Connotations
Vol. 34 (2025)

Now Tell Me What Else It Means: Gender, Genre, and Canonicity in Contemporary Fiction

FRANCESCA PIERINI

Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate, Vol. 34 (2025): 31-61.
DOI: 10.25623/conn034-pierini-1

This article is the first entry in a debate on "*Now Tell Me What Else It Means:* Gender, Genre, and Canonicity in Contemporary Fiction" (http://www.connotations.de/debate/now-tell-me-what-else-it-means-gender-genre-and-canonicity-in-contemporary-fiction).
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Abstract

This article analyses three different texts—a short story, a novel, and a book chapter—that each focuses on a young female protagonist who strives for a modicum of emancipation and agency: A. S. Byatt's *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1998), Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), and Jennifer Donnelly's book chapter "Anne of Cleves," from the young adult historical fictional work *Fatal Throne: The Wives of Henry VIII Tell All* (2018).

It specifically looks at the texts' critique of the relations of power inscribed within the practice of the artistic profession. As the texts under scrutiny focus on the unbalanced gender relationships underlying the artistic process, they all mobilize pictorial perspective as the most accomplished (male) expression of a worldview in which women are "made," celebrated, and manipulated, in function of a specific artistic and/or political design.

> "We read well, and with pleasure, what we already know how to read."
> (Annette Kolodny, "Dancing through the Minefield"12)

Introduction

A. S. Byatt's *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1998) and Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999) have been mostly read as instances of ekphrastic narratives that, in quintessentially postmodern fashion, shift the reader's attention from the work of art they draw inspiration from, to fictional interpretations of its context of creation and of artistic intention (see, for example, Bremm 40; Cibelli 583; White 213). The reader experiences the creation of the painting along with the protagonist of the story—which is also the main subject of the work of art at the centre of the narrative.[1]

The third text this article examines is Jennifer Donnelly's book chapter "Anne of Cleves" from the young adult historical fictional work *Fatal Throne: The Wives of Henry VIII Tell All* (2018).[2] Donnelly's account of Anne's marriage to Henry VIII, told by the queen herself on her deathbed, reflects upon the authority of artists as figures possessing the prerogative to depict but also intervene with reality.

If the first two texts focus on celebrated works of art of the Western tradition, the third retells, for a young readership, one of the most popular pages of English history. What makes these specific three texts relevant to considerations on gender, genre, and canonicity, is their critique of the unbalanced relationships that have sustained, over the centuries, the artistic profession, making evident the male privileges and prerogatives it entailed. The three authors in question not only make their heroines "return the gaze"; they appropriate the artist's perspective, each time reducing the painters of these canonical works of art to mere characters in their narratives. It will be argued that their strategy is not merely one of telling the other side of the story, with a focus on female humiliation and existential frustration behind the creation of these works; more poignantly, by inscribing the works of art along with their creators into their own narrative perspectives, the authors question canonical work at the same time as they celebrate it, bringing to light motif of subjugation, control, and exploitation latent within it.

The Short Story

A. S. Byatt's short story "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary," from the collection *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998), creates an imagined context for the painting *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1618) by Diego Velázquez:

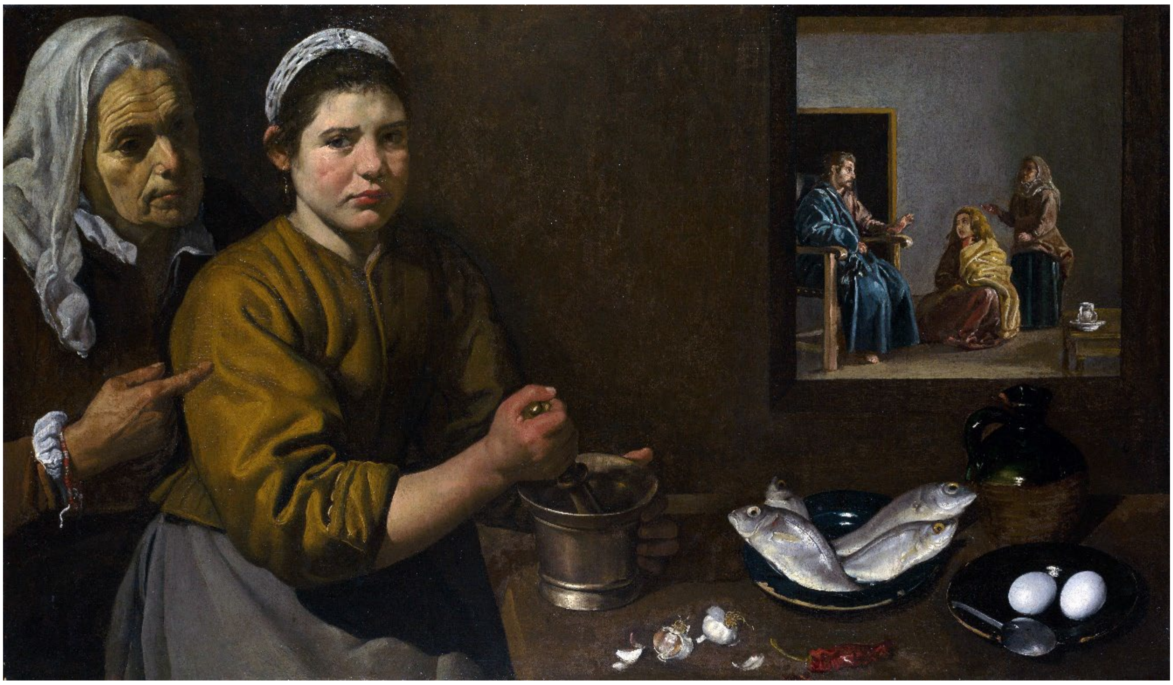

Fig. 1. Diego Velázquez, *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1618). Oil on canvas. 60.0 x 103.5. National Gallery, London. Reproduced with permission.
https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/diego-velazquez-christ-in-the-house-of-martha-and-mary

In the foreground Velázquez paints an everyday kitchen scene. A maid pounds garlic in a mortar, and other ingredients lie scattered on the table: eggs, a shrivelled red pepper, fish—a traditional symbol associated with Christ—and an earthenware jug probably containing olive oil. An older woman points towards the girl, as if

> giving her instructions or telling her off for working too hard, or she may be drawing our attention to the figures in the background.

Byatt imagines a busy kitchen in which Dolores, a young and talented cook, works under the supervision of Concepción, an older woman. A young painter—a fictional Velázquez—is also at work in the same kitchen, observing (and occasionally eating) the dishes the women prepare, portraying what he sees.

Dolores is a woman of "stalwart build and […] solid arms" (Byatt 219) who feels that beauty, wealth, and time for leisure are a constellation of privileges that belong to a social caste she will never be part of. The narrative begins with Dolores trying to conceal the anger and pain brought about by such awareness, and by her status of servitude that does not allow her to have any time for herself.

