Providing a Voice for the Other:
Marginalization in British Historical Fiction on the Dutch Golden Age

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Abstract

The genre of historical fiction has received much critical attention lately. Scholars, such as Linda Hutcheon and Jerome de Groot, have found that historical novels can reinstall the marginalized in historical narratives. While sub-genres like the Neo-Victorian novel have already been researched, the sub-genre of Dutch Golden Age novels has so far received little attention. Through a close-reading of three bestselling British historical novels on the Dutch Golden Age, and a study of relevant theory on the genre of historical fiction in relation to marginalization, this paper attempts to show how British historical fiction on the Dutch Golden Age provides a voice for the Other, stripping the golden era of its lustre. It contains three case studies of *The Miniaturist* by Jessie Burton, *Tulip Fever* by Deborah Moggach, and *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier, which argue that these novels heavily underline female marginalization and use appropriated works of Dutch Golden Age art to achieve this. Significantly, the novels also include other forms of marginalization, related to class, sexual inclination and race, which are often introduced by male characters. To establish the sub-genre any further, it is necessary to consider a greater variety of historical novels on the Dutch Golden Age, as the study's framework has likely influenced the research results.

Introduction

The seventeenth century was a time of change and enlightenment for the Dutch Republic. Progress became visible in "most areas of life, and not least in culture" (Price 102). Science had begun to replace magic, although "the transformation was far from complete by the end of the century" (Price 102), and religious tolerance and pluralism became an important component of the Republic, where citizens had a great "range of confessional choices" (Parker 2). Dutch art reached new heights; achievements of artists like Frans Hals, Rembrandt van Rijn or Johannes Vermeer, all household names in the twenty-first century art world, surpassed those of "many cultured contemporaries" who remained attached to the artistic criteria of the Renaissance (Price 83). Economically, the Republic displayed important modern characteristics, such as "an advanced market economy" (De Vries and Van der Woude 192), and a level of urbanization that would not be surpassed by other countries until the Industrial Revolution in England (63). As the Republic quickly established itself as one of Europe's most powerful countries during this period (Prak 46), it seems appropriate that the Dutch of the seventeenth century are "now famed for their astonishing economic success and remarkable cultural achievements" (Price 34), and that the period in Dutch history has become known as the Dutch Golden Age.

It is important, however, to remain aware of the fact that some could enjoy this golden age more than others. While Catholicism was tolerated in the predominantly Reformist country, Catholics who desired to worship together had to be "willing to pay for the privilege" (Price 80), as local officials often had to be bribed (Parker 3), which suggests that religious pluralism was more easily enjoyed by wealthy citizens than the poor working class. Similarly, the benefits of a humanist education could only be enjoyed by "those who could afford it" (Price 85). While "the sons of the social and economic elite" were sent to Latin school (65), the children of "unskilled or semi-skilled workers" were sent to work "as soon as they were

old enough to make a contribution," as their families "could not make ends meet" otherwise (95). It is easy to overlook these significant differences in the perception of the period, as the elite "could afford to pass off their culture as the national heritage," shaping the general impression of the seventeenth-century Republic, while the often illiterate working class did not have that luxury (Schama 4). Female perception of the Dutch Golden Age might also problematize its golden status. While "Dutch women enjoyed a greater ability to act within and shape their culture than did their female contemporaries in other societies" (Peacock 49), women were nonetheless treated as "second-class citizens socially, economically and legally" (Price 94). Their education, for example, was restricted, as it "was based on skills acquired in the home" (Moseley-Christian 348). Furthermore, although women of the working class usually helped to bring in an income, their "cultural reach" remained "severely restricted by their position in society" (Price 95-97). While they "could be shown to be enjoying the new public spaces of the burgeoning Dutch state," female "contributions to its success were firmly located in the home" (Spinks and Broomhall 10). It must be noted, however, that these domestic contributions were not belittled but regarded as significant, as is reflected in the popularity of images of "women in domestic settings" in Dutch Golden Age art (Peacock 48-49). While women were often portrayed in Dutch painting, they do not seem to be a big part of the public cultural and artistic production of the period themselves; there were only "a handful of painters, many poets but few of distinction, and a bluestocking or two" (Price 93).[1] As there are relatively few primary sources by women from the Dutch Golden Age, making it difficult "to find any distinctive feminine strand in Dutch culture in this century" (94), their voices are marginalized within this piece of history and often remain unheard like those of the working class.

[1] While it has been pointed out that "dozens of women were admitted to a Guild of Saint Luke across the Netherlands during the seventeenth century," female participation in artistic production remains relatively low when it is taken into account that there were "an estimated fifty thousand painters at work across the seventeenth century" (Smith n.p.).

Historical novels can help retrieve those voices, as they are often "used to reinsert communities into the past, rescuing them from the marginal positions to which they have consciously been consigned" by history (De Groot 148). Marginalization refers to "the process of making an individual or minority group marginal in relation to a dominant social group" ("Marginalization"). As the aforementioned examples from Dutch history suggest, the educated male elite often held more influential dominant positions, whereas women and working-class people, along with minorities such as black or homosexual people, held these marginal positions in the seventeenth century. These groups were perceived as Other; "treated and marked as different and inferior from the dominant social group"(Griffin). Historical fiction can address this notion of otherness by focusing on the margins that are often left out of history's centre-focused narratives. If history's textuality is taken into account, this focus is not surprising. History's "accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality" (Hutcheon 16): the past can only be known through "its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts" (16). As Schama and Price have suggested, such texts were generally left behind by members of dominant social groups, like the male elite, who were better equipped to pass on their heritage than members of , for example, the working class. Historical fiction can thus assist in filling this gap in history's representation. According to Hutcheon, the fact that historical novels "rethink margins and borders is clearly a move away from" history's centralization; the notion of a totalizing, eternal and universal centre is furthermore problematized through the reassertion of the margins (58).

Through such changes in focus from centre to margin, the historical novel can influence the reader's impressions of the past. While research on the representation of otherness and marginalization has been done for the genre of historical fiction in general, and specific branches such as the Neo-Victorian novel (Rousselot 2), novels about the Dutch Golden Age have yet to be examined within this framework. To analyse marginalization and

its effects in this new context, three British contemporary historical novels on the Dutch seventeenth century, published within the last twenty years, will be considered: *Tulip Fever* by Deborah Moggach (1999), *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier (1999), and *The Miniaturist* by Jessie Burton (2014). The selected novels have enjoyed great popularity as national or international bestsellers that have been translated in multiple languages and have even been adapted for the screen.[2] Importantly, each novel acknowledges the assistance of several historical sources or experts. The novels from 1999, for example, have both listed Simon Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* in their Acknowledgements section.[3] On the one hand, such acknowledgements establish a sense of authority; they articulate a link between the historical novel and "reality and […] history" (De Groot 9). On the other hand, they "also invoke questions of authenticity, directing the reader to consider how historical evidence is presented to make a particular case" (121). For instance, Schama's notions on the seventeenth-century Dutch woman might well be echoed in the novels, while opposing views such as those of Martha Peacock would be neglected.[4]

A defining characteristic of each of the novels is that they appropriate real Dutch Golden Age art in some way. It is important here to differentiate between adaptation and appropriation, since appropriation "extends far beyond the adaptation of other texts into new literary creations, assimilating both historical lives and events [...] and companion art forms [...] into the process" (Sanders 148), as is the case with these novels and their reworkings of seventeenth-century Dutch art. *Tulip Fever* has added paintings from several seventeenth-

[2] *The Miniaturist* has been adapted for the screen as a BBC series, which aired in 2017. *Tulip Fever* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring* have both been adapted as films; the first was released in 2017 and the latter in 2003.
[3] While *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and *Tulip Fever* both feature Acknowledgements sections at the end of the novels, in which all professional help is listed, *The Miniaturist* includes an informal "Thank you" section, in which experts and friends and family alike are acknowledged.
[4] Peacock argues for a re-assessment of the view, supported by Schama, that Dutch domestic imagery should be regarded as moralizing and didactic; as warning its spectators on the risks of loose morals and instructing them on proper behaviour through its depictions of female domesticity. It must be noted, however, that Schama does "allow Dutch women a certain amount of power and prestige" (48).

century Dutch artists between pages which can be connected to certain excerpts from Moggach's novel. *Girl with a Pearl Earring* follows the famous Johannes Vermeer while creating his best-known painting. *The Miniaturist* describes the process of decorating Petronella Oortman's doll's house, now exhibited at the Rijksmuseum. The novels' inclusion of these works of art is important to take into account, as they establish a verifiable link with the historical period. Although "we can never be sure that what we see and experience now" when looking at such seventeenth-century art "is either what the artist intended or what contemporaries perceived," it is a tangible piece of Dutch Golden Age history that "still lives" and is "still here to be experienced first hand" (Price 261). As most of the art, included in the novels, depict women, these works of art can be regarded as seventeenth-century sources of information on the lives of this marginalized group, albeit sources created by men.[5]

Through a close-reading of the novels and a study of relevant theory, provided by scholars such as Linda Hutcheon and Jerome de Groot, who have both published on the genre of historical fiction in relation to marginalization, this paper aims to show that British contemporary historical fiction on the Dutch Golden Age provides a voice for the Other, stripping the golden era of its lustre. The thesis will include three chapters that each present a case study of one of the novels within this framework. The first chapter will focus on the most recently published novel, *The Miniaturist*, and will be followed by a chapter on *Tulip Fever* and a chapter on *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, both published in 1999. Evidence from the novels will be provided to show how the unheard voices of the working class, women, and minorities such as homosexuals and people of colour, are reinstalled in this period of Dutch history. Hopefully, this research will lead to more nuanced views on these times of "emergent

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[5] While it is certain that all appropriated paintings in *Tulip Fever* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring* were created by male artists, this cannot, with the same certainty, be stated of Petronella Oortman's doll's house, as its creator remains anonymous to this day. Burton has used this knowledge gap to incorporate a female miniaturist in her novel, responsible for the house's furnishings. This seems unlikely, however, as a travel report by Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach, who visited the Brandt family to marvel at the doll's house, mentions that its maker was a carpenter, who was also considered a skilled lock maker and silversmith, and had previously worked at the French court (Ter Molen 125).

modernity” by including marginal voices (Price 84), and will also help contextualize this particular branch of historical fiction, which so far has received little attention.

