

## Sensibility and the Eighteenth-Century Novel

Sensibility isn't simply a literary phenomenon; there are a variety of social factors which need to be taken into account. In this lecture I want to try to make some 'sense' of 'sensibility' as a social as well as a literary construct; I'll give some examples of passages from the novels which you may find useful to look at but I will be concentrating on the underlying context and expecting you to relate these ideas to the texts for yourselves.

### Social Factors

#### Education

Men of any social standing still had a classical education focusing on Latin and Greek etc; Richardson, significantly, did not have such an education, something which the classically educated Fielding never let him forget. Their work testifies to the difference in their educational background, with Fielding using a complex structure of classical references in his work which can be baffling to the modern reader, seldom educated in the classics; Richardson's work is devoid of such elitist reference points. Thus, in the minds of contemporary readers, Fielding instantly aligned himself with the aristocracy and Richardson betrayed his bourgeois roots.

The women novelists we now study came from the leisured classes: Edgeworth and Austen were minor gentry and Burney's father was a member of the upper middle class intellectual elite. In the latter half of the eighteenth century the upper classes were growing increasingly leisured, with servants to do the domestic work; lifestyles were increasingly civilised and refined. Women from these classes were often comparatively well educated: they were still taught traditional feminine accomplishments such as drawing and music but now also had the opportunity to study writing, maths, geography, history, French, even current affairs.

Women's education was much debated throughout the century, not least in women's novels but the generally accepted ideal was to educate women not for professions of course but to render them useful and interesting companions capable of running their households and educating their children.

There was concern throughout the century that women's education should be practical and moral. Adam Smith approved of women whose 'education tends evidently to some useful purpose; either to improve the natural attractions of their person, or to form their mind to reserve, to modesty, to chastity, and to economy'(The Wealth of Nations, 1776). Thomas Gisborne objected to the notion of teaching women simply 'to improve in personal grace, to study fashionable decorations of the body and of the mind', noting the problems inherent in such a view of women simply as attractive objects; his arguments still have resonance: 'is it surprising that she, when grown up, should starve herself into shapeliness, and over-spread her face with paint?'

Even Richardson, largely sympathetic to women, did not advocate too deep an education for women, warning in *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-4): 'take care you give not up any knowledge that is more laudable in your sex, and more useful, for learning; and then I am sure you will, you *must*, be the more agreeable, the more suitable companions for it, to men of sense'(vol I, letter 13) - education is desirable only in so much as it will enable women to please men of sense.

Women's education was limited in our terms but set a vital precedent for the future in that women were no longer simply breeders of heirs but capable of rational and useful employments, which led to a degree of respect all too often absent in earlier periods.

#### Marriage and family life

Prior to the eighteenth century, upper class marriages were usually arranged: determining the succession of property was deemed more important than the partners' feelings. Children often died young and were generally regarded without sentimentality. By the middle of the eighteenth century life expectancy for both women and children had improved considerably; this, together with the increase in leisure time, meant that families had more time to spend together. The idea of domestic affection became increasingly valued, as we see in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Amelia* (1751).

Mr Wilson, who is of course Joseph's father, gives an idyllic description of his home life: 'we are seldom asunder...for I am neither ashamed of conversing with my wife nor of playing with my children: to say the truth, I do not perceive that inferiority of understanding which the levity of rakes, the dulness of men of business, of the austerity of the learned, would persuade us of in women. As for my woman, I declare I have found none of my own sex capable of making juster observations on life'(III, ch 4).

The Wilsons embody a domestic ideal based on friendship and respect, not passion, which is by its nature somewhat anarchic, not something which would be advocated in the eighteenth century - compassionate marriage still had a respectable, rational basis - property considerations were still important, although the practical demands of having enough to live on were increasingly balanced with an acceptance of the need for an affective bond. Austen addresses this in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813): Elizabeth Bennett comments that handsome young men must have something to live on as well as the plain.

Darcy is conscious of the differences in their social status but Austen reminds us through Elizabeth that although her family has less money than Darcy (most people in eighteenth-century England had less than Darcy!) she is a member of the gentry and as a well educated woman of respectable, albeit not spectacular birth, she is an appropriate marriage partner - Darcy is rich enough not to have to marry for money or even to take money into consideration but one really can't see him marrying a tradesman's daughter. We find much the same situation in *Sense and Sensibility*, with the well born but impoverished Marianne marrying Brandon and, to a lesser extent, in Elinor marrying Edward who, before disinheritance, was both well born and wealthy.