There is an added dimension to the painting—a text within the text—an open frame on the right upper end of it that depicts the biblical episode of "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary" as described by Luke in the *New Testament*. The biblical episode, as well as the kitchen scene foregrounded in the painting, suggest different elaborations on the notion of manual vs. intellectual labour. Behind the biblical scene, another door opens, suggesting an infinitely recurring sequence of possible instantiations of the dichotomy.

The painting, therefore, employs the device of *mise en abyme*, here understood as "any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it" (Dällenbach 8). Byatt's story relies on this strategy too. As the narrative focuses on a (pictorial) text that "interrupts itself" to open up different narrative levels, over the course of a conversation with Dolores, the painter will disrupt the linearity of his reasoning in order to tell the story of Martha and Mary.

In the same way as Velázquez opens a window onto the biblical story after which the painting is named, so that "in splitting levels of reality across the canvas, the artist (therefore the viewer) is able to transcend time and space and move from the material to the spiritual in one image" (Boyd 72), Byatt's Velázquez deviates from the linearity of his conversation with Dolores to open up a corresponding "space" for the biblical episode to be recounted within the main narrative. In Byatt's short story, intertextuality works as reciprocal commentary—from the Bible's discourse to Velázquez's art—ultimately comprehending, within its hermeneutic circle, Byatt's writing itself.

Byatt rejects the traditional interpretation of the biblical episode, according to which contemplative life is superior to active life. As June Sturrock points out, she elaborates the dichotomy into complementary terms: two different kinds of active life (the contemplative and the physical), opposed to a passive life (see Sturrock 474). The passage below articulates—through the words of her fictional Velázquez—Byatt's interpretation of the biblical episode in response to Dolores's frustration at seeing her skills unappreciated and her creations carelessly consumed:

> The divide is not between the servants and the served, between the leisured and the workers, but between those who are interested in the world and its multiplicity of forms and forces, and those who merely subsist, worrying or yawning [...]. The world is full of light and life, and the true crime is not to be interested in it [...] The Church teaches that Mary is the contemplative life, which is higher than Martha's way, which is the active way. But any painter must question, which is which? And a cook also contemplates mysteries. (226-27)

Through the words of the painter, Byatt argues for the spiritual importance of creative work, which begins with the capacity to observe (contemplate), and continues with an imaginative and personal elaboration of reality. In creative work—painting as well as cooking—contemplation and action are reconciled and made complementary to one another. Velázquez tells Dolores, "the world is full of light and life, and the true crime is not to be interested in it. You have a way in. Take it. It may incidentally be a way out, too, as all skills are" (226).

One could argue, however, that it is not the possession of skills that creates a chance for emancipation but the social recognition that goes with them. Dolores might possess extraordinary talents, but, being a busy servant, she executes them without being able to reflect upon them. The possibilities that come with her talents must be explained to her by someone who, by virtue of his gender, profession, and the social status that these circumstances imply, has had the time to reflect, someone who has been enabled to use his mental faculties: intellectual, imaginative, creative…

In other words, Dolores is a cook, whereas the painter enjoys a social status that usually goes hand in hand with a *scholastic disposition*—defined by Bourdieu as "time liberated from practical occupations and preoccupations" (*Pascalian Meditations* 13)—without which one, quite simply, does not have the possibility to elaborate upon reality, creating a meaningful relationship with oneself and the rest of the world.[3] Scholastic disposition, Bourdieu explains, is "the precondition for scholastic exercises and activities removed from immediate necessity, such as sport, play, the production and contemplation of art and all forms of gratuitous speculation with no other end than themselves" (13).

In a book chapter dedicated to Byatt's and Chevalier's texts—among other *Künstlerromane* published at the end of the last century—Roberta White observes that Byatt's is "one of the several stories and novels in which traditional domestic work of women—cooking, cleaning, spinning, weaving, and sewing—unexpectedly opens a door to the world of art in one way or another" (White 213). It should be emphasized, however, that the narrative focus is not on introducing the female protagonist to such a world but on exploring the contradictions at play in the encounter between female cooks/domestic workers and artists. While both sets of professions require competence and dedication, the former realm in general relies on dull labour, repetition, and daily consumption (physicality). The latter, socially respected, is intended for (intellectual) contemplation.

White further argues that Byatt's and Chevalier's "protagonists are to a greater or lesser degree transformed by discovering art," adding that "they move from dark spaces into the light and they come to see with renewed vision" (214). This reading, however, seems to trace a movement towards understanding and self-realization. In truth, in both narratives, the two components (understanding and self-realization) remain severed from one another. Both protagonists come to better understand their skills and potentialities, but, at the same time, they also learn that the (low) position they occupy in society means that they must contrive ways to confront the fact that such skills will not be cultivated or fulfilled. Consequently, although White's interpretation, according to which both narratives make evident the principle that "there is not a strict dividing line between the domestic arts and serious art" (214), is entirely plausible, it does not take into consideration the fact that such boundary, however arbitrary, *is constitutive of both realms*, and, as a necessary precondition for the very existence of a (artistic and literary) canon, is the conceptual axis around which Byatt's, and, as we will shortly see, Chevalier's narrative, pivot. In other words, as both narratives bring into focus the arbitrary—but unsurmountable—boundaries dividing high art from domestic work, authority/subjection, male artist/female servant, it is important to clarify how they resolve them. Byatt's does so through a rehabilitating gesture (manual and intellectual labour are both creative) that White takes up: "at least the painter, by granting her [Dolores] such recognition, offers a challenge to the hierarchic thinking that keeps her at the bottom of the scale of human esteem both in the world she inhabits and in her own mind. He treats her as a colleague who works towards mastery of her own craft as a cook […]" (White 215).

Yet it could be argued, that the painter's gesture of legitimising Dolores's work as creative, however genuinely intended, remains condescending precisely because, rather than "offering a challenge to hierarchic thinking," it confirms its validity through reintegrating Dolores's work within a taxonomy of values that remains in place. This is how Bourdieu describes the gesture of rehabilitation:

> Just as some celebrations of femininity simply reinforce male domination, so this ultimately very comfortable way of respecting the 'people', which under the guise of exalting the working class, helps to enclose it in what it is by converting privation into a choice or an elective accomplishment, provides all the profits of a show of subversive, paradoxical generosity, while leaving things

> as they are, with one side in possession of its truly cultivated culture (or language), which is capable of absorbing its own distinguished subversion, and the other with its culture or language devoid of any social value and subject to abrupt devaluations. (*Pascalian Meditations* 76)

This is to say: however much Dolores's work is valued by the painter, and however much she comes to see her own work as valuable, the social hierarchy in which they work remains unchallenged. The social capital associated with painting is higher than the one associated with cooking. Therefore, the violence at work in the painter's discourse is the bracketing out of the social, and the narrow emphasis on the individual experience of the cook.

