



“I’m not trying to be Tolstoy”: Women’s Authorship in Selected Television Series

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Received 23 October 2021; accepted 21 December 2021; published 27 December 2021.

Abstract

Authorship in television series is a complicated and self-contradictory notion, particularly given the collaborative nature of such texts. At the same time, the growing recognition of television as a significant art form has entailed the search for an artist to whom it can be attributed, and auteur theory has, in recent decades, become increasingly prominent in television criticism. Notably, the rank of auteur, and the prestige it confers, has been applied predominantly to men. The present article attempts to consider this context while analysing three acclaimed television series depicting women writers, namely *Sex and the City*, *Girls* and *I May Destroy You*, noting their thematic similarities, including self-referentiality and consistent preoccupation with autobiographical writing and its ethical dimension. In addition, the article addresses the ways in which the three series interpret and deconstruct the figure of the woman artist.

Keywords: auteur theory; auteurial television; television about women writers; autobiography; autofiction

1. Introduction: Authorship, Television Auteurs and Gendering the Showrunner

Discussions of authorship in the context of television series involve a set of inherent contradictions and problems. Unlike more traditional works of art, television shows are generally “mass-produced” (Shattuc, 2010, p. 142) – with as many as hundreds of people involved in any given programme’s final shape, and with commercial and creative constraints having a substantial influence on storylines and aesthetics (pp. 142-149). Accordingly, at the beginning of television’s history, television series were, after all, largely seen as “products” (or means of selling products) rather than legitimate cultural texts in their own right (Nochimson,

2019, p. 2). This perspective changed gradually as the status of television programmes rose and the role of an individual figure associated with the text in an authorial role became more prominent. However, who that figure might be remained contentious. Written texts usually have easily identifiable authors, and authorship of films, in the twenty-first century, has come to be associated primarily (though by no means exclusively) with their directors. In contrast, the “human source” of meaning, the “originator” of television series (Shattuc, 2010, p. 143), has been described in different terms, with the title being assigned to writers, producers, executive producers, writer-producers (also known as “hyphenates”) (Pearson, 2011, p. 11) or, most recently, showrunners.

As Roberta Pearson argues, “[b]y 2001, producer and programme had become inseparable” where American television was concerned (2011, p. 11). While as early as in the 1970s, the TV producer emerged as “both executive and creative authority” over a show (Cantor, 1971, p. 8 quoted in Pearson, 2011, p. 12), a person whose role encompassed staffing decisions as well as responsibility for the filmed scripts (and who usually possessed writing experience or who directly participated in the writing process), their control was limited through network interference, and they were rarely household names. This changed in the 1980s and 1990s, with, on the one hand, the ongoing proliferation of networks and audiences allowing for more creative freedom, and leading to broadcasters’ interest being drawn to increasingly niche shows, and, on the other, the critical or ratings successes of such idiosyncratic texts as Steven Bochco’s *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987) (cf. Pearson, 2011, pp. 15-17; Shattuc, 2010, p. 147) or David Lynch’s (and Mark Frost’s) *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) (cf. Williams, 2011). These series were seen as *authored* in a way much of earlier television was not: their creators were seen as sources of their meaning. In fact, the latter programme has been credited with “birth[ing] the possibility of television *art*” (Nochimson, 2019, p. 1, emphasis mine). Martha P. Nochimson goes so far as to draw a caesura between “pre-*Peaks*” and “post-*Peaks*” television (2019, pp. 2-3), pointing to the commercial aspect of the former era, which demanded bland, inoffensive qualities from television texts (cf. also Pearson, 2019, p. 13), creating conditions under which creators were considered interchangeable, and in the latter, to the advent of “new auteurs,” who attempt to break free of television’s formulaicity (Nochimson, 2019, p. 3).

It bears reminding that the term “auteur” is borrowed directly from film criticism, where it was already a problematic notion given that it was associated with a particularly gendered notion of authorship (cf. Kael, 1963; Kobus, 2021, pp. 271-301). This title is then conferred by Nochimson (but not only her; cf. e.g. Press, 2018, p. 9; Martin, 2013, pp. 13-14) on such figures as David Simon (*The Wire*), David Chase (*The Sopranos*), and their collaborators and successors, including Eric Overmyer, Matt Weiner and Lena Dunham (Nochimson, 2019, pp. 7-9). While Nochimson’s division into pre- and post-*Peaks* TV constitutes a simplification, this broad narrative of a new golden age of television, with revolutionary changes driven by creators either granted or demanding new artistic freedom and integrity, inarguably predominates in recent histories of the medium (cf. Martin, 2013; Sepinwall, 2015; Press, 2018).

The timing of this process generally follows the establishment of the “showrunner” as the semi-official highest position in terms of television series production hierarchy (Littlejohn, 2008). In *Stealing the Show*, Joy Press explains that the term “came into common usage in the

late eighties and nineties," when TV writers gained more creative control at the expense of the producers, or, perhaps more accurately, when the roles were partly consolidated (2018, pp. 8-9). Press describes that "*showrunner* is an elastic term that can encompass varying degrees of creative and managerial control over a TV series," and the showrunner's role often includes "developing the original concept, overseeing a cast and crew, shepherding a writers' room, consulting with directors, editing episodes" as well as other duties (2018, p. 9, emphasis in original). Even though, as previously mentioned, "television production is immensely collaborative," and the scripts, in particular, are usually the result of work done by a writers' room rather than a single person's composition, the showrunner or, less often, showrunners may be in the best position to be identified as the author(s) of the show (2018, p. 10), which identification serves a particular marketing function – especially in terms of conferring prestige on television texts. For the purposes of this article, I use the term "author" (as noun and verb) to refer to the (work of) creators and/or showrunners of TV series, but I do so while fully acknowledging the contingent character of the notion and its limitations.

