

# Which family? : The gender of genre

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# Which Family? The Gender of Genre

Anna Hirsbrunner

Genres are like families.

Genre is a concept that is indispensable to literary critics, yet it is more often exemplified (“tragedy is a genre”) than defined. The trouble with examples is that not all are equally incontestable. Not everybody would agree that, as Alastair Fowler suggests (see below), all texts having pride-in-reputation as their subject form a genre. The area covered by the examples, which would have to be the area covered by the term “genre,” frays at the edges. Another current way of explaining genre is by analogy: Genre is like something else. Very often very little is gained by such a comparison in terms of a positive description of the concept of genre, because analogies, too, fray at the edges. The genre theorist is then obliged to tidy up and trim those fraying edges by means of complicated disclaimers: Genre is like – but not like – a family.<sup>1</sup> This can lead to an infinite regress, where “what genre really means,” the central area of the term, increasingly disappears under a patchwork of corrective analogies and examples. Some genre theorists have therefore introduced the notion of prototypes, examples that represent the central area of a genre better than others (Ryan, Fishelov). Yet this still implies that there is a centre to be found, a truth to be established. It seems to me that this is a doomed enterprise. Instead of looking for the truth of genre I would like to explore the fraying edges of the comparison of genres to families as an example of the way ideology is woven into genre theory.<sup>2</sup>

So: Genres are like families.

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this thought to Anne Freadman; see Freadman, “Anyone for Tennis?;” “Untitled: (On Genre);” “Genre Again: Another Shot;” Freadman and Macdonald, *What Is This Thing Called “Genre”?*; see also Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre*, which can be interpreted as a book-length attempt to trim back the unruly edges of various analogies for genre.

<sup>2</sup> In this I follow Anne Freadman who has argued for a practice of genre theory that concentrates on the politics of the different genre theories, rather than a genre theory that desperately tries to reconcile those theories on a higher level; see, for example, Freadman, “Untitled: (On Genre).”

The analogy is usually traced back to Wittgenstein's comparison of games and families in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.

67. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances;" for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: "games" form a family. (32<sup>e</sup>)

This is the *philosophical* use of the term. The most recent use of the family analogy in *genre theory* that I have found is by David Fishelov and dates from 1991. He bases himself on Wittgenstein, yet his families are of a completely different kind. Where Wittgenstein speaks of "build," "features," "colour of eyes," Fishelov works with "stability," "ancestor," "founding father," "heritage," "line of descent," "pedigree," "genealogy," "family tree." His family is dynastic.

Although Fishelov refers to Wittgenstein, indeed claims to liberate Wittgenstein's text from the distortions of previous interpretations, he immediately rejects resemblance as the element that stabilizes families in favour of common ancestry: "This trait, unlike the visible physiognomic features which create only an elusive network of similarities, is shared by all members of the family" (Fishelov, "Genre Theory and Family Resemblance – Revisited" 134).<sup>3</sup>

In each genre, prototypical authors like Virgil or Homer serve as ancestors or "founding father[s]" (34), and the "elusive network of similarities" among the texts of one genre is replaced by the certainty of a "generic 'line of descent'" or "genealogy" (135). Genealogy is

the series of writers who have participated in shaping, reshaping and transmitting the textual heritage established by the "founding father" of the genre, including the dialectical relationship of "parents" and "children" in genre history. (135)

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<sup>3</sup> This article was integrated without changes in Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre*, but all references are to the article, unless indicated.

Note that genre genealogy is a matter of texts *and* writers here; genre is passed from writer to writer and from text to text, so both writers and texts form genre families. Fishelov's understanding of genre is predicated on the assumption that the author is not dead. Note also that for Fishelov genre is a property, something solid that can be passed from hand to hand. Yet it could be argued that ancestry is a relation. Anne Freadman writes about genre: "It is more useful to think of genre as consisting of two texts in a dialogic relation" ("Anyone for Tennis?" 97). This relation must first be established, as Fishelov himself acknowledges: "The determination of whether an individual is or is not part of a given family is a function of pedigree and of legal and cultural norms" (135).

*Pedigree* is the taming of nature by culture: "notable *ancestry* that is documented in detail and that usually includes many outstanding forebears" (Hayakawa 156). Without ever mentioning it, Fishelov here introduces the notion of class. In dynastic terms, most people are mongrels, of dubious and mixed ancestry. Pedigree, the working of nature documented and legitimized in the culture of writing, ensures and celebrates affiliation with a powerful class and a teleological history. Literature, too, has classes. Fishelov does mention some research on media genres, but the texts he concentrates on form a kind of Debrett's: the Western literary canon from classical antiquity.<sup>4</sup> The dynastic heirs are joined not only by heritage as property, but heritage as blood, coursing invisibly through writers' veins: "Every writer in this line carries on the *textual heritage* of the genre, or participates in its 'genetic pool' (if one is using a biological metaphor)" (135).