The educated creator, with time at his disposal to elaborate a vision of the world, inserts Dolores within it, and by his skills, but also authority, is able to transform her ordinariness into art, as he does with the fish and the other foods. Moreover, the primacy of his prestige and talent over those of Dolores is reiterated at the very same moment as he makes the gesture of including her. White observes: "The painter works with the visual, but, as he reminds Dolores, she works with several other senses as well: taste, smell, and touch" (216). Perhaps unintentionally, the fictional Velázquez offers Dolores admission to the *club des artistes* while reclaiming, only for himself, its most important sphere.[4] It should be reiterated that, however subtly hidden, the value and accessibility of scholastic disposition are very much at the centre of Byatt's and—as we are about to see—Chevalier's narratives. Read from this perspective, Chevalier's novel makes the precise point that skills and talent alone are not sufficient to emancipate oneself.

The Novel

Griet is a reserved and perceptive young girl, with a vivid intuition for aesthetic form, the arrangement of objects, and colours. Just like Dolores, she creates artefacts with food, arranging vegetables in beautiful compositions that last the time of a soup preparation. When her father, a tile artist living in Delft, loses his sight, Griet has to work to support her family. It is decided that she will serve as maid in Johannes Vermeer's household, an environment saturated with tensions.

Griet manages to navigate the household's conflicts because her approach to life has been, since childhood, strongly grounded in reality: "I always stopped the game, too inclined to see things as they were to be able to think up things that were not" (13). Griet makes her attentiveness and pragmatic nature work to her advantage, keeping her thoughts to herself but consistently studying the new environment, the characters that inhabit it, and the interactions between them.

Nevertheless, as a female of low social status, Griet immediately becomes the object of other people's designs on her: a servant of lower status to Tanneke, an older maid raised within the household, a sexual object to Vermeer's patron Pieter van Ruijven, and a prospective bride to Pieter, the son of a local butcher. Griet performs all her actions within a rigid web of external pressures; the reader perceives her as encased—framed—within other people's expectations of her long before Vermeer decides to portray her.

For a short time, Griet becomes apprenticed to Vermeer, learning to mix colours and prepare all the painter needs in order to create his art. She learns techniques that require the employment and development of her best skills—attention, precision, a keen practical and aesthetic sense—at the same time as she contributes to create something that, unlike laundry, cleaning, and cooking, will not need to be repeated the next day.

Momentarily infatuated with the possibilities her closeness to the painter might entail—knowledge, the pleasures of growth, and self-expression—Griet takes small steps towards overcoming her social circumstances. The narrative does not make explicit Griet's degree of awareness regarding her actions and intentions. Indeed, the opacity of human behaviour constitutes a key theme in the narrative, affiliating the novel to the coming-of-age genre, which frequently entails, for the protagonist, the recognition of reality as it is beyond its idealizations. As Franco Moretti maintains, such an act—recognizing reality as it is—

symbolizes consent, a figurative harmonious blending of the protagonist's values and aspirations with the larger social order in place (see Moretti 24).

Griet will learn that purity (of intentions, thoughts, and actions) is impossible to obtain, in the world of human relations as well as in art. Vermeer teaches this lesson to her:

> "Look out the window."
> I looked out. It was a breezy day, with clouds disappearing behind the New Church Tower.
> "What colour are those clouds?"
> "Why, white, sir."
> He raised his eyebrow slightly. "Are they?"
> I glanced at them. "And grey. Perhaps it will snow."
> "Come Griet, you can do better than that. Think of your vegetables."
> "My vegetables, sir?"
> He moved his head slightly. I was annoying him again. My jaw tightened.
> "Think of how you separated the whites. Your turnips and your onions—are they the same white?"
> Suddenly I understood. "No. The turnip has green in it, the onion yellow."
> "Exactly. Now, what colours do you see in the clouds?"
> "There is some blue in them," I said after studying them for a few minutes. "And—yellow as well. And there is some green!" I became so excited I actually pointed. I had been looking at clouds all my life, but I felt as if I saw them for the first time at that moment. (114)

Griet learns to recognize the colours that compose her idealized notion of purity. When the moment will come for Vermeer to choose—to protect his life and privilege or shield Griet from scandal and ruin—Griet, by looking attentively at the painter's face, will be able to tell apart from one another Vermeer's complex feelings for her, truly seeing the extent of his attachment beyond that impression of flawless goodness exemplified by the painter's hands; Griet often compares them to Pieter's, permanently stained with animal blood.

All characters in the novel are distinguished by complex motives: Vermeer takes a sincere interest in Griet, he is possibly attracted to her, but he also uses her, as a maid, an apprentice, and a muse. Pieter wants to marry Griet, but he also wants to be perceived as a rescuer, both by her and her family. Griet's mother loves her daughter while she pressures her to marry Pieter, so that her family might be relieved of their poverty. Griet, in turn, sincerely admires the painter, his detached attitude and sensitivity, but she also desires a degree of deliverance from her hard conditions. Rather than a measure of utilitarianism inherent in all human actions, Chevalier's point seems to be the importance of material circumstances that always characterize, and necessarily "pollute," human interactions.

The interactions between the realms of the high and low, painting and cleaning, male and female, ethereal and domestic, intellectual and sensual, the enduring and the ephemeral, are narrated as symbiotic and unequal. Vermeer embodies the first term of each dichotomy, and while he feeds on the second terms to sustain his art, he also relies on socially established exclusionary practices implemented for the sake of self-preservation, and the preservation of his work.

Once Griet understands that Vermeer is ready to sacrifice her to protect his work and the apparatus that sustains it, pragmatic as she is, she opts for safety, a little wealth, and some social status. She marries Pieter.[5] She knows that a part of herself will have to remain forever consigned to a world of untested possibilities in order to survive in the real one.

This is indeed a costly choice for Griet, one she will never verbalize but nonetheless reclaim. When, after many years of living and working as Pieter's wife, she gets summoned back to Vermeer's house following the death of the painter, she finds that Vermeer—in spite of dire financial circumstances—bequeathed to her the pearls worn in the portrait.

Griet's gesture of immediately selling them and settling, with the proceeds of the sale, Vermeer's debt to Pieter—contracted over years of buying meat on credit—might come across as excessively resolute and cold. It could be read, however, as a rejection of condescending guilt. Griet does not feel obliged to accept and/or show appreciation for the painter's remorseful gesture towards her. The pearls represent an apology for not having made a substantial effort to offer Griet a real possibility of advancement. Griet was briefly cheated (by herself as much as

Vermeer) into believing that her skills could emancipate her from her circumstances, but the painter—like Velázquez in Byatt's narrative—was never truly prepared to make space for her except on his canvas, as an object of his aesthetic vision.