It should be stressed that the aforementioned histories of the revolutionary development of prestige/quality/auteurial television (whichever term one may prefer) at first highlighted male creators almost exclusively. Such a focus may have been understandable in the 1970s, when Muriel Cantor's book *The Hollywood TV Producer: His Work and His Audience* (1971) announced the gender of its subject directly, but it persists well into the present day. As was previously signalled, Nochimson's recent study of auteurial TV singles out only one female auteur (Dunham) against five male ones, and uses the work of one female producer/showrunner/media mogul, Shonda Rhimes, among examples of formulaic storytelling that she contrasts with the auteurial approach (2019, pp. 232-236). Alan Sepinwall's earlier collection of essays, *The Revolution Was Televised*, focuses on twelve drama series, all of which are associated with male authorship¹ (2015 [2012]). Finally, Brett Martin's *Difficult Men* (2013) makes its focus explicit from the title. Martin acknowledges this skewed perspective, stating that:

[t]hough a handful of women play hugely influential roles in this narrative [of a creative revolution – NS] – as writers, actors, producers, and executives – there aren't enough of them. Not only were the most important shows of the era run by men, they were also largely about manhood – in particular the contours of male power and the infinite varieties of male combat. (2013, p. 13)

Arguably, his contention is possible due to excluding examples that do not fit his thesis – women-centric and women-helmed comedies, dramedies and non-cable shows that are granted only brief acknowledgment (Martin, 2013, pp. 12-13).

An alternative is proposed in Joy Press's herstory of television, *Stealing the Show: How Women Are Revolutionizing Television* (2018), but once again, the title is worth commenting on. Press's witty "stealing the show" metaphor seems to reinforce the unequal status quo at least somewhat: while women's efforts to break the glass ceiling in American television may be applauded as revolutionary, they are nonetheless compared to something covert or criminal.

¹ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) is the exception in that while it was created by Joss Whedon, its last two seasons were overseen by Marti Noxon as primary showrunner; nevertheless, the function of the author seems to be attributed to Whedon.

Press dedicates two chapters to older programmes authored by women (*Murphy Brown* and *Roseanne*) and subsequently focuses on selected works of ten women and one non-binary author² created over the first two decades of the 21st century, including mostly comedies. She situates her account against the backdrop of political shifts (in particular, the Obama presidency) and cultural changes (in particular, the influence of mainstream feminism and postfeminism reflected in the series under discussion) that preceded the #MeToo movement (Press, 2018, pp. 13, 14, 286) but her focus is primarily on workplace changes, which – while remarkable – are still far from approximating parity. As noted in the 2019-2020 edition of *Boxed-In* report, an annual publication which gauges presence of women in cast and creative positions in TV, “women accounted for 31% of individuals working in key behind-the-scenes positions. This represents no change from 2018-19”³ (Lauzen, 2020, p. 3). In fact, only a limited shift in numbers has occurred over the course of the twenty-three years of the report’s existence. The report also points out that, despite the relative prominence of some particular women authors, the success of their productions, or even the existence of initiatives directly aiming to deal with gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace in the wake of the Weinstein crimes being revealed, the previous few years brought remarkably little progress in terms of gaining parity behind the camera (Lauzen, 2020, p. 4, fig. 6; see also Press, 2018, p. 286).

The situation of women creators is not, however, the primary concern of this article. I want to dedicate my attention to its textual reflection: namely, to the ways in which selected English-language television series (including two American series and a British one, all produced or co-produced by HBO) thematize authorship of women characters, based on a selection of contemporary shows about female creatives. The choice of texts is necessarily severely limited by space, but I have tried to choose programmes airing over a certain time period. I also chose not to include works of historical and biographical fiction, as they would require additional consideration (which means omission of recent *Dickinson*, despite certain thematic resonance). My analysis focuses on the representation of authorship of the women characters, the works they author, and self-referential or metatextual features of the series.

2. *Sex and the City* (1998–2004)

While sexual/romantic lives of affluent New York women constitute the primary concern announced in the title of this 1990s/early 2000s series, its preoccupation with authorship is a significant theme as well; it is also one that has received much less attention in criticism or scholarship. Unlike the two series I discuss later, HBO’s *Sex and the City* was created and

2 The final chapter covers the works of Joey Soloway, who officially changed their name and pronouns after the publication of the book; their shows are thus provided as examples of women’s work. I exclude their series *Transparent* from my analysis despite their intense focus on life narratives as the gender of the creator and characters would necessitate a significant departure from my stated focus and adequately addressing that issue is not possible here for reason of space constraints.

3 Key positions considered here include “creators, directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and directors of photography,” employed in American network, cable and streaming television (Lauzen, 2020, p. 3).

produced primarily by men (Darren Starr and Michael Patrick King)⁴; however, it is based on Candace Bushnell's eponymous popular semi-autobiographical *roman-à-clef* (2002), itself adapted from a newspaper gossip column (Bushnell, 1997-2007). The preoccupation with authorship is evident not only on the level of the plot, which centres around a woman (modelled after Bushnell herself) writing about love and sex for a newspaper, but also on the level of structure, given that the series is narrated by the writer character, Carrie Bradshaw, and each episode of the early seasons corresponds to a segment of the "column" (many of them adapted from the original columns/chapters) that Carrie writes (Douglas, 2010, p. 172). Interestingly, while the first-person narrator of the column/novel and the character of Carrie are ostensibly separate entities in the original book, a similar device is not present in the series: instead, the first season features various characters speaking to the camera, in what is now recognised as mockumentary style, while the voiceover narration throughout all seasons is provided by Sarah Jessica Parker in character as Carrie.

The act of writing is figured in the series simultaneously as a confessional expression of the self (considering its predominant first-person phrasing, and particularly the "I couldn't help but wonder" refrain, which signals Carrie's thesis for a given episode/column) and as a means of (self-)creation. The relationship between Carrie's work (art) and her life (romantic and sexual choices) is represented as reciprocal. On the one hand, Carrie finds inspiration for the themes of her column in events that occur to her or to her friends – she relates their subsequent sexual and romantic adventures like a memoirist – and on the other, some of the choices she makes in her private life are clearly guided by searching for material and inspiration. In the pilot, she describes her profession as that of a "sexual anthropologist," but she is not an uninvolved observer. For instance, in the same episode, Carrie's column covers whether women can "have sex like men" (*Sex and the city*, 1998)⁵ – which is taken to mean for the purpose of fulfilling their own sexual desires, without regard for their partner, and without a romantic component. In order to be able to write on this subject, Carrie seeks out a former boyfriend and has a casual sexual encounter that is presented as only satisfactory for her: a behaviour that she finds herself enjoying, but that she also specifically engaged in experimentally, for the purpose of creating subject matter for her writing.

