Comparing Conduct: English Novels of the Long Eighteenth Century and the Formation of Ideals of Social Behaviour

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1. Introduction

Literary studies are in many ways a comparative practice. Scholars compare different texts and authors, they compare genres and literary figures, and they compare motifs, stylistic devices and national literatures, to name only a few of the most obvious examples. In the works of literary scholars, in other words, "comparisons are everywhere" (Erhart 2020: 111). However, despite such widespread academic practices of comparing, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the staging of comparisons in literary works themselves. Some aspects, as, for instance, the inherently comparative nature of stylistic devices such as the metaphor, have been thoroughly investigated. Yet, the various ways in which comparisons are deliberately enacted in literary works of all genres, i.e., the question in how far comparative practices play a constitutive role in literary texts themselves, remains profoundly understudied.

In this context, our article aims at making a contribution to the nascent field of research on literary practices of comparing.[1] Taking our cue from historical narratology and the recent surge of academic interest in comparative practices in the humanities, we turn to British novels from the long eighteenth century and argue that comparisons specifically revolving around ideas of social and moral behaviour constitute an integral component of narrative fiction

1 On the study of (literary) practices of comparing, see Erhart (2020), Kramer et al. (2020), and the introduction to this volume.

in this period. While aspects of comparison can be relevant on different analytical levels, we are primarily interested in the ways texts 'compare' their literary figures. Put differently, our focus is on narrative practices that perform and/or induce comparisons specifically between fictional characters.[2] For this purpose, we examine novels from Defoe to Inchbald and Edgeworth and show that those texts often do not (primarily) stage comparisons in a direct, explicitly articulated way. They rather tend to rely on various indirect strategies that prompt the reader to perform multi-layered comparisons him- or herself.

Moreover, we show that the eighteenth-century novel and its indirect strategies of figural comparing, by and large, display a general preoccupation with questions regarding social norms and behaviour. The genre of the novel, which emerges as the dominant literary medium over the course of the eighteenth century, makes use of practices of comparing that have their roots in the social dynamics of that time. Grounded in the changing social structure of the period, especially the emerging middle-classes' need for guidance in questions of morality and social life, novels practice acts of comparing in their own particular, literary ways.[3] In this fashion, we argue, they make an important contribution to the historical formation of the emerging ideal of a morally superior middle class.

2. Social Comparing in Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801)

We begin our discussion by turning to Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* as a general introductory example for the complex strategies of comparing social conduct found in much of the period's narrative fiction. In the novel the reader encounters a failed anthropological experiment that is both the result and the

2 For the discussion of other forms of comparison in literature, see again Erhart (2020) as well as Schneider (2017).

3 Applications of the term "class" in discussions of eighteenth-century social structure come with conceptual problems and are seen by some as anachronistic. For introductions to the term and concept of class in early modern Britain, see Corfield (1987) and Cannadine (2000: 27, 31). In this article, we use the plural 'middle-classes' as a way of acknowledging that no such thing as a monolithic 'middle class' existed in the period. The term rather refers to a broad and changing spectrum of social groupings. Historically, the language of social differentiation remained contentious well into the nineteenth century (Crossick 1991).

cause of different comparative acts. As the story of *Belinda* unfolds, the eponymous heroine's suitor Clarence Hervey is revealed to have a "secret attachment" (*Belinda* 136) to a young woman, Virginia St. Pierre, whom he keeps in seclusion in a house in Windsor. It turns out that years before the events portrayed in the story, Clarence had returned from a trip to pre-revolutionary France appalled by the licentious behaviour of French women and determined to find himself a wife of different moral disposition. When soon afterwards he encounters a beautiful, innocent young girl called Rachel while riding in the New Forest, he decides to take matters into his own hands. He forms the plan of raising the girl to be his future wife. He renames Rachel, who had been kept in almost perfect isolation from the world by her grandmother, after the heroine of Jacques-Henri Bernardine de Saint-Pierre's romance *Paul et Virginie* (1788) and ensures that she is brought up in continued seclusion from the putatively corrupting influences of (polite) society.

Unsurprisingly, the experiment of creating an ideal female in the image of Rousseau's educational ideals fails. It turns into an illustration of "the long-term effects" of a general lack of social intercourse coupled with "a purely supervised education" (Gustafson 2017: 660). The novel presents the seventeen-year-old Virginia as a parody of the innocent heroine of sensibility: "a soft sighing, dying damsel who puts bullfinches in her bosom" (*Belinda* 415) and whose natural beauty and affectionate nature come at the expense of a childish and overly excited imagination and a profound lack of brains (see Gonda 1996: 216). After having done everything to shield Virginia from the world, Clarence eventually realizes that it is precisely this lack of social experience that has prevented Virginia from becoming a suitable spouse:

> In comparison with Belinda, Virginia appeared to him but an insipid, though innocent child: the one he found was his equal, the other his inferior; the one he saw could be a companion, a friend to him for life, the other would merely be his pupil, or his plaything. Belinda had cultivated taste, an active understanding, a knowledge of literature, the power and the habit of conducting herself; Virginia was ignorant and indolent, she had few ideas, and no wish to extend her knowledge; she was so entirely unacquainted with the world, that it was absolutely impossible she could conduct herself with that discretion, which must be the combined result of reasoning and experience. (*Belinda* 345-346)

While Hervey is still touched by Virginia's innocence, it is Belinda's prudence, her "conduct" and "discretion" he begins to admire. Comparing the social skills

of both women Clarence is not only forced to re-evaluate his ideas about the benefits of a sentimental education, but he cannot help becoming "every day more wisely and fondly attached to Belinda" (346) and finally has to admit that "[n]othing could be more absurd than my scheme of educating a woman in solitude to make her fit for society" (432). Published at the end of the period under consideration here, this statement can also be read as an acknowledgement of the importance of the social sphere for the development of an individual.

