Ladies of the Ivory Tower

Academic Feminism and Feminist Academics in Carol Shields’s Swann, David Lodge’s Nice Work, and A. S. Byatt’s Possession: A Romance

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Abstract

This thesis explores the representation and negotiation of academic feminism and feminist academics in three best-selling campus novels: Carol Shields’ *Swann* (1987), David Lodge’s *Nice Work* (1988), and A.S Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990). It is based on the assumption that academic fiction may function as a significant contribution to academic and social debate, allowing for other modes of staging and exploring feminist issues than those offered by academic non-fiction. The close-readings of these three novels are supplemented by discussions concerning interpretive possibilities and reception in relation to the authors’ public profiles, as these possibilities arguably entail a particular emphasis on representational responsibility in terms of reception. The latter is here assumed to depend, in part, on the cognitive interaction of the author’s public profile and the reader’s interpretive horizon.
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# Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 1

Academic fiction and previous research on women academics in literature .................. 2

The texts and their authors ......................................................................................................... 4

Feminism in academia: a brief historical outline ................................................................. 9

Theoretical and methodological framework .......................................................................... 11

Chapter outline ....................................................................................................................... 16

1 Carol Shields’s *Swann* ........................................................................................................ 18

1.1 The lone feminist of *Swann*: Dr Sarah Maloney ...................................................... 18

1.2 Biography and the confessional female poet .............................................................. 21

1.3 Feminist literary criticism and aesthetic merit in women’s writing ......................... 27

1.4 The feminist enterprise and struggle for academic power ........................................ 31

1.5 Critical reception: *Swann* as theoretical discourse .................................................. 35

1.6 Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 41

2 David Lodge’s *Nice Work* ................................................................................................... 42

2.1 The institutionalization and specialization of feminism in *Nice Work* .................... 42

2.2 Academic feminism below the ivory tower ................................................................. 46

2.3 Appearance and objectification in poststructuralist feminist identity .................... 50

2.4 Poststructuralist feminism, sexuality and gender dynamics ..................................... 56

2.5 Critical reception: *Nice Work* as theoretical discourse ............................................ 62

2.6 Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 67

3 A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* ............................................................................. 70

3.1 Feminist literary criticism and textual sexuality ......................................................... 70

3.2 Literature and the feminist revising of history ............................................................ 75

3.3 Women’s Studies and the problem of marginality ...................................................... 78

3.4 The Sisterhood .................................................................................................................. 80

3.5 Female autonomy and erotic relationships ................................................................. 83

3.6 Critical reception: *Possession: A Romance* as theoretical discourse ....................... 89

3.7 Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 95

4 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 97

Works Cited ............................................................................................................................... 103
Introduction

During the course of my studies at the University of Oslo, I have become increasingly interested in gender studies and feminist approaches to literary theory and criticism. The courses I have taken on these subjects have raised my consciousness as well as a great many difficult questions concerning gender identity and gendered power structures, in language, literature and criticism, as well as in other areas of society. Although the questions must necessarily greatly outnumber the answers, the destabilisation of certain assumed truths and the discovery of new ways of thinking about gender have been refreshing and liberating in spite the confusion that must necessarily arise from attempting to navigate within such a vast field of theory.

I find, however, that when I share my thoughts about this field with people who are unfamiliar with feminist theory, the very word “feminism” often provokes a highly sceptical attitude. They may agree that both sexes should enjoy equal civil rights and professional as well as domestic opportunities. They may even agree that feminine values deserve the same social status and appreciation as masculine values. Yet, they are reluctant to identify themselves as feminists, as if this label reaches beyond reasonable concern into fanaticism and paranoia – perhaps because the significant battles appear to have been won at this point, in Scandinavia at least. Another reason for such reluctance may be ignorance as to what this subscription entails, which is understandable. After all, feminist thought encompasses a variety of divergent and often contradictory convictions about what gender equality and individual freedom should mean and how we should go about achieving it. The fairly new arrival of so-called stiletto-feminism arguing that stripping and pornography may be sexually and socially empowering to women, makes the confusion absolute.

From these experiences, I must necessarily gather that some knowledge of feminist theory and gender studies would be useful and relevant to more than the female academics who arguably take the greatest interest in it. However, given that feminist thinking may appear somewhat intangible and even irrelevant to a great many people at the present time, I must ask: Are we all so perfectly liberated that we no longer have need for feminism? Or have the feminists laboriously climbed the ivory tower only to find that they cannot get down

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1 By “feminine” and “masculine”, I am referring to gendered qualities rather than gender qualities. That is, if I refer to a man as having feminine traits, I do not mean that these traits are automatically incompatible with his male identity.

2 The term “stiletto feminism” is borrowed from Ariel Levy’s Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture.
again? That the former is not the case, I am quite convinced. As to the latter, there might be something to it. However, academics do not only write academic non-fiction, some also write more widely accessible texts that may and do serve as vehicles for negotiating ideas hatched in scholarly research. One such vehicle is the academic novel, which may, at its best, convey sophisticated theoretical problems to a greater public – and entertain them at that. A more extensive characterization of this genre will follow, suffice it for now to establish that the apparent great popular appeal of certain academic novels makes for a complex and fascinating intersection between academic and popular culture that I could not resist delving into.

Hence, the aim of this thesis is to explore the representation and negotiation of academic feminism and feminist academics in three best-selling academic novels: Carol Shields’s *Swann* (1987), David Lodge’s *Nice Work* (1988), and A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990). I propose that academic fiction may function as a significant contribution to academic and social debate, allowing for other possibilities of staging and exploring feminist issues than those offered by academic non-fiction. I would suggest that these possibilities entail a particular emphasis on representational responsibility in terms of reception, and also that the reception and interpretation of academic fiction depends to some extent on the cognitive interaction of the author’s public profile and the reader’s interpretive horizon. Each close-reading will thus be supplemented by a discussion about interpretive possibilities and reception of the texts also in relation to the authors’ public profiles. My theoretical and methodological framework will be discussed in detail in the latter part of this introduction.

**Academic fiction and previous research on women academics in literature**

The academic novel, or campus novel, might be said to date back to Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. However, C. P. Snow’s *The Masters* (1951), Mary McCarthy’s *The Groves of Academe* (1952) and Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* (1954) are generally credited with being the pioneers of modern academic fiction. The genre revolves, as the name suggests, around academics and academic life in a university setting. Central themes of the academic novel tend to concern conflicts between the academic pursuit of knowledge and its relevance to the world outside, between professional rivalry and ideological collaboration, between the desires of the body and the ideals of the mind (Scott 82-3; Rossen 3). David Lodge, who along with Malcolm Bradbury is one of the most well-known English writers of twentieth century academic fiction, has ascribed the broad appeal of the campus novel to its function as a kind
of microcosmos dealing with human issues transcending the campus setting (“The Campus Novel” 34).

Naturally, the social relevance and literary sophistication of the academic novel vary from relatively simple detective plots to the kind of thematically complex novels discussed in this thesis. Most campus novels are comedies satirical in tone, often applying a range of easily recognizable academic caricatures. Sanford Pinsker defines the genre as “a fun-house mirror held up to the nature of our colleges and universities, one that, for all of its grotesquerie, packs a good deal of truth within its pages. [...] L’Heureux and Lodge get to more unsettling truths in a single paragraph than most critical studies can unpack in a long, heavily footnoted chapter” (183-5), thus acknowledging the potential of fiction in academic discourse.

According to Kimberley Rae Connor, the element of satire has developed a sharper edge over the years, introducing a strong element of professional disillusion and discontentment rather than the nostalgia of earlier campus fiction. Tracing this development back to the reforms of the late nineteenth century, Connor notes that “what is apparent from the development of the modern university is the sad irony that as it became more inclusive, its prestige eroded in public perception and its depiction in fiction became increasingly cynical” (2). In Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents, Elaine Showalter describes a similar development of attitude in the campus genre. Indeed, novels such as Richard Russo’s Straight Man (1997), Philip Roth’s The Human Stain (2000) and Francine Prose’s Blue Angel (2000) offer a much more sombre view of academics and the politics of university life than that of their precursors. Janice Rossen supports the idea that twentieth century academic novels are shaped by the cultural conceptions of what the university setting implies as well as the changes that have taken place within the actual universities (1, 8). She claims that academic novels “are social documents, but they are also fiction: private fantasies writ large across cultural norms, expectations and values” (3). Whether this trend is desirable or not, seems to vary in the opinions of critics of the genre. While some proclaim the certain decline of the campus novel, others praise its vitality and ability to change with the times.⁵ Evident from my research is that it certainly continues to be written, published, read and critiqued, for better or worse.

⁵ See Adam Begley’s “The Decline of the Academic Novel” versus Robert F. Scott’s “It’s a Small World, after All: Assessing the Contemporary Campus Novel”. Scott claims that “the academic novel is a vital and aesthetically rich literary genre that has continually evolved in order to meet the demands of its large and ever-expanding readership” (82).
Although during my research, I have not come across any other survey with the distinct aim of discussing the portrayal and negotiation of academic feminism in academic fiction, there are several works dealing with the representation of female intellectuals in literature which should be mentioned in this context. *Feminism in Women’s Detective Fiction*, edited by Glenwood Irons, as well as Katja Hawlitschka’s “Detection, Deconstruction, and Academic Death Sentences: Female Scholars Reading the Mysteries of High and Low Culture” and “Female Academic Detectives: Bridging the Border of Individualism and Community” move further into the realm of popular culture by performing feminist readings of crime fiction by women authors such as Carolyn Heilburn, Joan Smith and Sue Grafton. Nieves Pascual Soler investigates the female intellectuals of American literature in “Academic Women in Fiction”, and Mary Eagleton’s “Nice Work? Representations of the Intellectual Woman Worker”, which along with several critical articles on the texts I have chosen to discuss, touches upon themes I too deal with in my thesis. These will be duly referred to both in my analyses and in the sections dealing with the reception of these novels. My own analyses will hopefully supplement this particular field with an in-depth discussion not only of the representation of female intellectuals, but also of how these academic novels discuss academic feminist theory in relation to their female characters’ experience of professional activity, politics and personal relationships.

**The texts and their authors**

Given that my aforementioned concerns are rooted in present attitudes to feminism, one might ask why I have chosen to analyse three novels which were all written more than two decades ago. The main reason is simply that these novels deal with issues that I feel are acutely relevant today – they concern my own thoughts on female identity as well as the contemporary challenges of institutionalised feminism. After all, all issues addressed by second wave feminism in the seventies and eighties have hardly been resolved to everybody’s satisfaction. I might have chosen more recent novels had it not been that authors of academic novels in English rarely seem to bother much with feminists anymore, which strengthens my impression that people have lost interest in them a little. In addition still to being thought-provoking, all three novels also offer interesting glimpses of a time in which the dust had somewhat settled on the institutionalization of feminism in academia, and more nuanced critique from both supporters and opponents of this development emerged. This historical
backdrop will be explored in greater detail below. Let us begin by taking a closer look at the texts and their authors.

**Carol Shields and Swann (1987)**

Carol Shields (1935-2003) was originally from Chicago, Illinois, but became a Canadian citizen in 1971 and is generally considered a Canadian writer. Shields’s bibliography includes novels, plays, short stories and poetry. Her most critically acclaimed novel is perhaps *The Stone Diaries* (1993), which earned her the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction among other awards. For *Swann*, she was given the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Canadian Mystery.

In addition to being a writer of fiction, Shields has taught English and Creative Writing at the University of Ottawa, the University of British Columbia and the University of Manitoba. In 1992, she was promoted to Associate Professor of University of Ottawa, and was appointed chancellor of the University of Winnipeg in 1996. Her non-fiction includes a biography about Jane Austen, for which she received the Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-Fiction. She has also edited literary anthologies for women’s studies and published some critical and theoretical work. Over the years, Shields has been awarded honorary titles from a number of colleges, universities and societies.

Shields has been very generous in sharing her thoughts about her writing, and there are many interviews and essays providing insights into her authorship, in which she often expresses a desire to write for and about women like herself who love family life and appreciate the potential literary value of domestic and quotidian subjects in fiction. Elaine Showalter claims that Shields “wrote repeatedly of the fragility and historical contingency of women’s lives, even when those lives seem outwardly placid and safe” (100). A self-proclaimed “late” feminist, Shields has also commented on how works that place woman at the “moral centre of the novel” tend to be taken less seriously than those who have a male protagonist (Carol Shields Literary Trust).

In *Swann*, Shields makes use of the traditional mystery genre in a self-reflexive manner, applying several unreliable narrators and focalisers, letters, poems and fictional non-fiction defying the possibility of a true, objective and coherent account of events – thus underlining the subjectivity of reading and interpretation. The most notable feature of this novel is perhaps the inclusion of Mary Swann’s poetry, written by the author herself, yet not really possible to list among Shields’s poetry.

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4 The facts here reproduced are to be found at *The Carol Shields Literary Trust* webpage. The site includes her bibliography as well as a detailed chronology of events in her career and personal life. Awards and honorary degrees are also listed in full.
The superficial mystery plot is simple: Several literary scholars and biographers are preparing for a symposium about a deceased rural Canadian poet by the name of Mary Swann. In the weeks before the symposium, the meagre material the scholars have managed to gather on Swann begins to disappear. The culprit turns out to be a bookseller who wishes to monopolize the Swann marketplace as the dead poet rises to fame, but the stolen goods are lost, and the scholars end up trying to reconstruct the Swann poems from memory. The underlying mysteries, however, are far less conclusive and cover many issues dealt with in modern literary theory: What makes a poet? How does poetry come about? How does the reader contribute to its meaning? Can one gain access to somebody’s life from the texts and fragmented facts they left behind? What is literary merit, and who gets to decide? For my purposes, the most interesting questions must be those regarding the introduction of forgotten and overlooked female writers into the literary spotlight and marketplace, and how feminist motivations of guardianship compare to other interests.

**David Lodge and *Nice Work* (1988)**

David Lodge (1935) was born in London and taught at the University of Birmingham from 1960 until 1987, when he retired from his professoriate to devote himself entirely to his writing. His literary production includes novels, plays, screenplays, short stories and several works of literary theory and criticism. Most of his novels may be described as academic fiction, the most famous perhaps being *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984) and *Nice Work* (1988). Lodge’s fiction has granted him several literary awards and honorary titles. Both *Small World* and *Nice Work* were shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, the latter winning the Sunday Express Book of the Year Award in 1989.

Lodge’s well-known works of literary criticism include *The Language of Fiction* (1966), *The Novelist at the Crossroads and Other Essays* (1971), *Working with Structuralism* (1981), and *After Bakhtin* (1990). Lodge’s focus is mainly on a formalist approach to the study of language in fiction, but he has also written on the uses of structuralism in literary criticism, and edited critical and theoretical anthologies of a broader scope.

*Nice Work* may perhaps best be described as a postmodern academic satire. Intertextual and theoretical references pervade the novel and reveal the author’s theoretical background. As numerous critics have noted, the novel may be seen as a parody of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, direct references to which are found in the text as well. Set in the northern industrial city of Rummidge (Birmingham’s fictional twin), the novel portrays the

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5 Not all critics agree that this is indeed satire – see the section on the critical reception of *Nice Work*. 6
colliding worlds of Dr Robyn Penrose, a brilliant young Marxist-feminist lecturer in English literature, and Victor Wilcox, capitalist workaholic and executive manager of Pringle’s, a company manufacturing machine parts. Their acquaintance is brought about by a scheme designed in honour of Industry Year 1986, in which the university departments must appoint one of their staff to shadow an industrial executive once a week for a term. The duty falls (rather hard) on Dr Penrose, holding only a temporary lecturing position and desperate to be kept on despite Thatcher’s budget cuts. Vic Wilcox is no more enthusiastic about the idea than Robyn, and the following clashes are inevitable. However, after some initial confrontations and near-disasters, the two begin to appreciate their weekly appointment.

Robyn gets a new and much needed understanding of British industry and economy, and Vic learns to appreciate Tennyson and the semiotic possibilities of popular discourse. The plot includes a sexual encounter between the two while away on Pringle’s business in Frankfurt, a more or less spontaneous liaison enhancing Vic’s hopeless infatuation with Robyn, who flees his attentions until he gets fired from Pringle’s and is sufficiently sobered up to reconnect with his estranged wife Marjorie. In the meantime, Robyn receives an unexpected legacy, a larger part of which she invests in Vic’s newly established industrial enterprise.

For my purposes, the most interesting aspect of this novel is how Lodge juxtaposes the industrial and the academic world (the latter represented mainly by an adherent to French feminist theory) to bring out salient problems concerning the construction of feminist and female identity within a poststructuralist framework, as well as the institutionalization of feminism in academia.

A. S. Byatt and Possession: A Romance (1990)
A.S Byatt, or Dame Antonia Susan Duffy (1936) was born in Sheffield, England. Her literary production so far includes nine novels and six collections of short stories. Most renowned is perhaps the Frederica Potter tetralogy (The Virgin in the Garden (1978), Still Life (1985), Babel Tower (1996) and A Whistling Woman (2002)), Possession: A Romance (1990) and The Children’s Book (2009). Like Shields and Lodge, Byatt has won and been shortlisted for many literary awards and has been granted a number of honorary titles. Possession: A Romance earned her The Booker Prize and the Irish Times/Aer Lingus International Fiction Prize, as well as the Eurasian section of Best Book in the Commonwealth.

Up until 1983, Byatt also worked as lecturer in English and Literature at University College London and Central School of Art and Design. She has written several works of literary criticism on Iris Murdoch, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge among
others, and has edited collections of selected writings by writers such as George Eliot and Robert Browning in addition to publishing several essays on fiction and writing. Identifying herself as a political feminist, she expresses doubts about the merits of literary feminism, as feminist readings in her view tend to read reductively and favour minor works by female authors over certain male authors more deserving of critical attention. She thus appears to dismiss the idea of a specifically female literary aesthetics and mode of writing.

Although Byatt’s fiction often involves academics and academic settings, Possession and The Biographer’s Tale are the only ones dealing explicitly with literary research and criticism. Like Shields’s Swann, Possession includes letters, poetry and fictional non-fiction in addition to the main narrative. The novel is difficult to define in terms of sub-genre, and has been referred to by Doryjane Birrer as a “postmodern-antipostmodern-Victorian-historiographic-metfiction-bildungsroman-gothic-detective story-literary thriller-romance” (50). Byatt places her fictional poets within a Victorian context, letting them interact with real historical figures and equipping them with whole chapters of epic poems to break up the novelistic prose, not unlike what Carol Shields did in Swann, although the amount of poetry is far more extensive in Possession.

The story revolves around Dr Maud Bailey, a fairly young and successful feminist scholar researching the writings of a rather unacknowledged Victorian poet by the name of Christabel LaMotte, and Roland Michell, a somewhat less successful expert on the much renowned poet Randolph Henry Ash, a contemporary of LaMotte’s. Roland stumbles upon a handful of undiscovered letters of Ash’s, and decides to steal them from the library rather than pass them on to his employer, a well-known authority on Ash. When Roland discovers LaMotte to have been at the other end of the correspondence, he joins Maud on a quest for knowledge about what turns out to have been a marriage of minds leading to a passionate, but short-lived affair between the already married Ash and LaMotte, the latter long thought exclusively lesbian by feminist scholars. The mission cannot be concealed for long, and soon Maud and Roland are chased by a number of ambitious scholars from both sides of the Atlantic, eager to get their hands on the newly discovered documents. The race ends at the grave of Randolph Henry Ash, where the final evidence is concealed: letters revealing that the affair resulted in a child, who turns out to be Maud’s great-great-great-grandmother. The quest for biographical evidence also becomes a quest for love as Roland and Maude are gradually drawn towards each other during the course of their research.
As the title suggests, *Possession* is thematically centred on desire and ownership of historical artefacts, texts, knowledge, life stories and people. Most salient to my project, however, is Byatt’s representation of feminist theory and literary criticism in the project of securing women writers and academics a central place on the literary scene. Also significant in this context is the author’s treatment of the dynamics of the feminist sisterhood surrounding Dr Bailey, implicitly displaying how this network comes to inform her personal relationships and female identity as well as her scholarly research.

**Feminism in academia: a brief historical outline**

In order to get a better idea of the historical and thematic context of these three novels, it is useful to take a brief look at the development of feminism and Women’s Studies in academia up until the late 1980s. The following outline is largely based on the developments described in Miriam K. Chamberlain’s *Women in Academe: Progress and Prospects*, and Toril Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics*.

Although studies on women had been performed (by women) as early as in the nineteenth century, the field of Women’s Studies really gained momentum in the late 1960s as a result of the women’s liberation movements in Europe and the United States at the time. According to the writers of *Women in Academe*, this was very much a voluntary collaborative effort of women scholars influenced by feminist ideology, made possible by the number of women employed in higher education, and a rather large percentage of female students, many of whom were mature students dissatisfied with the traditional gender roles they had been ascribed (Chamberlain 134, 138-9). Chamberlain’s study lists several important factors in the establishment of feminism in academia during the late 1960s through the 1970s, of which the three most significant are:

a) the formation of programs rather than departments of Women’s Studies, thus securing the positions of the lecturers within their respective departments as well as increasing the chances of influencing the university curriculum in general (Chamberlain 139-40).

b) professional pressure groups, both independent caucuses and committees within professional associations who promoted Women’s Studies in annual meetings and worked for better working conditions and higher status for women in academia (Chamberlain 141), and finally

c) the establishment of organized research centres publishing much needed material for courses in Women’s Studies (Chamberlain 142-3).
Although the field of Women’s Studies was essentially interdisciplinary, different disciplines such as history, literature, sociology, psychology, biology and economics, theory and methodology gradually became more specialised within their respective fields of research. In literary criticism, which happens to be the speciality of all of our protagonists, the two most influential branches of feminist theory during the 1970s and 1980s were French and Anglo-American feminist theory. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Anglo-American feminist literary critics became primarily concerned with what Moi refers to as “images of women” criticism, or criticism revealing the male stereotyping of women in literature. Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1969) is a key text within this approach. A few years later, feminist literary criticism in Britain and the United States (where we lay our scene) changed focus and began to mainly explore women’s writings, attempting to trace and elevate a female tradition of writing outside of the patriarchal aesthetic paradigm. Influential contributions to this practice are Ellen Moers’s *Literary Women* (1976), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and “Towards a Feminist Poetics” (1979), the latter introducing the term “gynocritics”, or the study of female experience through women’s writing.

The French feminist movement, drawing on structuralist and poststructuralist theory such as Jacques Derrida’s concept of *différance* in linguistics and Jacques Lacan’s interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis, remained more interdisciplinary and suggested an essentially theoretical approach to feminist scholarship. As Toril Moi observes, this branch did not exert much influence on feminists outside of France until the 1980s, a delay she attributes to the application in French feminist texts of a theoretical framework unfamiliar to British and American feminists. According to Moi, it was the publication of Juliet Mitchell’s *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) that first introduced French feminism to the Anglo-American feminists (Moi 94). The most influential ideas within French feminism are Hélène Cixous’ rejection of binary opposites and the concept of *écriture féminine*, Julia Kristeva’s concepts of intertextuality and the semiotic construction of femininity, and Luce Irigaray’s focus on the presence of the female body in women’s writing.

As Elaine Showalter has pointed out in her survey of campus fiction, the 1980s was a significant decade for portrayals of feminism in academic novels, and with good reason. By the mid-1980s, Women’s Studies had gained a solid foothold in institutions of higher education, although it was still situated at the margins rather than being fully incorporated in the general curriculum of the English departments. It was still considered an exciting and
progressive field by students as well as teachers, and diverse and contradicting feminisms were at play within it. However, the fervour of the women’s liberation movement had somewhat subsided, and now the specialisation and institutionalisation of feminism spurred new problems and new subjects for discussion. One might also suggest that as Women’s Studies were at this point a fixed feature of so many universities, the feminist scholar finally became eligible for inclusion in the academic novel’s stock of characters.

The financial situation for English universities in the eighties should also be mentioned ever so briefly in this context. After a period of growth and expansion, higher education in Britain suffered considerable cutbacks under Margaret Thatcher’s government as a result of the recession in the early 1980s, as noticeable in David Lodge’s *Nice Work*. The economical limitations thus placed on the universities brought forth issues of academic priorities, and having got their foot through the door, feminist scholars had to fight not to be pushed out again on economic grounds. Robyn Penrose’s vulnerable position as a temporary lecturer in *Nice Work* suggests that despite their popularity, courses in feminist literary theory and women’s writing still failed to be fully recognized by the administration as a necessary component of the field of literary studies.

**Theoretical and methodological framework**

This project springs from a fascination with the possibilities of academic fiction of playing out feminist theoretical issues through narrative, and also from a genuine curiosity concerning the social implications of such narratives. My theoretical point of departure is thus fairly open. As my area of exploration is located at the junction between literary form and socio-political concerns, my theoretical framework must necessarily draw on several different theoretical currents within literary criticism rather than being situated within one specific theoretical approach. For the sake of clarity, the following outline of my intertwining framework is as far as possible structured according to these theoretical branches.⁶

One of the assumptions stated in my central proposal, namely that *academic fiction may function as a significant contribution to academic and social debate*, concurs with basic conditions of feminist literary criticism. Some might argue that as a novel does not, by virtue of genre, claim to represent the “truth”, one need not credit it as a potentially powerful contribution to social debate and cultural development. I will argue that no fiction is wholly

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⁶ The arguments in this section are partly borrowed from my unpublished exam paper for ENG4471 at the University of Oslo, entitled “Authorial Authority and the Reader of Postcolonial Fiction”.

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without reality (by which I refer to our individual perceptions and experiences in life – I do not subscribe to the idea of an objective version of reality.) Fiction, in my opinion, will always be based on the world in which we live and the way we interact. Even the most fantastical novel cannot be without references to reality, as language itself is a construction designed to make sense of our experiences. I would suggest that the culturally specific setting of the academic novel in particular encourages a reading of such fiction as a comment on this very setting. As the reception of these novels implies, academics tend to read such novels as contributions to academic debate, but one can also imagine that readers unfamiliar with this setting may choose to read such fiction for the purpose of gaining new insight and knowledge as well as for entertainment (Rossen 1).

Given this insistence on the significance of representation and negotiation of academic feminism and feminist academics in fiction, I am obviously writing from a feminist point of view. My aim, however, is not to read these novels through the methodical grid of any specific theory within feminist literary criticism. Nor is my concern the automatic condemnation of negative images of certain feminist practices in these novels, but rather to remain as open as I can to valid criticism of several branches of feminism as they may appear in the texts. Unfortunately, I cannot claim neutrality any more than the next person, and my reading will naturally be highly subjective, reflecting my own experience and cultural position. After all, as Sandra Harding famously pointed out: There is no such thing as “a view from nowhere” (311).

Having acknowledged my position as a situated reader, I hope at least to avoid anachronistic readings by sufficiently taking into account the historical context of the novels in my analyses and subsequent discussions of earlier reception, thereby also locating my approach in new historicist principles. This attention to the significance of the reader’s historical and cultural background in interpretation is based on central tenets of reader-response and reception theory. After all, one of the factors that have motivated me to perform these readings is the variety of interpretive possibilities found in both the texts and their critical reception. While not quite subscribing to the textual relativity suggested by theorists such as Stanley Fish, I have found the theories of Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss useful in this context. In “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach”, Iser suggests that “the work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized [by the reader], and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader – though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the
text” (50). In short: It takes (at least) two to make meaning. Although my own readings of these novels will result mainly from my own individual realization of the text, I will also attempt to suggest potential differences of interpretations performed by readers who are not familiar with academic feminism as well as those who are. This difference in readership is a very real challenge in trying to define the meaning of fiction in social discourse both as it reads today and at the time it was written. One suggestion as to how one might bridge the gap is found in Jauss’ understanding of the significance of the reader’s hermeneutical horizon of understanding in textual interpretation. In his essay “The Identity of the Poetic Text in the Changing Horizon of Understanding”, Jauss advocates the awareness of both one’s own cultural and individual preconceptions in interpretation while acquiring sufficient knowledge of the “alien horizon” of the text, or what one might call the cultural context of writing, allowing for a dialogical reading of the text (Jauss 7-28). Luckily, the horizons of these novels are not as alien to me as those of many other texts, and yet there can be no doubt that the real authors’ individual horizons are as unobtainable to me as those of their earlier critics.