To carry on the textual heritage means to carry the family name (pastoral, tragedy, etc.). But the right inheritance (of traits, of genes) is only one precondition for inheriting and especially passing on the family name. In Northern Europe, as a rule, a person receives the family name from the father and only passes it on if he is male. Women thus pose the threat of the dispersal of property and the disappearance of the name (the threat of postmodernism, so to speak).

Now one might say, trimming the edges: texts are not persons; they are neither male nor female, they are texts. Genres are like, but in important

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<sup>4</sup> It could be argued that in this canon class implies race. To acknowledge non-Western literature as more than a mere "influence" on Western literature – for example to acknowledge Arabic literature as an independent family and not just a storehouse for motifs for the orientalising texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – would mean giving up the idea of a single ancestor as the One at the apex of the genre/family tree and coming to terms with the idea of miscegenation.

respects they are not, dynasties. The analogy produces a surplus, a frill, if you like, which one should dismiss as irrelevant to genre. Yet, as I have mentioned, in Fishelov's paper texts and persons are confused in a way that makes that frill interesting. Author, text and genre converge so that genres appear as all-male families:

The intertextual relationships among diverse writers can be traced back to the "founding father" of pastoral – Theocritus. Virgil, Theocritus' "heir," represents the first significant bifurcation of the genre into the idyllic and the more "realistic" version of pastoral which then evolved and branched out further. [. . .] Every writer in this line [. . .] participates in its "genetic pool." (134-5)

By metonymy Theocritus, the founding father of pastoral, becomes, *is* his (pastoral) texts *and* the genre of pastoral. And the genres Fishelov mentions seem to have been advanced only by male authors; only the family of the novel has some lone female members. When Fishelov speaks of "two 'parental' figures," he does not mean mother and father, but "Theocritus and Virgil in pastoral, Homer and Virgil in epic poetry, Aristophanes and Plautus in comedy," and so on (135). In human procreation, *pater incertus, mater certissima*. In literature it is the other way round: The author is male and male-born. Literature has no mothers.

Fishelov is of course a late descendant of the family of all-male criticism that produced such astonishing progeny as Harold Bloom with his *Anxiety of Influence*. To them literature was unproblematically male. If women ever were in the line of descent, both they and their texts were considered as sports of nature, mutations with no possibility of engendering new generations. F. R. Leavis thought that Charlotte Brontë was "not in the great line of English fiction" and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* was "a kind of sport" which only had an "influence of an essentially undetectable kind" (39).<sup>5</sup> Today we have no trouble detecting that influence in popular romance, a genre outside Leavis' field of vision (class consciousness again). Until the 1960s it was understood that the dynastic heritage would revert to a man, that the rare female heirs would remain without issue. The Muse, that helpful female of a classical poetics, was only a servant, outside the family and silent, as Anne Freadman has shown in "Poeta (1st decl., n., fem.)."

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<sup>5</sup> To be fair to Leavis, he thought Jane Austen "the inaugurator of the great tradition of the English novel" (16).

Writers were male, readers were male, texts were male. Thus in retrospect literary history appears as an instance of male bonding.

Why does (or why did) it matter? Fishelov views himself as a genealogist who merely records and researches what is there in the archives, making “explicit the implicit knowledge of the community of users of genres;” he sees his role as “explicatory” (133). The genealogist finds what is already there and lays it open. But Fishelov keeps forgetting that family membership is not a matter of heritage, but a matter of law. Description easily becomes prescription; at schools, at university, knowledge was inevitably passed as law, a law of nature which stipulated (and, to judge by Fishelov’s article, still stipulates) that the line of descent be male and the genre aristocratic.

The feminist criticism of the 1970s challenged the quasi-nature of the male canon. The history of this denaturalisation, this reclamation of women’s literary history is well-known. Women laid claim to a share in the literary property that men had so far kept to themselves. One by one they disproved the justifications for the claim that women can’t write, so wittily displayed in Joanna Russ’ *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*: that historically, empirically, there were no women writers, or if there were, that they were exceptions or minor writers. They unearthed numerous texts by women writers back to antiquity and showed that women writers were no sports of nature, but excluded by a gendered law. This work of rediscovery – critical reappraisal of forgotten authors, reprinting of out-of-print texts, the fight for women writers on the syllabus, for the establishment of courses on women writers – was first an attempt at supplementation and correction, an attempt to be accepted in the existing male family, to remove a gender bias without changing the structure on which this bias operated. It left the general outlines of the family tree intact. But soon what had been a matter of filling in between “the Austen peaks, the Brontë cliffs, the Eliot range, and the Woolf hills” (Showalter vii) – because it was a filling in between *women* writers – called the degendering of the family structure, which had only just started, into question. In the second chapter of *The Madwoman in the Attic* Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar adapted Bloom’s theories of authorship to propose a female tradition, a female family. Around the same time Ellen Moers wrote that “the idea of there being [a straight history of women’s literature] now intrigues rather than offends me” (xi). This epitomizes the transition from filling in the gaps on a pre-existing family tree to revealing it as a gendered structure and reconstructing it as such:

Once I thought that segregating major writers from the general course of literary history simply because of their sex was insulting, but several things



have changed my mind. [We] already practice a segregation of major women writers unknowingly, therefore insidiously, because many of them have written novels, a genre with which literary historians and anthologists are still ill at ease. (Moers xi)

The canon had to be re-examined. What Joanna Russ calls “false categorising,” the method by means of which women’s works could always be made to fall into genres that were minor or popular (i.e. not Art), was revealed as an ideological operation designed to keep women from claiming a share in the heritage. It became clear that on the family tree some (branches and individuals) were more equal than others, and that the resemblance between them was not quality, but gender.

Now the family was split up – again – along gender lines. The novel as the feminine genre became the paradigm genre of feminist criticism and crowded out the earlier master genre, the poem. Genres which used to be thought of as minor like gothic or romance, genres dominated by women writers, attracted the attention of feminist critics and publishers alike. Women’s publishing houses were founded to promote past and present women authors outside the male dynastic system. The result is “a literature of [our] own” (Showalter), a family of our own that has little to do with other families.

Thus, in challenging the traditional notion of the literary family, feminists have retained or rather reproduced the structure on which it relied. They have set a second tree next to the traditional male tree. For many feminists, literary history has become a history of mothers and daughters. It is pictured as a history of love and nurturing, although in recent years we have learnt to acknowledge that the relationship between mother and daughter is not necessarily characterised by unconditional and reciprocal love. We remain wedded to a Foucauldian counter-discourse that challenges the hegemony of the ruling ideology, but is not the abolition of that ideology because it is pre-structured by it in important respects. Just as the patriarchal family analogy for genre entailed a continuity of writers, texts and readers, of the living and the dead, the matriarchal family analogy entails a continuity between texts, writers, and readers. Whether writer or reader, we are part of one family, we share the narcissism of female bonding. Pandora Press’s “Mothers of the Novel” are also our mothers, and thus we are all sisters. As in the old-style genre theory, genres and texts are still gendered according to their authors and readers. Theories of *écriture féminine* are only the most extreme manifestation of that identification. The difference is, there are now two genders. Opposite the founding father we have the founding

mother. But they don't form a couple. Patrilineal and matrilineal families run parallel without disturbing each other. It is certainly an advance that non-aristocratic genres are now taken into account; romance, diaries, letters, gothic, autobiography, advertising now have their own family trees. The mongrels have come into their own. But genres are still organised dynastically: one line and one gender.

To say that this is no longer satisfactory and that maybe it is time to look for other interpretations of the family and genre means to move from description to prescription. (Of course, to talk of gender already hints at a certain bias, a certain prescriptive stake in description.) Should one advocate the liberal paradigm? Alastair Fowler, in his *Kinds of Literature*, also takes Wittgenstein's family resemblance as his starting point:

Literary genre seems just the sort of concept with blurred edges that is suited to such an approach. Representatives of a genre may then be regarded as making up a family whose septs and individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having any single feature shared in common by all. [The concept] promises to apply not only to close-knit connections within subgenres (Jacobean revenge tragedy) but also to far-flung resemblances between widely divergent works (pride in reputation in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Death of a Salesman*; humiliations in *Oedipus* and *Lear*). (41)

But where Fishelov reduces family to legalised biology, expelling resemblance as superficial, Fowler subsumes biology and law to resemblance. All texts are equal before the law. They have the right of association, or rather, the critic has the right to group texts as he likes. Genre criticism shades into comparative criticism. To say that the "septs and individual members [of a family] are related in various ways, without necessarily having any single feature shared in common by all," amounts to emptying the concept into pure metaphor. Although family is mentioned, as a metaphor it undergoes the process the material family has undergone in the last fifty years: In the past, families were as close-knit as Jacobean revenge tragedy; now their members just happen to resemble each other a bit. At the same time, family becomes bourgeois: There are not necessarily any eminent ancestors or fixed family names, only changing coalitions. Well, and gender – gender as difference has no place in such a rational framework. If the individual is good, gender will not hinder its progress.

