

Introduction

In his own day Samuel Richardson was read and admired by all kinds of people, from the King to a small boy who liked eating gingernuts. His reputation soon fell precipitously away. A recent renewal of interest drew attention first to the solidity of his worlds and to the perceptiveness, which some called confessional, of his psychological understanding. Later admirers, dissatisfied with this reduction of his work to document or naive self-exposure, explain its place in English literature and ideas, or point out how very well he wrote. Still others apply psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, semiotics, hermeneutic criticism and reader response theories to Richardson, who is great enough to reward them all. The gap between 'humanists' who recover a deliberate artist and 'subversives' who discover a modern man need not, however, exist if we can agree that wherever we turn in the symbolism of the unconscious, the politics of property or of sex, the subjectivity of reading, the philosophy of signs, and the meaning of meaning, Richardson has usually been there first. In the hope of reconciling historical explanation with present-day critical concerns, I shall therefore work closely from Richardson's own words to explore the ideas that inform his novels and the strategies that present them.

Richardson's image as a sober middle-class printer is deceptive, for the life he gives to radical ideas about hierarchy, power, education and reform demonstrates a considerable awareness of the intellectual and political ferment which had existed since the Civil War. His father was 'personally beloved' by that unlikely leader of the last great peasant revolt, the Duke of Monmouth (Carroll, p. 228), and he himself printed in the 1720s a periodical called *The True Briton*, which supported the English liberties guaranteed by the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and attacked the government of the day for upsetting the balance of power. Richardson wrote elsewhere that he 'always gave that Preference to the Principles of LIBERTY, which we hope will for ever be the distinguishing Characteristic of a *Briton*' (Eaves and Kimpel, pp. 29–35). The vocabulary, though vague, refers specifically to the traditional hope of seventeenth-century revolutionaries that England would be

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-31542-5 - Samuel Richardson
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relieved of the Norman yoke and restored to its ancient Anglo-Saxon birthright of liberty. This suggests that Richardson was not untouched by the millenarian dreams that his father must have known.

The approaching millennium, it was thought, would reverse the disastrous effect of the Fall and restore a Golden Age of brotherhood, justice and innocence.¹ The means was education, a general dissemination of knowledge which, being at once understood by all reasonable men, would bring about a change of heart and a paradise within. As a printer, Richardson took an essential part in the advancement of learning. For instance, he printed books of science, medicine, travel and the transactions of the Royal Society – that is, the kind of works whose tendency was to reveal truth and restore the purity of the word. The harbinger of the millennium was said to be a growing and general depravity, which Richardson, as well as many others in his time, earnestly believed in. Its warning could be a comet, and its manifestations would be the defeat of avarice and luxury, and the unmasking of Anti-Christ by providential agents. The consequent community of the saints would be marked by a benevolence as universal as the sun's impartial rays, by the disappearance of slavery and hierarchy (especially that created by property and the universities), by the conversion of the Jews, and by the diffusion of peace, tolerance, and understanding throughout a temperate, very English paradise here on earth.

Richardson's own work expresses just these hopes. First *Pamela* sketches the overthrow of wickedness and the return to a prelapsarian state; then *Clarissa* shows goodness confronting avarice, Anti-Christ, hierarchy, and clerical privilege, and finally *Grandison* presents a carefully worked out vision of millennial love, justice and reform. What this means is that Richardson's best work is profoundly political. It sets examples of the new against the old, such as liberal and conservative, Whig and Tory, freedom and hierarchy, woman and man, meritocracy and power, Modern and Ancient, progress and tradition. Related issues like natural and learned genius, vernacular and classical, scriptural and pagan, simple and allusive, plain and baroque, truth and deceit, sincerity and acting, realism and romance recur constantly in his work. They are the necessary contraries by which progression through the debates of reasonable people brings about the general reconciliation so much wished for.

