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# 1

## Feminist Narratology in Context

### **Narratives about theory**

It is now almost commonplace to begin writing a book about narratives with some reflection on the pervasive nature of storytelling. Indeed, the extensive presence of stories that we tell and that get told to us manifests itself in a myriad of ways. From high brow fiction to soap opera, conversational stories to those disseminated in the media; from private contexts to public domains including education, the law or medical environments, narratives appear in many guises. They perform multiple functions in creating and sustaining our understanding of ourselves, others and the world around us. Likewise, gender acts as a primary axis, which from birth onwards plays vital roles in processes of identification, social relationships and in various contentious ways might be implicated in macro-level structures of power. In recognition of their prominence, both areas have become increasingly influential as subjects of academic interest and theorization. In recent decades the development of narratology and of feminism have accrued status, so that while by no means unproblematic, both must be considered as significant intellectual forces at the end of the twentieth century. Given the wide-ranging and sometimes overlapping terrain covered by both, it is perhaps unsurprising that points of intersection between the two should be found. Narratives are human activities, and the assumptions and procedures involved in their telling and analysis are human constructions, which a feminist would argue must entail a consideration of gender. 'Feminist narratology' is the umbrella term which embraces the exploration of narrative from this point of view. More specifically, Warhol defines this as 'the study of narrative structures and strategies in the context of cultural constructions of gender' (cited in

Mezei, 1996: 6). The terms used in feminist narratology may be familiar: 'narrative', 'gender', 'feminism', 'context' and so on. But these are not transparent, or universally understood within or between different fields of study. In isolation, and even more so in combination, defining what is meant by 'feminist' or 'narratology' is not a straightforward matter, for both have been vigorously debated and are characterized by increasing pluralism. One of the central tenets of feminist narratology is its insistence on contextualization as a means of understanding the interplay between gender and narrative form. From the outset, then, it is all the more important to contextualize what might be understood as feminist narratology. I begin by tracing the developments in narrative theory and in feminism over the last three decades, showing how significant trends in both fields helped contribute to the emergence of feminist narratology and have subsequently shaped its landscape.

## **Developments in narratology**

Feminist narratology began in the mid-1980s, as its name suggests, from within the domain of narratology. Histories of narratology abound. In a simplified form, these highlight overarching trends which chart the movement from its structuralist origins which became academic currency in the 1970s, to a postclassical critique and evaluation in the 1980s, through to a postmodern diversification of both theoretical stance and interdisciplinary application from the 1990s onwards. Glancing through these stories, those surveying the development of narrative theory in these decades reiterate time and again its expansion across boundaries and its diversification (Gibson, 1996; Bal, 1997; Currie, 1998; Kreiswirth, 2000; Richardson, 2002). It would seem that while Barthes confidently asserted the all-encompassing nature of narrative as 'international, transhistorical, transcultural' (1977: 79) with a universalizing assumption that has since been challenged, narratology's transdisciplinary application does indeed contribute to the illusion of narrative being everywhere. The analysis of narratives in their various forms and functions has been given as evidence of this, including those studies which have been done in the fields of visual arts, history, philosophy, theology, psychoanalysis, sociology, legal studies, pedagogy and the natural sciences. Not only has it been applied widely, narrative theory has itself been the subject of interdisciplinary revision as it has drawn upon theories from outside its original home in literary studies, including those as wide-ranging as postcolonialism,

cognitive science, hypertext, and most pertinent to this study: gender theory (Richardson, 2000b: 169).

Feminist narratology is also part of the reconceptualization of narratology that has taken place in these years, a process that has been summarized as a move from 'coherence to complexity' (Currie, 1998: 2). This is expressed as a transition from early structuralist studies of narrative, which approached texts as objects that could be analyzed in a 'scientific' and systematic manner to a postmodern position where different kinds of questions are asked of the analysis, with the recognition that both the text and the analysis thereof cannot be 'neutral' but may be ideologically loaded in some way (Kreiwirth, 2000: 296). Currie locates the period of transition as centering around the 1980s, exactly the period in which feminist narratology began. The move away from an abstract, apparently universal narratology can be seen in the co-existence of various definitions of the field offered by eminent theorists who published key texts in this decade. On the one hand, the 'narrow' view continued to hold prominence. Prince, who distinguishes clearly between the concerns of narratology, criticism and interpretation, exemplifies this. At the opening of his *Narratology* (1982), he defines the project as follows:

Narratology examines what all narratives have in common – narratively speaking – and which allows them to be narratively different. It is therefore not so much concerned with the history of particular novels or tales, or with their meaning, or with their esthetic value, but rather with the traits which distinguish narrative from other signifying systems and the modalities of these traits. (pp. 4–5)