I therefore conclude that although the famous “implied author” does indeed exist, it must not be confused with the “real author”, or “flesh-and-blood author” – terms which in spite of their established usage in narrative theory require some clarification. According to Dan Shen, Wayne C. Booth termed the implied author to refer to the real author’s textual construction of a second self within the text:

The difference between the “real author” and the “implied author” [...] is that between the person in daily life and the same person in the process of writing with a certain “air” or stance. Since in the writing process, the “writer” may enter into a state of mind quite different from that in everyday life, the writer seems to be “creating” himself or herself when writing. (Shen)

However, as this definition does not take into account the diverse interpretations of this “second self” as perceived by different readers, I will instead use this term in accordance with Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s understanding of it as “a construct inferred and assembled by the reader from all the components of the text” (88), adding a special emphasis on the instability of this textual construction as dependant on the reader’s interpretive horizon.

As these concepts of narrative theory suggest, the appreciation of the literacy and aesthetics of fiction need not be lost in admitting and emphasising its social discursive function. As already mentioned, the mode and language of narration in literature are inextricably connected to its nuances of meaning, and so I have in addition chosen to apply certain other terms of narrative theory as presented in Rimmon-Kenan’s Narrative Fiction:
Contemporary Poetics. The concept of focalisation is particularly useful to my approach as it allows me to differentiate more precisely between the implied (and the real) author, narrator and focaliser, which is crucial when attempting to identifying the sender in a discussion about literature as contribution to debate. Similarly, characterisation, tone and modes of narration are also significant in suggesting the interpretive possibilities of the implied author.

This brings us to a few points from reception studies and authorship theory that may prove useful when looking at previous criticism and reception in general. My assumption is that the reception and interpretation of academic fiction depends to some extent on the cognitive interaction between the author’s public profile and the reader’s interpretive horizon. That is to say, the reader’s interpretive horizon is influenced by what she knows about the author. This is a tricky bit of theory, as this can easily become a circular and self-affirming process. After all, the reader’s idea of the author is often based on her interpretation of the author’s work, the one she is reading or others she has read before, thus merging the implied author of the text with the real author. Likewise, the reader’s knowledge of the real author’s public image may contribute to her construction of the implied author in interpretation. Be that as it may, in the case of the academic novel and academic satire in particular, the demand for authenticity and authorial credibility becomes particularly apparent in critical response, as many critics use facts about the author’s identity in order to either establish or dismantle her authority when assessing the discursive potential of her text. A good reason for such a “suspicious” reading might be the wish to publicly contest images of academic life that are thought misleading, consequently acknowledging the power of fiction to shape, strengthen or modify popular attitudes to academics and certain academic practices. After all, readers who are not well versed in feminist theory might easily trust the representations of feminism in a certain novel exactly because the author is also a scholar.

This strengthens my assumption that these possibilities entail a certain emphasis on representational responsibility in terms of reception. Hence, I subscribe to the critical vantage point advocated by Seán Burke in “The Ethics of Signature.” Burke points to the necessity of situating the author within a contextual framework in analysing the ethical implications of her text:

While an enquiry into the relationship between a discourse and its producer is conducted in responsible ethical terms […] and is not driven to axiological ends […], then the sundering of text and signatory is ethically regressive. As with the case of a putative discursive anonymity, to close of the domain of ethical enquiry simply to avoid *ad hominem* arguments is as unnecessary in its own terms as it unintelligible in those of an ethical criticism […]. (288)
Burke’s claim is particularly valid in relation to texts which expressly criticise or promote certain ideological concepts, as I would claim is the case with the three novels I have chosen to analyse. So, it seems, would most of their critics of these novels, who, as we shall see, appear to support Burke’s proposal that “the necessity of properly attributing a text to a signatory and of holding the signatory or the signatory’s heirs to account asserts itself in direct proportion to the perceived gravity of the ethico-political issues raised by that text” (289).

There are, however, reasons why holding writers accountable for the ethical implications of their texts is not always a clear-cut case. Differences in interpretations are already accounted for. Then there is the elusiveness of fiction, and my final assumption that fiction allows for other possibilities of staging and exploring feminist issues than those offered by academic non-fiction, leading us yet again into the field of narrative theory. This elusiveness concerns the obscuring of the author’s voice in fiction. Contrastingly, one rarely speaks of the narrator of a scholarly article, as the author is always identified as the speaking voice of the text, which again is always assumed to state an opinion or point of view. The obscuring of the speaker of fiction (which in our three novels must be said to vary greatly) may contribute to an impression that the narrative is showing us through a course of events rather than telling us by line of argument what is wrong with, for instance, French feminism. The nature of fiction, in that it does not claim to tell a true story, may certainly provide a convenient loophole in social debate. It is hardly news that professor-authors of academic novels sometimes base characters on real academics they may or may not approve of. Though recognizable to everyone within that circle, such portrayals are still difficult to prove slanderous, as it is generally difficult to hold people responsible for misrepresentation in a made-up story, and I would suggest that this goes for representations of groups and movements as well as individuals. Consequently, it is important to do critical readings emphasising on representation, and so as to continue the debate.

Here at last I find myself at the crossroads, having to choose a path. How should I relate to the public identities of the authors whose texts I am to analyse? Should I read the texts with as little thought of the author’s sex, academic affiliations and other publications as I can manage, or should I make use of these facts to grasp the fuller meaning of their contribution to the debates of academic feminism? I have decided to try the former. This may seem unfashionably Barthesian of me, especially considering my insistence on the significance of the author figure in literary reception, but I think I may defend myself in that
respect. In order to discuss these works as situated at the axis of popular and academic discourse, one must also investigate and appreciate its potential in relation to readers who are and will remain unfamiliar with the particulars of the authors’ theoretical affiliations and previous works. This becomes particularly significant when regarding academic fiction as, if not a realistic reflection of academia in the purely mimetic sense, then at least as a vehicle conveying opinions and experiences of academic life and practice also to those who do not take part in that particular enterprise. It is rightly so, that feminist criticism, fighting a very real political battle, has never been able to afford the indulgence of killing off the Author, man nor woman. As Nancy K. Miller claims, “The postmodernist decision that the Author is Dead and the subject along with him does not, I will argue, necessarily hold for women, and prematurely forecloses the question of agency for them” (196-7). At least when it comes to fiction dealing specifically with female experience, the female author may lend credibility to her renderings. One might also argue that depending on the degree of marginalisation of the female author, feminist critics must also draw attention to her gender as dominant criticism may otherwise simply dismiss the challenging literary work as unsuccessful according to existing norms, because everybody remembers the dead author to have been a (white) man. In making such an argument, however, one also encounters the dangers of stereotyping the male author as essentially sexist and unable to understand or sympathise with women. In the case of David Lodge’s *Nice Work*, I have for that reason chosen to give the author the benefit of the doubt, a man though he is.

**Chapter outline**

The first chapter deals with Carol Shields’s *Swann* and the novel’s negotiation of both the necessity and the potential pitfalls of regarding the feminist literary critic as a protector and promoter of deceased and forgotten female writers within the literary marketplace. My analysis explores how biographical information is used in the feminist project of giving Mary Swann her voice back, of feminist ideas of literary merit and the emphasis on female experience when arguing for new aesthetic criteria in women’s writings, and of feminist literary criticism in relation to careerism and economical profit in academia, respectively.

The second chapter concerns David Lodge’s *Nice Work* and its portrayal of the institutionalization and specialization of academic feminism apparent in the novel. Here, I discuss Lodge’s treatment of the possibilities of practical and political applications of feminist theory outside of academia, of questions of feminist attitudes towards female appearance and
the objectification of the female body, and of sexuality, domesticity and professional ambition in feminist academics.

The third and last chapter explores A. S. Byatt’s Possession: A Romance and how the novel questions the role played by feminist theory and criticism in placing the interests of women – as readers, writers, professionals and private individuals - from the margins and into the centre of academia and society in general. Here, I delve into Byatt’s exploration of themes such as the Cixousian emphasis on écriture féminine in feminist criticism, the feminist critical avoidance of texts by male authors, feminist scholarship in the writing and rewriting of women’s history, and the problematic aspects of focusing on women’s writings and women’s history as a separate field within the Humanities. My analysis also includes a discussion concerning the feminist academic sisterhood of Possession and how its unwritten codes of conduct influence feminist scholars work, female identities and erotic relationships.

All three chapters include a section discussing a selection of critical reception pertaining to the novels’ treatment of academic feminism, exploring how these responses function in placing and commenting on the literary work and their signatories within feminist theoretical discourse. In order to display how the novels and the responses to them may be regarded as a debate taking place within a particular period of time, I have chosen to include the year of publication in parentheses after the critics’ names. Although it is possible that some of these articles have been published previous to their appearance in the sources I have quoted, their inclusion in these, I would suggest, implies that their content was though valid still at the time of the second publication.
1 Carol Shields’s Swann

Mary Swann lends her name to the title of this novel, and yet she is, paradoxically, the only key character we never really get to know. Given little agency of her own and being entirely constructed from the elaborated memories and fantasies of the other characters, her confined and repressed way of life, the art produced in spite of it, and the final silencing of these whispers and the dismembering and concealment of her body by her violent husband seems an appropriate metaphor for the fate of many women’s writings under patriarchal modernist literary criticism.\(^7\) There is little doubt that the feminist literary critic has her work cut out for her, and in Swann, this work is fraught with ethical, philosophical and practical complications. Consequently, this chapter will concern Carol Shields’s representation and negotiation of both the necessity and the potential pitfalls of regarding the feminist literary critic as a protector and promoter of deceased and forgotten female writers within academia and the literary marketplace, as well as how the feminist agendas of protagonist Sarah Maloney compare with other interests in the discovery and inclusion of female voices into literary research and publication.

1.1 The lone feminist of Swann: Dr Sarah Maloney

Before delving into issues of feminist guardianship, it is perhaps necessary to spend some lines making out the one representative of academic feminism supplied by Swann, namely Dr Sarah Maloney. Sarah is the only one of the novel’s four focalisers given a voice of her own through first-person narrative. The attitudes of the others are conveyed through free indirect speech, and yet the implied author is always present through her subtly ironic, yet never malicious renderings of the characters’ thoughts and actions. Unlike Rose Hindmarch, Frederic Cruzzi and Morton Jimroy, Sarah introduces herself to the reader in the first chapter. However, the rather archaic and slightly stilted tone Shields has her use quickly reveals Sarah’s ambition to reinvent herself, as well as self-reflexively commenting on this reinvention through a language quite different from the American vernacular that one might

\(^7\)In “Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Politics of Literary History,” Jane Tompkins suggests that the demise of the sentimental novel and thematic of the domestic sphere is a result of modernist aesthetic and thematic criteria. She claims that in the pre-modernist literary industry, these writers, often women, enjoyed greater respect than often assumed, and that differences in values and symbolic systems in the Victorian age often caused critical response to reflect their popularity among readers. Hence, one cannot dismiss these novels on the foundation of criticism which fails to recognize these systems.
more easily expect from a twenty-eight year old woman born, raised and working in Chicago in the 1980s.\(^8\) This serves to place Sarah at a distance from the reader, as the constructed nature of her self-expression makes any identification \textit{with} her as well as \textit{of} her problematic, and so the reader is led to view her as any other character – and not necessarily as the intended heroine her intended self-construction. In fact, her little introductory autobiography reflects her loneliness and fragmented sense of self. As she concedes, “I’ve grown a little frightened of ‘the irrepressible Sarah.’ Her awful energy seems to require too much of me, and I wonder: Where is her core? Does she even have a core? […] I’ve tried diligence, done what I could; I’ve applied myself, and now I want my sweetness back, my childhood sugar” (\textit{S} 64-5). Hence, Sarah’s rapid rise to fame and authority does not seem to have provided her with a coherent identity, a fact she herself seems to both lament and play around with in her afternoon letter writing: “My concern, my well-governed wit, my closet kindness all crowd to the fore, revealing that rouged, wrinkled, Russian-like persona that I like to think is my true self. (Pick up a pen and a second self squirms out)” (\textit{S} 23-24).\(^9\) Sarah’s self-awareness also includes attentiveness to her personal appearance. She is expensively dressed and genuinely enthusiastic about fashion, but does not wear make-up, not due to feminist principles, but because she thinks herself good-looking enough to do without it for another decade or so.

Sarah’s aforementioned fame and authority resides in feminist scholarship. She lectures on women in Midwestern fiction and has written a bestselling doctoral thesis entitled \textit{The Female Prism}, the contents of which we are first allowed a glimpse when she encounters a female M.D. familiar with her work on the bus to Toronto for the Swann symposium. Rather than a work of literary criticism, her book seems directly connected to the women’s liberation movement, advocating a militant feminist position against “the masked enemy” (\textit{S} 248), namely men. Here, love and marriage are incompatible, as the latter amounts primarily to “a series of compromises that necessitates –” (\textit{S} 249). Sarah interrupts her companion before the end of that sentence, and so the reader is arguably left to assume that it necessitates a sacrifice of female autonomy. She also appears to have expressed a sceptical attitude towards pregnancy and motherhood. Her fellow traveller is at first surprised to find that Sarah is so young, but ironically, it seems that her young age is exactly what made her able to write it as she did – and we find that life has destabilised her ideological foundation quite a bit in

\(^8\) Clara Thomas describes Sarah Maloney as “self-aware and good-naturedly self-mocking” (“\textit{A Slight Parodic Edge}” 104).

\(^9\) Kristin Solbjørg Ruud refers to Sarah’s references to herself in the third person as implying a “split identity” (29), and Heidi Hansson has also remarked on Sarah’s letter writing as a part of her self-invention (364).
the few years following her publication: “Actually I’m a little less positive now. About everything. A little more flexible, I’ve been told” (S 248). At this point in the novel, Sarah is both married and pregnant, and explains this shift to her astonished co-passenger in the following manner: “You know something? – this is what I’ve always wanted only I didn’t know it” (S 249). The scene is laden with interpretive ambiguity. Sarah is still a feminist. She is still conscious of linguistic sexism and sexist hierarchy, but something has clearly yielded. Her change of attitude towards marriage, for instance, is reported to rely on the unexpected happiness she seems to have found with Stephen Stanhope. As she felt pressured into marrying her previous husband Olaf, it is hardly shocking that she should consider marriage a series of unhappy compromises, and yet one gets the impression that the change of husband is not the only reason for her newfound approval of matrimony. It appears to also be connected to the need for stability, intimacy and companionship along with a certain fatigue from keeping up with her reputation and chasing principles she can no longer fully identify with. As she writes in the first chapter: “For twenty-five years we’ve been crying: My life is my own. A moving cry, a resounding cry, but what does it mean? (Once I knew exactly what freedom meant and now I have no idea. Naturally I resent this loss of knowledge)” (S 11).

What kind of feminist are we then left with? If the responses to The Female Prism is anything to go by, it would make sense to connect her theoretical background to a poststructuralist approach to gender: “Immediately after my book was published I received about two hundred such letters, mostly from women, though three were from men, crediting me with changing their lives, liberating them from their biological braces and so on” (S 59). In the first chapter of the novel, she also expresses a sceptical attitude towards men in general, referring to them as mostly vain and defective, but she no longer manages to identify with the kind of separatist feminism her students seem to subscribe to: “At least half of my graduate students are determined to carry their own tent pegs, to hell with the male power structure and to hell with penetration as sexual expression. They’ve bailed out. All these women send me invitations, literal and subliminal, but something in me resists” (S 56). When Sam “Brownie” Brown suggests that Mary Swann is “a prime example of the female castrator” (S 13), Sarah does not approve of him “dump[ing] my Mary Swann into the same bathtub with Sigmund Freud” (P 15), and combined with her appreciation of the quotidian subjects of female writers such as Mary Swann, she seems to belong mainly to the Anglo-American branch of feminist literary criticism rather than the French psychoanalytical feminism inspired by Jacques Lacan’s interpretations of Freudian theory. As it is, it appears that Sarah’s interest in Mary
Swann’s poetry is far more closely linked to her own personal experiences as a woman than to specific feminist maxims. In fact, she seems to be more concerned with mother-daughter relationships than with those between men and women:

Clever men create themselves, but clever women, it seems to me, are created by their mothers. Women can never quite escape their mothers’ cosmic pull, not their lip-biting expectations or their faulty love. [...] It’s my belief that between mothers and daughters there is a kind of blood-hyphen that is, finally, indissoluble. [...] women carry with them the full freight of their mothers’ words. It’s the one part of us that can never be erased or revised. (S 47-8)

The essence of woman thus seems to depend on her mother, according to Sarah Maloney. Swann offers no other characters to provide images of the American feminist scholar, and as she is not given a sisterhood of colleagues to collaborate with, Sarah seems to be rather isolated in her work.

1.2 Biography and the confessional female poet

Besides teaching, Sarah Maloney has taken upon herself the task of chaperoning Mary Swann and her poetry in the company of male critics. Considering herself “Swann’s watchwoman, her literary executor, her defender and loving caretaker” (S 31), Sarah’s aim appears selfless as she differentiates rather sharply between her own objective and those of her male colleagues:

Willard Lang, swine incarnate, is capable of violating her for his own gain, and so is the absent-minded, paranoid, and feckless Buswell in Ottawa. Morton Jimroy means well, poor sap, but he’ll try to catch her out or bend her into God’s messenger or the handmaiden of Emily Dickinson [...]. Someone has to make sure she’s looked after. Because her day is coming. [...] She’s the right person at the right time for one thing: a woman, a survivor, self-created. [...] These guys are greedy. They would eat her up, inch by inch. Scavengers. Brutes. This is a wicked world, and the innocents need protection. (S 31-2)

Though he is hardly a self-proclaimed feminist, the notion that Mary Swann has somehow been wronged or underestimated by her readers is also present in “poor sap” Morton Jimroy’s interest in her: “Marvellous Swann, paradoxical Swann. He would take revenge for her. Make the world stand up and applaud. [...] Here was Mother Soul. Here was intelligence masked by colloquial roughness. Her modesty was genuinely endearing [...]” (S 87). Of course, Morton’s understanding of women is as deficient as his trust in them. The chapter devoted to this character suggests a man whose general sense of inadequacy is inseparable from his experiences with women. Falling in love with Sarah Maloney by correspondence, he edits from his idea of her the feminist principles that made her a writer of consequence in the first place: “He is sure she has mellowed, changed utterly in fact, since the publication of her big,
beefy, angry book, *The Female Prism*” (S 99). Refusing even to acknowledge those features of her photograph that to him suggest a presence of agency and sexuality, he thus displays a compulsion to write women into types that do not threaten his vulnerable sense of manhood: “He distrusts the photo on her book jacket, long hair falling over a long face. A talky mouth and libidinous eyes. A neat little chin, though, redeems her” (S 98). This vulnerability may explain why the idea of Mary Swann as “Mother Soul” so appeals to Morton and why he has such difficulty relinquishing these images even when the facts suggest otherwise, ultimately causing him to develop a personal animosity towards the deceased poet herself.¹⁰ In juxtaposing the parallels and differences of the biographical plight of these two characters – the feminist scholar and the unwittingly misogynist biographer, the novel points not only to the centrality of interpretive horizons in both biographical work and literary criticism, but also serves to question whether it is at all possible, even from a feminist vantage point, to speak for women who can no longer speak for themselves, as will be discussed at length below.

Interestingly, Morton means to elevate the status of Mary Swann’s poetry by writing her biography. However, both his theoretical and practical approaches to this task are essentially paradoxical. In spite of his attempt “not to reconcile Swann with her background, but to separate her from it, as the poetry had done” (S 107), and subscribing to the idea that “[t]he highest work, the most original work, comes […] out of an innocent, ignorant groping in the dark” (S 82), he is still desperate to connect Swann with a well-established female literary tradition. Suggesting that she must have been influenced by Jane Austen and Emily Dickinson, authors whose works were not available in Nadeau in Mary’s time, he chooses to omit what little information exists about her reading habits – that she enjoyed books by Edna Ferber and Pearl Buck as well as The Bobbsey Twins series. Further, Morton’s interest in biographical work comes, he claims, from the idea that life “is what the work feeds on. One’s own experience, before it is tainted by art” (S 82). Empty rhetoric, perhaps, designed to imply the superiority of biographical work over text-focused scholarship, but this passage also implies a conviction that it is the biographer’s general aim to locate and extract some objective and profound truth from the events of the biographee’s life, something that her poetry hints at, but is never able to fully capture. Morton’s strong antipathy towards the Romantic myth of the poet as a medium for divine inspiration (which is what Sarah thinks he

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¹⁰ Brian Johnson suggests that as the evidence fails to support his image of Mary, “Jimroy’s misogyny asserts itself as a power trip in which he makes Mary Swann into a pseudo-sexual plaything” (66). Johnson also draws a comparison between Morton’s forcing of the biographical subject to the silencing murder committed by Mary’s husband (66).
subscribes to) thus gives way for a modified version where the ingenious poet uses her experience to see beyond the constraints of the individual – capturing the universal through introspection. Hence, Morton Jimroy expects Mary Swann to at once confirm and undo the Romantic myth of the author-genius.

Could one then suggest that by separating the female poet from her domesticity and interpreting her references to it metaphorically in one sense entails releasing her from gendered constraints and admitting a universal rather than particular validity to her texts? Is it possible to claim that feminist readings may “gender” literature by emphasising social gender in artistic production, thus perpetuating the idea that “woman” versus “man” equals “particular” versus “universal”, a binary so problematic in feminist theory? One might suggest that this assumption entails ignoring the possibility of “domestic” subjects having transcending meanings without becoming exclusively metaphorical. Although Sarah and Morton seem to agree that Mary Swann’s quotidian rhymes contain insights of cosmic proportions, their paths to this conclusion differ significantly. While Sarah acknowledges Swann’s daily life and female experience as the material for a poetry which in meaning transcends the concreteness of its symbols, Morton seems to exclude femaleness from universality, and so to explain her inspiration, he must remove Mary from her experience of being a woman (Fellman 1). Although one might not agree that female experience must, theoretically speaking, differ much from that of men, there is no denying that Mary Swann must have felt smothered by the practical limitations of womanhood in her time – her physical inferiority emphasized by her husband’s brutality. Paradoxically, however sickened by the idea of the poet being fuelled by divine inspiration rather than life being the food of art, Morton still refuses to acknowledge Mary Swann’s oppressed existence as a poor rural woman and victim of domestic violence. This becomes apparent in his reading of the so-called blood poem, four lines which prove open to several very different interpretations, all of which depend on the preoccupations of its readers:

Blood pronounces my name  
Blisters the day with shame  
Spends what little I own  
Robbing the hour, rubbing the bone. (S 148)

To Morton, the blood poem is “a pretty direct reference to the sacrament of holy communion” (S 148). By considering his own interpretation to concur with the author’s intention, which is supposedly what he is after, he further displays his ignorance about the conditions of Mary Swann’s life. Rose Hindmarch, though too timid to say so, believes the poem refers to
menstruation – a proper nuisance on a remote farm with a limited supply of water and no money to buy sanitary towels. Hardly surprising, Morton is not open to this sort of interpretation: “But you see, Swann had that rare gift of translating her despair. She wasn’t writing poems about housewife blues. She was speaking about the universal sense of loss and alienation, not about washing machines breaking down […].” (S 149). There was of course no washing machine at the Swann farm. Knowing nothing about the grinding toils of women like Mary Swann, Morton cannot possibly appreciate the severity of her “housewife blues”, which to him does not qualify as loss and alienation. Consequently, his wish to take revenge for Mary has little to do with feminist principles, as his biography does not aim to suggest her life as she might have experienced it, thereby severely underestimating the importance of social gender in the production of her poetry, and imbuing her instead with qualities that counter the sense of rejection and sexual inferiority Morton often experiences in the company of strong, independent women. Hence, his biography of Mary Swann stems entirely from his own reading of her poetry (Johnson 65).

As Mary Swann seems to have been limited both in terms of mobility and acquaintance, and as such had only her own experience to draw inspiration from, the assumption that Mary Swann’s poems are confessional is thus not merely a habit from patriarchal literary criticism. So what about Sarah, then? How has feminism informed her critical approach to differ from Morton Jimroy’s act of ventriloquism? One might suggest that it has not, considering her claim that “In a sense I invented Mary Swann and am responsible for her” (S 30). She does admittedly modify her statement, suggesting that she rather discovered her, although she might have been closer to the mark the first time. Accusing Morton Jimroy of not paying sufficient attention to Swann’s family ties in his biographical work, Sarah proposes that the blood poem contains evident references to the relationship between mothers and daughters, although such a reference is hardly obvious to anyone else. Her subjectivity is revealed as we learn about the complicated nature of Sarah’s relationship to her own mother (Roy 123-4). Mrs Maloney has difficulty understanding Sarah’s priorities in life. She seems to think marriage the ultimate goal for her daughter, and regrets the divorce from Olaf in spite of Sarah’s apparent unhappiness in that relationship. Notably, like Morton, Sarah does not differentiate between the implied author’s intentions as governed by the reader’s subjectivity, and those of the real author. As such, Sarah’s attempts to write Mary Swann in her own image seem at once both calculated and automatized, as when she struggles to ply the disappointing contents of Mary’s little notebook into a suitable shape. The
notebook contains shopping lists, remarks about the weather and practical notes to self, and although this should tie in well with the much appreciated ordinariness of Mary Swann, it does not suit Sarah’s project quite so well, as will be discussed later. The deliberations of whether to present it as “a simple country diary” or “a cryptogram penned by a woman who was terrified by the realization that she was an artist” (§ 50) again suggest an attempt to rewrite the female poet in accordance with a particular feminist view of literary women, while simultaneously mirroring the vulnerable sensation Sarah felt herself after rising to fame at such a young age.\(^\text{11}\) Additionally, one may suggest that Sarah’s interpretation of the blood poem as referring to family relations contributes to secure Mary Swann a place within a female tradition of writing which is already established and approved by feminist literary criticism.\(^\text{12}\)

Although one might claim that her outlook is no more objective than that of Morton Jimroy, at least Sarah does not fail to place an appropriate emphasis on Mary Swann’s social context: “[…] it’s a legacy from the patriarchy, a concomitant of conquest, the belief that poets shape their art from materials that are mysterious and inaccessible. Women have been knitting socks for centuries, and probably they’ve been constructing, in their heads, lines of poetry that never got written down” (§ 31). She thus attributes Swann’s talents to “an eye for the surface of things” and a “heart-cracking persistence” (§ 31). However, Sarah’s enthusiasm for the concreteness and the ordinariness of “her” poet certainly does not stretch to include Mary Swann’s rhyming dictionary, which suggests a woman who, aware of her insufficient vocabulary, decided to educate herself by the few means available to her. However, if the dictionary was known to the public, Mary Swann’s surprising combination of words might be ascribed to her ignorance regarding the use of collocations. Sarah quickly gets rid of it, probably because she fears its existence will fuel the critics who claim Mary Swann’s poetry to be accidental (Buss 432; Johnson 63). As a feminist critic, it is perhaps imperative for Sarah to promote the image of Mary Swann as a poet of great skill and artistic vision, since non-feminist critics like Willard Lang appear to use what little exists of biographical information against her. Implicitly, literary quality becomes not only a matter of interaction between text and reader, but mainly a matter of the poet’s assumed (dis)ability to make conscious choices about style when writing. Chiara Briganti suggests that should Sarah fail in

\(^{11}\) Thomas suggests that Mary thus becomes “an extension of Sarah Maloney and not the always mysterious, ultimately unknowable, unpossessable individual she must, if truth be told, remain” (Thomas “Reassembling Fragments” 200).

\(^{12}\) It is interesting to note that in spite of their emphasis on biography, none of the novel’s characters connect the blood poem to physical abuse.
giving the impression of such ability, her career would suffer (180). The accidental model of explanation would not serve Morton Jimroy well either, as Swann’s poetry is the only reason for writing her life. Without genius, public interest would cease. 