This need to balance practical concerns with the affective needs of the individual was expressed in fiction through various rewordings of the traditional romance motif of parents wanting their children to marry to aggrandise the family and children wanting to marry the partner of their choice. The honourable compromise was that women would marry according to their affections but only if the parents agreed. The possibility of marrying for love inevitably allowed the possibility of improving one's social status through marriage; this was one of the reasons that fiction with such storylines came in for moral criticism. *Pamela* (1740), though immensely popular, was criticised in this way and gave rise to Fielding's parody, *Shamela* (1741), where Fielding's characters articulate contemporary criticisms of *Pamela*:

Parson Oliver writes at the beginning of *Shamela*:

'The Instruction which it [ie *Pamela*] conveys to Servant-Maids, is, I think, very plainly this, To look out for their Masters as sharp as they can. The Consequences of which will be, besides Neglect of their Business, and the using all manner of Means to come at Ornaments of their Persons, that if the Master is not a Fool, they will be debauched by him; and if he is a Fool, they will marry him. Neither of which, I apprehend, my good Friend, we desire should be the Case of our Sons'(p.324, OUP).

*Shamela* ends on a note of moral disapproval courtesy of Parson Oliver:

'The character of Shamela will make young gentlemen wary how they take the most fatal step both to themselves and families, by youthful, hasty, and improper matches...Young gentlemen are here taught, that to marry their mother's chambermaids, and to indulge the passion of lust, at the expense of reason and common sense, in an act of religion, virtue, and honour; and, indeed, the surest road to happiness'(the second to last letter, p.355 OUP). The implicit criticism of *Pamela* is evident.

There is a tendency to assume that women novelists were, indeed are, obsessed with courtship and marriage but Richardson's narratives, and indeed those of his male contemporaries, are also deeply concerned with these issues. Choice of marriage partner was central to one's expectations of domestic happiness in a society where divorce was all but impossible. For men, the choice was important; for women, it was doubly so since it was the one area of life which offered them any kind of active role: they could not exercise a profession but if they married well, there were possibilities in charitable activities and of course in running households and influencing local affairs through their husbands and friends. It is scarcely surprising that the search for a partner one could love and respect became central to so much fiction of the period.

However, by the middle of the eighteenth century many upper class women didn't marry. Many younger sons from upper class families, could not afford to marry, as Colonel Fitzwilliam argues in *Pride and Prejudice*. Estates almost always passed intact to the elder son; younger sons often had to live off an annuity and go into the professions, usually the army, church or possibly law. Austen assumes that we

recognise the importance of the distinction between older and younger sons in *Sense and Sensibility*; Edward is the elder son and so is due to inherit but when he insists on honouring his engagement with Lucy Steele, his mother disinherits him, effectively reversing his economic situation with that of his brother. Of course when Lucy finds out, she marries the brother.

Lawrence Stone, a social historian, notes in *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, p.242 that in the latter part of the eighteenth century, 20% of men (some elder sons as well as younger) were still unmarried at 50. The average age for men of the upper and professional classes marrying had risen to 28. By the end of the century 25% of upper class women remained unmarried.

It's worth remembering that when a woman married, all her money and property would usually pass into her husband's hands; it became his property and she lost all control over it. This was to compensate for the fact that when a man married, he was responsible for supporting his wife. Given that women were thus utterly dependent on their husbands, they had to be careful who they married and, in particular, they had to avoid fortune hunters, a concern which finds expression in characters such as Willoughby and Wickham. Marriage was a risky business, not to be entered into without a great deal of thought.

### **Social background as it relates to novel writing and reading**

It is hardly surprising that many turned to reading and indeed writing, and that these concerns should be reflected and discussed in their fiction. Women did not generally have access to coffee house discussions of current events and were often excluded from the more interesting aspects of dinner conversation; Mary Hays's Emma Courtney objects to having to withdraw to the drawing room, 'Whither I was compelled, by a barbarous and odious custom, reluctantly to follow, and to submit to be entertained with a torrent of folly and impertinence'(II, ch 5, p.44), recognising that 'That some of the gentlemen, present, should object to a woman's exercising her discriminating powers, is not wonderful, since it might operate greatly to their disadvantage'(II, ch 5, p.41) - published in 1796. Fiction was an alternative forum to discuss socio-political and legal issues of interest.

Novels became increasingly popular among leisured women. Circulating libraries brought books within the province of most women who could read. The first such library began in Bath in 1725 but by the 1780s they were in all major towns.