Carrie's career appears largely secondary to the romantic and personal storylines the series is known for, but its portrayal is present throughout all six seasons of *Sex and the City*. In the first season, the success of Carrie's column is hallmarked by her photograph, advertising the newspaper, placed "on the side of the bus" (*Secret sex*, 1998). In the second season, Carrie, due to being a popular columnist, is invited to a photoshoot for the *New York Magazine*'s cover story (*They shoot single people, don't they?*, 1999). In the third season, Carrie's writing is being considered for a possible Hollywood adaptation (*Escape from New York*, 2000). The fourth season includes an episode focusing on Carrie's fears over losing her life's work when her laptop breaks leaving her without a backup copy (*My motherboard, my self*, 2001), and has Carrie begin writing for *Vogue*, a significantly more prestigious publication (*A 'Vogue' idea*, 2002). In the fifth season, Carrie publishes her columns as a book, and the associated

4 Sarah Jessica Parker becomes an executive producer, signalling a possible degree of creative control over the series, starting in season 4.

5 All subsequent episode references contain the title of the episode quoted and the date of the original broadcast.

storylines span multiple episodes, focusing on choosing a cover (Cover girl, 2002), marketing the book (The Big journey, 2002) and becoming romantically involved with a published novelist, Jack Berger, who attends Carrie's launch (Plus one is the loneliest number, 2002; I love a charade, 2002). This relationship between the two writers continues in early season six, and the success of Carrie's book is depicted as one of the major sources of conflict between them – it directly causes Berger's insecurity (Lights, camera, relationship!, 2003), given that his own contract was terminated by his publisher owing to his previous book's unsatisfactory sales. In the latter part of the final season, Carrie temporarily abandons her career and the eponymous city of the series to travel to Paris with her new partner, artist Aleksandr Petrovsky, only for an encounter with her French readers to serve as a reminder of her identity as a New York-based writer (An American girl in Paris [part une], 2004; An American girl in Paris [part deux], 2004), which contributes to her choice to return to New York with her former and ultimate romantic partner, Big, who inspired much of her writing in the past. Although Carrie argued otherwise, being a writer is revealed to be the core of her identity rather than merely her profession (Douglas, 2010, pp. 174-175).

While Carrie's writing career is broadly represented as one of gradual success, the general satirical tone of the series effects a critical distance towards the protagonist's efforts and questions the quality of her oeuvre. This may be illustrated by a quote from the *Sex and the City* novel, re-purposed here for the article's title. In one of the last chapters, Carrie discusses her latest "project" with Samantha:

Sam said, "It's cute, you know. It's a cute idea."

Carrie said, "What's so cute about it?"

"It's cute. It's light. You know. It's not Tolstoy."

"I'm not trying to be Tolstoy," Carrie said. But of course, she was. (Bushnell, 2002, p. 220)

Carrie's ambition to be a serious literary figure, as represented by a writer offered as a direct contrast to her, is mocked both by the character of her friend, and by the narration that reveals Carrie's inner thoughts and not only directly contradicts the dialogue but does so with emphasis on the banality ("of course") of Carrie's aspirations. A similar attitude, one that simultaneously affirms Carrie's desires and ambitions and mocks them, can be seen throughout the series. When Carrie's glamorous photoshoot advert is featured on the bus, the innuendo of its slogan and imagery quickly leads to the image being vandalized with a graffiti of male genitalia (Secret sex, 1998). The "Single and fabulous" photoshoot that was supposed to celebrate Carrie's lifestyle features Carrie before glamorous makeup is applied, and its title is ultimately adorned with a question mark, undermining Carrie's self-image as a successful single woman known for her work. Instead, she is shown unvarnished, un-groomed, suffering from effects of alcohol and smoking a cigarette: a cautionary tale (They shoot single people, don't they?, 1999). What is more, publishing itself is also depicted as predatory and riddled with harassment – whether Carrie is trying to have her column adapted or searches for editorial guidance, powerful men may exert pressure on her or seek to overstep boundaries (e.g. when her male *Vogue* editor partly undresses in front of her) (A 'Vogue' idea, 2002). Finally, while Carrie and her friends in the series treat her work seriously, the male creatives whose acknowledgment she seeks in later seasons tend to approach it as trivial. Novelist Berger is offended by Carrie's mild and largely positive notes concerning his writing, and reacts to them with anger

and disdain (Pick-a-little, talk-a-little, 2003); he also cannot cope with her financial success, represented by a royalties check (Lights, camera, relationship!, 2003). Artist Petrovsky initially praises Carrie's writing as "very smart and very funny" (The cold war, 2004), but those very adjectives may also be considered to relegate Carrie's column to the category of entertainment only, much as Samantha's comment in the novel. Furthermore, Petrovsky consistently treats Carrie's work as secondary to his own pursuits, for example when he asks Carrie to abandon her meeting with readers in Paris to support his gallery opening in the series finale. Ultimately, Carrie's self-perception as a writer is undermined by those around her, and the series itself invites doubt as to the value of her writing, in a gesture that is conspicuously self-deprecating, since the writing she commits to the page is supposedly the source of what the viewer sees.