However, alongside this, 'broader' understandings of narratology also came into use. For example, Bal's *Narratology* defines the remit of narratology as including interpretation, with narratology 'conceived as a set of tools, as a means to express and specify one's interpretive reactions to a text' (1997: x, quoting from the Preface to the 1985 edition). Universalism is eschewed, as she goes on to write that 'the theory presented here holds no claim to certainty' (Bal, 1997). Tensions between these narrow and broad positions continued through the following years. It is not that one superseded the other (for example, Prince (1995a and b) continues to work from the same stance), but by the end of the 1980s, some critics at least were expressing dissatisfaction with this 'narrow' perspective and implying that a change of emphasis was needed. The turbulence implied in these debates is reflected in the

two collections of articles, 'Narrative Revisited' Volumes I and II, published in *Poetics Today* (1990). Amongst these papers, similar concerns were aired as the writers reconsidered narratology. Structuralist approaches were critiqued for their assumed universalism (Brooke-Rose, 1990: 283) and there was recognition of the need to take account of contextual factors (Chatman, 1990: 309). Narratology, it seemed, was undergoing an identity crisis. It was from within the midst of these debates and changes that the concept of feminist narratology emerged with Lanser's seminal paper (1986) bearing that name.

Despite earlier precursors (Brewer, 1984; Warhol, 1986), it is this work by Lanser that is credited as the principal impetus for integrating feminism with narratology. In proposing the interchange between these two theoretical paradigms, her approach is in many ways typical of the wider expansion of narratology at this time, which began to be 'energized by a variety of perspectives' (Herman, 1997: 1049), for example, including psychoanalysis (Brooks, 1984; De Lauretis, 1984), philosophy and sociolinguistics (Pratt, 1977). More specifically, Lanser's central argument for a two-way, mutually beneficial dialectic between feminism and narratology illustrates important theoretical trends within narratology. She proposed that 'narratology... might be altered by the understandings of feminist criticism and the experience of women's texts' (1986: 342), calling into question the corpus of texts from which the models of narratology had been derived and so adding her voice to those which challenged structuralist universalism, especially from a contextualist point of view. Significantly, Lanser's critique politicized the terms of this debate, suggesting that the assumption of universalism was not neutral, but founded on an androcentric bias. Just as universalism was argued to be abstract, undesirable, even untenable, this became replaced by an interest in ideology which was felt increasingly through narrative studies and debated in literary criticism more generally (Currie, 1998: 4–6).

If Lanser's goal to use feminism to challenge narratology reflected and contributed to these wider currents in the revisions of narratology in the 1980s, it brought to a head debates about the very definition and purpose of narratology itself. The contrast between the narrow and broad views of narratology posed a dilemma for those responding to Lanser's call: What exactly was entailed by feminist *narratology*, and as a concept was it even plausible? For those in the 'narrow' camp, where narratology remained an abstract system of categorizing narratives *qua* narratives, feminist narratology was rejected out of hand as either irrelevant (Diengott, 1988) or at the least something to be seriously

questioned (Prince, 1995a). For those working with a 'broad' approach, who argued that narrative theory also embraced matters of meaning, context and evaluation, feminist narratology was welcomed and proved a fruitful means of discussing both 'women's texts' and narratology itself. To some extent, this debate now seems somewhat redundant in the acknowledgement that the line between 'interpretation' and 'analysis of narrative form' is fuzzy, if present at all (Bal, 1997: 10–11). Indeed, the proof of the pudding, as it were, is clearly evident in the wealth of research that put feminist narratology to work (summarized by Richardson (2000b) and discussed in more detail in Chapter 3). Yet the debate remains important for clarifying the project of feminist narratology. Writing more recently, Warhol reviews feminist narratology, observing that 'feminist narratologists never tried to replace the structuralists' systems with alternative systems of their own' (2003: 24–25). Feminist narratology is not then a separate set of feminist narrative models, but is better understood as the feminist *critique of* narratology (in its broad sense) which operates on the basis of feminist *applications of* narrative theory to a range of texts that goes beyond the corpus originally drawn upon by the early structuralist work.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between 'narratology' and 'feminist narratology' is a complex and uneven one. The latter cannot be said to have substantially altered narratology in its narrow sense, and Lanser notes that 'narratology "proper"' (which I take to be roughly synonymous with what I have termed here as a narrow view of narratology) has remained disinterested in feminism (1999: 168). In many ways, feminist narratology is typical of the revisionist work in postclassical narratology, which did not necessarily reject the models of structuralist narratology wholesale, but integrated them with other theoretical perspectives. Paradoxically, while feminist narratology provides an essential critique of narratology (in both its broad and narrow senses), it has also illustrated the very strength of narrative theory as this has been developed, and in some cases revised, through the analysis of a range of texts of interest to feminist critics. Thus in both its origins and development, feminist narratology need not be seen in opposition to narratology. The superficial separation of the two overlooks the point that in some senses, feminist narratology is a product of 'narratology proper' as a revisionist response and in carrying to logical conclusion its expressed intention of examining narrative models against an ever-increasing range of texts. This feminist critique does not declare the end of narratology. Quite the opposite, the challenge is vital, that is both necessary and life-giving as it sustains and continues to transform narrative studies.

