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The 18th Century Novel: Defining and Redefining Realism

Jim Kjelland

Ian Watt defines reality, in contrast to the classical notion of the immutable ideal, as a matter of individual experience (9). Although this definition is certainly not exclusively Watt's—as it follows closely from the basic Enlightenment principle of human empowerment—it does lead Watt to several unique conclusions about truth. If the classical view equates reality with the ideal, then reality comprises any number of immutable, or ideal, truths. These truths are not tangible but are instead divine and immutable “ideas in the sky” upon which the material world—what we consider to be our tangible “reality”—is modeled. Our “reality” is, then, an imperfect representation or shadow working towards the achievement of exogenously imposed ideals or truths. But if reality is a matter of individual experience as Watt claims, then there is no truth, or, more specifically, humanity is left to create its own conception of truth. This conclusion introduces the idea of subjectivity into our definition of reality, which adds further complication—reality becomes anything we conceive it to be. Reality, in other words, becomes the aggregate of individual truths instead of any sort of external point of light. Watt doesn't appear to extend his definition this far. While he does realize the importance of individual experience in defining reality, his view is limited to formally realistic elements that limit focus to very specific subjective representations of reality. So while Watt does abandon character types and simplified black and white notions of truth, he still endorses the portrayal of a very exclusive selection of subjective perspectives: he trades in black and white for individual shades of grey, which, taken separately, are no less limiting or unrealistic. Watt names this formal realism, which he suggests is the defining characteristic of the 18th century novel (9-35). In this paper, I will show that formal realism tells only a very small part

of the story of the 18th century novel. While I do believe that realism, as defined by fidelity to individual experience, is the most definable characteristic of the 18th century novel, I will show that authors such as Henry Fielding and Charlotte Lennox realized the bias that *formal* realism imposes on a text, and that they attempted to create a more critically objective realistic view of humanity's diverse and subjective reality.

One might apply Watt's formal realism quite readily to Richardson. Had the 18th century novel comprised solely *Pamela*, there would be little difficulty in applying Watt's analysis of realism to the genre. Still, if *Pamela* was the only 18th century novel, the genre in my estimation would fall very short of realistically portraying the world and the people in it. *Pamela's* realism, once again, lies in its formal realism—its ability to create a three dimensional world with characters that the reader can imagine to be real people. Richardson achieves formal realism in large part by completely removing his authorial presence from the text. In his place stands an "editor" who compiles Pamela's letters into a bounded collection and is himself rather absent from the text. This editor makes only sparse appearances, once at the beginning and once during the plot's progression, claiming to be merely an objective compiler of these letters, "which have their foundation both in Truth and Nature" (Richardson 31). This *formal* authorial trick leaves the reader with direct access to Pamela's letters and hence, as is implicit in the content of those letters, to Pamela herself. As a result, readers feel like they know Pamela—Pamela has let them into her world, told them her secrets Richardson emphasizes this formal ploy by making the letters physical objects in the novel which Pamela refers to within the text. In Letter XI Pamela writes, "Well, my dear mother, I can't find my letter, and so I'll try to recollect it all," referring to a misplaced letter (53). Pamela's letters receive not only mention, but make an appearance in the text, as Pamela tells of Mr. B—

reaching for the letters hidden under her bodice (131). All of these formal elements contribute to a formal realism that convinces the reader that there is an editor, and that there are letters, which a captivating girl named Pamela happened to write.

The purpose of this formal realism, according to Richardson, is in part “to inculcate Religion and Morality in so easy and agreeable a manner, as shall render them equally delightful” (preface). Additionally, Richardson wishes to “paint vice in its proper Colours...and to set Virtue in its own amiable Light” (preface). Richardson, in other words, plans to instruct by dressing truth, like falsehood, in desire, which people find entertaining, so that readers will learn morality without rejecting it as education, which they despise (Spacks 1). The reader, therefore, learns the truth about morality and vice through Pamela, who acts as an ideal and entertaining, three-dimensional example. This is how formal realism conveys realities about truth, morality, and vice: through a single subjective interpretation. As I discussed above, in a subjective world that does not depend on universal truths, it is the aggregate of all subjective beliefs and perspectives that determines truth. Pamela is merely a single girl, and although the reader is led to trust her, she can still only offer very limited truths, which are grounded in the contexts of her unique life. From her we learn that morality consists primarily of chastity and that vice is embodied in social injustice and lust. The contexts of Pamela’s life impose bias on truth and distort reality by limiting it.