As critics have suggested, both Morton and Sarah thus contribute to inventing a Mary Swann that never lived. But is there a difference between Sarah’s kind of intervention and that of the male critics? Obviously, she hopes to promote a Mary more worthy of notice than her rhyming dictionary would suggest, boosting her own career while simultaneously protecting Mary’s shameful secret. However, one may suggest that Mary probably never had the pride or ambition to be ashamed of writing poetry with the help of a rhyming dictionary, and so the question remains: Is it not the task of feminists to write the story of women’s literary production from their actual circumstances? Should she keep secret what Mary never thought to hide? Thus, we return to the question of whether Sarah Maloney can speak for the actual Mary Swann when arguing her case in the literary industry simply because she is a woman and a feminist (Hansson 361). This dilemma is familiar in feminist theory. Shoshana Felman and Gayatri Spivak have both famously written on the problem of speaking for other women as a possible appropriation of patriarchal and Eurocentric practices, further silencing the voiceless and importing woman as category with false homogeneity. However, as feminist scholars such Ellen Rooney and Patricia Yaeger have pointed out, this category must necessarily remain valid to any movement committed to combating oppression based on biological sexual difference (Rooney 85; Yaeger 9). Even so, although naturally aware of its existence, it is arguably unlikely that Sarah should be able to fully grasp the experience of such oppression at its most severe. The differences of economic and social status in Mary Swann and Sarah Maloney are further underscored by the starkly contrasting characterizations of their appearances. While Mary is described as looking worn and shabby, missing several teeth and dressed in ragged men’s clothing, Sarah’s youth and beauty makes her the perfect popular heroine gone feminist. To Sarah, Mary Swann’s poetry signals the safe return to domesticity, the refuge of the quotidian – which here takes on metaphysical proportions as the only thing that lasts: “The mythic heavings of the universe, so baffling, so incomprehensible, but when squeezed into digestible day-shaped bytes, made swimmingly transparent. Dailiness. The diurnal unit, cloudless and soluble” (S 21-22). The following of Swann’s poems is highlighted in this context:

A morning and an afternoon and
Night’s queer knuckled hand
Hold me separate and whole
Stitching tight my daily soul. (S 21)

I would, however suggest a double nature to the ordinariness and dailiness of Mary Swann’s life. If quotidian activities stitched tight her daily soul, then her confinement to the house and her chores also imply a sense of captivity, which is acknowledged by Sarah to a certain degree. What Mary Swann had to do to survive both her husband and the Ontarian winters may be interpreted as just that; survival rather than redemption. “Redemption” seems to imply an end to hardship, which was hardly the case with Mary Swann. If we are to read her poetry as a confessional, which seems given not only by the novel’s other characters, but also by Shield’s strict refusal to allow Mary any chance to observe or relate to other people’s experience, they easily read as an outlet for distress and claustrophobia. Contrastingly, the attractive and admired Sarah Maloney lives in a charming house filled with carefully chosen objects. Her home functions as a comfortable refuge from the hustle and bustle of a professional life Mary Swann was unlikely even to imagine. As such, Sarah’s situation is quite the opposite to that of Mary Swann, whose home was so depressingly devoid of style and comfort that Rose Hindmarch felt obliged to provide the poor woman’s memory with a more dignified habitat in reconstructing the interiors of the Swann farm for her little museum. On that note, rather than glorifying the quotidian of the domestic sphere, Sarah should perhaps place a greater emphasis on the more distressing aspects of Mary’s domesticity, looking to Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” concerning the confines of the home for women of artistic aspirations when reconstructing the woman behind the words.

1.3 Feminist literary criticism and aesthetic merit in women’s writing

As we have seen, Sarah adheres to concerns of Anglo-American literary feminism in speaking up for the quotidian and domestic subjects as suitable matter for great literature. In addition, she must put up a rhetorical fight to defend the stylistics of “her” poet, perhaps even to us readers. On a metatextual level, Swann’s poetry is of course what one might call fictional poetry, in that it is designed to perform a specific function within a narrative, and is attributed to a fictional poet. Hence, the reader is given little to assist her assessment of these poems in terms of quality. There is no real criticism pertaining to it, nor is there a consensus among the fictional critics of the novel concerning its literary merit. The information revealed about
Mary Swann also serves to remind the reader of how much biographical knowledge of the author and the circumstances of artistic production really do influence the validation of literature. Some of the poems are admittedly “reproduced” in the novel, but they come with a great deal of conflicting opinions, which also challenges the reader to make up her mind of whether or not the implied author Mary Swann must be classified as a major or minor poet. Sarah Maloney, Mary Swann’s “loving caretaker”, also seems to harbour some ambivalence towards Swann’s literary technique. At first, we find her praising the ordinariness suggested by Swann’s unsophisticated style:

Even today Swann’s work is known only to a handful of scholars, some of whom dismiss her as a poète naïve. Her rhythms are awkward. Clunky rhymes, even her half-rhymes, tie her lines to the commonplace, and her water poems, which are considered to be her best work, have a prickly roughness that exposes the ordinariness of the woman behind them, a woman people claim had difficulty with actual speech. She was a farmer’s wife, uneducated. (S 17-18)

She thus implicitly criticises the narrow-mindedness of dominant criteria for literary evaluation of style and subject matter, praising a mode of writing which has escaped the dulling norms of literary aesthetics, a seemingly trend-less and therefore perhaps more touching brand of poetry. Of course, not all of Sarah’s fellow scholars agree with her:

Willard Lang, the swine, believes absolutely that Swann will never be classed as a major poet. He made this pronouncement at the MLA meeting last spring, speaking with a little ping of sorrow and a sideways tug at his ear. Rusticity, he claimed, kept a poet minor and, sadly, there seemed to be no exceptions to this rule, Burns being a different breed of dog. My Mary’s unearthly insights and spare musicality appear to certain swinish critics (Willard is not the only one) to be accidental and, therefore, no more than quaint. And no modern academic knows what to do with her rhymes, her awful moon/June/September/remember. It gives them a headache, makes them snort through their noses. What can be done, they say, with this rustic milkmaid in her Victorian velours! (S 18)

This lament of the conformity of literary scholarship appears to question the prevalent rules of rhyme preventing critics from acknowledging the power of Swann’s writing. However, as we read on, we find that Sarah herself seems to adhere to the same way of thinking:

I tend to get unruly and defensive when it comes to those bloody rhymes. Except for the worst clinkers (giver/liver) they seem to me no more obtrusive than a foot tapped to music or a bell ringing in the distance. Besides, the lines trot along too fast to allow weight or breath to adhere to their endings. (S 18)

14 It is not entirely true that there is no real criticism pertaining to these poems, although the assessment made by actual critics naturally followed the publication of Swann, and can hardly be said to constitute paratexts to the novel itself. Donna Smyth finds the poems “powerful in their own right/write” (1), and Sarah Gamble argues that “What the critics cannot grasp is that her spare, elliptic poetry is sufficient unto itself: it is not intended to be metaphorical or allusive or deeply meaningful, but a direct expression of concrete experience. Ironically, however, this is precisely what makes Mary Swann extraordinary, for she occupies a most privileged position in Shields’s work: a writer whose work has the tangibility of craft, since it arises spontaneously from the limited conditions of her life” (56).
Thus, we here encounter the feminist critic fervently defending the production of a female poet from criticism that she cannot help but agree with to some extent. Arguing that her rhymes are “unobtrusive” at best is an odd defense of the literary quality of Mary Swann’s poetry, and the idea that the poems themselves encourage such rapid recitation, “a Swannian urgency” (S 19), that these rhymes are rendered unimportant, suggests that Sarah to a certain degree subscribes to the same literary criteria as Willard Lang and other “swinish” critics. It is, of course, possible to admit weaknesses in a literary work while at the same time praising its strengths. However, Sarah rather appears to attempt sweeping these weaknesses under the carpet in order to secure her “ward”, as well as herself, a place on the literary scene. Alternatively, one may suggest that to Sarah, form is not the deciding factor in determining the impact of poetry. As she claims, “It’s possible to be brilliant without being profound – or, in Mary Swann’s case, profound without being brilliant” (S 39). She thus differentiates between form and content, or perhaps between brilliant and profound form. In a sense, the appeal of Mary Swann’s poetry may be said to reside in its refreshing rusticity and lack of sophistication which may serve to overturn traditional views of literary quality. And yet, Sarah’s problematic attitude towards the rhyme endings does seem to suggest a conflict between professional assessment, personal feelings, and theoretical and ideological convictions.

What, then, ought Sarah to do? Should she, being a feminist critic, relinquish all rules of literary assessment handed down by male-dominated literary academia? Is it possible or even desirable to ascribe Mary Swann’s clunky rhyme endings to a specifically female tradition of writing? Would this serve to change aesthetic criteria to embrace diversity or would it devalue female poets in general? The case of Swann’s Songs does pose a dilemma as to what aesthetic standard feminist criticism should adhere to in evaluating women’s literature, not only because there have been few alternatives to the dominant tradition of assessment, but also because, as previously mentioned, other elements of social background also come into play in Mary Swann’s literary production. One may in fact suggest that the language and form of Swann’s poetry is much more a product of her class and education (or lack thereof) than that of gender, which in one sense could be what Willard Lang advocates when he labels her poetry as rustic. Interesting, of course, is his claim that Robert Burns, decidedly a rustic poet, is a different breed of dog. We are not informed why this is, but are left to suspect that Lang is likely to make exceptions mainly for male poets who are already
included in the literary canon. Hence, the reader is reminded that the question of literary quality has been tightly knit up not only with gender, but also other circumstances pertaining to the poet’s life and artistic production as well as earlier critical reception.

This discussion has so far revolved mainly around the characters’ preoccupation with understanding the conditions of women’s literary production and aesthetic assessment, and yet, as the novel so clearly implies, their focus is perhaps somewhat misplaced. Especially as we learn that there is more than one poet involved in the creation of Swann’s Songs; Hildë and Frederic Cruzzi have reconstructed a great deal of the poems, guided by their own literary tastes: “Guilt, or perhaps a wish to make amends, convinced them that they owed Mrs Swann an interpretation that would reinforce her strengths as a poet. They wanted to offer her help and protection, what she seemed never to have had” (S 223). But what Hildë claims to be an almost telepathic insight into the literary mind of Mary Swann is a kind rewriting of what must be really be defined as the collaborative act of two separate poetic minds (Briganti 180-2). Of course, Hildë does not become the real Mary, but rather lends herself to the construction of Mary Swann as implied poet. In addition to questioning the importance of one individual source of creation, Shields suggests that the value of a poem may also be said to lie in its versatility by tying the characters’ interpretations of the blood poem to their personal concerns (Barbour 271). The implied poet Swann/Cruzzi is a great poet quite simply because her poetry speaks to both the feminist writer and the misogynist biographer, and so her gender does, in a sense, become significant only if the reader makes it so. This, of course, applies to a view of reading as an act of introspection and identification. In a feminist tradition, the reading of women’s literature naturally also entails the revising and revisioning of women’s history and experience through women’s writings, and as such, the conditions under which their artistic production took place cannot be ignored. Interestingly enough, the person who seems closest to understanding these conditions is fairly unfamiliar with feminist theory. It is perhaps the absence of strong theoretical convictions that enables Rose Hindmarch to understand Mary Swann’s life better than any of the other characters, because she never saw the woman through the grid of her poetry – implying that the “real” Mary Swann would be hopelessly out of place in the industry handling the poetry she left behind. Not surprisingly, Swann leaves the reader with far more questions than answers. The novel suggests the complexity and mysterious power of poetry, in addition to pointing out some of the multiple interrelated discourses, such as that of gender, and personal agendas determining our perception of literary quality. Whether or not Swann’s Song is a fine collection of poetry is
never really suggested by Shields, and so we are left to rely on our own resources in deciding whether Mary Swann deserved a symposium in her honour.

1.4 The feminist enterprise and struggle for academic power

As we have seen, the Cruzzis’ improvements of Mary Swann’s poetry are not the only alterations necessary for introducing her into academia and the literary industry. Curiously enough, part of the enterprise of protecting her seems to entail a rewriting making her worthy of this protection. But what is it that makes these scholars and writers eager to the point of desperation to argue her case in academic circles? What little there is to find of biographical information is uninformative when it comes to illuminating her artistic production, and as previously mentioned, the poetry itself brings out ambivalent reactions in many of the people working with her texts, including Sarah Maloney. They seem to be motivated by a personal fascination with Swann’s poetry combined with a sense of charity or obligation towards the woman herself, and yet, could it be that they need Mary Swann more than she needs them? If taken literally, the answer would naturally be yes. The poet herself is “exceedingly dead” (S11), as Sarah has it, and the heritage she left behind thus belongs to those still living.15 Her biography should form a part of the history of women’s writing for the benefit of scholars and writers still researching, still writing. Her poetry should reach readers who will find something to cherish in them. These are certainly admirable motivations, and most would arguably agree that such must be the primary goal of literary scholarship. However, as previously hinted at, there are clearly also more pragmatic and less altruistic concerns at work here.16 As Brian Johnson suggests, the affirmation of Mary Swann’s authorial authority also entails securing the critical authority of the scholars, and that in that sense, Mary Swann is indeed worth more to the critics dead than alive as her absence is required in the establishment of such authority (Johnson 58-9). Mary Eagleton supports this view, proposing that the creation of this author is necessary in order for the critics to “sustain their literary field” (“Carol Shields and Pierre Bourdieu” 316).

Of course, all the scholars attending the symposium work to get paid, as evident from Sarah’s reference to the “Swann industry” when it dawns upon them that Brownie meant to keep the Swann material hostage and demand a ransom (S 299). The superficial mystery plot

15 Kathy Barbour suggests that the characters unwittingly consume Mary Swann’s poetry as they would a communion wafer, depending on her for sustenance (258).
thus points to the female poets as a commodity and feminist literary criticism as a trend to profit from, in which case Brownie is hardly more to blame than some of the more speculative participants of the symposium. In fact, he more than probably collaborates with one of them. Sarah and Morton’s agendas may be partly motivated by professional advancement and have little to do with the real Mary Swann, but they both seem to have a sincere regard and personal involvement with her poetry. Brownie’s supposed partner in crime, Willard Lang, on the other hand, seems to be the most cynical of all the participants. In fact, he was one of the first people to visit the Swann farm after Sarah introduced Swann’s Songs on the literary scene, searching the house for writings and personal effects, and claims to have found several love poems hidden under the linoleum floor – poems that were not included in the original collection. Whether or not he actually did is never revealed, but considering his part in Brownie’s scheme, it is as likely as not that there never were any such poems. As previously mentioned, Sarah informs us that he has suggested that rusticity tends to prevent writers like Mary Swann from being recognized as major poets. He thus takes a rather passive stance in the case, not directly arguing that she is a minor poet, but refers to the lamentable workings of traditional literary scholarship. One might suggest that such a statement would make Mary Swann even more attractive to feminist scholars, as her exclusion by the establishment would make her a suitable figurehead for overthrowing patriarchal aesthetics. And of course, the more interesting she becomes to new trendy scholars, the more money can be made off her. 17

How does the feminist writer fit into this web of agendas? What on earth is a resourceful, energetic and intelligent woman like Sarah Maloney doing spending her time trying to write a lecture which will convince writers and scholars from all over the American continent that the grocery lists and weather remarks found in a farm woman’s notebook provides a valuable glimpse into her poetic production? It may seem that there is little left to do in the field she has chosen for herself. She can no longer rely on the clear and concise feminist principles she adhered to in the past, and the golden age of social activism and optimism has long since waned: “God is dead, peace is dead, the sixties are dead, John Lennon and Simone de Beauvoir are dead, the women’s movement is dozing – checking its inventory, let’s say – so what’s left? The quotidian is what’s left. Mary Swann understood that, if nothing else” (S 21). As mentioned in the introduction, academic feminism was fairly well established in academia in the 1980s, and the most important challenges of securing a

17 As Mary Eagleton suggests, “Once visible in the field, the improbability of Swann as a poet fuels the interest in her”, and thus she implies that there is something to gain by appearing unable to connect her life to her poetry (“Carol Shields and Pierre Bourdieu” 317).
foothold in academic institutions were arguably met and overcome. Sarah herself is clearly in the process of checking her inventory and revising both her feminist ideology and female identity. Additionally, as part of an institution, feminist literary scholars are not spared the political and economic concerns of everyone else working in academia and the literary marketplace, a fact of which Sarah is reminded when chatting to a rather intimidating talk show host during the promotional tour for *The Female Prism*: “To quell her I talked about the surrealism of scholarship. The pretensions. The false systems. The arcane lingo. The macho domination. The garrison mentality. The inbred arrogance. She leaned across and patted me on the knee and said, ‘You’re not coming from arrogance, sweetie; you’re coming from naked need’” (S 21). Hence, it is not unlikely to suppose that the case of Mary Swann’s notebook has as much to do with introducing the poet into the literary marketplace as with making sure Sarah Maloney keeps her spot in it. Briganti suggests that Sarah “expects that the role she will play in the canonization of Mary Swann to Canadian National Poet will allow her to shed her identity of militant feminist scholar, now démodé, for a new, more poised self well suited to the stylish square-shouldered wardrobe with which she has stocked her closet” (179). In *Swann*, then, the prospect of professional advancement clearly proves a hindrance to the production of knowledge and collaboration that the symposium should facilitate. Rather, the whole affair seems like a game of poker played close to the vest, the players bluffing shamelessly to raise the stakes. Then personal conflicts are added to the mix. Morton’s displeasure at discovering that Sarah is married causes him to attempt to humiliate her during the presentation of her paper, pressing her for information about the notebook and strongly implying that she is holding something back from the community of scholars, which of course she is. However, she is not alone in this, and the result tends towards confusion and division rather than fruitful collaboration.

What does this do to the feminist enterprise of securing appreciation of forgotten female poets? Is it possible to claim that the non-feminists endanger the feminist project of retrieving and promoting lost voices of female writers by joining the party on different terms? One may suggest that such differences in orientation could help to sustain a healthy debate through which feminists might have some influence on literary scholarship in general, and in their turn be influenced to revise and question certain assumptions of their own. However, this is only conceivable in a debate free from the kind of competition and distrust so evidently pervading the Swann symposium. Morton Jimroy and Willard Lang thus constitute the most important obstacles to the academic success of the symposium. Paradoxically, two of its most
distinguished participants appear to have little or no respect for feminist scholars and scholarship, applying rhetorical strategies clearly designed to undermine and diminish the critical authorities of those who do not readily accept their assumed superiority in the field. If in addition their criticism (still resting firmly on the pillars of modernist as well as Romanticist patriarchal thinking) is not challenged and properly debated, one would once again end up with a criticism of women’s writing from the vantage point of critics who have no appreciation or understanding of the habitus of female writers or their readers. Annette Kolodny confirms the relevance of such concerns in “real-life” feminist scholarship as well:

[…feminist theorizing has emerged as a new cachet. Male critics rush to prove that they are at least “something of a feminist”. […] What is so sobering in all this is that the originating revolutionary potential of feminism is slowly being eroded. The male critics who would “profess” feminism too often read only the same selective sampling, thus establishing for themselves their own feminist “canon” and evading feminism’s hardworn diversity of voices. (457)

In this context, Sarah’s self-appointed function as chaperone may be claimed by far the lesser of two evils, and her distrust of Willard Lang and Morton Jimroy’s intentions as expressed in the first chapter is in a sense justified (Hansson 359), as the behaviour of these characters reminds the reader of the necessity of feminist criticism looking out for the interest of female writers, readers and scholars in academia, especially at this vulnerable time when feminism is “checking its inventory”. As Kolodny wrote in 1988, “the anxieties that laid the minefield in the seventies are still with us in the eighties – ‘the male fear of sharing power and significance with women’” (460). However, dealing with these anxieties in women’s biography is hardly uncomplicated. Basing her argument on William Epstein’s concept of biographical abduction as “a complex process by which biographers, while seeking to represent their subjects, must, by necessity, exclude and/or revise portions of the subject so that she can be ‘recognized’ by current commodification standards”, Helen M. Buss argues that although Sarah aims to rescue Mary Swann from being thus abducted by other critics, she must ultimately risk performing an abduction of her own (428).19

18 Mary Eagleton argues that Jimroy is no feminist, but uses the field of women’s writing to boost his own career: “If Jimroy could only prove that Swann has a legitimate place in a line of female authors from Austen to Dickinson and through to Stevie Smith, then Swann can be ‘consecrated,’ her literary significance confirmed, and Jimroy will be seen as one of the ‘agents of consecration,’ the critic who perceived the line of influence […]” (“Carol Shields and Pierre Bourdieu” 320).

19 Also acknowledging this problem is Brian Johnson, who describes how Foucault’s author function is thematized in Swann, and argues that Sarah in spite of her acute awareness of the process of appropriation that her colleagues are likely to perform, “makes the remarkable claim that she can somehow step outside of discourse and protect the “real” Mary Swann” (62). Johnson claims that the “violation” Sarah talks about is impossible as there is no real Mary Swann to violate, and as such, she labours under the misapprehension that she perceives the “real” woman behind the poetry (60-4). I would suggest that although there may not be a
In our context, the question that must follow is that of which abduction is to be preferred from a feminist point of view. Sharon O’Brian argues that biographical portrayals of the lives of women writers may still serve an important function in making room for new female identities in theory as well as the lives of readers: “Biography can also contribute to the feminist/deconstructionist commitment to pluralism by offering us many female voices and stories, thus helping to deconstruct the monolithic category ‘woman’ as well as giving us new ways of interrupting or rethinking theory” (128). She also argues the relevance of biography in feminist formations of female identity because biographies have a much greater popular appeal than theoretical articles (132). However, as Sarah also insists on one superior interpretative strategy which does not differentiate between the historical poet, the implied poet, the poetry itself and the interpretive horizon of her readers, Sarah herself becomes a representative of monolithic and authoritative criticism. Feminist “caretaking” clearly requires a fine balance indeed.

At the very end of Swann, as critics have noted, the scholars let go of their egotism and power struggle for a moment and come together in an act of literary collaboration and creation in reconstructing the poems in Swann’s Songs from memory. As Anita Clair Fellman writes, “Shields’ story suggests that the power of creation, while mysterious, is democratic, and can be communal and open-ended as well” (2).\(^2\) I would in addition suggest a more sombre undertone to this scene. As the author and the literary work slips through their fingers, the scholars suddenly find themselves quite superfluous. In other words – literature is always first, and criticism is always second. These fictional critics do admittedly sponge off the author to an impressive degree, and it is perhaps appropriate that they should become so submerged in the process of reconstruction and reinvention after their parasitic existence, doing together what they have been doing alone all along – building the foundation of their employment. Or, for a more cheerful twist, they are finally doing what they should have been doing all along – retrieving from oblivion a voice worth listening to.

1.5 Critical reception: Swann as theoretical discourse

Having recognized in Swann the presence of issues that are highly relevant to feminist thinking and critical practice, it now becomes necessary to move beyond Shields’s fictional tangible Mary Swann to violate, there is at least a danger of misrepresentation of female authorship by male, distinctly nonfeminist critics, so it is possible to say that although Sarah might not accurately represent the real author, she does at least publicly resist a patriarchal appropriation of the study of female writers.\(^2\) See also Barbour 275.
In viewing Shields’s fiction as a contribution to critical discourse, certain aspects of the responses to it are of particular interest, especially that of whether academics have acknowledged the theoretical potential of *Swann*, and if so, how they have related to it as such. To start, let us take a look at how critics have commented on the plausibility of Shields’s portrayal of academic feminism, as well as how they have responded to the problematizing of certain feminist principles and their application in the novel.

As to the authenticity of representation, critics seem to find the character of Sarah Maloney quite believable in spite of the subtle irony that underscores the narrative throughout. Donna E. Smyth (1989) suggests that Shields “gently satirizes” her portrait of feminism and academia, but also writes that “her woman characters are wonderfully shaped out of the stuff of female experience” (4). Smyth is supported by Clara Thomas (1990), who describes Sarah as superficially “a wish-fulfilment figure for the young feminist”, but further as “a character-in-depth” (“‘A Slight Parodic Edge’” 2). She argues that Sarah “both cherishes and laughs at the idiosyncrasies that make her a fully believable, complex individual”, suggesting that “she makes an advance […] in our gallery of young feminists: the bewilderment, the victim-syndrome, and defensive hard edges of early Engel or Atwood heroines are absent” (“‘A Slight Parodic Edge’” 3). According to Thomas, all the characters turn out full rather than flat in the course of the novel, in spite of its parodic qualities. She argues that although the final chapter caricaturizes the characters in a farcical setting, they are humanised in the final act of reassembling Swann’s poetry (“‘A Slight Parodic Edge’” 2).

Kristin Solbjørg Ruud (1999) has also commented on the elements of parody and postmodern play of genre (such as the mystery plot form) which denies novelistic realism in the traditional sense, but like other critics, she does not seem to discredit Shields’s representations on that account (52-5).

This is also generally the trend concerning the dilemmas and difficulties as well as the more admirable aspects of academic feminism as portrayed in the novel, and it is safe to say that critics have placed a significant emphasis on the philosophical and metacritical aspects of *Swann*. Helen M. Buss (1997) refers to it as “a satiric critique of the economy of literary production and literary criticism in general, but since the subject is an obscure Canadian woman poet who dies practically unknown, it is particularly a critique of the biographical enterprise that attends the entry of such a figure into the canon” (427). Referring to Sharon O’Brian’s “Feminist Theory and Literary Biography”, Buss suggests that Shields advocates
the avoidance of constructing “an essential self” in the case of women subjects whose production is repressed both before and after their deaths, and that Shields succeeds in writing “beyond the epitaph” (433). Indeed, several critics, Burkhard Niederhoff (2000) and Heidi Hansson (2003) among them, have commented on the historiographical aspects of the novel as essential (Niederhoff 72). Hansson suggests that _Swann_ displays the challenges of writing history in a time influenced by poststructuralism, feminism, New Historicism and decolonisation (355), and that Shields “combine[s] the indeterminacy of postmodernism with the authoritative attitude of biographical research” (355), pointing to the connection between feminism’s newly developed interest in biography and the project of “retrieving silenced voices, with the result that the unified picture of the past is gradually being replaced by a host of subjective and sometimes conflicting histories” (356). Rather than drawing the conclusion that Shields, as a representative of postmodernity, dismisses biography altogether, Hansson claims that _Swann_ “maintain[s] a precarious balance between questioning and celebrating biography, and these examples contribute to the sense that biographical knowledge is necessary” (366). Susan Elizabeth Sweeney suggests that through Mary Swann, Shields succeeds in mapping out a history of influence in women’s literature which does not exclude writers such as Edna Ferber and Pearl Buck (21-2).

Brian Johnson (1995) describes the biographical search for Mary Swann as a comment in “the debate about authority in contemporary criticism” (56). He suggests that “the author function in _Swann_ produces a paradigm shift which reframes the question of ‘Who is Mary Swann?’ to implicitly accommodate the more complex problems of authorship that Foucault identifies in ‘What Is an Author?’” (58). Similarly, Mary Eagleton (2003) emphasises Shields’s treatment of the author in the production, distribution and criticism of literature. Applying Pierre Bourdieu’s definition of a field as space for struggle over power and capital in terms of money, status or security, Eagleton argues that the characters in _Swann_ inhabit such a field, where criticism and biography become a sort of cannibalism (“Carol Shields and Pierre Bourdieu” 313ff).

Kathy Barbour (2003) is among several critics who have connected Mary Swann’s grotesque murder to Roland Barthes’s idea of the Death of the Author, suggesting that the novel metaphorically displays the insufficiency of this attitude in relation to feminist literary criticism (257-8). She also claims that to “[z]any scholars, sucking grass blades of irony

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21 Roland Barthes’s influential essay “The Death of the Author” advocates an essential tenet of (post)structuralism, namely that texts are unoriginal products of cultural discourse, and that the identity of author should thus not be taken into account as its place of origin or meaning.
between their teeth”, Sarah’s reverence for the dailiness of Mary Swann seems ridiculous. (259) One may suggest that Shields has countered such a response in advance, as these zany scholars are indeed under attack in the novel itself, if one accepts Kristin Solbjørg Ruud’s understanding of Morton Jimroy as a parody of the academics “who use academic discourse to wield power and silence others” (53). And how can one not, observing his conversations with Rose Hindmarch, who according to Barbour “is a bearer of perhaps the most important truth Shields would convey to bookish types, particularly post-modern scholars: goodwill and the open desire to embrace meaning, to embrace community, to embrace our jaded planet in this fagged-out century is what is lacking, is what stinks, is what makes fishy our veneration for intellectual approaches to words” (266).

