UNIT 9

Prose and the novel 1573–1830

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Introduction

The emergence of the English novel in the eighteenth century involves a bewildering multiplicity of themes, methods and influences, and to introduce you to these phenomena I shall offer different perspectives on the event: the literary origins of the form in the picaresque, in romance, in prose forms (fictional and non-fictional) of the Renaissance; its debt to the concept of narrative in literature *per se* – including the classical epic, dramatic forms and periodical styles; the relationship with the cultural, political and social elements of the period of its rise. I will then deal with the following authors: Defoe, Swift, Richardson, Fielding, Burney and Austen.

The rise of the novel and the context of literary production

The novel, more than drama or the poem, feeds upon a variety of non-literary registers and usage: dialogue, reported speech, reflection, letters, journals. Hence its birth in the eighteenth century might be explained in relation to the vast and complex multiplicity of these linguistic registers that went with modern urban society. The birth of the novel corresponds to trends that we are now familiar with as being modern. For example, during the eighteenth century we witness the triumph of bourgeois individualism and the desire of this group to legitimize materialist ideology (I use the word 'ideology' in its loosest sense as a dominant set of beliefs) with a literary analogue – Defoe's novels are often read in these terms. The novel was both a prime example and benefactor of the commercialization of leisure promoted by increased levels of literacy and an expanded readership drawn largely from this bourgeois group, especially among women. The demise of the patronage system and new methods of publication (subscription, cheap part-editions of novels, magazine publication and circulating libraries) which treated the production and reproduction of texts as a business venture corresponded to changes in the financial world and money system which in themselves fed into a climate that made the Industrial Revolution and radical changes in modes of work and living possible (by the end of the 1840s England was the first predominantly urban society in history). All these changes have their roots in the eighteenth century and the novel reflects how society was changing.

The novel as a bourgeois form?

By now it should be clear that the novel has emerged from a variety of cultural and literary roots. Ian Watt defines the characteristic features of the novel as realism and an emphasis on individualism, qualities that Watt directly attributes to Puritan roots which later find a reflection in the orientation of bourgeois culture towards the independence of each individual (Watt, 1957, 1963). While Watt offers a persuasive argument for viewing the novel as a social project, his position has not gone unchallenged and needs some qualification. First, it is impossible to speak of early novelists as representing a homogeneous group and thus claim that the novel reflects a dominant bourgeois experience (see Rogers, 1974). Secondly, novels, far from reflecting unconditionally the triumph of a bourgeois world-view, for most of the eighteenth century are sites of competing discursive practices (see McKeown, 1988). Such flash-points occur with *Robinson Crusoe* and Swift's satiric version of the plain-speaking hero in *Gulliver's Travels.* At issue in Swift's reaction is an unmasking of what he considers to be the falsity of pseudo-objective representation underlying the mercantile vision. Later, essentially the same debate re-emerges with Richardson's *Pamela* and Fielding's parodic *Shamela* where Fielding's satiric intention is to reveal the commercial basis of the heroine's 'virtue' and thus call into question the moral intention of Richardson's text.

Swift's and Fielding's anti-novels form part of the eighteenth-century debate about the form and context that the novel should represent. The novel does not signal the abandonment of earlier prose forms like romance and satire, rather it incorporates these structures which in turn modify realistic intentions. Thirdly, the claim that the novel reflects the ordinary and therefore can be claimed to be a realistic form is qualified by the fact that most early heroes and heroines are exceptional rather than representative figures. Such characters exist on the margins of the society in which novels were produced and consumed: for example, Robinson Crusoe, whose adventures prove to be uncommon, or Eliza Haywood's pre-1720s heroines who hold only a marginal relationship to femininity as a code of social acceptability.

While the rise of the novel could not have come about without an enlarged reading public, it is difficult to ascertain with certainty the composition of this new constituency. Certainly it was enhanced by an increased mercantile class who had disposable income, privacy, literacy, and leisure (prerequisites for novel reading). Circulating libraries which began in the early eighteenth century reflect and promote an increased market for novels and the proliferation of pirated editions point to a potentially wider reading market. Watt's theory that the novel promoted and reflected an essentially bourgeois representation of experience, made possible by an expanded reading public drawn from this group, has not gone unchallenged by later critics (such as Bull, 1988) who propose a much broader network of social tastes and influences. However, while the early novel does exploit populist themes and involve characters from all social classes, it maintains a reluctance to advocate values and moral concerns that are not recognizably middle class. This is as true for Fielding and Smollett as it is for Defoe and Richardson – while the former do not necessarily endorse bourgeois

sentiments, they are aware of the readership's expectations and often exploit irony as one method of recording their ambivalent relationship with the public.

What characterizes the early novel more than anything else is that it is an experimental form. Criticism of the novel (which was widespread) was social as much as literary, stemming from the perception that the form was challenging traditional notions of the writer's role and relationship with the public. The novel, then, is both a promoter and product of such changes. The early eighteenth-century novel held an improvisory status: whilst the genre often reflects bourgeois values, it also points to the places where those values break down (see Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Richardson's *Pamela* and Fielding's *Shamela*).

Status of the genre

The novel begins as a 'low' form where classical knowledge was not a prerequisite for literary competence (compare with poetry of the period: for example Gray's *Trivia*, 1719, Thomson's *The Seasons*, 1726–30). Early novelists often turn to prose fiction from other employment or literary avenues (Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, Eliza Haywood, Daniel Defoe). During the eighteenth century the main inducement for writing novels was financial. The history of the eighteenth-century novel reflects a genre that starts as a hybrid form, having neither fixed generic form or structure. The novel's close links with other prose forms is indicated by the confusion between fact and fiction in descriptive tags like 'history', 'memoir', 'romance', 'true life' and 'story'. The full titles of novels often reveal this indeterminate status of the genre as a separate prose form for much of the century. The word 'novel' itself indicates the newness with which the genre was regarded by critics, public and novelists. Early novelists reveal a confidence to experiment freely with an incipient form. By the close of the century the novel has gained status and a level of authority as a separate genre with a wide readership and with attendant structural and thematic rules. It is upon these achievements that Scott and later nineteenth-century novelists expand.

The combination of the novel's early status as 'illegitimate' art, and the possibility of pursuing novel writing within the domestic environment, encouraged many women during the century to write fiction. In fact, the majority of novelists during the eighteenth century were women and the genre can be seen as a female form. Restoration writers like Aphra Behn and Delarivier Manley did much to challenge the double standards of sexual morality and claim a voice for fictionalizing women's concerns. But they served as contradictory models for later women novelists because they took as their themes exceptional women: adventurers, seductresses and seduced women. The autobiographical reading of women's texts (reinforced by Manley's works where she self-dramatizes herself as a heroine) tended to conflate the personal lives of women with their works. The history of women's fiction for the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century was in direct reaction to the achievements of the major Restoration women writers like Behn and Manley.

In contrast to the radical message of the Restoration woman writer, eighteenth-

and nineteenth-century fiction by women tended to emphasize the didactic and point to the costs of slippage for women. This change in orientation – from radicalism, to surface endorsement of the social order, though often revealing doubleness and subtexts, to renewed radicalism at the close of the century – is exemplified by the career of Eliza Haywood (1693?–1756). Haywood's career charts a movement from protest in women's fiction (many of her novels of the 1720s are scandal novels), where an emphasis on sexual relationships and the seduction theme reveal the double standards of society's morality, to an assertion of woman's innate moral superiority to those social laws while portraying heroines who still have to function within those standards. (For a full account of the roots of women's fiction, see Spencer, 1986, and Unit 23, pp. 614–18, of this volume).

Terms of acceptance

Experimentation and innovation continued throughout the century. Testing the boundaries of what fiction could constitute probably reaches its fullest expression with Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–65). Sterne's hero Shandy tells his story through continuous digressions, shifts of perspective, by mixing up his 'story' with immediate concerns like a faulty parlour door (vol. III, ch. xxi). The uneasy relation between fiction and actuality in *Tristram Shandy* often earns it the status of an early Modernist text, pre-empting as it does the techniques of Joyce and Woolf (see Unit 16). The relationship between fiction and actuality which Sterne's playfulness constantly tests is in fact a typical concern of the eighteenth-century novel. *Tristram Shandy* is a self-conscious, extended version of the experiments conducted by Defoe, Fielding and eighteenth-century novelists in general who worked with an incipient form without given rules or structures (compare with the nineteenth-century novel where concepts of realism and story telling become fixed).

