In 1797, German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte wrote the following on the position of women in the public sphere in his *Foundations of Natural Right*:

The husband is the administrator of all her rights; she wills her rights to be asserted and exercised only in so far as he wills them to be. He is her natural representative in the state and in society as a whole. This is her relationship to society, her *public* relationship. She cannot think about exercising her rights directly on her own (Fichte 2000, 299).

In this statement, Fichte denies women any political rights of their own, which is exemplary of the gender ideology that emerged in the course of the eighteenth century and that conditioned the domestication of women. Together with other European philosophers of the period, such as Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel, Fichte ‘succeeded in writing women out of the state’, as feminist historian Karen Offen summarises (Offen 2000, 72). The irony of the situation, however, is that while these authors were developing their theories about the apolitical ‘nature’ of women, one of the most powerful persons in Europe was a woman: Catherine the Great, who ruled over the large Russian empire from 1762 until
her death in 1796 (Timm and Sanborn 2007, 17). Yet this example of female sovereignty would not be repeated. As I will be arguing, female political power was erased with the Ancien Régime and, in contrast to men, women were offered no alternative in the form of civil political participation.

The present article investigates how literature by German women writers of the early nineteenth century relates to this historical transition. When it comes to the question of female political power, can these texts be more than an aesthetic representation and mediation of their surrounding contexts and actively participate in them? In other words, did female authors try to ‘write women back into the state’? Secondly, this article will search for a fruitful methodological and theoretical framework to chart the political potential of women’s writing. As such, it will try to contribute to the ongoing debate in literary and cultural studies about the relationship of aesthetic works to their (many) context(s).

‘In a republic, men are needed’: female sovereignty after 1789

The story of Catherine the Great is, of course, more than exceptional, yet it illuminates a significant change in the political and gender norms of the late-eighteenth century. Although the entire history of sovereignty in Europe reveals a consistent ambivalence towards the idea of female participation in matters of hegemony, during the Ancien Régime, dynastic concerns in the continuation of power could supersede ‘even the most entrenched attitudes and prejudices’ (Earenfight 2007, 2). Examples did not only occur in the Middle Ages or in early modernity: apart from Catharine II, the eighteenth century knew other successful female regents and rulers (Hunt 2010, 325–30; Orr 2004, 2).

Yet the French Revolution, and with it the end of the Ancien Régime, marked a turning point in the history of female sovereignty. As is well known, the French Revolution aimed to replace the old monarchical order by a political system that found its origin and legitimation in the idea of a social contract between equal, free, and rational human beings. Women, however, were excluded from this contractual universe. Joan Landes (1988), Carole Pateman (1988), and Lynn Hunt (1992), among others, have convincingly pointed out the blind spots in the seemingly universal and humanist republican ideology. Although the fundamental ideals of the French Revolution might have given rise to more political
rights for women, in the end, they resulted in a profound gendering of the public sphere and a castigation of female public action. Discourses on gender thus played a major role in the formation of a new political system. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, repeatedly warns for the corrupting female influence in society and argues that a healthy republic demands the domestication of women (Landes 1988, 66–89). He insists that ‘in a republic, men are needed’ (quoted in Landes 87). Joan Landes concludes: ‘The Republic was constructed against women, not just without them’ (171).

These phenomena did not remain confined to France. Even in regimes where monarchical sovereignty was not radically abolished, new ideas on patriotism, nationalism, and citizenship emerged during the nineteenth century that had significant consequences for the public roles of men and women. As the quote from Fichte’s work demonstrates, even the slightest association of women and political action was erased or anxiously debated (Abrams 2002, 213–41; Timm and Sanborn 2007, 36–54). The idea of female participation in national and democratic sovereignty ultimately became ‘inconceivable’ and ‘unthinkable’ in political discourse (Frevert 1995, 88 and 93).

Writing women back into the state? Early nineteenth-century women’s literature and ‘dissensus’