Hence, it is fair to assume that Swann has indeed been taken seriously as a poignant contribution to the discourse of academic feminism and scholarly practice. Let us now take a look at how some of the criticism referred to display the idea of Carol Shields as the signatory of a critical vantage point, to use Seán Burke’s expression. The hint of satire with which her characters are drawn arguably enhances the impression of an authorial agenda just under the surface, as satire usually implies at least some degree of judgment. In addition, critics’ knowledge of Shields’s academic career often appears to support her authority in Swann’s reception. Buss suggests that Shields’s years as a sessional lecturer have contributed to the insights displayed through her satire:

[…]. Shields has enough experience in the incivilities, the injustices, the sheer foolishness of the academic world, as well as its few decencies and its vast desire, to be capable of the tactical achievement I have described, both in the novel Swann and in her subversive interventions encoded in the biographical scripts awaiting women writers in our culture. (440)

Further, Niederhoff suggests that “Shields does not have a methodological axe to grind; she is not endorsing a particular school of criticism at the expense of others. Her aim in this scene is not exclusive, but inclusive. It is an affirmation of what the participants of the symposium share, their curiosity and their care for Mary Swann and her poetry” (75-6). Barbour comments on Shields’s choice to write the last chapter as the film script of a thriller, suggesting that she is “having fun with literary pretension” (261). She also suggests that the elusive narrator of this section may serve one of two purposes: either Shields is supporting the poststructuralist idea that writing has no inherent meaning, or she might be making fun of the idea of the writer and the reader as “co-equal in the creative process” (261). Evidently, Shields is not only held responsible for her implied judgment, she is also credited with being
competent enough to handle such issues, which again links her fiction to the real world of academia.

Whether or not Shields has succeeded in creating or perpetuating a debate in the proper sense of the word, is however unclear, as none of the responses to Swann that I have come across appear to question the knowledge and integrity of the author in that respect. Rather, the body of criticism on Swann appears to compliment the arguments suggested by the narrative, and more interesting than the praise of Shields’s young feminist protagonist is perhaps the absence of negative responses to her faults and the issues she comes to represent. One might claim that this is merely to do with the text itself not permitting a suspicious reading. However, one may also suggest that Carol Shields’s public profile does not invite much resistance to her fiction, and that the author is in this case imported with a good deal of trustworthiness. It does however seem a bit strange that there has been so little resistance to the transformation of Sarah Maloney’s principles and priorities going from radical feminist to loving wife and mother, arguably finding peace of mind for the first time when she is expecting. This part is, in my opinion, not satirized, and may be interpreted as suggesting that women who choose otherwise are ignorant as to what really matters in life.

One explanation for this may be that the critics who choose to read and review Carol Shields’s novels belong to the same interpretive community.\(^\text{22}\) Perhaps they are already on board with the kind of feminism she adheres to, and recognize the difficulties of fashioning a female identity and agency after the women’s liberation movement and the theoretical disciplines it spurred. Or – because they take her seriously as a voice in feminist discourse, they have also taken the trouble to find from where she speaks through interviews and her non-fiction. Here, Carol Shields clearly emerges as a writer who wished to write books about the kind of women she knew and identified with, as there were no credible portrayals of kind and intelligent women to be found at the time she became a novelist. In 1989 she explained, “I was reading books where women were bitches, or bubbleheads” (Shields qtd. in Watchel 20). One may suggest that Shields thus launched herself as a writer portraying womanhood as it was experienced by her and her friends, which makes her female characters easier to accept and more troublesome to dismiss. She also appears to have been a strong advocate of the appreciation of personal relationships and the domestic sphere as literary topics. In an interview from 1993, she expresses great displeasure at the fact that women’s writings have

\(^{22}\) The term “interpretive communities” was coined by Stanley Fish to denote a group employing similar interpretive strategies, accounting for similar interpretations of texts in spite of the allegedly arbitrary relationship between textual signs and meaning (Fish 355-8).
been so often dismissed on the grounds of such settings, while “domestic literature” by men is credited with the label of “sensitive, contemporary reflections of modern life” (Shields qtd. in Anderson 60). Shields has expressed a belief that women and men function emotionally in a similar way, but that she believes the chief differences lie in traditions of language and communication. Although she has stated that she has always been interested in women’s lives, Shields does not seem to consider the subject matter of her novels to be distinctly female, as evident in this interview from 1988: “I have never for one minute regarded the life of women as trivial, and I’ve always known that men and women alike possess a domestic life that very seldom finds its way into our fiction” (Shields qtd. in De Roo 47). However, unlike Sarah Maloney, Shields has often referred to herself as a belated feminist, finding herself in-between the demure women of her mother’s generation and the confident feminists born of the women’s liberation movement in the 1970s. In an interview by Eleanor Watchel from 1989 she states that she is “too late to be an old-style woman and I’m too late to be a new-style woman. I’m always going to defer to men to a certain extent and I can’t get over it. I regret that” (Shields qtd. in Watchel 38). Adding that she has often admired the confidence of younger women and their ability to expect and demand more agency in life than Shields herself did at their age, the image of the author emerges as that of a woman harbouring great compassion for those who have been restrained by tradition, but who instead of refusing the significance of family life for women, proceeds to include men in it as well.

Hence, like that of Mary Swann, though far better founded, this picture of Carol Shields arguably constitutes a facet of Michel Foucault’s author function in that it is constituted from “projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice” (Foucault 237). Through her public profile, Carol Shields’s name comes to signify a set of values which may contribute to the interpretation of her novel, and the reader is likely to further invest this “brand” with certain impressions made from the literary text which bears her signature, a process resulting in the creation of the implied author. The implied author is arguably always present in a text as the more or less abstract point of origin for judgment and/or agency as perceived by the reader. However, as the text is supplied with a signature and the person behind it proceeds to write essays on
literature and give interviews, the two must necessarily merge as the impression of the one will arguably always colour that of the other, altering the reader’s horizon of understanding.  

1.6 Conclusion

Carol Shields’s *Swann* is very much a metafictional and metatheoretical academic novel, offering multiple layers of complex and intriguing questions concerning not only the origin of literature, but also the formation and protection of female identity, both in the Self and the Other. Of course, the beauty of Shields’s treatment of such complex theoretical topics, is that she allows them to play out in language both sophisticated and accessible to a varied audience of readers. Indeed, the gap between scholars fuelled by theory and the civilians of “real life” is emphasized also by the fact that Shields has chosen to write her novel borrowing traits from popular crime fiction, blending genres in a way which destabilizes the distinction between high and low culture (Hansson 355; Hutcheon 176; K. S. Ruud 55; Smyth 4). A further testament to the popular appeal of *Swann* resides in the fact that it was adapted to film by screenwriter David Young and director Anna Benson Gyles in 1996, starring Miranda Richardson as Sarah Maloney. In addition, Shields’s name is quite well known to book-lovers outside of academia, as suggested by the respectable amount of public attention concerning both her person and authorship (York 238ff). It is fair to assume then, that *Swann* may certainly exert some influence on the private reader’s idea of academia and feminist academics. What impression should I then conclude that they will get of critics and biographers writing and inventing the lives of dead women? I must, as my reader may expect, give the disappointing answer that I do not know. I will however be foolhardy enough to suggest that it is not a wholly glamorous one, and that the characterisations of the scholars attending the Swann symposium may strengthen certain prejudices against the enterprise of literary criticism and scholarship. Hopefully, it will also suggest the necessity of creating and sustaining a feminist framework for the protection of women’s interests in a still male-dominated line of work, in spite of the pitfalls such a framework will be hard put to avoid.

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23 At this point I must underline that I do not claim to be able to state or prove that the critics mentioned above have been directly influenced by the public profile of Carol Shields, although I do think it is fair to assume that it has at least not led to a clear suspicion in reading her texts, which - in contrast - is hardly the case with author of the novel discussed in the next chapter.
2 David Lodge’s Nice Work

The role of feminist theory in the protection and promotion of women’s interests in male-dominated environments is a significant theme in David Lodge’s Nice Work as well, a thought-provoking and complex literary accomplishment in terms of both structure and meaning. Abounding with intertextual references spanning from Victorian industrial novels to the theories of Derrida and Lacan, yet entertaining and accessible enough to become a bestseller adapted for television, this novel proves an interesting junction between academic and popular culture with great potential for providing a varied audience with impressions of intellectual women and how feminist theory and practice functions in these women’s lives. Like many academic novels, Nice Work is essentially a satirical piece of fiction, arguably more overtly so than the previously discussed Swann. It also contains more typically pop-cultural elements than Shields’s narrative – more obvious stereotypes, more romance and lots more explicit sex. In spite of its many references to sophisticated literary theory, the narrative of Nice Work certainly displays a greater freedom in terms of political (in)correctness than one might assume would be acceptable in an academic paper. Pop culture allowing for a more superficial and sometimes also comical focus on sex and the body than would occur in scholarly writing, the genre of fiction itself may be said to provide Lodge with new and poignant ways of exemplifying feminist issues. However, the general acceptance of such a focus in pop culture may also contribute to obscuring sexism or blur the critical focus of the reader, as some of Lodge's critics have suggested. In my opinion, such complications do not render the text lacking value as a contribution to theoretical debate. My analysis of Nice Work will thus concern what I find to be the novel’s most salient issues of representation and negotiation of institutionalized feminism in Britain in the 1980s, with special emphasis on the scholarly and political application of feminist theory.

2.1 The institutionalization and specialization of feminism in Nice Work

The representations of academic feminism in Nice Work are mainly supplied through the character of Dr Robyn Penrose (shortened from Roberta Anne Penrose), a white middle class

24 See section 2.6 on the critical reception of Nice Work.
25 As touched upon in the general introduction, I have chosen not to base my interpretation of Nice Work on David Lodge’s academic reputation and scholarly writings. Eva Lambertsson Björk has already provided a thorough reading of this novel in light of Lodge’s works on critical theory, and concerning my focus on a broader appeal, it seems uncalled for that I do the same.
feminist literary critic and lecturer. Sophisticated, bright and ambitious, fairly young (thirty-three) and fairly attractive, she shares a good few characteristics with Carol Shields’s Sarah Maloney – including a touch of self-centredness. Like Sarah, Robyn exudes professional self-confidence: “She knew she was good, and it wasn’t long before she privately concluded that she was better than most of her colleagues – more enthusiastic, more energetic, more productive” (NW 30). However, in spite of her diligence and the evident popularity of her courses on women’s writing and the industrial novel, Robyn’s position in the English Department of Rummidge is a vulnerable one. Not having acquired tenure, she is the first to go when the money runs out, as tenured lecturers may not be forcibly replaced before their retirement, no matter how few students sign up for their courses, or how little work they produce. There is no mention of any other feminist lecturers in the English Department, and with the exception of her friend, feminist sociologist Penny Black, Robyn seems to lack a personal network of feminist collaboration and communication, another circumstance shared by Shields’s Sarah Maloney. As Penny researches somewhat more hands-on issues of domestic violence, this apparently leaves Robyn without a single fellow feminist teacher of literature.

Feminists appear to be more in demand at Euphoric State University, the workplace of academic wonderboy Morris Zapp, who in the end comes to offer Robyn a rather well-paying job in the States. Apparently, feminist theory is “all the rage” across the Atlantic – a seeming must-have for any trendy college. Zapp is well-versed in the writings of theorists such as Showalter, Felman, Irigaray, Suleiman and Clément, but we get the impression that his enthusiasm for feminist theory is skin-deep at best, and has more to do with academic survival than with ideological dedication. In fact, like Morton Jimroy and Willard Lang of Swann, Zapp is little more than condescending to women. When Philip Swallow refers to Robyn as a girl, Zapp comments: “Men have been castrated for less at Euphoric State. You mean woman. Or lady”’ (NW 232). Of course, only a moment later he refers to Robyn as “a smart girl” (NW 234), thus fully (and possibly intentionally) disclosing his indifference at the guidelines applied at Euphoric State. His helpfulness to Robyn appears to surprise Philip Swallow, who explains that Zapp has distaste for feminists as they have usually been very critical of his work. Merete Ruud suggests that Zapp’s offer puts Robyn “in debt and out of power”, and “reduces her to a commodity” (77). As Ruud observes, his assistance in helping Robyn get a lectureship at Euphoric State was in fact a direct measure to ensure that the position did not go to his ex-wife (M. Ruud 77).
The girl/woman issue provides a glimpse of the actual political changes brought about by the institutionalization of feminism in academia, as well as the resistance to it by men failing to understand the imperative of changing attitudes by conscious use of language, which of course is Robyn’s field of expertise. Although she deals in highly specialized feminist literary theory, the theoretical and political framework for this approach must necessarily be interdisciplinary, drawing on politics, sociology and linguistics as well as psychology. In order to explore Lodge’s treatment of feminist theory and application, it is necessary to provide a somewhat coherent a picture of Robyn’s academic make-up. This is no easy task, as she may appear to subscribe to multiple and sometimes conflicting theoretical orientations. Introduced by the third-person narrator, we get the idea that she is likely to support every new and exciting radical move within literary theory, at least during her time as a PhD candidate in Cambridge in the 1970s:

Intellectually it was an exciting time to be a research student in the English Faculty. New ideas imported from Paris by the more adventurous young teachers glittered like dustmotes in the Fenland air: structuralism and poststructuralism, semiotics and deconstruction, new mutations and graftings of psychoanalysis and Marxism, linguistics and literary criticism. […] She subscribed to the journals Poétique and Tel Quel so that she could be the first person on the Trumpington Road to know the latest thoughts of Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva. She forced her mind through the labyrinthine sentences of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida until her eyes were bloodshot and her head ached. She sat in the lecture theatres and nodded eager agreement as the Young Turks of the Faculty demolished the idea of the author, the idea of self, the idea of establishing a single, univocal meaning for a literary text. (NW 26)

Robyn’s interest in these theorists does not necessarily imply that she agrees with all of them. Judging from her subscription to Marxism Today and Spare Rib, in addition to her lectures on the industrial novel, in which she performs Marxist-feminist deconstructive analyses of Victorian texts, she can hardly be accused of entirely finishing off the situated Author in her seminars. Still, a devout poststructuralist, Robyn is all on board with the idea of the author and everyone else as products of their time and the discourses belonging to it:

According to Robyn (or, more precisely, according to the writers who have influenced her thinking on these matters) there is no such thing as the “self” on which capitalism and the classic novel are founded […] Not “you are what you eat” but “you are what you speak” or, rather “you are what speaks you”, is the axiomatic basis of Robyn’s philosophy, which she would call, if required to give it a name, “semiotic materialism”. (NW 21-2)

Hence, Robyn’s brand of feminism is linked to her disapproval of humanist philosophy and capitalist society, and must then be said to be merely one aspect of a larger egalitarian project. Robyn partakes in this project through feminist literary criticism, which in this case appears to entail deciphering gendered ideology in the industrial novel by the application of a Freudian take on semiotics:
“It hardly needs to be pointed out that industrial capitalism is phallocentric. The inventors, the engineers, the factory owners and bankers who fuelled it and maintained it, were all men. The most commonplace metonymic index of industry – the factory chimney – is also metaphorically a phallic symbol. The characteristic imagery of the industrial landscape or townscape in nineteenth-century literature – tall chimneys thrusting into the sky, spewing ribbons of black smoke, buildings shaking with the rhythmic pounding of mighty engines, the railway train rushing irresistibly through the passive countryside – all this is saturated with male sexuality of a dominating and destructive kind.” (NW 49)

However, the narrator appears to suggest that something valuable is lost in reading as mere social analysis. Discussing *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* (which she refers to as classics) with the painfully ignorant Vic Wilcox who considers novels by women writers “women’s books” that cannot concern men unless they are “nancy boys” (NW 141), provokes the following reflections: “What difference did it make, never to have shivered with Jane Eyre at Lowick school, or throbbed in the arms of Heathcliff with Cathy? Then it occurred to Robyn that this was a suspiciously humanist train of thought and that the very word classic was an instrument of bourgeois hegemony” (NW 141).26 Such emotional identification and empathy deemed humanist and hence dismissed, Lodge’s narrator implies that excessive theory has prohibited the kind of reading experience that made Robyn love literature in the first place.27 Indeed, Robyn seems to read more theory and criticism than actual literature. And when she does read literature, she analyses Victorian characters with a Freudian insistence on the sublimation of libido, as evident in her treatment of the relationship between characters Margaret Hale and John Thornton in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* from 1855. Her readings do admittedly come off as a bit reductive and perhaps even anachronistic. It is hard to tell whether she is analysing a character as she would a real person, or exploring the workings of Gaskell and Victorian women’s sexual subconscious. It certainly seems unlikely that she should present it as a deliberate narrative strategy. The notion of Margaret Hale’s unacknowledged erotic feelings for John Thornton sublimating into an interest in industrial matters must arguably have been unfamiliar to both Gaskell and her readers at the time *North and South* was published, as neither Sigmund Freud nor his theories on sexual sublimation had then yet come to be.

Hence, the portrayal of specialized academic feminism in *Nice Work* appears to display an interdisciplinary and theoretically complex activity whose point of origin as well as

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26 The mistake is either Robyn’s, Lodge’s or the publisher’s – Jane Eyre goes to Lowood, of course. Lowick figures in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*.

27 The romantic reminiscence of Cathy and Heathcliff is particularly interesting here – and perhaps a little unlikely, as Heathcliff would fit perfectly into Robyn’s idea of the possessive and violent male sadist. In my opinion, the marital imprisonment, physical abuse and possible rape of Isabella Linton by Heathcliff makes a much stronger impression on the modern reader than the actual love story – to feminist critics at least, I would imagine.
end appear a little undecided. Is it primarily feminism? Or literary criticism? Or is it really about psychology? The emphasis is hard to place, as Robyn’s lectures historicize the industrialization of England from a Marxist-feminist angle, while performing textual criticism as psychoanalysis. Without neglecting textuality, her project remains essentially political, as her approach to teaching literature resides mainly in the deconstruction and exposition of texts whose perceived doctrine she does not support, offering resistance to dominant ideologies and shaking up the automatized perceptions of her students. However, in addition to this political commitment, Robyn’s preference for theory and criticism is also a matter of professional survival: “There were always so many books, so many articles in so many journals, waiting to be read, digested, distilled and synthesised with all the other books and articles she had read, digested, distilled and synthesised. Life was short, criticism long. She had her career to think of” (NW 151). When asked by Charles whether the world really needs another book on the industrial novel, she justifies her pending feminist publication Domestic Angels and Unfortunate Females as her “chief hope of getting a permanent job somewhere” (NW 222).

Echoing Swann and its desperate scholars, this passage suggests that literary research and publication serve the single purpose of enabling the intellectual elite to do it for a living. Robyn’s dear wish is of course that all members of society should be able to enjoy higher education, enabling a more dynamic relationship between academe and society at large, but her new insights into the complicated economic and cultural structures in Britain show that this is not yet probable. However, as we shall see next, Lodge’s heroine does not restrict her application of feminist and Marxist theory to her books and lectures, but brings it into the “real world” of finance, industry, and the private sphere.

2.2 Academic feminism below the ivory tower

In spite of her social commitment, Robyn never reads the political pages in the newspaper: “It is enough for her to know that things are going badly for Mrs Thatcher and the Tory party; the details [...] do not engage her interest” (NW 26). Nevertheless, she insists on lending her voice to all groups who suffer discrimination, applying her maxims of freedom and equality wherever she goes. However, Lodge provides us with several examples of the alleged insufficiency of feminist and Marxist theory in assessing the complexity of the present political and economic situation, writing his heroine as a bit of a snob, hopelessly out of touch with real social concerns. The gap between ideological theory and practical application is satirically portrayed as Robyn drives through Angleside, and seizes the opportunity to exert
her open-mindedness: “[...] Robyn catches the eye of a young West Indian with Rastafarian dreadlocks, hunched in the entrance of a boarded-up shop, and smiles: a friendly, sympathetic, anti-racist smile” (NW 65). The young man turns out to be a drug-dealer, and Robyn flees as the traffic jam disperses. The dangerous neighbourhood and the man’s suspicious loitering should have tipped her off, but instead Robyn notices only his non-white ethnicity, which has rather stereotypical connotations to her. Satire further turns to sarcasm as the narrator describes her reaction to seeing a black man in the depths of the foundry: “He was the noble savage, the Negro in chains, the archetype of exploited humanity, quintessential victim of the capitalist-imperialist-industrial system. It was as much as she could do to restrain herself from rushing forward to grasp his hand in a gesture of sympathy and solidarity” (NW 90). A well-intended sort of racism, but racism nonetheless, it would seem.

Another example of Robyn’s attempts to empower the individual is provided as she sets off to warn Danny Ram about his pending dismissal, which nearly leads to a strike threatening the factory with bankruptcy. However, she does not seem particularly empowered herself in this situation. To the workers she really is a sexual object in the most offensive sense, and she experiences what it feels like when those who objectify her are strong enough in numbers to impair her agency. Her reaction to the incident makes it evident that she has never really suffered this kind of overtly sexist objectification before, nor has her theoretical convictions helped to prepare her for such blatant harassment:

Wolf-whistles and catcalls, audible in spite of the mechanical din, followed her as she hurried through the factory. The more the men whistled, the more ribald their remarks, the faster she walked; but the faster she walked, the more of a sexual object, or sexual quarry, she became, twisting and turning between the rows of benches (for she soon lost her bearings), stumbling over piles of metal parts, skidding on the oily floor, her cheeks as red as her hair, the wings if her nostrils white, her eyes fixed steadfastly ahead, refusing to meet the gaze of her tormentors. “’Allo, darlin’, lookin’ for me? Fancy a bit of that, Enoch? Show us yer legs! Coom over ’ere and ’old me tool, will yow?” (NW 99)

The working class heroes of the industrial novel bear little resemblance to twentieth century foundry workers, it would appear. Further, Robyn’s condescending attitude to Debbie on hearing her Cockney accent reveals her less than updated impression of working class women as well, only this time she underestimates social progress by assuming that Debbie is a typist, and is genuinely surprised to find that she ranks higher than Robyn’s brother Basil and earns more money than any of them. However, one might argue that as Debbie’s gender apparently does not cut her any slack for reaping the fruits of capitalism, Robyn at least allows her the right to be quite as deplorable as any man in the same position. Hence, her distaste for
capitalism trumps the aim of getting women into positions of influence in what Robyn might refer to as “the symbolic realm”.

Robyn’s implicit inability to include actual non-academic women in her theoretical feminist concerns is underscored by Charles’s suggestion that she is intimidating to women who are not intellectuals. Earl J. Ingersoll suggests that “[...] Nice Work asks its readers to consider not only the obvious subjects of how easily academics can be seduced into believing in their moral superiority on issues of class and race relations but also how willing we are to ignore points of view and areas of experience we feel ourselves superior to” (106). This would go very well with the case of Marjorie, for whom Robyn oscillates between sympathy and contempt. Blaming Vic for patronising her one day, and going to bed with her husband the next, Lodge displays this feminist as rather fickle when it comes to sisterly solidarity.

Complaining to Penny of the unwanted attention from Vic, she shows no conception of being responsible for her part in the drama: “‘What shall I do? Next thing you know, I’ll have Mrs Wilcox in my office, stoned on Valium, begging me not to entice her husband away from her. I feel as if I’m getting dragged into a classic realist text, full of causality and morality. How can I get out of it?’” (NW 218). She cannot get out of it, of course, the point being that life is full of causality and morality which cannot always be resolved by a poststructuralist logic. Of course, the novel’s resolution hardly offers more than a simplification of the problem at heart, namely the deception of Marjorie by Vic, as Stefan Horlacher has noted (475). Marjorie is never told about the affair, and is thus not given the opportunity to make a choice about how to deal with her husband’s adultery. In spite of being allowed, or rather allowing herself, to work in the new family business, it appears that Vic still assumes that “what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her”, patronizing his wife once again under the pretext of protecting them both from the truth. This solution is not problematized by the narrator, nor is the actual affair to any great extent, at least not in Vic’s mind. However, Vic’s mind is not necessarily to be fused with that of the author.

Critics have also commented on the improbability of Robyn being saved from ruin by a legacy, just like the heroines of the industrial novel. She does indeed receive a great deal of money and saves Vic from ruin the way Gaskell’s Margaret Hale saves John Thornton, easing up on her Marxist principles and ends up “on the side of the master” (NW 49) (M. Eagleton, “Nice Work?” 101; Horlacher 476-479; Showalter 106; Wennö. 28-30). Yet, she is really saved by Swallow’s decision to use the virement money to keep Robyn on the job, because she is very good at it. This solution is improbable enough, of course. However, it may easily
be interpreted as a postmodern reminder of the difference between life and fiction – Lodge knows he may not offer a probable solution to Robyn’s situation, yet the comic mode of the novel demands its happy ending, its very improbability pointing back to the impossibility of resolving complex socio-economic issues in the course of a novel.

Eva Lambertsson Björk suggests that Robyn’s relinquishing of eco-political principles also entails a rejection of feminist theory (112-3). Horlacher supports this claim by pointing out that Robyn in any case owes her financial security to men, by investing in “male-dominated systems such as free entrepreneurship and British Universities” (476). Allegedly, through her sexual behaviour and decision to invest in Vic’s business, “the text ‘forces’ Robyn to adopt a male subject position” (Horlacher 469). Such statements arguably go straight to the core problem of constructing a female identity from an established binary opposition of gendered qualities. The assumption that moving away from the traditional female gender role and approaching that of the male entails the continued effacement of femininity in female identity is an issue of much debate, and the truth of such statements must necessarily depend on the reader’s philosophical and political convictions in that respect.

Readers who dispute a given connection between women’s liberation and Marxism will not automatically come to this conclusion, and readers who do believe that women must express an imaginary pre-oedipal experience in avoidance of the symbolic realm, to use psychoanalytical terms, will not see Robyn’s sexual identity as appropriating patriarchal conceptions of sexual differance, or the notion that femaleness is defined by lack of “phallic maleness”.

However, Robyn’s idea of feminism does seem inextricably connected to a larger project of lifting the human oppression caused by capitalism, and in that sense, her feminist principles do indeed change in the course of the novel. However, the male dominance of the English Department does not seem to impair freedom to design her courses exactly the way she wants. And of course, should women shy away from the public arenas of business, education and research, these arenas would stay male-dominated forever. In fact, were it not for feminists fighting for influence and reforming the educational system from within, Horlacher would probably never have written his feminist critique of Nice Work. The idea of Robyn’s employment in a state university as anti-feminist does not seem to hold, in my opinion. The fact that Robyn chooses to stay on at the state-funded University of Rummidge despite the far more lucrative offer from Euphoric State, shows that she has not lost her faith in potential of academic theory in raising consciousness, and that her professional vision
includes a genuine wish to share her knowledge with young people from more than one layer of society. 

However, on understanding that practical application must work from within the structures of capitalism in order to make a lasting difference, Robyn thinks better of her “slightly Quixotic” attempts to change the world by insisting on her principles regardless of the situation (NW 133). Unfortunately, this includes rethinking her initial disapproval of her student Marion Russell’s skimpy work outfits. Rather pleased with Marion’s essay, Robyn reflects that “perhaps the modelling job was turning out to be a sensible decision” (NW 122). In other words, the end justifies the means. A very unlikely compromise for someone like Robyn Penrose, I should think.

2.3 Appearance and objectification in poststructuralist feminist identity

Robyn’s adherence to “semiotic materialism” must necessarily also apply to her conceptions of what it is to be a woman. Lodge has Robyn turn to a wide range of the most influential feminist theories for guidance in establishing her female identity, and the result appears rather confusing. For how does one go about being a woman when there is no such thing as human nature in the traditional sense? Can one judge by experience if experience is considered an automatized response to dominant and oftentimes oppressive discourses? From a feminist perspective, one of the most interesting features of Nice Work is its potential for posing ethical and philosophical dilemmas in terms of how women should and do assess themselves in relation to appearance and physical attractiveness, as becomes evident in the case of Marion Russell. Is female beauty a feminist impossibility as long as it attracts sexual attention? Can the concepts of attractiveness and physical desire be separated, and is this required to de-objectify women? Does wanting to feel physically attractive automatically signify self-objectification? Is it possible for anyone, man or woman, to free themselves from being an object to others in some sense or another, and do all variants of objectification always equal subordination?