In general, the Virginia-subplot in Edgeworth's novel serves several functions. In terms of plot, Virginia is one of the obstacles that need to be overcome for the romance to reach its happy conclusion in the prospective marriage of Belinda and Clarence. On a more philosophical level, the failed experiment is a condemnation of both Rousseau's educational philosophy (Kowaleski-Wallace 1991: 100) and the type of romance fiction represented by Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*.[4] Most importantly in the context of this chapter, however, the example illustrates a key compositional feature of the novel's narrative design: the central role comparisons play in the text's literary negotiation and didactic evaluation of contemporary norms and values of social behaviour. Clarence does not recognize the extent of Virginia's deficiencies until he begins to explicitly compare her to Belinda. Moreover, we find various other literary figures in the text also engaging in acts of social comparing. Characters compare their lovers and suitors, they compare themselves to other characters, and on occasion even engage in reflections of their own comparative practices. The novel's heroine Belinda, for example, is troubled by her own inclination to compare the qualities of her suitors with each other. "And yet," she concludes, "how are we to judge of character? How can we form any estimate of what is amiable, of what will make us happy or miserable, but by comparison?" (*Belinda* 217).

Belinda's acknowledgement of the necessity to compare touches upon a key aspect of the text. Explicitly labelled a "Moral Tale", Edgeworth's novel revolves around the question of how to judge moral character. *Belinda*, Linda Bree argues, was deliberately intended by Edgeworth to promote the discussion of "the principles of morality" (2020: xxvi). For this purpose, the text

4 Virginia's 'faulty' education is also signalled by her reading practices which "echo turn-of-the-century anxieties about novel reading; as soon as she learns to read, she becomes a model of the dangerously susceptible female reader" with an insatiable appetite for romance fiction (Britton 2013: 439-440).

creates a diverse set of literary characters embodying different virtues and vices; it then makes not only the protagonists but also the reader navigate the emerging tableau of human behaviour by constantly comparing those different characters with each other in both explicit and implicit ways. Inner-textual practices of comparing are thus complemented by extra-textual appeals to the readers' capacity for comparing behaviour and dispositions.

Critics have pointed out that the characters of Edgeworth's *Belinda* constitute a rather exaggerated "assortment of natural oddities" (Chalk 2014: 133). However, we believe that despite the novel's eccentric collection of characters, its structural narrative reliance on practices of comparing is neither particularly eccentric nor unusual for the literary fiction of its time. In the following section of our chapter, we will examine different novels in order to illustrate this claim. Moreover, we will suggest a heuristic distinction between two basic modes of comparing in narrative: 'direct' vs. 'indirect' comparisons.

3. Modes of Comparing in the Eighteenth-Century English Novel

We have suggested above that in both literature and literary studies comparisons are ubiquitous. Readers, for example, "constantly compare different heroes and different actions, different fictions and different reading experiences" (Erhart 2020: 114). Moreover, scholars have argued that the recipient's emotional investment in literary fiction may be (at least partially) based on the formation of analogies between the individual reader and certain aspects of the persona of one or several fictional characters. "In reading", Fluck (2013: 59) argues, "we establish analogies to those aspects that fit into our own narrative of identity or are especially meaningful or moving from the perspective of this narrative."

Yet, comparisons not only emerge in the intertextual space between different literary works or from acts of comparing that relate fictional worlds to readers' own personal experiences. They also play an important role on the level of the individual narrative; here texts can actively work to trigger or invite comparisons between different aspects or components of their fictional worlds. While such invitations take various forms, we can differentiate heuristically between two basic modes of narrative comparing in a way roughly analogous to the classical narratological differentiation between

telling vs. showing.[5] First, comparisons can be enacted explicitly and directly, i.e., by mentioning at least *two comparata* (*primum comparandum* and *secundum comparatum*) or both these *comparata* and the *tertium comparationis*.[6] Much more frequently, however, comparing in narrative is done more indirectly, namely when there are no linguistic markers explicitly signalling an act of comparing, but the context makes it clear that two (or more) items are supposed to be compared to one another. While the former are more obvious and thus easier to analyze, the latter practices of comparing are in many ways more interesting for literary scholarship, as they are based on a complex semantic interplay between the producers and recipients of texts about the theme and evaluation of the comparison: the positioning of *comparata* in a novel without the explicit naming of the *tertium* can be understood as an offer by the text – and thus, by extension, the author – that is realized by readers if they see the comparability. Therefore, the more implied the comparison is, the greater must be the shared understanding between (implied) authors and readers.[7]

5 For an overview on the distinction of "telling" vs. "showing" and its controversial debate, see Klauk/Köppe (2014). Furthermore, our distinction between direct and indirect practices of comparing is deliberately heuristic in nature and does not do justice to the full complexity of comparative practices in literature.

6 For a more detailed account of the theory and terminology of comparing, see the introduction to this volume.

7 In our discussion of figural comparisons, we use the notion of 'narrative practices of comparing' as an emphatically *heuristic* concept that refers both to a text/author's strategic offer to the reader to establish a comparison *and* the realisation of the offer made by the reader. While naturally not every reader will follow every invitation to compare, narratives can foreground the relationship between literary figures in structural and stylistic ways, thus, making it more likely that readers will follow the cues to compare provided by the text/author (see discussion below for examples). On the general (cognitive) reception processes underlying those assumptions, see Schneider (2000) and Strasen (2008). For pragmatic reasons we do neither engage with the specifics of literary communication and reception processes nor the inherent complexity of the categories of "text", "reader", and "author" in this article. For a general introduction to and survey of the academic study of characters in fictional worlds, see Eder/Jannidis/Schneider (2010). An influential cognitive theory that conceives of processes of mental comparison ("cross-space mapping") as an integral part of meaning making in general has been proposed by Fauconnier/Turner (2002).

