upon voice, yielding a structure in which discourses of and for the other constitute the discourses of self; that, to go as far as Wayne Booth does, "We are constituted in polyphony" (51). The blatant heteroglossia of this letter—and I shall suggest below that it is even more layered than at first appears—is but a sharper version of the polyphony of all voice and, certainly in visible ways, of the female voices in many women's narratives. For the condition of being woman in a male-dominant society may well

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Bakhtin

necessitate the double voice, whether as conscious subterfuge or as tragic dis-possession of the self. Thus in a text like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator speaks her desires underneath a discourse constructed for her by her husband John; in Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers" two women protect a third from a conviction for murder by communicating in "women's language" under the watchful but unseeing eyes of the Law; in novel after novel Jane Austen constitutes a narrative voice that cannot be pinned down, that can be read according to one's own desires; a novel like Marge Piercy's *Small Changes* builds a double structure through which both its author and its protagonist work out the necessity of living in a world of double discourse (Hansen). A narratology adequate to women's texts (and hence to all texts, though polyphony is more pronounced and more consequential in women's narratives and in the narratives of other dominated peoples) would have to acknowledge and account for this polyphony of voice, identifying and disentangling its strands, as recent studies by Graciela Reyes and Michael O'Neal begin to do.

If we return with this understanding of voice to the double-text letter, it is easy to identify those verbal features that distinguish one from the other by examining the forms of "excess" that were pared away in the decoding process. The first and less significant is a combination of repetition and hyperbole that serves as "filler," yielding phrases like "which has ever been in unison with mine" and "with the liveliest emotions of pleasure." The second is more important, for it creates the syntactic hinge that binds and finally transforms the whole: a series of negations that the subtext will reverse:

I . . . have never found the least reason to repent my husband is . . . far from resembling . . . monsters a wife, it is his maxim to treat . . . not as a plaything Neither party, he says ought to obey implicitly I am unable to wish that I could be more happy—

This negativity is more than the link between two texts; it is the means by which the two letters finally yield a third: a story, a third voice, a third audience. For the negativity makes of the surface text not one narrator's simple proclamation of happiness but the indictment of an entire social system. What indeed, does the surface paint but the very portrait of marriage that it claims to erase? Each negative statement suggests departure from a social norm, a norm in which brides repent their marriages, husbands are monstrous, women are treated as playthings or slaves, and women's desires are unthinkable. In other words, the surface text, by saying what one particular marriage is not, shows the terrible contours of what its narrator expected marriage to be. While the subtext condemns one man and laments one woman's fate, the surface letter condemns an entire society, presenting as typical the conditions which the subtext implies to be individual. The subtext, then, becomes an instance of the surface text rather than its antithesis; the two versions reveal not opposing but related truths. It is fitting, then, that they meet at their point of dissatisfaction, at the single line—the first—that does not change: "I cannot be satisfied, my dearest Friend!"

In the light of this reading, women's language becomes not simply a vehicle for constructing a more legitimate (masculine, powerful) voice but the voice

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through which the more global judgment of patriarchal practices is exercised. This text differs from the "palimpsestic" discourse feminist criticism frequently describes in which "surface designs" act simply as a cover to "conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning" (Gilbert and Gubar 73). Here the "surface design" turns out to be a more damning discourse than the text it purports to protect. The text designed for the husband conceals an undertext (the text designed for the confidante), but the undertext, in turn, creates a new reading of the surface text and hence a third text designed, I would argue, for yet another addressee. This third text is the one constituted by the public "display-text" that is the letter as it appeared in *Atkinson's Casket*. Its addressee is the literary reader; she is neither the duped male nor the sister-confidante but the unidentified public narratee of either sex who can see beyond the immediate context of the writer's epistolary circumstance to read the negative discourse as covert cultural analysis. Thus the literary context of this text provides a third and entirely different reading from the readings yielded to the private audiences of husband and friend. At the same time, it is the knowledge of the other two texts, the access to the private texts, that opens the third reading, in a version, perhaps, of what Genette calls *hypertextualité* (*Palimpsestes* 11).