Although to call him feminist is an anachronism, Richardson particularly speaks, in consequence, to feminist concerns. The words of the millennial theorist Mary Astell on marriage and female

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education seem especially to echo through his novels,² and he would have encountered everywhere the assumptions of the ‘fair sex debate’. Ultimately, though, I think he drew his ideas directly from the clash of libertarian with authoritarian politics that gave rise to what we now call ‘feminism’. Domestic relations, at that time, reflected for political theorists like Filmer and Locke the social relations of the state, while conversely, in the edgy amorous civil warfare of Restoration plays, characters very much like Richardson’s bandied about the risky terminology of usurpation, tyranny, slavery, rebellion, liberty and birthright. Many of these themes came into focus in the well-known story of Lucretia’s rape and suicide, a fable of individual liberty confronting the state whose political and sexual implications go far to explain Pamela’s resistance and Clarissa’s death.³

Women writers also were quick to complain of men’s ‘usurpation’ of their poetic birthright,⁴ and Mary Astell, Lady Chudleigh and Mary Leapor, for instance, demanded in their attacks on domestic Divine Right a balance of powers very much akin to the checks on a constitutional monarchy. ‘If absolute Sovereignty be not necessary in a State,’ wrote Astell unanswerably, ‘how comes it to be so in a Family?’⁵ Whenever Richardson wrote of relationships, then, he inevitably wrote of politics.⁶

He was attracted to these large themes because he believed fiction could be nationally important, and (heretical though it may be to say so) Richardson is crucial to his own work. Like Pope in the *Dunciad*, he believed that vice and virtue could readily coalesce into ‘one putrid Mass, a Chaos in the Moral and Intellectual World’;⁷ like the millenarians, he thought that Anti-Christ was to be found, and fought, in the human heart. Here the passions are constantly at war with reason, especially in ‘love’ relationships; where, he wrote bleakly, men and women are devils to one another, they need no other tempter (*Grandison*, I. 439). His remedy, like theirs, was words, his trust in their power deriving from the apotheosis of reason in his time. To John Locke, the great Modern whose views on the mind’s capacity, education and political implications were as axiomatic as the Bible in the eighteenth century, Richardson must have been particularly susceptible, for though formal education had been largely denied him, Locke’s *Some Thoughts concerning Education* (1693) explained how to educate oneself, the *Essay concerning Humane Understanding* (1690) demonstrated the development of the reason, and his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) advised rational men struggling to set up a just society. And if

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Richardson shared the belief of the Moderns that progress spread through printing, education, and the dissemination of reasonable words, his own 'mite' to mend the world (Carroll, p. 175) can be seen as the representation of political, moral and educational ideas in his fiction.

Richardson spoke largely to women, because his topics concerned them and himself most nearly. Although awkward with educated men, Richardson saw women as uneducated outsiders like himself, and therefore potentially progressive. A clever woman had no choice but to be a 'natural genius', too. The 'Cause of the Sex' was 'the Cause of Virtue' (Carroll, p. 112), and indeed if women followed Locke's recommendation to educate the young they could reclaim themselves, men, and the world.⁸ But who was to educate them? The blank slates of their minds were often said to have suffered a second fall, scored over by the frivolity of their fashionable accomplishments. But if, as Locke said, education rather than innate ideas were crucial in shaping the mind, women's capacities might be restored by reading their favourite novels, once those novels were washed and brought to church.

Richardson reached out to women, who in their idle incarceration read romances, by using love stories as a structure to contain much else. Like Herbert, whom he quotes approvingly for seeking him 'who a Sermon flies' (Carroll, p. 91), Richardson smuggles moral and ethical debate into his tales of 'love and nonsense, men and women' without which he would catch, he said, none but grandmothers (Carroll, pp. 46–7, 221). His important characters are mostly women, heroines who stand for principle under stress: Pamela Andrews defends her 'own self' against assaults from a powerful master; Clarissa Harlowe, having escaped from her persecuting family to a lover who drugs and rapes her, dies to remain herself; Harriet Byron maintains her own life's choice; and Clementina della Porretta weighs love, religion and duty in the face of madness and oppression.