## Developments in feminism

Looking back, now some twenty years later, the development of feminist narratology is clearly embedded in the debates and complex transitions within narratology of the 1980s. But if feminist *narratology* has needed clarification, what the modifier 'feminist' means also deserves careful consideration. As a political movement, feminism, or more appropriately feminisms, has never been unified and whose development is full of controversy, reversal and change (Bryson, 1999: 5). Throughout the last three decades, work that has gone under the name of 'feminism' has been characterized by tensions regarding the object of feminisms' attention, its goals and how these might be expressed. At the turn of the millenium, ironically, within this diversity, there is common agreement that now 'one cannot even attempt generalizations about the state of feminist theory in the West, let alone in the rest of the globe' (Braidotti, 2001: 381). This multiplicity and ambivalence is far-reaching and presents itself in a range of ways. From an internal perspective, there is an ongoing argument which sets up an opposition between feminist theory, a focus on discourse, a search for universals on one hand, and activism, feminist practice and experience on the other (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990; Walters, 1996; Hanssen, 2001).<sup>2</sup> The relative prominence and specifics of these terms has varied according to time and context, and, as we shall see, has particular importance for determining what feminist narratology might mean. Indeed, feminists have been divided over the contrasting values and meanings associated with the central terms of their struggles, such as equality, difference and diversity. As Guerrina notes, these have been developed in specific social and political contexts, sometimes with quite differing aims and outcomes (2001: 35). Looking at feminisms from a disciplinary perspective, matters are equally complex. While women's studies have now become institutionalized, Harding and Norberg suggest that its influence has expanded across intellectual areas with few exceptions (2002: 943). At the same time, feminisms have also been characterized by drawing upon and adapting a whole spectrum of theoretical paradigms, notably marxism, psychoanalysis, philosophy and deconstruction.

Since Lanser's (1986) paper, time has moved on, and, as Kavka puts it, that 'Feminism ain't what it used to be' (2001: 1). Precisely how that change is articulated, however, is fraught with difficulty. Various terms have been suggested to indicate the contrast between feminisms at the beginning of the new millenium and that which preceded them some thirty years or so earlier. 'Third wave', 'post feminism' and 'postmodern

feminism' have all gained currency, but at least the first two of these have been fiercely contested. Given the potential to interpret 'post feminism' as implying the demise of feminism itself, (an illusion I would not want to perpetuate), I choose not to use this term here. Despite the potential racism that might be invoked by the wave model (Springer, 2002), I will use 'second wave' to refer to period of feminist development in the 1960s and 1970s. This is not because I do not want to acknowledge the important contribution that women of colour have made to feminisms' various projects, but because feminist narratology emerged out of the context usually delimited by this term. However, I am not convinced that 'third wave' is the most useful way of referring to the most recent shifts within feminist thought and activity. It seems to me that the developments from the late 1980s into the 1990s (approximately speaking) are less a separation from the work immediately preceding it and more of a continuation. To describe these as a separate wave suggests a value-laden attempt to contrast the changes that have taken place, where the earlier 'feminism' is viewed nostalgically as a period of consensus, which is either lauded for its political edge or berated as outmoded in the light of postmodern theory that followed it. As even this brief discussion has shown, in attempting some meta-narrative of feminisms' developments, the ideological significance of exclusion or imposing a false sense of uniformity of experience is felt acutely. However, it is inescapable that significant changes have taken place between the mid-1980s and the beginning of the new millenium. Kavka summarizes it as

A shift from explaining women's subordination in terms of a single constraining system – whether we call it capitalism, patriarchy, biology, or even language – to focusing on the discursive, material and cultural differences that make up the being or becoming of women. (2001: xiii)

The corollary of this was that the category of 'woman' and even 'gender' itself was radically reconceptualized in the light of poststructuralist theorizing. Simultaneously, groups within these overarching categories rightly drew attention to the diversity of their own experiences, especially as these were refracted through the lenses of race and/or sexuality. While the view of second wave feminism as unified is undoubtedly illusory, the increasing pluralism within feminism is signalled by the language that was used to identify individuals, groups and theories. Books from the earlier period used the descriptor, 'feminist',

but by the 1990s this had diversified into a proliferation of modified terms: 'black feminism', 'lesbian feminism', 'radical feminism', 'liberal feminism', 'queer feminism', 'black male feminism', 'French feminism', 'American feminism', 'global feminism', 'ecofeminism' and so on. Because these developments are both derived from and symptomatic of postmodern influences, the label I choose to refer to the later period is the last of the three: 'postmodern feminism'.

