Petticoats or Miniskirts: A Comparative Analysis of Feminine Narration in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*

Ida Jonsson
BA Degree Project
Literature
Autumn, 2018
Irina Rasmussen
Abstract

Both *Pride and Prejudice* (Jane Austen) and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Helen Fielding) have been thoroughly examined by literary critics. When discussed from a feminist perspective, critics are ambiguous as some claim that the novels work against feminist values rather than the reverse. This essay aims to add to the existing discussion, with focus on narration, specifically the narrative authority heroines Elizabeth and Bridget claim. Thus, it is situated within feminist narratology, examining the discourse of the narrative rather than the story. Analysis is conducted with Alison Case’s concept *feminine narration*, where women traditionally have been *narrative witnesses* without authority. Through acts of *plotting* and *preaching*, authority is claimed by which the narrator can control the meaning the reader is meant to derive from the narrative. I argue that Elizabeth and Bridget both assert narrative authority throughout their stories, thus breaking gendered conventions by claiming agency in traditionally male positions. Additionally, the comparative analysis enables discussion on “Chick lit” literary status, which has been questioned by critics.

Analysis shows that both Elizabeth and Bridget assert narrative authority throughout their stories, by acts of plotting and preaching. Often, both heroines meet male characters attempting to usurp narrative authority by assuming the role of master-narrator, a figure who traditionally possesses more authority. By avoiding these attempts, Elizabeth and Bridget escape the position as narrative witnesses and claim authority, thus directing the readers towards the intended meaning of respective narratives. Furthermore, the comparative analysis opens up for a broader discussion of issues women have faced, and continue to face, throughout time.

**Key Words:** feminine narration; Austen; Fielding; Chick Lit; authority; feminism; feminist narratology
There are many inspiring heroines throughout literary history. Interestingly, Jane Austen’s heroines have become an ambiguous topic when examined from a feminist point of view (Prewitt Brown 303). Austen has been critiqued for reinforcing patriarchal conventions by “her insistence upon marrying off her heroines” (Warhol 5). In her article on *Persuasion* (Austen), Robyn R. Warhol counters these arguments and claims that we should look beyond the story and focus on the discourse, in which Austen can be reclaimed as a feminist author (5-6). 150 years later, an equally contradictory discussion can be discerned concerning the “Chick lit” genre, which emerged in the 1990s, with for example Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Wilson 83). How come, as Mallory Young puts it, are convention breaking women such provocative characters even in today’s society (2)? Moreover, Chick lit has been questioned on its literary status, considered unsuitable for serious literary discussion, but conversely also a substantial source which can “reach beyond the individual texts to broader social and cultural concerns” (Wilson 84). Based on this, I will examine Austen’s and Fielding’s work, from a feminist point of view and additionally discuss Chick lit’s literary status in conjunction to more esteemed classics. This essay will be based on a comparative analysis, focusing on the narration of *Pride and Prejudice’s* (Austen) and *Bridget Jones’s Diary’s* (Fielding) heroines, Elizabeth Bennet and Bridget Jones who, despite a substantial time gap, face similar struggles within their societal and social contexts. Using Alison Case’s concept of *feminine narration*, I will argue that Elizabeth and Bridget assert narrative authority in their stories, thus breaking gendered conventions by claiming agency associated with a traditionally male position. Thus, I position myself against critics who claim that both Austen’s and Fielding’s
novels are working against feminist values. As well-known pieces of literature, both novels have been thoroughly examined separately, and to some extent side by side however, comparison has been mostly centred on plot and characters, rather than narrative functions.

To begin, we must consider what makes these novels comparable at all, as they differ on several points. Except for a distinctive time gap, the novels’ differing style of narration is of concern (which will be discussed in detail below), as narration is the focus of analysis. However, focusing on the similarities will show how comparison of the novels is justifiable. Firstly, there is an obvious intertextuality, where Fielding makes indisputable references to Austen’s novel. Except for male protagonists sharing the name of Darcy, Bridget refers explicitly to *Pride and Prejudice*, for example when meeting Mark Darcy: “It struck me as pretty ridiculous to be called Mr Darcy and to stand on your own looking snooty at a party” (Fielding 13). Bridget is referring to the first meeting with Elizabeth’s Mr Darcy, who spent an evening at a party declining to dance and “walking about the room, speaking occasionally to one of his own party”, giving him an aura of unpleasant pride (Austen 11). Secondly, the heroines share a similar plot, where Fielding has drawn on *Pride and Prejudice* explicitly and implicitly (Marsh 63). For example, both Bridget and Elizabeth end up with their respective Darcys.

Moreover, I will briefly account for *focalization* due to the difference of narrative style between *Pride and Prejudice*, which has a third-person narration, and *Bridget Jones’ Diary* which has a first-person narration. Focalization entails having access to a character’s thoughts and observations (Culler 89). As Bridget narrates her story through journal writing she is clearly the focalizer. When examining Elizabeth’s narration, we must first consider what makes Elizabeth the main focalizer, which I argue she is. Though Elizabeth is not technically the narrator, the events of the story are often viewed from her perspective, which makes the story focalized through her (Culler 89). Furthermore, Austen writes in *free indirect discourse* (FID), which entails a third-person narration where the narrator is more or less invisible, and rather imitates the inner thought processes in the character (Bodenhaimer 706). FID provides us with the inner workings of a character’s mind without being subordinate to main clauses constructed as “She thought” and such (Bodenhaimer 706). For example in the passage where “Elizabeth listened in silence but was not convinced; their behaviour at the assembly had not been calculated to please in general…” (Austen 14), we follow
Elizabeth’s thoughts, without the marker of “she thought”. We thus attain insight in Elizabeth’s view of the events in her life in the manner typical of FID, strengthening her position as the main focalizer. Therefore, I deem it possible to do a comparison between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* based on narration.