To the characters, stories and techniques of romance and drama he added the lures of letters and realistically observed scenes. After the collapse of Mary Astell's end-of-the-century scheme for a Protestant nunnery where woman who did not wish to marry could pool their resources and live together, those conscious of educational neglect could at least correspond with men more favoured than themselves, as did Astell herself, or Lady Damaris Masham, or the whole circle of women whose correspondence with Richardson intersected excitingly with his fictional worlds. By this important

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principle, which he called 'accommodation' (Carroll, p. 98), he spoke through young, lively characters, suggested different points of view to pull his readers in, domesticated romance so that it read like their own lives, discussed their own main concerns, courtship and marriage, and enthralled them with letters just like the ones they wrote themselves. The result was fictional realism, his most extraordinary and obvious accomplishment.

Above all, Richardson trained his readers to be 'if not Authors, Carvers' (Carroll, p. 296),⁹ who practise their rational gifts in protected, mock encounters of innocence with treachery, as Johnson saw in *Rambler* 4. The idea that every reader is competent to judge, Richardson promoted, for instance, by the novels being typically built upon matters debated by all, so that when he screens himself behind 'the umbrage of the editor's character' (Carroll, p. 42) he forces his 'Sovereign Judges the Readers' to choose and to decide (Carroll, p. 280). In the absence of obvious direction arises a sudden dizzying sense that our decision is vital indeed.¹⁰

Outside the works, too, Richardson ran what amounted to interpretative schools, prodding, teasing, provoking his friends into the reasoned response that was the Puritan reply to rigid authoritarianism. Increasingly he fused life and fiction, prompting debate over characters and scenes upon which he invited fresh comment to weave back into the book. Out of the consequent proliferation of points of view, each novel challenges readers to find an ideal reading, just as each heroine seeks someone who will understand. 'Many things,' he wrote, 'are thrown out in the several Characters, on purpose to provoke friendly Debate; and perhaps as Trials of the Readers Judgment, Manners, Taste, Capacity.' Something also, he said, must be left for the reader to make out (Carroll, pp. 315, 296). Although many later commentators have triumphantly brandished against him points that he first made, Richardson's novels consequently demonstrate what some think the highest art, the ability to contain their own criticism.

If Richardson encouraged his readers to think independently, they often pushed him to reconsider and rewrite. *Pamela* enlarges upon a situation sketched in his *Familiar Letters*, *Pamela in her Exalted Condition* writes over the top of *Pamela*, *Clarissa* courageously faces the implications of them both, and *Sir Charles Grandison* explores aspects of *Clarissa*. When Johnson accused his friend of terminal vanity¹¹ he may not have seen how Richardson needed his 'flatterers' to let him know what to say and whether he was saying it. In all his novels and letters Richardson worried away at the triangular

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relationship of author, work and reader in ways that we are only now beginning to respect. He involved his readers in the composition of his works, suited his books to them, and trained them to comprehend what he wrote. Reading his readers became the necessary habit of a lifetime.

Three major literary events might not have occurred without them: *Pamela*, which raised fiction to the dignity of serious debate, *Clarissa*, which to Johnson was perhaps the finest work in the language,¹² and *Sir Charles Grandison*, so significant a touchstone for writers in the following century that Jane Austen (for instance) drew on it extensively for three of her novels. But the enthusiasm of his audience proved embarrassing. Increasingly confident that they shared in his creativity when his letters and female subjects magnified their own lives, they seized the chance to escape from what Lady Winchilsea had called 'the dull manna, of a servile house' into the heady complicity of authorship. His physical and psychological particularity, together with the fact that the characters, their own authors, editors and commentators, apparently write themselves into existence, persuaded readers to believe in the actuality of his created worlds. They responded to the letters as if they were addressees, spurned his characters, or fell in love with villains as real to them as their own neighbours. In these ways Richardson's readers became not rational carvers, but upstart novelists shouldering him out of his place. They demanded a continuation for *Pamela*, a happy ending for *Clarissa*, and private messages to be placed in *Grandison*, and made him remark despairingly that 'I have met with more Admirers of Lovelace than of Clarissa', for everyone took measure of a character by their own standard, everyone put himself or herself into the character and judged of it by their own sensations.¹³