3. *Girls* (2012–2017)

The second show under discussion, Lena Dunham's dramedy, initially establishes itself as existing in direct dialogue with the influential text of culture that is *Sex and the City*. What stands as a substantial difference is the much-acknowledged auteur character of *Girls*. While many creatives collaborated on the production of *Sex and the City*, Dunham plays a much larger role, both behind and in front of the camera in the case of *Girls*: she created the series, starred in it, wrote and co-wrote many of the episodes, and at times stepped in as director as well (including for the pilot). The show aired on HBO, like *Sex and the City* before it, and its focus was on the Millennial generation of New York-dwelling women: four friends representing broadly similar types to the heroines of *Sex and the City*, a correspondence made explicit by Shoshanna, in the first episode, when she discusses which *Sex and the City* characters she and her cousin, Jessa, might resemble (Pilot, 2012; see also Blair, 2012). Like its predecessor, *Girls* centres around a woman writer and her friends; unlike in the case of Carrie, said writer, Hannah Horvath (played by Dunham), is not particularly successful for much of the show's run.

The series begins with Hannah, two years out of college, holding down an unpaid internship, as she is told by her parents that they intend to withdraw their financial support, which signals the series' preoccupation with the material aspects of creative work. Hannah is writing a memoir, which is to be composed of essays (although other characters describe it as a "novel" as well), and the difficulty she suffers with it consists in the fact that, at 24, she has limited experience of life, and needs material, which she expects to come to her with time. In an effort to persuade her parents to finance her literary work for two more years, Hannah asks them to read the completed portion of her book, making a boastful claim about her own potential: "I don't want to freak you out, but I think that I may be the voice of my generation. Or at least a voice of a generation." The scene is comical – Hannah, who immediately undercuts her own boast, is also under the (seemingly largely psychosomatic) influence of "opium tea"; her behaviour is puerile and her parents are exasperated by her explicit financial demands (Pilot, 2012). However, for all the mockery of Hannah's writing aspirations, the show consistently emphasises "that Hannah is a writer, specifically a writer of personal essays, a form dedicated to investigating the humiliating, perverse, and self-defeating aspects of one's own nature" (Blair, 2012). Every humiliation that Hannah puts herself through is potentially done in the

service of her art. Similarly, even the distance of the narrative, between how the character may see herself and how she is represented – an “aspiring writer” (Blair, 2012) who believes in herself, or a “wannabe memoirist” (Nussbaum, 2019, p. 75), who can at best be described as “funny” or a “quippy voice” (Pilot, 2012) and who has yet to create memories to write about – is a part of the vulnerability mined by the creator.

Critical reactions to Hannah’s writing and false starts of her career are a staple of the series. When Hannah shares her collection’s “working title” (“Midnight snack”) with her seemingly supportive ex-boyfriend, his immediate reaction is “I mean, you know, there’s lots of titles” (All adventurous women do, 2012). In another episode, her friends read her diary and discover unflattering depictions of themselves in it. Not only is the very fact of Hannah keeping a journal perceived by other characters as a cliché, but also what she writes is described as “drive!” composed by a “boring” person, and it is open to interpretation whether this assessment is accurate or biased, given the subject matter (Hannah’s diary, 2012). When Hannah has to choose a piece of writing to present at a reading, she initially settles on a “personal essay” about her unsuccessful date with “a hoarder”: a piece that her friend Marnie considers to be “whiny.” Hannah then describes the essay to her employer, Ray:

Hannah: I don’t know if that sounds really trivial to you. It’s definitely supposed to be funny. It’s not supposed to be super serious, but it’s also supposed to take on bigger issues, like fear of intimacy...

Ray: What in the world could be more trivial than intimacy? Hmm? Is there anything real you can write about? [...] You should write about death. (Leave me alone, 2012)

Hannah reacts to this critique by hastily writing a new, death-centric story while on her way to the reading. Her former teacher expresses a positive opinion about the hoarder story she rejected; however, Hannah’s opinion of her own writing is already changed in response to the word “trivial,” which she repeats when describing her own writing and herself as a writer, in contrast to her earlier claims of being more talented than her successful and published peer (Leave me alone, 2012).

The subsequent seasons explore Hannah self-sabotaging and experiencing negative consequences of seemingly positive developments in her writing career. She begins to write freelance articles for an online publication, where she is encouraged to engage in risky or illegal behaviour for the sake of interesting stories (Bad friend, 2013). Subsequently, she signs a contract to publish an e-book of her essays, even receiving an advance (Boys, 2013). Though the latter in particular may signify success, the short deadline and the publisher’s pressure in fact contribute to Hannah’s mental health swiftly declining: she suffers from writer’s block, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder (It’s back, 2013). As a result, she punctures her own eardrum while cleaning her ear, necessitating medical intervention, therapy and medication. In addition, Hannah’s publisher threatens to sue her for the return of her advance when she fails to meet her obligations and deliver “the pages,” and while Hannah attempts to produce the text, the symptoms make that seemingly impossible (On all fours, 2013). In season three, the editor working with Hannah dies (Dead inside, 2014), and her book, which has caused her so much trouble, is cancelled; furthermore, Hannah cannot even withdraw the draft and publish it elsewhere, given her contractual agreement (Only child, 2014).

Hannah continues to try to make writing into her career, and takes another job in publishing, working for a magazine, which she then leaves unsatisfied. By the end of the third season, she applies and is accepted for a prestigious creative writing graduate course (Iowa Writer's Workshop), a significant professional opportunity (Two plane rides, 2014). Nevertheless, in the subsequent episodes, Hannah finds herself unable to fit in among other prospective writers: she is consumed with insecurity, struggles with giving and receiving feedback (Triggering, 2015) and again doubts her own potential as a writer (Female author, 2015), ultimately quitting the course. For much of seasons four and five, Hannah is employed as a teacher instead of pursuing writing; it is only after one of her best friends, Jessa, begins a relationship with Hannah's long-time romantic partner, Adam, that Hannah finally has a more serious subject to explore. The last season begins with Hannah as the author of a story, based on her reaction to Adam and Jessa's relationship, published in *The New York Times* (All I ever wanted, 2017). She is also once again employed by a magazine, but the work proves to be a source of potential humiliation or even degradation: after Hannah writes a badly-sourced article alleging that a famous male writer is a sexual abuser, she is forced to admit her mistake (in lacking sources on record) and apologise to him, only for him to manipulate her into unwanted sexual contact, proving Hannah's point (American bitch, 2017). Subsequently, the series largely abandons its focus on Hannah as a writer, instead showcasing her personal maturation, depicted in connection with her decision to continue an accidental pregnancy and move away from New York to work an academic job, much like her own mother before her (Goodbye tour, 2017; Latching, 2017).