A Case Study of *The Miniaturist*

The Miniaturist by Jessie Burton is a novel inspired by the famous doll's house of Petronella Brandt-Oortman, one of the Rijksmuseum's prized possessions. The novel is situated in Amsterdam, during the Dutch Golden Age, and uses a third person limited point of view to tell the story of the eighteen-year-old Nella Oortman, who has moved to the city to live with her new husband Johannes Brandt, an influential and prosperous merchant. In the novel, Johannes gifts her a doll's house, hidden inside a tortoiseshell-decorated cabinet, as a wedding present. When Nella starts ordering accessories to decorate the doll's house with, the secrets of the Brandt household gradually come to light. The miniaturist, recipient of Nella's purchase orders, turns out to be a woman who seems to know more about the girl's husband, his sister Marin, and their servants Otto and Cornelia than any stranger should.[6] She communicates her knowledge to Nella through mysterious messages and telling miniature items that were not requested but added to the parcels nonetheless. Desperate to uncover the miniaturist's identity, as well as the secrets of the house, Nella goes on a search for truth that eventually leads to the unexpected birth of Thea, the illegitimate child of Marin and her black servant Otto, Johannes's death sentence and newly-acquired self-dominion for Nella.

Burton's decision to base her debut historical novel on an existing doll's house (Appendix A fig. 1), especially made for and owned by a known female citizen of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, helps her to provide a voice for the women of that period and to address the particular issues and assumptions that came with womanhood. Doll's houses like the one featured in the novel were part of an elitist culture during the Dutch Golden Age. Often, an incredible amount of time and money would be spent on these houses by their female owners (Broomhall 55; Ter Molen 135). The doll's houses were generally

[6] In this novel, a miniaturist is someone who is "trained in the art of small things," such as doll's house furniture (Burton 59). The craftswoman is contacted by Nella to decorate "a house of nine rooms, on a miniature scale, that is to be displayed in a cabinet" (Burton 59).

acknowledged as highly valued works of art.[7] They have their origins in the cabinet of curiosities, at the time referred to as a *kunstkabinet*, which was a collection of remarkable items, often picked up during travels, abundantly displayed in either an entire room or a luxurious cabinet (Pijzel-Dommisse 13-17). The seventeenth-century doll's houses, often shaped like cabinets, can be considered the female counterpart of these cabinets of curiosities, which were generally collected and possessed by the male elite. The doll's house, as the cabinet's feminine variant, therefore provides a great window on female experience in the Dutch Golden Age. It should be noted that Oortman's doll's house in particular can be used to discuss racial marginalization as well. Jacob Appel's painting of the doll's house, created circa 1710, depicts several dolls within the rooms, including a black servant (Appendix A fig. 2-3). The purpose of doll's houses like Oortman's was two-fold: they were a means of showing off wealth and status (Moseley-Christian 344), and also served as female education on, and a celebration of, the Dutch seventeenth-century ideal of well-organized domesticity (Broomhall 60).

The purpose of doll's houses is also commented on in *The Miniaturist* and can be connected to Nella's search for power and independence throughout the novel. When Johannes reveals his wedding gift to Nella and the rest of the household, he lets it slip that his sister Marin told him "to find a distraction" for Nella (Burton 45). A suspicion arises that both siblings feel that Nella should not interfere in Johannes's business or Marin's household, but should rather occupy herself with the miniature household that she now owns. This suspicion seems to be confirmed when Johannes informs Nella that it is not just a copy of their house, but that "[i]t's [her] house" (46). It is again underlined when he argues that "[i]t's for her education" (45), and again when the maid, Cornelia, suggests that the doll's house is "a lot

[7] Jet Pijzel-Dommisse points out in *Het Hollandse pronkpoppenhuis: interieur en huishouden in de 17de en 18de eeuw* that doll's houses did not end up being forgotten after the death of the original owner. They were put up for sale as precious works of art or, rather, as done with paintings such as Rembrandt's *Portrait of Jan Six*, they were proudly kept within the family, as was the fate of Petronella Oortman's house as well. In the 18th century, this particular doll's house gained such fame that people from all over the world requested a viewing (13).

easier to manage" (46). It appears that the protagonist is not deemed able to run an actual household by her husband, sister-in-law, or even her maid. Nella, however, feels that there is no need for such a "practice-instrument" now that she's married (48), and claims that she does not "need to be educated" (49). She does not seem to value the doll's house as a possible embodiment of Dutch domesticity, but rather regards it as "a monument to her powerlessness, her arrested womanhood" (49): "It's your house, her husband had said – but who can live in tiny rooms, these nine dead ends?" (49). Rather than running her miniature household, Nella would like to manage the Brandt household, a position currently held by Marin: "[Marin]'s still mistress of this household. You see how strict she is, keeping us all in order. That's supposed to be my [Nella's] job" (174). The cabinet's other potential purpose, that of showing off wealth and status, is rejected by Nella as well: "Who will see this piece of work […]. She [Nella] has no friends, no family in this city to come and exclaim at it" (48-49). The novel thus seems to treat the doll's house as a means of discussing Nella's struggle for power and independence, rather than fulfilling its traditional purposes.

Interestingly, the wedding gift seems to guide Nella through several stages of this struggle. This becomes clear when her responses to the miniaturist's parcels and notes are taken into account. Initially, Nella dismisses the empowering note she receives from the miniaturist, which contains the message "every woman is the architect of her own fortune," with the comment that "[w]omen don't build anything, let alone their own fates" (76).[8] However, when she discovers, fairly early on in the novel, that the miniaturist is a woman (130), the notes appear to become more meaningful to the protagonist. They guide Nella and motivate her to take action when Johannes is imprisoned. She is inspired to pick up his sugar business and make a deal with pastry baker Arnoud Maakvrede, remembering one of the miniaturist's notes: "don't let sweet weapons stray" (299). Nella is clearly no longer

[8] The note adapts the proverb "every man is the architect of his own fortune," included in *Moral Emblems* (1627), a work by Dutch poet Jacob Cats, and was likely well-known in the Dutch Republic.

predominantly concerned with matters of the house. She has moved into the public sphere of trading, dominated by men, and now has to overcome prejudice regarding her "youth and sex" (319). The miniaturist has assisted her during this process. Nella believes she has helped take back her "self-dominion" and her "own possession" (377). The protagonist seals this fate by destroying the doll's house (394), which appears to be the last step in becoming "the architect of her own fortune" (130).[9]

The miniaturist's doll's house and messages are not the only factors that change the girl's ideas on women's position in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Johannes as well as Marin influence her thinking too; Marin might even be considered the embodiment of twenty-first century commentary on this piece of history, as her concerns echo present-day ones and thus lead to contemplation of the current position of women in society (De Groot 37). During the first part of the novel, Nella is predominantly guided by general opinion and her mother's ideas: "so many women – including my own mother, Nella, realizes – see [marriage] as the only possible form of influence a woman may have" (Burton 317). Befitting this Dutch Golden Age ideal, she initially aspires to be "a proper woman," who marries and has children (161). She believes that "life as a wife" is a woman's only option (18), and when Johannes discusses VOC business with his sister, Nella feels that "Johannes is surely crossing a forbidden boundary – for what other woman knows this much about the ins and outs of the VOC?" (29). She is merely concerned with her powerlessness within the house, as Marin still seems to hold the position of "mistress of this household" (174). When Johannes takes his young wife out to a feast at the Guild of the Silversmiths, however, her world expands from domestic to public: "it is not a man she has married, but a world. Silversmiths, a sister-in-law, strange acquaintances, a house she feels lost in, a smaller one that frightens her" (104). Johannes tells her that "there is a freedom among Amsterdam ladies that the French and

[9] The destruction of the doll's house is purely fictional. As figure 1 in Appendix A shows, Oortman's cabinet is still intact and can be admired at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

English lack […]. Ladies can walk alone on the street. Couples can even hold each other's hands" (87). She also learns that although Frans Meermans, a former friend of Johannes, manages his wife Agnes's plantation, her name, "a woman's name," is still "on the papers" (85-86). While Johannes informs Nella of the freedom women are allowed in the Dutch Golden Age, Marin enlightens her with a radical stance on marriage that does not in the slightest coincide with the beliefs of that time. For the first time in her life, the girl starts doubting the power that marriage supposedly bestows on women: "Marriage is supposed […] to increase a woman's power, Nella supposes. But does it? Marin believed herself to be more powerful without it […] and indeed extraordinary things have happened [in Marin's life]. A child, a prison cell, yes – but also choice and the moulding of one's own fate" (317). As Nella's eyes are being opened to life outside marriage and the domestic sphere, the novel gradually changes focus from Nella's personal and domestic power struggle with Marin, to a more general struggle between margin and centre positions, between the female Other and the ideals of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. The novel no longer raises questions on Nella's position only, but also touches upon the fate of other women through, for example, Cornelia, Marin and the miniaturist.