In the face of this internal and diachronic multiplicity, what did *feminist* narratology mean in the 1980s, and what could it mean now? The emergence of feminist narratology in the 1980s is clearly influenced by trends in feminism from this period. First, it is perhaps no surprise to find the analysis of narratives as a potential subject for feminist critique, given the increasing prominence of literary and cultural theory in feminism during these years (Kavka, 2001: xiv). Hand in hand with this shift into focusing on the discursive as a site of gender politics, feminism in academia followed the second wave exposure of sexism by means of challenging the notion of academic objectivity itself (Nicholson, 1990: 3). Together, these two dynamics prepared the way for a feminist critique of the apparent neutrality of narrative theory, which in turn could be used to articulate the feminist interpretation of texts. Importantly, feminist narratology as it is described in Lanser's early paper does not deal with just any kind of discourse, but is situated within the domain of literary studies. So when Mezei (1996) questions whether feminist narratology refers to feminist literary theory as opposed to 'feminism(s) – a movement' (p. 6), I would answer that its origins align it more closely with the former, for Lanser hoped that her paper might influence 'American departments of literature' (p. 342), and is informed by the literary interests of feminists such as Showalter (p. 343). Feminist narratology thus has similar emphases to strands of the feminist literary criticism of this time, with its insistence that 'all interpretation is political' (Belsey and Moore, 1989: 1) and a desire to draw attention to the work of women authors that had been neglected in earlier studies. Within the diversity of American feminist literary criticism in the 1980s, the influence of French theorists such as Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva also began to be felt (and contested) as their works were translated and disseminated. This is less obvious in Lanser's (1986) paper, but the vision of a specifically feminine discourse as envisioned through psychoanalytically derived models of language, desire and sexuality also informed later feminist analyses of narrative theory and literature (Winnett, 1990). While there are important differences between these currents of feminist literary criticism, both gynocriticism

and *écriture féminine* imply a model of analyzing 'feminine' texts as different from 'masculine'. This opposition is interpreted within a hierarchical framework of power relations, where the recovery of 'feminine' alternatives is seen as a form of emancipation and cultural revision.

The feminism of 1980s feminist narratology is thus very much a product of its time, imbued with a second wave agenda of overturning inequality towards women, but framing this within a specifically literary context. By the end of the 1990s, concepts of gender had radically altered under the influence of poststructuralist theorizing, especially that laid out by Judith Butler (1990, 1993). No longer was the focus on a binary model of difference but on the ways in which gender might be performed in various ways and in different contexts. This change in theoretical stance is also reflected in developments within feminist narratology, which likewise embraced queer theory in a more fluid understanding of the ways that gender might be implicated in narrative structures and response (Lanser, 1995, 1999; VanHoosier-Carey, 1997; Warhol, 2002, 2003). However, even though the concepts of gender might have changed, the nature of feminism found in feminist narratology has still retained its theoretical emphasis. Because the discussions of cultural context and of women's 'experiences' are filtered through the analysis of texts (usually literature), feminist narratology has had little to do with application in feminist practices. We might then question how to define the politics of the 'feminism' in feminist narratology. Mezei's distinction between the feminism of 'feminist literary criticism' and 'feminism(s) – a movement [...] a political position' suggests a telling separation. While I think that it is too strong to deem the feminist interpretation of texts to be apolitical, there are certain limitations to its political potential, or at least its politics need to be understood in particular ways.

In the case of feminist narratology, this is rooted in the points of compatibility and difference in the goals of feminism and narratology. One of the fundamental principles of feminism is that it should analyze and interrogate gender relations (Flax, 1990: 40). From the early days of feminist narratology onwards, the tools of narrative theory have proved useful as a means of achieving this. Although it may appear that narratives are everywhere, they are by no means universally expressed. Issues of representation, patterns of desire and agency, the right to speak and how that speech is evaluated are all critical matters for both gender relations and narrative analysis. However, feminism is not content with simply describing such matters. It also seeks to change those arrangements through political action (Flax, 1990: 40; Bryson, 1999: 5). Herein

lies the heart of the dilemma, for narratology makes no such claim. It is true that narratology has become politicized insofar as it is now concerned with ideology in important ways, but there are restrictions on the ways we might understand this as political action. Mitchell writes about a similar quandary emerging from the integration of feminism and psychoanalysis. She says,