For much of its six-season run, *Girls* offers a satirical depiction of Hannah's writing ambitions and the see-saw of her self-assessment; nevertheless, it also encourages a degree of investment in her success. This is perhaps the most evident in the conclusion of season three. Earlier episodes offer multiple scenes of the protagonist using writing as an excuse to be callous and cruel, for instance when she expresses envy about the fact that her peer's boyfriend died by suicide, so she could write about him in her memoir, or when Hannah only cares about her publisher's death inasmuch as it affects her book, to a degree that shocks other characters (Leave me alone, 2012; Dead inside, 2014). In contrast, the decision to attend Iowa is shown as both a personal and a creative triumph, as evidenced by a brief moment of sincerity when camera focuses on Hannah's hopeful facial expression, without any dialogue to distract from her positive emotions (Two plane rides, 2014).

While *Sex and the City* concludes by focusing on the romantic arc and having Carrie re-unite with her primary love interest/the person she used to write about, at the same time as she returns to the place where she can work as a writer, *Girls* ultimately follows what Diane Negra describes as a postfeminist, "retreatist" script (2009, p. 18): the protagonist finding fulfilment in motherhood rather than (writing) career, and leaving big city life to focus on family, even if her destination is not, as in stories Negra analyses, that of her hometown, but merely a college town upstate, where she is to teach creative writing. One of the impulses for Hannah's transition may arguably be found in the reversal that occurs when her former boyfriend, Adam, makes a film based on their relationship. While previously it was Hannah portraying her own life and her friends' lives in art, enforcing her own perspective, now she is seeing herself as the object of someone else's work and gaze. This, combined with the relative fame brought on

by her story publication, makes Hannah reconsider her past relationships, romantic or otherwise, and her own writing. Nonetheless, the series moves its focus away from authoring to mothering, where the work of writing the self appears to be associated with self-centredness, and mothering with connection and selflessness: the final image of the show is a close-up on Hannah's face as she manages to successfully nurse her baby (Latching, 2017).

4. *I May Destroy You* (2020)

The last of the three shows that this article discusses is a joint BBC-HBO production, which, even more than *Girls*, is identified with a singular author. Michaela Coel created the limited series, co-directed nine and single-handedly wrote all of its twelve episodes, in addition to starring as its lead, Arabella Essiedu, a young Black British woman writer and a minor social media celebrity. In contrast to the narrative sprawl of the two earlier shows, *I May Destroy You* is much shorter, and its scope is more focused, as it centres on the ways in which the experience of sexual assault influences the life of its protagonist, her family and her closest friends. Nonetheless, like Carrie and Hannah, Arabella is also a writer whose career is charted by the series: in the pilot, she is under contract to finish a second book, after the relative success of her debut, *Chronicles of a Fed-up Millennial*, which has made her famous on the Internet, and by the end of the finale, she has, in fact, published her second book.

One difference between the protagonists of the three shows is generational. While Carrie worked in print media and struggled with new technologies (e.g. *My motherboard, my self*, 2001), and Hannah's milieu was still primarily written word, Arabella communicates with the world largely through social media. In fact, her first book was made "for Twitter" (*Eyes eyes eyes eyes*, 2020), and seemingly consisted of her posts combined and edited together. It is clearly autobiographical writing that she is known for, much like Hannah and Carrie. However, social media writing has a different function from a private journal, like the one Hannah uses: it is simultaneously an expression of private thoughts, and a text made for public consumption, meant to generate attention, a tension that the show explores. Another difference lies in the subject matter: while Arabella is clearly intended to occupy exactly the position that Hannah aspired to ("a voice of a generation," given the "millennial" in Arabella's book's title), and her writing is autobiographical just as Carrie's and Hannah's, the show and Arabella focus specifically on sexual assault, depicted from multiple perspectives and as experienced not only by the writer protagonist but by those in her environment as well.

The show traces Arabella's writing career over the course of approximately a year. In the pilot episode, Arabella returns from a publisher-sponsored trip to Italy and intends to spend the last day and night she has left until her deadline frantically collating her social media posts into a new book, since she procrastinated on her obligations; however, upon her friends' insistence, she leaves her publisher's office before finishing the project in order to go clubbing with her friends. During the night, an unknown perpetrator drugs her drink, takes her to another location and rapes her in a club bathroom (*Eyes eyes eyes eyes*, 2020). She only vaguely remembers what happened, especially at the beginning, but she is both physically and psychologically affected, suffering from symptoms of trauma (*Someone is lying*, 2020). Successive episodes depict Arabella's efforts to cope with the aftermath of her rape, including the unsuccessful

police investigation, as well as her struggle to finish the contracted book. Her publisher suggests that she could receive help from another writer, Zain, who – unlike Arabella – completed a degree in writing. Much like the male writers encountered by Carrie and Hannah, Zain is an antagonist for Arabella. Initially, he is unhelpful and dismissive of Arabella's writing, questioning her about her intended genre (which she is unable to specify) and her credentials, particularly once she admits she received her commission based on her Twitter success in contrast to his "three years of uni," and that she knows little about their shared publisher. Zain's sole interest in Arabella appears to be sexual, and while it is Arabella who initiates their first encounter, Zain is manipulative throughout their interaction, using his feedback to undermine her confidence, claiming that "[she] do[es not] care about [her] writing," and finally, committing assault (removing his condom without Arabella's knowledge) during their initially consensual encounter (That was fun, 2020).