3.1 Direct Comparisons

As the example of *Belinda* above has shown, comparing in literature can take place on the inner-textual level of speakers: characters in novels, as well as narrators, can directly compare virtually anyone or anything that is important in the fictional world with anyone or anything else. Readers can follow suit and mentally perform the comparison. Such direct comparisons frequently occur in the eighteenth-century novel in connection with the growing class consciousness of the bourgeoisie. A classic instance of this kind of direct comparison between the classes can be found at the very beginning of Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Here, Robinson's father, having been confronted with his son's plans to go to sea, exhorts Robinson to stay where providence has put him, by comparing and contrasting the middle station of life with those above and below:

> He told me it was for Men of desperate Fortunes on one Hand, or of aspiring, superior Fortunes on the other, who went abroad upon Adventures, to rise by Enterprize, and make themselves famous in Undertakings of a Nature out of the common road; that these things were all either too far above me, or too far below me; that mine was the middle State, or what might be called the upper Station of *Low Life*, which he had found by long Experience was the best State in the World, the most suited to human Happiness, most exposed to the Miseries and Hardships, the Labour and Sufferings of the mechanick Part of Mankind, and not embarrass'd with the Pride, Luxury, Ambition and Envy of the Upper Part of Mankind. (1994 [1719]: 4-5)

Robinson's father still has in mind a static model of a predestined social structure that echoes classical models and stands in contrast to the notions of social mobility and self-optimisation that would characterize later eighteenth-century society. Yet, the tendency to regard social distinctions with the help of a model of vertical stratification, as well as the middle-class contentedness with being placed in the 'best' social stratum, set the tone for much eighteenth-century writing about social classes. In this example, the three classes serve as the *comparata*, and the presence or lack of circumstances conducive to happiness as the *tertium*.

The passage from Defoe's novel is, however, a rare case of very explicit social comparing by way of discussing abstract social distinctions. More often, explicitly articulated comparisons, such as in the example from *Belinda* above, relate specific characters and/or their actions in the story with each

other. In addition to such direct strategies, in which comparisons are voiced by narrators or characters, texts can work by making structural offerings to the reader. This type of comparing is by nature indirect.

3.2 Indirect Comparisons

While indirect comparisons again exist in many forms, one of the most common ways of indirect structural comparing in novels emerges from a text's constellation of characters. Classical drama analysis has long been aware of the inherently comparative aspect of presenting an arrangement of different characters (on the stage), and seminal theoretical works have drawn attention to the relations of contrasts and correspondences between the *dramatis personae* of a given work (see Pfister 1988 [1977]: 163-176). Similarly, in narrative fiction comparisons are frequently triggered by constellations of characters or perspectives that foreground aspects of similarity and difference.[8] For example, two or more literary figures can be portrayed as similar in some respects, such as age, gender, or class, but different in others, as for instance attitudes and behaviour. To see a character act in a particular way in a given situation, and then observe a different character who shares a number of traits with the first behave differently in a similar or perhaps even the same situation, initiates a comparison that draws attention to the reasons behind their respective behaviours and serves to characterize their fictional personalities. In this case, the two characters are the *comparata*, whereas the way in which they act is the *tertium comparationis*.

A good example of this kind of comparison can be found in an episode of Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771) in which the old squire Matthew Bramble and his family travel to the city of Bath 'to take the waters'. Having arrived at the famous resort, Bramble and his young niece Lydia react in fundamentally different ways to the people they encounter and the places they visit. While Bramble is appalled by virtually every aspect of fashionable life in the city, especially by what he considers the inappropriate mixing of people from different social ranks, Lydia is delighted by this kind of unceremonious behaviour. For her, Bath is an "earthly paradise" filled with

8 Pfister defines the identity of a (dramatic) figure from a structuralist point of view as "the sum of the contrasts and correspondences linking it with the other figures in the text" (1988 [1977]: 163). On the application of Pfister's theory to character constellations in fiction, see Nünning (2001).

music and entertainment. And she is fascinated by the unconventional intermingling of people from different social backgrounds in the pump rooms (*Humphry Clinker* 68). By contrasting their different assessments of city and resort, the text thus not only invites the reader to compare the personalities and age of both characters but also to relate their points of view to different contemporary ideas about propriety and decorum.

While this comparison in Smollett's novel is triggered by a form of narrative multiperspectivity in which the same 'object' is viewed from different (character) perspectives (see Hartner 2008: 182-187),[9] a similar comparative effect can emerge from the presentation of action sequences or plot structures that share recognisable features. The relationship between comparable plot elements can be one of contiguity, i.e., it can emerge from the appearance of these elements in either spatial or temporal vicinity, as in the case of the picaresque novel. Here, the protagonist is usually placed in successive situations that are comparable, for example, in terms of the hero's capacity for suffering.[10] In general, however, structural analogies between successive parts of a story can emerge whenever novels present different characters acting differently in comparable situations or uttering different opinions about the same issue. Depending on how strongly marked or foregrounded these analogies are by the narrative, they invite readers to compare the attitudes and habits of the figures in ways that range from the blatantly obvious to the intellectually encoded. Yet, many eighteenth-century novels feature implicit comparisons so deeply ingrained into the basic structure of the narrative that we contend that it is virtually impossible for the recipient not to start comparing the respective characters during the reading process.