As a political practice in search of a political theory, it [feminism] can use concepts and arguments from elsewhere to analyze its own object – the position of women – in the relevant contexts, but it cannot convert these concepts and arguments into political ones in and of themselves. (2001: 16)

Similarly, neither can feminist narratology necessarily transform narrative analysis into political activism. In part, the problem lies with the object of study. It is not that the analysis of literary texts is devoid of attention to material and social relations. However, feminist narratology is concerned with texts and how these might relate to their various contexts, whereas ‘feminism(s) as a movement’ (to borrow Mezei’s distinction again) might be said to be more intent on altering the contexts themselves. Indeed, analyzing gender as it is important to narrative theory, for example in terms of the characterization, plot structure or voice, does not necessarily neatly translate into an understanding of how the oppression of women operates in its various contexts and how this might be challenged. Related to this is the separation that occurs between academic disciplines and environments outside these. As Hartmann *et al.* argue, certain disciplines tend to be aligned with particular activities and occupations, and therefore perhaps the kind of theory and analysis coming out of departments of literature should not be expected to inform other domains such as public social practice (1996: 938). More generally, the institutionalization of feminism has led to a situation where discussion of feminist theory may become isolated from practice and activism as the audience becomes limited to professional academics.<sup>3</sup> Thus the location of feminist narratology within academia might well limit its potential to operate as a form of social change. Currie expresses similar doubts about the political potential of narrative theory more generally. He writes, ‘If the role of the intellectual is to speak the truth to power, as Gramsci formulated it, the evidence suggests that power is not listening’ (1998: 8). Do these limitations mean that the project of feminist narratology should be abandoned, and the metaphorical baby thrown out with the

bath water of political activism? It is with the desire to answer in the negative that this book has been conceived. I hope that the preceding discussion has made it abundantly clear that the concept of feminist narratology is not without limitations. But this does not mean that it is of no use. Indeed, with the burgeoning of narrative studies and the recognition that feminism remains critically important both in theory and in practice, there is perhaps a greater need than ever to take account of the ways in which these two important fields of study might contribute to one another.

### **Postmodern feminist narratology**

The aim of this book is to affirm the potential of feminist narratology, not only to recognize the valuable work that has been carried out in this field over the last two decades, but also to understand the ways in which these are situated within specific historical and theoretical contexts. This review forms the basis for reconceptualizing the interchange between feminism(s) and narrative theory in order to argue for its ongoing usefulness to both fields. In particular, I want to suggest that feminist narratology must take into account the changes that have taken place in both fields as a result of postmodern influences. As the meta-narratives outlined earlier suggest, both share a similar progression away from a concern with universalizing categories into diversification and intersectionality where revisionist narratology questioned the assumptions of an abstract system and in feminism, post-structuralists challenged the construction of universal categories of womanly experience. The problems of universalism were countered by the inclusion of multiple perspectives that resulted in the fracturing of narratology and feminism into increased pluralism that went hand in hand with a focus on localized contexts. It has become obvious that no one set of data, model of analysis, methodology or theory alone can achieve the goals of feminism or narratology. Rather each will have particular strengths and limitations. For example, the localized studies of gender and language use developed through Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1998) concept of Communities of Practice are extremely helpful for looking at micro-level interchanges but are less concerned with exploring macro-level forces that may also shape gendered behaviour. Likewise, the analysis of plot structure may be useful for looking at the global arrangement of a text, but may tell us little about other important aspects of its organization, such as focalization or characterization. Moreover, this diversification is politically important in drawing attention

to the specific experience of groups or individuals who might appear otherwise excluded. However, plurality in itself is not without its problems and in turn the limitations of an atomistic approach have now begun to be raised. In both feminism and narrative studies there are increasing demands for integration between areas, so that this multiplicity might be useful (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1999; Richardson, 2000b; Herman, 2001). At the beginning of the new millenium, feminist narratology now faces the challenge of responding to this dual call for both diversification and integration. This challenge has implications for the feminist theory, narratology and narrative texts that are brought together in the continuing work of feminist narratology.