Women novelists were popular and numerous but received no respect from the male dominated literary establishment. In our times, people warn of the dangers of TV but in the 18th century, people complained in much the same way that novels, particularly those written by women, were at best wasting their reader's time on idle fantasies and at worst eroding the moral fibre of the nation.

Throughout the century there was a debate about novels, both in periodicals and in novels themselves. Edgeworth's novel *Ormond* (1817) provides a clear eg of this debate, together with some interesting comment on the potential influence of Richardson and Fielding: Harry Ormond, the hero, is strongly influenced by the fiction he reads (traditionally a female problem but one which Edgeworth believed to be true for men too). Firstly he reads Fielding's *Tom Jones* and 'was charmed by the character - that of a warm-hearted, generous, imprudent young man...governed more by feeling than by principle, never upon any occasion reasoning, but keeping right by happy moral instincts; or when going wrong, very wrong, forgiven easily by the reader and by his mistress'; Ormond 'resolved...if possible to shine forth an Irish Tom Jones', by 'being an accomplished - blackguard'. He later reads Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*: 'all the generous feelings which were so congenial to his own nature, and which he had seen combined in Tom Jones, as if necessarily, with the habits of an adventurer, a spendthrift, and a rake, he now saw united with high moral and religious principles, in the character of a man of virtue, as well as a man of honour; a man of cultivated understanding and accomplished manners'(ch 7).

Novelists sought to defend themselves partly by disassociating their work from that of foreign novelists, particularly French and German writers, who came in for particular moral criticism. Their most powerful defence lay in moral didacticism, the argument that novels could both entertain and teach moral values in particular those appropriate to women's lives, that is, to explore right ways of dealing with domestic issues.

Women novelists used such ideas to justify their work but they interpreted their moral remit broadly to suit their individual interests and concerns. Apparent moral teaching on courtship and marriage provided opportunities for considering issues which could not have been dealt with overtly: gender roles, law, politics.

Conservative writers tended to celebrate English ideals and customs, mistrusting European excesses of emotion as witnessed in 'foreign' fiction. England was associated with sense, restraint and morality, whereas Europe was popularly associated with the exotic, excessive emotion, and anarchic romanticism. Austen supports English values but not without problematising them - she is well aware that such values, while laudable in themselves, don't really exist outside her fiction - the real England of Austen's era was often petty and hypocritical. Austen's heroes, Darcy, Mr Knightley, Colonel Brandon, may well embody English virtues, behaving with restraint and moral rectitude, bred from generations of land owning blue-blooded males. However, she also presents characters who embody the snobbery of some members of the nouveau riche mercantile classes, for eg the Bingley sisters in *Pride and Prejudice*; we see the hypocrisy of false sentiment and self-indulgent coquetry in Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* and Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility* - such things were not simply the preserve of the Europeans.

Henry Tilney's speech to Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* tells us much about Austen's view of the matter. Catherine has allowed her imagination, fed by Gothic novels, to run somewhat wild and is worried that Henry's father killed his mother. Henry remonstrates: 'Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding...your own observation of what is passing around you - Does your education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetuated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing'(ch 24).

This apparently straightforward reassurance about the safety of England is in fact heavily ironic - women might not have been murdered by their husbands with the connivance of law, but they could be incarcerated and fed on bread and water, they could be beaten as long as the stick wasn't broader than a man's thumb, they lost all their money to their husband as soon as they married and he could waste it on mistresses if he pleased, while leaving his wife locked in an attic. Such things were not common but one comes across accounts of such happenings in contemporary journals and trial reports. Henry is articulating a view of a stable, moral and safe England here which is very attractive but far from reality.

This is expressed in the novel when General Tilney turns Catherine out of the house because she isn't the heiress he supposed her to be and his only interest lay in getting her money by marrying her to his son. While this may not be as dramatic as murder, his behaviour is in 18th century terms appalling - he sends a young girl, unprotected, on a long journey home in which she could face very real dangers. Through Henry and his family, Austen is humorously exposing the inadequacies inherent in such attitudes.

### **Literary traditions to be inherited / reworked / subverted and challenged**

The major masculine novel form was the picaresque, in particular novels by Smollett and Fielding. Picaresque novels provided a realistic account of the life of a rogue (picaro) who survives various adventures by his wits, often satirising society. The term came to be applied to anyone at odds with society, for eg Fielding's Tom Jones (outsider because illegitimate). Picaresque elements include the low born rogue, variety of adventures, sexual freedom, panorama of life reflected in the travels of the protagonist - cf Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews and their travels.