His correspondent Lady Echlin thought 'accommodation' mistaken, but Richardson knew it was essential (Carroll, p. 322). It was certainly fatal to his contentment when it forced upon him a deference to his audience that he often groaned under. By his reasoning he had to write for nine out of ten readers who were in 'hanging-sleeves' (Carroll, p. 42) – that is, young, needy and often obtuse. But he could not dare to doubt the typicality of silly little Miss Westcomb, who even after reading *Clarissa* was still fond of rakes.

When readers' responses went awry, he fought to regain control in the private correspondence and the novels, revised, or started all over again. But his difficulties were perhaps inevitable. If words

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are not just conduits for meaning but signs arbitrarily agreed upon, their sense can be undermined at any time by failures of expression, incomprehension, or stubbornly resistant self-love, so that optimism gives way to the consternation of Babel. Perhaps it is true that works are only completed by their readers, but whenever his contemporaries invaded his work they made it swerve from its own imperatives, and impelled him to modify his text, to explain his explanations.

They also made him revise. Richardson, who could think of a text as unfixed probably because he was a printer, rewrote almost as much as he wrote, and often revised his last novel at the same time as he invented the new one. But since, as he realised, revisions could only do so much, in a strange sense each novel 'corrects' its predecessor. His anxiety often made him simplify before and after publication, but having once abandoned the closure of didacticism for the openness of fiction, he found he had granted his readers a freedom inadmissible in instruction. Once his design depended upon character, story and figure, in short, upon imaginative art, it instantly became ambiguous, and capable of as many readings as readers. After years of struggle to control them individually through correspondence or more generally by revision and rewriting, he eventually resorted to exhortation in his Indexes to *Clarissa* and *Grandison* and the *Collection of Moral and Instructive Sentiments* garnered from the three books. Just before his death, he felt he had written to little purpose (Carroll, p. 340).

To watch his career is, however, to witness a printer creating himself as author, for reader consultation and response, painful as they were, induced in Richardson constructive dissatisfaction. An autodidact in this above all else, he was persistent enough and humble enough to learn from failure as well as success, and embarked at the end of his writing life upon ambitious new experiments in *Grandison* with a lightness of touch and prodigality of invention which were remarkable, given that he was so tired and ill. Samuel Johnson was right to assure his friend, 'You, Sir, have beyond all other men the art of improving on yourself.'¹⁴

Since art, to Richardson, was secondary to teaching, he would have been startled to know how often his novels are praised as either documentary or aesthetic experience. He wrote realistically, to be sure, but the realism was to him always the vehicle, not the reason for his writing. Moral instructions and warnings, he said, were 'the very motive with me' for *Clarissa's* being written at all (Carroll, p. 224). Critics often say that he wrote better than he knew,

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but his careful preservation of the commentaries he wrote on his own books show how thoroughly he considered the purpose as well as the art of fiction. As he writes, his books become more sure in their technique, more largely important, more expansively accepting of his predecessors, and so linked by allusion and resonance to a wider world of literature which in turn enriches his own. From the illustrative allusions of *Pamela* to the richly charged, invigorating analogies of *Clarissa* and *Grandison*, Richardson places his work boldly among English writing rather than the classical past. He may not have changed the world, but he established a path for fiction that was new and extraordinarily influential.

1

Pamela

Pamela was a novel, something new, and it took the world by storm. Simple villagers rang church bells to celebrate Pamela's wedding, but her solid little world exists primarily for the sake of its subject, the rape that does not happen.