A case in point is the relationship between Tom Jones and Master Blifil from Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749). Cast as boyhood companions and rivals – Tom being Squire Allworthy's ward, the

9 On multiperspectivity in literature in general, see also Hartner (2014).

10 See Guillén (1971), on the "loosely episodic" (84) form of the picaresque novel which is generally characterized by "recurrent motifs, circular patterns, and incremental processes" (85). According to Ehland (2003), a central aspect of the situation of the *picaro* is the dilemma that the protagonist's acceptance into society requires the sacrifice of his moral identity – a dilemma that structurally "*materialises in a repeated change of place which generates not only new spatial settings but also new human environments*" (65, original emphasis). The genre thus structurally invites comparisons between those different human environments and the protagonist's corresponding actions and strategies of survival.

other boy the Squire's nephew – they are frequently placed in comparable circumstances. Blifil's meanness and small-mindedness stand out as particularly negative in comparison with Tom's generosity and warm-heartedness, forming a central theme of the narrative. When Allworthy falls ill and is thought to be dying, Tom's only concern is his mentor's health, while Blifil is more interested in the inheritance promised by his uncle, his demonstrations of sorrow notwithstanding. The narrator's comments leave no doubt throughout the novel that the reader is supposed to compare the dispositions and actions of the two young men. One chapter in the work's third book is even entitled "Chapter 10 – In which Master Blifil and Jones appear in different lights" (116-118). In spite of Tom's naivety and his frequently rash behaviour, the evaluation of Tom as the morally superior of the two is driven home eventually when his real parentage is revealed and the narrative closure rewards Tom's honesty with an inheritance and increased social status. In fact, the whole panorama of characters in Fielding's novel can be grouped into a virtuous and a villainous cluster, respectively. Lead by Master Blifil, the villainous group containing Mr Square, Reverend Thwackum and Lord Fellamar among others,[11] is characterized mainly by hypocrisy and falseness, but also by coldness towards or abuse of their wives. In the good group are honest and charitable men, such as Tom himself and Squire Allworthy, as well as the virtuous woman Sophia Western.

Beyond portraying characters in places or situations that are arranged to trigger comparing, some novels go one step further and present structural analogies between entire plotlines. Again, we consider it practically impossible not to compare what happens to the characters in such cases. A striking example is Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791), which is neatly divided into two parts, consisting of two 'books' each, which present plotlines of a strikingly analogous nature.[12] In the first two books, the reader is confronted with the story of a young lady, Miss Milner, who is entrusted to the care of a Mr Dorriforth after her father's death. Pleasure-loving and obstinate, Miss Milner revolts continuously against the constraints society has imposed upon women by disobeying Dorriforth's rigid orders and rules. Despite her behaviour, however, Dorriforth and Miss Milner are later united in a tempestuous marriage, after the priest Dorriforth has renounced his priesthood upon inheriting a

11 The characters Lady Bellaston, Mr Nightingale and Fitzpatrick also belong to this group.

12 Mergenthal (1997: 146-151) elaborates on the structural analogies in this novel.

title. In the second half of the novel, after a time-lapse of seventeen years, the reader is presented with the life of Matilda, the daughter of Dorriforth (now Lord Elmwood) and Miss Milner, who is dead by the time the third book begins. Here the reader learns that Miss Milner committed adultery after her daughter's birth and was abandoned by her husband. In contrast to her mother, however, Matilda manages to win Dorriforth's love through utter submissiveness and obedience. The reader here finds two consecutive development plots with different outcomes which are obviously meant to be compared. Miss Milner's actions and attitudes, extremely unconventional in the context of the norms of female behaviour at the time, are contrasted to those of her daughter Matilda, whose personality is much more adapted to social expectations. In other words, the two women are the *comparata*, the *tertium* is a standard of female behaviour that is not explicitly verbalized in the novel but emerges from both Dorriforth's orders and prohibitions and from the fact that Miss Milner is punished for trespassing them. The emerging comparison, however, does not result in a simple, antithetical juxtaposition of Miss Milner and Matilda, as the daughter unites some of the aspects of both her parents (see Mergenthal 1997: 151). This hints at the overall estimation that all extremes of behaviour and opinion, those of the mother and the father, are deemed destructive.

The novels discussed so far all feature comparisons revolving around questions of social norms and values. They illustrate by way of example that many eighteenth-century works of fiction are preoccupied with aspects of social comparing. This preoccupation, we will argue in the following, emerges from a broader social concern with questions of morality, conduct and social status that play an essential role in various forms of public discourse during the period. Before continuing our discussion of comparative practices in eighteenth-century fiction, we therefore take a closer look at the changing social structures, especially the so-called rise of the middle classes, that shape manifestations of social comparing in literature and beyond in this period.

4. Social Comparing and Historical Change in Eighteenth-Century England

Social, cultural and literary historians of the long eighteenth century have long ascertained an essential link between the development of the middle classes as the culturally dominant group in modern English society on the

one hand, and the development of the novel as a distinct literary medium on the fast-growing market for printed material, on the other.[13] In this context, scholars have drawn attention to the importance of various historical factors such as the financial and agrarian revolution, the emergence of consumer capitalism as the predominant life-style of large parts of the population,[14] and developments in the publishing industry (for example, the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1694), which contributed to a veritable explosion of the print market.[15]

This explosion, in which periodicals and novels joined forces in discussing matters of current social issues primarily for an emerging middle-class readership, forms a particularly important background to our discussion of comparative practices. It coincides with the emergence of a cultural discourse that promoted the idea of the middle-classes, or the 'middle order', as a social group possessing a distinct and superior (moral) quality. Building on the notion of a "virtuous social middle" (Wahrman 1995: 64) initially developed in Aristotle's *Politics*,[16] this discourse engaged in the construction of the idea of the middle classes as a distinct social group distinguished by its political, economic importance for the British nation, on the one hand, and by its superior moral qualities, on the other.

David Hume famously attempted to provide a philosophical foundation for this belief. He argued that the upper classes are too immersed in the pursuit of pleasure to heed the voices of reason and morality, while "the Poor"

13 These notions were proposed already in the late 1950s and early 1960s by scholars such as Watt (1957) and Habermas ([1962] 1989). Among the landmark contributions to the history of the early English novel in its socio-cultural context after Watt are the studies by Davis (1983), McKeon (2002 [1987]), and Hunter (1990); they start from fairly different theoretical premises and put different emphases on the factors for the rise of the novel. For a short summary of perspectives after Watt and Habermas, see also Cowan (2016).