This second violation compounds Arabella's trauma and contributes to her symptoms, further alienating her from her own writing. She decides that she wants to change the subject of her book so that it reflects her being a rape survivor and uses the opportunity to read her work at a literary festival to publicly accuse Zain instead (It just came up, 2020). The video of her speech becomes viral, and initially seems to destroy Zain's career and contribute to Arabella's fame; however, the series ultimately reveals that form of narrative closure to be an illusion. Zain remains associated with the same publisher, albeit in secret, while Arabella's contract is terminated, and she is asked to return her advance. His debut comes out, under a female alias "Della," a name conspicuously similar to that of the show's protagonist; in fact, Arabella herself loves the book and reaches out to the pseudonymous author. While she is shocked to learn that Della is her assailant, the meeting between them results in a reconciliation: Zain helps Arabella the way he was supposed to in the earlier episode, by using his skillset while acknowledging her talent and agency as a writer (Would you like to know the sex, 2020). In the last episode, Arabella uses Zain's advice about narrative structure to re-organise her book. This also contributes to her healing: in the final episode, the protagonist envisions different stories about finding closure. In three distinct fantasy sequences, Arabella imagines identifying her rapist and alternatively, assaulting him physically, confronting him until he expresses regret, or forgiving him and having intercourse with her as the penetrating partner. Having mentally re-enacted, and presumably, written down these scenarios, Arabella is able to refrain from returning to the scene of her trauma, taking control of her story in a different manner. The final scene of the show takes place during a reading from Arabella's second book, "published independently," entitled *January 22nd*, which refers to the date of her first assault⁶ (Ego Death, 2020), suggesting that the act of storytelling, recovering memories of the rape and healing from its trauma are related processes; only after taking control of her narrative can Arabella finally cope with her past. In fact, the series has Arabella confront other stories about herself and other memories as well – in particular, two episodes feature extensive flashbacks to her teen years. While ostensibly only tenuously connected to the main narrative, these sequences, focusing on Arabella revealing to her school that a classmate's rape story is feigned (The alliance, 2020), as well as showcasing her troubled relationship with her father (The cause the cure, 2020), shed light on Arabella's complicated personality, and the process of remembering

⁶ This title also refers to the date of Coel's own assault, as discussed later in the article.

them allows her to re-consider her own story and in particular, develop compassion for others and critical self-insight.

5. Authorship/Autobiography/Authenticity

Each of the three series under discussion has occasioned autobiographical readings and attention paid to the similarities between characters and their women authors. Arguably, it is *Sex and the City* that has been approached in this manner least frequently, even though Carrie's book shares the title with the show and the novel, and the character herself "began as a mirror [or] avatar" of Candace Bushnell, who was drawing on her own life and real events in her writing (Nussbaum, 2019, p. 51). The adaptation by other creators and the relatively well-known actor playing the role seem to contribute to a distance between the creation and the woman author of its source material. Furthermore, the distinctive stylisation of the series (Nussbaum, 2019, p. 53), drawing, among others, on romantic comedy, screwball comedy and classic sitcom (McCabe and Akass, 2004, pp. 12-13), emphasises the fictionality and satire rather than a possible expectation of biographical fidelity.

In contrast, *Girls* is not explicitly autobiographical, yet Lena Dunham has often been compared (if not mis-identified) with the character she wrote and played. While Hannah is an aspiring essayist and Dunham is primarily a filmmaker and television writer, director and producer, and only wrote her actual memoir, *Not That Kind of Girl* (2014), after her show's initial success, the similarities between the character and her creator are highlighted in much of the series' publicity (e.g. Goldberg, 2012). In addition, Dunham herself, in response to negative reviews concerning lack of diversity in the cast, has asserted that the reason for the main cast being white is that "each character was a piece of [her] or based on someone close to [her]" (Dunham, 2012). In the case of *Girls*, this connection seems to be largely subject to criticism: Dunham is seen as incapable of writing outside her own particular experience, and the character's flaws seem to be perceived as reflecting on the author (cf. Nussbaum, 2019, pp. 74-79), particularly given the naturalist and intimate aesthetics of the series (cf. Goldberg, 2012).

Finally, although the characters and most of the plot of *I May Destroy You* are predominantly fictional, the assault at the centre of the narrative reflects the actual experience of Coel, who was drugged and raped while working on *Chewing Gum* (2015-2017), her earlier television series (Tillet, 2020; Jung, 2020b). Coel and Arabella are both survivors of assault – as well as artists for whom said assault becomes subject matter, and for whom their art provides a valuable way of coping with the trauma (Jung, 2020a). Significantly, unlike in the case of *Girls*, the connections between fiction and reality have been perceived positively in reviews of the series. Coel's authority in speaking about the subject of sexual assault from experience has been highlighted by many critics, who praised the candid portrayal of rape as courageous and "nuance[d]," particularly given the focus on the experience of underprivileged groups, such as Black women or queer Black men (Tillet, 2020). In a long profile dedicated to Coel, E. Alex Jung describes the series as an example of "autofiction" and writes that "[w]atching it is like entering a pool of Coel's consciousness. Her performance as Arabella [...] feels like truth telling, though the truth of the thing is not in 'what happened' but in how it feels" (2020). The autobiographical aspect of the series contributes to its approximation of intimacy between

viewing audience and character, even if that character is a fictional creation – a strategy akin to breaking the fourth wall, which the show at times engages in, with Arabella looking almost straight at the camera lens.

All three series are thus somewhat autobiographical, albeit to different extents and although their blurring of boundary between fact and fiction has garnered different critical reactions. The three series also share the fact of their protagonists' preoccupation with writing about themselves and their immediate environment, a fraught ethical issue; in addition, this preoccupation often turns self-reflexive or metafictional, taking on characteristics of a response to the show's own reception and status as works of fiction by and about women.