The seemingly ‘natural’ logic that decides throughout the nineteenth century who belongs to the political community and whose speech is considered meaningful could be categorised as what Jacques Rancière famously described as the order of the ‘police’ (Rancière 2010, 139). Police operations structure what is visible and invisible, audible and inaudible, they distribute competencies and pin ‘bodies’ down to certain times and spaces and to ‘specific ways of being, seeing and saying’ (139). The increasing political exclusion of women throughout the nineteenth century is a good example of this policed organisation of people, places, and capacities. Yet Rancière emphasises that it is possible to break with the seemingly ‘natural’ order of the police and deprive the prevailing ‘distribution of the sensible’ of its self-evidence, an intervention which he designates as ‘dissensus’ (139). According to Rancière, politics and art are intrinsically connected because both can define a form of dissensus. Consequently, he defines the ‘politics’ of literature as follows: ‘Literature as literature is involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and
saying that frames a polemical common world’ (Rancière 2004, 10). In his attempts to trace the political ‘efficacy’ of art, Rancière does not assume a dichotomy between the ‘real world’ and the realm of fiction or representation. Instead of a ‘real world’ situated at ‘the outside of art’, there is only a certain partition of the sensible that is constantly challenged by artistic and political practices (Rancière 2010, 148). Works of art thus belong to ‘a specific sensorium that stands out as an exception from the normal regime of the sensible’ (Rancière 2002, 135).

Following Rancière’s emphasis on the intervening potential of art, the central question of this article will be whether the regulation of female political activity is ‘dissented’ in literature written by German women after 1789. One of the reasons why this article zooms in on the German context is because nineteenth-century German feminism was a decidedly unpolitical movement. The idea of women as political subjects was thus absent not only from political discourse, but also from feminist discourse. Until the very end of the century, the German women’s rights movement only concentrated on women’s possibilities to participate in social and economic life, often rejecting the rare voices who stood up for women’s political rights (Evans 1977, 103–4; Frevert 1995, 97–100; Greven-Aschoff 1981, 82–106; Nave-Herz 1997, 11–16). This feminist disinterest and unawareness makes it all the more interesting to trace whether women writers reflected in their fiction upon the socio-political, institutional, and ideological changes described above – in short, whether they attempted to ‘write women back into the state’.

Early nineteenth-century women’s writing, however, hardly gives evidence of such a dissensual potential. In the first place, the theme of political sovereignty is absent from almost the entire literary production by women in this period. Instead, many works focus on domestic themes, often dealing with a woman’s struggle to attain personal sovereignty. One of the few texts written by a female author that is concerned with matters of state and woman’s participation in it, is the novel Der Günstling (1809) by Caroline Auguste Fischer (1764–1842). The novel deals with the Russian Empress Catherine II, who is not named explicitly: the monarch in question is called Iwanova. Temporal and spatial settings remain oddly vague, the reader only learns that the story is located in a large, northern country governed by a female monarch who is referred to with the name ‘the Great’ (Fischer 1809, 7 and 11). Yet considering the widespread fame of the Russian Empress in Germany around the time of publication, it may be safe to conclude that nineteenth-century readership associated these descriptions with none but Catherine the
Great. *Der Günstling* was published only thirteen years after her reign ended in 1796, which makes the novel one of the few works in early nineteenth-century German literature that stages a recent female sovereign. Whereas a number of texts on mythological, ancient, and medieval queens were published in this period, novels and dramas staging female rulers whose mark on European politics was still felt, were comparatively rare. By representing a recent manifestation of female political leadership, the novel thus establishes an association between bodies and capacities that were disentangled in the dominant distribution of the sensible. It attempts to make ‘visible’ and ‘sayable’ what was barely thinkable in nineteenth-century political discourses, both conservative and progressive (Rancière 2004, 10). The novel thus performs a fundamentally political act, as Rancière, by making reference to Plato, states that politics essentially begins when ‘the invisible’ is made ‘visible’ (Rancière 2010, 139).

Caroline Auguste Fischer is an author who has hardly found any attention outside the circles of feminist research, and even within this field, scholarship remains fairly limited in comparison to other women writers of the period. Between 1801 and 1820, Fischer published four novels and several collections of short stories and fairy tales. Although her oeuvre is thematically diverse, all stories reveal the destructive consequences for both men and women of living in societies divided by gender, class, and race. Her work is characterised by a formal and an emancipatory awareness that is ‘unmatched in the work of any other German writer of this period’, as one critic would have it (Purver 2000, 292). Yet this progressiveness seems absent in *Der Günstling*, as the plot of the novel and the characterisation of the female protagonists seem to reproduce contemporary discourses on women’s participation in matters of state. In order to demonstrate how the novel relates to contemporary attitudes and discourses on gender and politics, the reception of Catherine II in Europe during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will first briefly be outlined.