14 On the importance of the Consumer Revolution, see McKendrick/Brewer/Plumb (1982), and Berg (1999; 2005). For further studies on the history of the period, see Porter (1982), McKendrick (1982), Earle (1989), Langford/Harvie (1992), Weatherill (1993), Haan/Niedhart (2002), and Beck (2003). These studies explore the changes we can summarize only sketchily here. Rogers (2016) presents a concise survey of the factors with regard to their relevance for the emergence of the novel.

15 See Feather (2006: 67-125 and 2016) as well as Hinds (2016) and Suarez (2016) for accounts of the publishing industry in the long eighteenth century.

16 See Aristotle (1984: IV.11).

find themselves entirely caught up in the daily struggle for survival and therefore have "little Opportunity of exerting any other Virtue, besides those of Patience, Resignation, Industry and Integrity" (1964 [1742]: 376). As a result, in his opinion, "the middle Station of Life […] is more favourable to the acquiring of *Wisdom* and *Ability*, as well as of *Virtue*" (377) than any other class. "[A] man so situate[d] has a better Chance for attaining a Knowledge both of Men and Things, than those of a more elevated Station" because the middle class provides the best opportunities for the exercise of virtuous behaviour (ibid.). In Hume's opinion it exposes its members to a wider and more complex range of social life and thus forces them to develop greater moral sensitivity and power of judgement (376-377).

The idea of "the middle order of mankind" as a social sphere of particular quality, which we have already encountered in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (see above), was neither entirely new nor universally acknowledged in the eighteenth century.[17] However, it provided a controversial but attractive conceptual means of ideological self-fashioning for those who saw themselves as belonging to this particular segment of society. Facilitated by the expansion of the publishing industry it consequently found its way into many contemporary texts celebrating the "generous Disposition and publick Spirit" of members of the middle classes in contrast to the "Depravity and Selfishness of those in a higher Class" (Thornton 1752: np).[18]

4.1 Social Comparing and the Middle Classes

While the well-established historical developments sketched above connect the media genre of the novel with the rise of the middle classes and the idea of the virtuous social middle, the role of practices of comparing in these processes has been largely overlooked by academic scholarship so far. Until recently, on the one hand, there has been "no reasonably coherent research tradition" that engages with the history of "comparisons as practices" in gen-

17 On competing models of the social structure of the period and the persistent traditional belief in a providentially ordained hierarchical order of social layers, see the discussion in Cannadine (2000: 24-56). In this context, see also French, who argues that the aristocracy and gentry retained their dominant economic and political power in Britain throughout the eighteenth century and beyond (2017: 269, 280). On the emergence of the "Middling Sort" as a cultural identity during the early modern period, see Muldrew (2017).

18 Quoted from the unpaginated preface of Thornton (1752).

eral (Steinmetz 2019a: 4). On the other hand, the focus of existing research on social comparing, for example in the field of social psychology, has been mainly directed at the individual. While researchers in this discipline have long been aware of comparing as a key psychological process of identity formation and self-evaluation (Festinger 1954), they have long neglected the role comparisons play in the functioning of communities, groups, and society at large (Križan/Gibbons 2014: 2). However, more recent scholarship has emphasized that the construction of the individual cannot be neatly separated from that of society:

> [S]ocial comparisons are tools that are just as important to the functioning of societies as they are to the functioning of individuals. As many great social thinkers of the 20th century have recognized, how we construe individuals and the society in which they live is mutually dependent. Our notion of the self is dependent on how we are viewed and treated by others, and our views of social groups always depend on how we view their constituent individuals. (ibid.)

In other words, social comparing is not only essential to the way individuals judge their abilities and opinions. As the "regulation of individual behavior is central to a proper functioning of a society" (ibid.), it also forms an important aspect of its (ideological) construction.

From a historiographical point of view, this means that practices of social comparing need to be understood as discursive practices that contribute to create and maintain social, legal, political, and cultural structures on the one hand, and that provide impulses for change on the other. They are therefore particularly interesting and revealing objects of study in periods of (social) transformation. This applies to Britain in the long eighteenth century – a key phase in the country's slow historical transition from a society primarily regulated by (inherited) status and rank to one based predominantly on ideas of (economic) competition.[19] As different views about social hierarchies struggle and clash with each other during the course of this development, practices of

19 According to Steinmetz (2019b), this transition goes hand in hand with changes in the (dominant) usage of different forms of comparison between 1600 and 1900. Next to traditional, hierarchical "above/below comparisons" (82) of social rank, the period saw the increasing appearance of two different types of comparison: (1) a form of competitive social comparing he calls "better/worse comparisons" (81; *passim*); and (2) comparisons that give "priority to individual difference" and function as "assertions of being 'simply different'" (81). He emphasizes that all three basic forms of comparison (bet-

social comparing play a key role in the self-fashioning of the increasingly self-confident eighteenth-century middle classes.

We have already seen that this process of self-fashioning goes hand in hand with a self-attribution of moral superiority based on favourable comparisons of social virtues. This self-positioning relies significantly on the way members of the middle classes relate themselves specifically vis-à-vis the upper strata. In social contacts with their 'betters', they develop strategies of behaviour aimed at toning down distinctions in rank. This includes "ingratiation", "vanity" and, most importantly, "emulation" (Porter 1982, 87-88, and see McKendrick 1982), i.e., the adoption of styles in dress, furniture, pastimes, (etc.). During the period, those who wish to find out what it means to be middle class and to adjust their behaviour accordingly would naturally resort to comparing themselves with the upper classes they attempt to emulate in appearance and habits, though not morals. The eighteenth-century middle classes cultivate a reputation of libertinage and idleness for the aristocracy and gentry that contradicts their own moral codex. Moreover, such socially 'vertical' comparing is complemented by a 'horizontal' awareness of the behaviour of members of one's own class, to which one can compare one's own actions and habits.