In the case of *Carrie*, the ethical aspect of her autobiographical writing is rarely emphasised by the plot. Even though it can be inferred that *Carrie* portrays some aspects of her own and her friends' lives in the column she writes, just as *Bushnell* revealed details of real people's lives, other main characters appear unconcerned with matters of privacy, and do not dispute her perspective. Exceptions are found in the way *Carrie*'s romantic partners perceive their portrayal, but even in these cases, the writer's perspective or prerogative to write about others is not truly undermined. In one storyline, *Carrie*'s relationship with a politician is terminated partly due to his misgivings about having explicit details of his intimate life written about in the press, but this only spurs *Carrie* to reveal more lurid information about him, so as to reveal his hypocrisy (*Politically erect*, 2000). In another, after *Carrie*'s book is published, *Big* reads it and consequently, reflects on his own actions, in a scene resembling a response to critical feminist readings of the series: while *Carrie* wants to have intercourse, *Big* prefers to discuss passages from her book that portray him in a negative light, in an effort to apologise for his previous behaviour or explain it (*The Big journey*, 2002). In addition, while writing about herself may seem to be an aspect of *Carrie*'s general self-centredness, it is primarily her preoccupation with romance and sex that earns a degree of opprobrium in the series, as proof of her supposed triviality and shallowness.

A much more ambivalent image of the woman writer emerges from *Girls*, where *Hannah*'s writing about her friends and herself is subject to constant critical distancing. As mentioned previously, *Hannah*'s friends consider their own portrayals in *Hannah*'s writing to be biased and intrusive. Furthermore, there are episodes in which the act of writing about herself is explicitly posited as evidence of *Hannah*'s narcissistic tendencies, and at times leads to reproach from friends and acquaintances, surprised by her aforementioned lack of consideration for others, as when her editor dies and her sole preoccupation is the fate of her book (*Dead inside*, 2014), or when she is envious of the death of another writer's boyfriend (*Leave me alone*, 2012). Moreover, writing about herself does not necessarily seem to provide *Hannah* with insight into herself, given how biased her perspective seems to remain: in addition, it makes it all the more difficult for her to accept suggestions for her writing, as she identifies with her protagonist(s). In season four, another writer in *Hannah*'s creative writing class highlights this issue, commenting on a story *Hannah* submitted for the class: "how are we supposed to critique a work which is very clearly based directly from [sic] the author's personal experience [...] *Hannah* [...] is very much this character" – what is more, even classmates who do not know *Hannah* assume that her writing is autobiographical based solely on physical similarity be-

tween her and her story's narrator, and treat that as a problem – since her writing depicts behaviour they see as offensive, Hannah herself is evaluated in the same way (Triggering, 2015). This scene, as well as one in the next episode, which features Hannah arguing against being “pigeonholed” as gratuitously graphic, trivial and writing from a narrow and privileged perspective (Woman author, 2015), can be read as a direct dialogue with those same criticisms having been addressed at *Girls* and its creator Lena Dunham (Nussbaum, 2019, pp. 75-76; Sobaś-Mikołajczyk, 2016). At the same time, while Hannah is given the chance to argue with her critics, the narrative never represents her perspective as the only legitimate one, undermining the points she makes in her own defence. When she argues against her peers' negative feedback in “Triggering,” her ostensibly feminist arguments appear distinctly self-interested and exaggerated, and when she delivers her critique of the other authors from her class in “Woman author,” she meets with lack of acknowledgement, and finally exits the conversation by awkwardly throwing herself off the back of the sofa she was seated on, accidentally exposing herself in the process – a visual metaphor for the way in which her writing exposes her flaws and insecurities and, arguably, a comment on *Girls* doing the same for Dunham.

I May Destroy You dedicates less attention to the ethics and practical side of Arabella's looking for material in her life and the life of her friends, instead bringing into focus the relationship between social media, publishing and authenticity. Arabella's writing is always assumed to be based on her life, and her life, or at least what she posts about it, is indivisible from her “brand” as a Millennial writer. Her friends largely do not mind being featured in her posts: on the contrary, her best friend Terry, being an aspiring actor, willingly participates in the videos Arabella records, hoping to leverage her exposure into roles, since auditions she attends feature questions about social media presence (Someone is lying, 2020). However, while social media initially represent a source of support for Arabella in the aftermath of her making a public assault allegation, she soon becomes even more excessively reliant on attention her followers give her, which leads to personal and professional problems. The need to constantly perform authenticity to drive engagement, be it in connection to her success or victimhood, contributes to Arabella's mental breakdown (Social media is a great way to connect, 2020). Significantly, while Arabella's debut succeeded due to her ostensible connection with her audience, as suggested by instances of her encountering fans of her social media persona (Eyes eyes eyes, 2020), her decision to remain authentic and change the subject of her writing to reflect her new experience is associated with her encountering career obstacles: she wants to write about a more difficult subject, sexual violence, and her publisher is initially supportive (albeit in a distinctly appropriative and problematic manner, expressing enthusiasm when she describes her assault) but ultimately becomes discouraged by the delays connected with Arabella's changed circumstances. In contrast, as previously mentioned, the writer who assaulted her, Zain, publishes his ostensibly personal book under a pseudonym of a different gender, claiming an identity that is not his, and not only succeeds but manages to appeal to Arabella herself, which questions the connection between art and artist, authenticity and value (Would you like to know the sex, 2020).

6. Collaboration and Agency

Another difference between the three shows that bears noting concerns portrayal of creative work as collaborative or individual, and assigning of agency to the writer and her subjects. Carrie's writing is distinctly a reflection of her individuality and thoughts, as emphasised by the narration; she considers social phenomena around her, and events from her own and her friends' private lives and transforms them into writing that is only ever attributed to her. The relationship between the artist and her subjects is stable: even when Carrie becomes involved with men who are themselves artists, she is not in danger of having her perspective countered by theirs, as their art and writing seem to occupy different spheres from the intimate and auto-biographical milieu in which she is engaged. The only storyline that threatens to see control wrestled away from Carrie is the possibility of adaptation posed in season three: when the film fails to materialise, this may be seen as not so much a failure as survival of Carrie's vision, unadulterated by a Hollywood mis-reading of her perspective (*Escape from New York*, 2000).