However, there is also a discernible desire by novelists to gain authority and legitimacy for the new form as a species of moral art. Attempts to structure the novel are reflected in greater attention being given to plotting and characterization. Characters become less 'type' figures standing exclusively for virtues and vices, and more individualized – more like people that the reader might know but whose lives are more exciting or problematic. Peripheral characters still often maintain type status (Allworthy as the ideal country squire in *Tom Jones* or Lovelace as the seducing aristocrat in *Clarissa*). Novels also grow in length reflecting greater attention being placed on both plot and characterization.

No longer are an isolated number of adventures drawn together loosely; attempts are made to suggest a sequential progression and interconnectedness. These developments do not follow a uniform plan; rather the novel develops by two main routes: (a) Fielding and the development of the picaresque tradition and (b) Richardson and the refinement of the epistolary form. Novelists do not necessarily follow either/or of these precedents, but often utilize aspects from both authors. For example Fanny Burney, who we can class as the heir of Fielding's social-satiric vision, emphasizes her heroines' misreading of social codes, but also stresses their

refinement of virtue thus aligning her works with Richardsonian didacticism (*Evelina* and *Cecilia*).

Richardson, rather than creating anything radically new, capitalizes on the successes of earlier women novelists who developed the letter-novel into a form that could express emotional responses to situation. The Richardsonian novel is closely associated with the aesthetics of sensibility in which feminine style and finer feelings are given privileged status. (For an account of the novel of sensibility see Todd, 1986.) The ethos of sensibility (*c.*1740–70, also known as the Age of Sensibility) exemplifies a period when women's fiction was positively encouraged because the feminine 'voice' was considered to be more spontaneous and natural – Richardson's first two novels both reproduce feminine narrative speakers. The outcome of this valorization of things feminine in fiction and culture at large in the latter half of the eighteenth century becomes the codified ideal of the Angel in the House of the Victorian novel. The reaction against sensibility in Romanticism takes the form of an attack on its tearful self-indulgence which becomes associated with female weakness. However, it would be wrong to view sensibility as a totalizing system in the latter half of the eighteenth century – it was by no means inclusive or definitive. Not all writers adhered to a code of tender tearfulness and there remained a vein of social satire in novels and a tendency to ridicule sentimental excess. Fanny Burney and Oliver Goldsmith are equivocal about sensibility (refer to *Cecilia*, 1782, and *The Vicar of Wakefield*, 1766), Jane Austen is openly hostile to its excesses (*Sense and Sensibility*, 1811), and Mary Wollstonecraft argued that it was detrimental to women's education and rational faculties (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792).

Radicalism and consolidation

1780–1830 marks a period of revolutionary upheaval followed by reactionary consolidation. Romanticism (*c.* 1770–1840) witnesses a reaction against the novel of sensibility and the re-emergence of poetry as the dominant form. For an insightful account of the relationship between literature, politics and culture during this period refer to Butler (1982). Prose and the novel of the period reflect the radical atmosphere: for example, Godwin's political novel *Caleb Williams* (1794), Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and her radical gothic *Maria: or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). However, the main trend of the novel is towards realism. Praise of the novel increasingly stresses its verisimilitude, while rejecting eighteenth-century forms like the gothic and novel of sensibility which are seen as being fantastic, unrealistic and escapist. While the popular forms of the late eighteenth century fall out of vogue in the nineteenth century, their subversive potential is not fully rejected, as is illustrated by the strong vein of female Gothic and romance that runs through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Walter Scott's phenomenal success was no doubt in part the result of his development of the novel as a vehicle for social cohesiveness. The novelty of

Scott's works (*Waverley* (1814) is often termed the first historical novel) was that they offered a historical and social perspective whilst maintaining a romance appeal. Where Scott's focus differs from Defoe's, who offers a retrospective narrative in *Robinson Crusoe* which can be read as a historicizing of capitalism, is in his placement of his hero off-centre: the emphasis is no longer on the individual *per se* but the individual within a social context (see Bull, 1988).

Like Scott, Jane Austen (1775–1817) in her fiction represents a consolidatory message. Austen is often viewed as a conservative thinker and as a novelist of 'manners' whose skill lies in representing the minutiae of domestic life and in rendering an ironic commentary on nuances and misinterpretations of language. All Austen's heroines are intelligent (if at times misleading) women whose 'education' takes the form of a realization of the limited options open to them. It is, therefore, possible to read Austen's fiction across the grain and see strategies of subversion competing with her overtly endorsing codes.

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is generally accepted to be the first true gothic novel. The word 'gothic' originally implied 'medieval' but the form soon became associated with romance as in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italians* (1797), both of which are subtitled a 'romance'. Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) satirizes this immensely popular form by ridiculing the conventions and mechanics by which Gothic horror operates: haunted castles, ruins, wild picturesque and the lone threatened heroine. Gothics hold a complex and contradictory appeal, both as expressions of fantasies of female power (Radcliffe's novels can be read in this way) and as subtexts for female anxieties regarding woman's place in society. In *Maria: Or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), Wollstonecraft revises her position of *The Vindication* by radicalizing the gothic form. In Wollstonecraft's novel, the fantasies and anxieties of the heroine become, not an index of Gothic excess, but a reflection of woman's position in society where the home, the nexus of feminine identity, becomes a prison. Wollstonecraft expands the Gothic to offer a feminist protest against the imprisoning of women within codified roles which disallow autonomy or growth. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) yokes a social critique of industrial and scientific thought to the gothic formula through her rewriting of the birth myth. While the main trend from the eighteenth- to nineteenth-century novel is realism, subgenres of fantasy continue to modify and cast doubt on realistic intentions. For example, in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, gothic structures cast ambiguity upon the socially cohesive closure of the texts.

Prose forms and the novel

There was no single prose source for the novel. Early fiction drew upon an immense variety of styles, registers and sub-genres. To name but a few we might include: letter-novels, the diary and journal format, Puritan spiritual autobiographies, popular rogue and scandal tales, travellers' narratives, allegories and fables, conduct literature, satirical commentaries, confessional memoirs, chapbooks, jest-biographies, 'cony-catching' pamphlets, character sketches, *novellas*, spiritual tracts,

picaresque tales and romance structures. Before the eighteenth century no distinction was made between 'novel' as fictional representation and as news gossip or topical opinion.

Elizabethan and Carolean prose narratives exhibit many features which we can claim as being precursive to the novel. 'Historical' realism is one strategy adopted by the Elizabethan prose writer to negotiate the arbitrary relationship between author and print. Fictional works often appeared as translations or histories in order to facilitate the creation of a narrative relationship with the text as something already given: the narrator's role then becomes independent (or seemingly) of the text and that of commentator.

Prose fiction of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reflects a range of styles, themes and precedents. These can be divided into two main categories: (a) romances, such as Gomberville's *Polexandre*, which first appeared in English translation in 1674, Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590), which set precedents for pastoral romances, and the many translations of French sentimental, religious and anti-romances, which include a translation of Jean de Cartigny's *Voyage of the Wandering Knight* (1581), which set a precedent for Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), and (b) popular tales, in the form of tales of burgher life in Deloney's *Jack of Newberie* (1597?) and *Thomas of Reading* (1600?), jest books and 'cony-catching' pamphlets (the anonymous *The Tinker of Turvey*, 1630), jest biographies (*The Life of Long Meg of Westminster*, 1620) and criminal literature such as Deloney's *A Notable Discovery of Cozenage* (1591), which set a precedent for Defoe's criminal biographies and novels.