On another level, eighteen-century middle-class self-fashioning is complicated by the contrast between traditional (Christian) values of social behaviour and the behavioural codes inherent to a culture of competition. In the moral framework of the time, the mainsprings of consumer capitalism that increasingly secure the social position and well-being of the middle-classes are dangerously close to the cardinal sins of avarice and gluttony: the desire for, and consumption of, goods beyond necessities and subsistence, as well as the desire for profit-making. Though largely accepted as 'natural' human motives today, they are difficult to reconcile with the central ideals of decency, moderation and righteousness during the eighteenth century. Consequently, the middle classes need to constantly negotiate how to align the material side of gentility with the moral one. They need to find a way of being both a 'polite' *and* a commercial people at the same time (Langford 1989).

In sum, various modes of comparing accompany the changes in social structure in the long eighteenth century. Comparing codes of competitive behaviour on the one hand and ideals of decency and moderation on the other

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ter/worse; above/below; simply different) have co-existed ever since "and may be re-enacted at any time" (104).

play a key role in the emergence of a general philosophical awareness of the conflict between (economic) competition and moral behaviour. Comparing other people's behaviour either between them or with reference to oneself serves as an important strategy for finding out about sanctions that are administered to deviancy from the implied norm. In this way, comparing provides a practical tool that helps individuals who are concerned and insecure about their own behaviour to navigate the social world by obtaining feedback and reassurance about the propriety and adequacy of certain actions, tastes, and moral values.

In this context, literary fiction during the eighteenth century fulfils an important function in expanding readers' horizons of personal experience and knowledge in a way that adds aesthetic and 'safe' modes of comparing to the more immediate social practices they observe in their own lives. Moreover, literature in general complements other, more openly instructive textual resources such as conduct books, sermons, and philosophical treatises. Specifically, the novel offers itself as a laboratory for social values and behaviour in accordance with bourgeois ideals by drawing on the inherent strengths of literary storytelling. In the remainder of our chapter, we suggest that it is the novel's ability to present large, heterogeneous collections of characters and to stage complex, multi-layered, and inherently ambiguous comparisons that was largely responsible for its emergence as a key medium in the negotiation of middle-class ideals of behaviour during the eighteenth century. For this purpose, we turn to two further examples: Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) and Frances Burney's *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778).

5. Complexity and Ambiguity in Narrative Practices of Comparing

We begin by turning to Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* as a good example of the complexity and multi-layeredness of literary practices of comparing. Chapter 16 reports the "rivalry in point of taste" (2006 [1766]: 70) that exists between the family of Dr Primrose, the Vicar of the title, and the neighbouring Flamborough family. Like many upper middle-class families at the time, the Flamboroughs had their family portrait painted by an itinerant painter, in imitation of tradition of family portraiture practiced by the nobility. The Primroses, ever eager to out-do all others in their aspiration for gentility, want to surpass their neighbours and have the painter produce a hugely dimensioned paint-

ing, cluttered with all sorts of (incongruent) mythological symbols. When the painting is finished, the family realize that it is too big to fit through any of the doors, so that it has to remain in the kitchen, where it was done, rather than be hung in some more representative room: "The picture, therefore, instead of gratifying our vanity, as we hoped, leaned, in a most mortifying manner, against the kitchen wall, […] and the jest of all our neighbours" (71).

Comparing occurs on multiple levels in this novel generally, and in this particular scene, too. First, the Primrose family, naively caught between attempts to increase their morality on the one hand and eager to rise in the esteem of those socially above them on the other, continually compare themselves with other families, the Flamboroughs in this case. The *comparata* are the Primroses' attitudes and behaviours, and what they perceive to be the attitudes and behaviours of others; the *tertium* is the degree of respectability the Primroses assume these attitudes and behaviours demonstrate.

Since the comparison prompts the Primroses to actions that will prove ridiculous, the second level comes into play, namely the level of the text itself, understood as an act of communication between the author and his readership. The reader is invited to compare the Flamboroughs' successful imitation of an upper-class habitus with the unsuccessful one of the Primroses, and to laugh at the latter, much as their motivations may be understood. The moral of this episode appears to be partly rendered in the Vicar's acknowledgment that the function of the picture was to gratify the "vanity" of the family, and partly in the reader being led to understand that the real difference resulting from comparing the two families lies in the fact that the Primroses practice their emulation of the upper classes with a lack of moderation. The wish to have one's family portrait painted is not despicable, it seems, but to do so in excess is. Yet, the highly ironic fashion in which the novel, including this episode, is rendered, leaves considerable room for ambiguity with regard to the precise scope of the implicit comparisons offered by the text. The Primroses' failed vanity project, for example, may also be read as an ironic comment on the middle-class inclination for upward social imitation in general. This, in turn, may invite readers to reflect on their own inclination for imitation, in other words, to compare themselves to both the Primroses and the Flamboroughs in a critical fashion.

In any case, readers have to draw their own conclusions about the precise moral lessons offered by the comparisons evoked in the narrative. As Nünning (2004) has shown, the reading of *The Vicar of Wakefield* and its usage of irony, for example, are heavily influenced by the perceived reliability of the first-per-

son narrator Primrose. Goldsmith's novel thus not only serves as a reminder of the crucial role of the narrative voice in the presentation of characters and comparisons in literary fiction. It also suggests that the semantic polyvalence generally inherent to literary texts extends to narrative practices of comparing. In fact, we believe that it is the semantic complexity of literature and its openness to interpretation that turned the eighteenth-century novel into an ideal textual medium for the staging of comparisons.