Additionally, and more importantly, the presentation of Pamela’s subjective perspective imposes Richardson’s bias and beliefs on the text. By removing his authorial presence from the text, Richardson creates a world that appears realistic and probable. But, as we know, Richardson is actually very involved in the text (though his influence is hidden by formal tricks), and, as a result, what appears probable and realistic is in actuality very contrived; Richardson, through this authorial trick, is able to make

the unrealistic seem very probable. The basic premise of *Pamela*, for example, is unrealistic; waiting maids simply did not marry men of standing such as Mr. B—, and Mr. B would not very likely have thrown away his social position and his lineage to protect a girl's virtue, which in all frankness (during that time period) was his to take and not Pamela's to withhold. Watt accounts for these unrealistic events stating, "the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it" (27). This is certainly true for *Pamela*, and there is a certain danger of distortion involved in presenting "reality" in such a way.

Richardson names his novel *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, and while Pamela's "virtue" is rewarded, the reader must realize that both the virtue and the reward are contrived by Richardson. The problem is that the formal realism makes it difficult for the reader to realize Richardson's manipulation of the text. As a result, Richardson is able to indoctrinate readers with his definitions of good and bad using a constructed embodiment of his notion of virtue (in *Pamela*), which he reinforces as being "good" through a contrived providence that rewards that "virtue" with a happy ending. In other words, Richardson's definition of virtue is self fulfilling, and Richardson is therefore able to manipulate the reader into seeing the world from his limited perspective.

One might argue that the contrived "virtue" in *Pamela* is realistic for the fact that it represents virtue outside of the restrictive social contexts of conventional society. Said in another way, one might argue that Richardson is broadening the subjective definition of virtue by rejecting the social limitations of society, which reserve the right to chastity and virtue to the upper classes; he is making Pamela and her virtue her own property—certainly and unconventional perspective. If this were the case, Richardson would be presenting a possible alternative view of virtue that is no less valid, which could be viewed as a less restrictive definition

and more representative of the aggregate of subjective perspectives and, in that way, more representative of reality.

The problem with this argument is that it does not take into account the fact that Richardson does not overtly offer his definition of virtue as an *alternative* for readers to consciously contemplate. Using formal realism, Richardson makes Pamela's actions seem inevitable. Indeed, readers read in such an absorptive way that they hardly realize that Pamela's virtue is unconventional. In this way, Richardson prevents the reader from becoming conscious of Pamela's virtue as an authorial redefinition, and instead of partaking in a critical discourse *per se* with Richardson regarding the alternative possible perspectives surrounding definitions of virtue, the reader sees only the very limited and subjective perspective portrayed by Pamela. In such a case, Richardson's formal realism has the unrealistic effect of putting readers out of touch with reality on the aggregate, offering them only his own limited, subjective view of the world. Both Fielding and Lennox attempt to expose and counteract this possible detriment of formal realism in their own novels.

In Fielding's novel, *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding abandons any attempt at formal realism and instead blatantly exposes his authorial presence. William Warner states, "Joseph Andrews was Fielding's first novel to attempt the narrative stance combining detachment and a good natured conversational alliance with the reader" (271). Fielding achieves this instructive dialogue with the reader by making his authorial ploys so obvious as to make the reader conscious of how such ploys may be used manipulatively by authors within a text. For example, the narrator's presence as an intermediary and his role as Fielding's authorial puppet is so plain that the reader is unable to view the plot that unfolds as anything but contrived. Throughout the text, this narrator uses a broad spectrum of different types of writing and speech: the narrator's critical introduction, the

narrator-historian's account of Joey's early life, Adams' catechizing of Joseph, Joseph's two interviews with Lady Booby and his encounter with Mrs. Slipslop (with its climactic Homeric similes), Joseph's two letters to Pamela, a "satire on love," and so on. (Warner 270)

In using such a wide variety of different writing styles, which work as exaggeration and parody in an already absurd story, Fielding is able to show how authors manipulate a text with language—he exposes language and narrative structure as authorial tools used for authors' manipulative purpose in portraying the world as they wish it to be seen. Relating this idea back to *Pamela*, Fielding is making the reader conscious of the fact that despite a formally realistic style, *Pamela* is no less contrived than the blatantly manipulated text (by the narrator and, in turn, Fielding himself) of *Joseph Andrews*. He advises the reader to be wary of such manipulations.