However, while it may be useful to categorize the various forms of Elizabethan and Carolean prose, it must also be acknowledged that a characteristic of prose fiction of this period is a mixture of elements (Nashe uses the term 'medley' to describe his intention in *The Unfortunate Traveller*). Greene, Nashe and Deloney all mix elements of serious and comic in their works and draw on elements from romance, popular tales, satires and jest-books. In this they set an important precedent for the eighteenth-century novel in which experimentation and improvisation remains a key element.

What distinguishes the Elizabethan writer from the eighteenth-century novelist most clearly is a public orientation – the allegorical framework is intended to serve as a point of mediation between public and private. Of course, allegorical intentions do not disappear in the eighteenth-century novel (consider *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe*) but experience is placed less exclusively in the social perspective. One reason why the novel does not gain impetus until the eighteenth century may be to do with demography. The rise of city living (particularly London) created the anonymity necessary to make private experience of interest. In Elizabethan England while bourgeois values were being established there was not the scale of urban living necessary to make other ordinary people's experience (except in a symbolic mode) distinct and therefore potentially interesting. By the eighteenth century these conditions were present (see Margolies, 1985).

In Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* the hero (Jack Witton) is also the narrator and this dual function proves problematic. While the loose structure of the work is

nominally held together by the presence of the hero, his role as narrator and foil for Nashe's invective make his comments far from individual, a trait which is further reinforced by the hero's lack of any inner thoughts or consistency of outlook. Nashe sees no need to give his character plausible motives or a definite personality. This quality of the public function of the hero and action is reinforced through word-play and punning which are intended to draw attention to the author's virtuosity rather than to a delineation of character.

Periodicals

The rise of the periodical and the novel occur in tandem. Episodic accounts in periodicals form an important stage in the development of the novel. What we might class as the characteristic narrative tone of the early novel (intimacy) bears a close resemblance to the friendly chattiness of Addison's and Steele's periodical narrator, Mr Spectator. The conversational style, the sense of familiarity between narrator and reader, the circumstantial approach that characterize *The Spectator* (1711–12) and prose journalism generally of the period also informs the novel. Compare Addison's direct, personalized method of narration in *The Spectator* (No. 171) with Fielding's similar method in *Tom Jones* of specifying time and place. Many novelists also wrote prose journalism (Defoe, Haywood, Swift, Fielding, Johnson, Goldsmith – to name but a few). Gender representation in journalism establishes a slightly different type of relationship between narrator and reader – a difference that would, as we shall see, be further complicated in the novel. *The Female Spectator* (edited for a period by Eliza Haywood) takes its lead from conduct literature which taught women that upon marriage it was their role to accept a diminution of power. Novels, while often endorsing a code of modesty for women, contradict the logic of conduct books by placing the heroine centre stage and thus making her the focus of interest.

The picaresque tradition

The roots of the picaresque lie in sixteenth-century Spanish fictional narratives: particularly the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1553), Metes Aleman's *Guzman de Alfarache* (1599–1640) and Francisco Quevedo's *La vida del Buscon* (1626). The picaresque story involves the adventures of a rogue-hero, a trickster figure whose experiences offer the opportunity for comic action and satiric comment on the mores of society from the vantage point of the outsider. Picaresque offers the opportunity for rapid narrative pace and packed adventures whilst demanding only the loosest structural coherence. Picaresques can be satiric (Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, 1594, generally regarded as the first picaresque in English), discursive (Fielding's *Tom Jones*, 1749), or involve comic buffoonery (Smollett's *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, 1748). Smollett's picaroon's surname points to the organizing principle of medley and random experience drawn together nominally through the hero's presence. The appeal of picaresque for novelists lies in the range

of subject matter it facilitates and styles of address that it accommodates. It formed an important source for eighteenth-century novelists (most notably Defoe, Fielding, Smollett) and is an acknowledged influence on early Dickens (see *The Pickwick Papers*).

However, the opportunity for freedom of invention and the discursive possibilities that picaresque facilitated were not open to women novelists for a number of stylistic and cultural reasons. The narrative position created for eighteenth-century women novelists meant that it was impossible for them to create the adventurous heroine without radically challenging their status as gentlewomen writers. This was a position that few genteel women were willing to assume because it would place them in open conflict with their society and, at best, open their text to the criticism of exaggeration and implausibility. Such adventures as roaming about the countryside and having encounters often of a sexual kind (see *Tom Jones*) were considered to be outside the remit of a polite lady's experience and at worst could cast serious moral aspersions upon the character of the author since women's writings were read primarily in a confessional context (see Figes, 1982). In contrast to the picaresque, the main trend in women's fiction was the domestic novel. One form of subversion developed by women novelists at the close of the eighteenth century was the female gothic in which the heroine does have roaming adventures, but she remains blameless because her actions are motivated by the need to escape the designs of an unscrupulous male. The gothic novel held an added attraction for the woman writer in that it allowed her to operate in a fictional context detached from the expectations and conventions of the real world.

Romance structures

The novel is often considered to be the product of a rejection of earlier romance structures which come to be seen as representing an essentially aristocratic vision of experience; for example, seventeenth-century French romances such as Madeleine de Scudéry's *Clelia* (translated into English in 1656). Heroic romances proved popular in England during the seventeenth century (Gomberville's *Polexandre* and d'Urfé's *L'Astrée*). The theme of these works was the love of a great hero for his lady and the trials and tribulations that he underwent to win her favour. Italian and Spanish *novellas* were also popular: Cervantes' *Exemplary Novels* (first translated by Mappe in 1640 and thereafter reprinted in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries) set a model for the theme of divided lovers trying to unite in the face of parental disapproval. Key elements in romances are (a) the quest, (b) rise and progress (often during a period of exile either physically or from 'true' identity when commonly the hero or heroine starts life in a lowly station), (c) discovery and restoration (of true identity which is invariably accompanied by an elevation in social position), (d) resolution (the 'happy ending' in which the good are rewarded and the bad punished). Realistic intentions are often in tension with romance elements in the novel rather than dominating them. Romance elements occur frequently in novels and not solely in those that deal with love and marriage. Often

romance elements are masked under the guise of authorial omnipotence when the good are rewarded and the bad punished at the closure of novels.

Romance plot structures, especially in the resolution of eighteenth-century novels, often point to the fictionality of fiction and reflect an ironic relationship between writer and text. When used in this manner the writer is often highlighting to the reader that what is being offered is representation and not reality. All the resolutions of Fielding's novels (*Joseph Andrews* (1742), *Tom Jones* (1749) and *Amelia* (1751)) reveal a doubleness of intention: whilst the author exploits romance structures to create happy endings, implicit in the texts is satire on the unreality and false expectations that such codes promote. Romantic resolutions can also serve as a critique of reality in which it becomes fictionally impossible to portray a 'realistic' representation of culture in which the good are rewarded and the bad punished. The romantic ending of *Amelia* (1751) strains plausibility because the foregoing grim analysis of contemporary society has stressed that goodness is a virtue of fidelity for the heroine, but also a trait that can offer her little protection in society. Like satire, romance elements are incorporated with story lines rather than being dominated by them: the accommodation is not always a balanced one. Certainly the ending of *Amelia* promotes doubleness which denies closure, offering instead variable readings of the novel as a structural failure or as a sustained satire reinforced by the romance structure.

Tobias Smollett (1721–71), like Richardson and Fielding, felt free to improvise on the form of the novel. In the Preface to *Roderick Random* he declares his distrust and rejection of romance structure which he claims 'no doubt, owes its origin to ignorance, vanity and superstition'. However, contrary to avowed intentions, romance structures inform Smollett's texts to such a level that they invite other readings. Consider how resolution is brought about in *Roderick Random* (1748) and *Peregrine Pickle* (1751, rev. edn 1758), or the artificiality of the multiple marriages at the close of *Humphry Clinker* (1771). The conventions of romance form part of Smollett's satiric intention – a deliberate arbitrariness denies readings of satisfactory realistic meaning, inviting instead marvel at the plot's audacity and artifice and pointing to the dysfunction of society (see Michael Rosenblum's 'Smollett and the Old Convention' reprinted in Damrosch, 1988). Like nearly every other eighteenth-century novelist, Smollett neither manages to free himself from or fully reject romance structures: exile, recognition, restoration, the staples of romance plotting are deeply embedded in his texts.