Plunging straight into the middle of things, Pamela tells her mother and father that the old mistress of the house has died. Her son Mr B. vows to take care of her, giving her 'with his own Hand Four golden Guineas' which she promptly sends to her parents 'by *John* our Footman, who goes your way; but he does not know what he carries; because I seal it up in one of the little Pill-boxes which my Lady had, wrapt close in Paper, that it mayn't chink; and be sure don't open it before him'. A death, the ambivalence of being placed in the care of a young man, gold that chinks and must be hidden in a pill-box, all these are lures to raise the curiosity of the reader. Richardson wastes no time in developing the relationship between that interesting young man and Pamela. She has been scared out of her senses, she says, for in has come her young master. 'Good Sirs! how was I frightned! I went to hide the Letter in my Bosom, and he seeing me frighted, said, smiling, Who have you been writing to, *Pamela*?' Here is an invasion not only of her refuge, the lady's dressing-room, but of her private life and thoughts, and as her reaction shows, she realises that however kind, this is her master's first attack.

Conspicuous for beauty and literacy, vulnerable in a house bereft of its old order, and alert to the danger of the gold going astray or herself doing likewise, Pamela responds with instant alarm to the proximity of this young man. Her instinctive concealment of the letter in her bosom shows how she equates her inmost self with the letters which Mr B. will pursue as earnestly as he pursues her body. No wonder she can do nothing but 'curchee and cry, and was all in Confusion', but at his goodness, merely, as she thinks? She does not know, and neither yet do we.

After this promising start the story proceeds briskly. Gifts of his mother's clothes allow Mr B. to show his awareness of the body he desires, and the space within which he encroaches grows

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dangerously more confined. Pamela, unable to recognise an attraction to a man so greatly her superior in class, tries to stave off disaster by acting as though the worst will not happen, stays doggedly on in the house to finish a waistcoat, and defies him with her own sense of right. This wary and unstable situation is dramatically heightened by Mr B.'s unexpected abduction of Pamela just when she thinks she is on her way home. At his country house she is guarded by two monstrous warders, Mrs Jewkes and Mr Colbrand, so that even her energy and ingenuity must falter before the array of obstacles to her freedom. When she is reduced to considering suicide, her state at last convinces Mr B. of her determination not to be raped. Once allowed to go, Pamela wants to stay. She and Mr B. marry, the remainder of the book showing how their new relationship works out.

Such a tale of sexual pursuit and resistance is scarcely new, but, as has always been known, what gives it life is the particularity of its physical and psychological realism. The carefully itemised clothing that Mr B. gives to Pamela, the forty sheets of paper, the bundle of pens and the sealing wax by which she is enabled to carry on her correspondence, the letters that she sews into her petticoats or hides under the sunflower, the blister on her hand from scouring a pewter plate, the round-eared cap of her country clothes, those four golden guineas, all are present and important through the naming of their names and what they mean to Pamela. The bold Hogarthian caricature of Mrs Jewkes' 'Picture', for instance, tells us just as much about Pamela as it does about her keeper:

She is a broad, squat, pursy, fat Thing, quite ugly, if any thing God made can be ugly; about forty Years old. She has a huge Hand, and an Arm as thick as my Waist, I believe. Her Nose is flat and crooked, and her Brows grow over her Eyes; a dead, spiteful, grey, goggling Eye, to be sure, she has. And her Face is flat and broad; and as to Colour, looks like as if it had been pickled a Month in Salt-petre: I dare say she drinks!

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Again, when she dresses for home, Pamela's delight in the details of her own appearance gives Mr B. a chance:

I dropt a low Curchee, but said never a Word. I dare say, he knew me as soon as he saw my Face; but was as cunning as *Lucifer*. He came up to me, and took me by the Hand, and said, Whose pretty Maiden are you? – I dare say you are *Pamela's* Sister, you are so like her. So neat, so clean, so pretty! Why, Child, you far surpass your Sister *Pamela!*

I was all Confusion, and would have spoken; but he took me about the Neck; Why, said he, you are very pretty, Child; I would not