As the scope of this essay is limited, it would be difficult to account for a definition of feminism, as several waves of feminism have lapsed between Austen and Fielding. Neither is it feminism itself I am looking to examine in this essay, but rather narrative functions in relationship to the larger questions posed by feminist theory. Therefore I deem it more relevant to account for *feminist narratology*, which concerns not the “what” of a narrative but the “how” (Case “Plotting Women” 6). Feminist narratology entails the “study of narrative structures and strategies in the context of cultural constructions of gender”, moving the focus from the story to the discourse, the way in which a story is told (Warhol 5-6). As a pioneer in feminist narratology, Susan Lanser concluded that gender is a vital factor to account for in narration, as gender is a strong determinant regarding social, literary and linguistic behaviour (Case “Plotting Women” 7). Lanser put emphasis on gender as it influences the narrator’s status, and the authority which the narrator is conventionally ascribed, since it is dependent on the social conventions of the time (8). Thus when discussing feminism in this essay, the discussion will be centred on narration and whether Elizabeth and Bridget are able to break from gendered conventions imposed on them by their respective social contexts.

Even though I will situate both novels in their respective social contexts throughout my analysis, I will also give a brief description of Chick lit’s position as postfeminist fiction. Postfeminism is an ambiguous term, which is both defined as the success of feminism, but also as its failure (Jolles 43-44). According to some, postfeminism entails female subjects who enjoy more freedom socially and economically thanks to previous feminism, but also a rejection of feminism as it is perceived to constrain women’s lifestyle (44). Chick lit as a genre is strongly situated within the postfeminist field (Harzewski 8). Some critics claim that Chick lit undermines the women’s movement, and is both a cause and product of feminism’s weakened status (Harzewski 8). But, as Mallory Young questions whether equality between men and women has been attained, which postfeminism partially claims, why are women breaking convention the focus of many postfeminist texts (3)? Postfeminism posits and explores a tension between feminism and femininity, juggling both the gains and the deficiencies of feminism (Harzewski 150). Thus, postfeminism entails many
perspectives and parameters for women to situate themselves within. It is in the ambiguity of postfeminism where I find the worth of applying feminist narratology, as it provides another perspective, not focusing on different views of what feminism is, but rather on the authority in the narrative.

Alison Case aligns her work with that of feminist narratology (Case, “Plotting Women” 6). Feminine narration is based on the female narrator and her traditional role as a narrative witness, rather than a narrator actively shaping a plot or actively telling right from wrong, something Case refers to as plotting and preaching (4). Women functioning as narrative witnesses depend on gender roles from the period on which Case’s research is based, eighteenth- and nineteenth century women’s literature, in which feminine narratives are marked by “passivity and lack of discourse authority” (5). The act of plotting is an act of claiming authority over the narrative, shaping the story and in extension controlling the meaning the reader is meant to derive from it (12-13). Conventionally, women have been seen as unable to assume narrative authority, both from their perceived inability to actively shape their lives and of the unnaturalness of women preaching to men (13). Preaching is explained as the act of interpreting an experience, the moral of it, for the greater good of the surroundings whereas witnessing entails only giving an account of said experience, without interpreting the morality of it (14). Thus, plotting and preaching provides the narrator with authority by which the narrator can influence the reader’s understanding of a story, whereas a witness leaves her story up to interpretation of others.

Using Case’s concepts of plotting, preaching and narrative witness, I will now commence a comparative analysis of Elizabeth’s and Bridget’s narrative authority. I argue that the heroines do not remain passive witnesses, thus challenging the previous gender role in terms of narration and putting these characters in a positive feminist light. The side by side analysis will also provide argument for the value of bringing Chick lit into discussion equally as the esteemed classic. Analysis will focus on Elizabeth’s and Bridget’s ability to claim narrative authority when meeting gendered conventions that attempt to take away their narrative power.

Alison Case uses her concept of plotting when examining narration in Jane Eyre (Brontë), where Jane meets St John, who tries to engage Jane in his own plot and narrative (“Plotting”, 102). St John attempts to usurp the narrative authority by imposing a marital plot over Jane, by explaining it would be Jane’s best, if not only, choice in accepting his marriage proposal (103-104). By declining his offer, Jane asserts
her narrative authority (104). Moving into my own analysis and focusing on the struggle over narrative authority by plotting, I find that men attempting to impose marital plots over women is a common feature in Pride and Prejudice (Austen). For example, Mr Collins attempts to assume narrative authority when proposing to Elizabeth. After a lengthy monologue of all the reasons why Mr Collins wishes to marry Elizabeth (or rather, why Elizabeth should marry him), Elizabeth’s answer causes discussion:

“You are too hasty sir!” she cried “You forget I have made no answer. Let me do it without further loss of time. Accept my thanks for the compliment you are paying me. I am very sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them.”