Hannah in *Girls* is in a different position as she is forced to contend with other artistic visions that may clash with her perception. In contrast to Carrie, whose interactions with editors and publishers seem to consist in only limited interventions into her work, Hannah often receives negative feedback, is assigned specific subject matter to cover, and interacts with other writers who are more commercially or critically successful. Furthermore, the human subjects of her writing resist her interpretations and, at the end of the show, even conceive their own creative work that functions in counterpoint to hers (Adam and Jessa's aforementioned film about their relationship). In addition, while Hannah struggles while attempting to work on her own, basing her identity on the notion of lonely genius with unique voice, her peers enter into creative partnerships and collaborations: while those are not necessarily much more successful (e.g. Marnie's singing-songwriting work with Desi, which is derailed by his addiction in seasons five and six), they are offered as viable alternatives to Hannah's individual work ethos, and ones that are much more similar to the way in which the television show they exist in was made – by collaboration and compromise between many artists and their complementary visions.

It can be argued that Michaela Coel's work, despite being the most cohesive and singular in terms of authorship, is also the most complex in its revision of what individual authorship actually means. While *I May Destroy You*'s Arabella is unquestionably depicted as the author of her books, and those books depict her personal story and authentic experiences, her creative process is predominantly interactive. For much of her career, Arabella writes for social media followers and in response to them: although her ultimate success comes only after she limits her social media presence, interactivity and collaboration are ingrained in her work. She also reconsiders and re-contextualises her own experiences in the process of attending a support group, which offers her counter-perspectives and requires that she reconsider her own narration of herself, and her ambiguous position in other people's stories.

Arabella's pursuit of artistic maturity and independence requires her not only to embrace her own agency, as evidenced in the ambiguous storytelling of the finale, which sees Arabella imagine various forms of closure for her trauma and her story. It also means learning about craft (even if knowledge comes from Zain), taking responsibility for one's own actions (including the harm Arabella caused to her friends while seeing herself solely as a victim) and

making creative choices even when they are commercially risky. The finale shows that Arabella was able to publish her second book, but this was done outside of the traditional market, independently. This choice seems to have been necessary to retain her project's artistic integrity, and in some ways perhaps reflects the decision Coel made in demanding to retain copyright to her work (Jung, 2020b).

7. Conclusion

The theme of women's creative work and authorship as depicted on television cannot be fully discussed in the space of one article. In the course of over two decades that separate the premieres of *Sex and the City*, *Girls* and *I May Destroy You*, the landscape of English-language television has undergone significant shifts. Albeit auteurial shows were initially largely the domain of male creators, recent years have seen a growing number of series by women come to prominence, and some of these series have focused on women writers. Accordingly, the problems discussed here could be considered in connection with such texts as *Jane the Virgin* (2014-2019), another television series with *Künstlerroman* characteristics, which at the same time plays with conventions of various genres, both literary and televisual; or as a way to reconceptualise *Gilmore Girls*, whose 2016 revival series *A Year in the Life* sees the narrative of the entire preceding show become subject matter of the protagonist's debut. Other series have delved into the connection between life and art in non-literary yet distinctly authored and autofictional productions: the tension between writing the authentic self and the position of a woman author is central in such diverse productions as *30 Rock*, created by Tina Fey, who is also playing a showrunner to the show within the show, or Amy Sherman-Palladino's *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017-present) about an aspiring comedienne launching her career in the 1950s and 60s, or *Better Things* (2016-2022), co-created by the show's star Pamela Adlon, partly focusing on its protagonist's work as actress and creator. In addition, projects of nonbinary showrunner Joey Soloway, such as *Transparent* (2014-2019) and *I Love Dick* (co-created with Sarah Gubbins; 2016-2017) could merit separate or comparative analysis, in particular given the way in which "Musical Finale" of *Transparent* re-casts the matriarch Shelly Pfefferman as the storyteller of her family's narrative.

The three series that I selected share more than the fact that they are all produced or co-produced by HBO: they are also all explorations of the creative process involved specifically in autobiographical writing, the material reality of being an artist, and the intricacies of the publishing industry. Women writers are represented in these series as willing to, or perhaps even driven to, translate the most personal experiences – their own and those of others in their immediate environment – into material for their art. This partly reflects the creative process of the writers authoring the series (or the material adapted into the series) – Bushnell, Dunham and Coel model their characters on themselves and incorporate some events from their own lives in their stories. The texts themselves portray this with a degree of ambivalence, particularly in the case of *Girls*; writing about oneself appears solipsistic, and may be seen as an artistic or even ethical failing – at the same time, it seems to represent a step in one's development rather than an aspirational goal. Similarly, in *I May Destroy You*, not all personal, self-focused writing represents an artistic triumph, and authenticity can be somewhat successfully feigned; however, writing the self is also seen as possessing healing properties, as long as it is

rooted in genuine insight into one's own history. What this means is confronting one's image of the self with other versions of one's story, which appears to be a necessary condition of ethical writing and artistic growth. The series is careful not to suggest that being sexually assaulted is the source of Arabella's new maturity, which she has clearly obtained by the end of the show – it is reckoning with her past and present behaviour that teaches the character what Coel describes as "radical empathy" (Jung, 2020b).

In *How to suppress women's writing*, Joanna Russ, citing Julia Penelope, argues that women's autobiographical writing is often described as "confessional" in an effort to deny it artistic merit: the same intense preoccupation with the self is not perceived as a flaw when it characterises the works of men writers (2005, p. 29). Linda Anderson makes a similar point about diaristic and autobiographical writing as women writers' domain, but sees it as one of both "restriction" (1986, p. 61) and "a reaching towards the possibility of saying 'I'" (p. 65). Nussbaum echoes this in her review of *Girls*, noting that women's autobiography is often seen as "icky, sticky memoir – score-settling, *not art*" (2019, p. 76, emphasis mine). The three series I have discussed acknowledge the likelihood of such a critique, or contend with existing critique of their preoccupation with self-centred women writers, and retain self-deprecating distance towards their characters' work. Nevertheless, the authors of the two latter texts – Dunham and Coel – are also increasingly unapologetic in offering their protagonists the opportunity to demand that their fictional writing, even when problematic and solipsistic, and especially when concerned with women's experience, be taken seriously *as art*, thus making the same demand for the shows themselves.

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