The fact that this letter has several narratees suggests the importance of recognizing the narrative levels a text may contain. Gérard Genette has made an extremely important contribution to narratology in distinguishing the multiple diegetic levels possible in a single text because one narrative may enclose or generate another (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 227-37; *Nouveau Discours* 55-64). Genette speaks of the outermost level as the *extradiegetic*, of a narrative incorporated within this one as *intradiegetic*, and of a third narrative level as *metadiegetic*. Extradiegetic narrators, says Genette, are usually "author-narrators"—Jane Eyre, George Eliot's "third person" voice—and "as such they occupy the same narrative level as their public—that is, as you and me" (*Narrative Discourse* 229). But as Genette also makes clear, there is no necessary connection between extradiegetic narration and a public audience; letter-writers and diarists (Pamela, Werther) may also be extradiegetic narrators. Intra-diegetic (and metadiegetic) narrators—Rochester when he is telling Jane Eyre the story of Bertha Mason, the characters in *Middlemarch*—are conventionally able to address only narratees inscribed within the text. In *Frankenstein* Walton's letters to his sister constitute an extradiegetic narrative; Frankenstein's story, told to Walton, is intradiegetic, and the monster's history, narrated to Frankenstein and enclosed within the tale he tells Walton, is metadiegetic. Genette's notion of levels provides a precise way of speaking about such embedded narratives and identifying their narratees—and for describing transgressions across narrative levels (called *metalepses*) like those Diderot's narrator commits in *Jacques le fataliste*.

But Genette himself recognizes that narrative level has been made too much of, and that indeed it does not take us very far. In the *Nouveau Discours* he makes clear just how relative the distinction of levels is by generating an imaginary scene in which three men sit down, one offers to tell the others a story which he warns will be long, and the storyteller begins, "For a long time I used to go to bed early . . ." (64). With a frame of only a sentence, says Genette, the entirety of Proust's *A la Recherche* suddenly becomes an intradiegetic narration. If we look at the letter in terms of Genette's levels, we could identify as either an

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extradiegetic narrator or simply as an editor the voice that presents the letter as a specimen of "Female Ingenuity" and explains both its context and its secret code to the readers of *Atkinson's Casket*.<sup>14</sup> The diegetic level of the letter is then contingent on this initial decision. And both the surface letter and the subtext, being interlinear, exist on the same level, in an unusual case of double diegesis. Genette's notion of levels does not allow us to say much about the narrative situation of this letter because it applies only to internal relations among parts of a text. It does not describe any individual narrative act *per se*, and it closes off the text from considerations external and contextual.

To provide a more complete analysis of narrative level, I would propose as a complement to Genette's system a distinction between public and private narration. By public narration I mean simply narration (implicitly or explicitly) addressed to a narratee who is external (that is, heterodiegetic)<sup>15</sup> to the textual world and who can be equated with a public readership; private narration, in contrast, is addressed to an explicitly designated narratee who exists only within the textual world. Public narration evokes a direct relationship between the reader and the narratee and clearly approximates most closely the nonfictional author-reader relationship, while in private narration the reader's access is indirect, as it were "through" the figure of a textual persona. Such a distinction, combined with Genette's notions of both level and person, would yield the typology shown on the facing page.

I propose this notion of public and private narrative levels as an additional category particularly relevant to the study of women's texts. For women writers, as feminist criticism has long noted, the distinction between private and public contexts is a crucial and a complicated one. Traditionally speaking, the sanctions against women's writing have taken the form not of prohibitions to write at all but of prohibitions to write for a public audience. As Virginia Woolf comments, "Letters did not count": letters were private and did not disturb a male discursive hegemony. Dale Spender takes the distinctions even further, arguing that the notions of public and private concern not only the general context of textual production but its gender context as well: that is, writing publicly becomes synonymous with writing for and to men. Spender comments:

The dichotomy of male/female, public/private is maintained by permitting women to write . . . for themselves (for example, diaries) and for each other in the form of letters, 'accomplished' pieces, moral treatises, articles of interest for other women—particularly in the domestic area—and even novels for women. . . . There is no contradiction in patriarchal order while women write for women and therefore remain within the limits of the private sphere; the contradiction arises only when women write for men. (192)

The bride's letter both illustrates Spender's formulation and expands it in important ways. The only public level of narration here is the narration that presents the letter in the *Casket* as the "display" of a correspondence. In relation to this level, the letter itself is a private text, designed for a private readership. Yet the surface letter is intended by its narrator to be an eminently public text in relation to the subtext, which is the private text she urgently hopes will *not* be available to the "public" who is her husband. In terms of the I-narrator's intentions, the

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Public vs. private narr.