Romance elements have been most thoroughly associated with a woman's tradition of writing. However, women writers were often critical of the pernicious influence of romantic fiction on impressionable young females. In *The Cry*, Sarah Fielding and Jane Collier offer a criticism of romantic illusion while in *The Female Quixote* (1752), Charlotte Lennox presents an anti-romance through the medium of satire. The message of romantic plots – the virtuous heroine is rewarded with marriage, social position and, usually, economic security – undoubtedly reinforces certain ideological imperatives. But romance offers a complex response to women's experience which, far from offering single readings, in fact promotes doubleness and reflexivity. While romance elements reinforce the social formulation (by emphasiz-

ing love and marriage as woman's lot), forming arguably a dangerous form of escapism based on false expectations, they also serve as a critique of culture prompting the question: why should women want to escape their social role? In other words, romance offers a vehicle for oblique criticism of woman's lot. These two imperatives for instruction and escapism do not neatly divide. Consider the Cinderella structure and didactic intent of Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and particularly, how the text cannot fully justify the limits of the solutions it endorses (discussed below, pp. 220–3).

Texts, authors, contexts

Defoe

Daniel Defoe (1660–1731) wrote *Robinson Crusoe*, his first novel and generally considered to be the first English novel, in 1719. When Defoe turned to novel writing he was nearly 60 years old and the main inducement for his adoption of the form was financial. Within the space of five years Defoe wrote all his major novels: a second volume of *Robinson Crusoe* (*Farther Adventures*) appeared a few months later, *The Adventures of Captain Singleton* in 1720, *Moll Flanders*, *Colonel Jack*, and *A Journal of the Plague Year* (a fictionalized account of the Great Plague) all in 1722, *Memoirs of a Cavalier* and *Roxana* in 1724. Behind him was a prolific literary career and wealth of experience. In all Defoe wrote over 500 separate works including pamphlets, journals, poetry, satires, pseudo-biographies, ghost stories, historicized accounts, travel books, essays on projects and economics, history, crime, urban affairs and politics. Apart from this Defoe also held many occupations as a merchant, business man and government spy, to name but a few. The failure of many of his business ventures (including bankruptcy) did nothing to abate his championship of the business ethic which was closely linked to his Dissenting religious background: see Defoe's *Review* (1704–13), *The Complete English Tradesman* (1726) and the *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–6).

Robinson Crusoe did not emerge in isolation. Defoe as a popularist writer was astute enough to draw upon established forms and a ready-made readership for prose accounts, such as travelogues, Puritan spiritual autobiographies, popular rogue tales and criminal autobiographies. *Robinson Crusoe* represents a story that is both representative and exceptional, where the hero is both the exponent of mercantile values and a marginal figure who has very slight connection with the experiences of the average eighteenth-century reader. This is no back-to-nature book; rather it is a novel about 'home', about eighteenth-century commercial culture. What makes Crusoe believable is a balance between representative significance (a re-enactment of the ubiquitous theme of quest and survival that is the source of epic) and his apparent individuality (created through a narrative that records the minutiae of everyday existence). Turn to the opening paragraphs of the text and note how Defoe through the personal pronoun 'I' and the piling on of details and information creates

the impression that because we learn so much about him the speaker must be 'real'. This plethora of circumstantial detail is a characteristic of all Defoe's fiction. Now turn to any passage of description of the exotic (for example, Crusoe's island or Roxana's oriental dance) and note how unreal and fantastic Defoe's writing can become.

Realism in a Defoe novel is invoked through the consciousness of the speaker.

> and I went through into Bartholomew Close, and then turned round to another passage that goes into Long Lane, so away from Charterhouse Yard and out into St. John Street, then, crossing into Smithfield, went down Chick Lane and into Field Lane to Holborn Bridge, when mixing with the crowd of people usually passing there, it was not possible to have been found out; and thus I enterprised my second sally into the world. (Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, [1722] 1978, p. 191)

This is an account of Moll's second crime. The stylistic method is essentially the same as the description of her first theft. While the reader responds to Moll as a tangibly 'real' narrator, she/he also finds it hard to believe how the heroine can remember events so precisely with such a vast amount of factual detail. Unlike Crusoe, Moll does not keep a journal. Defoe does not find it necessary to explain the implausibility of such a photographic memory which manages with apparent ease to stretch over such a vast period of time. This is fictional 'realism' in its infancy: while Moll's story is offered as retrospective narrative, the sheer amount of information and detail that inform events (what we could term Defoe's 'realism') suggest immediacy and the here and now. Moll seems to be able to close the gap between the distant past and the reported present in a manner that the reader often finds implausible. Later first-person narrators (for example, Pip in *Great Expectations*) supplement fact and detail with the stylistics of reflection and a self-conscious dressing up of memories as events.

All Defoe's novels offer retrospective accounts. Retrospective narrative re-creates a representation of how imagination works. In creating their stories, characters are attempting to place order on disparate experience and, in the process, make sense of it – in other words, create a story. In the gaps and fissures between act and recollection, Defoe's narratives enact a facsimile of how memory works. Defoe is a far more sophisticated writer than is often first perceived and his relationship with his characters is often ironic. Structurally Defoe's narratives are far from realistic; present is an element of wish-fulfilment deeply embedded in romance plots which the adherence to mercantile methodology works against. What a Defoe novel offers is not a 'mirror' of reality, but realism in the manner in which characters perceive significance.

It should be clear by now that the speaking 'I' of a Defoe novel is not the voice of the author speaking directly to the reader. In fact, Defoe's relation to his narrator is at times ironic and subversive. This is most obvious with his woman narrators whom he sees both as exponents of a capitalist economy and as victims of that ideology (see *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*). Why, then, does Defoe take such pains to represent his fictions as truth and his narratives as the words of his heroes or heroines? Refer to

any 'Preface' of a Defoe novel and you will become aware that the author is at pains to claim factuality for his narratives: words like 'true life', 'history', 'adventures of' are intended to encourage the reader to see the world through the narrator's eyes. This attempt at realism, which has been claimed by Ian Watt to be the hallmark of the genre, has also a more specific cultural context. Realism in fiction during the eighteenth century stems, in no small part, from attempts to legitimize the genre as a distinctive literary form. Until the mid-eighteenth century, no clear distinction between prose as factual or imaginative emerges. The novel's development parallels the emergence of two discourses whereby prose becomes categorized as either journalistic or fictional. What has recently been termed 'faction' (a hybrid form of novelistic reportage) was a distinction that would not have been clear, or seemed necessary, in the early eighteenth century.

Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* takes as its imaginative starting-point Alexander Selkirk's experiences as a castaway and his *Journal of the Plague Year* offers a mixing of historical prose sources and a fictionalization of historical occurrences. Defoe's style of pseudo-autobiography reflects a prevalent tendency of the early novel to disguise prurience as moral instruction: note the popularity of French romances, particularly *histoire scandaleuse* which as the name suggests offered accounts of real or fictitious historical figures with an emphasis on what was scandalous in their lives (Defoe's *Roxana* is indebted to this form). By presenting stories as 'real life', Defoe imbues his texts with connotations of usefulness and moral soundness (thus developing the format of Puritan spiritual autobiographies). The deliberate masking of fiction as fact is one strategy employed by the author to counterbalance the novel's early reputation as immoral, fantastic, salacious, time-wasting, and escapist. Now, turn to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and consider how Swift satirizes the basic presumption of verisimilitude associated with the novel as a reading experience.

Swift

Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) wrote as well as *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) political pamphlets, journalism (he edited and wrote for *The Examiner* 1710–11), satire and burlesques (*The Battle of the Books*, 1704, and *A Tale of a Tub*, 1704), a journal (*Journal to Stella*, 1710–13), letters and poetry. In the 1720s and 1730s he became increasingly involved in Irish affairs and central as a political writer on the Irish scene: *The Drapier's Letters* appearing in 1724 and *A Modest Proposal* in 1729.