Overall, women of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic might have been struggling with ruling assumptions on womanhood, domesticity and marriage, but Cornelia underlines that women can be further divided into classes and wealth, which in turn affects their fate. When Nella asks her if the Brandt family is poor, the maid replies with "Madame, don't be ridiculous. Poor? Women all over the city would give their right arm to be where you are" (Burton 111). The miniaturist, as a working woman living by herself, also highlights the fact that different women had to fight different battles during the Dutch Golden Age. She is constantly confronted with prejudice concerning her living situation, as "[o]nly widows and whores live alone" (132), and would sooner be regarded as a "Norwegian witch turned

Amsterdam spy" than a working woman: "No woman can be an apprentice […]. No man is keen to train a woman" (288-89). Marin, too, can be looked at in this context. She has deliberately remained unmarried, and as such does not qualify as "a proper woman" in seventeenth-century Amsterdam (161). She is regarded by fellow citizens as "the perfect Dutchwoman, immaculate, handsome, and walking with a purpose. The only thing missing is a husband" (117). She is deemed incomplete and is constantly confronted with her marginal position, caught in the city's religious and moral web, in which women have no power:

> We can do nothing – Petronella – we woman […]. All we can do if we're lucky is stitch up the mistakes that other people make […]. And some of us can work, […] back-breaking work, for which they won't even pay us half of what a man could earn. The only thing they think we can do is produce children who then become the property of our husbands. (160-61)

As suggested earlier, Marin's character can be interpreted as echoing twenty-first century concerns, in this case that of women's earnings compared to men's. Marin's desperate outburst with regards to women's powerlessness furthermore exemplifies the novel's attempt to provide a voice for the female Other, "the unseen of history, rather than the progress outlined by historians" (De Groot 37), as it clearly articulates the struggles that "women in particular went through" (56). Important to note is that none other than Marin's own daughter adds nuance to her mother's seemingly universalizing statements on seventeenth-century women. This nuance is much-needed, as difference always "operates within […] these challenging cultures, as well as against the dominant" (Hutcheon 62). Although Marin is likely right in arguing that women in general were marginalized in the Dutch Golden Age, her mixed-race daughter, who is "scandalously unique" and will have to deal with an entirely new set of problems (Burton 388), clearly reflects that women do not fit neatly into one category.

While it is clear that the novel is predominantly concerned with the marginal position

of women in history, it does not reduce gender roles to a simple binary opposition between male and female, nor does it universalize the seventeenth-century Dutch woman. Both Johannes, the wealthy merchant, and Otto, his black manservant and Marin's secret lover, refute the idea of a binary opposition, as not only women's position is discussed, but the positions of homosexuals and black people in the Dutch Golden Age as well. A voice is provided for the unheard tales of black people in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic through Otto. He is well-educated, raised "like a son" by Johannes (Burton 112), and is a seventeenth-century "Dutchman" in every sense (31), but for his skin colour. Because of that colour, and regardless of his acquired skills, his freedom is limited to the house. He becomes powerless and Other as soon as he steps out the door; he cannot actually do anything in the public sphere. He is stared at, laughed at, and blatantly discriminated, as a passer-by shouts: "I can't find work, and you [Marin] give that animal a job?" (115-16). It is not hard to see the similarities between the racism Burton portrays in her Dutch Golden Age novel, and twenty-first century racist comments on, for instance, fugitives supposedly stealing jobs. Like Marin's stance on women's earnings, the novel's depiction of racism could be interpreted as a reflection on current society, as the novel's historical and fictional treatment of the Other "forges a link with the present" (Hutcheon 196).

When Nella discovers Johannes is gay (Burton 150), it appears that the novel furthermore addresses the drowned voices of homosexuals. The wealthy merchant is put to trial for sodomy and becomes a voiceless Other, as he does not get the opportunity to speak up for himself and tell his story to the court (339). As a result, he is sentenced "to be weighed down at the neck, and to be drowned in the sea" (367). Johannes has lost his centre position power due to a marginal sexual preference, as "[i]n the face of that accusation no one has power, only God" (303). It is interesting to note that he only seems to become aware of the boundaries of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic when he moves from the centre to the

margin. Whereas he first assures Nella that Amsterdam "is not a prison" (87), he later states that it is in fact a prison, and "its bars are made of murderous hypocrisy" (264). Johannes, too, has suffered under the Dutch Golden Age regime, in which citizens are called upon by the church to consider how they have sinned against their neighbours or how their "neighbour is a sinner" (123): "Any person's behaviour would mutate under such constant scrutiny, such bigoted piety – neighbours watching neighbours, twisting ropes to bind us all" (264). The inclusion of racist slurs towards Otto and Johannes's tragic fate as a homosexual suggests that that the novel transcends its purpose as providing a voice for history's women, and rather takes it upon itself to provide a voice for anyone who has struggled for power and freedom.

A Case Study of *Tulip Fever*

Deborah Moggach's novel *Tulip Fever* is set against a backdrop of tulipomania in seventeenth-century Amsterdam.[10] It is written from several perspectives and has multiple narrators who each tell their own, though intertwined, stories over the course of several chapters. All narrators are appointed a third person limited point of view with the exception of Sophia, who shares her side of events in the first-person perspective, and can therefore be interpreted as *Tulip Fever*'s leading lady. Moggach's intricately-woven narratives tell the story of the young Sophia, who is unhappily married to the much older and much richer merchant Cornelis Sandvoort. While he is smitten with his beautiful wife, desperately longing for a son, she feels only duty towards her husband. Sophia's sense of duty fades quickly when Cornelis decides they will be eternalized through portraiture; his wife falls in love with the painter Jan van Loos and they have an affair. When Maria, the household's maid, discovers her mistress's double life, she blackmails Sophia to protect her own secret: she is a pregnant, unmarried woman. The maid's pregnancy appears to be a blessing in disguise to her mistress, however. The women decide that Sophia will pretend to be pregnant, so that Cornelis will stop his nightly visits and Maria's baby will be ensured a good life. To top it all off, Sophia will fake her own death in child birth, so that she will be free to sail off to the colonies with Jan. The expenses of the journey will be paid through the lucrative tulip trade. Although risky, the plan seems to work, until Jan's servant accidentally eats their most valuable possession, the Semper Augustus bulb. When Sophia realizes she cannot have a life with Jan and has caused Cornelis unnecessary grief, she disappears into a convent, never to return.

While Jan van Loos and his paintings have never existed, unlike the works of art in *The Miniaturist* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *Tulip Fever* clearly appropriates actual Dutch

[10] During the early seventeenth century, the tulip became an immensely popular flower, causing a "rapid inflation," which was later followed by a major "collapse in the prices of tulip bulbs" (Price 66). While the "damage caused to the wider Dutch economy seems to have been decidedly limited," tulipomania "served as a symbol of what many felt was going wrong with Dutch society," as aggressive capitalist interests overshadowed morals and values "at the heart of social stability" (67).

Golden Age art to tell the unheard stories of that time. In line with Sanders' statement on appropriation, Moggach has assimilated art and historical events, such as the tulip craze, to create her fictional narrative. The novel's debt to existing seventeenth-century paintings is obvious when looking at the physical book: it contains four sections between the pages with copies of Dutch Golden Age works (Appendix B fig.1). This suggests the novel has a relationship with these paintings, although in most cases this appears to be a relatively free and creative relationship based on inspiration rather than interpretation. While Moggach's appropriation of Vermeer's *Girl Reading Letter at Open Window* into Sophia reading Jan's love letter seems to be a likely interpretation (Appendix B fig. 2), as the letter in Vermeer's painting is probably of amorous nature, Moggach's readings of other included paintings appear to take more artistic freedom.[11] De Hooch's *Woman with Maid and Fish in an Interior* (Appendix B fig. 3), for example, as well as Maes's *A Sleeping Maid with her Mistress* (Appendix B fig. 4), seem to be used as the inspiration for Maria's storyline. In the first painting, we can see the maid holding a fish and a cradle depicted in the foreground. The scene possibly inspired Maria's relationship with fish monger Willem and her unintended pregnancy. Similarly, Maes's work appears to be creatively appropriated in the novel. The work portrays a maid, sleeping on a stool, and her mistress grinning at the spectator with a jug in her hand. The reversal of Maria and Sophia's positions inside the house during the pregnancy seems to be inspired by this work: "When we're alone, our positions are reversed. I look after Maria; I am her servant. If she is tired I put her to bed in the wall; I scour the cooking pots and sweep the floor" (Moggach 108). These examples underline the relationship between the contemporary historical novel and Dutch Golden Age painting. It seems that these works of art helped Moggach shape a British contemporary novel about the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, albeit in a less straightforward manner than can be seen in *The*

[11] X-ray analysis showed that "a painting of cupid previously hung from the wall behind the young woman" but was later omitted by Vermeer (Thompson 8).