chart

LEVEL	PERSON	PUBLIC	PRIVATE
extra-diegetic	heterodiegetic (third-person)	narration of <i>Emma</i> or <i>Middlemarch</i>	moments of "metalepse" in <i>Jacques le fataliste</i> when narrator consorts with his characters
	homodiegetic (first-person)	Jane Eyre's narration	letters of Walton or Werther
intradiegetic or metadiegetic	heterodiegetic (third-person)	?	tales of the <i>Heptameron</i> or <i>Scheherazade</i>
	homodiegetic (first-person)	the "found" memoir of Lionel Verney in Mary Shelley's <i>The Last Man</i> or Pirandello's <i>Six Characters</i>	narratives of Frankenstein and the Monster

"public" text is indeed designed for the man, the private (indeed secret) text for the female friend. One must already, then, redefine the simple distinction of public and private to create a category in which a narration is private but is designed to be read as well by someone other than its officially designated narratee;<sup>16</sup> I will call this a semi-private narrative act. To the extent that the surface letter is in some sense public, it dramatizes the way in which women's public discourse may be contaminated by internal or external censorship. This, in turn, helps to explain why historically women writers have chosen, more frequently than men, private forms of narration—the letter, the diary, the memoir addressed to a single individual—rather than forms that require them to address a public readership, and why public and private narratives by women employ different narrative strategies.<sup>17</sup> The concept could also be applied fruitfully to texts in which the narrative level is unclear, as in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Craik's *A Life for a Life*, which seem to implicate a public narratee while purporting to write a private diary.

The application of the distinction public/private to literary texts requires us to think in more complex ways about the dichotomy of gender that Spender attaches to private and public discourse. Here again the letter is illustrative. For if my analysis is persuasive in suggesting the existence of a third text available only to one who has read both the second and the first, and read in the light of a particular understanding both of women and of textuality, then the public text—that is, the one which is directed by the extradiegetic narrator or editor to "anyone"—is also the most hidden text, the hardest to see, for nothing really points

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to its existence except itself, and it requires a reader who brings to it particular kinds of knowledge. Since it is at the public level of narration that the ideal reading becomes possible, the letter *presented as a display text* also *escapes* the gender associations of the original structure of the intradiegetic narrative (in which it seems that public = male and private = female), suggesting a kind of paradigm for reading "as a woman" that encompasses but is not determined by the question of sex. Equally, when women write novels that use private narrative forms, they are nonetheless writing for a public, and a public that cannot entirely be dichotomized in gender terms. How individual writers negotiate this complex context of gender and public-ity constitutes another important area to investigate.

The difference between Genette's formulation of narrative levels and my own illustrates, I hope, the difference between purely formal and contextual approaches to meaning in narrative. Just as speech act theory understood that the minimal unit of discourse was not the sentence but the *production* of the sentence in a specific context, so the kind of narratology I am proposing would understand that the minimal narrative is the narrative as produced. In the case of the letter that appears in the *Casket*, questions of context are closely related to interpretive possibilities. For depending on whether one sees the letter as a historical document or as a text written deliberately for display—and whether, if "display text," an imitation or a parody—different readings of the letter emerge. If the text is an authentic document, a letter actually written by an unhappy wife that somehow came into the hands of the *Casket*, then the text might become important historical evidence of the ways in which women's writing is conditioned by censorship. If the text were constructed as imitation, it stands as evidence of the perception, if not the historical fact, of censorship. But the letter may well have been intended as a parody of the "female style." Indeed, the history of this style, and its connection to the epistolary, provides the context for an interesting possibility. Historically, the letter has such overdetermined associations with women that what became thought of as the "female style," a style acclaimed for its artlessness, its sense of immediacy and lack of forethought, was a style tied to the epistolary mode (Donovan, "The Silence is Broken" 212–14). If the letter is in fact a "display text," it may well be a display of "female ingenuity" not only in the obvious sense of a clever composition that finds a "woman's way" around censorship, but in the service of a broader and literary design: to make mockery of the assumptions about women's "artless" epistolary style, to reveal woman as man's equal in intellectual capacity. For "ingenuity," the *OED* tells us, means not only the (oxymoronic) union of straightforward openness with the genius for skillful, inventive design but also the quality or condition of being a free-born man. And if the letter was written by its own editor, it also provided a convenient and safe vehicle for criticizing male dominance, since an editor need take no responsibility for a private "found" text.

The rhetorical complexity of the letter reminds us that narrative meaning is also a function of narrative circumstance. Narratology has not yet provided satisfying language through which to make distinctions of rhetorical context;<sup>18</sup> feminist criticism, in its concern with questions of authenticity and authorship, might find it difficult even to talk about a text this uncertain in origin. A feminist narratology might acknowledge the existence of multiple texts, each constructed by

a (potential) rhetorical circumstance. To the extent that such questions determine the very *meaning* of narrative, they are questions for narratology.