The usual length, complexity, and richness of detail of the novels from the period makes it possible for complex strings of interrelated comparisons to be woven into the narrative tapestries of their story lines. This not only leads to the inclusion of large numbers of increasingly complex comparisons. It also ensures that texts do not merely mirror the presentation of ideas about social norms and behaviour found in other types of media and public discourse during the period. The conflicts enacted in literary stories make it possible to stage colliding viewpoints in great detail and to negotiate ideological tensions inherent in contemporary ideas about social conduct in ways that force eighteenth-century readers to participate in the construction, interpretation, and evaluation of those ideas by way of comparison. Again, practices of indirect comparing play a particularly important role in this respect, as they generally required a higher degree of (cognitive) participation by the reader. Moreover, they can be evoked in many different ways, thus inviting authors to be creative in terms of the narrative structure of their works.

Complexity and ambiguity in eighteenth-century fiction, in other words, can take many forms. In the example of Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* it is closely connected to the humorous and ironic tone of the text. In Frances (Fanny) Burney's successful epistolary novel *Evelina* (2012 [1778]), our last example, ambiguity arises from a different ideological tension played out in the narrative. Presenting a heterogeneous cast of characters embodying different sets of values and/or vices, the novel features multiple sets of direct and indirect forms of comparing that attempt to convey a general moral lesson. Yet, the text's choice for the embodiment of virtue reveals an underlying ideological tension in contemporary middle-class attitudes towards the nobility.

Generally, the novel is another prime example for the key role that comparisons play in the narrative negotiation of morality and conduct. The novel's young protagonist Evelina has grown up in rural seclusion as the ward of Mr Villars, a clergyman, after the death of her mother. When invited to a trip to London, Burney casts her as an impartial observer of the habits and fashions of London society, which gives the author the opportunity to present

Evelina with all types of behaviour that she can partly understand and compare, but which partly also baffle her. Since readers get access to these behaviours through the letters she sends back home to her guardian, they are encouraged to perform a variety of comparisons.

The first characters that can be compared by the reader before Evelina arrives in London, however, are Evelina, her mother, and her grandmother, who are discussed in close succession in the letters between Villars and his acquaintance, Lady Howard, which open the novel. The implied *tertium comparationis* between the three women is a combination of prudence, decency and the danger to fall prey to dishonest men. Lady Howard tells Villars about the design of Evelina's grandmother Mme Duval, an Englishwoman pretending to be French to get Evelina to live with her in France after she has learned of her granddaughter's existence. Mme Duval had cut off all connections to her daughter, Evelina's mother, who had been persuaded into a marriage with a Lord Belmont that the dubious peer later renounced without acknowledging the daughter as his legitimate offspring. Mme Duval is described by Lady Howard as "vulgar and illiterate" (12) and by Villars as "at once uneducated and unprincipled; ungentle in her temper, and unamiable in her manners" (13) and she is associated with low social status, since as a young woman, she was "a waiting-girl at a tavern" (14). This stands in contrast to Evelina's unfortunate mother: when Evelina is allowed to go to London in the custody of Lady Howard, she is described by the lady in direct comparison with her mother: "She [Evelina] has the same gentleness in her manners, the same natural grace in her motions, that I formerly so admired in her mother" and is attested both intelligence ("excellent understanding, and great quickness of parts") and moral integrity, possessing "a certain air of innocency and inexperience that is extremely interesting" (23). The interest of this character conception for the reader lies in the question which kind of fate the innocent woman will meet in the society of the metropolis. Neither her grandmother's nor her mother's developments, which are compared succinctly over the first few pages, offer themselves as patterns.

Evelina's letter to Villars reporting the first ball she takes part in then duly delivers her impressions of the men in the city, and it initiates the next set of comparisons. Out of a group of young gentlemen with a "careless indolent manner", one person "who had for some time looked at us with a kind of negligent impertinence" and whose "dress was so foppish that I believe he even wished to be stared at" besieges Evelina with his attentions which she refuses, not least because she finds him "ugly" (32). Immediately afterwards,

she is approached by "another gentleman, who seemed about six-and-twenty years old, gayly, but not foppishly, dressed, and indeed extremely handsome, with an air of mixed politeness and gallantry" (33). Subsequently, she finds that "[h]is conversation was sensible and spirited; his air and address were open and noble; his manners gentle, attentive, and infinitely engaging; his person is all elegance, and his countenance, the most animated and expressive I have ever seen" (ibid.). Although Evelina does not comment on the discrepancy between the two men in manner and dress, the immediate juxtaposition is clearly intended to provoke acts of comparing. The man who impresses Evelina so much, Lord Orville, will also prove superior to yet another suitor, Sir Clement Willoughby. Orville thus functions as the ideal potential partner of the romance plot, which indeed he proves to be after a whole series of prototypical hindrances including mutual misunderstandings, a faked letter written by a spurned rival, and the fact that as an aristocrat Orville seems to be out of reach for Evelina – until her real descendance from Lord Belmont is revealed towards the end.

As if the initial comparative constellation were not enough, Burney brings all three men together before the eyes of Evelina in quick succession two more times at places of entertainment, Drury Lane Theatre (letter no. 20) and the London Pantheon (letter no. 23) respectively. On these occasions, the impertinent fop, Mr Lovel, continues to misbehave and even offends Evelina on grounds of her inexperience and while Sir Clement oscillates between reticence and forwardness, Lord Orville again shines with "his generous conduct" (123), "his usual politeness" (133) and "a politeness which knows no intermission, and makes no distinction, is as unassuming and modest, as if he had never mixed with the great, and was totally ignorant of every qualification he possesses" (ibid.). This last characterisation is followed by a summary of another nobleman who remains unnamed in this scene and has aroused Evelina's contempt by being so utterly "deficient in *good manners*" (125, original emphasis) that "even Sir Clement Willoughby appeared modest in comparison with this person" (ibid). In comparison to Lord Orville the nameless nobleman appears as the epitome of upper classes' bad reputation. Evelina states that

> this other lord, though lavish of compliments and fine speeches, seems to me an entire stranger to real good breeding; whoever strikes his fancy, engrosses his whole attention. He is forward and bold, has an air of haughtiness towards men, and a look of libertinism towards women, and his conscious

> quality seems to have given him a freedom in his way of speaking to either sex, that is very short of rudeness. (133)

The correct version of politeness from the perspective of the novel, as the text's extensive conglomeration of direct and indirect comparisons aims to emphasize, is not naturally connected to rank, but a quality of attitude and behaviour that needs to be performed with moderation and discretion.