“I am not now to learn,” replied Mr Collins, with a formal wave of the hand “that it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses if the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour; and that sometimes the refusal is repeated a second or even a third time. I am therefore by no means discouraged by what you have just said and shall hope to alter ere long.”

“Upon my word, sir,” cried Elizabeth, “your hope is rather an extraordinary one after my declarations. I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring as to risk their happiness on the chance on being asked a second time. I am perfectly serious in my refusal. You could not make me happy, and I am convinced I am the last woman in the world who would make you so.” (Austen 86-87)

Here, Elizabeth is resisting the marital plot Mr Collins is trying to impose on her by declining the proposal, where Mr Collins already has plotted for a yes. Mr Collins’ sermon of the perks of marrying him and the general sense in marrying at all (84-86), is an attempt to assert his narrative authority over Elizabeth who, in her position of an inferior woman, should be overjoyed with the chance of a prosperous marriage. In the next section Mr Collins attempts to narrate Elizabeth’s refusal in favour of himself, claiming he is “by no means discouraged by what you have just said and shall hope to alter ere long” (86). Mr Collins, quite conceitedly, perceives that he will be able to shape and change Elizabeth’s mind, which would entail taking away her narrative authority. Mr Collins attempts to assume the role of master-narrator 1, since he from the perspective of society and in his own view has a superior authority position over Elizabeth. Elizabeth’s response, claiming that happiness is impossible in a marriage between the two, is an assertion of her narrative authority and controls the meaning we

---

1 Alison Case describes the master-narrator as a narrator who has a higher authority, traditionally a man, who determines and shapes the story of the female narrator by being an authority figure socially and morally (“Plotting Women” 33, 66, 102).
as readers are supposed to derive from it. Elizabeth does not see any sense in marrying where happiness and love is not part of the equation.

Mr Collins’ narrative is representative of the time in which *Pride and Prejudice* was written, where the gender roles perceived women as unable to actively shape their own lives (Case, “Plotting Women” 13). In this section, Elizabeth resists Mr Collins’ attempt to narrate her life and provides us readers with her own narrative. Considering the power coming from the higher economic and social position of men in society (Lowder Newton 27-28), Elizabeth resists the very conventions of her time, making her a forerunner of women’s independence in a feminist sense. Arguably, Elizabeth’s ability to authorize her own narrative and life, should be considered when discussing Austen from a feminist perspective, as it opposes the view of women of the time. However, feminist critics have declared scepticism against Austen’s heroines and especially Austen’s preference for engaging her heroines in matrimony, which reproduces the patriarchal idea of marriage (Prewitt Brown 305).

Even if Elizabeth originally resists the marital plot, there is no denying that the novel ends with a marriage between her and Mr Darcy. Of course, this ending can be seen as settling to the conventions of the time, and thus not being progressive at all. However, after examining Elizabeth’s situation with Darcy, I argue that Elizabeth is in fact the narrator with authority in the narrative that leads up to the marriage. She does not bend to the marital plot by any other convention than her own. Previously we have derived from Elizabeth’s denial of Mr Collins’ proposal that Elizabeth will not marry for economically beneficial motives. Elizabeth did, as concluded, not bend to Mr Collins’ narrative, which would have been adhering to the convention of the time. Examining Mr Darcy’s first proposal, we face a similar situation, as Mr Darcy attempts to superimpose his own narrative over Elizabeth. Darcy expresses his feelings but also all the reasons for why his endeavour is below him, implicitly suggesting that Elizabeth should consider herself lucky to receive such a proposal (Austen 147-48). Despite Elizabeth is admitting to the honour of receiving a proposal from such a high standing man, she recognizes the slight in Darcy’s words, and foremost in his presumptuousness in assuming a positive answer:

He concluded with representing to her the strength of that attachment which, in spite of all his endeavour, he had found impossible to conquer; and with expressing his hope that it would now be rewarded by her acceptance of his hand. As he said this, she could easily see that he had no doubt of a favourable answer. He *spoke* of apprehension and anxiety, but his countenance expressed real security. (Austen 148)
Darcy is trying to claim the narrative authority as he is attempting to engage Elizabeth in his marital plot, and assuming he will receive a “yes”. This is another example of the power bestowed on men in the 1800s as discussed by Judith Lowden-Newton, where men perceived their power of choice and control so grand they can merely choose a woman they wish to marry (30-31). In *Pride and Prejudice*, both Mr Collins and Mr Darcy believe they possess this power of choice, thinking their respective proposals are irresistible (31). Lowden-Newton also argues that Elizabeth’s refusal of the proposals gains her power in relation to men, and that she acts against conventions of feminine behaviour (35).

Based on gender conventions Elizabeth should say yes. But again, we find Elizabeth plotting, and asserting narrative authority. Initially, she is convinced that Darcy is impossibly disagreeable, and that she even has a “deeply-rooted dislike” towards him (Austen 148), thus seeing no reason to marry him. Hence Elizabeth claims the narrative authority and once again direct us readers towards the meaning of her plot: marriage without happiness and love is useless. Moreover, in this episode Elizabeth gives another strong argument against Darcy; he has squandered the happiness of her sister, and thus she could never love him (Austen 149). In the end, Elizabeth will marry Mr Darcy, but not until his prideful behaviour is fundamentally changed and Elizabeth is able look past her own prejudice against him.