The final element of my discussion of difference between the bride's two letters—the question of story or plot—I will treat only sketchily here, for it lies outside my area of expertise. In traditional terms, the surface text—the one written for the husband—can barely be said to have a plot, and one might of course argue that it is not a narrative at all. There is not a singular verb tense in the text; every independent predication is cast in the stative or iterative mode. All the action that the text implies, hence all there is of story, precedes the narrative moment; by the time of the writing all conflict—the gap between expectations and reality—has already been resolved (and not by the protagonist's actions at all). Notions of both plot and character are strained by such a structure in which the *(actant)* is really a recipient, in which nothing whatever is predicted of which the fulfillment would constitute plot as it is narratologically defined. And although one could also see this stasis as the basis for a plot left to the reader's imagination, to the extent that plot is a function of modalized predication and hence of desire (Costello, Brooks), the surface text refuses even the possibility of plot: "I am *unable to wish* that I could be more happy."

Thus the first text creates stasis of both event and character, an idyll of harmony in which the "indulgent husband," as "bosom friend," is a synthesis of the confidante with her "friendly bosom" and the "gallant lover": all characters but the protagonist coalesce into one idealized whole. But the subtext does offer the elements of a possible plot. Here we have a full-blown triangle—husband, lover, wife—in which the necessity for a confidante becomes logical. The plot of this subtext is actually highly conventional: drunken husband, sinister maiden aunt,<sup>19</sup> gallant suitor in the wings. But here too the expectations for story, though more fully roused, are shunted aside. While there is one singular event—"my former gallant lover is returned"—the narrator says, "I *might have had him*," suggesting that there is no real possibility of change.

Can one speak narratologically of plot or even story in these two letters, or is one condemned simply to negative definitions—plotlessness, or story without plot? Narratology is rich in its efforts to pin down the nature of plot. The formulations of Propp, Bremond, Todorov, Costello, Pavel, Prince, all offer useful ways to talk about large numbers of texts, perhaps of most (premodernist) texts. But in the case of the letter, each schema fails. Although the subtext is a catalogue of acts of villainy, for example, one cannot say of it as Propp says of his folktales that "each new act of villainy, each new lack creates a new move" (92). In his canon movement is possible; here it is not.<sup>20</sup> The units of anticipation and fulfillment or problem and solution that structure plot according to narrative theorists of plot assume that textual actions are based on the (intentional) deeds of protagonists; they assume a power, a possibility, that may be inconsistent with what women have experienced both historically and textually, and perhaps inconsistent even with women's desires. A radical critique like Maria Brewer's suggest that plot has been understood as a "discourse of male desire recounting itself through the narrative of adventure, project, enterprise, and conquest," the "discourse of desire as separation and mastery" (1151, 1153).

If standard narratological notions of plot do not adequately describe (some)

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women's texts, then what is needed is a radical revision in theories of plot. For one thing, as Katherine Rabuzzi notes (in Donovan, "Jewett's Critical Theory" 218), "by and large, most women have known a nonstoried existence." Women's experience, says Donovan, often seems, when held against the masculine plot, "static, and in a mode of waiting. It is not progressive, or oriented toward events happening sequentially or climactically, as in the traditional masculine story plot" (218-19). This letter, or a novel like Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, can thus only be defined as a "plotless text." (Donovan, "Women's Poetics," 106). Similarly, some of Grace Paley's finest stories (for example, "Friends" and "Ruthy and Edie" in the most recent collection, *Later the Same Day*), which a traditional narratology would describe as "plotless," are constituted by plots of women's attempts to "make sense" of their world.<sup>21</sup> A contemporary popular novel like Meg Wolitzer's *Hidden Pictures*, which sets up negative possibilities that neither occur nor are noted *not* to occur, when measured against plot theories becomes a "flawed" story making worrisome predictions that it does not fulfill. Yet one could also see this plot as a structure of anxiety and (gradual) relief that corresponds to real-world experiences of women in the difficult circumstances of this novel's protagonists, a lesbian couple raising a son in suburbia. If again and again scholars of women's writing must speak in terms of the "plotless" (usually in quotation marks, suggesting their dissatisfaction with the term), then perhaps something is wrong with the notions of plot that have followed from Propp's morphology. Perhaps narratology has been mistaken in trying to arrive at a single definition and description of plot. We will learn more about women's narratives—and about scores of twentieth-century texts—if we make ourselves find language for describing their plots in positive rather than negative terms.