Before the French Revolution, a number of admiring accounts of Catherine the Great appeared, and satirical images usually remained mild. After 1789, however, an abundance of caricatures, pamphlets, and biographies presenting the Russian ruler as a murderous despot or pervert and lascivious woman appeared, which colors her reception until today (Carretta 1994, 23–9; Dawson 2002, 69–77; Hunt 2010, 329–330; Timm and Sanborn 2007, 19–20). A good example is the satirical image *An Imperial Stride!* (*L’enjambée impériale!*), which appeared originally in England in 1791 and in France in 1792.
It shows a colossal female sovereign with her legs widely spread, one foot pointing to Constantinople, the other to Petersburgh. She literally subordinates the male leaders of Europe, who look up and make suggestive comments, such as the Turkish Sultan who exclaims that ‘the whole Turkish Army wouldn’t satisfy her’. The image satirises both Catherine’s sexual behaviour and imperial ambitions and betrays anxieties about women in power by evoking the so-called ‘vagina dentata’ motif. In the French version, Pope Pius VI warns the other male sovereigns: ‘Voici un abîme prêt à vous engloutir’ (Carretta 1994, 50–51).

Other caricatures compare the Russian Empress to monstrous female figures such as witches or Medusa, for instance the print Royal Recreation (1795) by the hand of the famous British satirist Isaac Cruikshank. Here, General Alexander Suvorov, the recent conqueror of Poland, brings his monarch the heads of Polish civilians killed by his troops – a large and sinister collection with which Catherine ‘far outdoes Salome’ (66).

These demonising and sexualising representations of Catherine II are not exceptional but must be understood against the background of an ‘ideological climate in which the overlapping of female sexual and political activity had become a central metaphor for political decay’ (Maza 2013, 86). The association of femininity and dangerous (sexual) power is, of course, part of a longer tradition in European religious and philosophical thought (Timm and Sanborn 2007, 21). Yet from the late eighteenth century onwards, when processes of political modernisation were accompanied by enlightenment discourses on essentialist and dichotomic gender roles, this dogmatic idea was discussed more forcefully and anxiously. A key argument in French revolutionary discourses on the illegitimacy of monarchical rule was the suspicious power of women at French court by means of political intrigues or sexual manipulation. Nothing demonstrates this more sharply, of course, than the fate of Marie-Antoinette, who became the subject of a tireless stream of hateful pornographic images and texts before and during the Revolution (Hunt 1992, 103–14). Her body was imagined in antimonarchical propaganda as the summit of perversion, in other words, antithetical to and dangerous for the ‘healthy’ republican body politic (Vinken 2003, 89–91). The slander on the natural body of queens, as exemplified by the reception of both Marie-Antoinette and Catherine II, can be interpreted as the climax of the perceived incompatibility between women and (modern) political action. In the course of the nineteenth century, warnings against female power remained meaningful in the demands of the emerging middle
classes for more constitutionalised or republican forms of government in Europe.

The plot of Der Günstling seems to reproduce these contemporary scenarios of demonised female power. The title, ‘The Favourite’, already refers to the connection between female sovereignty, sexuality, and the bourgeois criticism of corrupt court politics. Fischer’s epistolary novel consists almost entirely of letters written by Alexander, a statesman at court who writes to his ambitious family at home, though their responses are never shown. Immediately after his arrival at court, queen Iwanova falls passionately in love with him. Yet Alexander, who is already very ambivalent about the fact that a woman is holding sway, reacts with repugnance to her overt amorous advances. Instead, he falls in love with the young girl who is under his guardianship, Maria. As her name suggests, she embodies the contemporary ideal of domestic, virtuous, and innocent femininity. By now, the queen’s passion has become an obsession, and when Alexander and Maria finally marry, she turns into a murderous Medea who poisons their wedding bed and kills both.

The stereotypical figure constellation of the novel, associating women with either political corruption or domestic virtue, thus completely affirms ideologies about the unnaturalness of women in political roles. Yet considering the condemning attitudes towards female power, it is not surprising that women’s texts do not dissent the political exclusion of women on a direct mimetic or thematic level. Both the conventional plot and the avoidance of any direct reference to the Russian Empress attest to the ambivalence or even anxiety women writers experienced when negotiating the question of female sovereignty in their texts. Yet there is a stream of research that argues that the political potential of women’s writing should not (only) be sought on the representational level but (also) on the level of form, style, language, and structure. This is one of the claims of feminist narratology. According to one of the ‘founders’ of the field, Susan Lanser, feminist narratology is particularly fruitful to study historical literature dealing with culturally sensitive or contested themes, in other words, ‘where content may have been closeted by circumstance … and where the story thus can’t tell in any literal let alone vulgar way’ (Lanser 2015, 37). In the remainder of this article, I will subject Fischer’s ostensibly conventional novel to a feminist-narratological reading in order to investigate whether the text contains a dissensual subplot that it cannot tell ‘in any literal way’.