Likewise, Griet cannot make space for the artist now that she has chosen another life, a life that daily stains her hands and clothes with blood. By settling Vermeer's debt, Griet rescinds in one gesture the last ties of obligation possibly connecting her to the painter as well as to Pieter. She reclaims as her own the choice of not having succumbed to her ambitions.

Unlike Dolores, she does not adapt herself to the painter's vision but creates one of her own. Seen from this perspective, giving up the pearls is Griet's own gesture of self-preservation, as the pearls would have been a painful reminder of lost prospects, of who she could have been if she had lived in a world that permitted her self-expression and individual growth.[6]

Byatt's short story and Chevalier's novel share, inscribed in the encounter between a maid/cook and an artist, a meditation on pictorial perspective as "the most accomplished realization of the scholastic vision" (Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* 1). Bourdieu argues that pictorial perspective "presupposes a single, fixed point of view—and therefore the adoption of the posture of a motionless spectator installed at a point—and also the use of a frame that cuts out, encloses and abstracts the spectacle with a rigorous, immobile boundary" (21-22).

The fixed position of the painter has just been remarked upon in relation to the first narrative: his role is not questioned, nor is his prerogative to create a perspective on the world. He selects, arranges, and creates on canvas. A painter's authority over a cook, or a maid, is granted by gender, education (scholastic disposition), status, and wealth, a constellation of privileges—of personal possibilities of self-realization vis-à-vis skills and material conditions—that needs to be preserved.

Girl with a Pearl Earring is very much about the boundary that separates Vermeer's position from the mundane world of everyday relations and preoccupations represented by the women in his family. Vermeer supports himself and his household by creating and selling the manufactured goods of his skills and scholastic vision. Griet's coming-of-age consists of her gradual understanding of the artistic process as not only reliant on the individual genius of the creator, but also on the upkeep of that very limit separating it from the rest of the world, not admitting intruders.

The novel, therefore, conveys a celebration of the artistic process—Chevalier describes Vermeer's painting techniques with a wealth of detail—as well as a critique of the unbalanced relations between genders that have traditionally sustained it. The narrative functions as (1) a "supplement to the painting" (Cibelli 590)—it significantly contributed to its popularisation for the larger public—as well as (2) a sociohistorical commentary on it.

In a way, one could argue that Chevalier "returns the favour" of using Vermeer the way (she imagines) the painter used Griet. The novel is written in symbiotic relation with the work of art, borrowing the painting's artistic and historical authority, appropriating its beauty. At the same time, after reading the novel, the portrait is returned to our imaginaries as more familiar than it used to be, but also tainted by the sad story of thwarted self-realization it tells.

Diverging from a conception of ekphrasis as essentially mimetic, or as a literary device merely intended to voice pictorial concerns, Grant Scott sees it as "a means of […] demonstrating dominance and power" (303). Seen from this perspective, Chevalier's claim over Vermeer's vision consists in assimilating his art to her own—narrative—vision.

According to Chevalier's standpoint, Vermeer's painting is not the expression of a self-assured appropriation, a taming of the other. If the portrait must be hidden from Catharina, Vermeer's wife, it is not only because it is proof of the time Vermeer and Griet spent together—Griet posing while wearing Catharina's jewellery; this is also because it clearly reveals an intimate bond between muse and painter, a reciprocal attraction much more than an authoritative arrangement of a female figure on canvas.

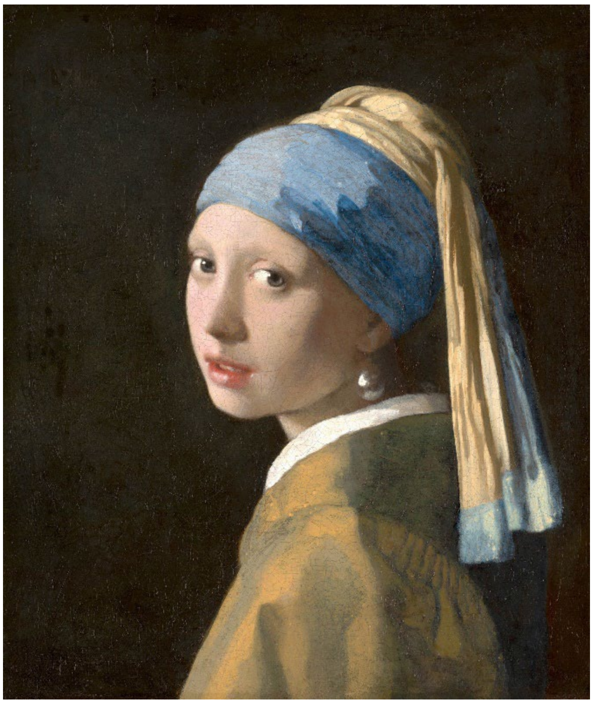

Fig. 2. Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl-Earring* (c. 1665). Oil on canvas. 44.5 x 39 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague. Reproduced with permission. https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/our-collection/artworks/670-girl-with-a-pearl-earring/#detail-data

Critics have faulted the novel with remaining conservative in spite of its potential for feminist revendications: "Chevalier does not have the character overturn female stereotypes or transcend her social class. Chevalier discusses Griet's nascent interest in art without making her the equal of Vermeer or Dutch women artists such as Judith Leyster or Rachel Ruysch" (Cibelli 586). But Chevalier's feminist gesture consists, in subtler postmodern fashion, in "artistically appropriating" the painter along with his muse, in consigning to posterity a portrayal of Vermeer created by a female artist (Chevalier, of course) who pays homage to his talent at the same time as she gets him off his pedestal of assumed perfection. In other words, Vermeer's painting might have been intended as the portrayal of a young girl in love. The novel, however, dramatizes a reciprocal rapport in which the painter, for a moment, vacillates from his position of impassive demiurge to come close to endangering his own status and privilege.

Indeed, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is not the parable of an individual transcending material circumstances to access an ideal world of self-fulfilment. On the contrary, it elaborates precisely upon those material circumstances, positing them at the centre of its narration. The result is a tale of frustrated self-realisation exposing the restricted—social and existential—possibilities available to a young maid in Holland in the seventeenth century.

Surrounding Griet is a significant array of female characters committed to enabling the artist's work—on which their own livelihood depends—while dealing with the frustration of perceiving their lives revolving around an activity they are excluded from.[7] When Griet fully understands that permanent access to the artist's world is denied to her, she sees the necessity to escape the pyramid of bitter unhappiness on which it rests, relegating others to a state of servitude (Tanneke), mortification (Catharina), utilitarian and pointless strategizing (Maria Thins and Cornelia).

Chevalier, unlike Byatt, is not condescending to her protagonist. Griet is not happy with a late apology and recognition (the pearls); she needs to live a life that does not completely oppress her. She creates it for herself, at the cost of sacrificing all her secret aspirations.