There is another level of plot, too, that the bride's letter urges us to think about. There is, in fact, one sequence of anticipation and fulfillment that this text does fully constitute, and it occurs in the act of writing. In the case of both letters, whether the narrator's life is happy or miserable, what she "cannot be satisfied" without is, simply, *the telling*—narrative itself. The act of writing becomes the fulfillment of desire, telling becomes the single predicated act, as if to tell were in itself to resolve, to provide closure. *Récit* and *histoire*, rather than being separate elements, converge, so that telling becomes integral to the working out of story. Communication, understanding, being understood, becomes not only the objective of the narration but the act that can transform (some aspect of) the narrated world. In a universe where waiting, inaction, reception, predominate, and action is only minimally possible, the narrative act itself becomes the source of possibility.

What happens in the letter, then, is that the wish for the other's happiness substitutes for the possibility of change in one's own life; the writer's experience serves as a (positive or negative) stimulus to the reader's own story. The confidante thus becomes an active participant not simply in narration, but in plot itself; the wish for the narratee's happiness transfers the imperatives of plot, so that the possibilities of change and fulfillment are given over to the narratee. The letter thus suggests a plot behind women's "plotless" narrative, the subversive plot of sharing an experience so that the listener's life may complete the speak-

Propp

overview

er's tale. I would be eager for narratology to talk about such a crossing of the plot of narration with the story plot.

My analysis of this coded letter suggests in sketchy ways aspects of narrative that a revised poetics might scrutinize and codify. A comprehensive theory of voice would develop a framework for describing the elements that constitute polyphony and would formulate a linguistically based theory of narrative tone. Attention to the rhetorical context of narrative—its generic status and the public or private level of the narration—would be understood as important determinants of narrative meaning. And theories of plot and story would be reexamined to find alternatives to the notion of plot as active acquisition or solution and to incorporate the plot that may be generated by the relationship between narrator and narratee. Once it is clear that some (women's) texts cannot be adequately described by traditional, formalist narratology, we begin to see that other texts—postmodernist texts, texts by writers of Asia and Africa, perhaps—may be similarly unaccounted for. It is only, I believe, such an expansive narratology that can begin to fulfill the wish Gerald Prince expresses at the end (164) of his *Narratology*: that "ultimately, narratology can help us understand what human beings are."

## NOTES

I am grateful to Michael Ragussis, Leona Fisher, Caren Kaplan, and Harold Mosher for invaluable criticism of this essay in successive manuscript stages.

1. A simple distinction between so-called "American" and "French" feminisms is impossible. By "French" feminism is usually meant feminism conceived within the theoretical premises of poststructuralism and hence heavily indebted to the writings of Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray. "American" feminism tends to be conceived within the political imperatives of the American women's liberation movement and the historical experience of women in general and women writers in particular. Both modes are practiced in the United States, and the two have become increasingly intertwined. Nonetheless, the debates go on. For further discussion of the differences see, for example, the introduction and bibliography and the essay by Ann Jones in Showalter, *The New Feminist Criticism*; for an example of the new synthesis, see Meese.

2. See especially Furman 45-54.

3. A piece of Bal's book on the Hebrew Bible is available to English-language readers as "Sexuality, Sin and Sorrow."

4. It is revealing that the single sentence in my book most cited by reviewers is the statement that "my training is deeply formalist, and my perspective as deeply feminist"; clearly many scholars consider feminism and narratology an odd pair.

5. I find it ironic that Donovan's rejection of formalist "dissection" is justified by finding it incompatible with what Evelyn Beck and I have called a "women's epistemology" (Lanser and Beck 86).

6. Particularly in the wake of the new psychoanalytic narrative theories the term *narratology* has fallen into disuse, perhaps perceived as too narrowly structuralist. Critics disagree about the differences between *narratology* and *narrative poetics*; see, for example, Rimmon-Kenan's attempt to distinguish the two in *Narrative Fiction* (133 n.1). By *narratology* I mean simply that branch of poetics concerned with defining and describing all aspects of narrative.

I have chosen throughout this essay to use the word *narratology* rather than *narrative poetics* partly to foreground the dissonance between narratology and feminism and partly to identify more precisely the formalist/structuralist practices that I am discussing here. I will, however, be calling in this essay for a study of narrative that is finally less formalist than *narratology* generally connotes. For that reason, and since I am also suggesting a less alienating terminology for the study of narrative, I can also see the advantages of *narrative poetics*, and I would not hesitate to make the change.