Feminist narratology emerged in the 1980s as both an engagement with and a criticism of structuralist or ‘classical’ narratology. In its
original form, narratology proceeded ahistorically and aimed at distilling laws and typologies characterising all narrative texts (Lanser and Warhol 2015, 4). As Gérard Genette formulated in his seminal *Discours du récit* (*Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Genette 1980), the goal was to identify ‘elements that are universal, or at least transindividual’ (23). Against this universalising paradigm, feminist narratology drew attention to the importance of context, insisting that contextual issues do not only shape the thematic dimension and interpretation of narrative, but its particular narratological, formal, stylistic, and structural properties as well. When feminist narratology was developed by Susan Lanser and Robyn Warhol in the 1980s, this was the first attempt to bridge the gap between ahistorical structuralism on the one hand and political, ideological, and context-sensitive readings of literature on the other. Lanser and Warhol understood their work not only as a corrective to the gender-blindness in narratology, but also to the prevalent mimetic and historicising orientation in most early feminist literary scholarship (Lanser 1986, 344–6; 1989, 3–4). The field gained firm foothold in the 1990s and has by now been widely acknowledged for pioneering the so-called ‘postclassical’ and contextualist turn in narratology.⁸

Feminist narratology thus offers a different contribution from both narratological and mimetic-based historicist approaches to text. Although this distinction might no longer be as absolute as it was in the 1980s, as late as 2010, Susan Lanser observed that ‘the more historicized a narrative project, the less likely it is to be narratological, and … the more narratological a project, the less likely it is to be historical’ (Lanser 2010, 186). Indeed, some present-day narrative scholars are still sceptical about the project of contextual narratology (Nünning 2009, 51), while scholars on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German women’s writing still tend to devote more attention to sociohistorical conditions than to the formal or structural dimensions of women’s texts (Gilleir 2011, 32). Yet as I will demonstrate here, a purely mimetic reading neglecting the ‘transgressions, subversions, and contingencies embedded in form’ is not the most productive approach to uncover the political potential of early women’s writing (Lanser 2015, 25).

The call of feminist narratology to integrate formalist and contextualised readings of literature also resonates with Rancière, who insists in his article ‘The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes’ that only the link between the ‘autonomy’ and ‘heteronomy’ of aesthetic practices guarantees their dissensual faculty (Rancière 2002, 134). As diverse as feminist narratology and Ranciérían theory might appear, they share the same commitment towards the question of the ‘politics of literature’,
in other words, the question of how literature is ‘involved in the actual generation of the ways of thinking and attitudes that stand behind historical development’ (Nünning 2009, 61).

‘The greatest of all women…’: towards a feminist-narratological reading of Der Günstling

What is remarkable, first of all, is the question of narrative situation and perspective. The story in Der Günstling is told only from the point of view of Alexander’s letters, who can thus be classified as an intradiegetic and autodiegetic narrator with internal focalisation. The letters mostly focus on his personal experiences of court life, or they offer direct descriptions of his dialogues with Maria. While her words are, of course, still controlled and shaped by his act of narration, this at least gives a suggestion of her discourse. In contrast, although Catherine II arguably was one of the most powerful persons of her age, her literary alter ego Iwanova hardly receives a voice of her own, which is symptomatic of the real attempts to silence women socially and politically around 1800. In Rancièrian terms, it demonstrates the police distribution of the audible and inaudible, of who counts as ‘subjects sharing in a common world, making statements and not simply noise’ (Rancière 2004, 10). The opening letter is illustrative of the way Iwanova will be represented throughout the rest of the novel:

I have arrived. Whether she lives up to her reputation? O yes! A great mind, a great dignity and yet very mild – milder than I expected – but also a lot of self-confidence. That is no criticism. What would she be, what would her people be, when she did not have it? They call her mother, and rightly so. She is it, however, more in mind than in deed, which is unfortunately only seldom hers (Fischer 1809, 1).

Alexander’s ‘barely hidden criticism, despite his claim to the contrary’ and his attempt to subsume Iwanova under conventional categories of femininity indicate the fundamental theme of the story, namely the ambivalence towards women and power (Harms 2013, 46). The first lines of the opening letter already show that the novel will primarily revolve around the ‘reputation’, i.e. the subjective perception and construction of the sovereign woman. All information we receive about Iwanova are subjective interpretations of Alexander, such as ‘It seems to
me as if she has changed’ (Fischer 1809, 10, my emphasis). His letters are in fact hardly recognisable as such: they consist of a rapid and fragmentary succession of emotional outbursts, fleeting impressions, and sudden thoughts. Through a repeated use of apostrophes, a highly coloured image of the absent Iwanova arises: ‘Unhappy woman! On your lonely throne, you begged for love, but it was not given to you. The immense pain threatened to destroy you, so you fled into the jaws of lust’ (50).