The Book Chapter

Anne of Cleves, the fourth wife of Henry VIII, is about to die of cancer of the womb. She is looked after by a young servant, Alice, who is devoted and caring. Besides her affection towards the Queen, Alice also exhibits a natural instinct for medical remedies. As Anne tells the reader: "I am fond of Alice. She is an honest girl with a nimble mind. Clean. A good worker. Shy, because of the large red birthmark that mars her face. The village boys taunt her about it. Her father worries no man will have her" (Donnelly 204).

Drugged with opioids, Anne encounters, in the course of her agony, the ghosts of men and women that populated her youth and years as

Queen.[8] One of these is historical figure and master artist Hans Holbein, who famously painted Anne's betrothal portrait in 1539. Holbein's ghost confesses to Anne that Thomas Cromwell had ordered him to paint the portrait of a beautiful princess, regardless of Anne's actual appearance. Cromwell's scheming and manipulation only caused, in Henry, resentment towards Cromwell and disappointment in Anne. Similarly, Anne never managed to conveniently hide her own displeasure at meeting Henry. Remembering her marriage, she confesses her mistakes to Alice: "I made my face a mirror when it should have been a mask, and what the King saw there terrified him. He hated me for it, and never, ever forgave me" (206).

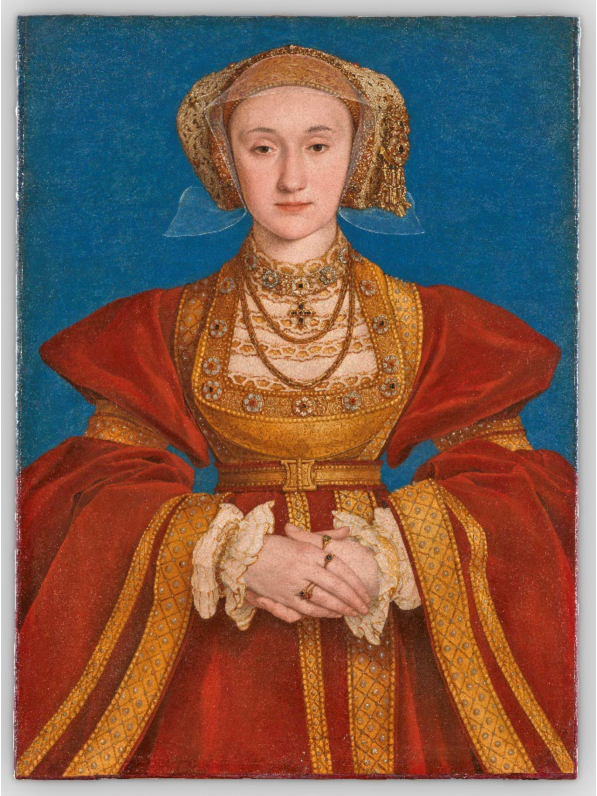

Fig. 3. Hans Holbein the Younger, *Portrait of Anne of Cleves* (c. 1539). Parchment mounted on canvas. 65 x 48 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Reproduced with permission.
"Holbein had posed me looking directly at the viewer in order to hide my long nose and pointed chin. He made my skin paler than it was and left out my smallpox scars" (Donnelly 207). Donnelly aims at assimilating the painting to her own vision of reparation and compensation, after it served as an important means to fabricate a false narrative.

Anne and Henry's marriage, characterized by profound disharmony and lack of physical attraction, did not produce the sons it was meant for. Despite Anne's failure at giving Henry heirs, she was granted, at the end of her marriage to the king, a peaceful and financially secure life at court. She was also the queen who outlived all other queens, as well as Henry.

Anne thinks she owes her life and happiness after her marriage to Henry, to her connections and diplomatic skills, but also to the king's lack of interest in her as a woman. She therefore encourages Alice not to wish for beauty, but for qualities that guarantee a peaceful and fruitful life. She observes: "Plain girls can prosper. We can make our lives our own" (205).

The chapter, therefore, articulates a former queen's sorrowful and poignant reflections on a woman's position at court, as well as within the society of the time. Through her conversations with Alice, Anne recalls her days as queen, her failures at court, and her miserable nights with Henry, reflecting on the possibilities for autonomy and self-determination open to women of different social standing.

Before dying, she once again sees the ghost of Holbein, working on another portrait. Holbein urges Anne to settle a last debt, which Anne only understands when she sees that the painting he is working on is a portrait of Alice, this time unembellished: "The portrait is of a girl. She is wearing the plain clothing of a servant. Her hair is covered by a simple linen cap. There is a birthmark on her face" (245). Anne understands she must do what she can for Alice, not letting this unfortunate mark define the young girl's life and future prospects. She pays the fee on her behalf to study as a doctor's apprentice, thereby offering the girl the possibility to acquire skills, take pride in her work, and live independently:

> This girl will not spend her life digging turnips. She can make her own plans, command her own future. She will belong to herself […] That was the debt to be settled. Maybe one day, Alice will help set a girl free, too. Maybe one day, the world will change so radically that girls will not need freeing. (249-50)

In this story, works of art are treated as a potent weapon at men's disposal, as malleable, superficial, and misleading devices determining their subjects' destinies beyond their true merits and talents.

Laura Sager Eidt's categorization of different types of ekphrasis might help clarify the characteristics of Donnelly's usage of ekphrasis in comparison to the previous two instances. We will see that a less complex usage of ekphrasis is one of the elements that contribute to relegating Donnelly's text to the realm of genre fiction.

Sager Eidt ranks different types of ekphrasis according to their increasing degree of complexity: attributive, depictive, interpretive, and dramatic.[9] Byatt's short story and Chevalier's novel employ the latter type, the most complex as well as appropriating, as they "take […] the picture out of its frame" (Sager Eidt 57). Donnelly, instead, recurs to interpretive ekphrasis, a "verbal reflection on the picture" (50).

In interpretive ekphrasis, the picture/painting serves as a mere device, "springboard for reflections that go beyond its depicted theme" (51), but the image "remains on the canvas," so to speak, it is not brought to life, and the moment in which the work of art is accomplished does not correspond to any time in the narrative. In Donnelly's book chapter, therefore, ekphrasis is deployed more conventionally than in the other two texts: instead of weaving the entire narrative around the making of a work of art, Donnelly makes her queen reflect on it in retrospect, explaining the unhappiness it caused.

Anne, who could only acquiesce to having her portrait taken, does not return her painter's gaze in resentment/resignation (Dolores), or adoring abandonment (Griet). She makes Holbein take a new, truthful picture of a younger version of herself: bright, talented, not pretty. Sager Eidt explains that:

> In the traditional Renaissance profile portrait, the woman is seen from the side, passively looking into emptiness, representing an object of exchange or material wealth. This tradition […] is countered, in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, by the active turn of the girl's head and eyes toward the viewer, affirming the female gaze and her power to break that male tradition of looking and objectifying women. (190)

In Donnelly's narrative, Anne returns Henry's gaze by mistake. The king, wishing to surprise her, approaches her for the first time unannounced, without revealing his identity. Anne sees a rude, overweight, unpleasant man. Without hiding her repulsion, she keeps him at a distance. She will pay for this "active turn" of the gaze for the rest of her marriage to Henry.