So what does this say about Elizabeth’s authority? Does this reduce her to the narrative witness? I argue that it does not. Elizabeth marries Darcy on the basis of a change of opinion, which in turn is changed by Darcy’s transformed behaviour. It is revealed that Darcy has gone to great length in not only restoring Elizabeth’s sister Lydia’s reputation, but also attempting to bring Jane and Mr Bingley together again. Elizabeth realizes that he indeed is a man she could both love and respect:

“If you *will* thank me,” he replied, “let it be for yourself alone. That the wish of giving happiness to you might add force to other inducements which led me on, I shall not attempt to deny. But your *family* owe me nothing. I thought only of *you*."

Elizabeth was too much embarrassed to say a word. After a short pause her companion added, “You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. *My* affections and wishes are unchanged; but one word from you will silence me on this subject forever.” (Austen 282)

Here we see a widely different proposal than what Darcy previously produced. He is no longer trying to narrate Elizabeth’s answer, he does not presuppose anything, he
simply asks and hopes for a positive answer. By accepting this proposal, under the circumstances she does, I argue that Elizabeth is once again plotting. Darcy has now the qualities in a man which Elizabeth values. He has redeemed himself by caring for both her and her family, and in conjunction with that Darcy is moving past his pride, Elizabeth is able to move past her prejudice. Darcy proves to be a man who respects Elizabeth, thus Elizabeth is able to respect him in turn, which enables a loving and happy marriage. This, I argue, is why Elizabeth’s marriage is not an act of witnessing or bending to convention. She is actively shaping her narrative and the meaning we as readers are meant to derive from the plot: a marriage without love, respect and happiness is not worth it, however lucrative it may be.

As Bridget story begins we have moved from the 1800s into the 1990s. Petticoats have been exchanged in favour for black miniskirts, and the heroine is a thirty-something single woman in London. Obviously, a great change in context from *Pride and Prejudice*, which forms the question: are the ideas of narrative authority and marital plots applicable to the reading of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*? As a postfeminist work, the argument could be made that Bridget’s generation has achieved equality, thus should narrative authority not have to be questioned. However, Alison Case has examined *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, with feminine narration as her basis. Case concludes that while writing a diary in itself forms a better basis for a plotting narrative, Bridget is a witness rather than an authority in her own story (“Authenticity” 178-80). While I will not argue against Case on the narrative at large, as I am not examining the narrative function of the journal itself, I will instead show instances where Bridget is surely both plotting and preaching, thus contradicting Case’s argument. When applying the same manner of analysis to Bridget’s story as to Elizabeth’s, I find equal issues of struggle over narrative authority is present in Bridget’s life.

Firstly, there is no shortage of pressure from her social context concerning her single status:

‘Bridget! What *are* we going to do with you!’ said Una. ‘You career girls! I don’t know! Can’t put it off for ever, you know. Tick-tock-tick-tock.’

‘Yes. How does a woman manage to get to your age without being married?” (Fielding 11)

Bridget is not spared the idealism of marriage and is soon introduced to Mark Darcy, who everyone around her perceives as a catch; he is rich, successful and available (Fielding 12). Upon introduction, Bridget decides she sees nothing she likes in Mark Darcy (13). However, this does not stop her surroundings from incessantly pushing
them together: “The worst of it was that Una Alconbury and Mum wouldn’t leave it at
that … in a desperate attempt to throw me into Mark Darcy’s path yet again” (15). Thus,
the first instance of imposing a marital plot comes from Bridget’s social circle, and
foremost her mother. Bridget’s mother tries to impose her narrative by constantly
reminding Bridget of Mark Darcy’s singlehood, but Bridget sees through these futile
attempts rather bluntly: “I don’t know why she didn’t just come out with it and say,
‘Darling, do shag Mark Darcy over the turkey curry, won’t you? He is very rich’” (12).
In these early episodes Bridget’s mother and acquaintances are attempting to narrate
Bridget’s plot, by assuming that Bridget will take any opportunity to end her
singlehood. In their minds Mark Darcy is the perfect solution. However, Bridget resists
these attempts of external plotting of her life. Bridget has her own plot in terms of men,
with her eyes set on Daniel Cleaver. Despite successfully plotting and catching Daniel’s
attention early on in the novel, Bridget ends up denying Daniel when he attempts to
take their relationship further. After their first date, Bridget follows Daniel home, and
whilst in the process of taking each other’s clothes off, Daniel attempts to narrate the
implications of their actions in his favour: “This is just a bit of fun OK? I don’t think
we should start getting involved” (33). Whilst this could be perceived as the opposite
of imposing a marital plot, Daniel is after all trying to remain single, I argue that the act
of performing narrative authority is the same. Daniel is under the impression that he is
in an authoritative position where he can narrate his wishes over Bridget’s. In the same
way Mr Collins believed he could assume the role as master-narrator and how
Elizabeth’s Mr Darcy thought himself in a superior position of choice, Daniel is
attempting to exert authority similarly. However, his attempt is abruptly intersected by
Bridget:

“That is such crap,” I slurred. ‘How dare you be so fraudulently flirtatious, cowardly and dysfunctional? I am not interested in emotional fuckwittage. Goodbye.’