These thematic and formal elements – monologic narration, an emotional and associative language, a male narrator who is pathologically struggling with his place in society, and the performative construction of a largely absent female character – all remind of a work that had become a literary landmark in early nineteenth-century Germany, namely Goethe’s epistolary novel Die Leiden des jungen Werthers (1774). Late eighteenth-century literature in Europe was especially influenced by the epistolary novel as created by Richardson and Rousseau, whose novels display letters of all main protagonists, thus creating a more objective account of the events and situating them in broader familial and societal contexts. By radically isolating the perspective of the hero, Goethe broke with this dominant model and introduced a new subjective tone in Western literary history (Safranski 2013, 159–62). Yet rather than merely imitating Goethe’s seminal work, Fischer uses its formal innovations for her own purposes and varies them. While her other epistolary novels lie in the tradition of Richardson’s and Rousseau’s polyphonic novels, adopting the one-sided, almost narcissistic viewpoint of Die Leiden enabled her to reveal that both the figures of the dangerous female sovereign and the angelic virtuous woman are in fact subjective and masculine constructions.12

Because of its single perspective, the novel seems to offer an unanimously negative account of female rule. In contrast, polyphonic epistolary novels usually create a plurality of divergent opinions, attitudes, and beliefs. Yet the idea that the role of women lies outside the political sphere was hardly disputed around 1809. Hence, it would have been rather difficult to insert a letter that is openly positive about the question of female power – or, in Rancièrian terms, a letter that is directly criticising the police distribution of capacities, functions, and destinies according to gender. Instead, in far more subtle ways, dissenting voices are woven into the seemingly single perspective of the novel.

A first example concerns the voices of Alexander’s relatives, who function as the ‘narratees’ or fictional addressees of his letters. Although their responses are never shown, Alexander repeatedly refers to their answers in his last letters. His writing thus increasingly approaches a
dramatic mode of expression, as Anita Runge points out (Runge 1997, 23). He for instance opens one letter with a seemingly literal repetition of a reproach of his family: ‘Thoughtless? And more ruthless to [Iwanova], than I have ever been? How soft should I be, according to you? – You fear. What do you fear?’ (Fischer 1809, 168, my emphasis). According to Runge, the criticism of his family functions as an ‘irritating accent’ against Alexander’s seemingly homogeneous discourse (Runge 1997, 107). It opens another perspective on Iwanova that is confirmed and strengthened through a surprising narrative intervention at the end of the text. While Goethe’s novel opens with an introduction by a fictional editor, thus making clear from the outset that Werther’s letters are part of an embedded narrative, only at the final page of Der Günstling does a fictional editor enter the story. The higher narrative level of the frame is thus only inserted at the end, which is ‘the rarest and most striking type’ of narrative embedding according to Monika Fludernik (Fludernik 2009, 22). While the editor in Goethe’s story largely endorses Werther’s viewpoint and conduct and aims at enlarging the reader’s identification and sympathy, the editor in Der Günstling agrees with the criticism of Alexander’s family:

These were the last lines of Alexander to his family. They have reproached him with thoughtlessness and ruthlessness, unfortunately, with good reason. He, who was normally always in control of himself, could now no longer suppress the repugnance to his enemy. […] But this harshness drove the unhappy woman to extremes (Fischer 1809, 172).

The fact that Alexander’s narration is for the first time explicitly questioned by another narrating instance has an alienating effect that is increased by the surprise effect of the change in narrative levels. This formal intervention thus causes a turn on the level of story as well: the editor proclaims that Alexander’s treatment of Iwanova has provoked her extreme reaction, which casts doubt on the societal conviction of the inherent danger of female power.

Applying a Rancièrean vocabulary allows us to grasp the dissensual potential of the narrative situation of this novel: the radical subjectivity of Alexander’s perspective and the criticising voices of both the narratees and extradiegetic narrator are in fact challenging ‘the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world’, more in particular, the perception of women as having either an inherently corrupt or unpolitical domestic nature (Rancière 2004, 10). By upsetting
‘any steady relationship between manners of speaking, manners of doing and manners of being’, Fischer’s novel tries to suggest an alternative partition of the sensible (14).