While clearly aware of the conventional system of class distinction by denomination, the novel's comparisons thus promote the ideal of good conduct over the primacy of birth. By means of comparing, the text sets an essentially (upper) middle-class understanding of virtue and decorum as the general standard according to which all members of society should be judged. For this purpose, it presents characters from the nobility who embody different degrees of morally deficient behaviour, thus promoting the ideology of the virtuous social middle by drawing on and reinforcing contemporary stereotypes about young noblemen. However, at the same time, the romance retains a clear fascination with the upper strata of society that subliminally undermines the notion of the middle station as "the best State in the World" (Defoe 1994 [1719]: 5). By presenting Lord Orville, the highest-ranking of Evelina's suitors, as the girl's ideal marriage partner and the male embodiment of sensible (male) conduct and good character, Burney's work makes an ambivalent statement on the position of the middle classes and their strife for gentility.

This ambivalence also extends to the figure of Evelina herself. Since none of the gentlemen in question is a writer of letters in the novel, we get access to their behaviour mainly through the perspective of the female protagonist, who, as an outsider unspoiled by the habits of London society is presented as possessing a somehow 'natural' power of judgment of morally adequate behaviour. This, in turn, differentiates her from both her mother and her grandmother, who in comparison appear to have lacked that kind of understanding. Repeatedly exhibiting this talent over the course of the novel, Evelina comes to embody a (middle-class) ideal of (female) sensibility, judgement, and conduct. However, her status as this embodiment of the virtuous social middle equally retains an aspect of ambiguity. When the plot finally confirms her noble descent as the daughter of Lord Belmont, this not only facilitates the happy ending of the romance plot. It creates a constellation of characters in which the representatives of ideal male and female behaviour both turn out to be members of the nobility. Despite all of its promotion of middle-class ideol-

ogy, the text thus still implicitly raises the suspicion that nobility of character and nobility of birth may be related after all.

6. Conclusion

The eighteenth century was a period of drastic change, which included the slow emergence both of new social patterns of behaviour and of literary genres. In both areas, there was much experimentation and diversity, and there were contradictory but overlapping tendencies and ambivalences. On the social side, the composition of what can be regarded as the emerging middle classes changed throughout the century and scholars continue to disagree on how strongly this development affected other segments of society (see Corfield 1987; Cannadine 2000: 24-56; French 2017). On the literary side, the genre label of the eighteenth-century novel is a heuristic academic construct. There is no such thing as 'the' eighteenth-century English novel. Apart from the considerable confusion displayed by authors, publishers, booksellers and commentators of the period as to the name for this emerging genre,[20] the sheer polymorphism and diversity of prose narratives makes it difficult to summarize what the texts published during this period have in common that would even allow a single, unifying genre designation. There is such a variety of narrative modes and moods that lumping them together with traditional labels such as 'formal realism' and 'individualism' (Watt 1957) is seen as highly problematic by today's scholarship (McKeon 2002 [1987]). In addition, different sub-genres did not only have different readerships, but also different formulas for plot developments, character types, and character constellations. This complex situation affects the analysis of literary practices in connection with contemporary issues of social comparison quite considerably. It makes it inherently problematic to put forth comprehensive assertions about the types and performances of narrative practices of comparing, on the one hand, and to make general statements about the nature and development of different classes and their norms and values, on the other hand.

Nevertheless, despite those reservations, we believe that there is a discernible relationship between much of the period's literary fiction and con-

20 See the collection of contemporary voices, attempts at definition, and controversies collected in Williams (1970) and Richetti (2012); see also the chapter on circulating libraries by Ralf Schneider in this collection.

temporary practices of social comparing grounded in the changing social structure of the long eighteenth century, in particular, the emerging middle-classes' need for guidance in questions of morality and social life. Even though social comparing also occurred in other literary genres,[21] it was the new genre of the novel, with the multitude of characters and plotlines it usually features, that provides an ideal aesthetic framework for the literary negotiation of social values, norms, and conduct. With the examples discussed in this chapter, we have tried to suggest that novels engaging with those issues tend to rely heavily on evocations of figural comparisons, on the one hand, and on the staging of different types of indirect comparison, on the other hand. Texts also feature direct comparisons, explicitly articulated by characters or narrators. Yet, indirect strategies are often not only deeply ingrained in the narrative structure of texts, but they tend to require a higher degree of (cognitive) participation and can serve as a powerful way of prompting readers to perform multi-layered acts of comparing. With this ability to present extensive, heterogeneous character constellations and to stage ideological tension and colliding points of view by evoking complex strings of multifaceted and ambiguous comparisons, the eighteenth-century novel goes beyond the mere replication of ideas from contemporary public debates about social comparing. It historically offered itself as a literary laboratory for middle-class ideals of social values and behaviour. In this way, it made an important contribution to the contemporary formation of the emerging idea of a morally superior middle class. As the novel became the dominant literary medium over the course of the century, it provided readers with the possibility of obtaining guidance, feedback and reassurance about the propriety and adequacy of certain actions, tastes, and moral values, on the one hand, and the opportunity to engage in critical reflections of those issues, on the other. Moreover, ever since this key phase in the development of the novel, practices of comparing literary characters have arguably served as a key narrative strategy in much of literary fiction. And, as social psychology tells us, this is not surprising. Because, after all, Belinda seems to be right: "[H]ow are we to judge of character […] but by comparison?"

21 Eighteenth-century drama, in particular comedy, employs contrasting characters as a standard device. Some novelists, including Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, Oliver Goldsmith and Fanny Burney were also dramatists, which may account for some of the parallels in the use of contrastive character constellations.

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