These questions are cleverly posed through the juxtaposition of several female characters in the novel. Let us begin with Robyn, whose fashion sense is clearly a product of some deliberation: “Robyn generally favours loose dark clothes, made of natural fibres, that do not make her body into an object of sexual attention. The way they are cut also disguises her smallish breasts and widish hips while making the most of her height: thus are ideology

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28 Critics have argued that her experiences at Pringle’s have made her see the importance of working at a University not reserved for the privileged (Wennö 29; Winston and Marshall 10).
and vanity equally satisfied” (NW 28). Here we find the first hint of what might appear as a somewhat schizophrenic feminist attitude to female beauty and erotic allure, the ironic narrator apparently suggesting that there is a natural contradiction between Robyn’s ideology and her vanity, thus lending a superficial quality to the former. This implies that although she does not wish to be regarded merely as a sexual object, she would not have anyone dismiss her female attributes either, and further, that Robyn is primarily concerned with adhering to a feminist dress-code, making sure that she does not appear to be actively seeking this kind of attention. Later, while under the influence of that treacherous bottle of champagne, she spontaneously admits to wanting bigger breasts, and reveals a remnant of involuntary subscription to popular criteria of sexual aesthetics, disclosing that the feminist principles condemning such aspirations have failed to inspire her on a profound level; they cannot win against society’s powerful preoccupation with a certain perception of physical beauty (Horlacher 472). Her attempts to hide a normal, healthy shape in order to approximate a certain physical ideal does come off as rather hypocritical for someone who should, by all probability, believe in beauty only as a floating signifier. In terms of convincing characterization, it does seem rather unlikely that this particular kind of feminist should crave a larger cup size.

Of course, aesthetic aspects of appearance are not always connected to sexual attraction. Robyn’s stylish and comfortable wardrobe is also very much a part of her intellectually motivated self-expression, making her agency apparent even as she is being observed and interpreted. Her springy copper curls, for instance, are apparently insufficiently dignified, which is why she cuts most of them off. Always the deconstructionist, dissembling the existing feminine aesthetics and write them anew outside the confines of a sexist society certainly poses a challenge for Robyn. Lodge makes use of this challenge to underline the constructed nature of Robyn’s feminist identity: “What did a liberated woman wear to visit a factory? It was a nice semiotic problem. Robyn was well aware that clothes do not merely serve the practical purpose of covering our bodies, but also convey messages about who we are, what we are doing, and how we feel” (NW 63). The narrator seems to suggest that her identity as a liberated woman is a role to be played, and so Robyn must find the right costume to go with it – one of her more unlikely meditations.

Plausibility aside, these passages certainly stimulate reflection concerning whether a woman’s attentiveness to her appearance necessarily equals self-objectification. In Nice Work, this might be argued to depend on the degree to which attractiveness is invested in one’s
identity and sense of self-worth. Contrasting Robyn, Lodge provides us with several female characters whose only ambition seems to be attracting the male gaze. One of them is Shirley’s daughter Tracy, a “well-developed young hussy” (NW 19), whose nudity is forced upon Vic through erotic photographs passed around by the proud mother. He is not impressed with either of them. Exclaiming that Tracey’s voluptuous breasts look like “a double helping of pink blancmange, and about as exciting” (NW 94), signalling that it takes more than pornographic representations of the female body to arouse Vic’s desire, and that such ambitions encourage both him and the narrator to apply condescending terms such as “hussy” and “bitch” to these women, in a spiral of objectification and self-objectification.

Shirley’s defence of her daughter’s choice of career introduces another vantage point regarding female nudity in erotica, namely the argument that women may gain both power and money by taking advantage of men’s fascination with the female body as sexual object: “‘If you’ve got a beautiful body, why not make the most of it? Look at Sam Fox! […] The top Page Three girl. D’you know how much she earned last year?’” (NW 19). The implied author seems as unimpressed as Vic – an impression strengthened by the existence of Vic’s much loathed colleague Brian Everthorpe, a character more responsive to the charms of both mother and daughter. His general lack of social intelligence, work ethic and respect for women make him an improbable role-model for any reader. His rather hypocritical claim that pornographic company calendars celebrate the female body rather than degrading it is efficiently torpedoed by Robyn’s retort that they should include some naked men to cater for customers who might prefer that:

“[…] I like them with hairy chests and ten-inch pricks.” Everthorpe gaped at her. “You’re shocked, aren’t you? But you think it’s perfectly all right to talk about women’s tits and bums and stick pictures of them up all over the place. Well, it isn’t all right. It degrades the women who pose for them, it degrades the men who look at them, it degrades sex.” (NW 95)

Marjorie Wilcox is also a clear victim of objectification – by herself, her husband, and the women’s magazines she consults for marital advice. Suspecting that her husband might be involved with another woman, though not daring to provoke a possible break-up, she attempts to win him back by the means of a tanning bed and an exercise bike. Her attempts are futile; indeed they only serve to push him further away. Underestimating both her interest and her intellectual ability to take part in his life, Vic reduces his wife to a body he feels no inclination to make love to (Wennö 26). The fact that her husband cannot grasp the depth of her loneliness and depression, in spite of her generous self-medication and prolonged naps, does not mean that the reader cannot appreciate the tragedy of Marjorie’s situation. She
evokes pity, but also frustration, for not demanding agency in her own life. When Vic is made redundant, however, Marjorie gets a chance to use her secretarial skills and share a life with him again by taking part in their small family firm. Brutally awakened from his domestic unconsciousness and surprised by her thriftiness and optimism, (and the fact that what she really wants is to be working rather than shopping), Vic is able and willing to mentally reconnect with her, and thus begins to find her easy on the eyes again.\footnote{Elisabeth Wennö suggests that this reconnection of love and work is presented as enabling “individual fulfillment within the existing [sex/gender] systems” (28).}

The connection between personality, agency and physical attraction is nowhere as well exemplified as in Vic’s infatuation with Robyn, who in spite of her political and theoretical shortcomings is implicitly credited by the narrator as being the more interesting alternative to Marjorie and the hair-patting Shirleys at Pringle’s. Although Vic does come to see Robyn as his object of desire, he does not, in my judgement, reduce her to an instrument of his sexuality, even if he does think of her when he creeps “guiltily to the en suite bathroom to seek a schoolboy’s relief” (NW 227). The narrator’s tone is slightly sarcastic when describing Vic’s shameful attitude to his own sexual fantasies, and implies that they are both aware of the insufficiency of these mental “blue movies” (NW 227), working reductively on his part, not Robyn’s. His desire seems in fact to be a product of Robyn’s pronounced agency:

\begin{quote}
[... there was something about her that was different from the other women he knew – Marjorie, Sandra, Shirley and her Tracey. Dress, for instance. Whereas they dressed (or, in the case of Tracey, undressed) in a way which said, Look at me, like me, desire, marry me, Robyn Penrose turned herself out as if entirely for her own pleasure and comfort. Stylishly, mind – none of your women’s lib regulation dungarees – but without a hint of coquetry. She wasn’t forever fidgeting with her skirt or patting her hair or stealing glances at herself in every reflecting surface. She looked a man boldly in the eye, and he liked that. (NW 158)
\end{quote}

In this context, it proves useful to spend some lines examining the term object, which in this case is hardly unambiguous. In feminist discourse, this term has generally denoted a state of passivity, a lack of agency in one’s own life, sexually and otherwise. In grammatical terms, however, people tend to be subject and object simultaneously, depending on the point of view from which their story is related. In that sense, being an object does not necessarily entail a lack of agency outside the sentence, nor does Robyn being in some respect an object of desire entail that she is not considered by herself and others to be the subject of her own life, unless one considers desire to be essentially degrading. With this in mind, one might suggest a semiotic difference between sexual object and object of desire, the former working reductively for the individual in question.
The scene in the foundry may also be interpreted as a metaphor for how women may invest their bodies with more rather than less sexual connotations by consciously hiding it both from the feminist gaze and the male gaze. A delicate problem for sure, as one might argue that the loose and covering clothing favoured by feminists like Robyn hardly solve the problem of objectification, as it does little to change attitudes towards female nudity and the feminine silhouette as exclusively sexual, which again might suggest that the blame for objectification must always remain with women for not covering up their more interesting bits. There is, however, a difference between hiding and not putting on display, and though I do not pretend to offer a resolution to this discussion – potentially a philosophical ping-pong match of infinite duration – one might attempt something of a compromise by approaching the question from a semiotic angle. If certain forms of female nudity imply self-objectification, it is not because of nudity in itself, but because the shape it takes in terms of postures and clothing has become a sign of begging for sexual attention. As Vic has it: “‘You don’t get blokes going into an art gallery and staring at a picture of Venus or whatever and nudging each other in the ribs saying, ‘I wouldn’t mind going through her on a Saturday night’” (NW 149). One may claim that they probably would not imagine what the model had been thinking about either, and that her physical beauty alone is still very much the theme of the painting. Still, Tracy’s freely displayed breasts and pouting lips fail to impress Vic, while Robyn’s exposed nipple fuels a passionate infatuation by the fact that it was not for him to see. One might argue that such reasoning implies the importance of good old-fashioned feminine modesty, and there is some textual evidence, albeit circumstantial, that this might be the case in Nice Work. Robyn’s reflections on the pin-ups in the foundry do seem a bit out of place: “That, she realised, was what was peculiarly degrading and depressing about the pictures. Not just the nudity of the girls, or their poses, but the fact that nobody was looking at them, except herself. […] It made the models’ sacrifice of their modesty seem poignantly vain” (NW 84). Admittedly, “modesty” is not very likely to appear in the feminist vocabulary of someone harbouring Robyn Penrose’s convictions.

The issues of desire and personal appearance in Nice Work are necessarily connected to Vic’s infatuation with Robyn, and I have admittedly come dangerously close to proposing that the right kind of woman is one that appeals to the right kind of man. I would suggest, as I believe Lodge does, that this is merely a pleasant side-effect of being a person of agency and assertiveness who does not live to satisfy the male gaze. Robyn is certainly an object of desire to Vic, but that does not leave her passive or powerless in his or her eyes, as evident when she
decides to seduce him at the Frankfurt convention. Comprehending that he may soon be making love to Robyn, his expression is described as being “like the face of a prisoner who comes to the door of his cell and grips the bars, only to discover that it is unlocked, and does not know whether the prospect of release is genuine or not” (*NW* 205). This fits in well with Ingersoll’s suggestion that contrary to the assumption that the object of desire must necessarily be deprived of agency, desire disempowers the desirer, and so the question of reciprocal possession thus becomes a matter of restoring the power balance. Hence, he claims that Vic “becomes ‘feminized’ by his desire not only to possess her but to enjoy the enabling power of that otherness she embodies for him” (Ingersoll 102). Ingersoll’s point is supported by the rape-like fantasy Vic resorts to for sufficient arousal to make love to his wife:

> [...] yes, that was good, to have her there on the floor amid the incredible litter of books and dirty coffee cups and wineglasses and album sleeves and copies of *Spare Rib* and Marxism Today, stark naked, her bush as fiery red as her topknot, thrashing and writhing underneath him like the actresses in the TV films, moaning with pleasure in spite of herself as he thrust and thrust and thrust. (*NW* 114-5)

Interestingly, Vic’s satisfaction lies not in the thought of subduing Robyn’s body by physical strength, but from forcing her to *desire* him and acknowledge his superiority as a lover. Lodge then arguably displays such pornographic instrumentation as inadequate and misguided through Vic’s subsequent reaction:

> He himself felt only guilt and depression, like he used to feel as a lad when he wanked off. […] the bitterest thought was that, had she known what he had done, Robyn Penrose would have nodded smugly at so complete a confirmation of her feminist prejudices. So far from having had his revenge, Vic felt that he had suffered a moral defeat. (*NW* 115)

This imbalance of power is emphasized by Vic’s association between Robyn and Diana, the virgin hunting goddess often related to the moon in Roman mythology, who punishes the hunter Actaeon for spying on her naked body by turning him into the prey of his own hunting party. It is interesting to note that Vic seems capable only of either ignoring women or worshipping them, perhaps because he seems to have experienced female company in a very restricted sense. Robyn clearly being a new experience to him, he confuses her resistance to self-objectification with a kind of asexuality also prohibiting any sexual interest in her: “She was the most independent woman he had ever met, and this had made him think of her as somehow unattached and – it was a funny word to float into his mind, but, well, chaste. […] There was no place in the picture for a lover or husband – the goddess needed no male protector” (*NW* 158-9). Vic thus fails to differentiate between female sexuality and emotional dependence. The view of woman as either servant or goddess is hardly a new invention, and
may be illuminated by Simone de Beauvoir’s famous explanation of the nature of such worship: “To say that woman was the Other is to say that there did not exist between the sexes a reciprocal relation: Earth, Mother, Goddess – she was no fellow creature in man’s eyes; it was beyond the human realm that her power was affirmed, and she was therefore outside of that realm” (70). Consequently, Vic has at this point not quite managed to grant Robyn a place within the human realm.

2.4 Poststructuralist feminism, sexuality and gender dynamics

Appearance is naturally closely connected to sexuality, the latter forming a vital part of any identity. Constructing a female sexuality from poststructuralist feminist maxims while living in a male-oriented sexual paradigm presents yet another challenge, if we are to believe Robyn’s conflicting principles on the subject. Of course, the question of sexuality is inseparable from dynamic interaction and relationships between the sexes, and as always in Robyn’s case, theory and practice do not necessarily concur. She appears to distrust men in general (Charles excepted), and her enthusiasm for sexual semiotics and Lacanian Freudianism seems at times to insist on perpetuating the idea of male and female sexuality as essentially conflicting, resulting in problems of male sexual stereotyping. It may seem as though feminists like Robyn are all about removing false oppositions between male and female identity, and that the one true female psychological trait is a shared history of oppression and objectification. In Nice Work this is not a clear-cut case, which is clear from her short lecture on the sexual metaphors of a poster advertising Silk Cut cigarettes:

The shimmering silk, with its voluptuous curves and sensuous texture, obviously symbolised the female body, and the elliptical slit, foregrounded by a lighter colour showing through, was still more obviously a vagina. The advert thus appealed to both sensual and sadistic impulses, the desire to mutilate as well as penetrate the female body. (NW 154)

Vic suggests that Robyn “must have a twisted mind to see all that in a perfectly harmless bit of cloth” (NW 155). She, on the other hand, assumes that all human beings at least subconsciously recognize these metaphors, suggesting that men would never buy this brand if the tissue was substituted with a roll of silk cut in half, as this would symbolize a mutilated penis. The fragmented nature of Lodge’s representations of psychoanalytical feminism suggests a discrepancy in Robyn’s theoretical convictions. Appearing to insist on such subconscious symbolic interpretations as an essential part of human nature, a concept she allegedly does not believe in, Robyn seems to be perpetuating the notion of biological gender
difference and sadomasochism as naturally connected. Considering her claim that people are not essences, one should imagine that her sources of inspiration would be feminists such as Julia Kristeva, who propose that the concept of gender difference as nurtured in childhood through the systems of language, but this is not obvious to the reader who is not well versed in the diverging branches of psychoanalytic feminism, especially not when encountering such claims that “[a]ll holes, hollow spaces, fissures and folds represent the female genitals” (NW 156), which points more in the direction of Cixous’ theories of the maternal body as a site of women’s writing. Her convictions suffer a blow on her initial visit to Pringle’s. Finding not a single phallic chimney thrusting into the virginal sky (as the factory runs on electricity) Robyn and the reader are left to contemplate the possibility of chimneys having a function other than representing phallic dominance in capitalist society.

Regardless of whether this alleged male sadism is inherent or not, the feminists of Nice Work appear to prefer avoidance rather than reform. However, no woman is an island, and nor should she have to be, according to the feminist discussion group Robyn attends while still at Cambridge. That is, as long as her needs are satisfied by other women. Attempting to “free themselves from the erotic patronage of men” (NW 33), some of the members even strive to change their sexual orientation:

Several members of the group were lesbians, or tried hard to be. Robyn was quite sure she was not; but she enjoyed the warmth and companionship of the group, the hugging and kissing that accompanied their meetings and partings. And if her body occasionally craved a keener sensation, she was able to provide it herself, without shame or guilt, theoretically justified by the writings of radical French feminists like Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who were very eloquent on the joys of female autoeroticism. (NW 33-4)

This passage implies an assumption that according to feminists, men are essentially patronizing to women. In addition to enforcing the impression of Robyn’s hidden insecurity and naïveté in indiscriminately absorbing all feminist ideas, the narrator implies a lesbian policing of women’s sexual relationships. Thus, he paradoxically suggests that what is at work here is really the erotic patronage of lesbians, in which masturbation is the only alternative available to those not tempted by other women.

Dr Penny Black proves a more likely advocate for separatism and female supremacy, as she fits perfectly into the stereotype of the radical lesbian feminist, with her adopted American accent and militant feminist attitude. When she hears of the Shadow Scheme, Penny naturally supposes that Swallow commanded Robyn to do the task as an act of deliberate oppression: “‘That’s how they screw us, these men in authority. It’s a power trip’” (NW 61). She disapproves of Robyn’s affair with Vic, not because he is married, but because
she feels that Robyn has succumbed to “the old female rape fantasy” (NW 212) by going to bed with what Penny supposes is a rich and powerful industrial manager. Both Robyn and the know, of course, that rape has nothing to do with it, and so Penny comes off as rather oppressive in her own way, criminalizing all forms of heterosexual intercourse and victimizing the women who practice and enjoy it. As will be discussed later, several critics have accused Lodge of objectifying his female characters through the narrator’s descriptions of their bodies, and this claim seems fair in Penny’s case: “she […] levered her formidable breasts into the cups and thrust her arms through the shoulderstraps. Latex smacked lustily against solid flesh. Playing squash was the only time Penny wore a bra – without it, as she said, her boozums would bounce from wall to wall faster than the ball” (NW 61). And then again: “Penny Black shifted her weight from one massive haunch to the other, making her pendulous breasts tremble. Runnels of sweat ran down between them and vanished into the damp undergrowth at her crotch” (NW 216-7). The ironic narrator here seems to tip over into a kind of sarcasm bitter in tone – could it be the male author who, on feeling that his gender is being reduced to an emblem of oppressive and sadistic sexuality, Seizes the opportunity to perform the same kind of reduction against a fictional representative of his accusers? The lusty smacking of latex, as well as the inclusion of the comment “‘Pretend the ball is one of Swallow’s’” (NW 62) certainly implies a sadistic quality to Penny. From a feminist point of view, this kind of protest cannot possibly strengthen Lodge’s case. Of course, another reason for equipping Penny with such a generous bosom might be to suggest radical feminist insistence on inscribing all aspects of traditional femininity with motives of male hegemony, here exemplified by the pointless stubbornness of refusing to wear a bra when it would arguably be more comfortable and practical for Penny to wear one. However, Penny never really evolves from the stereotype of the angry feminist barking up the wrong tree, as neither her work on domestic violence nor the history of injustices done to female intellectuals in systems of higher education are ever properly explored in the novel.

Luckily, Robyn’s conflicting attitudes toward sex do not often need application in real life, as her weekend visits from Charles is the only thing happening in that department:

There was sex, of course, but although both of them were extremely interested in sex, and enjoyed nothing better than discussing it, neither of them, if the truth be told, were quite so interested in actually having it, or at any rate in having it very frequently. […] Sexual desire was a play of signifiers, and infinite deferment and

30 Horlacher suggests that “[…] the concept of an independent and self-confident female usually evokes in Lodge’s novels the stereotype of the sadistic redhead, of the witch and of the castrating woman […]” (471).

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Here, feminism is not entirely to blame, although excessive theorizing of sex might be argued to drain the allure from it. It seems, however, that it is the poststructuralist preoccupation with theory over experience that has lessened their erotic appetite. Indeed, spontaneous passion is replaced with a kind of scientific sobriety in Charles’s case, technical inventiveness replacing penetrative sex on the grounds that “[f]eminist theory approved, and it solved the problem of contraception” (NW 106). Considering Robyn’s alleged conviction of the phallus as a sign of male domination and destruction, and consequently that of heterosexual intercourse as oppressive, it is rather odd to find that she carries with her a packet of condoms at all times. It appears that the sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies here comes into conflict with the idea of penetration as mutilation, and poor Robyn not knowing which to follow in order to liberate her sexuality, subscribes to them both for good measure.

A slightly reluctant feminist, Charles cannot help wanting to move beyond the usual erotic massage, but does not insist when met with obvious disapproval on Robyn’s part. However, when she gets drunk on champagne and decides to seduce Vic (already overripe for plucking), she hardly bothers to stand her ground against his claim that he is “a phallic sort of bloke” (NW 208). Hence, the narrator seems to suggest not only that the alcohol reveals her true inclinations and that her feminist convictions on the subject are token, but also that she is quite right in relinquishing them. The scenes following certainly make it very clear that if anyone controls the situation, it is Robyn, penetration or no. Indeed, the greatest discrepancy between theory and practice in Robyn is her insistence on being able to write the world anew while still choosing to hold on to radical feminist conceptions of male sexuality, inscribing sexual intercourse with violent connotations even when these do not fit her experience of it. One might argue that within her form of poststructuralist logic, her experience does not shape language, it is language that shapes her experience, but this is clearly not the case in her experiences with Charles and Vic. Charles arguably also receives his share of ridicule for allowing himself to be constructed by radical feminist thoughts about the oppressive nature of male sexuality. However, we get the impression that he has more respect for Robyn than for radical feminist theory, but, being a man and thus in a vulnerable position to question feminist principles, he chooses not to confront her on the issue and thus fails himself and men in general by accepting a set of rules he really believes to be based on faulty judgment.

Another potentially problematic feature commented upon by critics in reference to Lodge’s representation of a poststructuralist feminist approach to sex and relationships, is
Robyn’s separation of body and mind, perceiving romantic love as a “rhetorical device” and a “bourgeois fallacy” (NW 210). In fact, she theoretically dismisses Vic’s declaration of love already during the foreplay:

“We aren’t essences, Vic. We aren’t unique individual essences existing prior to language. There is only language.” […] But the discourse of romantic love pretends that your finger and my clitoris are extensions of two unique individual selves who need each other and only each other and cannot be happy without each other for ever and ever. (NW 210)

Robyn explains her own experiences of falling in love with having allowed herself “to be constructed by the discourse of romantic love for a while” (NW 210). A hopeless attempt – and highly improbable in anything but satire – to appear more conscious of the shaping discourses than she really is, Lodge points to the absurdity of falling in love as a result of the decision to subscribe to a set of beliefs one has already exposed as linguistic construct. Indeed, several critics have suggested that Robyn’s self-deception regarding her own abilities to deconstruct existing cultural discourses and then write the world anew is what truly exposes her to ridicule (Björk 121; Horlacher 475; Ingersoll 95; Winston and Marshall 4, 9; Wennö 25). But her convictions do not affect her alone – they also cause Vic a great deal of emotional distress. By dismissing the existence of his feelings on theoretical grounds and refusing any further discussion of them, Robyn appears either very cold-hearted or slightly stupid – or perhaps both (Eagleton, “Nice Work?” 100). Ingersoll suggests that Robyn’s egotistical sexual behaviour in this context suggests that she has adopted patriarchal standards after all (102). Indeed, knowing that Vic is in love with her, Robyn could easily be blamed for objectifying him in taking advantage of his feelings. Robyn’s callousness comes with her sobriety as a new day dawns upon the consequences of her actions. It is interesting to note that her motivation for seducing Vic actually stems from the connection between body and mind, namely the emotional sting caused by Charles’s affair with Debbie (Wennö 25). That being said, Vic gets his share of narrative ridicule for his unrealistic, yet persuasive illusion of love, sustained as it is by “a mixture of erotic fantasy and erotic reminiscence, wish-fulfilment and self-pity, accompanied by snatches of Jennifer Rush” (NW 226).

Of course, the absurdity of Robyn and Vic ever getting married is obvious to everyone but him, including the reader. Not that Robyn is likely to marry anyone. She opposes the institution of marriage on theoretical grounds, a principle Lodge’s narrator implies is rather token and slightly hypocritical, as Robyn and Charles’s relationship was at one time very

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31 Elisabeth Wennö suggests that “Robyn has passion for the body rather than of the body […] The needs of the body, she thinks, are biological reflexes that can be observed and they have very little to do with passion, let alone love […]” (Wennö 24).
much like a traditional marriage. Of course, Charles did most of the housework in order for Robyn to spend every waking hour doing extra-curricular academic and political work. This subversion of functions can be read in at least two ways. Readers who subscribe to traditional gender roles might interpret it as displaying the absurdity of women having priority over men in pursuing a career, and – as Robyn might have it, a symbol of the castrating feminist. Others (myself included) read this subversion as a kind of Shklovskyan defamiliarisation, allowing the reader to appreciate this imbalance of interest when removed from the shroud of automatized perceptions of gender. The downside of this interpretation is that it may imply that what feminists like Robyn are really doing is to demand priority in relationships while claiming to fight for equality. Her shock to find women doing dirty work in the Pringle’s foundry supports such an interpretation. She claims to be all for equality, only not “equality of oppression” (*NW* 81), which arguably implies that women deserve oppression less than men.

Not having a family to look after, Robyn may allow academic life to pervade the home as well, and her house is not nearly as well organized as her lectures. Critics have suggested that Lodge here enforces the stereotypical idea of the intellectual woman as domestically challenged. That may be so, but one can hardly suggest that he urges women back into the kitchen. Marjorie and Vic’s marriage illustrates the devastating results of husband and wife occupying completely separate spheres, and Mrs Penrose certainly constitutes a rather narrow-minded example of the housewife whose only ambition for her daughter is marriage:

“There’s no reason why you shouldn’t still have your own career. If that’s what you want.” She managed to imbue this last phrase with a certain pitying incomprehension. She herself had never aspired to a career, finding complete satisfaction in acting as her husband’s typist and research assistant in the time she had left over from gardening and housekeeping. (*NW* 32)

This divide between two generations of women resembles that between Carol Shields’s Sarah Maloney and her mother, the latter also failing to understand and accept her daughter’s goals and priorities. As evident in his letter of proposal, even Charles appears to have very traditional conception of marriage: “I’m fairly confident that I shall be earning enough by then to support you in the style to which you have become accustomed, if not rather better. There’s no reason why you shouldn’t go on doing research and publishing as a lady of leisure” (*NW* 271). He is refused, of course. In the end, Vic is the unlikely candidate to supply Robyn and the reader with the possibility of a dimension of erotic relationships which

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32 Wennö describes Charles as the empowerer in this relationship: “The undercutting of the sex/gender system that is promised in Robyn’s and Charles’ inverted gender roles and gender attributes is as challenged as the ‘given’ nature of the ‘normal’ combination of the bread-winning man and the house-making woman” (23-4).
may add something to her happiness without impairing her independence and sense of self-fulfilment: ‘‘One day you’ll meet a man who deserves to marry you.’ ‘I don’t need a man to complete me,’ she says, smiling. ‘That’s because you haven’t met him yet’” (NW 274). And so the discourse of romantic love gets the final word this time around.

2.5 Critical reception: Nice Work as theoretical discourse

Not surprisingly, the social and theoretical issues at stake in Nice Work have generated a fair amount of scholarly criticism, and responses to Lodge’s novel are not nearly as homogenous as those of Swann. As sales numbers and awards would suggest, Nice Work has proved a commercial success, and its reception has to a great extent cohered with its popularity. However, Lodge’s satirical negotiation of poststructuralism and academic feminism has caused Nice Work to be dismissed by critics such as Terry Eagleton as a defence of liberal humanism offering no more than a confirmation of certain stereotypical prejudices against intellectual women and modern literary theory. Others, among them Elaine Showalter, are quite enthusiastic about its portrayal of postmodern feminists. Hence, the critical responses seems to confirm the potential of fiction as a contribution to academic and political debate, which again alerts us to the importance of taking into consideration the professional background and theoretical orientation of the critics as well as the author in analysing the potential of academic fiction in theoretical discourse.

Terry Eagleton (1988) appears to recognise Nice Work as an attempt to ridicule feminist and poststructuralist theories which have challenged the notions of liberal humanism in academia. He claims that Lodge dismisses such theory as

[…] yet more instances of theoretician Eurospeak, to be blandly satirized along with floating signifiers and intertextuality. They are simply moves within the semiotic game – whereas the beauty of liberal humanism is that it is at once a move within the game and a move outside it, to those intuitive decencies beyond the long arm of politics or theory. (95)

Eva Lambertsson Björk (1993) supports this complaint, noting that in Lodge’s descriptions of the conflicts between feminist ideology and Robyn’s “natural” inclinations, the former comes across as “[a] discourse fabricated by the feminist other” which “alienates Robyn from her true self, threatening to confine her to a passive, trance-like condition” (123).