Finally, Alexander’s own discourse on Iwanova provokes a more complex reading as well. As a highly educated, intelligent, and upper-class man, he is the type of narrator who is conventionally associated with reliability and authority (Allrath and Surkamp 2004, 155–7). Yet the authority of his narration is increasingly called into question, and at times it even resembles unreliable narration. It becomes increasingly clear that Alexander is not the self-controlling and rational man he claims to be, as he is often overwhelmed by his violent emotions, torn by constant doubts and inner conflicts, and repeatedly contradicts previous convictions (Fischer 1809, 50 and 169). Throughout the story, he struggles in vain to reconcile his personal desires with the ambitions of his family, his duty towards the country, and his social and political dependency on Iwanova (Harms 2013, 53). His increasing despair is made evident by the emotional language of the letters, which are characterised by exclamations, rhetorical questions and broken sentences. This already troubled perception of the story world is further distorted by his growing antipathy towards Iwanova, which becomes especially manifest when he falls ill. During his feverish delirium, the perception of Iwanova is more coloured than ever, and his aversion to her grows into sheer ‘madness’ (Fischer 1809, 149).

On the other hand, he allows a sneaking respect or admiration for her, for instance when he calls her ‘noble’ (11), ‘mild’ and ‘kind’ (119), praises her self-control and sense of duty (45), and even asserts that she deserves the designation ‘The Great’ (110). Then again he condemns her for being ‘cruel’ (30), ‘fiery’ (39), and ‘consumed by a terrible passion’ (110). One moment he perceives of her as a terrifying, inhuman, Medusa-like figure, the next he is filled with deep compassion because of her – perceived – loneliness and unhappiness. Alexander’s dissonant assertions testify to what extent he seems to struggle with the available codes and with his own categories and models of thought in order to cope with the phenomenon of female rule. Through his discordant speech, a heterogeneous plurality of different, incompatible ‘versions’ of Iwanova arises, which again undermines the self-evidence of police dogmas and ideologies.

The last formal strategy of importance here is plot structure. The story is driven by the two scenarios that have dominated Western literature at least since the late eighteenth century: the marriage plot and the plot of the Bildungsroman. Both plot structures are intimately
connected with the values, norms, and world views advocated by the emerging middle class. Principles such as the idealisation of the bourgeois family or the ideology of the separate spheres also figure prominently in *Der Günstling*. On the other hand, as scholars have rightly noted, Fischer’s protagonists also look critically at some aspects of bourgeois life. Alexander denounces, for instance, the exhausting work regime that is expected from him as a statesman, as it is undermining his mental and physical health (*Harms 2013, 55–6*) and might threaten his relationship with Maria (*Dawson 2002, 84*). In general, however, most values and norms associated with the nineteenth-century middle classes seem to be endorsed on the level of story.

This ideological stance makes the end of the novel all the more striking. As the story proceeds, *Der Günstling* seems to turn more and more into a parody on the *Bildungsroman*: Alexander initially left his family to search for professional and private success, but because he rejects Iwanova, he loses his career and social status, and his wedding ends in violence and death. *Der Günstling* thus engages critically with two prominent literary genres of its time: the epistolary novel and the *Bildungsroman*, of which the prototypical example, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1794/96), was also written by Goethe. Instead of outlining the *Bildung* of its subject, Alexander’s letters register his increasing alienation and collapse. The novel also responds to the genre’s exclusive focus on *Bildung* as a male process, by showing how Maria’s eagerness to receive a scientific and artistic education is disapproved by Alexander, who dismisses her inquisitiveness as something ‘that could distract her attention away from me’ (*Fischer 1809, 56*). Through this manipulation of generic conventions, the novel reveals the incongruities of Enlightenment ideals such as *Bildung* and exposes the regulation in bourgeois gender ideology of ‘the “proper” relationship between what a body “can” do and what it cannot’ (*Rancière 2010, 140*). By placing one woman in the position of a political ruler and the other in the position of a subject striving for *Bildung*, maturation and self-realisation, the novel introduces female bodies into a new configuration of the sensible and participates in a ‘re-distribution in the whole set of relationships between capacities and incapacities’, which is a central example of ‘aesthetic rupture’ (140).

The figure of Maria demonstrates that the only possible course for female characters lies in the marriage plot. Today, feminist narratologists have well established the dominance of this heteronormative scenario in narratives featuring female protagonists.¹⁴ Yet as Judith Roof revealed in her seminal study *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (*Roof 1996*),
not only the novel of marriage is intrinsically heteronormative but virtually any narrative that is oriented towards futurity and closure – as, indeed, most stories usually are. She points out to what extent prevailing understandings about what narratives are, depend on endings (6). She emphasises that narratives are essentially heterocentric even when they do not appear to represent sexuality at all. Roof is in other words not so much interested in literal representations of sexualities, but instead, she traces how narrative’s teleological structure metaphorically reaffirms and reconfigures a reproductive heteroideology (xxviii).