The chapter makes evident two different levels of appropriation that will be further discussed later. Firstly, it sets up a double opportunistic relationship: Alice relies on Queen Anne (a figure of power and authority) for her livelihood. She takes care of her, but she also learns and improves herself through the connection. Donnelly, on her part, mobilizes the historical figures of Anne of Cleves, Thomas Cromwell, and Hans Holbein to fabricate a credible tale grounded in historical research, availing itself of references to a celebrated work of art representative of the time she sets her story in.

The text accordingly engages in the double gesture of, on the one hand, reiterating the importance and centrality of this specific segment of history, and, on the other, corroding its received meanings. Despite Donnelly's competence in deploying all these elements, this is the text less likely to receive critical attention and being recognized as deserving to survive its time. Generic texts might be canonized within the perimeters of their own categories. If they are considered "good enough," they may enter the literary canon, but at that point they must renounce their affiliations to a particular genre. *War and Peace* is a canonized text of literary fiction, not a particularly good instance of historical literature.

The main reason why generic fiction is seldom canonized perhaps concerns the fact that it is not as widely taught in universities as literary fiction. Should genre fiction (detective stories, romances, fantasy novels, et cetera) substantially enter the curricula of advanced education, canons would be designed, proposed, and, in time, established. Introducing a new and large corpus of texts worth studying would, *de facto*, expand and fragment the canon, which would thereby necessarily lose some of its authority and/or centrality. Quite possibly, literary fiction, especially contemporary, would come to be regarded, in time, as one genre among others.

Hence this article aims at shedding light on that part of the process of perpetuation and/or renewal of the literary canon which is mostly based on familiarity, a mechanism Annette Kolodny most effectively explains in the following passage:

> The authority of any established canon, after all, is reified by our perception that current work seems to grow, almost inevitably, out of it (even in opposition or rebellion), and is called into question when what we read appears to have little or no relation to what we recognize as coming before. (9)

Considering literary genres as "discursive formations" (Foucault 34) in constant development, which should be examined and questioned, rather than taken at face-value and relegated to the realm of minor literature, the remainder of this article aims to discuss a cluster of concerns that evidently cross literary genres: the history and role of women vis-à-vis artistic creation and, by extension, the creation of a canon.[10]

Challenging the Canon from the Margins

The three texts consolidate a cluster of values and (artistic) standards at the same time as they create discursive trajectories—mostly concerned with gender politics—that essentially question them, illustrating some of the difficulties pertaining to the endeavour of challenging the canon from the margins. More specifically, two axes of marginalisation vis-à-vis the canon have been explored:

1. Gender. The analysed texts employ ekphrasis—always a form of intertextuality—to comment on art and the male perspective that informs it, but their goal is also that of being regarded as having some literary value. Therefore, they tend to reproduce established forms of canonical textuality by commenting authoritatively on a work of art, or on past events.

2. Genre. Chevalier's and Donnelly's texts establish themselves by showing familiarity with strategies that pertain to the world of literary fiction (ekphrasis, intertextuality, commentaries on high forms of art…). This challenges their attempt at legitimizing genre in opposition to literary fiction, as they reproduce the literary grid of values genre literature usually wishes to oppose.

This inconsistency epitomizes the difficulty of counter-hegemonic discourses: in order to be successful, they must, at least to a degree, obey the rules set up by the hegemon while they attempt to challenge them. As Bourdieu would put it, the canon predetermines "the space of possibilit*i*es" ("The Field of Cultural Production" 315) available to authors who want to challenge it, either from the perspective of gender, and/or genre.

Another one of Bourdieu's notions, the notion of *field*, is particularly resonant at this point. According to Bourdieu, there are two types of inequalities at play in the distribution of symbolic capital within a specific field: those present within a field—male vs. female authors within the field of literary fiction, for instance—and inequalities between fields—the economic vs. cultural field, for example (see Sapiro 164). Players in the dominated field are compelled to adopt the rules and conventions of the dominant field, which has the effect of reinforcing the latter.

Although there is literary capital in every literary genre, the highest form of capital in genre fiction is subordinated to the most average capital in the literary field. Therefore, the struggle this article explores is detectable along two distinct trajectories: the acquisition of capital within the field of literary fiction, and the acquisition of capital of one field (genre) in opposition to the dominant field (literary fiction).

In order to advance its argument, the article has focused on the different ways in which Byatt, Chevalier, and Donnelly use ekphrasis in order to show its functionality within and through the discursive trajectories mobilised by the narratives. Put differently, the article looks at how ekphrasis has been employed in order to make and relate meanings concerning gender difference.

By concentrating on their discursive strategies—only in appearance subordinated to, and/or merely celebratory of, the works of art/historical events they retell—this article aims at bringing to the surface each text's bipartite approach, concerned with paying homage to a given literary, historiographical, and/or artistic tradition, at the same time as it may question its fundamental tenets, shedding light on the contradictions upon which it rests. This article has so far argued that, in all texts under scrutiny:

3. The ekphrastic/intertextual approach becomes a way of continuing the discourse of the canon and a discourse about the canon. As the author—writer, painter, film director—has the "last word" in reframing all the other components according to his/her vision of the world (pictorial or narrative), every reading offers the opportunity to appropriate some of the existing repute of the art at the centre of the narratives, as well as the possibility to amend the aspects of it the authors in question take issue with.

All examined texts convey a critique of the unbalanced relations between genders that have sustained, over the centuries, the most respected professions, disclosing the amount of (mostly female) unhappiness, frustration, and sacrifice, necessary to enable and upkeep their practice.

What makes these texts especially relevant to considerations on what makes a work canonical is that they do not focus on just any respected profession, but specifically on the artistic process. In other words, they spell out an interpretation of the criteria that are supposed to make a work of art canonical as well as an attempt at questioning such criteria. For instance: is Vermeer's portrait canonical because it masterfully depicts a young girl in love? Or is it so because it depicts a reciprocated rapport? Is male control/manipulation/prevarication over his artistic subject matter—including women—a necessary condition to canonical art? Would Holbein's portrait have entered the canon if it had portrayed a young princess with scars on her face?

Within this general framework of unbalanced relations between genders, it is possible to detect a specific opportunistic rapport, concerning the narratives' protagonists vis-à-vis their masters and/or mentors, repeated by the creators of fictional characters vis-à-vis their chosen narrative subjects. Just as the young girls of the stories rely on established figures of authority to learn, and possibly to emancipate themselves from their hard conditions, so do their authors rely on canonical pages of literature and historiography to bring credibility and stature to their works.