This form was unsuitable for women because there was no question of having heroines wandering around the countryside having adventures, however innocent they may be. The word 'adventures' suggested possible sexual intrigues which would be utterly inappropriate, even if only implicit, in the hands of a woman writer. When Miss Bingley criticises Elizabeth Bennett for walking to Netherfield on her own through muddy lanes etc her horror is very much symptomatic of 18th century attitudes to feminine behaviour and what is acceptable; we may admire Elizabeth's independence and so, unwillingly enough, does Darcy, but independence and rejection of convention were hardly qualities that would be encouraged in young women. The Countess in Charlotte Len's *The Female Quixote* (1752) warns the heroine Arabella: 'The Word Adventures carries in it so free and licentious a sound' and so cannot 'with Propriety be apply'd to those few and natural Incidents which compose the History of a Woman of Honour'(ch 7, p.327).

Austen's heroines are more mobile than most young women would have been able to be but they manage to exercise a degree of independence in ways which, although shocking in terms of strict propriety, are not seriously questionable in moral terms. Their rebellion is innocent, and easily reconciled with social constructs of acceptable behaviour. For women writers who wanted their heroines and thus, vicariously, their readers to have the option of real travel, there was an alternative, which developed in what we now call the Gothic, where women are often abducted and have all sorts of adventures not because they sought them for adventure's sake but because fate has thrown them into impossible situations which they have to deal with resourcefully.

There were two broad plot constructs for writers to follow, one dealing with moral and social conduct, particularly in relation to courtship; the other focusing on seduction and ruin. Thus writers could argue that their fiction provided examples of moral conduct to be followed, or warnings of conduct to be avoided.

The novelistic enterprise declared itself to be primarily moral but it expressed itself in different ways - some in terms of moral feeling, as in the novel of sentiment, others in more prosaic terms in predominantly didactic novels advocating reason and warning against the vagaries of emotion.

### **The sentimental novel**

By the middle of the 18th century, when the sentimental novel was at its most popular, the term 'sentimental' was no longer primarily associated with morality but emotion. The French philosopher and writer, Rousseau was influential with his belief that natural emotions were inherently good and innocent - something akin to Marianne Dashwood's attitude in *Sense and Sensibility*. Rousseau argued that society and its institutions, in particular its laws, had corrupted man from a state of natural innocence. His writing was popular but also controversial in that it contradicted biblical teaching that all men are sinners in need of God's grace and forgiveness. It was a fundamentally optimistic view of human nature, one with which Fielding had some sympathy - the notion of human perfectibility argued optimistically that man was fundamentally good and that as our knowledge increased through science, so we would become more moral.

Of course experience shows that this simply isn't true - such optimism is clearly misplaced, as writers such as Austen show - the real world has Wickhams and Willoughbys and Lucy Steeles, selfish people who in their own way, can be very destructive. This is one of the sad lessons Marianne has to learn; it is not by accident that Willoughby acts like a romantic hero in Rousseau; his language is romantic, as are the literary tastes he lays claim to in order to impress Marianne; he is the living embodiment of Rousseau's thesis that society and its restrictions are bad and natural feeling is its own justification. Marianne believes this attractive proposition to begin with but experience teaches her that it is both fallacious and destructive.

Richardson would not have agreed with Rousseau but his depiction of heightened and refined states of emotion was very influential in the development of the novel of sentiment. *Pamela* and particularly *Clarissa* were imitated by writers such as Henry Mackenzie in his quintessential sentimental novel, *The Man of Feeling* (1771).

What for Richardson was a complex and primarily moral enterprise, became in the hands of lesser writers such as Mackenzie, a means of focusing on extreme emotion for its own sake. It is this rather simplistic and unsatisfying approach that came in for particular ridicule later in the century by writers such as Austen. Richardson himself may dwell with frustrating earnestness on the emotional states of his characters but only occasionally do they sink to the absurd depths of sentimentality that writers such as Mackenzie indulge in. Mackenzie's heroes and heroines are beautiful, clever, talented and morally perfect; their emotional lives reflect this refined perfection, often expressed in that essential response: tears, and lots of them. Richardson may be responsible for helping to popularise the novel of sentiment but we need to recognise that what he does is considerably more complex than what lesser writers achieved subsequently.