But the style of writing is not the only form of authorial manipulation that Fielding exposes. Fielding also uses the narrator to manipulate the reader's expectations. In chapter one of *Joseph Andrews* the narrator states,

the authentic History with which I now present the public is an instance of the great good that book [*Pamela*] is likely to do, and of the Prevalence of Example which I have just observed: since it will appear that it was by keeping the excellent Pattern of his Sister's Virtues before his Eyes, that Mr. Joseph Andrews was chiefly enabled to preserve his Purity in the midst of such great Temptation. (Fielding 34)

The reader is led to expect Joseph to have learned from Pamela's example and to act accordingly. At first, as Warner relates, Joseph does indeed appear as a "witless imitator of his sister's example"

(255)—He bravely rebuffs the sexual advances of Mrs. Booby, and in a letter to Pamela even attributes his success to her example. In the following chapter (XI), though, the narrator surprises the readers by relating information contrary to what he told them in the opening chapter. Chapter XI is titled, “Of Several New Matters Not Expected,” which is exactly what it relates by contradicting reader expectations. The narrator opens,

It is an Observation sometimes made, to indicate our idea of a simple Fellow, “That he is easily to be seen through”: nor do I believe it a more improper Denotation of a simple Book. Instead of applying this to any particular Performance, we choose rather to remark the contrary in this History, where the Scene opens itself by small degrees; and he is a sagacious Reader who can see two Chapters before him... For this reason, we have not hitherto hinted a Matter which now seems necessary to be explained. (63)

Fielding continues to relate the real reason that Joseph left town so soon after being put out and why he made his way to Lady Booby’s country residence. Joseph’s motivation in both of these actions, the narrator relates, is his beloved Fanny (63). From this information the reader may presume that Joseph’s real reason for resisting Lady Booby is also his love for Fanny (Warren 255). In this passage, readers expectations (“it was by keeping the excellent Pattern of his Sister’s Virtues before his Eyes, that Mr. Joseph Andrews was chiefly enabled to preserve his Purity”) are contradicted by the very narrator that originally created them.

This contradiction, alongside the narrator’s coy justification (see above block quote) for keeping Joseph’s true motivation (Fanny) secret, seems to suggest that Fielding is once again in dialogue with his reader to make him or her conscious of the manipulations of authorship. Given Joseph’s secret motivations,

the reader must allow for the possibility of alternative motivations in a character like Pamela. Fielding's previous work of *Shamela* makes this point in showing that a promiscuous interpretation of Pamela is not necessarily any less valid. Maybe Richardson should have named his novel *Pamela; or, promiscuity and deception rewarded*. Fielding points out, with his inter-textual dialogue with the reader, the ability of an author to paint actions and characters in a narrative in whatever color suits his or her purpose. "Painting characters" as such allows an author like Richardson to indoctrinate readers with subjective perspectives as discussed earlier. Fielding, in contrast, blatantly exposes the author's hand in withholding information and creating false expectations. Additionally, he exposes Joseph's own contradiction in attributing his actions to Pamela's example.

By exposing all of these forces at work, making the reader conscious of them, Fielding is commenting on the act of reading, exposing its pitfalls—he encourages readers, therefore, to read critically and to be aware of potential authorial manipulations. Had the narrator never revealed Joseph's true motivations and maintained a consistent narrative, the reader would not be drawn to question the text and think critically about it. Fielding's overt communication or dialogue with the readers (through blatant authorial ploys) assures that readers do think critically about the text, and it prevents them from reading in absorptive and therefore un-critical ways that open them to authorial manipulations such as happens in *Pamela*.

It seems from my discussion of Fielding that his novel, *Joseph Andrews*, works as a textbook on critical reading that can be applied to novels of moral instruction such as *Pamela*. Does it serve the purpose of moral instruction in itself as Fielding wishes it to, though? Just as criticism continued during this period to function as moral reformation—as attested by critical publications such as *The Spectator* and *The Female Spectator*—novelists at the

time, driven by the same literary market powers, also focused (at least superficially) on moral instruction (Gardiner 30). Fielding, then, must have had a moralistic aim in addition to his instruction on critical reading. Clive T. Probyn makes a good point when he states, “whereas Richardson’s preface implies that moral truth is exemplified in and may be learned from his novel, fielding implies that the reader is already familiar with moral truth and needs only to be reminded, not instructed” (17). This might explain Fielding’s apparent lack of explicit moral instruction. Still, there might be something to be said for a text that can critically instruct *and* provide realistic characters on which to practice critical reading. Such a text would have a very powerful impact and would offer very efficient moral instruction—both critical instruction on reading and moral application on three dimensional characters that captivate readers and make lasting moral impressions.

Consider the captivating power of *Pamela* read with Fielding’s critical instruction on meditative reading in mind. Combining formal realism with a conscious awareness of authorial manipulation would allow readers of *Pamela* to see Richardson’s portrayal of virtue (in the form of a waiting-maid) as an illuminating possibility of redefinition and social change instead of as a limited and subjective view of virtue.