This book responds to the call for a more holistic approach to feminist narratology that not only looks beyond its existing boundaries in terms of data, theory and discipline but also brings this multiplicity together in the belief that synthesis can be productive. The approach I take is essentially comparative. There are several benefits that arise from this. First, as Porter Abbott puts it, the operation of 'suddenly seeing your old familiar terms from a new disciplinary perspective can be salutary precisely because the differences of field are so great' (2000: 260). Such a shift may allow us to re-evaluate the meaning of terms that become used so readily as to be taken for granted, such as 'gender', 'context', 'text'. Second, this comparison opens the possibility of dialogue between researchers working in different areas. At its most basic, this would include the acknowledgement of other relevant findings and arguments, which in their points of commonality and difference may help to clarify or alter our own perspective. Perhaps more contentious and far-reaching is the integration that transposes models, methodology or theory across boundaries. This may be useful, but should always be handled sensitively so that distortions that may arise from decontextualization are at best minimized, or at least acknowledged. The integration that I am proposing is between feminist narratology and the work on narrative that has taken place in language and gender studies. The interdisciplinary combination of literary and linguistic studies is in many senses nothing new, as the expansive field of stylistics (or literary-linguistics, as it has come to be known) indicates. The rationale for such a synthesis has been laid out by many scholars who have gone before me (summarized recently by Simpson, 1997; and Toolan, 1990, 1998, 2001). In general terms, my work proceeds from the premise that the study of literary texts using frameworks from linguistics, using those literary texts in the process of formulating linguistic models or comparing different text types and perspectives

may prove mutually beneficial. As Gymnich, Nünning and Nünning point out,

Given the fact that language, the object of study in linguistics, is also the fabric all literary texts are made of, linguistics and literary criticism should be almost natural allies in the endeavour to develop approaches to literary texts that do justice to the multifaceted nature of literary texts and to their dependence on language as a medium. (2002: 7)

While there are important differences between the two, the early desire to equate literary and linguistic approaches with a corresponding subjectivity and objectivity has been replaced by an acknowledgement that 'interpretation and persuasion' are common to both, and the belief that the possibilities suggested by this way of reading are not only valid but rewarding (Toolan, 1990, Chapter 1). The benefits of integrating findings from linguistic research, applying linguistic models and drawing in non-literary texts are manifold and of specific relevance to feminist narratology.

In its evolution from narratology (in its narrow sense) to the more wide-ranging 'narrative theory', the focus has moved away from privileging literature and gone on to include a variety of other narrative texts (Genette, 1990). It is then perhaps all the more surprising that feminist narratology has largely adhered to its roots in narratology proper and feminist literary criticism and mostly kept to analyzing literary texts. There are exceptions to this, such as Bal's important work on the visual arts (1990, 1997, 1999) and Warhol's engagement with cultural studies (1999, 2003). Nonetheless, feminist narratology has remained a literary concern, without taking much notice of parallel research that has been carried out in other fields. Yet considerable work in sociolinguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) has also interrogated similar issues to those posed by feminist narratology, such as whether or not gender makes a difference in the storytelling styles used by groups of women and men (Johnstone, 1990; Abney, 1994; Georgakopoulou, 1995; Coates, 1996) and the ways in which sexism may continue in the representation of women (Clark, 1992; Mills, 1995; Caldas-Coulthard, 1996). Incorporating approaches from these perspectives is an important extension of feminist narratology. On the one hand, it widens the type of data that should be analyzed to include narratives not conventionally considered as 'literature' such as conversational stories, media reports and writing of various kinds

by children. In so doing, it moves feminist narratology closer to its original project of testing narrative theory against a fuller range of texts produced by, and about, women. These 'non-literary' narratives are also important for providing alternative examples of what 'context' might entail, as they function in a range of ways in relation to their 'real world' environment. Perhaps in part because of this, sociolinguistic analyses of narratives have tended to be more aware of the multiple ways in which gender might intersect with a range of other variables. In turn, this may also have significant implications for the way in which 'gender' is treated in the analysis of literary texts. Finally, studies in sociolinguistics and CDA have tended to place greater emphasis on the dialectical relationship between the narrative and its social or ideological context than has happened in the text-immanent focus of literary feminist narratology. If the apparently diffuse relationship between social context and literary analysis limits its feminist potential, then these more contextually sensitive approaches to narratives in use may alleviate this in some measure.

The integration of work from linguistics also complements the methodology traditionally used in feminist narratology. One of the great strengths of feminist narratology has been its application of close reading. However, it is important not to generalize about the wider implications of gender relations on the basis of individual texts. Thus Prince writes,

In postclassical as well as in classical narratology, there has been little extensive empirical or experimental (cross-cultural) exploration of these or similar problems and I think that we – 'literary' narratologists – are too often inclined to take locally suggestive and persuasive arguments about understanding and responses for generally true statements. (2001: 233)

It is precisely this inclusion of empirically oriented methods (for example, using corpus-based approaches or analyzing wider samples of data) that may be of use to feminist narratology. Of course, these should not be valourized as superior to close reading. It is clear that empiricism in itself may be used to oversimplify and reach abstract generalizations just as readily as other methods (Bing and Bergvall, 1998: 503; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1999: 194). Nonetheless, they provide an important addition to feminist narratology, enabling us to gain a greater sense of what 'actually is' and so building a wider picture

of the ways in which gender might be important in the telling and reception of narratives.