Miniaturist and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, which have both used one piece of art as the foundation of their narratives.

Similarly to the other novels, however, *Tulip Fever* has used art as a source on the lives of seventeenth-century women especially, since nine out of sixteen included works portray women. Moggach appears very much aware of art's ability to focus on the historically marginalized woman. In a chapter called "The Painting" (115-16), which interestingly is not tied to any of the novel's usual narrators, the readers are taken back to the twentieth century, in which Jan's nude painting of Sophia, *Woman on a Bed,* is exhibited at the Rijksmuseum (116). The nude is studied by scholars and visitors alike, who speculate about the depicted woman, as Moggach suggests has been the case with Rembrandt's Danae too (Appendix B fig. 5): "Scholars will quarrel about her [Sophia's] identity. Is she Venus? Is she Delilah? […] Ordinary people will wonder: who is she? His mistress? A model? Surely not a model, for she gazes out of the painting with such frank love" (115-16). The inclusion of this chapter, which reflects on popular interpretations of famous paintings and contemplates possible readings of Jan's *Woman on a Bed*, exemplifies that art indeed is used to bring attention to the histories of the marginalized .

Historical fiction shares visual art's power to raise awareness for unheard voices, as has been pointed out by De Groot (148). This most certainly seems to be the case for *Tulip Fever*. The novel's inclusion of several narrators from different walks of life, who each shed a particular light on the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century, stimulates its readers to look critically at "issues of legitimacy, authority and identity" (De Groot 68). This becomes especially clear when Sophia's and Cornelis's experiences are compared. Cornelis, for example, patriotically claims that "[i]n other countries servants are treated like slaves," yet "here, in his enlightened city, they are considered one of the family" (Moggach 122). Sophia, however, makes a contradictory statement that bitterly echoes the enlightenment Cornelis has

praised: “Maria is a servant and even in our enlightened country servants are on the periphery of our vision” (155). In another instance, Cornelis lovingly quotes Vondel on the wide colonial reach of the Dutch Republic to exemplify that they live “in the greatest city, home to the greatest nation on the globe” (2-3).[12] Being a woman, however, Sophia cannot enjoy this wide reach: “Around my waist hang keys to nothing but our linen chests, for I have yet to unlock anything of more significance. In fact, I am wondering what clothes I shall wear for my portrait. That is the size of my world so far. Forget oceans and empires” (Moggach 3). Through contradictory narratives like these, “the idea of a single, unitary and linear history” is contested in the novel (Wallace 202). Instead, it seems to foreground the “subjective, fragmentary nature of historical knowledge” (202), showing the desire, like *The Miniaturist*, to tell the many stories of the marginalized.

By including characters such as Sophia and Cornelis, with conflicting points of view as seventeenth-century man and woman, *Tulip Fever* cleverly reveals how the “constraining and ordering social ideologies and structures” of the Dutch Golden Age affect the female Other (De Groot 158). As can be seen in postmodern works as well, “class or general economic issues” cannot be ignored within the novel (Hutcheon 216). Not unexpectedly, women are portrayed as suffering most under the ruling economic and class structures. Sophia, nor Maria, seem happy with the restrictions forced upon them by their social classes and corresponding economic situations. This dissatisfaction is for example reflected in their jealousy with regards to each other’s outfits. Maria occasionally “puts on her mistress’s blue velvet jacket, trimmed with fur collar and cuffs” when Sophia is not home. Sophia, in turn, jealously witnesses how Maria can afford to look “shameless” with her “bodice is unlaced, revealing the freckled curve of her breasts” (33). While Maria might be able to show some cleavage as a servant, she is also degraded to “an item of furniture” (Moggach 103), whose

[12] Vondel on Amsterdam: “What waters are not shadowed by her sails? On which mart does she not sell her wares? What peoples does she not see lit by the moon, she who herself sets the laws of the whole ocean?” (Moggach 2-3).

death "would not plunge a house into mourning" (231). She only escapes this fate, if Willem saves enough money, so that they can marry and find "a place to live" of their own (52). Sophia, however, is also trapped: to save her "family from ruin" (129), the girl is forced married to someone "who's sucking the life out of [her] to warm his old bones" (69). Although her class and status obviously bring about benefits too, she cannot help but envy Maria, who "is free" to carry herself however she likes (33), as a maid is "on the periphery of [society's] vision" (155). Tellingly, to escape her life and visit Jan, Sophia borrows Maria's dress, which offers her the opportunity to be who she wants to be; "a creature transformed" (69). Sophia dreams of freedom; "of how it would have been if [she] had met Jan first and were free to marry him, to love him blamelessly" (129). Important to note is that, although the reasons behind it differ, the desire to marry for love is problematized by finances for both upper-class Sophia and working-class Maria.

Although Sophia and Jan's relationship is characteristic of the romance genre, which "is often interested in the relationship between professional male and subject" (De Groot 56), it nonetheless deviates from typical romance fiction in a significant manner. It remains critical of the central patriarchal system, even when love is promised, which goes against the genre's pattern as outlined by De Groot (58). It does not "sustain dominant cultural modes such as family," nor does it honour ruling "economic, social and class structures" (De Groot 57). Sophia and Jan rather blemish than cherish the dominant family values in hope of achieving happiness together: Sophia pretends to offer Cornelis a family, faking pregnancy and later death in child birth, so that her husband is finally left utterly alone, without wife or child of his own.[13] Above all, their relationship goes against the social structures of the Dutch Golden Age, indirectly critiquing them. As Sophia is wed to Cornelis, and divorce was not an option

[13] While Maria initially pretends that her baby is Cornelis' daughter, this changes when Willem, her former lover, returns. Cornelis accidentally overhears Maria explaining the situation to Willem and decides to leave for the colonies to chase down Sophia and Jan. He leaves the child and house with Maria and Willem, asking only to have the child keep his last name, so that the Sandvoort family will not die with him (Moggach 233-50).

in her case, her affair with Jan would automatically be frowned upon by God and country alike.[14] Even Sophia herself, trapped in a loveless marriage, believes she is "committing a mortal sin" (Moggach 69). Dutch society would also take issue with Sophia and Jan's relationship due to their difference in class. The painter "comes from a family of craftsmen," while Sophia is "a gentlewoman"; Sophia's interactions with Jan, as well as his neighbourhood, would be deemed "disreputable for a refined lady like [her]" (Moggach 49). As the romance offered to the novel's readers is thus problematized in several areas, the grim reality for those living in the margins, those going against the grain, is underlined. By addressing the effects of social and patriarchal structures, Sophia and Jan's relationship shows what "keep[s] women in bondage," and "work[s] to suggest that dominant cultural orderings might be challenged, subverted or questioned" (De Groot 57).

Another area in which dominant orderings are challenged within Moggach's historical novel is religion. Religious differences go hand-in-hand with the Dutch Golden Age due to the Reformation and its aftermath, and it is therefore not surprising that Moggach's novel mentions the tension yet general tolerance between Catholicism and Protestantism.[15] The different interpretations of Christianity are cleverly included in Moggach's story through its narrators: Maria and Jan are Protestant, Sophia is Catholic. While these are clear-cut categories, the novel also includes more subtle religious differences. Sophia, for example, seems to believe in an unforgiving, punishing God (Moggach 88), while Jan promotes a loving, generous God (69). Maria, in turn, is described as someone who merely pays "lip-

[14] According to a study on single, divorced and widowed women in the Dutch Republic, "there were two options for couples to be separated from each other" (Schmidt and Van der Heijden 32). They could decide to "live separate lives," in which case women "could not remarry," or they "could obtain a divorce on the grounds of proven adultery or malicious desertion, in which case the innocent party was allowed to remarry" (32). The first option would not allow Sophia to marry Jan, and would likely leave her without a livelihood due to her family's bankruptcy. The second option would not be possible at all, as Sophia had no such grounds to make her case.
[15] The Republic offered a freedom of conscience, which "allowed a dissident religious culture to flourish and to express its beliefs with some freedom, though there were very definite and well-understood limits to this freedom" (Price 186). Dutch citizens, for example, were not obligated to join "the official church of the Dutch state," the Reformed Church, nor were they required to attend any services. Catholics enjoyed a freedom of conscience, which meant that they were allowed "to hold their own religious services as long as they used a certain discretion – and paid the necessary fines to the local" authorities (186).