All texts hinge on a consideration of the social context, making visible the scarcity of possibilities a woman of the working class had to acquire valued skills that would make her advance in status. The text that makes this very point the most explicit, however, is perhaps Donnelly's, as her historical book chapter centres on the necessity of formal training as a way towards financial autonomy.

Paradoxically, the quality of its writing, competent and meticulous, but necessarily intended to be accessible to a younger readership, relegates her narrative within the boundaries of a genre that does not attract an amount of critical attention comparable to that received by the other two texts. Hence, that first correspondence of opportunistic affinities—maids, cooks, and nurses in relation to artists and established professionals on the one hand, and authors in relation to canonical texts on the other, is further repeated if we consider the axis of genre and the path the three texts sketch leading from literary to generic forms. Byatt's short story is a literary text, Chevalier's novel is positioned on the cusp between the literary and the popular/historical, and Donnelly's is a Young Adult historical fictional chapter. This "trajectory" towards genre allows us to see that common practices of categorizing and gatekeeping, to use a term in high fashion these days, are ironically reminiscent of the strength of those boundaries—put in place to safeguard the artistic process from external pressures and aspirations—these narratives shed light on.

The notion of boundaries between literary genres, in turn, leads us back to considerations on the literary canon. This article suggests that, ultimately, one's familiarity, and ability to "play," with the canon is an important reason for canonicity. Literary canonical texts display in abundance instances of those "primarily male structures of power […] inscribed (or encoded) within our literary inheritance" (Kolodny 20) that the works of fiction explored here aim at exposing and questioning, not only by re-telling their story, or by telling the proverbial "other side" of it, but by claiming to formulate the last word on the story each time told.

Therefore, the (female) authors of each of these texts not only make their heroines—once framed by authoritative artists—return the gaze, not only do they recast their original creators (Velázquez, Vermeer, Holbein) within the parameters of their own stories, making them subjects of/in their narrative visions; they also place a "shadow" on each work of art at the same time as they competently bring it to the fore, keeping, just like Penelope, the weaving (of the literary canon) alive, along with its corrosion.

Rewriting the Male Gaze

I read the three authors' different treatments of ekphrasis as an ingenious appropriation of that male logos which is constitutive of the literary canon. I will further elaborate on this notion in light of W. J. T. Mitchell's discussion of the interconnections of genre and gender in G. E. Lessing's *Laokoon* (1766), a text which systematises beliefs the Western tradition has relied upon for a long time, one of the most fundamental of which is that poetry (and, by extension, all literature) is an eminently temporal art, whereas visual art chiefly belongs to the spatial dimension.

There is little doubt, Mitchell argues, regarding the secondary value of the spatial dimension in relation to the temporal. Within the dichotomy, the spatial is "marginal, deviant, or exceptional" (Mitchell 96). This basic hierarchy, Mitchell explains, outlasts later developments and apparent moments of overturning, such as modernism and its spatial aesthetics.

Whereas Mitchell denies that the distinction between temporal and spatial is in any way an essential criterion to assign intrinsic value to the arts,[11] he sees the battle between the notions of space and time as a "dialectical struggle in which the opposed terms take on different ideological roles and relationships at different moments in history" (98). Mitchell argues that problems arise when these principles play a part in "the formation of value judgements, canons of acceptable works, and formulations of the ideological significance of styles, movements, and genres" (103).

Analysing such principles might help us reconstruct the "political unconscious" (Jameson n.p.) upon which we base our value judgements. If there is, hence, a "natural inequality" (Mitchell 107), separating the two arts, the texts discussed in this article reproduce it by making their narratives tell the stories not of a woman framed by a painter, but of a woman and a painter framed by a storyteller.

Quite significantly, Mitchell argues that Lessing's "most fundamental ideological basis" for his categorization of artistic genres is gender: "The decorum of the arts at bottom has to do with proper sex roles" (109). Such roles are articulated, by Lessing, as follows: "Paintings, like women, are ideally silent, beautiful creatures designed for the gratification of the eye, in contrast to the sublime eloquence proper to the manly art of poetry" (Mitchell 110). The defiant gesture Byatt, Chevalier, and Donnelly make consists in appropriating this (male) logos.

Moreover, if we keep in mind Lessing's argument that "genres are not technical definitions but acts of exclusion and appropriation which tend to reify some 'significant other'" (Mitchell 112), we see that our authors, while debunking the silent woman/eloquent man dichotomy, reify the "significant other" of commercial literature, by abstaining from the characteristics of plot linearity (Byatt), from a traditional usage of ekphrasis (Byatt, Chevalier), and from an overtly optimistic resolution of the plotline (Byatt, Chevalier), which would affiliate their works to its realm. These characteristics, much more detectable in Donnelly's book chapter, determine its different labelling within the classification of contemporary works of fiction.

Concluding Remarks

The short story discussed here belongs to one of the most respected contemporary authors of Anglophone fiction, known for her erudite and expert use of literary and artistic references. In the narrative a fictional Velázquez explains his pictorial perspective through references to the Bible, thereby voicing Byatt's own elaboration upon the painter's interpretation (as perceived by Byatt) of the biblical episode. Intertextual references are intricate, ending in opacity: Dolores sees herself in the portrait, she laughs, but the reader is left to wonder if her laughter is one of reconciliation, resignation, or both. At any rate, the portrait has "absorbed" Dolores's anger, immortalising it on canvas: "The momentary coincidence between image and woman vanished, as though the rage was still and eternal in the painting and the woman was released into time" (Byatt 230).

Girl with a Pearl Earring also ends in a partial victory. Realistic, incomplete, but more defined than Byatt's short story in its main narrative developments: Griet manages to save herself, to improve her social status and economic condition. In the process, her most ambitious dreams get crumpled. In a way, her rage too is transcended, buried within her once and for all when she sells the pearls.

The novel is a thoughtful and meditative narrative characterized by accuracy in describing psychology and context. It also appeals to a larger readership by positing at its centre, if not a love story, the suggestion of one, articulated along the popular trope of a young, disadvantaged girl being (possibly) rescued from difficult circumstances. It promises, in other words, to be satisfying to the reader interested in performing "the ritual of hope" (Cole 169) inherent in romance reading, as well as the one eager to learn the particularities of Vermeer's artistic process. Chevalier's novel strikes a difficult balance between literary fiction, the artist novel (*Künstlerroman*), and the historical novel, a literary form that has been for some time in the process of being "lifted out of genre" (Mantel n.p.).[12]

Lastly, Donnelly's book chapter belongs to a collective work that has been categorized, marketed, and perceived as fitting quite exactly within the genre of YA fiction. In this instance, the narrative parable is more auspiciously accomplished, as Donnelly gives Alice, through Queen Anne, the gift of a promising future.