Gulliver's Travels is Swift's only novel (or more correctly we should term it an anti-novel) and like all early fiction it is experimental and unplanned in structure and characterization. Indeed, Swift shows little or no interest in giving Gulliver an inner life and his character's lack of growth and inconsistencies are motivated by an overriding satiric imperative which dominates the narrative. What we might on first reading regard as 'realistic' features of the novel – for example, Gulliver's unadorned prose style and the amount of circumstantial detail – are present for parodic purposes: in these instances satire on the travelogue format and the values it

implied. *Gulliver's Travels* offers many layers of reading: as a satire on contemporary politics and culture, as a traveller's tale, as a Christian apology, and as a Utopian fantasy. Swift is well aware of the metaphoric potential of the travel theme – in *Gulliver's Travels* he takes the idea of the voyage to its limits and over the edge. What Swift's representation of somewhere else does is to point obliquely to the real fictional element in most eighteenth-century travel literature (including *Robinson Crusoe*) which insists on the validity of empirical investigation and purports to be factual reportage.

Refer now to the opening paragraph of *Gulliver's Travels*. On first reading, our narrator Gulliver is offering the reader details of his history which are intended to support his claim that his adventures are fact. This is the procedure that Defoe follows in the opening of *Robinson Crusoe*. Swift exploits this realistic intention through Gulliver's detailed and precise account of his early education and familial relationships. Now, read on to the end of Chapter 1 and note the preciseness of Gulliver's recollections and the emphasis he places on fortune as an explanation for what might otherwise be considered to be implausible connections. Swift is offering a parody of the plain-speaking narrator of travel literature. The opening passages of *Gulliver's Travels* establish the tone of the novel with its mockery of the way eighteenth-century travel stories operate through a mass of circumstantial information to give the appearance of verisimilitude. Swift's parody closely follows the format of travel literature, right down to the inclusion of empirical methodology suggested by references to maps and nautical positions.

Throughout the novel, Swift uses Gulliver as a foil. Gulliver is not simply the voice of Swift; often the intention is ironic. Sometimes Gulliver reflects what Swift believes as, for example, when he attempts to bring about peace between Lilliput and Blefuscu; but more often Swift's irony is directed at his hero in order to reflect Gulliver's blindness of vision. Wearing spectacles carries metaphoric implications in this novel (see Rogers, 1985).

Consider now this extract from Gulliver's conversation with the King of Brobdingnag on the uses of gunpowder:

> I told him of an invention discovered between three and four hundred years ago, to make a certain power, into a heap of which the smallest spark of fire falling, would kindle the whole in a moment, although it were as big as a mountain, and make it all fly up in the air together, with a noise and agitation greater than thunder .... The King was struck with horror at the description I had given of those terrible engines, and the proposal I had made. He was amazed how so impotent and grovelling an insect as I (these were his expressions) could entertain such inhuman ideas, and in so familiar a manner as to appear wholly unmoved at all the scenes of blood and desolation .... A strange effect of *narrow principles* and *short views*! (Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, [1726] 1986, pp. 174–5)

What is the tone? Does Swift endorse Gulliver's eulogization of the potential of gunpowder or is the author's satire directed at his hero's sense of self-importance, jingoism and short-sightedness? How close is the relationship between author and character at this point? Can we claim that Swift identifies with his hero, or is the intention to let him damn himself with his own words? There is a surplus meaning to

Gulliver's words and Swift's irony points to an opposing meaning to his hero's reading of significance. The overall effect is bathetic comedy. Note that Gulliver's motive for imparting the secrets of gunpowder to the King is to bolster his own self-importance (bear in mind the ratio of scale) and also how our hero is dumbfounded when his offer is refused. Surely the '*narrow principles*' and '*short views!*' that Gulliver accuses the King of holding are in fact his own? Gulliver reveals what we would now call a Eurocentric perspective: an inability to view difference in any terms except his European norms. Here the speaker is the butt of Swift's satire and a foil to promote a counter-argument to the one that Gulliver voices. Now read Chapters 6 and 7 (Part II) fully and consider where Swift is endorsing the norms of European politics and culture and where he is satirizing them.

The reader is also under attack in *Gulliver's Travels* – references to the 'gentle reader' are more than a polite address (see Rawson, 1983). Swift mocks the reader's expectation of seeking a story that will be anything but gentle. He also satirizes the expected relationship established in novels of intimacy between the adventurer hero and the reader. Structurally the novel subverts the symbolic potential of the journey as a metaphor for life and progress. The repeated pattern of outward movement and return to the same locale established by the four-part structure suggests circularity rather than linear progression. By the end of Part 4, Gulliver believes that he has gained spiritual enlightenment but his utopian projections induced by his experiences with the Huoyhnhnms are of questionable practical application and even absurd. The reader is justified in querying the validity of the hero's vision and the possibility of insanity in Gulliver's conclusions. At the close of the novel, Swift's satire suggests yet another example of where author and character are considerably distanced in meaning, interpretation and intention.

Writers like Swift and Pope supported an Augustan value system (*c.* 1660–1740). Broadly speaking, Augustan literature reflects the values of order, moderation, balance, harmony and decorum, and its dominant idiom is satire. Because Augustan writers valued the concept of order in both form and content they were also obsessed by its absence – hence the emphasis on the themes of madness and chaos. For a writer like Swift the individualism that the novel championed smacks of the impolite. The communal and cohesive intentions that underpin Augustan art seemed in the early eighteenth century to be challenged by this new breed of hybrid prose which sought to justify as 'realism' a personal and, in the view of Swift, highly dubious (because subjectivity is always open to distortion) interpretation of reality. In terms of early eighteenth-century cultural and literary values, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels* form part of a debate about the value and status of literature which is both generic and culturally inscribed.

Richardson

Samuel Richardson (1689–1761) embodied the Puritan virtues of self-help, self-reliance and worldly success. His achievements offer an equivalent 'real-life' version

of Defoe's *The Complete English Tradesman*. Richardson was a self-made man who received little formal education but was proud of his bourgeois credentials. His novels are noticeable in comparison to Fielding's for their lack of classical allusions and negative portraits of aristocratic figures such as Mr B— and Lovelace. Richardson entered novel writing after a successful career as a publisher and printer. Novels, in Richardson's case, start as the product of his business interests as a publisher: *The Apprentice Vade Mecum* (1733), a book of advice on morals and conduct was written to cater for a popular audience and *Letters ... to and for Particular Friends* (1741) which forms the germ for *Pamela* to fill a niche in the market. *Pamela* was published 1740–1 when Richardson was 51 and thereafter followed *Clarissa* (8 vols, 1747–9) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (7 vols, 1753–4). It is hardly surprising given Richardson's business acumen that his novels take the form of epistolary fiction. Women novelists had already established a ready-made market for letter novels. Where Richardson develops the letter novel form is in his emphasis on characterization, representation of psychological drama and strong moral emphasis. Prior to Richardson letter novels often under the guise of real-life accounts in the form of *histoire scandaleuse* comprised of salacious material and erotic fantasies: for example, Eliza Haywood's *A Spy upon the Conjurer* (1725) and *The Invisible Spy* (1754).

Richardsonian realism derives from the basic premise of confession in the letter form. Epistolary fiction exploits the private nature of letter-writing to promote a relationship of intimacy and revelation between reader and text. Note the length of a Richardsonian novel, promoted by minuteness of observation from the central correspondent. Such detail gives verisimilitude to the central consciousness of the narrator, but realism is based on a premise of suspended disbelief on the part of the reader. The sheer amount of information that we are offered, the reportage of the speech of others, and the actual amount of time that Pamela (the heroine of Richardson's first novel) would have had to spend writing letters would, in reality, deny the time for any action to occur. Pamela writes six letters on her wedding day, which if viewed realistically would have entailed her spending most of her wedding day writing.

Pamela's status as an exemplary heroine is based upon the premise that she is a dutiful daughter. Here is a fairly representative extract from the text.