service to God and then get[s] on with" her life (193). Through the character of Cornelis, however, *Tulip Fever* takes the question of religion to an entirely new level by moving beyond Christianity, the dominant religious form during the Dutch Golden Age, and into the marginal territory of atheists. Interestingly, this changes Cornelis's position. In almost every way, he fits into the centre: he is a wealthy, white, heterosexual male. He is decentred, however, because he sheds his believe in God. After Cornelis receives the news that Sophia, his second wife, has died just like his first wife, he "realizes, quite suddenly, that he has lost his faith" (191). He cannot believe in a God that would leave him with "[t]wo dead wives and two dead children," while he has "paid his dues" for sixty years (191). To question God's existence would be blasphemy, however (95). To publicly reject God in a society in which faith "is deeply rooted" and considered "the very foundation of our existence" would be illegal and could potentially lead to long imprisonment (Moggach 89), as was the fate of seventeenth-century author Adriaan Koerbagh (Price 193).[16] Cornelis is therefore forced to keep his atheism a secret, until he abandons the Republic for the colonies at least. Months after his arrival there, a rumour reaches Amsterdam that "he set up home with a beautiful native girl," and "lives with her in sinful pleasure, for he has never solemnized their union – in fact, he has never set foot inside a church" (Moggach 256). Moggach's decision to have the most dominant figure lose his faith allows the novel to add nuance to centre and margin, suggesting that neither is universal and eternal.

Tulip Fever might present a romantic love story, but is far from romantic about the past. It cannot be considered nostalgic: the marginalized Sophia refutes any idealised comments about the Dutch Republic made by the generally central Cornelis. Just like *The Miniaturist*, the novel underlines the issues that those within the margins had to deal with. Through the use of multiple narrators in different positions of society, the novel highlights the

[16] Adriaan Koerbagh, author of the blasphemous work *A Light Shining in Dark Places*, "was sentenced to ten years imprisonment by the Amsterdam magistrates" (Price 193).

fact that those who do not belong to the dominant group do not necessarily form "monolithic movements," but rather "constitute a multiplicity of responses to a commonly perceived situation of marginality and ex-centricity" (Hutcheon 62). It thus interrogates "the very bases of any certainty (history, subjectivity, reference) and of any standards of judgment" (Hutcheon 57). The past is re-established through these interrogations; contradictory statements within the narratives suggest that what we know of history is subjective. The novel refutes the notion of a seemingly homogeneous golden age for all Dutch citizens of the seventeenth-century: through the unheard voices of atheists, the working-class and especially women, margins "are reasserted as the center becomes a fiction," no longer totalizing and universal (Hutcheon 58).

A Case Study of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*

Tracy Chevalier's popular historical novel, *Girl with A Pearl Earring*, follows the fictional working-class Griet during her time as a maid at the Vermeer residence. She is charged with the cleaning of Johannes Vermeer's studio, and gradually becomes more involved in the world of painting when the artist asks her to work as his assistant on the side. When the painter's patron, the wealthy Van Ruijven, meets "the wide-eyed maid" (Chevalier 88), Griet's fate appears to be sealed. She is to be painted; eternalized in one of the most famous works of art from the Dutch Golden Age.

Like Moggach and Burton have done, Chevalier appears to use the creation of this existing work of art from the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic to reveal the period's class and gender issues, carefully hidden underneath the domestic tranquillity that Spinks and Broomhall suggest Vermeer's paintings portray (24). As Hutcheon claims of postmodern works, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* prevents straightforward nostalgia, as it is made impossible to ignore the issues that many seventeenth-century Dutch women must have had to face (216). The connection of the novel to this particular piece of art history might be explained when taking into consideration that "[m]uch of history is dominated by men, which means you have to look for subjects that include women" (Goodman 15), such as this painting. Although Vermeer's arguably most popular painting is not a portrait of an actual woman, but rather "a painting of an imaginary figure" ("Girl with a Pearl Earring" Mauritshuis), the figure's female face is still one of the best-known of the Dutch Golden Age (Appendix C fig. 1). The painting thus provides a useful stepping stone for a novel that discusses the female perspective on this period in history, as the appropriated works of art in *The Miniaturist* and *Tulip Fever* did as well.

Chevalier's appropriation of the Vermeer painting could also serve as a means of bringing other negative assumptions about women to light, "held by society in general" and

"artists in particular," reflected in "almost all individual images involving women" (Nochlin 2). Nochlin lists several of these assumptions, such as "women's weakness and passivity; her sexual availability for men's needs; her defining domestic and nurturing function," and "her existence as object rather than creator of art" (Nochlin 2). Prejudices like these have a strong marginalizing effect on women, as they are written off as "muses, models, observers, diversions" (Hutcheon 198). It is not hard to see how the novel's protagonist fulfils similar functions for the men in her environment. She is not just a model to Vermeer, but also his muse. When Griet is cleaning the studio's windows, the artist walks in and asks her to pose for him: "Look over your shoulder at me again" (Chevalier 91). Griet seems to inspire him, as he starts a new painting the next day (92), and opts to have his female subject wear "a white cap that hangs down in two points below her chin," like Griet wears hers (96). In addition, although she works as the painter's assistant, Griet does not usually take on an active role in the creation of art, but rather observes it. Even when she realizes that "[s]omething about the scene he was to paint bothered [her]," she initially waits for Vermeer "to make the change" (141). Eventually, she takes action and adjusts the carefully arranged scene herself, but is immediately frightened that he might send her away for it (142). The experienced anxiety can be linked to the maid's position as a female servant from a lower social class; she is powerless and risks punishment if she does not submit to the wishes of those above her in class. This becomes eerily clear when the maid is fired for having her portrait painted by Vermeer, wearing his wife's pearl earrings, even though she actually helped bring in much-needed extra income for the family by posing for a painting that Vermeer's patron, Van Ruijven, had commissioned. Griet furthermore serves as a diversion for the married Van Ruijven, who is eager to bed her, as he bedded "the maid in the red dress," whom he tossed aside after he had his way with her (134-35).

As the novel is a first-person narrative from a maid's point of view, it forces its

reader to consider the protagonist's position, in which class issues are added to those of gender, in contrast to the elitist positions of the protagonists in *Tulip Fever* and *The Miniaturist*. According to Hutcheon, exposition of the marginalized woman is "often directly connected to that of other similarly unequal oppositions, such as race and class" (198). In Chevalier's novel, the constraints of the Dutch Golden Age are predominantly addressed through Griet's position as a maid at the Vermeer residence. Even before Griet starts working for the family, social structures comes to light. When Vermeer and his wife, Catharina, visit Griet's home to see whether the girl would make an appropriate maid, Catharina voices her concerns about Griet's strength, as she is "not very big" (Chevalier 4). Vermeer, however, does not seem to pay much attention to his wife's concerns, which suggests her opinion carries little weight. Catharina appears aware of the fact that her disagreement does not influence her husband. Rather than fighting with her husband, she focuses her annoyance on Griet, whom she does have power over, since she is in a higher social class than the maid: "Though she was annoyed by his attention to [Griet], it was [her] she frowned at" (6). Catharina's ignored opinions, however, seem almost reprehensible in comparison to her maid's lack of options and influence. The girl has no say in her future at the Vermeer household; her mother simply informs her of her fate, telling her that she is "to start tomorrow as their maid," since her "father has lost his trade" (6). Griet has little to no autonomy or power as their maid. She cannot even slap Cornelia, one of the daughters, for misbehaving, without endangering her job: "I'll tell our mother. Maids don't slap us" (23). She is clearly positioned below the children in the household's hierarchy. While this could be explained through the difference in class, which shaped the ordering of seventeenth-century society, Griet also appears rated below her fellow maid Tanneke, equal in class and function: she "was new and [she] was young – it was to be expected [she] would have the hardest tasks" (21). Her appointed sleeping quarters, "a hole in the floor of one of the storage rooms" (19), seem

to underline Griet's position at the bottom of the domestic hierarchy. The situation outside of the domestic sphere is not much better. When her family's neighbourhood is quarantined due to the plague, she approaches one of the soldiers on a barrier at the street to inquire about their fate. She is not taken seriously, however, as the soldier tells her that he "could ask around, but not for nothing […] looking [her] up and down so [she] would know he didn't mean money" (70). Both inside and outside the house, Griet thus appears powerless and taken advantage of.