Feminist narratology has also yet to take on board fully the ramifications of the changes in feminist theory. The implications of reconceptualizing gender as a fluid, performative notion rather than as a fixed category may be felt in far-reaching ways. The very terms of the analysis have been destabilized. While second wave feminists made a distinction between biological sex (male/female) and socially constructed gender (masculine/feminine), later theorists, notably Judith Butler, have collapsed this distinction, arguing that sex itself is socially constructed and is better understood as a continuum of possibilities rather than as a binary pair. Throughout this book, I have continued to use the term 'gender' to refer to the ways in which individuals may identify themselves or be identified (mostly) as women or men, and to describe the behaviour and beliefs that enable these norms to be reproduced or contested. However, I also recognize that other gendered alternatives may be possible that go beyond this two-way distinction, for example, through gender blending or in cyborg imagery. More recent studies in feminist narratology have gone beyond the binary model of gender used in earlier years (Lanser, 1995, 1999; Warhol, 2003), but it is notable that the corpus of texts that has attracted attention has stayed within Lanser's early directive that feminist narratology should analyze texts by women, mostly British or American authors. It seems less easy now to pose 'texts by women' as a simple, homogenous category, and important differences between women need also to be recognized. Typically, these other differences have highlighted alternative sources of oppression or exclusion, such as race, class or sexuality, and may also include others such as age, historical period or academic discipline. While the data that I look at is still influenced by the eurocentric origins of feminist narratology, I have tried to include examples that go beyond this and come from other cultures and periods. Thus the narratives I look at include work by Afro-American author Toni Morrison, medieval Japanese monogatari, and stories by Maori children in New Zealand. Where the data remains British, I have wherever possible signalled its cultural specificity rather than assuming it to be universally representative. Moreover, to study 'texts by women' assumes that masculinity is itself a homogeneous concept to which femininity is opposed, so I have also included narratives by or about men in order to examine points of similarity and difference within and between categories.

Most fundamentally, reconceptualizing gender means that the kinds of research questions asked by and of feminist narratology

should be revised. Bing and Bergvall provocatively highlight the many ways in which traditional questions about language and gender may reinforce a binary model of gender relations (1998). Their critique might also usefully be applied to much of the feminist narratology that has gone on in the last 20 years, which at its very inception was founded upon the premise that women's narratives might be different from men's. Looking at the situation now, it may be time for feminist narratology to question its questions. Because the assumption of difference has been so influential, much of this book's thrust is to challenge that in various ways. This includes testing hypotheses of difference against various data and demonstrating the restrictions of categorizing narratives, their tellers and readers in this way. I go on to look at the ways in which stereotypes and power relations based on gender difference continue to be important in narratives of different kinds. So while difference remains a central issue for feminist narratology, the questions we ask about it need to be of a different nature now and avoid perpetuating false oppositions and preconceptions.

Feminist narratology cannot be understood as a single, unified entity. In many ways, it never has been. The original concept was forged from two distinctive fields and the subsequent studies have been described as 'eclectic' (Mezei, 1996: 7). However, at this point in its development, the multiplicity it might embrace is more expansive and increasingly necessary. In this pluralistic re-envisioning, feminist narratology has become thoroughly postmodern, and in line with the postmodern feminist theory projected by Fraser and Nicholson (1990). They describe this as 'comparativist rather than universalizing, attuned to changes and contrasts rather than covering laws', and which 'would replace unitary notions of woman and feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand amongst others' (pp. 34–35). However, despite the political motivation that impels such multiplicity, this must also guard against the fragmented separatism that ignores possible points of commonality between groups. So the postmodern feminist narratology that I want to argue for is not only plural, but also integrative. Like the metaphor of a tapestry used by Fraser and Nicholson (1990: 35), postmodern feminist narratology is made up of many strands which may not only be differently coloured but also have points at which they cross and combine. It is only as they are woven together that the overall picture of feminist narratology can begin to be formed.