It was great. You should have seen his face. But now I am home I am sunk into gloom. I may have been right, but my reward, I know, will be to end up all alone, half-eaten by an Alsatian. (Fielding 33)

Here, I argue that Bridget refuses Daniel’s attempt at narrating her life, and overtakes
the narrative authority. Bridget does not accept the terms that Daniel is presupposing
she will agree to and dismisses him, despite admitting experiencing hopelessness due
to her singlehood. Even in her self-deprecation over her failed dating life I argue that
Bridget controls the narrative. As readers we understand that despite Bridget’s fear of
eternal singlehood, she is convinced that it is not worth compromising her integrity and surrendering to Daniel’s plot for the singlehood to end. Bridget continuously pines over Daniel, but asserts her narrative over again as Daniel treats her poorly: “It’s all chop-change chop-change with you. Either go out with me and treat me nicely, or leave me alone. As I say I am not interested in emotional fuckwittage” (76). Only when Daniel offers an actual relationship, does Bridget agree to it (120), which is for all purposes an act of plotting where Bridget has controlled the narrative to an end product she is happy with.

Critics of Bridget Jones’s Diary have claimed that Bridget works against feminist values as too much focus is given to trivial and shallow matters, rather than “more broadly, meaningful concerns” (Marsh 53). Superficially, these claims seem correct, considering Bridget’s insistence on losing weight, obsession with exterior beauty and self-depreciating narrative concerning her singlehood (Fielding 106-7). However, I agree with Kelly A. Marsh’s reading and that these recordings of Bridget’s failures assert her narrative. Marsh argues that Bridget’s behaviour of setting goals of self-perfection, which she can only fail, does not indicate that she is a powerless character, thus contradicting Case’s arguments of Bridget’s status as a narrative witness (60). Instead, Bridget sees through the ideals imposed on her by society, such as losing weight, by failing to achieve her goal but still liking herself in the end (Marsh 62). Even Bridget’s failed attempts at being domestic can be seen as working in the favour of feminism, as it challenges the demands of feminine perfection (Knowles 97-98). In my reading, I agree with Marsh, where I perceive Bridget’s ironic view of her failures as signs of her narrative authority, providing the readers with the meaning of feeling self-worth despite failing to adhere to society’s and her social context’s pressures.

This ties to where I think Bridget assumes narrative authority in her situation with Mark Darcy. Bridget’s story ends with her going into a relationship with Mark Darcy, which gives us another happy ending based on the relationship with a man. This forces the question: what meaning are we supposed to derive from this? That it is only when engaging in a relationship we can be happy and successful in the eyes of society, our social circle and ourselves? If so, then yes, I would agree that not only is Bridget too absorbed with shallow values, she is also working against feminist values which critics suggest. But I argue that in likeness with Elizabeth, it is not the end product of Bridget’s plot that is significant here. What we need to consider is the narrative that brings the reader to the end. Throughout the story Bridget, I argue, maintains the
narrative authority. As the story progresses, Bridget ends her relationship with Daniel due to infidelity (or as Bridget would put it: “fuckwittage”) and reconnects with Mark Darcy. Whilst not certain of what she wants, Bridget’s opinions of Mark have changed: from “real geek” (104) to someone she appreciates as a much nicer person than Daniel (259). Opposed to earlier in the story, no one is forcing a narrative over Bridget. She has concluded on liking Mark Darcy all by herself, as he is both nice and incredibly helpful when Bridget’s mother ends up in trouble. Bridget even experiences annoyance over the lacking attempts of her social circle to set her up with Mark:

> At this a loud cheer went up from us all and Geoffrey launched into ‘For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow’. I waited for Una to make some remark about me but none was forthcoming. Typical. The minute I decide I like Mark Darcy, everyone immediately stops trying to fix me up with him. (Fielding 282)

From this we as readers can derive a meaning that Bridget controls; it is not because she is expected by others to like Mark Darcy, it is because he has turned out to be a great person she wants to be with him. Her social context is no longer pressuring her about marriage, no man is attempting to narrate the terms of their relationship, it is Bridget’s conclusion which is important here.

However, Bridget’s claim to authority is not as obvious as Elizabeth’s, as we have seen in the inconsistent dealings with Daniel Cleaver, and Bridget’s constant struggle between asserting independence and desire to end her singlehood. In a purely feminist sense, Elizabeth seems stronger than Bridget, with a clearer break from the conventions of her time. However, we must remember the 150 years that have passed between the days of Austen up till Fielding’s publishing. Society is different and:

> gender identity is more complex than just choosing between single life and a family; it also encompasses issues of sexuality, professionalism, cultural pressures and individual desires – points of concern for many women who are struggling to locate themselves within third-wave feminism. (Wilson 88)

Thus, as Cheryl A. Wilson points out, there are more aspects to take into consideration in Bridget’s story; she has more freedom than Elizabeth ever had, but is still trapped by similar gender conventions, creating a difficult juxtaposition in her narrative. My point is that, in contrast to Case, I do not find Bridget to be a narrative witness, but rather possessing narrative authority on several points. Elizabeth’s authority may make a greater impact due to her historical and societal context, but Bridget’s authority brings with it more dimensions.
So far I have accounted for asserting narrative authority by plotting. A second way of asserting authority is by acts of *preaching*, that is, “interpretation of that experience … explicitly for the benefit of the congregation” (Case, “Plotting” 14). Preaching is thus an act of exerting moral and typically a male enterprise. Women have traditionally been seen unsuitable in the role of preachers, and especially preaching to men who according to gender roles enjoy a superior position in society (13). In *Pride and Prejudice* we see Elizabeth performing acts of preaching in several instances. Ironically she is often preaching to a preacher, attempting to persuade Mr Collins to see the error of his ways:

> Elizabeth tried hard to dissuade him from such a scheme, assuring him that Mr Darcy would consider his addressing him without introduction as an impertinent freedom, rather than a compliment to his aunt; that it was not in the least necessary there should be any notice on either side; and that if it were, it must belong to Mr Darcy, the superior in consequence, to begin the acquaintance. (Austen 78-79)

Here, Elizabeth is preaching to Mr Collins as she interprets Mr Collins behaviour as unsuitable, and doing so for the sake of the congregation, in this case Elizabeth’s and her family’s pride, which will be damaged by Mr Collins’ foolish behaviour. To call this “moral” might be a stretch, but I argue that the narrative function is the same. In the following passage, Mr Collins acts with the same presumptuousness as before, once again convinced of his own superiority: “‘My dear Miss Elizabeth, I have the highest opinion in the world of your excellent judgement in all matters within the scope of your understanding’” (Austen 79). Mr Collins quickly dissuades Elizabeth’s objections by explaining that Elizabeth has no authority in these matters, yet again attempting to assume the role of master-narrator that enjoys a higher authority than Elizabeth: “‘I consider myself more fitted by education and habitual study to decide on what is right than a young lady like yourself’” (79). As men possessed more power and control than women (Lowder Newton 31-32), Mr Collins is acting accordingly to the conventions of his time. In this scene it seems that Elizabeth’s act of preaching is not gaining her any narrative authority. Mr Collins disregards her concerns and explains that Elizabeth is unsuitable to exert such authority over him. However, I argue that by the consequences that follow Mr Collins’ actions, Elizabeth’s narrative authority is strengthened. In his conversation with Mr Darcy, Mr Collins is making a fool of himself as “Mr Darcy’s contempt seemed abundantly increasing” as well as Mr Collins’ inability to read the situation correctly: “‘Mr Darcy seemed much pleased with the
attention”’ (Austen 79). By this juxtaposition between Elizabeth’s narrative, which shows Mr Darcy’s disapproval, and Mr Collins’ misconception of Mr Darcy’s behaviour, we as readers understand that Elizabeth was correct in her preaching, thus gaining authority.

This also enforces Elizabeth’s position as convention breaker, as her preaching positions her away from witnessing. Another example where Elizabeth moralizes, is in regards of her younger sisters, Lydia and Kitty. For example, Elizabeth performs an act of preaching when she tries to persuade her father to stop Lydia from going on vacation, as Elizabeth perceives Lydia’s behaviour as scandalous: “‘Oh! my dear father can you suppose it possible that they [Kitty and Lydia] will not be censured and despised wherever they known, and that their sisters will not often be involved in the disgrace?’” (Austen 179). While Mr Bennet acknowledges his daughter’s fears, he chooses not to act on Elizabeth’s advice.

Moreover, as in the case with Mr Collins, Elizabeth’s prophecy of Lydia’s misfortune is fulfilled as Lydia runs away with Mr Wickham, bringing disgrace over the Bennet name. Elizabeth has thus further strengthened her position as the narrative power of Pride and Prejudice; even if her preaching falls on deaf ears, her narrative provides us as readers with the clarity of Elizabeth’s moral compass. There is, however, an example where Elizabeth’s preaching is not only received, it is respectfully and seriously considered. When declining Mr Darcy’s first proposal, Elizabeth explains all the reasons of her refusal, admonishing Darcy for his behaviour: “it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner” (Austen 150). Initially, Darcy’s only response is to give up his pursuit and leave. Later, we find out that not only did he listen, he took Elizabeth’s words to heart:

“I cannot be so easily reconciled to myself. The recollection of what I then said – of my conduct, my manners, my expressions during the whole of it – is now, and has been for many months, inexpressibly painful to me. Your reproof, so well applied, I shall never forget; ‘Had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner.’ Those were your words. You know not, you can scarcely perceive, how they have tortured me; – though it was some time, I confess, before I was reasonable enough to allow their justice.” (Austen 283)

In this scene I find evidence for several of my arguments. Firstly, Elizabeth’s narrative authority is strengthened as her preaching of morals is proved to be justified and correct. Secondly, Elizabeth breaks convention as she preaches to a man of high position, who is undoubtedly seen as superior to her in society. Thirdly, by Mr Darcy admitting to
adhere to Elizabeth perceptions, by respecting her opinion and valuing her frankness, I argue once again that Elizabeth’s marriage to Mr Darcy is not simply a reproduction of patriarchal values, but rather a fairly obvious show of the importance of equality. By Darcy showing reverence towards Elizabeth’s moral lessons, I argue that Elizabeth’s narrative gains another level of authority. Elizabeth plots, preaches and does not let herself be reduced to a narrative witness by a male master-narrator. This assertiveness I argue should be considered when discussing Elizabeth and Jane Austen from a feminist perspective, rather than just focusing on the end product of a marriage.