> What business had he to send *me one way*, to his wicked house, and vile woman, *when I hoped to go another, to you*, my dear, worthy parents! *The very first fellow*! I scorn his reflection! He is mistaken in your Pamela. You know what I writ about Mr Williams; and if you, and my mother, and my own heart acquit me, what care I? – I had almost said. But these are after reflections. At the reading of his letter, I was quite broken-hearted.
>
> Alas for me! said I to myself, what a fate is mine, to be thus thought artful, and forward, and ungrateful! when all I intended was to preserve my innocence; and when all the poor little shifts, which his superior and wicked wit and cunning have rendered ineffectual, were forced upon me in my own necessary defence! (Richardson, *Pamela*, [1740–1] 1980, p. 204)

Drama is represented by the retelling of events through Pamela's consciousness: note the representation of movement and contesting directions when ostensibly the

heroine's position is static. There is an element of self-interrogation in Pamela's monologic justification which is reinforced by the colloquialism of language, questions, rhetorical flourishes, exclamation marks and varying typographical styles; all intended to reinforce a sense of immediacy and conflict when structurally the heroine is retelling past events. However, the impression is not clearly one of retrospective narrative. The drama recreated through Pamela's projections of herself is one of active participation. By including commentary on retrospective events by comments such as 'I had almost said' and 'these are after reflections', Richardson promotes Pamela as an active commentator on her own virtue and as a passive spectator providing commentary on what she wished to have said. By these means, Richardson attempts to represent Pamela as an exemplar of passive femininity, whose role as an active proponent of these virtues is at once undercut by her writerly silence. Femininity as an ideal provided novelists with a number of problems, the most obvious of which being how to represent passivity as a virtue while needing a heroine who does things in order to provide a story line. Pamela's letter-writing style, with its immediacy and often inelegant drawing attention to her own fictionalizing on past events, is the way Richardson attempts to promote feminine passivity as an active virtue.

Whilst Richardson's epistolary method brought a new level of psychological realism to the novel it also proved problematic with regards to plausibility. Contrast Richardson's approach with Smollett's in *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), where the epistolary form is expanded in order to shed an ironic light on the act of interpretation. The basic difficulty contesting Richardson's realistic imperative is that everything has to come from Pamela's letters. For example, consider the characterization of Mr B— and Mrs Jewkes – on one level these are psychologically realistic (given Pamela's mental state) but neither is realistic as a three-dimensional character. Following the logic of the text the reader becomes unclear about these characters; if Mr B— is as bad as Pamela depicts him then why does she marry him, and if we accept her reasons then we are forced to question whether such a radical reformation of character is possible? While the reader has to conclude that there may be other valid points of view (which counteract Pamela's reading), these are never given full voice. Also the situation that Pamela finds herself in and the outcome of her trials is highly unrealistic: the basic premise of a young innocent woman imprisoned by an evil tempter and his cohort predicts the structures of gothic fantasy and draws upon a tradition of fairy-tale and romance in a highly improbable restoration of the heroine through marriage.

Letters xxxi–xxxii reveal most glaringly where Richardson's realism is still finding its feet. Pamela asserts her full awareness of her dangerous situation and need to escape ('I'm in an evident hurry!', p. 121) and then goes on to write 'VERSES *on my going away*'. Obviously here Richardson's desire to underline his moral message works against plausibility. By page 123 (same letter) the epistolary medium breaks down completely.

> It is also to be observed, that the messenger of her letters to her father, who so often pretended business that way, was an implement in his master's hands, and employed by him for that purpose; and always gave her letters first to him, and his master used to open

> and read them, and then send them on; by which means, as he hints to her [as she observes in one of her letters, p116], he was no stranger to what she wrote. Thus every way was the poor virgin beset. (*Pamela*, p. 123)

At this point the novelist is forced to interject and give the reader additional information necessary to understand the plot.

By the 1740s there is a discernible change in the current of feeling reflected in a concern for literature to be a conduit whereby the reader's relationship with the text becomes one of empathy and moral improvement. Richardson does not instigate such changes; rather he reflects broader cultural trends and develops on the achievements of women novelists who use romance to subvert the peripheral subject position of women within public discourse. With Richardson the novel becomes respectable. However, these changes do not go unchallenged: for example, Fielding's novels and Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759) maintain an adherence to Augustan principles and reveal a mistrust of the subjectivity inherent in sentimental fiction in general.

Much of the mid-century debate regarding the form and purpose of the novel revolved around discussion of the respective merits and shortcomings of Richardson's and Fielding's fiction. Both writers were viewed as establishing divergent paths for the novel to develop upon. Dr Johnson famously phrased the moral debate regarding the contesting merits of Richardsonian and Fieldingesque fiction as being 'between a man who knew how a watch was made, and a man who tells the hour by looking at the dial-pate' (Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, ed. R.W. Chapman, corr. J.D. Fleeman, Oxford University Press, London, p. 389). Elsewhere, Johnson voices widespread anxieties regarding novel-reading and the role models provided by mid-century fiction (see *The Rambler*, 31 March 1750). In its broadest terms the division between Richardson and Fielding is represented by insider and outsider perspectives, but such distinctions are also at times undermined by narrative patterns which subvert avowed moral intentions. Now, turn to Fielding and assess his different approach to novel writing and its claim to moral instruction.

Fielding

Henry Fielding (1707–54) was a professional writer who combined a literary career with a legal profession as a Bow Street magistrate, Justice of the Peace for Westminster and Middlesex (from 1748 and 1749) and magistrate for the Western Assizes. Fielding's literary career reflects the developing role of the writer in the eighteenth century and the situation by mid-century when the writer now claimed professional status and recognition as such (see Dr Johnson's famous letter to the Earl of Chesterfield on the insufficiency of patrons which voiced the demise of the patronage system of literary production). Fielding started his literary career as a poet and dramatist. The strong vein of political satire to be found in his plays *The Grub Street Opera* (1731), *The Historical Register* (1737) and *Eurydice Hissed* (1737) did much to incur government displeasure and inaugurate the Licencing Act (1737).

Thereafter Fielding turned to journalism, satires, social pamphlets and novel-writing, producing *Shamela*, an anti-novel, in 1741, *Joseph Andrews* (1742), *Tom Jones* (1749) and *Amelia* (1751). In his novels Fielding attempts to create an amalgam which could combine satire and comedy in order to create a new language that he could call his own and a mode that would reflect contemporary life while retaining the force and wit produced by the Scriblerians and prominent in his own plays. Indeed, dramatic structures are deeply embedded in Fielding's novels.

Tom Jones does not offer the hero of the title as the narrative centre. Consider some of the reasons why this should be? The eclectic and ambitious plotting formula (including picaresque, romance, epic, and journey formats) might at first lead the reader to consider whether Fielding is sure of exactly what he wants to do in this novel. It is through the narrator–reader relationship that Fielding converts what might otherwise have been a disparate conglomeration of stylistic strands into a social reading experience. And, in this stress on art as a sociable exercise, Fielding reflects his debt to Augustan values. This is a very different reading experience from the ones we encounter in a Richardson or Defoe novel.

The most important character in *Tom Jones* is the narrator. It is through the omniscient third-person narrator that the reader gains knowledge or is denied information.

> THE reader will be pleased to remember, that, at the beginning of the second book of this history, we gave him a hint of our intention to pass over several large periods of time, in which nothing happened worth of being recorded in a chronicle of this kind.
>
> In so doing, we do not only consult our own dignity and ease but the good and advantage of the reader... (Fielding, *Tom Jones*, [1749] 1966, Book III, Chapter 1, p. 121)

With Fielding's *Tom Jones* we often get the impression of the narrator treading a fine line between actuality and fiction. The narrator directs the reader in the ways to react and interpret. In Book x, Chapter 8 the reader is asked to 'be pleased to remember' and 'to look a little back'. Here life as fiction and life as actuality (outside the covers of the novel) are mixed. Is the reader to look back in 'real times' or back through the pages of the book? The ambivalence here suggests an attempt at patterning wherein life and fiction corroborate while still acknowledging the essentially artificial basis of fiction. Note the narrator's varied use of tenses in Book x, Chapter 8 as he describes events which have led up to this point but treats the immediate events as though they were happening before his eyes. Possibly here we have an example of where Fielding's dramatic training transposes his fiction – the overall impression is one of fictional descriptions as an ongoing performance.