Terry Eagleton and Björk also concur that Lodge perpetuates unflattering stereotypes of academic women, and they are not alone in this. In a review from 1989, well-known writer and critic Hilary Mantel claimed that according to Nice Work, Lodge’s idea of a feminist is
that “she is argumentative and does not wear a bra”, and that these characters “pander to the reader who has settled his world view in the 1960s and does not want it altered” (Mantel). Björk suggests that “Nice Work evinces clear anti-feminist and élitist patterns” (131), describing Robyn as “a crude caricature of a ‘liberated’ woman [...]” (115), and “the twentieth century spinster par excellence” (120). She argues that Robyn is kept at an ironic distance from the reader while Vic is more sympathetically and convincingly portrayed, creating a narrative imbalance: “The dialogue between self and other is not allowed to materialize. How can a proper dialogue be created with the use of stereotypes?” (Björk 113) Terry Eagleton proceeds to claim that “Robyn [...] has little time for sex, since intellectual women are of course irritatingly passionless. She behaves rather like a Victorian prude, needing to get drunk to have intercourse with Wilcox, and then apparently repressing the whole affair” (100). Risking the danger of treating Robyn like an individual rather than a character, one might in Lodge’s defence suggest that she is hardly alone in having slept with someone while under the influence of alcohol, wishing she had not the next day. Considering also her enthusiasm for erotic massages and general approval of masturbation, the label of Victorian prude seems inappropriate.

However, not all critics share this view. Supporting Terry Eagleton’s review, Stefan Horlacher (2007) strongly emphasises the authorial voice in Nice Work as an expression of David Lodge’s allegedly sexist attitudes. Placing Robyn in the position of the textual victim of an inherently sexist narrative structure, Horlacher implies an allegiance between the narrator, the implied and real author, as well the male sexist characters of the novel – and allegiance is exemplified in what he sees as the comic potential of the harassment scene in the foundry (477). Horlacher further claims that Vic’s impression of Robyn as chaste underscores the portrayal of Robyn as an “obviously outdated Lawrentian image of the sexless female brain” (469). It might in this context be appropriate to keep in mind that the novel’s implicit critique of poststructuralist lack of sensuality goes for both Robyn and Charles. Again, claiming that the comparison is promoted as valid in itself entails the assumption that Vic and the narrator must share opinions, which seems unlikely, as Vic views his goddess with reverence rather than ridicule. Further, Horlacher suggests that Robyn functions as the “incarnation of the male fantasy of a predatory and for this very reason attractive woman” (471). He writes, “What Lodge in an interview has called “emancipatory” is in effect yet another badly disguised male fantasy, since on a subtextual level Robyn is the passive victim of a textual logic, which not only prepares but even announces the seduction scene 26 pages
before it actually occurs in the novel [...]” (473). Considering Horlacher’s aforementioned claim that Robyn is presented as a Victorian sexless brain, one might wonder if there is any way Lodge can ever win. If I understand Horlacher correctly, the passive virginal heroine (a male fantasy) is in a sense textually raped by the patriarchal male author who forces her to willingly initiate sex, and in doing so defines her as a sexual predator (also a male fantasy). It seems an instance of feminist criticism which insists on the male author’s intention to place the female character into the binary of frigidity/promiscuity, seemingly without convincing references to textual patterns. Thus the textual possibility of non-sexist representations of female sexual agency in *Nice Work* is reduced to none.

Lodge’s feminist characters are not the only portrayals feminist critics have reacted to. Björk also suggests that the narrator displays a condescending attitude in his depiction of Marjorie Wilcox and the women working at Pringle’s, the ironic narrative voice obscuring the sexism inherent in this characterisation by using comedy to take the edge off. Referring to Michael Mulkay’s *On Humour: Its Nature and Place in Modern Society*, she argues that messages delivered as jokes are difficult to criticise, as senders of a humorous comment is seldom held responsible for their statement (Björk 114). Horlacher as well points to Lodge’s mode of female characterisation as objectifying, claiming that “it is striking how often Lodge’s narrator characterizes his female protagonists by describing not their minds but their bodies, and preferably their breasts” (468-9), and suggests that the narrator shares Vic’s view of Marjorie as nothing more than an unattractive body (468). Admittedly, Lodge’s narrator implies a traditionally male vantage point on female beauty. However, his male characters are equally subjected to ridicule and physical scrutiny, albeit through Robyn’s eyes. One may suggest that the matter of focalisation has not been sufficiently taken into consideration in Horlacher’s critique, seeing as Lodge’s narrator seems to slide from a position as storyteller offering his own judgment to relating the opinions of his characters through free indirect discourse. In that sense, the descriptions of Marjorie may be read primarily as Vic’s act of objectification rather than the narrator’s. Finding Marjorie’s sense of fulfilment in going back to work insufficient, Horlacher also suggests that secretarial work is here presented a woman’s highest ambition (475), which, judging by the novel’s other secretaries, does not bode well for female intelligence. This attitude, I believe, belongs chiefly to Mrs Penrose, hardly an advocate for the narrator’s opinions. On the contrary, Robyn’s mother and the silly secretaries at Pringle’s exemplify not what women are like, but rather images of the results of imposed and self-imposed limitations, contrasting Robyn in terms of personal assessment and
ambition. They may not be very realistic, but one must keep in mind that this is very much a satire of opposites.

On that note, one may easily agree that Robyn Penrose is a bit of an exaggeration, but then again, all the characters of *Nice Work* are exaggerated, and not a single one, man or woman, gets away unscathed. Although works of indirect satire may not ensure realistic representation, they may still open up for debate. Lodge’s ironic mode of characterisation clearly announces its own exaggeration, advising the reader to take these portrayals with a pinch of salt as they personify attitudes and social phenomena rather than claim realistic representation of individuals. Abrams and Harpham’s *Glossary of Literary Terms* offers the following description of satire: “Its frequent claim (not always borne out in the practice) has been to ridicule the failing rather than the individual, and to limit its ridicule to corrigible faults [...]” (320). However, Horlacher disagrees that Lodge’s novel qualifies for a satire. Referring to Brian A. Connery’s reading of Lodge’s *Small World* and *Changing Places*, he argues that unlike proper satire, *Nice Work* allegedly ends up supporting the very concepts it parodies, referring in this case to the sexist attitudes displayed in British industry (Horlacher 479). He claims that in the end, “sexuality with a strong, self-confidant and intellectual woman remains highly problematic, even if *Nice Work* repeatedly makes fun of a supposed male superiority. [...] traditional notions of a phallic maleness are ridiculed but defended whenever they come under real threat” (Horlacher 470). I would offer the alternative suggestion that the satirical representations of the sexist attitudes of the men (and women) in the novel do not necessarily represent male chauvinism in comic disguise or benign attacks covering up an incriminating bias, but serve to remind the reader of the necessity of making feminist principles visible and accessible also to those who are not middle-class academics.

Conclusively, it appears the most extensive readings of *Nice Work* exploring female and feminist representation concur that these representations inevitably result in sexist stereotyping. One might wonder whether it is in fact possible to perform a feminist analysis of *Nice Work* without finding blatant sexism in the narrative structure. If one subscribes to the idea that a novel like *Nice Work* may have some bearing on people’s opinion of academic

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33 Connery writes that “while postmodernist works like Lodge’s *Changing Places* and *Small World* give the impression of being satires, because of their self-conscious and rather thick use of parody as a means to defamiliarisation, along with their presentation of a humorous world, the satirical attack is actually deflected or blunted by the parody. In Lodge’s novels – in which author, characters, and readers are all academics – the parody congratulates the readers on their reading competence, establishing a Fishean community among author, reader, and characters, an alliance which protects that community from most of the satire which, thus, remains latent” (126-7).
feminism and feminist academics, feminist literary criticism can admittedly never be naïve in reviewing such literature. However, if it is the aim of a feminist reading to discover and indict even the smallest potential for sexism in texts concerning women and feminism, the feminist critic will run the risk of prohibiting any discussion of feminist dilemmas.

Not all critics seem to share this agenda, though. Earl G. Ingersoll (2007) suggests that although Robyn’s obsession with feminist deconstruction now seems a bit dated, Lodge’s treatment of it still has “depth and seriousness” (86). In her a survey of academic novels from 2005, highly profiled feminist critic and theorist Elaine Showalter credits Nice Work with having supplied “the most detailed, convincing, and upbeat portrayal of the feminist academic in the 1980s” (102). Belonging to the Anglo-American feminist tradition, it is perhaps not surprising that Showalter should also be more supportive of Lodge’s implied criticism of the potential paradoxes of French feminist criticism than critics such as Björk and Horlacher, who display a debt to French feminism through their consistent use of Lacanian terminology. Without being too presumptuous, one might then suggest a connection between the aforementioned critics’ theoretical positioning and the interpretation of narrative voice and attitude in relation to the representation of women in Nice Work. For instance, Mary Eagleton (2005) suggests that ambition and competitive drive becomes “the butt of satire” in Robyn, as these qualities have traditionally been viewed as typically male (“Nice Work?” 204). I, on the other hand, did not see the ironic potential of Robyn’s “masculine” qualities, as my experience, or horizon of understanding, has not taught me to automatically make such a connection. My reading would suggest that Robyn’s productiveness primarily serves to highlight the failings of the tenure system – as the most popular, devoted and productive member of staff, Robyn still enjoys less security than the scruffy old professors who spend most of their full academic freedom lingering in the cafeteria.

As mentioned in the introduction, the readers’ theoretical background is naturally just one factor in the reception of academic novels. As we have seen, political readings of Nice Work greatly emphasise the author’s public profile in their assessment of its representations of women and academic feminism, an approach which introduces a particularly difficult dilemma. For while readers who are unfamiliar with feminist literary theory might find that Lodge’s scholarly background lends him sufficient credibility, literary scholars might find this aspect particularly incriminating should the novel prove tendentious in representation, implying wilful ideologically motivated distortion rather than ignorance. On the other hand, such assumptions also entail a certain danger of the author overshadowing the literary work,
inscribing potentially valid points with ideological connotations it might not otherwise have had. The case of *Nice Work* and David Lodge is particularly challenging in that respect. Here we have a male heterosexual author who takes upon himself the rather daring task of criticising feminism, thus speaking *of* the margins, but not *from* the margins. Admittedly, he cannot lay claim to female experience, but to assume gender bias in male authors and critics also implies an exclusion of male voices from feminist debate in a time when many feminists demand more active male participation in discussions about sex and gender. Indeed, avoiding naiveté while taking care not to employ biased interpretive strategies seems to me perhaps one of the greatest challenges of feminist literary criticism.

Interestingly, Björk and Horlacher use Lodge’s previously stated support for women’s liberation *against* him, arguing that the attitudes allegedly displayed in *Nice Work* disputes the truth of these statements, thus they both emphasise *and* disregard the author’s public profile in their reading (Björk 119-20; Horlacher 469). Consequently, we find that the perceived message of the literary work in this case functions as a public statement even more powerful and authentic than a non-fictional quotation directly concerning the author’s personal opinion on the women’s liberation movement.

### 2.6 Conclusion

As obvious satire may be perceived as offensive to those who do not share the speaker/writer’s opinions, Lodge does risk ending up preaching to the choir in *Nice Work*. Still, it does not seem given that the ironic representations of women and feminism should be so emphasised in criticism while the satire concerning “phallic maleness” should be labelled benign. One may suggest that the blatantly sexist characters of *Nice Work* point to the fact that the endeavours of feminist theorists do not seem to affect the people who perhaps need it the most in Lodge’s little universe – be it foundry workers, lonely housewives, teenage girls, managers or their secretaries. What is written by the intellectual elite stays with the intellectual elite, if we are to believe the conditions of *Nice Work*. But should we? Does Lodge provide both literary scholars and other readers with valid and accessible portrayal of the academic feminists and feminism at the time it was written? If so, do these representations still bear some relevance to feminism and female identity today? To be sure, Lodge’s representation of poststructuralist feminism has its deficiencies. Rather than promoting one coherent branch of feminist literary theory, Robyn may be seen to personify the contradictions
of this vast field, or what Annette Kolodny describes as “feminism’s hardwon diversity of voices” (457). The fact that there is no sign in *Nice Work* of the contents of proper theoretical debate among feminists, strengthens the impression of Robyn Penrose and the issues of academic feminism as merely a trendy embellishment to the curriculum rather than a fully incorporated concern of literary criticism, which may reflect the situation of the physical world without necessarily justifying it. In 1988, Kolodny claimed that “the feminist invited to a summer school of institute of critical theory is invariably a token, her particular style of theorizing forced to stand synecdochically for a whole it cannot possibly represent” (457).

This also appears to be the case with the feminist protagonist of *Nice Work*, both in terms of her fictional workplace and her function in the novel. Perhaps Robyn would not have seemed quite so inconsistent had the ideas she subscribes to been explained more fully, for instance that her understanding of Freudian psychoanalysis is filtered through Lacan, which again is filtered through the writings of French feminists.

Although I agree with critics such as Virgil Stanciu who argue that readers of *Nice Work* should not be so eager look for one polarised theoretical stance in the dialectical nature of Lodge’s negotiations (64), I do find that Lodge has Robyn draw an unnecessarily sharp line between the poststructuralist notion of the self as shaped by cultural discourse and the individual’s experience of this. Behaving like a unified self does not automatically entail the complete dismissal of the idea of being a product of one’s time, nor does Robyn’s understanding of romantic love as a cultural construct automatically entail that she should have no compassion for Vic’s experience of it. Of course, Robyn herself does not perform or experience in concord with the discourses she has “allowed” to construct her. Hence, she is at once too rigid and too fickle in her convictions to resemble a well-read, reflected professional academic, in terms of plausible representation, at least. I would still suggest that the dilemmas posed by the text in terms of female identity are valid and interesting although they do not form a comprehensive overview of diverse feminisms. There is of course a danger that readers unfamiliar with feminist theory will accept Lodge’s representation of Robyn as a typical feminist, confirming certain prejudices of feminism as logically inconsistent, fanciful and tendentious. What is perhaps more serious, is that the divide between feminist theory and practice seems essentially unbridgeable in *Nice Work*. The value of forming systems for understanding and rectifying the imbalance of power between the sexes is not visible in this
particular narrative. In terms of independence and assertiveness, Robyn does admittedly inspire and impress Vic by example, but that is about it. Still, on issues of female identity, appearance and objectification, I would argue that there is plenty to be harvested from the combination of Robyn’s deliberations and the attitudes of the novel’s other characters. Far from being dated, this discussion is acutely relevant today, with the expansion of so called “lipstick feminism” or “stiletto feminism”, in which porn stars and glamour models claim feminist affiliation in expressing their sexuality unhindered by puritan ideals of female modesty and chastity. One might then ask if it is really their own sexuality they are expressing. I highly doubt it, but a further discussion of this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

34 Terry Eagleton claims that “[w]hat is forcibly suppressed by the work is the possibility of any theory which might have practical foundations in social life” (102).
3  A. S. Byatt’s Possession: A Romance

Possession: A Romance by A. S. Byatt is a virtual palimpsest of textual layering whose complexity resides not only in its parallels and references to Victorian literature, myth and folklore, or the variety of genres sometimes patched together and sometimes merged in this decidedly postmodern romance, but most importantly in the ethical and theoretical dilemmas posed by its characters. This richly intertextual Romance relates the story of literary scholars Maud Bailey and Roland Michell who researches the clandestine love affair of fictional Victorian poets Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash. The narrative interweaves lengthy samples of these poets’ literary works in addition to other fabricated historical sources such as diary entries, letters and even texts of natural science – all authored by Byatt.

In terms of the novel’s representation and negotiation of academic feminism, it appears that several issues covered in Swann and Nice Work crop up in Possession as well. My aim in this chapter is the exploration of Byatt’s questioning of the role played by feminist theory and criticism in placing the interests of women – as readers, writers, professionals and private individuals - from the margins and into the centre of academia and society in general. Here I examine whether the text may be claimed to argue that focusing on feminist theory in academia may impair women’s personal growth rather than encourage them to speak up for their own interests in professional and private relationships. In Byatt’s romance, this aspect is visible in two products of institutionalized feminism, namely the discipline of psychoanalytical feminist literary criticism and the “sisterhood” of the feminist academics practicing it.

3.1  Feminist literary criticism and textual sexuality

In Possession, “the feminists” seem primarily to denote a fairly homogenous group of literary critics, at least in terms of ideology and theoretical affiliation. They subscribe to psychoanalytical and poststructuralist feminist theory and methodology, interpreting women’s literature as expressions of female sexuality, implicitly present in omissions and symbols – as evident in the (fictional) collection of mostly American feminist criticism entitled Herself Herself Involve, LaMotte’s Strategies of Evasion (P 43). The feminists are quite enraptured by LaMotte, for whom they hope to secure a more prominent position in literary history. Her most significant work is a twelve volume epic poem entitled The Fairy Melusina, a proto-
feminist work inspired by a Breton mythical figure half woman, half serpent. The two feminist scholars we come to know best are experts on LaMotte’s prose and poetry; Dr Maud Bailey of Lincoln University, and her friend Professor Leonora Stern from Tallahassee. The latter is abundant and colourful in every sense, and seldom makes an appearance on the pages without the narrator’s mention of her large soft breasts, which is comparable to David Lodge’s treatment of Penny Black. However, Leonora’s breasts may seem to function as a metaphor for the warmth and strong physical presence she exudes. Of course, Leonora’s interpretive approach works the other way around; she decodes texts for metaphors and references to the body itself. Like Robyn Penrose in *Nice Work*, Leonora is influenced by Cixous’s work on female auto-eroticism and *écriture féminine*, which she applies to her analysis of landscapes in the works of all the great English nineteenth-century women writers, including Christabel LaMotte and the “female wetness” of her imagery (P 298). The chapters of her book *Motif and Matrix in the Poems of LaMotte* are suitably entitled “From Venus Mount to the Barren Heath”, “Female Landscapes and Unbroken Waters, Impenetrable Surfaces” and “From the Fountain of Thirst to the Armoric Ocean–Skin” (P 296-9). To Leonora, the scenery in women’s novels symbolize the curves and orifices of the female sexual body, as apparent in an extensive excerpt from this paper - a textual orgy of bodily streams, metaphorical orgasms and pubic vegetation, all wrapped in dense and highly sophisticated French feminist lingo. Indeed, Leonora’s Freudian-gynocritical paper is a rather impressive display not only of Byatt’s extensive knowledge of French feminist theory, but also the ease which she may play around with it – creating a caricature which is delightfully over the top (or so one can only hope) without losing complexity.

Maud Bailey’s critical methodology differs somewhat from that of her American colleague – a difference emphasised in her general characterisation. Maud is English and then some. Her manners are calm and reserved to the point of coolness, as fellow scholar and love interest Roland Michell experiences during their early acquaintance. She is impeccably dressed in expensive fabrics, mainly greens and whites. Like the heroines of *Swann* and *Nice Work*, Maud is tall, slim and statuesque with rather beautiful feature. However, she conceals her fantastically blond hair under elegant silk scarfs. Her slightly impersonal air extends to her mode of criticism – or so she thinks. She describes herself as “a textual scholar” (P 259), who cares little for modern feminism’s emphasis on biographical detail. In the case of *Melusina*, Maud appreciates the mythical figure’s “monstrous form as a ‘transitional area’,” in Winnicott’s terms – an imaginary construction that frees the woman from gender-
identification” (P 401). In contrast, Leonora reads LaMotte’s literary motifs as expressions of the poet’s own lesbian identity, as evident in Leonora’s letter to Maud concerning their papers in progress:

I could extend it to *The Drowned City* – with special reference to non-genital imagery for female sexuality – we need to get away from the cunt as well as from the phallus – the drowned women in the city might represent the totality of the female body as an erogenous zone if the circumambient fluid were seen as an undifferentiated eroticism, and this might be possible to connect to the erotic totality of the woman/dragon stirring the waters of the large marble bath […]. Or you might wish to be more rigorous in your exploration of LaMotte’s lesbian sexuality as the empowering force behind her work. (I accept that her inhibitions made her characteristically devious and secretive – but you do not give her sufficient credit for the strength with which she does nevertheless obliquely speak out.) (P164)

Whether they aim to define female sexuality or escape such definitions, both Leonora and Maud apparently focus their attentions entirely on LaMotte’s poetry as expressions of the pleasures and frustrations of being women through *what is not being said*. As we shall see, the narrative suggests several complications pertaining to this way of thinking, both in terms of the appreciation of literature, and of the political aspects informing feminist literary criticism.

Our first encounter with the dilemmas arising from reading women’s texts as sexual expression occurs as devilishly handsome hot-shot poststructuralist Fergus Woolf introduces Roland Michell to LaMotte’s great epic “proem”:

“What the feminists are crazy about it. They say it expresses women’s impotent desire. It wasn’t much read until they rediscovered it – Virginia Woolf knew it, she adduced it as an image of the essential androgyny of the creative mind – but the new feminists see Melusina in her bath as a symbol of self-sufficient female sexuality needing no poor males.” (P 40-1)

Interestingly, Virginia Woolf supposedly recognized LaMotte’s work as an expression of a common ground on which women and men may meet and understand each other – namely that of the artistic mind, while new feminists like Leonora seem to insist on the importance of a specifically female sexuality as the driving force of women’s artistic production. One might suggest that Byatt has Maud side with Woolf in this case, but there is arguably a significant difference between focusing on the *presence* of the androgynous mind and *absence* or need to escape traditional notions of womanhood.

One may further suggest that the psychoanalytical criticism presented in *Possession* clearly proposes that although female sexuality must and should be acknowledged and accepted in all its diversity, singularly emphasising it in women’s texts threatens to once again reduce women to mere body and instinct, which is exactly what early feminists sought to get away from – the idea that women do not possess the faculties of rationality and intellect. However, psychoanalytic theory informed by poststructuralist linguistics does not
suggest that being governed by sexuality necessarily entails a lacking ability to reflect on its workings, nor that its form of sublimation does not depend on the ever changing systems of language. Seen through this grid, one must necessarily also consider men’s writings to be governed by sexuality, as we find evidence of in feminist readings of Randolph Ash’s poetry. Feminist interest in Ash is allegedly limited to tracing evidence of misogyny in his lines, as evident in Val’s thesis, whose central proposition is that “his female speakers were constructs of his own fear and aggression” (P 16). Maud too considers Ash’s poetry to be anti-feminist and full of “cosmic masculinity” (P 50). However, the following conversation between Roland and Maud points at the interpretive ambiguity of Ash’s poem The Sorceress as entirely dependent on the reader’s realization. Maud thinks the poem a prime example of misogyny:

“[…] He’s punishing her for her beauty and what he thought of as her wickedness.” “No, he isn’t. He’s writing about the people, including herself, who though she ought to be punished because of her beauty and wickedness. She colluded with their judgment. He doesn’t. He leaves it to our intelligence.” (P 65)

This, the novel seems to advocate, is exactly the kind of openness and exchange of perspective which is hindered by exclusively searching for sexist patterns in men’s literary writings. As we shall see later on, such an approach may also result in misconceptions of history.

In spite of her position as head of Women’s Studies at Lincoln, Maud does not seem entirely comfortable with the tenets of her own academic discipline: “[…] The whole of our scholarship – the whole of our thought – we question everything except the centrality of sexuality – Unfortunately feminism can hardly avoid privileging such matters. I sometimes wish I had embarked on geology, myself” (P 272). Her point is valid – female sexuality is indeed a significant topic for literature, and studying it may say a great deal about women’s experience of life. One may then suggest that the problematic aspect of this interpretive approach resides primarily in its institutionalization, which may be claimed to establish it as a compulsory stencil for any text and any reader. As we shall see, the novel also suggests such feminist literary criticism to be an insufficient method of revising history in terms of gender dynamics and female experience. The following dialogue between Roland and Maud is exemplary of this problem:

“And then, really, what is it, what is this arcane power we have, when we see that everything is human sexuality? It’s really powerlessness.” “Impotence,” said Maud, leaning over, interested. “I was avoiding that word, because that precisely isn’t the point. […] Everything relates to us and so we’re imprisoned in ourselves – we can’t see things. […]” (P 308)
Roland’s longing for unsexed meaning seems to cohere with the aforementioned (fictional) vantage point of Virginia Woolf. So would the convictions of Dr Beatrice Nest, a character constituting the sad result of failing to keep up with literary trends. Beatrice, at one time eager to write a dissertation on Randolph Ash’s Ask to Embla, was advised by her supervisor to do an edition of the poet’s wife’s diaries and letters instead, as it would be more suited to her “capacities as they were thought to be, whatever they were” (P 270). Twenty-five years later, she is still at it, hidden away in the cellar of the British Museum, her edition being continually delayed by feminist expectations of who Ellen Ash was, or rather how she should be portrayed. Established authority on R. H. Ash, James Blackadder describes how she “woke up to find that no one wanted self-denial and dedication anymore, they wanted proof that Ellen was raging with rebellion and pain and untapped talent” (P 38). The untapped talent is all Beatrice’s, it seems, and her comment to Maud arguably reveals the gist of Byatt’s critique of feminist literary scholarship: “[…] A good feminist in those days, Dr. Bailey, would have insisted on being allowed to work on the Ask and Embla poems” (P 270).

Apparently, the institutionalization of feminism has not made it easier for rather unassuming personalities like Beatrice to shake off the limitations placed upon them by patriarchal academia and pursue their true academic interests – in this case the writings of Mr Ash – unless these should include the deconstruction of his supposed sexual ideology. Instead, Beatrice seems irretrievably lost in the theoretical turmoil of modern literary theory, unwanted and unable to satisfy the demands of the traditional scholars as well as the new feminists. Indeed, the following passage further reminds the reader of the very real suppression and involuntary isolation suffered by female academics in the fifties and sixties:

“I don’t think you can imagine, Miss Bailey, how it was then. We were dependent and excluded persons. In my early days – indeed until the late 1960s – women were not permitted to enter the main Senior Common Room at Prince Albert College. […] We were grateful for employment. We thought it was bad being young and – in some cases, not in mine – attractive – but it was worse when we grew older. There is an age at which, I profoundly believe, one becomes a witch, in such situations, Dr. Bailey – through simple ageing – as always happened in history – and there are witch-hunts – [”] (P 270-1)

From this perspective, it is perhaps understandable that women such as Beatrice Nest should prefer to be taken seriously within traditional scholarship rather than seeking the relative seclusion of the feminist sisterhood working at dissembling the character of her beloved idol. As James Blackadder explains, the feminists eager to get hold of Ellen Ash’s diaries are convinced that “[…] Randolph Ash suppressed Ellen’s writing and fed off her imagination. They’d have a hard time proving that, I think, if they were interested in proof, which I’m not sure they are. They know what there is to find before they’ve seen it […]” (P 37). All
Beatrice can do at this point is to keep the feminists at bay in order to protect Ellen and Randolph Ash from what she would see as an intrusion spurring untruthful speculation.

### 3.2 Literature and the feminist revising of history

As previously noted, the feminist interest in Ellen Ash’s diaries indicates that a part of the feminist enterprise entails a revising of history emphasising women’s experience. Blackadder’s comment above is not the only passage hinting that the methods of Possession’s feminists are hardly less monolithic than that of patriarchal historiography. It seems that they too have their favourite archetypes, drawn from whatever image of woman is in vogue at the time. The helpmate is clearly not, nor the androgynous mind or the contented domestic poetess. These appear to have been supplanted by the female artist as “distraught and enraged” (P 44), and it seems Ellen Ash too must be shaped according to this template. What the feminists seem to forget, in this instance, is that most Victorians, women included, would arguably have a hard time reconciling with poststructuralist feminist ideology. The diaries suggest that Ellen Ash was an intelligent woman and a keen reader, but she did see herself as a helpmate – and even then only in the sense that she did not hinder her husband’s poetic production. Rewriting her into a suppressed and bitter artist thus results in the misrepresentation of both husband and wife. One might in fact suggest that feminist scholars may have over-historicised Randolph Ash as well as his poetry by attributing him with certain attitudes generally observed in Victorian texts (Adams, “Dead Authors, Born Readers, and Defunct Critics” 122), and this may again contribute to reinforce an image of Victorians which may not be entirely representative of their opinions and experience. Whether or not this is fair to claim for feminist criticism outside of the textual universe of Possession, I cannot presume to tell. Within it, however, the feminist version of this particular part of history is proven inaccurate, as the narrative supplies us with very different versions of both Ash and LaMotte than those constructed by Byatt’s feminists. Their letters and the narrator’s account their affair prove R. H. Ash to be highly progressive for a Victorian, and also reveals that Christabel LaMotte was neither exclusively lesbian nor sceptical of Ash’s poetry. In fact, their ability to encourage and appreciate each other’s artistic production constitutes the

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35 As Merete Ruud observes, this may also lead to a reductive reading of the work itself: “The author’s name and what is known about him/her [...] become a care label directing the reader towards a general interpretive frame. [...] reading in this perspective means tracing projections of the author’s milieu, the portrait of an age, which is reductive vis-à-vis the multiplicity if meaning inherent in language” (45).