When once again approaching Bridget’s story we must remind ourselves of the change of context, as the moral lessons will be quite different. Analysis will also show that Bridget’s claim to authority is more ambiguous than Elizabeth’s. Frankly, on the most obvious level Bridget is the one receiving sermons rather than assuming the role of preacher. For example, Bridget’s friend Sharon continuously provides Bridget with moral guidance, where Sharon has strong, feminist convictions (Fielding 20). Despite Bridget not always being receptive to Sharon’s advice, claiming that; “there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism” (20), which of course is another point of concern for critics of Bridget Jones, Bridget proves to listen to Sharon’s advice in the end: “Had it not been for Sharon and the fuckwittage … I think I would have sunk powerless into his arms.”(33). However, Bridget also interprets and moralizes events concerning her friends. For example, in a conversation with married friend Magda, Bridget realizes that the married side of life may be as miserable as her own:

I watched her toying with her champagne glass despondently and wondered what the answer is for we girls. Talk about grass is always bloody greener. The number of times I’ve slumped, depressed, thinking how useless I am and that I spend every Saturday night getting blind drunk moaning to Jude and Shazzzer or Tom about not having a boyfriend; I struggle to make ends meet and am ridiculed as an unmarried freak, whereas Magda lives in a big house with eight different kinds of pasta in jars, and gets to go shopping all day. And yet here she is so beaten, miserable and unconfident and telling me I’m lucky… (Fielding 132)

In this passage, Bridget is preaching, as she is interpreting an event in her life and by doing so directing us readers towards what we are meant to derive from this instance. Bridget is highlighting the conflict of being single contra married, what it really means to be successful as a woman and how no matter what choices they make, it seems like women cannot win. I argue that this is an important moment for Bridget’s narrative, as it also contradicts feminist critics that claim that Bridget is too concerned with the
shallow things in life. Here she reflects over the difficulty in achieving happiness, and that marrying rich and having a successful domestic life might not be the solution to her own unhappiness as single.

Sharon is not the only one who is a moralizing force in Bridget’s life, and while Sharon’s sermons are empowering, other are constricting and backwards. Daniel Cleaver often assumes the role of master-narrator as he preaches over Bridget’s behaviour and short-comings. For example, Daniel mocks Bridget’s domestic incompetence, here in a scene where he meets Bridget’s mother: “If Bridget had a child she’d lose it,” he guffawed, ‘Pleased to meet you, Mrs Jones. Bridget, why can’t you get all done up on Saturdays like your mum?” (Fielding 136). In one swoop, Daniel does not only impose a moral on Bridget, thinking it unfortunate that she does not get “all done up”, but also enlightening how poor he perceives Bridget’s domestic competence is. Both of these moralizing statements are enforcing patriarchal expectations of women, in the manner of expecting feminine perfection as Joanne Knowles discusses. In Chick lit, she argues, a common feature is the struggle of domestic expectation as well as the male characters who, despite their own disengagement with household work “expect their spouses to maintain particular standards” (Knowles 101). This is a reproduction of patriarchal standards, a structural issue in society and allows a deeper discussion regarding feminist issues (Knowles 99). This, as Knowles calls it, “bad femininity” (98), is exactly what is highlighted by Daniel Cleaver’s behaviour towards Bridget, as he perceives her imperfections as negative. How does this affect Bridget’s narrative and her authority then? Sure, we are led to read Bridget’s behaviour as short-comings in this passage, but in her narrative at large I argue that we attain a much different reading. Bridget is, as discussed before, prone to take on domestic tasks that are beyond her capability, but is despite this satisfied with herself (Marsh 62). Furthermore, I find that Bridget throughout her narrative provides us with ambivalent feelings towards Daniel Cleaver, showing that he is hardly perfect:

feeling a bewildering smugness and pride over my perfect new boyfriend whom the girls clearly wished to have a go at shagging, and furious with the normally disgusting sexist drunk for ruining our feminist ranting by freakishly pretending to be the perfect man. Huh. We’ll see how long that lasts, won’t we? (Fielding 128)

In this passage, Bridget reveals her scepticism of Daniel’s behaviour, and later in the story we find Bridget actively preaching and moralizing over Daniel’s sexist comments: “Daniel!” I exploded. ‘That is the most appalling sexist, fattist, cynical thing I’ve ever
heard’’ (Fielding 159). Therefore, I argue that Bridget is not a passive witness in terms of preaching, as her narrative reveals an apprehensiveness of Daniel’s perceived perfection as well as calling him out on being sexist. However, Bridget’s preaching in this particular scene is quickly deflected by Daniel, as he perceives himself as more informed in the situation and believes he can narrate Bridget’s own thoughts: ‘‘Oh don’t be like that Bridge,’ he said. ‘It’s the logical extension of what you really think’’ (159). Over the novel as a whole Bridget struggles with the expectations not only Daniel, but also society in large, have of women. She admonishes herself for gaining and losing weight, for being a failure in many aspects of her life, therefore it is not strange that Bridget’s narrative at times seems powerless and that she is rather witnessing her life than actively shaping it, as Case argues (178-80). However, Bridget also actively preaches moral, leaving us with an ambiguous impression of Bridget’s narrative authority in relation to preaching.