Now, read on and consider other passages of narrative commentary in the novel. Note the tone of playfulness established between narrator and reader. The digressive tendency of the narrator seems to draw away from development of plot line or character analysis. This is deliberate. What is being offered is an essentially external view of character: Tom Jones represents mankind, essentially well intentioned but flawed and apt to fail. The narrative relationship forces the reader to adopt an overview rather than any subjective relationship between character and reader. The

narrator functions to promote a deliberate comic distancing (consider the significance of the stage-life analogy in Book VII, Chapter 1) and ensure that the reader never gets close to the drama being enacted on the page.

Now, turn to the chapter headings and note how the author is directing our responses. We are encouraged to be variably 'surprised', 'puzzled', 'brought into danger', offered 'five pages of paper', or 'little or nothing', withheld information from, allowed to confirm our suspicions, congratulate ourselves on our correct reading and, finally, bid farewell. Why should the author draw such attention to his own ingenuity, show us his literary cleverness so blatantly, and disrupt the story-line by offering tangential readings? One function of these devices is to make clear to the reader that it is not the author's intention to immerse us wholly in his fictional world. Another function is to promote a comic relationship between text and reader. These strategies are intended to establish a reader relationship with the text that is public and humorous rather than private and confessional.

Fielding's intention to 'classicize' the novel is reflected in his drawing upon epic themes and the framework of epic to offer comment on his own times. *Tom Jones* (1749) offers a vision that is panoramic – the novel takes the reader on a romp around the countryside and in the process enacts a latter-day Odyssey with the intention of offering an expansive view of the contemporary culture. In this novel Fielding exploits the epic convention of the journey as a metaphor for discovery. Mock heroic scenes (see Partridge's battle with his wife, the feast at Upton) are primarily intended to be comic; what is being mocked is not the values of classical literature, but the heroic diminishment of latter-day life. In *Tom Jones* we are offered a commentary on England of 1745, the love story of Tom Jones and Sophie Western, and a fairy-tale unravelling of disguised paternity.

Fielding's classicizing on the picaresque tradition is part of a programme to give the novel status, to bring the genre within the remit of 'polite' literature. His novels (rather than offering anything radically new which rejects the literature of the past) reflect a desire to make the novel a continuation of established forms and proven achievements in literature. Fielding is often termed a conservative-innovator. Whilst inheriting Swift's and Pope's literary values, Fielding was forced to acknowledge that times had changed since they wrote. In his fiction Fielding is attempting to make the novel a medium suitable to transmit classical values and represent the contemporary world.

Burney

Fanny Burney (1752–1840) is best known as a novelist but she was also a prolific letter-writer, diary and journal-keeper. Her *Early Diary 1768–1778* (1889) reveals the pressures combatant upon a woman with literary aspirations in the late eighteenth century and offers a lively portrait of the social and literary world of the day; and the later *Diary and Letters...1778–1840* (1842–6) recounts Burney's experiences as a court official and offers a first-hand account of the Napoleonic era.

All of Burney's novels take as their theme the important marriage choice of the heroine but there is also a noticeable enlargement of scale, extended geographical range, and accentuated analysis of social convention from *Evelina* (1778), *Cecilia* (1782) and *Camilla* (1796) to *The Wanderer: or Female Difficulties* (1814). Burney's importance as one of the first 'respectable' professional woman novelists is reflected by the income she gained from her works (*Evelina* sold for 20 guineas, *Cecilia* for £250, the copyright of *Camilla* earned her £1,000, whilst her last novel *The Wanderer* earned her £1,500). Burney offered a model for later women novelists (cf. Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell) of a 'respectable' writer who established literature as a viable profession for the genteel woman and one whose success did much to counteract the risqué reputation associated with women writers of the Restoration and early eighteenth century (cf. Aphra Behn, Delivierie Manely, Eliza Haywood). In many respects (in both subject matter and status) Fanny Burney predicts the position of the nineteenth-century woman novelist.

Evelina (1778) was published anonymously and was an immediate popular success. The theme of Fanny Burney's first novel is that of a young lady's entry into society. *Evelina* in theme and context reveals a debt to Eliza Haywood's *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751) with the emphasis on romantic love and the choices open to marriageable young women. The plot of *Evelina* is quite simple. As the full title reveals, it is the story of 'The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World'. What Burney offers is a contemporary version of the Cinderella story. The irony unmasked in *Evelina* is the duplicity in eighteenth-century sexual politics. While the reward for the heroine remaining pure is a happy marriage, Burney's analysis of social life reveals that it is this very trait that leaves women vulnerable. Whilst Burney's novels represent strong females who function in their own right as centres of interest, they are also shown as having to seek masculine approval and protection in order to maintain their purity. Purity becomes an ambivalent fictional and social ideal. Burney's own immersion in the ideology of romantic love is reflected in her maintenance of purity as an ideal in her fiction. But this is tempered by a developing awareness of the limitations and restrictions that society places on the value of innocence. Her last novel, subtitled 'or Female Difficulties', emphasizes this theme of vulnerability. (See Unit 23, pp. 615–16, for a further discussion of *Evelina.*)

Cecilia, the heroine of Burney's second novel, enters the world of fashionable life, in the phrase of Margaret Anne Doody, as a parodic man (Introduction to the World's Classic series, p. xvi). Like Evelina, her forerunner, she is also an orphan, but Cecilia is economically independent. The father figures in the form of her guardians all prove to be ineffectual, if not openly threatening. Like *Evelina* the world of *Cecilia* (1782) is one in which women are vulnerable due to their innocence, but equally a world in which purity is the mark of their worth. The masquerade scene (a trope in eighteenth-century fiction used to offer carnivalesque inversions of the social order) reveals the true position of Cecilia in her society.

> Her expectations of entertainment were not only fulfilled but surpassed; the variety of dresses, the medley of characters, the quick succession of figures, and the ludicrous mixture of groupes, kept her attention unwearied: while the conceited efforts at wit, the

> total thoughtlessness of consistency, and the ridiculous incongruity of the language with the appearance, were incitements to surprise and diversions without end. Even the local cant of, *Do you know me? Who are you?* and *I know you*; with the sly pointing of the finger, the arch nod of the head, and the pert squeak of the voice, though wearisome to those who frequent such assemblies, were, to her unhackneyed observation, additional subjects of amusement. (Burney, *Cecilia*, [1782] 1990, p. 106)

The assembly displays an array of costumes revealing characters' true natures (the devil and chimney-sweep for example) and masks which suspend social decorum and incite licence through the taking on of other identities. What the masquerade reveals is that there is no one way of interpreting – identities are fluctuating and unstable. Naming (initially introduced through the theme of the codicil to the will) should provide a means for definition. At the masquerade the arbitrariness of naming is uncovered, and for the heroine an experience of the fluctuating nature of female identity highlights how femininity proves to be a precarious defence.

The masquerade scene is thematically important and forms a base in the novel for variant readings of appearance and reality. Cecilia is the only person present at the masquerade who is not in costume. On a psychological level the scene gives expression to the heroine's vulnerable position within society and the paradoxes of purity and knowledge which culminate in the mad scene (Vol. V, Book X, Chapter VII). Thematically this scene is the outcome of Delvine's misinterpretation of Cecilia's motives and meanings. The masquerade scene is given full significance in Cecilia's flight into gothic escape when female identity and non-identity take on roaming expression. Whilst the logic of the plot makes this scene the outcome of Cecilia's fear of violence being done in her name, the text reveals alternative readings expressing real female fears regarding woman's non-identity in social terms.