Lillian Schmidt also suggests that Ash is ascribed “all the sins of the male literary establishment” (45).
common ground of understanding which fuelled their passion – not the other way around. Also, rather than being a fastidious Sister, it turns out that LaMotte sacrificed her loyalty towards Blanche Glover as well as any feeling of solidarity towards her lover’s wife in order to live out her passion.

In spite of her distaste for biographical readings of poetry, even Maud is disappointed to find out about LaMotte’s admiration for Ash: “Part of her was still dismayed that Christabel LaMotte should have given in to whatever urgings or promptings Ash may have used. She preferred her own original vision of proud and particular independence, as Christabel, in the letters, had given some reason to think she did herself” (P 299-300). It seems that Maud’s version of LaMotte is very much that of the implied author, and like Sarah Maloney of Swann, Maud very much reads her own concerns into the lines of her favourite poet. As critics have observed, Maud appears to deliberately view LaMotte’s writings as expressions of the kind of autonomous seclusion she herself idealizes, and so the discovery of the affair thus destabilises her own attitude towards erotic relationships (Adams, “Dead Authors, Born Readers, and Defunct Critics”115; Bronfen 124; Buxton 7).

Indeed, if Ash has been over-historicised, LaMotte has arguably not been historicised enough. Blanche Glover’s suicide note certainly suggests that the proto-feminist project of these two women did not revolve mainly around the question of sexuality, although that too seems likely to have been an issue:

I have tried […] to live according to certain beliefs about the possibility, for independent single women, of living useful and fully human lives, in each other’s company, and without recourse to help from the outside world, or men. We believed it was possible to live frugally, charitably, philosophically, artistically, and in harmony with each other and Nature. Regrettably, it was not. […] It is to be hoped that our first heady days of economic independence, and the work we leave behind us, may induce other stronger spirits to take up the task and try the experiment and not fail. Independent women must expect more of themselves, since neither men nor other more conventionally domesticated women will hope for anything, or expect any result other than utter failure. (P 370)

Their primary concern thus seems to revolve around matters of economic independence, of being at liberty to choose work, and of being taken seriously as a professional. As LaMotte herself puts it:

Men may be martyred
Any where
In desert, cathedral
Or Public Square.
In no Rush of Action
This is our doom
To Drag a Long Life out
In a Dark Room. (P 133)
These concerns are echoed in two other fictional Victorian documents included in the novel. The first is an excerpt from the diary of LaMotte’s Breton cousin Sabine de Kercoz, who writes that according to LaMotte herself, women were “largely thought to be unable to write well, unlikely to try, and something like changelings or monsters when indeed they do succeed, and achieve something” (P 420). The other source is Ellen Ash’s diary, which contains a response to LaMotte’s *Melusina*:

> It is truly original, although the general public may have trouble in recognising its genius, because it makes no concession to vulgar frailties of imagination, and because its virtues are so far removed in some ways at least from those expected of the weaker sex. Here is no swooning sentiment, no timid purity, no softly gloved lady-like patting of the reader’s sensibility, but lively imagination, but force and vigour. (P 143)

Force and vigour are certainly traditionally regarded as masculine qualities, and the strength of LaMotte’s writing seems to lie precisely in her refusal to suppress her masculinity. These accounts arguably leave the reader with the impression that those female characters which have experienced the limitations of systematic gendered oppression at its most severe are indeed the ones most eager to participate in public arenas on equal terms as those of men.

In the case of Christabel LaMotte’s literary production, there is nothing to suggest that she ever deserved to be labelled a minor poet. She has indeed been ignored by male critics – at first because her writing was not feminine enough, and later because it did not meet with established aesthetic conventions, and so the attention she finally receives from feminist scholars does seem overdue. As in *Swann*, Byatt admittedly allows the reader to decide about the literary merit of her poetry and fairy tales, as much of it is included in the novel. One might still suggest that her writing nevertheless deserves some praise at least within the universe of *Possession*, endorsed as it is by both the feminists and the Ashes. However, in securing a more prominent position for LaMotte, feminists like Leonora and Maud seem to choose a method which does necessarily reflect the author’s opinion on the matter.

The question which perhaps must remain unanswered is whether it mattered what LaMotte intended to express in her work. Perhaps it does contain stylistic and structural elements that a male author neither could nor would produce. Perhaps LaMotte could not see it, because she could not see herself in relation to history. That she did not consciously choose to write psychoanalytical riddles must be fairly certain, but that does not mean that she could not have been governed by biological and cultural systems that she was not aware of. That her experience of being human must have been coloured by her experience of being a woman in Victorian society is beyond doubt. However, as the mutual understanding and appreciation of literature revealed in the LaMotte/Ash correspondence would suggest, all of these systems
were not necessarily exclusive to women. Indeed, it may seem that Ash and LaMotte were more alike in thought and expression as Victorians, than Leonora and LaMotte are in terms of being women. As in *Swann*, this ultimately points to the complications of doing literary criticism as biographical research. One might then suggests that Maud and Leonora both risk not only a biographical abduction, but also a poetic abduction in attempting to speak for women whose cultural circumstances were very different from their own (Hansson 361).

### 3.3 Women’s Studies and the problem of marginality

As we have seen, scholars like Maud and Leonora, who enjoy economic freedom and the opportunity to pursue a career of their own choice, seem to seek the exclusively female in women’s texts in order to build and support not only their own sense of female identity within a poststructuralist framework, but also a female tradition of writing which – because it can claim exclusive femaleness in aesthetic as well as thematic terms – remains less vulnerable to the kind of patriarchal criticism that so easily discarded LaMotte’s production. Let us now consider the problems such an approach might cause apart from those of biographical misrepresentation. It should be pointed out that dismissing the categorisation of all women’s texts as *écriture féminine* does not necessarily entail a reluctance to acknowledge that these texts often express the concerns of being a woman in a specific cultural context. Nor does *Possession* suggest that this experience may not be both interesting and accessible to both sexes, or that female experience should not have its place in the history of humanity. Rather, it is the focus on poetic language as an extension of the body and a self-sufficient female sexuality, *and only that*, which is arguably being problematized in Byatt’s novel. The possibility of reductive readings has already been mentioned. In addition, the novel seems to suggest that such a methodology presupposes that women’s experience can never cohere with that of men, and that consequently, men cannot appreciate women’s literature as anything but a glimpse of the unattainable Other – and vice versa. In other words, claiming the superiority of sexuality and desire in all human activity seems to perpetuate the idea of a communicative chasm between the sexes that will always remain unbridgeable. The result tends towards intellectual segregation where men and women at best will form two separate centres. It is perhaps more likely that female writers and readers will remain at the margins.

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36 William Epstein’s term “biographical abduction” is explained on page 35.
In *Possession*, the potential problem of exclusion and seclusion also appears in relation to the institutionalization of feminism in higher education. The novel seems to suggest that specialisation of women’s history and art through programs such as Women’s Studies may ultimately perpetuate the idea of women’s experience as something particular rather than universal – an exception from the rule. Consider for example the following passage delivered by Randolph Ash’s biographer, Mortimer Cropper:

“LaMotte? Oh, yes, *Melusina*. There was a feminist sit-in, in the Fall of ’79, demanding that the poem be taught in my nineteenth-century poetry course, instead of the *Idylls of the King*, or *Ragnarök*. As I remember, it was conceded. But then Women’s Studies took it on, so I was released and we were able to restore *Ragnarök.*” (P 367)

To Cropper, Women’s Studies seems to function as a convenient alibi for continuing to keep female authors out of the canon and out of literary courses in higher education. In this case, *Melusina* did not earn a place in Robert Dale Owen University’s survey of notable nineteenth-century poetry, but remained instead an artefact of women’s history, thus enforcing the idea that history of women’s experience is not a vital part of history in general. Indeed, the very idea of Women’s Studies and even feminism as a political movement is of course a great and unavoidable paradox, as its focus on gendered difference will arguably always cause it to occupy a liminal space in academia. However, in order to for women to gain access and influence in public institutions, feminist scholarship must necessarily continue to expose those constructs excluding women on grounds of gender.³⁷

As in both *Swann* and *Nice Work*, one may easily get the feeling that academic feminism in *Possession* has become somewhat of a trendy game for the very clever. While Roland is reluctant to participate in it, more ambitious characters such as Fergus Woolf readily join the party. Similar to Morris Zapp in *Nice Work*, Fergus is a suspiciously versatile academic surfing the newest waves of fashionable theory. He is also what induced Maud to celibacy by invading her space with an exasperating display of theoretical know-how and superior rhetorical skills. Fergus can play the feminist tune by ear, but as Morris Zapp and the male scholars of the Swann symposium, he too appears to be a “phallic sort of bloke” in the true Lacanian sense, as evident from the description of his paper “The Potent Castrato: the fallogocentric structuration of Balzac’s hermaphrodite hero/ines” at a Paris convention on

³⁷ Merete Ruud suggests that Maud Bailey as well as Robyn Penrose of *Nice Work* are “portrayed so as to indicate that they only way to get into the male strongholds of academia may be to place oneself on the borderline between the sexes, in a no-man’s-land, literally speaking” (50).
“Gender and the Autonomous Text”: “The drift of his argument appeared to be feminist. The thrust of his presentation was somehow mocking and subversive” (*P* 67). As Deborah Denenholz Morse suggests, feminist criticism also grants Fergus access to “bodies of beautiful women like Maud Bailey” (151).

However trendy, any real money to be made on feminist criticism seems to be in America, as was the case in *Nice Work*. While Maud laments the sparse funding of her Women’s Studies resource centre, Leonora tries to tempt her with a position in Tallahassee which she seems to be able to conjure with a snap of her fingers. Of course, Leonora knows how to sell an idea. When pairing up with James Blackadder on TV in order to influence the British authorities to purchase the Ash-LaMotte correspondence, her instructions are clear: “‘[…] you’ve got to make out your Mr. Ash to be the sexiest property in town. You’ve got to get them by the balls, Professor. Make ’em cry. […]’” (*P* 478). Apparently, sex sells, and sex is of course the card Leonora plays herself during the interview. The TV host appears to take the bait, and one might conclude that Leonora is not entirely wrong to assume that sexuality governs people’s interest to a great extent, although this may not give much cause for joy. Having both done their best to make their product sufficiently sexy, Blackadder’s heart is a little broken at having had to cheapen down Ash and his poetry to a matter of sex. Whether or not he deserves our sympathy must admittedly depend on the reader.

### 3.4  The Sisterhood

The posters of pro-abortion campaigns and feminist reviews on the walls of the coffee shop at the Women’s Studies Research Centre at Lincoln University clearly displays the connection between feminist theoretical disciplines and the greater political concerns that spurred them. Hence, the feminists of *Possession* see themselves as a part of a shared political enterprise rather than a group of individual scholars elbowing their way to the top, as evident in Leonora’s letter offering Maud her ideas. This is perhaps why the latter feels so uneasy about hiding the truth of LaMotte’s relationship with Ash from Leonora, who is still writing from the assumption that LaMotte had no sexual interest in men: “She would feel betrayed and sisterhood would be betrayed” (*P* 165). The concept of a feminist sisterhood is prevalent in *Possession*, and as the reader might expect by now, its dynamics are not at all unproblematic. It would seem that in order to secure the autonomy of women as a group, the sisters keep a rather sharp eye on each other, ensuring that certain codes of conduct are adhered to. Those
pertaining to prevalent methods of criticism discussed above, let us take a look at how the sisters influence Maud’s sense of self.

First and foremost, there is the case of her hair. Plaited and concealed under a delicate silk scarf, its pale golden colour appears to cause her a considerable amount of concern. Maud, it seems, labours under the yoke of beauty – the wrong kind of beauty, she would claim, assuming that her pretty face automatically undermines her intelligence and integrity: “The doll-mask she saw had nothing to do with her, nothing. The feminists had divined that, who once, when she rose to speak at a meeting, had hissed and cat-called, assuming her crowning glory to be the seductive and marketable product of an inhumanly tested bottle” (P 68). In other words, Maud’s particular kind of good looks has become thoroughly invested with connotations of vanity and self-objectification – even if she wears no makeup (Bronfen 124-5). This connection has admittedly been forged by patriarchy, as evident in Beatrice Nest’s story of how young beautiful women were the least likely to be taken seriously by male scholars in her time as a fresh member of staff. In Possession, however, this kind of prejudice seems to be perpetuated by the feminists who aim to dismantle it. They appear to have appropriated an overtly sexist and degrading response to the sight of sisters who satisfy popular criteria of physical beauty. Not in a subversive sense, but with the aim of objectifying her – or at least demonstrating their disgust of her supposed self-objectification. The effects of the two are arguably very similar, and one can easily imagine that Maud felt no more at ease in that conference room than Robyn Penrose of Nice Work did running through the foundry in search of Danny Ram. The saddening fact is that Maud seems to have accepted and internalised these women’s attitude, responding to the incident by cutting her hair very short, as Robyn Penrose does in Nice Work.38

The aforementioned passage also implies that Maud, through Byatt’s use of free indirect discourse, does not fully identify with “the feminists”. On meeting her for the first time, Roland “sensed too that she would never make it in the Women’s Studies building” (P 91). Her elegance seems out of place, and it appears that to Roland at least, she does not have the forcefulness he usually associates with feminist scholars. But then again, Roland’s idea of the typical feminist might not be very realistic, as he at first supposes that men are not permitted to enter the Women’s Studies building. Still, Maud does appear vulnerable to influence, at least in terms of how she should look: “[…] Fergus said, the shaved style was a

38 It is perhaps unfair to suggest that Lodge has Robyn view her feminine curls as undermining her identity as a feminist – it does perhaps seem to have more with taste, as Robyn admittedly wishes for a pre-raphaelite hairstyle or something along the lines of Simone de Beauvoir.
cop-out, a concession, it made me look like a skull, he said. I should simply have it [...]” (P 329). The connotations of death evoked by the image of the skull imply that while she allows her conduct to be governed by the sisterhood, Maud is not fully alive – a fact accentuated by the coolness and reserve of her manner. She takes Fergus’s advice and grows her hair, but decides to hide it under a scarf when the relationship comes to an end. Cutting it, it seems, would be too demonstrative, and keeping it loose would not allow her to mark a much needed distance their relationship. In any case, her choices are essentially governed by the judgment of others.

Returning for a moment to the idea of feminists perpetuating patriarchal attitudes towards female beauty, it is arguably difficult to overlook the obvious parallel between Maud’s scarf and the Muslim headdress hijab, arguably morally justified by the responsibility of women not to awaken desire in men other than their husbands. The theological and ethical implications of the hijab is a matter of much heated debate which will not be explored here, but it seems fair to conclude that Western feminists have traditionally protested fervently against both the use of hijabs and the kind of moral philosophy informing it. Of course, in the case of Possession’s feminists, women are not responsible for men’s reactions as such, but they are responsible for not “letting the side down” (P 380) in the sense that they must not embrace patriarchal objectification and reduce themselves and other women to mere sexual objects. Of course, this is a vital concern within the feminist enterprise. However, as thoroughly discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, consciously attempting to hide those natural shapes and colours that may attract sexual attention simply because they do, does not necessarily help to disconnect the female physique from purely sexual connotations. Nor is it a given that wanting to be desired and enjoy physical admiration must involve self-objectification. As in Nice Work, this appears to depend on how this admiration is expressed, and whether or not it constitutes the entire basis of women’s identity and self-esteem. In that sense, one may also suggest that had Maud indeed bleached her hair, it could have simply have been because she thought the colour was better suited to her taste and character. Either way, the fact that she feels compelled to hide her hair and disapprove of her own facial features strongly suggests that the feminist sisterhood has not aided her in loving herself as she is – as a woman in the biological sense. Ironically, it appears that the Victorian proto-feminists, although conventionally dressed, enjoyed a greater freedom of mind than Maud,

39 I do not presume to claim that this may not also be a reason why Muslim women wear hijabs – my comment here is meant to refer to the traditional Western feminist view of this particular custom.
and that their female identities, although at odds with society in general, were much more defined than those of their modern sisters whose concepts of womanhood have been displaced by poststructuralist feminism. It does not follow that this displacement is not valid, but Possession nevertheless demonstrates that the challenges of defining femaleness within this theoretical framework may lead to a weakening rather than strengthening of women’s sense of self – a challenge Byatt’s feminist sisterhood has not been able to solve in a satisfactory manner.

Maud’s hair, or rather the virtual absence of it, also functions as a metaphor for her stifled passion. When at last she takes the scarf off during their Yorkshire picnic, “Roland was moved – not exactly with desire, but with an obscure emotion that was partly pity, for the rigorous constriction all that mass had undergone, to be so structured into repeating patterns” (P 329). The element of sympathy in this passage is worth noting, particularly if one assumes that the pinned plaits symbolize Maud’s emotional inhibition. It is as if Roland’s urge to un-plait her hair is not merely motivated by his wish to enjoy its beauty, or her desire, but by a genuine concern for Maud’s well-being. In the end, she does set her hair free, if only for a while. And she does feel better.

3.5 Female autonomy and erotic relationships

One may presume that the “rigorous constriction” in the aforementioned passage refers above all to the ideological rules of conduct Maud adheres to, but as we shall see, feminist theory is not entirely to blame for this. In fact, the idea of emotional seclusion securing female autonomy that Maud so admires in Christabel LaMotte appears to be a convenient justification for not dealing with her fear of intimacy and the emotional risks involved in romantic relationships. Indeed, Maud’s celibacy does not seem to have anything to do with separatist lesbian feminism. The following conversation between Roland and Maud illuminates her reasons for preferring solitude:

“[…] People treat you as a kind of possession if you have a certain sort of good looks. Not lively, but sort of clear-cut and –” “Beautiful.” “Yes, why not. You can become a property or an idol. I don’t want that. It kept happening.” “It needn’t.” “Even you – drew back – when we met. I expect that, now. I use it.” “Yes. But you don’t want – do you – to be alone always. Or do you?” “I feel as she did. I keep my defences up because I must go on doing my work. I know how she felt about her unbroken egg. Her self-possession, her autonomy. I don’t want to think of that going. You understand?” “Oh yes.” “I write about liminality. Thresholds. Bastions. Fortresses.” “Invasion. Irruption.” (P 599-600)

In other words, Maud is not necessarily suspicious of men in general, but of being hurt in a destructive relationship that does not allow for personal space, wasting valuable time on pain.
Her apparent ideological fortitude may thus conceal an emotional weakness (Schmidt 73), and in the end, it takes great courage to surrender to the love she comes to feel for Roland, who as it turns out has no desire to control, defeat and objectify her. He thus parallels Ash’s attitude towards LaMotte: “He knew her, he believed. He would teach her that she was not his possession, he would show her she was free, he would see her flash her wings” (P 338). In other words, instead of confining the women they love, both Ash and Roland want to encourage them to claim the full range of their personal space (Morse 162). By depriving the latter of any qualities associated with the alpha male, Byatt also makes it quite clear that Maud chooses Roland for reasons that do not threaten her autonomy. He ranks below her in practically everything; in height, looks, wealth, success and class. In other words, it is not really possible to assume that Maud has conceded to any sort of anti-feminist desire to boost her self-confidence and social status by hitching herself to an outwardly impressive man. All Roland has to offer, it seems, is love, respect, support and a shared understanding of the things that matter to her. And who could ask for more?

As we see in the quoted excerpt above, Maud draws a parallel between her own need for self-possession and that of Christabel LaMotte. However, as LaMotte’s fate confirms, the threats posed by a sexual relationship with a man entailed far greater risks for a Victorian woman than for Maud. Marriage would entail the sacrifice of LaMotte’s political project of sustaining economic independence in a time when most women could not survive without the support of a husband or male relative. Having a family would also mean giving up the freedom to dispose of her own time as she thought best, which would entail possibly having to sacrifice her writing. Of course, Ash is already married, and divorce being out of the question, heartache is pending from the very beginning for LaMotte. The illegitimate child resulting from the affair, which she must give up, becomes the concrete evidence of the social and emotional devastation such a liaison could easily bring about. Hence, the political circumstances of these women’s lives are entirely different from one another, and as Jonathan Loesberg observes, this juxtaposition makes “more ironic the lack of connection that threatens the modern characters” (380).40 However, as their names, LaMotte and Bailey (motte-and-bailey castle), suggest, both of Possession’s heroines seem to be significantly occupied by the fear of an outside threat, a concern which appears to hinder them in taking full possession of their own lives. As Roland has it: “‘What a coward you are after all. I’ll take care of you, Maud’” (P 601). Indeed, Byatt gives us little reason to think that he will not.

40 See also Schmidt 57, 59.
The issue of erotic relationships brings us to an aspect of the novel’s treatment of feminist ideology which has a great potential for causing a critical stir, namely Byatt’s representation of lesbianism within a feminist framework. By not including a discussion about Christabel LaMotte as being among the novel’s representatives of female homosexuality, I may be accused of giving her heterosexual inclinations priority. However, as the novel does not offer access to her thoughts on the relationship with Blanche Glover, I have chosen to concentrate on the latter in comparison with Leonora Stern. It is perhaps inaccurate to define Leonora as a lesbian, as she does not seem to care for such limitations – at least not in her own love life. Unlike the cat-calling sisters, this feminist does not hold Maud’s pretty face against her. She may, however, be seen to objectify her in the traditional sense – namely by repeatedly trying to get her into bed. Like Sarah Maloney’s students and the women of Robyn Penrose’s consciousness-raising group, Leonora is eager to have her heterosexual friend give lesbian sex a go: “You were hurt by that bastard Fergus Wolff, but you shouldn’t have gotten so annihilated, it’s letting the side down. You should branch out. Try other sweet things.” (P 380) Apparently, Maud should have sex with women primarily to set a good example for the sisterhood, which seems a little paradoxical within a movement whose chief aim is to secure women’s right to govern their own bodies. The following passage further displays Leonora’s lack of respect for Maud’s personal boundaries:

Leonora came to bed and folded Maud into her bosom. Maud fought to get her nose free. Loose hands met Leonora’s majestic belly and heavy breasts. […] To her shame, she began to cry. […] Leonora made various rrr-ooof noises like a large dog or bear, and finally rolled away, laughing. “Tomorrow is another day,” said Leonora. “Sweet dreams, Princess.” (P 382)

The image here is arguably that of the lesbian feminist who has appropriated the aggressive sexual behaviour associated with the male predator. And the rest fits too – Leonora sports a long list of conquests whom she has loved and left as the panic of settling down kicks in: “‘I love ‘em dearly,’ Leonora would say, moving on, ‘but I’m paranoid about home-making, I can’t bear the feeling of sinking into cushions and sticking there, the world’s too full of other marvellous creatures…’” (P 375). This might imply that Leonora, though choosing the opposite of Maud’s celibacy, also suffers from a fear of emotional intimacy after her relationship to an abusive man. Or it might suggest that she has become so immersed in the sexual metaphors of her trade that she cannot help but feel compelled to exchange bodily fluids with everyone she meets, including James Blackadder. In that sense, the logic of the narrative seems to suggest that she has been reduced by feminist theory to what she herself assumes to be – pure sexual drive.
However, I would not suggest that Leonora is an entirely unlikeable character. In fact, she exudes far more charm than any of the others. Her ease, frankness and sense of humour are supplemented with a warmth and generosity that seems to disarm both Maud and Blackadder, although she may be a bit much for them both. After all, she can hardly be called a man-hater for calling Fergus Wolff a bastard, as this denotation seems fairly accurate. On that note, it is useful to remember that the real author’s intentions in designing Leonora Stern does not necessarily dictate the reader’s impression of her – so far as language and the concepts it represents may hold very different connotations for different readers.

Assuming that Christabel LaMotte did live in a lesbian relationship prior to her affair with Ash, the other representative of lesbianism in Possession would be Leonora’s direct opposite in everything but sexual orientation – Blanche Glover. Her discretion contrasts Leonora’s openness, and her unassuming personality is accentuated by physical characteristics entirely different from those of Leonora. Glover is petite and fair-skinned, and her reddish blonde hair may be interpreted to represent the subdued glow of forbidden and rejected passion. In contrast, majestic Leonora is Native American/Creole, with curly black hair and olive skin, and seems highly unlikely to subdue anything.

While Leonora flaunts her emotional independence, all we come to learn about Blanche Glover in the narrative is entirely tied to her life with LaMotte, to whom she refers as “the Princess” (P 54) with a reverence approaching worship. As Ash’s letters cast threatening shadows over their relationship, Glover’s diary entries become tinged with a bitterness which reveals that the two women’s proto-feminist project of sustaining female independence is not only threatened from the outside – it is imbalanced in itself: “I am no Sneak, no watcher, no Governess. A governess is what I am most surely no t. From that fate you rescued me, and you shall never, for one moment, one little moment, suppose me ungrateful or making claims” (P 55). Whether spitefully sarcastic, or earnestly modest, this passage conveys that Glover and LaMotte do not share equal terms of giving and receiving, neither economically nor emotionally (Schmidt 41). Glover seems hindered from taking her rightful place as a lover due to a sense of dependence and debt which perhaps is not so different from what many heterosexual women experienced in relation to their husbands at the time, Ellen Ash included.

Critics have proposed that the striking contrast between these two lesbian characters implies that female homosexuality can only occur through either unhealthy admiration or indiscriminate promiscuity (Carroll 357ff). The absence of emotional reciprocity is certainly noticeable. However, one may also suggest that the contrast between Blanche Glover’s
despair and Leonora Stern’s carefree manner also serves to underline the differences in their socio-political climates. As we see in her final letter, Glover’s suicide is the result not only of hopeless love, but of the failure of her political project. It was not possible to sustain life without men’s help, and perhaps it would not be possible to sustain happiness with it. As Glover was poor, there could be no question of starting over alone. She had her dignity if not LaMotte’s love, and continuing to live on her ex-lover’s expense would entail becoming the spinster friend people assumed she was. One may also imagine the difficulty of finding a new female life partner in a society that did not really admit the possibility of erotic relationships between women, and so Blanche Glover must either become a governess, or a wife. Both are against her inclinations, both would rob her of her time and her work, and the latter might not even be possible at her age. Of course, as critics have noted, the narrative never confirms that the relationship between LaMotte and Glover was sexual, although the latter’s diary suggests as much. Withholding this information might serve the purpose of emphasizing the difficulty of ascertaining such details from documents which barely suggest their possibility, and thus hint to the tendentious nature of feminist criticism attempting to discern a tradition of lesbianism through Victorian literary texts. In contrast, the case of Ash and LaMotte provides the reader with a narrative level describing the affair in detail, and the letters mentioning the child confirm the researchers’ suspicions. The result may tend towards the narrative effacement of the emotional import of Glover and LaMotte’s relationship, as if they were just playing house until the right man came along to awaken LaMotte’s true passion. However, a similar effacement is produced as Roland’s neglected girlfriend Val conveniently finds her way into the arms of Euan McIntyre before Roland has a chance to break her heart (Carroll 366-7). One might suggest that this very parallel cancels out the suspicion of homophobia caused by Byatt’s reluctance to explicitly confirm the erotic nature of Glover and LaMotte’s relationship. This may instead be viewed as merely a narrative device, allowed by the improbable nature of the romance genre in general, in which the author may avoid the kind of attempted realism that would distract the reader’s attention from the main plot and the love at the end of the chase. After all, the critics who suggest that Glover’s death remains the unproblematic removal of an obstacle to Ash and LaMotte’s heterosexual affair, may not have placed sufficient emphasis on LaMotte’s accusation at Mrs Lees’s séance; that Ash has made a murderess of her. Her final letter confirms that this comment applies to her former lover’s suicide, and that her “terrible end torments me daily” (P 593).
Still – in the end, Blanche Glover is abandoned, Leonora Stern abandons, and lesbian feminists in Possession are never granted a wholly fulfilling romantic same-sex relationship that lasts. One might suggest that Byatt has no obligation to do so, as an in-depth portrayal of lesbian love was arguably never the chief aim of the novel’s conception. Nevertheless, the presence of lesbianism in Possession is sufficiently overt to propose that criticism protesting against its representation of homosexuality cannot be quite so easily dismissed, if one is to acknowledge the novel as a contribution to the discourses surrounding romantic love and sexual relationships.\footnote{See Fletcher and Carroll. Their reviews will be further discussed in 3.7.}

However, the Leonora Stern is not the only characters to presents a rather deflated image of over-intellectualized sex. Rather like Robyn and Charles in Nice Work, Maud and Roland are removed from their sexuality from too often seeing it dissected in poststructuralist feminist discourse:

They were children of a time and culture which mistrusted love, “in love,” romantic love, romance in toto, and which nevertheless in revenge proliferated sexual language, linguistic sexuality, analysis, dissection, deconstruction, exposure. They were theoretically knowing: they knew about phallocracy and penis-neid, punctuation, puncturing and penetration, about polymorphous and polysemous perversity, orality, good and bad breasts, clitoral tumescence, vesicle persecution, the fluids, the solids, the metaphors for these, the systems of desire and damage, infantile greed and oppression and transgressions, the iconography of the cervix and the imagery of the expanding and contracting Body, desired, attacked, consumed, feared. (P 501-2)

It is thus not only Maud’s (and Roland’s) ideology and fear of invasion that must be overcome in order to provide this romance with its proper ending. Their chemistry in combination with Ash and LaMotte’s passionate Victorian letters seem to do the trick, however, and the story of Maud and Roland ends, as it must, with a love scene, which in spite of the characters’ postmodern attitudes towards romantic love as a concept, seems to confirm its existence. Not only that, Byatt also plays upon an image of popular romance which is much criticised by feminists, namely that of the male sexual predator subduing the seemingly frigid female:

And very slowly and with infinite gentle delays and delicate diversions and variations of indirect assault Roland finally, to use an outdated phrase, entered and took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him, so that there seemed to be no boundaries, and he heard, towards dawn, from a long way off, her clear voice crying out, uninhibited, unashamed, in pleasure and triumph. (P 601)

Of course, in the absence of boundaries, there can be no real question of assault and possession, but rather that of a merging which paradoxically sets them free. Hence, the old
image is somehow subverted, and the triumph is, as we see, also Maud’s. The description above is quite analogue to that of Ash and LaMotte on their first night together: “‘Don’t fight me,’ he said once, and ‘I must,’ said she, intent, and he thought, ‘No more speech,’ and held her down and caressed her till she cried out. Then he did speak again. ‘You see, I know you,’ and she answered breathless, ‘Yes, I concede. You know’” (P 344). In this context, it is interesting to note that Maud recalls the bed she shared with Fergus as an “empty battlefield” (P 67), and to indulge in such metaphors for a moment, it appears that both our heroines are reluctant to lower the bridge and let their lovers pass through, uncertain whether the caller is friend or foe, and so they must be persuaded that battle is quite unnecessary.