Because of its emphasis on the developing love story between Alexander and Maria, the plot of Fischer’s novel seems to be driven by a teleological development towards the founding of a heteronormative couple and nuclear bourgeois family. Yet the abrupt and violent ending of the novel interferes with this scenario. One could raise objections against this analysis by arguing that Maria’s and Alexander’s death is nothing more than a variation of the marriage plot: after all, the extradiegetic narrator describes their death as their ‘union for all eternity’ (Fischer 1809, 173), and the connection between love and death is a conventional topos in the history of Western literary imagination, as, for instance, Denis de Rougemont has argued (De Rougemont 1983). Moreover, their mutual death once more replays the heteronormative ‘narrative structure of joinder and completion to which we are accustomed as the premise of narrative satisfaction’ (Roof 2015, 49). From this angle, the ending of Fischer’s novel would not so much undermine but rather reproduce the bourgeois and heteronormative marriage plot. However, it can be argued that the ‘eternal union’ of Alexander and Maria follows a radically different logic. The tragic ending of the lovers was anticipated by a letter of Maria, inserted halfway in the novel, in which she describes a prophetic dream about her and Alexander being killed by Iwanova and ascending to heaven:

Would it be possible for two people to only think of one another? To only find happiness in one another? That must be an indescribable and blessed state! … There was a large, glorious angel, who caught us with his wings. … We heard heavenly music … We floated higher and higher, there were a thousand stars around us … it was as if you were me, and I were you, and I knew … everything you thought (Fischer 1809, 122–5).

According to Anita Runge, the letter affirms the image of Maria as ‘child-woman’ (Runge 1997, 60). Yet it presents more than a mere sentimental
and naive fantasy: it is the only moment in the novel when a female voice disrupts the dominant masculine and heteronormative logic. Maria dreams of a removal of all differences and boundaries between lovers in another dimension, characterised by an almost static and eternal temporality. Her vision, refusing closure, futurity, and productivity, is at odds with the logic of the bourgeois family, which hinges upon reproduction, progress, and strict differences between the male and female position. This challenge to normative conceptions of time is what several queer theorists have called ‘queer temporality.’ As Judith Halberstam has argued in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Halberstam 2011), time is not a neutral or objective given, nor is it value free. In dominant conceptions of time and history, temporal development is interpreted as a linear movement that builds on the old and proceeds according to a generational logic. The main social form connected to this temporal model is that of the family, with its emphasis on lineage and tradition (70–75). Queer challenges to time, on the other hand, seek for alternative ways of relating people and operate ‘against the logics of succession, progress, development, and tradition proper to hetero-familial development’ (75).

These arguments allow us to conclude that Fischer’s novel is *queering* the heteronormative, bourgeois plots of both marriage and *Bildung*. To take this argument even one step further, I would suggest that the inherent structure and temporality of epistolary fiction *in se*, where the narrator during the act of writing can have no sense yet of the final outcome of the story, disrupts and *queers* the specific temporal and teleological organisation crucial to both the plots of romance and *Bildung*.15 This leads to the important insight that, although some aspects of bourgeois ideology are criticised on the level of story, these world views undergo a much more profound subversion on the formal level.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this article, I have traced how Caroline Auguste Fischer’s novel *Der Günstling* is shaped by and responds to its historical moment, especially when it comes to the political exclusion of women. Although I have focused on one individual case study, the analysis has shed light on the ‘political’ – in the Rancièrian sense of the term – potential of early nineteenth-century German women’s writing as a whole. Moreover, it has addressed a central debate in literary studies since decades, namely the relationship between a literary text and its (many) context(s).
In the first place, this contribution has shown that even neglected and ostensibly conventional literary texts can actively negotiate their relationship to broader contextual issues, instead of being only a passive echo of prevailing societal discourses. *Der Günstling* seems to reproduce police distributions regarding gender and power on a mimetic level, but a combination of feminist-narratological and Rancièrian analysis has proven to be a fruitful approach to reveal its dissensual faculty. By taking up two dominant literary genres of her time and consistently incorporating innovations on the level of form and structure, Fischer can challenge the self-evident de-politicisation of femininity in contemporary ideology and discourse. As such, the novel essentially reminds of and affirms the scenarios of artistic political intervention as explored by Jacques Rancière. The societal consensus on woman’s domestic nature and the ambivalence towards female political participation can explain why Fischer did not incorporate direct statements on women’s political exclusion in her novel, but used narratological devices and intricate plot lines to define a form of dissensus instead. Hence, a final conclusion is that, although formalist and politically engaged readings are to a certain extent still considered incompatible, only a methodology combining a narratological and historicist approach can elucidate the political efficacy of a text that cannot dissent ‘in any literal way’.