To understand the work of eighteenth-century women novelists, it is essential to have some awareness of the context in which they lived and wrote, and the restrictions placed upon them as writers. As the century progressed literature by women attained a degree of authority by conforming to established ideas regarding what female style, subject matter and message should be. The term 'familiar style' or 'feminine style', an idea popularized by Richardson, was a highly codified term expressing cultural assumptions regarding women in general. It was assumed that women's fictional style naturally expressed feelings artlessly and simply. In other words, women's fiction was considered confessional and not the production of studied application. However, women's experience could not be neatly pocketed within such stylistic and cultural generalities. Burney's novels, in their rendering of how a young heroine should behave, reveal the subject's essential powerlessness and offer a subtle expression of the unfairness of this situation. The reward for the heroine in Burney's fiction is marriage, but the texts reveal the diminishment that women have to undergo to achieve this status.

Burney writes in a period of revolutionary change and this context informs her fiction. She married an impoverished French émigré in 1793 (Alexandre d'Arblay) and experienced first-hand the ferment of continental unrest. Burney's response to the

radical ideas and protest engendered by the social upheavals of the closing decades of the century was one of conservative feminism (see the portrait of Elinor Jorrdorel in *The Wanderer*). All of Burney's novels end by supporting marriage as the best alternative for the lone woman, but they also chart a darkening vision of the perils and snares that threaten the single woman in a hostile world.

An important theme in Burney's fiction is a young woman's entry into society. Her fiction can be read as novels of passage which reveal subtexts of anxieties and fear regarding the cost of conformity. The solution that the novelist proposes is marriage. How should we read such a conclusion? On one level, Burney reflects a widespread eighteenth-century tendency to incorporate romance structures within realistic narrative, a tendency that was assumed to be particularly prevalent in women novelists due to their saturation in the ideology of romantic love. Thus, it could be argued that Burney's fiction is a conservative endorsement of patriarchal culture, but she is also being realistic in her appraisal of the limited options and the vulnerable position of the single woman in eighteenth-century society.

Burney's texts, with their realistic imperatives and romantic solutions, pull in two directions. Their realistic assessment of a woman's position follows a strong didactic emphasis in eighteenth-century women's fiction which is itself supported by conduct literature of the period, while their vein of wish-fulfilment and the solutions proposed suggest attempts to escape such experience in their advocacy of romance structures. There is a double edge to Burney's fiction (and eighteenth-century women's fiction in general) of both endorsement and protest. The contradictions inherent in the texts offer the reader a means to analyze the inscription of the woman writer in the construction of gender roles and their ideological imperatives during the eighteeth century.

Austen

Jane Austen (1775–1817) by comparison with Fanny Burney appears to have led an uneventful life: she was born, the sixth of seven children, in Steventon, Hampshire (1775) where her father was the incumbent rector. In 1801 the family moved to Bath and later, after her father's death, to Southampton (1806); from there she moved to Chawton, seat of her brother's estate in 1809 (and where *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion* were written), and in 1817 died of Addison's disease. The period when Austen wrote her major fiction was a time of revolutionary political upheavals, rapid industrialization, a transitional phase in literature and currents of thought (from the social orientation of the eighteenth-century novel to Romanticism with its stress on the isolated and alienated individual), and a period of renewed radical feminism in the 1790s with the works of Mary Wollstonecraft. Modern criticism has rewritten the popular nineteenth-century seamless image of the novelist as an endorser of the status quo but there is still debate regarding how far Austen ingested the radical ideas of her times. For example, Marilyn Butler (1975) sees Austen as a conservative thinker writing in reaction to the radicalism of novels in the 1790s and as one who is in reaction to the traditions she inherits. Another view is offered by Meenakshi Mukherjee

(1991) who suggests that her heroines' attitudes and actions accord with Mary Wollstonecraft's views on female education: for Mukherjee, Austen's novels are 'particularly striking for their refusal to eroticise female inanition and to promote the cult of vulnerability' (p. 10).

Walter Scott in the nineteenth century praises Austen's novels for their 'exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting'. Scott is reflecting a commonplace belief that Austen's fiction instigates a new type of novel in the nineteenth century. What Austen's emphasis on manners creates is certain changes of focus in the novel, while at the same time drawing upon a tradition of eighteenth-century women's writing. The plots of all of Austen's novels are based on making the correct marriage; within terms of a conservative gentry ideology this theme becomes a social rather than merely a personal decision. In an Austen novel, words and modes of discourse take on a new significance as indications of how characters will act. Often Austen makes her characters expose themselves through their own words; a moral evaluation is implicit in modes of expression rather than through direct authorial or narrational comment (compare with the omniscient Fielding narrator). While both Austen and Fielding adopt a comic and ironic mode, Austen's ironic emphasis places significance upon the localities of language and situation rather than on narrative overview.

In all of Austen's fiction the established vantage point is that of the heroine, but there is a considerable distance between author and heroine. Austen does not identify herself with any of her heroines; instead her relationship with them is ironic. In *Emma* (1816), the heroine consistently misreads the significance of actions and intentions and her education takes the form of a gradual enlightenment whereby Emma faces her own shortcomings, which ultimately result in a re-evaluation and clarification of moral values.

> EMMA WOODHOUSE, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her. (Austen, *Emma*, [1816] 1966, p. 37)

This is the opening of *Emma* where Austen introduces the reader to the heroine. Ostensibly the narrative suggests praise, but the language is quantitative: 'seemed', 'some', 'nearly' all imply faint praise, a measured, reserved appraisal of the heroine's qualities.

> The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened allay to her many enjoyments. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her. (*Emma*, p. 37)

The opening paragraphs involve terms of diminution to ironically reveal the aggrandizing self-image of the heroine. The comedy of the situation derives from the reader being made aware and encouraged not to identify with the heroine but align herself/himself with the authorial ironic reading. Austen's conservative values are

represented through her notion of conduct which insists that the possession of property (the traditional basis of gentry status) exists in the same broad moral plane as good manners and transparent speech. Austen's irony points to the fact that Emma Woodhouse is not fulfilling these duties.

All of Austen's heroines are championed or ironically depreciated on a scale of their discriminatory powers. Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* (1814) holds an ambiguous position within the social hierarchy of the house. However, in the pivotal play scene it is Fanny who assesses correctly the value of others. The title of this novel indicates that Austen's focus is on the country house as a symbol of values which the traditional holders of property prove to be sadly insufficient in maintaining. Austen is an apologist for the gentry class but also its critic when she deems that the values traditionally associated with their status are not being adhered to.

The term most often used to describe Austen's works is the novel of 'manners'. The cultural context of the turn-of-the-century novel suggests a much broader focus than the term 'manners' first implies. In hierarchical and highly formalized societies manners denote moral positions and therefore carry social implications. Manners, then, in Austen's fiction involves a moral code. While the world of her fiction is the country house and one or two gentry families and their interactions, the significance of their behaviour is intended to imply a microcosmic critique of the public world. The problem that an Austen novel investigates is how a scheme of values can be articulated when traditional authority has been undermined. Such changes were not new: at the beginning of the century Defoe notes with pride in his *Tour* the infiltration of gentry status by bourgeois wealth, and at mid-century Richardson's *Clarissa* investigates the significance of gentry status upon bourgeois morality. While Defoe and Richardson both write from the position of bourgeois spokesmen, Austen's focus is that of a gentry apologist realizing the full effects of these changes.

Austen's fiction is often viewed in terms of an exemplary model of woman's didactic fiction which emphasizes personal relationships in the private context of the house. Such an emphasis has in the past received unfavourable critical responses, and her texts have been denigrated for their limited range and contrasted unfavourably with the panoramic focus of the Fieldingesque and Dickensian novel. However, Austen's subject matter is a result of choice rather than a reflection of her status as a woman of limited experience and knowledge. Her own family would have provided ample source material for the inclusion of public themes of the day in her fiction if she so chose: for example she had brothers who were involved in the public affairs of the day and relatives who experienced the French Revolution first hand. That Austen chose instead to focus on woman's marriage choices from a specific class vantage point suggests that she saw personal relationships as the foundation of cultural attitudes and actions. A feminist criticism would argue that the personal is political (a view arguably underscored by Austen's fiction), and also claim that the male valuation of domestic experience has led to the marginalization of woman's texts from the critical canon. Austen's fiction builds upon a very orthodox perception of what women should be and do, but her status as a writer should be judged against her ability to use these conditions as the focus for much broader notions of truth and morality.

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