There are instances where Bridget take definitive initiative in preaching and asserting narrative authority. In likeness with her predecessor Elizabeth, Bridget is not afraid to give her Darcy a sermon. Earlier in this essay I accounted for why Bridget did not perceive Mark Darcy as a potential boyfriend; he was too boring, too geeky, too snooty. Further into the story, Bridget tires of Mark’s behaviour and inability to converse with her:

‘‘Mark,’’ I said. ‘‘If you ask me once more if I’ve read any good books lately I’m going to eat my head. Why don’t you ask me something else? Ring the chances a bit. Ask me if I’ve got any hobbies, or a view on the single European currency or if I’ve had any particularly disturbing experience with rubber’’ (Fielding 235)

Here, I argue that Bridget asserts herself towards Mark, explicitly telling him that he should try to get to know her, and implicitly telling us readers that Bridget perceives herself worth of genuine interest. She does not care for polite small talk, she is a person capable of depth and deserves to be treated as such. To Bridget’s astonishment, Mark responds to her sermon by asking her to dinner. Bridget provides another interpretation of the event, correctly guessing Mark’s mother has been involved in this: ‘‘I don’t want to be asked out to dinner just because your mum wants you to.’’ (Fielding 236). Here, Bridget is moralizing and preaching accordingly to what we have perceived thus far of Bridget’s view of relationships: she wants to date someone she feels something for, and someone that feels something for her. Once again, Bridget does not simply bend to expectations others have of her, she paves her own way. After hearing this, Mark Darcy
admits to something much more personal; “Then I met you… and I was wearing that ridiculous diamond-patterned jumper… Bridget, all the other girls I know are so lacquered over.” (237). Finally, Bridget accepts the offer of a date, but only after Mark Darcy has admitted that he sees something different in her that he likes.

This is also where Mark Darcy differs from Daniel Cleaver. Whereas Daniel mocks Bridget’s short-comings and points out her “bad femininity” as something negative, Mark Darcy perceives it as something positive. As Knowles points out, Bridget’s non-perfections seems to be what attracts Mark Darcy to Bridget, he neither expects nor wants this female perfection of handling both a career and domesticity flawlessly (98). Mark is thus the opposite of Daniel, but I find that it is not just that Mark appreciates Bridget for who she is, it is that he, in likeness with Elizabeth’s Darcy, considers Bridget important enough to listen to. He does not patronize her in the manner Daniel did, but takes her words to heart. After confusions and unfortunate circumstances, the novel ends with Mark and Bridget making up and Mark admitting that he thought Bridget was the one not liking him: “And the first time I met you I was wearing that stupid jumper… and behaved like a complete clod. I thought you thought I was the most frightful stiff.” (Fielding 306). This echoes the scene mentioned in the previous paragraph, where Bridget preached over Mark’s lacking conversational skills. Therefore, I come to the same conclusion with the ending of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* as I did with *Pride and Prejudice*; Bridget’s narrative does not leave us reader with something as simple as a happiness depending on a relationship, but rather something more. By adding up the pieces I find that Bridget is not a witness to her story, that she does assert her narrative authority on several occasions. To claim that Bridget is a shallow, antifeminist witness is a far too simple reading of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, as I find the ambiguous aspects of her narrative to provide opportunity for a much deeper reading.

After conducting a comparative reading of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, I find that both are works of literature on which serious discussion can be based. To discard Chick lit as unsuitable for literary studies would be, in my opinion, a missed opportunity to widen perspective on issues concerning women throughout time. Chick lit has been critiqued both for its ambivalent relationship with feminism and questioned on its literary value (Wilson 83). My analysis shows that while not unquestionable, Bridget does possess qualities as a narrator which work with feminism, not against it, by breaking gendered conventions. Furthermore, the comparative
analysis of a Chick lit novel contra a more esteemed classic, I believe shows Chick lit’s possibilities in literary discussions. Chick lit is multifaceted, thus good for raising awareness among students on questions such as feminism (Wilson 97). Analysis also shows that issues relevant in the 1800s are still, albeit transformed, relevant for women in the 20th century. This allows us to widen the scope of discussions concerning women in literature across time.

In conclusion, by conducting analysis with feminine narration, utilizing the concepts of plotting, preaching and witnessing, I have concluded the both heroines in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* respectively claim narrative authority and thus control the meaning we derive from their respective narratives. Traditionally, narrative authority has been a male enterprise thus Elizabeth and Bridget break gendered convention through their narratives, claiming agency in positions traditionally male. I argue that it is not necessarily the end product of their respective relationships that is of most importance, but rather the narrative that leads us there. Elizabeth and Bridget evade marital plots and master narrators, plotting themselves to a satisfactory ending. However, Bridget’s narrative proves to be more ambiguous in terms of feminism, which can ascribed to Chick lit’s position as postfeminist fiction, with more parameters for women to orient themselves within. To compare the novels as similar in terms of narratological features, I situated the analysis within feminist narratology, which focuses on the “how” rather than “what” feminism is. To develop the analysis, it could have been useful to account for the history of feminism, but it is beyond the scope of this essay. The comparative analysis I find add to the discussion of Chick lit’s place in literary studies, where I agree with scholars who claim that Chick lit’s multifaceted perspectives provide opportunity for an extended discussion of women’s issues. In short, I argue that Elizabeth and Bridget should not be discarded as heroines who provide us with anti-feminist narratives. Rather, they (and Jane Austen and Helen Fielding) should be credited for the authority they take and the gendered convention they break.
Works Cited