This is, in essence, exactly what Lennox accomplishes in her *Female Quixote*. Lennox finds a balance between the formally realistic and uncritical narrative of Richardson’s *Pamela* and Fielding’s formally and overtly unrealistic narrative that works instead as a signal to readers to look critically at texts. Michael McKeon coins the term “free indirect discourse,” which very well fits Lennox’s writing style. Free indirect discourse may be understood as,

a method of refining access to character interiority in conjunction with an exteriority free (unlike epistolary form) of the naïve claim of historicity...free indirect discourse

combines the virtues of first- and third-person narration by allowing the narrator as it were to enter and speak from within the mind of the character, but also to vacate that internal locale in order to reflect externally upon its contents. (McKeon 261)

Lennox achieves this by working within a very strict framework of internal probability and external improbability. Probability separates into two categories: internal and external. External probability is defined as “the correspondence between fictional action or characterization and real experience as we know it” (McKeon 255). *The Female Quixote* certainly doesn’t fit this designation. The basic concept of the novel—that of a girl who takes romance novels as histories of the real world and then plays the part of heroine—is quite the opposite of external probability; nobody could be so naïve. The second category of internal probability, in contrast,

does not arise so much from the resemblance of the fictions to real events, as from the consistency of the language with the sentiments, of the sentiments and actions with the characters, and of the different parts of the fable, with each other. (256)

In other words, internal probability only applies after one has accepted and disregarded the improbability of the overall premise of a certain situation—it depends only on the internal events and interactions within that situation. Disregarding the overall improbability of a girl being so incredibly naïve and holding such absurd beliefs, Arabella’s actions based on those given beliefs are entirely rational. In romances, every man is a potential ravisher, and given that Arabella believes that romances are representative of reality, she is entirely justified in throwing fits when approached by men. Her sentiments are, therefore, internally probable. Arabella, as a result, appears as a three dimensional character who the reader can empathize with and relate to, very much as one

would continue to empathize with a schizophrenic person who had simply lost touch with reality.

At the same time that Arabella's actions are internally probable, the entire situation is still very much externally improbable, which allows for a critical commentary on reading by Lennox while maintaining three dimensional, realistic characters. The external improbability, once again, arises from Arabella acting as a reader of romances within the text. Taking her romance novels to represent reality, she plays the role of a heroine in her life and as a result holds outrageous views about courtship and heroism. Arabella is, therefore, an absorptive, non-critical reader within Lennox's novel. Lennox uses the consequences of her internal, non-critical reading to inform the external reader of *The Female Quixote* of the negative consequences of reading non-critically. There are other internal "readers" within the text as well, which I will not cover in this paper, but they serve much the same critical purpose for Lennox. The critical reading of *The Female Quixote* works in much the same way as would a critical reading of *Pamela* using the critical lens developed by Fielding in *Joseph Andrews* (discussed earlier in the paper). Just as a critical reading of *Pamela* would reveal the redefinition of virtue of a waiting-maid as a social possibility, so to does a critical reading of *The Female Quixote*, using its own critical lens, reveal the social possibilities of an empowered woman (however improbable those possibilities appear given the current social context). "By daring," as Patricia Spacks states, "to imagine radical disagreement over indices of truth, the novelist has announced revolutionary possibilities for fiction" (23). By placing Arabella in a world of romance, in which she—as a three dimensional character—acts completely rational within the given context of her irrational romantic beliefs, Lennox reveals the possibility of a world where men and their ambition do not have all the power. She reveals the possibility of a world where women have more control, as those in

romance fiction do because they control love. In this way Lennox combines the realism of Richardson's characters with the critical perspective of Fielding that allows readers to view the subjective world from all of its perspectives.

In conclusion, then, while Richardson's *Pamela* follows Watt's conception of realism and so portrays a very specific subjective perspective in order to teach a specific moral lesson, Fielding instead creates a discourse where the reader is made conscious of the act of reading. Fielding forces readers to realize that they are being guided by a certain subjective perspective, which allows them take a step back and make an informed and objective assessment concerning the values and beliefs being promoted. Lennox is ultimately most effective in combining both literary styles. Whereas Richardson encourages uncritical reading, Fielding fails to create three dimensional characters that allow him to apply his critical analysis to a moral narrative. Lennox, in contrast to both, writes in a mixed style called by McKeon "free indirect discourse," which allows her to create a critical dialogue with the reader while also portraying realistic characters and situations that serve as applications for critical reading.

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