Notes

1. Apart from Landes’, Hunt’s, and Pateman’s fundamental work, numerous other studies discuss the changing position of women in the public and political sphere during the gradual transition in Europe from Ancien Régime to modern forms of political government. Some excellent recent studies include Abrams (2001), especially the chapter ‘Politics, Nation and Identity’; the chapter ‘Liberty, Equality and Fraternity’ in Timm and Sanborn (2007); and chapters 8 and 9 in Margaret Hunt (2010).

2. Many novels written by female authors in this period explore the difficulties for women in their striving for individual autonomy, independence, and self-development, often connecting this with power conflicts in the private sphere, such as those between a female protagonist and her father or husband. Examples include novels by Friederike Helene Unger (*Julchen Grünthal. Eine Pensionsgeschichte, 1784*), Sophie Mereau (*Das Blüthenalter der Empfindung. Roman, 1794; Marie, 1798; Amanda und Eduard. Ein Roman in Briefen, 1803; Die Flucht nach der Hauptstadt, 1806*), Therese Huber (*Louise. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Konvenienz, 1796; Die Ehelosen, 1829*), Caroline Auguste Fischer (*Die Honigmonathe, 1802; Margarethe, 1812; Justine, 1818*), Johanna Schopenhauer (*Gabriele. Ein Roman, 1819/20; Sidonia, 1827/28*), Ida Hahn-Hahn (*Gräfin Faustine, 1841*).

3. This name could also refer to another eighteenth-century female ruler of Russia, who was much less known and less powerful: Empress Anna Ivanovna, who ruled from 1730 until 1740.

4. For the German reception of Catherine the Great around 1800, see Dawson (2002).
5 One reason for this is that Fischer was not connected to a famous male author or to one of the literary circles of her days, unlike authors such as Sophie Mereau, Johanna Schopenhauer, Sophie von La Roche, or Bettina von Arnim.

6 Fischer connects questions of racial and patriarchal oppression in the story William der Neger (1818), which is considered the first story in German literature that represents a love relationship between a black man and a white woman.

7 In the wake of Ernst Kantorowicz’s famous theory of the king’s two bodies, the question of how the dual concepts of the natural body and mythical-political body apply to female monarchs has recently started to intrigue scholars. See Schulte (2006). Studies focusing on late eighteenth-century queens include Vinken (2003) and Hunt (2002).

8 Roy Sommer has for instance called feminist narratology ‘the earliest and most established strand of contextual narratology’ (Sommer 2007, 61), and David Herman remarks in his introduction to New Narratologies that Lanser’s early work ‘reflects the move toward integration and synthesis that is one of the hallmarks of postclassical narratology’ (Herman 1999, 11).

9 See for instance Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, who state that ‘the contextualists have so far failed to provide a convincing justification for the notion that narratology should or could be transformed into a theory of interpretation capable of taking “contextually driven concerns” (835) into account’ (Kindt and Müller 2003, 415, my emphasis).

10 Der Günstling, Fischer (1809, 11). All translations from the novel are my own.

11 In their chapter on multiperspectivity in Erzähltextanalyse und Gender Studies, Allrath and Surkamp present an overview of how the specific narrative perspective of a novel could be influenced by, relate to, or express societal relations and hierarchies, especially with regard to gender (Allrath and Surkamp 2004, 159–70).

12 Anita Runge also emphasises that the one-sided and subjective perspective of the novel exposes how the female characters of Der Günstling are the product of male anxieties and wishes (Runge 1997, 59).

13 Throughout the story, Alexander continuously describes Iwanova as having ‘a burning eye’ (Fischer 1809, 20), a ‘flaming gaze’ (99), ‘fire eyes’ (170), etc.

14 See for instance Susan Stanford Friedman, who argues that the Bildungsroman is a genre that for women has been dominated by the marriage plot … the narrative drive (kinesis) centered in courtship; narrative closure (stasis) achieved in engagement and imminent marriage’ (Friedman 1996, 123).

15 Robyn Warhol makes a similar argument concerning serial fiction in her essay ‘Queering the Marriage Plot: How Serial Form Works in Maupin’s Tales of the City’ (Warhol 2001, 233–4).

Works cited