7. While there is a reader-oriented narratology that emphasizes the process of text production, Rimmon-Kenan is right to imply that "the more far-reaching 'revisionism' of some reader-oriented studies . . . is often at odds with the very project of narrative poetics" (118).

8. Oppositional thinking has, of course, been sharply disadvantageous to women, as to other dominated groups. Binary pairs of the variety P/not-P are precisely the structures that create hierarchy (as in nonwhite, illiterate, un-American). Categories and classifications, while sometimes also used by feminists, are ripe for Procrustean distortions, for premature closures, for stifling rigidities.

9. In *The Narrative Act* I have in fact worked with women's texts as well as with men's, and I have also included the narrative theories of neglected women like Vernon Lee and Käthe Friedemann. But I did not really undertake the radical reevaluation I am now calling for, one which would mean *beginning* with women's writings (both narrative and theoretical) in order not to remarginalize the marginal, in compensation for a training that has been so strongly biased in favor of male discourse.

10. I discovered this letter quite accidentally. While browsing through the stacks of the University of Wisconsin-Madison library several years ago, I came across an odd compendium titled *The Genteel Female*, edited by Clifton Furness. Its endpapers consist of the page from *Atkinson's Gasket* which contains the letter.

11. There are three controversies embedded in this topic: whether there is in fact a "women's language," whether it is exclusive to women, and whether it is a negative characteristic. In 1975 Robin Lakoff suggested that women use language forms that differ from men's, and that this language reinforces the social and political powerlessness of women. Other critics have argued that "women's language" is a fiction constructed upon sex stereotypes and that women do not actually speak differently from men. Still others agree that there is difference but rather than seeing the difference as negative, they consider "women's language" better oriented to concern for others and to the careful contextualizing of one's beliefs (rather than the "masculine" assertion of universals). For a sense of this controversy see Spender 32-51. A related question is whether it is more accurate to speak of "women's language" or of "powerless language." On the basis of empirical study in a courtroom context, O'Barr and Atkins found far more credibility accorded to female witnesses speaking in the "powerful style" than to those speaking in the "powerless style."

12. Richard Sennett believes that simple, direct discourse in the active voice bespeaks a confidence that frequently inspires a too-easy and hence dangerous obeisance. See *Authority*, chapter 5.

13. Mary Louise Pratt uses the term to designate a text or speech act whose relevance lies in its tellability, and which is thus detachable from its immediate circumstances of production. Literary texts and jokes are examples. See Pratt 136-48.

14. I thank Harold Mosher for the suggestion that this figure is not actually a narrator at all but merely an editor. I had been considering this voice to be similar to the one that introduces, say, the governess's narrative in *The Turn of the Screw*. The problem, I believe, lies at least in part with Genette's own system, which does not distinguish an editor from an extradiegetic narrator. Such a narrator, after all, may appear only briefly to introduce a major intradiegetic narrative and may do so in the guise of an editor.

15. I am suggesting that not only narrators but also narratees can be heterodiegetic or

homodiegetic—that is, within or outside the fictional world—and that a homodiegetic narrator can address a heterodiegetic narratee (although it would constitute a narrative transgression for a heterodiegetic narrator to address a homodiegetic narratee). I have decided not to use these terms, however, in order to avoid confusion with heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrators and because of my commitment to simplify narrative terminology.

16. This is somewhat different from the case of a letter that is intercepted by a character for whom it was not destined, as happens frequently, say, in *Clarissa*. The difference is that in this case the narrator *knows* her text will be intercepted and has structured the surface narrative accordingly.

17. The differences between private and public narration in narratives by women are a major focus of the book I am now completing on women writers and narrative voice.

18. As Susan Léger has pointed out to me, a book like Ross Chambers's *Story and Situation* is a healthy exception to this norm.

19. I am aware that my analysis of the letters has omitted any discussion of the maiden aunt and that her "maidenness" makes her a particularly interesting figure in the context of the portraits of marriage in these letters.

20. One could argue that the presence of a lover in the subtext keeps eternally open the possibility of action, even if that action seems to be thwarted by the given text. Such a possibility testifies to the power of the desire for plot.

21. For the example of these Paley stories I am indebted to Alan Wilde, whose book, *Middle Ground: Studies in Contemporary American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), includes a chapter on her work.

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