This powerlessness is echoed in the maid's portrayal as a voiceless tool for others to use. She is a tool of survival for her parents. Their daughter first ensures an income by working as a maid, and later offers them the prospect of future security as the sweetheart of the butcher's son Pieter, since a "butcher's wife – and her parents – would always eat well" (Chevalier 128). Similarly to *Tulip Fever* and *The Miniaturist*, the novel codes marriage "in economic terms," portraying Griet as an "economic victim" who is pushed towards marriage to save her penniless family (Hutcheon 216). When Pieter dines at their house, Griet's mother tells her to walk him "to the end of the street," causing Griet to feel her "parents had pushed [her] into the street, that a deal had been made and [she] was being passed into the hands of a man" (129). A sense of powerlessness is addressed here: Griet's situation is described as if her parents were pimps whoring out their daughter, albeit out of dire monetary necessity. The fact that Pieter later blatantly states that "[Griet's] family needs [him]" in an attempt to rush her into marriage and the marriage bed (Chevalier 186), to emotionally blackmail her into it even, ties in with Nochlin's claim that men assumed that they "were naturally entitled to desire, to possess, and to control the bodies of women" (Nochlin 9). Van Ruijven's attempts to physically force himself on Griet, while she clearly is not interested and tries to push "him away as politely as a maid can a gentleman" (Chevalier 199), indicates that it indeed seems to be the ruling assumption that women have to submit to men's needs, especially when they are of lower classes than the men. So, apart from being a tool of survival, Griet also functions as a

voiceless tool for male pleasure. This is confirmed by Pieter when he confronts Griet about the rumour that she is to be painted with Van Ruijven: “He is very powerful […] and you are but a maid. Who do you think will win that round of cards?” (169). Vermeer should be discussed within this context as well, although the painter helps Griet attain a sense of power too. She becomes his assistant, albeit mostly in secret, and, literally and figuratively, moves up in the house from “a hole in the floor” to the attic (19), allowing her to “wander freely” around the studio, where his wife “is not allowed” (118). It is furthermore claimed that Griet’s apprenticeship under Vermeer’s guidance “leads to liberation and self-knowledge” (Morel n.p.).[17] However, Vermeer seems to feel entitled to Griet’s body, just like Van Ruijven. He agrees to paint the maid for his patron, and although he protects her by painting her alone rather than with Van Ruijven, he does not stop to inquire after Griet’s feelings on being painted. The lack of inquiry points to Vermeer’s assumption that he, as the maid’s master, has the right to decide for Griet on matters that exceed her job description. Telling of the Republic’s ruling assumptions, the girl seems to believe this herself as well. When Pieter asks her “If your master did want to paint a picture of you and Van Ruijven, do you really think you could say no?” she replies with “Thank you for reminding me of how helpless I am” (Chevalier 169).

While Van Ruijven’s influence cannot be ignored in the matter of Vermeer painting Griet, as he has commissioned the piece, there are other examples of assumed control over and possession of Griet which the painter himself is solely responsible for. Interestingly, Vermeer no longer functions as the provider of his family in these instances; his actions are no longer motivated by the need to bring in an income through his commissions. Instead, he is depicted as an independent artist concerned only with himself and his artistic results. As

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[17] In the paper “Look at Me: the Camera Obscura and the Apprenticeship of the Gaze in Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*,” Morel links the male gaze and the novel’s inclusion of the camera obscura to Griet’s “apprenticeship of the gaze” and focuses especially on “its voyeuristic, transformative, sexual, fetishist, and capitalistic implications” (n.p.).

Griet's portrait is being finalized, he suddenly announces: "This will satisfy Van Ruijven, but not me" (Chevalier 202). It turns out that the missing element is the pearl earring, which Griet will know "be the end" of her time as the family's maid (203). She states that she "cannot wear it" (206), and argues that he is not painting it for himself, but "for Van Ruijven," who "would be satisfied with it" (207). It does not affect him, however, and Griet realizes that he "used what he wanted for his paintings, without considering the result" for her personally (207); Vermeer only cares about the artistic result now. The painter's assumed control and possession of Griet reach their full extent when he asks the maid to wear the second earring as well, as it would be "a farce to wear only one" (222). He knows Griet will not refuse him, even though the other pearl "can't be seen in the painting" (221). Since there is thus no practical need for the maid to pierce her unpainted ear, it seems that Vermeer is simply testing the extent of his control over Griet, which also appears to be the case when he enters the room while she is changing her headdress. As Griet had earlier determined that she "could not show him [her] hair," because she "was not the sort of girl who [leaves] her head bare" (Chevalier 192), Vermeer's decision to enter when Griet's hair is uncovered should be considered a grave intrusion of Griet's privacy.[18] His action seems to be in line with the belief that artists "had more or less unlimited access to the bodies of the women who worked for them as models" (Nochlin 9-10). By walking into that room, Vermeer has "seen [Griet] revealed" and has taken away the one thing that she intended to keep to herself without her being able to do anything about it (Chevalier 208). The grief that such assumptions cause Griet, seems underlined by the multiple comments on assumptions about maids in the novel. When Pieter tells Griet about Catharina's family history, he asks her whether they do not talk in the house. Griet answers that she does not "listen behind doorways," which appears to be funny to Pieter

[18] In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger explains that in European tradition, "hair is associated with sexual power, with passion" and therefore often remained covered, as the "woman's sexual passion needs to be minimized so that the spectator may feel that he has the monopoly of such passion. Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own" (55).

(124). Griet bitterly reflects: "Like everyone else, he thought all maids eavesdropped. There were many assumptions about maids that people made about me" (124). As the reader knows, Griet was telling Pieter the truth, yet ruling assumptions ensured that she would not be believed. Similarly, she suffers under the stories everyone has heard "of maids stealing silver spoons from their mistresses. Stealing and tempting the master of the house " (150). These ideas, Griet suggests, have influenced Catharina: "She was suspicious of me, in part because she did not like me, but also because she was influenced by the stories we had all heard" (150). Stories like these have trapped the maid in a Dutch Golden Age net of beliefs and assumptions, which appears difficult to break free from for her.

While the novel carefully depicts Griet's powerlessness in these multiple areas, it also interrogates it. The first-person narrative from the maid's point of view allows for personal reflection on the events in the novel. Through such reflections, it becomes clear that Griet is aware of her dependent position as a working-class woman in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and that she attempts to safeguard whatever control over her life she does have. The girl, for example, reflects on Vermeer's assistance in the missing comb debacle, for which Cornelia tried to set her up, saying: "I felt indebted. I felt that if he asked me to do something I could not say no. I did not know what he would ask that I would want to say no to, but none the less I did not like the position I had come to be in" (Chevalier 160). The maid might already be stuck in a relatively dependent situation, but nonetheless wishes to avoid any extra dependence. She voices similar concerns for losing independence when Pieter offers to find out how her quarantined family is doing: "I wondered what I would do if he did find out something. He was not demanding anything the way the soldier had, but I would be obliged to him. I did not want to be obliged to anyone" (71). Griet's attempts to remain as independent as possible within her limited position fittingly reach their climax when she is able to change the initial meaning of the phrase "a maid came free" on the very last page of the novel. The

phrase first appears roughly halfway through the novel, in relation to Van Ruijven's assumed ownership of the female body: "As I [Griet] had discovered with Van Ruijven, however, it was more often the man pursuing the maid than the other way round. To him a maid came free" (150). It has an obviously negative connotation in this instance, as its meaning points to both men's assumption that they are entitled to control the female body (Nochlin 9), and the marginal position of the working-class woman. However, when the phrase is later repeated as the conclusion of Griet's story, this connotation has changed completely. Griet has sold the pearl earrings that Vermeer gifted her in his will and is able to pay off the family's debt to Pieter. No longer would her husband be able to joke that the debt of fifteen guilders was "the price [he had] paid for [her]" (Chevalier 234). With "the debt now settled," she "would not have cost him anything. A maid came free" (248). Through the repetition of this phrase, man's assumed ownership of the female body is eventually rejected, and instead, woman's self-dominion is celebrated.

Although Griet's story predominantly focuses on the struggles of the seventeenth-century Dutch maid, it is important to note is that she is not the only victim of the oppressing structures of the Dutch Golden Age. Two other characters that should be included in this discussion are Catharina, Vermeer's wife, and Griet's younger brother Frans. Both characters are blamed for mistakes that they were not solely responsible for. The other parties involved, however, are in both instances more dominant, and thus have the power to oppress the voices of Catharina and Frans. Frans loses his apprenticeship at the tile factory when he becomes romantically involved with the owner's wife. While it was the wife "who started it" and showed her interest in Frans first, only to run to her husband after the boy reciprocated the interest, Frans is the one who is punished and deemed "stupid" (Chevalier 176). It does not seem to matter that he did not instigate the affair: his voice remains unheard. As a working-class citizen, who is beneath the owner's wife in social status, Frans is held

responsible because he should “know she’s not for the likes of” him (176). In a comparable manner, Catharina is also held responsible for the wrong-doing of one of her children. When the family discovers that Cornelia has stolen a tortoiseshell comb in an attempt to set Griet up for the crime, Vermeer charges his wife “with failing to raise her children properly” and does not concern himself with Cornelia’s punishment, as it is “not his duty” (156-57). Due to the “gendered divisions” of the Dutch Golden Age, Vermeer, being a man, does not have to occupy himself with his misbehaving children and can simply blame Catharina, as she is charged with any “domestic responsibilities” (Spinks and Broomhall 10). Although these divisions suggest that Catharina is in charge in the house, she actually has surprisingly little power within her assigned territory as soon as her husband decides to meddle in domestic matters. She cannot, for example, refuse her husband’s proposal to move the maid’s sleeping quarters up to the attic, while it is clear that she is “not happy about [Griet] being” there (Chevalier 118). Even Griet, herself oppressed by Catharina, realizes that it “must have been hard for a wife to accept such an arrangement” (118). The fact that Catharina is “not allowed in” Vermeer’s studio, a space located within the house that she is put in charge of, also exemplifies her marginal position (118). Vermeer has forbidden her to enter his studio and, in this way, quite literally marginalizes her, keeping her at a distance from his male domain. Most telling, however, of not just Catharina’s, but also Griet’s, powerlessness is Vermeer’s dying wish that his wife’s pearl earrings are gifted to their former maid. Both women clearly feel uncomfortable about the request: Catharina hesitates before laying “them on the table”; Griet hesitates before picking “them up” (246). Significantly, a man, Vermeer’s friend Van Leeuwenhoek, is there to ensure the exchange. While he states that the earrings are Catharina’s “to give” and not his or Vermeer’s, seemingly assigning the woman power and independence, he immediately refutes this by “order[ing]” Catharina to do it (246). When she hands over the pearls “after a moment’s hesitation,” she tells Griet: “it’s not for you to decide.