## About this book

My description of the strands in this tapestry is organized around particular questions that feminist narratology might consider. I begin in Chapter 2 by interrogating the very basis of feminist narratology: problematizing the ways in which gender might be related to narrative form. The focus of the discussion is the feminist narrative theory that has been derived from psychoanalytic theory, especially the feminist revisions of Brooks' (1984) work on narrative desire. I critique the binary opposition of Brooks' 'male plot of ambition' and the subsequent feminist alternatives that were suggested on the grounds of their essentialist and universalizing tendencies. Instead, I review these gendered plot types in the light of current debates about narrativity and examine how the stylistic features that contribute to varying degrees of narrativity may be found in work by both male and female authors. I also question the eurocentric focus of this strand, and suggest that gender cannot be treated in an abstract manner, and should not ignore other important influences like that of race, as seen for example in the work of Toni Morrison. This opens the debate concerning the extent to which a specific narrative feature might be interpreted as 'feminist'.

Because of its landmark status, Lanser's (1986) paper is reviewed in detail in the next chapter. Here I acknowledge the ways in which it is influenced by the characteristics of second wave feminism and begin to explore the limitations of a binary model of gender for feminist narratology. Following on from the previous chapter, I provide an alternative feminist revision of plot analysis, this time drawing on the work of Michael Hoey's (2001) culturally popular patterns of organization. Again, the analysis and discussion is cross-cultural as I compare a selection of texts from the medieval period that prescribe gendered patterns of moral behaviour. These include Middle English romances and Japanese monogatari. Lanser's work stresses the importance of contextualization for feminist narratology, but here I question how easy it is to examine this relationship between text and context, and how this might operate within certain restrictions for literary texts. Chapter 4 provides an alternative perspective on the influence of context and shifts to a sociolinguistic perspective. The aim of the study in this chapter is to test the claim that women and men might tell stories differently against some empirical data. Labov's (1972) highly influential work on 'danger of death narratives' has also been critiqued for its gender specific bias. My work uses the Labovian framework to compare the oral narratives told by women and men about an equally

personal and emotive topic: that of childbirth.<sup>4</sup> What is striking about this set of narratives is not so much the points of difference between the stories told by the women and men but the over-riding similarity in their use of an anecdotal structure. Thus I question the extent to which gender might be considered as a salient variable, and how feminist narratology might need to take into account the fine-grained ways in which this intersects with other contextual parameters.

Chapter 5 addresses an area that has been given relatively little attention in feminist narratology: that of reader response. The study looks at a group of readers' interactions with a fictional hypertext. In so doing, I also raise the need to take account of the influence of a narrative's medium, an issue that has been taken for granted in the primacy of print culture. The analysis revisits the concepts of narrativity and plot structure outlined in earlier chapters, but here uses these to examine the strategies that the readers used for processing this transitional narrative. While the discussion provides some much needed empirical data regarding women's and men's actual reading practices, it also highlights the dangers of assuming difference based on a simplistic, binary categorization of 'women' and 'men'. In particular, I argue for the need to examine intra-category variation, which might be explained for reasons that have little to do with gender at all.

The following two chapters examine cases where assumptions about gender norms continue to be important in the way narratives are used and evaluated. Chapter 6 considers the ways in which power relations between women and men continue to be of importance, particularly in terms of media reports. Using perspectives from CDA, I examine the ways in which the British and American press has constructed narratives of success, failure and stability for two particularly high-profile figures: Cherie Booth/Blair and Hillary Rodham Clinton. In my discussion of these narratives, I argue that feminist narratology should go beyond the description of texts alone, and pay greater attention to the ends to which these narratives might be put. In the reporting of Booth/Blair and Rodham Clinton, isolated narratives might suggest that these two women are feminist role models, but examining the wider context reveals the extent to which these narratives serve patriarchal ends of building their respective husband's reputation and so political power. In applying a corpus-based approach, I argue for the need to complement the close reading of feminist narratology with analyses of a much broader number of texts.

Chapter 7 turns to another area which has not yet been embraced fully by feminist narratology and examines the relationship between

storytelling style, age and gender in a cross-cultural sample of narratives told by British and New Zealand children. Once again, the consequences of storytelling style are of considerable importance here, where the ability to conform to culturally specific patterns of narrative prescribed within educational contexts may have social and academic consequences for the children involved. Again I argue for a context-sensitive approach to the analysis of both gender and narrative form. The findings discussed in this chapter provide an important challenge to feminist narratology's assumptions that it is women writers who might diverge from normative patterns, leading to questions about where such assumptions might have been derived from.

Brian Richardson points out that even while feminism has had a far-reaching transformation on narrative theory, the subsequent reconceptualizations 'continue to be debated and refined' (2000b: 168). In this book, the vision of postmodern feminist narratology is one in which these debates may take place across rich and varied terrain, exposing sometimes surprising areas of similarity and difference. At the beginning of the new millennium, I argue that in its eclectic and post-modern plurality, feminist narratology is still very much a going concern, relevant to those who consider themselves to work with narrative theory from a wide range of perspectives. The following chapters demonstrate some of the ways in which this might be so.

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