Ultimately, I would venture the claim that Byatt’s descriptions of sex in Possession are not particularly sexy, probably because, as Roland has it, that precisely isn’t the point. The point is passion – not sensual desire alone. The few love scenes included seem to function as conceptual metaphors, as if the sexual act itself metaphorically expresses an attitude, a state of mind, and a way of relating to the hearts and minds of others. In this way, Possession seems to fuse together the intellectual, emotional and physical faculties of human existence which have been separated by the kind of poststructuralist theory that governs the modern characters’ sense of identity. As the narrator comments: “Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable” (P 500), and yet, the novel shows that the modern characters somehow, if unable to completely overcome the deconstruction of romantic love, at least find a way to construct it back into working order. Hence, the narrator suggests that Maud both may and must comfortably shed all the prejudices of separatist feminism and poststructuralism towards heterosexual romance in order connect not only with Roland, but with her own capacity for love, intimacy and the thrill of desiring as well as being desired.

3.6 Critical reception: Possession: A Romance as theoretical discourse

Critical response to Possession is abundant, and one need only skim the titles of the several hundred search results registered in literary databases to comfortably state that the metacritical and metafictional aspects of this novel have definitely not gone unnoticed, nor has its social context of heated debates about the legitimization of English studies and the importance of literary theory in research and education during Thatcher’s government (Birrer 54). Doryjane Birrer (2007) suggests that “Byatt’s academic novels establish a multifaceted
arena within which we as readers and writers, scholars and teachers can metacritically engage with the ramifications of and possibilities opened up by changing literary-critical practices” (70). And so they have, responding to the novel’s treatment of issues such as historiography, postmodernism/poststructuralism, the reading process, and the role of the author in interpretation. Given my focus on representation and negotiation of academic feminism, I feel comfortable here including only criticism which explicitly comments on issues pertaining to my own reading of Possession.42 As we shall see, critical responses to Possession have also placed the literary work within a larger political context, and continue to debate the questions raised in the text.

Let us first begin by looking at how critics have related to the question of plausible representation of academic feminism in Byatt’s novel. Unlike the case of David Lodge’s Nice Work, few seem to object to the image of the poststructuralist feminist presented by the novel’s (post)modern heroine, Maud Bailey. One exception is Merete Ruud (1993), who claims that “neither Byatt nor Lodge seems able or willing to portray the successful female academic as much more than a cardboard figure - a walking talking literary theory primer, with occasional sexual athleticism and a firm sense of clothes and make-up thrown in to redress the balance between masculine and feminine traits” (50-1). This comment shows that the problem of striking a balance between intellect, sexuality, femininity and masculinity in a female identity that would satisfy both feminist ideology and female biology also extends to the creation of female feminist characters which are to be received by a discerning audience of feminist readers. However, Maud is generally tolerated, it seems. Leonora Stern and her “moist” brand of French feminism, however, is more easily categorised as parodic and satirical (Adams, “Dead Authors, Born Readers, and Defunct Critics” 116; Birrer 60; Buxton 4; Morse 168; Showalter 115;Wells 542). Ann Marie Adams (2003) suggests that the novel displays Leonora’s influence on Maud’s thinking as “undue” (“Dead Authors, Born Readers, and Defunct Critics” 115), and Jonathan Loesberg (2007) questions the probability of a professional feminist like Leonora so easily abandoning her own reading of LaMotte’s bodily landscapes merely because the author is proven to have been in Yorkshire (384). However, it does not necessarily follow that the satirical treatment of Leonora is altogether thought misrepresentative and untruthful. Nor does it entail that this portrayal must be considered unsympathetic (Morse 168). Adams’s proposition that Leonora’s “‘lesbian’ identity is part of

42 The large number of critical responses to Possession admittedly makes my task of accounting for its reception very challenging. Should I have failed to include significant responses to Possession in terms of its treatment of academic feminism, I can only beg its writers’ and my reader’s pardon.
the general satire of academic life” (“Dead Authors, Born Readers, and Defunct Critics” 122), is supported by Lynn Wells (2005):

Read carefully, however, Byatt’s critique of Stern’s character, beyond poking fun at the sometimes-ludicrous excesses of certain theorists, need not be taken as a condemnation of feminism, with which Byatt clearly has sympathies. Rather, the depiction of Stern appears more to be an indictment of any system of thought that seeks to obliterate the Other, whether historical, cultural or personal, through the imposition of self-serving views. (Wells 542)

As we see, critics such as Wells seem to view the novel as fiction promoting an ideological or theoretical standpoint, in this instance a sympathetic view of feminism. She is supported by Sophia Andres (2006), who emphasises the construction of Christabel LaMotte and her poem The Fairy Melusina in her suggestion that Byatt writes from within a feminist framework: “Refusing to associate with the victimization of the Lady, Christabel luxuriates in her power to create, not the patterns relegated to her by her patriarchal world, as the lady did, but her own original works of art, as, for instance, the indomitable Fairy Melusina which records women’s resistance to prescribed modes of female behaviour in the past, present and future” (15). Andres claims that unlike the Lady of Shalott, LaMotte ventures out of her tower and lives – gaining inspiration to complete her great epic poem, which overturns mythical constructions of womanhood, thus forming a “reconstitution and assertion of female subjectivity” (18-19). The significance of LaMotte’s writings in determining the novel’s feminist affiliations is also noted by Julia Sanchez (1995) who proposes that LaMotte feminizes and subverts traditional structures of fairy tales with the “expressly feminist purpose of giving the female voice control and subjectivity” (33). Deborah Denenholz Morse (2000), supports this interpretation by suggesting that Melusina in her bath represents “the power and possible danger of female art, and the necessity of female solitude for independent creativity” (150). Jackie Buxton (1996) too appears to approve of LaMotte as a plausible proto-feminist, proposing that her “independent, feminist perspective is too sympathetically drawn to make of her a wilting romantic heroine” (11), and Lilian Schmidt (1995) concludes that “in refusing to pin down her characters […] she [Byatt] seems to subscribe to Diane Elam’s position that ‘feminism is a politics of uncertainty because it insists that we do not know what woman can be’” (20).

It thus appears that most critics not only recognize the novel’s ties to feminist discourse, but also count the real author A. S. Byatt as the signatory of a contribution to theoretical and political debate. Both Birrer and Elisabeth Bronfen (1996) have devoted a fair amount of their reviews to tracing Byatt’s theoretical ties to F. R. Leavis (Birrer 54-5) and the
genre of “self-conscious moral realism” (Bronfen 120), respectively, and Adams (2008) concludes that in *Possession*, Byatt is recuperating “Arnoldian humanism by making it account for the feminine in its articulation of the ‘best that is known and thought in the world’ (literally, through its recovery of LaMotte’s verse) [...]]” (“Defending ‘Identity and the Writer’” 340).

However, Byatt’s perceived brand of feminism does not go down too well with all critics. Elaine Showalter (2005), for instance, points to an ambivalence in Byatt’s attitude towards the feminist literary scholarship which “makes her story of the recovery and reinterpretation of a Victorian woman poet possible” (115), and although Jackie Buxton (2001) has commented favourably on the invention of Christabel LaMotte, she too is among several critics who have questioned the validity of *Possession’s* implicit subversion of traditional gender roles on the whole, detecting a humanist and heterosexist ideology in *Possession* in spite of its postmodern form and poststructuralist self-consciousness (Fletcher 137ff; Carroll 357ff; Schmidt 25; Buxton 8; M. Ruud 56). Contrary to Andres, Morse and Sanchez’s enthusiastic readings of the Lady of Shalott motif in *Possession*, Kathleen Coyne Kelly suggests that as LaMotte must lose her love, her work and her child, “Christabel is nothing more than another iteration on the theme of the entowered, doomed maiden. Her story is not a *revisioning*, but simply a *revisiting* of the tantalizing tale of ‘The Lady of Shalott’ [...]]” (291). She also suggests that Maud’s freedom becomes possible only through “masculine agency” (292).

Lisa Fletcher (2008) claims that *Possession* offers “a naturalization of the relationship between heterosexuality and love [...]]” (154), and proposes that the novel presents lesbianism as “an aberrance; it is an interruption or an obstacle to the proper course of narrative and of history which must be removed. [...] lesbianism is not simply left out of this text, but is raised as a possibility to be explicitly rejected” (149). She further draws a comparison between the release of Maud’s constricted hair and the popular cross-dressing romance where the heroine can only have her hero once she sheds her masculine disguise, and claims that ‘[...] Maud must reveal her true femininity before her romance can reach its happy ending. She must learn to look like a woman in order to be happy in love [...] Maud’s clothing signifies the repression of her femininity and her heterosexuality, Leonora “dressed up to her size” [...]]’ (160-1). Inherent in this comment is arguably the assumption that Maud’s hidden hair not only symbolises her repressed femininity, but somehow also expresses her natural masculinity. It seems prudent to point out that Maud obviously cuts and hides her hair from
fear of reproach and not because she prefers a masculine style, and so within the logic of the narrative, Fletcher’s claims does not seem to hold. However, Byatt’s choice of image may of course be suspected of perpetuating such a heterosexual ideology. Nevertheless, one may suggest that the case of Maud’s hair functions as a critique of Fletcher’s critique of this critique - in advance. What Possession arguably aims to problematize through Maud’s attitude to her own femininity is precisely this way of seeing feminine women’s desire to be feminine as a remnant of patriarchy, thus making it essentially problematic.

Samantha J. Carroll more explicitly explores what she perceives as anti-lesbian ideology in Possession. Suggesting that Byatt diminishes the significance of lesbianism in her novel by simultaneously applying techniques of apparitionalization and sensationalization to the characters of Blanche Glover and Leonora Stern, respectively, Carroll suggests that “Byatt’s construction of Glover […] relies on successive spectral metaphors and alliances with iconic lesbian ghosts from Western culture to achieve her dismissal” (359). In contrast, “Stern functions as a symbol for lesbianism uncontained, which is further demonized by allusions to popular constructions of lesbian predation in the scandal-mongering pages of the British popular press” (Carroll 360). Interestingly, Carroll points to the inclusion of “Martina” on the list of Leonora Stern’s former lovers as a reference to the 1980s professional tennis player Martina Navratilova, whose relationship with a previously married mother of two allegedly led her to be presented by the popular press as a threat to heterosexual relationships and male privilege (Carroll 373-4). Clearly, Possession is read by Carroll as a contribution to the very same discourse in which the tabloid papers participate. She also views Leonora’s attempts to seduce Blackadder as “a fickle turn away from lesbianism” (Carroll 375). What is particularly interesting about Carroll’s critique of Possession, is that it not only ties the novel to popular discourse at the time it was written, but her review also responds to earlier criticism failing to fully acknowledge Blanche’s role as LaMotte’s life partner and the claims she may make as such, and as such participates in the apparitionalization of the former (358).

Critics thus clearly having attributed the perceived advocated ideology of Possession to the real author A. S. Byatt, the Author cannot possibly pretend to be anything but vibrantly alive. Fletcher admits that detecting Byatt’s personal agenda is “an almost irresistible urge when reading her fiction” (142), and although she has chosen to see the novel in relation to the romance genre in general, she, along with several of the aforementioned critics obviously deploy Byatt’s public image quite consciously in their readings – hence, their readings of the implied author again contribute to the construction of Byatt’s public image. One may suggest
that Byatt has been quite apt at explicitly clarifying her own stance in relation to the enterprise of feminist literary criticism, as evident in an interview conducted by Laura Miller in 1996:

> What I don’t like is people with very strong beliefs that causes them not to look. I’m a political feminist. I think women’s lives need quite a lot of improving, some of which has now happened. I’m interested in feminist themes, women’s freedom. Literary feminism is a much more dubious thing. I meet a lot of people who have spent so much of their time being educated by women about women’s writing. They don’t notice perfectly obvious things because they’ve not looked at anything else that might have contributed to this woman’s life or writing other than women. […] It’s because I’m a feminist that I can’t stand women limiting other women’s imagination. It really makes me angry. But I’m angry because I’m a feminist. I can’t stand the thought of really good women students being taught courses on very minor 18th century women writers, who didn’t write very well, only because they were women. […] If you want to teach women to be great writers, you should show them the best, and the best was often done by men. […] Women should be truthful and then it will be more often done by women, or as often done by women. (Byatt qtd. in Miller 3)

Yet, the convictions of Byatt’s feminist sympathies or antipathies appear to differ to such an extent that they inspired critic Christien Franken to provide an account of it which synthesizes Byatt’s metacritical fiction and her critical work, with a hope to “counteract a narrow-minded image of the novelist-critic A. S. Byatt as somebody who is traditional, anti-theoretical, highbrow and non-feminist or anti-feminist” (Franken 197). Franken’s states that Byatt’s brand of political feminism, as opposed feminist literary criticism, “maintains that feminist theorists perpetuate a conceptual model they want to get rid of by focussing on a ‘female sense of species’ that is pressed upon them. From this point of view, ‘female identity’ can only emerge as a limitation” (212). In other words, we are dealing with a matter of conflicting ideas as to what women’s academic and personal freedom should entail. Hence, the question of whether or not Byatt and her novels may comfortably be considered feminist seems to be essentially related to the fact that “feminism” as a term encompasses too many conflicting approaches and epistemological stances to denote anything more specific than a general aim of lifting women’s oppression. Indeed, one may suggest that the generally indiscriminate use of this denotation potentially muddles both the novel’s discussion of feminism and that of its critics, at least to an audience not familiar with the conflicting and intertwining branches of this vast field of political theory.

However, the elusiveness of this particular signifier cannot alone count for the divergent perceptions of detected ideology in Possession. As always, there are also the readers’ individual interpretive horizons to consider. For instance, it appears that most critics fail to recognize the possibility of LaMotte having a primarily lesbian identity. Whether they advocate the presence of a homophobic narrative structure or not, most of them seem to assume that LaMotte’s affair with Ash somehow implies the priority of heterosexuality within
what turns out to be a clearly bisexual character. In this context, it is interesting to note that Byatt herself considers LaMotte to be “a lesbian poet who turned out to have had a heterosexual affair” (Byatt qtd. in Walker 7). In other words, one may suggest that it is primarily the critics’ suspicion of (or compliance with) a discourse undermining the validity of homosexual relationships that causes them to read Possession into this tradition. Consequently and contrastingly, Byatt’s narrative may also be viewed to imply an elasticity to sexuality which to a great extent depends on intellectual as well as emotional intimacy. In other words, it may be seen as both progressive and traditionalist, depending on the eye of the beholder, apparently confirming Iser’s proposal that the realization of meaning is a collaborative effort between textual patterns and the reader’s “individual disposition” (Iser 50). Interestingly, this seems to cohere with the novel’s critique of attempting to trace the author’s ideology from literary “evidence”. Criticism of Possession certainly seems to suggest that even such a publicly profiled author like Byatt must remain elusive within the confines of her text, which because it is a fictional narrative implicitly suggestive in nature, ensures that its meaning is out of her control once the novel reaches the reader.

3.7 Conclusion

Whether or not one agrees with A. S. Byatt’s opinion of feminist literary theory and criticism, one must arguably admire the courage and confidence of a woman writer and scholar daring to write against the grain of what many female scholars and critics considered desirable at the time Possession came about. By choosing to write a romance, Byatt defied the significant feminist tradition of regarding the romance and its courtly love as inherently misogynistic and heterosexist (Burns 23), and demonstrated her ability to showcase feminist sensibilities within a traditional form by use of the self-reflexivity and self-consciousness of a quintessentially postmodern narrative. Admittedly, the individual reader must ultimately decide whether Byatt has indeed managed this, or whether she has confirmed her position within a conservative literary paradigm. However, her exhibition of theoretical knowledge and nimble use of generic self-consciousness does seem to place the author one step ahead of her critics at all times, as when Roland contemplates his situation as one of a romance plot: “He was in a Romance, a vulgar and high Romance simultaneously, a Romance was one of the systems that controlled him, as the expectations of Romance control almost everyone in the Western world, for better or worse, at some point or another” (P 503) (M. Ruud 57). Hence, I would
argue that *Possession* does not defer to either patriarchal essentialism, feminist essentialism or full-blown poststructuralist ideas of the utter instability of history, gender and sexuality as cultural-linguistic constructs, but first and foremost advocates the necessity of women becoming less concerned with having to write, read, live and love primarily as *feminist women* in order to achieve an autonomy equal to that of men – because we lack a coherent and general picture of what constitutes the essential features of femaleness as well as maleness – or, that is, whether there are any. It also appears to point towards the dangers of what might be perceived as a feminist perpetuation of the patriarchal binary opposition between male and female by dividing the literary field into gendered categories. I would also suggest that *Possession* advocates the importance of acknowledging themes particular to women’s lives as valid material for literature – as long as it is well written. Within the textual logic of *Possession*, the reading of women’s literary texts as expressions of female sexuality arguably remains unproblematic as long as it is not considered to be *only that*, or specifically as *the real author’s* sexuality, and consequently more generally as “herstory”.43 Without going into the general difficulties concerning objectivity and certainty in historiography, suffice it to say that history must to a certain degree always remain unattainable, because, again, there is no such thing as a view from nowhere. Perhaps the feminists’ guess is as good as any – or better, but one might, in the terms of Robert Jauss, suggest that in merging the alien Victorian horizon with that of postmodern feminist scholars, omissions and evasions is simply too little to go by, even if they can no longer be considered innocent.

43 A term for the writing and understanding of history from women’s point of view, allegedly coined in Robin Morgan, ed. *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement.*
4 Conclusion

The most obvious common denominator of the three novels discussed in this thesis is perhaps their critique of the insufficiency of academic feminism in causing noticeable changes to take place in women’s lives outside of academia. This is especially true for Nice Work, and Possession, which both express a concern with the inaccessibility of poststructuralist feminist lingo and its applicability – its relation, even – to feminist ambitions of securing all women not only basic civil rights, but also the possibility of comfortably entering and owning the professional realm opened for them by first and second wave feminist activists. The novels appear to suggest that the relativity of poststructuralist selfhood in combination with feminist identity formation may easily result in confusion and anxiety. In fact, Sarah Maloney, Robyn Penrose and Maud Bailey all initially seem to share an ever-present caution not to appropriate patriarchal value systems, sexuality and female identity. Adhering to Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own”, Sarah and Maud “think back through their mothers” (610) in attempting to trace a female tradition of values in literature with which to identify, but this tradition remains somewhat elusive and the feminist scholars must acknowledge the gaps – large or small – which separate their female experience from those of the authors whose works they admire. In addition, Robyn and Maud are ambivalent about their physical femininity, and all three heroines appear to initially struggle with a fear of emotional intimacy, seeing love and family life as incompatible with their theoretical and ideological convictions. Although feminist vigilance and critical gaze is justified by the attitudes and behaviour of characters such as Morton Jimroy, Willard Lang and Brian Everthorpe, it is also strongly implied in all three novels that emphasising traditions of how men have related to women and their work in the past, may perpetuate rather than dissolve the essentialist binary nature of conventional views of gender. As such, Sarah Maloney, Robyn Penrose and Maud Bailey may all be seen as both empowered and victimized by the self-consciousness brought about by academic feminism – a realistic possibility pointed out by Patricia Yaeger, who, although she supports anti-essentialism in feminist theory, admits to feeling “cornered by the conspiratorial demands of these arguments even as I’m liberated by them” (Yaeger 7). I would suggest that the implied authors of the three novels discussed do not seem wholly partial to the complete dismissal of nature in the favour of nurture, and it is also these inner contradictions which cause a divide in the identities of our three heroines. Conclusively, feminist theory has not freed these characters from worrying about what women can and
should be. Considering that we see few benefits of academic feminism in female non-academic characters, it appears that the communicative chasm between men and women in these novels has not been successfully bridged by poststructuralist feminist theory or gynocriticism – neither in academia nor in the private sphere. Whose fault that really is, remains somewhat unclear, but the threat of separate gendered spheres does nevertheless cast its shadow over the lives of our feminist heroines.

On that note, one may also suggest – as we have seen that many have, that the problematic aspects of both theoretical and activist feminism presented in these three texts seem tied to its potential conflicts with the concept of heterosexuality. One of the more easily distinguished features of all three novels is the apparent automatic connection between feminism and lesbian sexuality. Indeed, Shields, Lodge and Byatt all display feminist networks of academics which explicitly advocates the supremacy of lesbian sexuality within a feminist ideological framework – attempting (and partly succeeding) in recruiting women who initially identify themselves as heterosexual. There appears to be an anxiety present in all three texts concerning lesbian feminist criminalization of heterosexual relationships and male sexuality in general. We must keep in mind, however, that the texts do not relate in any great detail the real circumstances that caused these suspicions. Nor are these novels concerned with the influence of second wave feminism on the legitimisation of lesbian relationships and lesbian and bisexual women’s images of their own sexuality, and so even if the claim that heterosexual women need not become lesbians to have supportive romantic relationships seems fair enough, the link between feminism and lesbianism remains rather one-sided in these narratives.

If the evolution of society has rendered some feminist campaigns “slightly Quixotic” to the perceptions of modern readers, I would still suggest that the question of forming identities in societies where these need no longer be shaped by conventionally gendered activities is still a very real challenge. So is the uncovering of those little software programs running quietly in the back of our minds, telling us what we may or may not do because we are women – or because we are men. Just like the female characters of all the three novels, we all arguably have difficulties resisting the influence of popular culture. One may in this context reflect on why Shields, Lodge and Byatt all chose young, attractive women to be their chief representatives for feminism. It is perhaps easier to more sympathetically display what Lodge and Byatt in particular appear to view as feminist hatred of conventional female beauty from the vantage point of its victims. Anything else might provoke even stronger objections
to the representation of feminist academics. At least sexy feminist characters do not perpetuate the ignorant prejudice that women become feminists when they are not attractive or feminine enough to engage the sexual interest of men. But of course, deferring to such a possibility also arguably perpetuates and even supports this kind of thinking. Either way, these model popular heroines do seem to imply a lingering anxiety about women professionals in academia as well as in popular culture. It may appear that the authors feel somehow obliged to show not only how women can be smart and sexy at the same time, but also that they should be. Could it be so that neither women nor men are yet very interested in reading about or identifying with feminist heroines that look like Beatrice Nest or Marjorie Wilcox? Consider that none of the central male characters in any of these novels are described as particularly attractive. Perhaps they do not have to be? Perhaps readers find them more interesting when they are not? Or – perhaps I am at this moment performing just the sort of reductive feminist reading that Byatt has publicly dismissed. Yet, although questions of how a writer should or should not write women remains essentially problematic, I would hold that there still very much cause to be aware - to talk and think about the ideological implications of such female representation in literature and popular culture, because it does exert such powerful influence over women’s self-perception and men’s idea of what women are and should be. On that note, it would have been interesting to perform the kind of reading I have done here, but with a special emphasis on the anxieties of male identity formation in popular culture after the Women’s Liberation Movement and arrival of feminism in academia.

The novels discussed in this thesis all point to themselves as literary constructs rather than the mimetic reflection of their social contexts. As such, it is also important for me to make it abundantly clear that the problematic aspects of feminism put forth in my analyses are discussed as I have perceived them to be represented within a fictional universe. I will therefore not encourage my reader to assume that the objections towards academic feminism raised in my argumentation necessarily refer to this cluster of disciplines as it was and is practiced and taught in the “real” world. That being said, one must not forget that satire is arguably always informed by the real author’s frustration or disapproval of concepts in the physical world, and so I would never deny the social relevance and influence of their texts. Although Swann, Nice Work and Possession: A Romance are not theoretical textbooks guaranteeing a comprehensive outline and explanation of feminist theory and literary criticism within the complex socio-historical context of women’s oppression and patriarchal
academia, their potential impact on people’s perceptions of these issues justifies the application of feminist literary methodology in reviewing them.

Clearly, their discursive impact is here ultimately filtered through my perception, and so what emerges as critique in my reading must necessarily be that of the implied author. In this context, I should suggest that the reason I may spontaneously laugh at Lodge and Byatt’s single-minded feminists, while sympathise with Sarah Maloney’s wish for a family of her own, is arguably precisely because so many women (and men) were willing to face the savage ridicule of patriarchal establishment in attempting not only to bring the concerns of women to the foreground of literary history and sociology, but also to provide women with the freedom to choose a different life style from what they were expected to want. Had I been one of them at that point in history, I may perhaps have responded differently to the issues negotiated in these novels. But fiction lives on even though times change, and as such, I would suggest that it is both possible and necessary to give space for two kinds of ethical readings: Those which take into account the contextual framework of their signatories in historicising texts as social documents, and those concentrating on the interpretive possibilities for readers who become further and further removed from this context and who will not trouble to seek it, as the text may yet speak to them about their own concerns – though perhaps not in the way the real authors once intended.

In the end, one must accept that the interpretive possibilities of fiction are ultimately beyond the control of both author and critics once it reaches the bookshops. Some references are accessible only to those who are trained to recognize them, and that the author’s knowledge and intentions must to a certain degree elude those who are not. In my opinion, that does not mean that the author does not have a moral responsibility in terms of representation, and that this responsibility may be said to extend in proportion to the author’s reputation as an authority on the subjects he or she chooses to represent, and readings extending the scope of my own may wish to explore these issues in greater detail. At the same time, what I am left with after countless hours of reading and researching, is a sense that feminist theorists must to a certain degree take their share of the responsibility of clearing up the general confusion connected to “feminism” as a term, so that novelists, critics, journalists and others may provide a tidy debate concerning the contradicting opinions and suggested solutions that embody the field it refers to. I should have liked a selection of more accurate tools myself, and one of the future tasks of feminist theorists must perhaps be the revision and development of a more nuanced and accurate terminology to encompass diverse feminisms,
which would be accessible both in scholarly research and in popular culture – although, as time goes by and the field moves forward, the arbitrary nature of language may serve to render any terminology somewhat elusive.
Works Cited