All narratives enclose an external point of view on the protagonist embodied in a work of art; an authoritative pictorial perspective they must reconcile with, renounce, and/or emancipate themselves from in order to come to terms with, or escape, their subjection. Whereas the first two narratives propose an articulation of ekphrasis leading to a "pregnant moment" (Steiner 41)—a still moment in which the artistic endeavour is accomplished at the same time as the acme of narrative development is reached—Donnelly offers a more conventional treatment of it. For Anne, the painting has not been the medium for (self-) recognition, but a mere instrument of betrayal and manipulation.

The path from literary to generic fiction is accomplished through (1) implementation of traditional descriptions of art and (2) a progressively hopeful resolution of plot conflicts. Regardless of their remarkably different approaches and stylistic characteristics, however, the three texts have in common competent historical research, meticulous writing, compelling storytelling. Moreover, they all posit, at the centre of their narrative development, the encounter of one (or two, in Donnelly's case) young girl with a power figure enabled, by scholastic disposition, to formulate a vision of the world.

The authors who created them similarly feed on the conventions of recognized literary forms to occupy and maintain a space within the contemporary taxonomy of genres. Availing themselves of scholarly references (Byatt), the credibility of literary fiction (Byatt, Chevalier), the popularity of the historical romance novel (Chevalier, Donnelly), all authors illustrate the subordinate role women have been relegated to—by a prevailing male perspective—while at the same time working within the parameters of exclusionary practices similar, in nature, to the ones they indict, and/or question, and/or shed light on.

By expertly dosing literary and/or generic standards, all writers demonstrate their proficient reliance on taxonomic rules, showing that gatekeeping, more than an "evil" top-down procedure programmatically implemented to preserve privilege—something it can certainly be, depending on circumstances—is much more frequently a widespread individual and collective practice implemented for reasons of cultural safety and social distinction.

Asian University for Women
Chittagong, Bangladesh

NOTES

This article is dedicated to my students at the Asian University for Women.

[1] In *Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film*, Laura Sager Eidt examines different types of ekphrasis, outlining its historical evolution: "the term ekphrasis," Sager Eidt explains, "is generally used to refer to works of poetry and prose that talk about or incorporate visual works of art" (9). It has been defined as a rhetorical figure, a rhetorical exercise, and an intertextual relation. In order to comprehend its current conception, it is important to acknowledge the shift that sees "the real or fictional art object itself [as] the occasion for the poem, which seeks to render that visual object into words" (Sager Eidt 12-13). An important contribution towards the expansion of the meaning of ekphrasis is the work of musicologist Siglind Bruhn, who reads ekphrasis as the "representation in one medium of a real or fictitious text composed in another medium" (559). Not just a literary description of art, but a musical description of poetry, for example, may be considered an instance of ekphrasis which at this point becomes "transmedial" (Bruhn 51) in nature.

[2] *Fatal Throne* is a co-authored novel: the lives of Henry VIII and his wives are narrated, in seven different chapters, by seven authors: M. T. Anderson as Henry VIII, Candace Fleming as Katherine of Aragon, Stephanie Hemphill as Anne Boleyn, Lisa Ann Sandell as Jane Seymour, Jennifer Donnelly as Anne of Cleves, Linda Sue Park as Catherine Howard, and Deborah Hopkinson as Katherine Parr.

[3] Pierre Bourdieu points out that the scholastic disposition, "arising from a long historical process of collective liberation, is the basis for humanity's rarest conquests" (*Pascalian Meditations* 49). Therefore, the point is not that of morally condemning intellectuals, but of "trying to determine whether and how […] scholastic disposition and the vision of the world that is enabled by it […] affects the thought

that it makes possible, and, consequently, the very form and content of what we think" (49). The point accordingly is not criticising the painter of the story (or Byatt) for what Bourdieu calls "the laudable concern to rehabilitate" (75), but to see how the dichotomies that are being mobilised—unquestioningly, ironically, and/or self-reflexively—have affected our thought and subjectivities.

[4] The privileging of the visual over the other senses—ocularcentrism—has long been acknowledged as a feature of Western epistemology.

[5] "Confused as I felt about him, he was my escape, my reminder that there was another world I could join. Perhaps I was not so different from my parents, who looked on him to save them, to put meat on their table" (Chevalier 160).

[6] When Vermeer catches a glimpse of Griet without her cap, he sees the side of her Griet knows exists but is afraid of: "When it [the hair] was uncovered it seemed to belong to another Griet—a Griet who would stand in an alley alone with a man, who was not so calm and quiet and clean" (Chevalier 138).

[7] Catharina's continuous pregnancies may therefore be seen as a way to reclaim for herself some of her husband's love and attention, whereas Maria Thins is determined to exert on her servants the power she was denied in her interactions with men.

[8] Perhaps Anne's most touching conversation is the one she entertains with Thomas Cromwell. Cromwell, after appearing to her holding his own decapitated head, offers a detailed account of his last days in the service of the king.

[9] Attributive ekphrasis, according to Sager Eidt's categorization, indicates "the smallest degree of involvement with the visual arts" (45), such as a "brief allusion" (45). In depictive ekphrasis, "images are discussed, described, or reflected on more extensively" (47). Interpretive ekphrasis is a verbal reflection on the image" (50). In dramatic ekphrasis, "texts or films have the ability to provoke or produce the actual visual images alluded to in the minds of the readers or viewers while at the same time animating and changing them thereby producing further, perhaps contrasting images" (56). In this last type of ekphrasis, the dramatization of a work of art can "take its characters out of the original context of the picture, and allow them to move beyond the picture's frame" (57). Crucially, dramatic ekphrasis entails a high "degree of interference" (57) with the work of art because "the dramatization of pictures […] implies a conflict between the original context of the quotation and the new context in which the quotation is inserted" (57).

[10] A brief evaluation of the textual as well as para-textual strategies put in place to discriminate between literary genres in light of the fact that "paratextual features have a huge influence in shaping genre identities and understandings, that marketing plays a fundamental role in literary taxonomies […]" (McAlister 8) suggests that, instead of presenting the text as an imaginative but historically grounded account, it is marketed as a piece of gossip writing, starting with its subtitle: "the wives of Henry VIII tell all."

[11] At the same time, Mitchell does not mean to deny substantial differences between the two realms: "Nothing I have said can be taken as a claim that the two

arts become indistinguishable, only that the notions of space and time fail to provide a coherent basis for their differentiation" (103).

[12] In the following passage, author Hilary Mantel comments on readers' expectations of historical fiction: "When you choose a novel to tell you about the past, you are putting in brackets the historical accounts—which may or may not agree with each other—and actively requesting a subjective interpretation. You are not buying a replica, or even a faithful photographic reproduction—you are buying a painting with the brush strokes left in. To the historian, the reader says, 'Take this document, object, person—tell me what it means.' To the novelist he says, 'Now tell me what else it means' (Mantel n.p.).

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