He has decided for you, and for me. They are yours now, so take them" (246). Even after death, Vermeer's patriarchal desires ignore and repress those of the women (De Groot 157). They continue to be controlled: Van Leeuwenhoek simply replaces Vermeer as executioner (157).

By including the issues that secondary characters such as Catharina and Frans have to face, the novel shows that marginalization is much more than a personal issue that only the protagonist has to cope with. It is a problem that affects anyone marked as Other: anyone who does not belong to the dominant group can be silenced, subjugated and marginalized (De Groot 158). The novel's incorporation of this otherness allows it to criticize and interrogate the social structures of those times. The novel seems to suggest that the Dutch Golden Age can only be considered golden for those within the centre, demonstrating its "moral bankruptcy" by providing a voice for the Other (De Groot 162). Implicit in the novel's treatment of the Other's powerlessness and marginalization during this historical period, is the notion that the modern-day reader might recognize these sentiments from their own world, as is line with De Groot's ideas on the genre of historical fiction in general (57). As it exposes "the patriarchal exoskeleton of a historical society" (De Groot 158), it allows the reader not only to contemplate the limitations of a so-called Golden Age, but also "to reflect upon their contemporary circumstance" (37). Most importantly perhaps, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* opens up a discussion about ruling assumptions and the ways in which it shapes society and stimulates marginalization and otherness. In the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, it is assumed that men are entitled to women's bodies like it is assumed that maids steal, tempt and eavesdrop. A twenty-first century point of view would argue that this is, without a doubt, wrong. However, as the story confronts its readers with views that were historically regarded as common sense, it forces them to reconsider twenty-first century assumptions as well, as they too might simply be wrong.

Conclusion

Studies on historical fiction by scholars such as Linda Hutcheon and Jerome de Groot have helped theorize the genre. They have listed several of the genre's distinctive properties that can also be found within historical fiction on the Dutch Golden Age specifically, such as the genre's desire to address "the lack of options available to women" (De Groot 158), and its reassertion of the margins (Hutcheon 58).

The case studies of three contemporary British novels on the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, *The Miniaturist*, *Tulip Fever*, and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, indicate, however, that the sub-genre does not just discuss the marginal positions of women in the Dutch seventeenth century, but in fact underlines them quite heavily. The novels seem committed to bringing issues in relation to womanhood to light. In the first-mentioned novel, Marin, a bourgeois lady and sister of a wealthy merchant, clearly addresses seventeenth-century Dutch women's lack of options by stating that women "can do nothing" and that it is assumed that women can only "produce children who then become the property or [their] husbands" (Burton 160-61). In the second novel, this lack is brought to attention through the contradictory narratives of elitist husband and wife, Sophia and Cornelis. While Cornelis passionately quotes Vondel, who praises the Republic for its great colonial powers and commercial reach across oceans and empires, Sophia responds with the bitter comment that her reach, as a woman, is still limited to the domestic sphere: "Around my waist hang keys to nothing but our linen chests, for I have yet to unlock anything of more significance" (Moggach 3). Through this reassertion of the woman's exclusion to the world outside the domestic, the novel seems to suggest that primary sources from the Dutch Golden Age, such as the quoted Vondel, do not necessarily reflect the lives of everyone in those times and should always be looked at critically. While Vondel's celebration of the Republic's power and reach might hold truth for Cornelis, Sophia cannot relate to it. The last novel, by Chevalier,

also strongly emphasizes women's relative powerlessness, which is especially noticeable when Vermeer's will is taken into consideration. When the painter dies, neither his wife, nor their former maid, can oppose the dead man's wish that Catharina's earrings are gifted to Griet (Chevalier 246).

While each of the novels addresses the protagonists' restricted freedoms in widely varying ways, the freedom to choose a husband is denied for similar reasons in all three novels. Each of the protagonists feels forced into marriage to save their families from bankruptcy. The novels seem to suggest that women were considered commercial goods, as wives are exchanged for financial support, fittingly presenting marriage as a form of commerce in an era that thrived on commerce and trade. Griet's parents need Pieter to support them (Chevalier 186), Sophia's family is kept "from going under" through her marriage with Cornelis (Moggach 2); Nella, similarly, is pressured into marrying Johannes due to her "family's financial predicament" (Burton 158). The modern Western desire to marry for love and the romance novel readers' desire for wish fulfilment are rejected by these novels. Instead, they force the readers to consider the concept of marriage in the seventeenth-century Republic, where arranged marriages were customary and marrying for love was the exception. The fact that marrying for love is no possibility for these female protagonists is also underlined by the novels' failed romances. Nella desires love within her marriage with Johannes, but he turns out to be gay (158). Griet longs for Vermeer, but he appears to care more about his paintings than her (Chevalier 207). Sophia intends to run away with her lover Jan, but when financial disaster strikes, feels her only option is to take up the veil (Moggach 226). While these grim portrayals of marriage are in line with De Groot's claim that historical fiction exposes constraining structures, such as arranged marriages, it is nonetheless remarkable that each of these Dutch Golden Age novels appears to use marriage and love in such similar manners to accomplish this exposition: while all protagonists express a strong

desire for love, they are denied a marriage for love, and instead are pressured into marrying for money, becoming part of the Republic's spirit of commerce.

Another defining characteristic of the Dutch seventeenth-century spirit, was the "gendered divisions" that restricted women to the domestic sphere (Spinks and Broomhall 10). This idea of female domesticity is brought to the attention through works of art of the period, appropriated within the novels. Doll's houses, such as the one featuring in *The Miniaturist,* embody the Dutch ideal of domesticity (Broomhall 60), Vermeer's paintings are generally praised for their domestic tranquillity (Spinks and Broomhall 24), and the seventeenth-century paintings added in *Tulip Fever* more often than not depict mistresses and their maids within the house. The appropriation of these works of art in the studied novels thus offers a way to address the relationship between domesticity and womanhood in the Dutch Golden Age and women's general exclusion from the public domain. It should be taken into account, however, that appropriation in these instances includes more than the works of art already mentioned. In line with Sanders' definition of appropriation, the novels have not only assimilated "art forms," but also "historical lives," such as Petronella Oortman's and Vermeer's, "and events," like the tulip craze. Significantly, this combination of historical and artistic elements provides a tangible connection to the historical period, which is much needed for most novels within the genre.

The works of art, included in the novels, not only help the novels to address the domestic restrictions of the seventeenth-century Dutch woman, but also help the novels' protagonists to move beyond those restrictions. Through art, their world and knowledge of the world grows. In *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, which appropriates Vermeer's domestic scenes, Griet's world exceeds the domestic world when Vermeer asks her to assist him in mixing colours; she becomes part of the workplace, the public domain, as she helps with the creation of his now world-famous paintings. In Burton's novel, Nella's world reaches into the public

spheres when the miniaturist, decorator of her doll's house, inspires her to pick up Johannes' sugar trade. In *Tulip Fever*, Sophia's affair with the painter leads her to become involved in the lucrative tulip trade, changing her world of linen chests for a world of risk and bidding in a pub.

During the course of this study, it has also been discovered that the novels include multiple forms of marginalization, as not only women, but other social groups, such as the working-class, ethnic, homosexual and atheist people, fall victim to it as well. Marginalization marks "the process of making an individual or minority group marginal in relation to a dominant social group" ("Marginalization"). Significantly, in each of the studied novels, these different forms are mainly embodied by male characters. This suggests a certain need for the novels to move beyond its seeming focus on women, even though the novels predominantly target a female audience. Burton's novel addresses both racial and sexual otherness through the inclusion of African male servant Otto, who cannot leave the house without facing discrimination, and the homosexual merchant Johannes, whose sexual inclination eventually leads to his death sentence. Moggach's novel opts to have its most socially dominant character, the wealthy Cornelis, lose his faith. As he becomes an atheist, he no longer belongs to the Christian centre, but rather moves towards the margins, in which his freedom to express his beliefs, or rather lack of beliefs, is severely limited. Chevalier's novel treats the issues that a working-class male might come across through Griet's brother, Frans, who loses his livelihood due to inappropriate relations with his boss' wife.