In a similar way, Marie-Laure Ryan assimilates family to a club with a graduated admission policy (here, as so often, analogy breeds analogy):



This approach [to genre as family] invites us to think of genres as clubs imposing a certain number of conditions for membership, but tolerating as quasi-members those individuals who can fulfill only some of the requirements, and who do not seem to fit into any other club. As these quasi-members become more numerous, the conditions for admission may be modified, so that they, too, will become full members. Once admitted to the club, however, a member remains a member, even if he [sic] cannot satisfy the new rules of admission. (118)

There are of course clubs that do not admit women (or poor people), but there is always the freak club where those who do not fit in anywhere else will be accepted, as second-class citizens, with the option of becoming first-class ones in the long run. This is a far cry from what I understand by family, but it illuminates the problem that liberal criticism has with family and gender: an ideology predicated on the freedom of individual choice must be uneasy with a phenomenon that puts this possibility in doubt. So it erases the irritant of gender and replaces the family with a metaphor more to its liking, the club. And it could be argued that since the author is dead, his/her gender does not matter, let alone infect her/his texts.

Of course, Jacques Derrida has shown (and I show my prescriptive hand by repeating it here, towards the end of my argument) that the death of the author need not entail the disappearance of gender. In "The Law of Genre" he formulates his "law of the law of genre" as follows:

It is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy. In the code of set theories, if I may use it at least figuratively, I would speak of a sort of participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set. (206)

Participation without belonging is the idea of the club taken to its limits: one is never completely "in" a club and can participate in the activities of several clubs at the same time. This is also true of families: the further back I go in time, the more families I have in which I can participate. Thus, a text can participate in several genres. But in French, *genre* also means gender. If a text participates in several genres, it also participates in several genders:

The genres [*genres*] pass into each other. And we will not be barred from thinking that this mixing of genres, viewed in light of the madness of sexual difference, may bear some relation to the mixing of literary genres. (Derrida 223)

Yet this mixing does not mean that the genders disappear; on the contrary, they become pervasive. They do not identify text or person, yet they are there to be identified with, or rather, to function as possibilities of participation. Rethinking family from this point of view would imply an acceptance of hybridity, of the fact that, although we may all go back to Adam and Eve, we (female/male) have more fathers and mothers than that.

But in the end, whether I agree with a particular understanding of family or not is not the point. The different interpretations of the analogy are very useful to show up certain peculiarities not of *family* ideology, but of the ideology of *genre* that is advocated. For what is at issue are ideologies of genre, which are only made acceptable by the use of the family. This is the case even in Wittgenstein's text. There family appears as physical resemblance. I have brown eyes, my brother has blue eyes, but we both have the same nose, the same straight hair, and so on. But it is not noses, hair, temperament, that make us members of the same family. We were related before my brother was born, before the shape of his nose and the colour of his eyes could be ascertained. Also, if it were just a matter of noses and eyes and hair, I could be related to quite a number of people outside my family. It is not those features that make us family, we are family *before* someone remarks that we look very much alike.

Family is not an answer, but the reason why no answer can be given. The problem Wittgenstein had set himself in the *Philosophical Investigations* was to define language. He came up against the impossibility of giving "the general form of propositions and of language" (31e), of formalising language. Yet in a sense his efforts were not in vain. Family does account for something, namely the *differences* between family members (or between texts) *after* they have been grouped and named.

But in another sense, family is also a manner of saying "that's the way it is." Wittgenstein uses family as he uses his examples of the builder and his assistant or of the coloured squares: as the obvious. There is no need to define family. "Well, of course: like a family." We all know what that is. Obviousness, as Althusser says, is "the elementary ideological effect" (172). That which goes without saying works best as ideology. The obviousness is revealed as ideology when it needs saying or defending, when fraying edges are trimmed this way or that. Althusser defines ideology as "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162). I have here understood ideology as a terminological regime comprising two or more terms including analogies, the imaginariness of which can only emerge when it is exposed to a comparison with another

regime around the same terms. Ideology emerges in collisions over such terms. Of course, ideology is also and primarily a set of practices, as one of Wittgenstein's examples illustrates:

Someone says to me: "Shew [sic] the children a game." I teach them gaming with dice, and the other says "I didn't mean that sort of game." (33e)

The other does not object to a merely verbal misunderstanding, but to an ideological practice which is different from his own. The stakes in genre theories are not just words, but, for example, university posts and publication opportunities.

The title of my paper – "Which family?" – promises a consumer survey of the family analogies in genre theory and a recommendation of the best option. One could say that I have offered to provide prescription as well as description. And to a certain extent I have done so. But my main aim has been to make different ideologies of genre collide over the term of the family in order to bare their fraying edges. There are other analogies I could have chosen: games, biological species, social institutions, contracts, etc.<sup>6</sup> But nowhere does the genderedness of genre theories emerge as clearly as in the family.

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<sup>6</sup> Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre*, Dubrow, and Fowler provide lists of such analogies. The game analogy is Anne Freadman's; see in particular Freadman and Macdonald, *What Is This Thing Called "Genre"?*, where gender also figures prominently.

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