It must furthermore be noted that the concept of female otherness in these novels seems inseparable from the portrayal of maid and mistress. Female otherness is consistently depicted through a relationship between a working-class servant and their upper-class mistress that outlines how social class, besides gender, also affects the freedom and power available to these characters. In *Girl with a Pearl Earring,* this concerns Griet and her mistress Catharina,

while Sophia and her maid Maria exemplify this in *Tulip Fever*. In *The Miniaturist,* it is the relationship between Nella and the maid Cornelia that underlines these different versions of otherness. Interestingly, as *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is the only novel that has chosen to use the maid, rather than the mistress, as its protagonist, it is the only studied case that confirms Hutcheon's claim with regards to an often direct connection between the female Other and "other similarly unequal oppositions, such as race and class" (198).

As each of the considered historical novels depict multiple marginalized characters from different walks of life, the sub-genre does not seem satisfied to focus on merely one minority group and the suffering that comes with that particular position in Dutch society. They do not only pay attention to the positions of upper-class women or lower-class women, but consistently include both, and, importantly, do not limit their discussion to gender-based issues of exclusion and restriction. It thus seems that these Dutch Golden Age novels do not only provide a voice for women, but for the seventeenth-century Other in general. Moreover, as each of the depicted marginalized characters address a different set of issues due to their particular otherness, the golden era is stripped of its lustre in the novels, suggesting that in many cases, the seventeenth century of Dutch history may not be worthy of the title of the Golden Age after all.

As this study only considered three Dutch Golden Age novels, it is tricky to make any conclusive statements on the sub-genre. To further contextualize and theorize it, more historical novels on the Dutch Golden Age should be considered in a similar manner. While these three novels have all been selected based on the fact that they enjoyed popularity and bestseller status, incorporated Dutch Golden Age art, and were written by British female authors in the last twenty years, there are other novels that could be included, such as Nina Siegal's *The Anatomy Lesson* or Rosalind Laker's *The Golden Tulip* that meet most of these

requirements as well.[19] Naturally, there are many other options beyond this particular framework too, which could help better establish the sub-genre's properties, as the set requirements for this thesis have likely affected the listed research results as well. It would therefore be useful to consider historical novels on the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic outside the scope that was used here, and to compare and contrast any findings to see whether these novels also provide a voice for the Other, stripping the golden era of its lustre.

It might, for instance, be interesting for further research to consider whether this critical stance towards the Dutch Golden Age, voiced within the three examined contemporary British historical novels, is a particularly British one. As there was much tension between the Dutch and British in the seventeenth century, this might have, consciously or unconsciously, coloured the representation of the Dutch Republic in British history, which in turn might have negatively influenced current British thought on the Netherlands of that time. Similarly, the sources that these authors have used, like Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches*, may have led to false images of this era as well. [20] These British authors could, however, also suppose a critical attitude, as they may be more distanced from this piece of history than their Dutch counterparts may be, whose own country's history would be considered. To see whether the novelists' heritage influences the portrayal of the Dutch Golden Age within historical fiction, these British novels could be compared to Dutch historical novels to research in how far cultural distance to a historical period affects a fictive account. Similarly, the novels discussed here could be put next to American ones, for example, to see whether the omission of a shared history of tension and wars influences the portrayal of the era in any way.

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[19] *The Anatomy Lesson* was not included in this study, as its author is American. Similarly, *The Golden Tulip* was not examined, since it was published in 1991.

[20] In a review on Schama's book, fellow-historian and Dutch Golden Age expert J.L. Price states that it contains "a disturbing number of factual errors," and argues that many of Schama's statements float "unsupported and unsupportable above his empirical evidence" (159).

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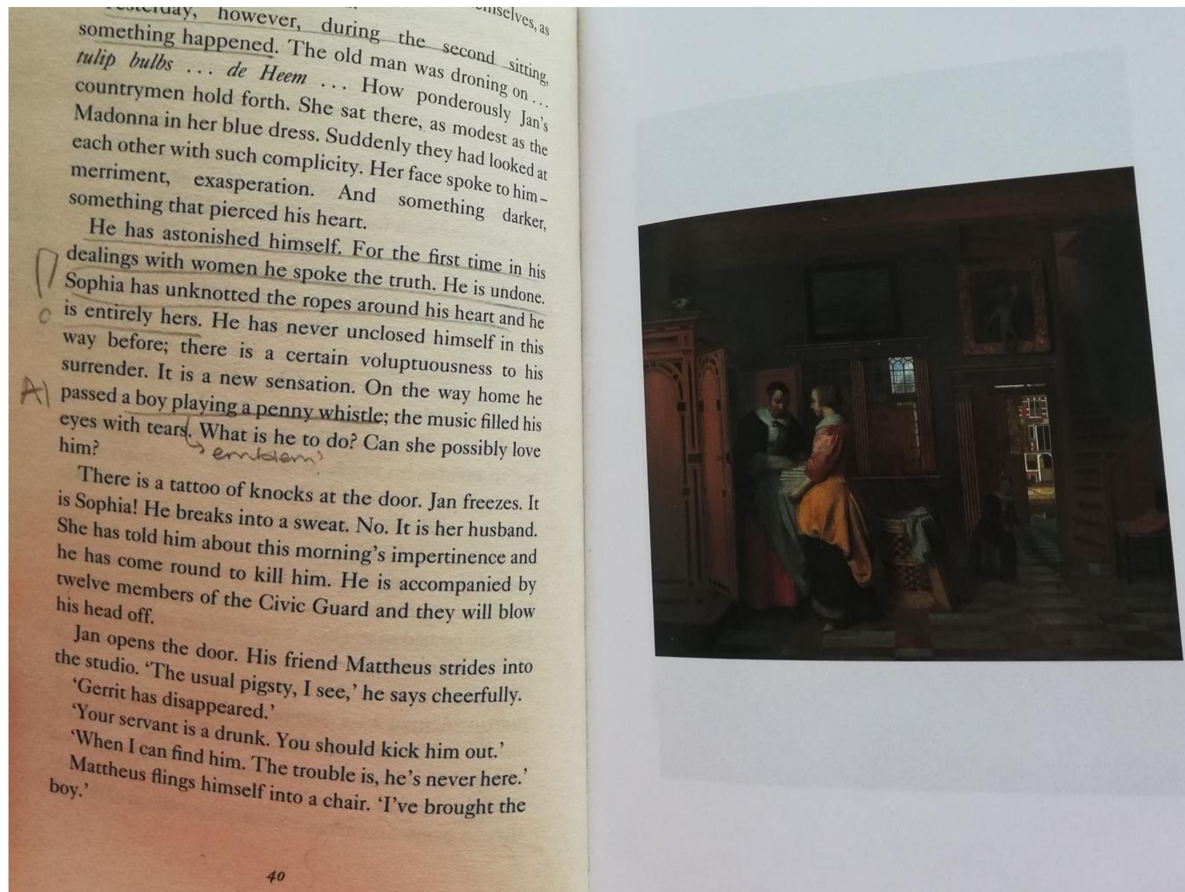
Appendix A

Figure 1. Petronella Oortman’s doll’s house, anonymous, c. 1686-c. 1710.

Figure 2. *Petronella Oortman's Doll's House*, Jacob Appel, c. 1710.

Figure 3. Fragment from *Petronella Oortman's Doll's House*, Jacob Appel, c. 1710.

Appendix B



…selves, as

…esterday, however, during the second sitting, something happened. The old man was droning on . . . *tulip bulbs . . . de Heem* . . . How ponderously Jan's countrymen hold forth. She sat there, as modest as the Madonna in her blue dress. Suddenly they had looked at each other with such complicity. Her face spoke to him – merriment, exasperation. And something darker, something that pierced his heart.

He has astonished himself. For the first time in his dealings with women he spoke the truth. He is undone. Sophia has unknotted the ropes around his heart and he is entirely hers. He has never unclosed himself in this way before; there is a certain voluptuousness to his surrender. It is a new sensation. On the way home he passed a boy playing a penny whistle; the music filled his eyes with tears. What is he to do? Can she possibly love him?

There is a tattoo of knocks at the door. Jan freezes. It is Sophia! He breaks into a sweat. No. It is her husband. She has told him about this morning's impertinence and he has come round to kill him. He is accompanied by twelve members of the Civic Guard and they will blow his head off.

Jan opens the door. His friend Mattheus strides into the studio. 'The usual pigsty, I see,' he says cheerfully.

'Gerrit has disappeared.'

'Your servant is a drunk. You should kick him out.'

'When I can find him. The trouble is, he's never here.'

Mattheus flings himself into a chair. 'I've brought the boy.'

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Figure 1. Example of paintings between pages in Deborah Moggach's *Tulip Fever*.

Figure 2. *Girl Reading Letter at Open Window*, Johannes Vermeer, 1659.

Figure 3. *Woman with Maid and Fish in an Interior*, Pieter de Hooch, 1670-5.

Figure 4. *A Sleeping Maid with her Mistress*, Nicolaes Maes, 1655.

Figure 5. *Danae*, Rembrandt van Rijn, 1636.

Appendix C

Figure 1. *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Johannes Vermeer, c. 1665.