Mackenzie's work inverts Richardson's in terms of its narrative priorities: rather than show emotion as an expression of goodness, co-existing with traditional moral thought, as Richardson does, Mackenzie presents emotion as the locus of goodness, a rationale in itself, something Richardson would have regarded as dangerous.

Terms such as 'the novel of sentiment' are problematic because they invite generalisation - like all such terms, one needs to allow for the individuality of writers and their concerns.

The terms 'sentiment' and 'sensitivity' are problematic because there are areas where they overlap and, crucially, there is a tendency to use the word 'sentimental' to refer to either sentiment or sensitivity - we're all guilty of it. Janet Todd makes some sense of this critical mess in her excellent book, *Sensitivity: An Introduction*; she explains that before Sterne, the term tended to apply to sentiment but that after Sterne it usually meant sensitivity, ie a focus on the heart as opposed to the head.

**Sentimentalism** - a philosophical and political as well as a literary construct, predicated on the belief that human nature is essentially good and expressing itself in humanitarian concern for others. A 'sentiment' is both moral and rational, for eg an assessment of the rights and wrongs of society. Early eighteenth-century novels are full of such reflections on life. Sentimentalism is usually by definition refined and informed by emotional response; this emotional influence brings it close to sensitivity. After Sterne's novels the term sentimental often refers to refined and elevated emotion but it still carries the implication of moral reflection.

**Sensitivity** - the term really came into its own in the middle of the eighteenth century. It focused on the individual's emotional state and encouraged an idealised view of emotional response, focusing on spontaneity and virtuous feeling and developed its own language or use of existing language - key words include: pity, sympathy, benevolence, openness of heart; in addition to this a parallel system of body language developed, with blushes, crying, stammering, shaking and of course fainting all indicating varying degrees of feeling. More specific sentimental vocabulary evolved to express emotional responses particular to the sentimental mind, eg 'sublime', 'transported', 'exquisite', 'luxury'.

It was believed that women in particular expressed emotions physically; hence their propensity for crying, fainting etc; hysteria, perhaps the ultimate expression, was seen as a female disease but later so-called masculine versions such as melancholia or hypochondria developed.

Sensitivity was associated with 'sensations', which were in turn associated with sexual excitement, which rendered it suspect in the minds of many writers, particularly later in the century. Hannah Moore articulated the concerns of moralists in the late eighteenth century in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), arguing that such works 'teach, that chastity is only individual attachment; that no duty exists which is not prompted by feeling; that impulse is the main spring of virtuous actions, while laws and religion are only unjust restraints'. This is the sort of attitude that writers like Austen were reacting against.

Sensitivity also had implications for the class system, which Richardson exploits in *Pamela* (1740). Refined feeling was traditionally the preserve of the aristocracy. Addison and Steele presented what is often referred to as a 'gendered' version of the sentimental vision; women were characterised as refined, delicate and feeling creatures for whom sensitivity is not only an approach to life but a way of life - Todd refers to it as an alternative profession - this may sound strange but she is presumably referring to the domestic role played by women. It was elevated in superficial terms by focusing on the delights of domestic virtue but it also kept women firmly subordinate to men, their very sentimental qualities which rendered them so delightful as companions in the home, rendering them weak and incapable of surviving in the public realm, which remained resolutely masculine.

*Pamela* is somewhat revolutionary in that Richardson shows that the lower classes are also capable of refined feeling and moral consciousness; it is in this sense a great equalizer, what Janet Todd refers to as a meritocracy of feeling (Todd, *Sensitivity. An Introduction*, p.13). Pamela often articulates the Christian teaching that all men are equal in the sight of God, anathema to exponents of the rigid class structure in England at the time, eg: 'my soul is of equal importance with the soul of a princess'(p.197), 'How poor people are despised by the rich and the great! And yet we were all on a foot originally. Surely these proud people never think what a short stage life is; and that, with all their vanity, a time is coming, when they shall be on a level with us'(p.294), which is reminiscent of biblical teaching; Christ himself commented rhetorically, 'what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?(Matthew 17,v.28).

It is important to note that Richardson is not advocating the demolition of the class system - this is one of many examples in his work where his moral conservatism wrestles with more radical Christian teaching. If he achieves any resolution at all, it is through his male aristocratic characters and their

enlightened behaviour - they embody Christian ideals but in a way which is consistent with the social structures of the day. I'm not sure Richardson would approve of Christ's life in some ways - sleeping rough, overturning money lenders' tables in the temple, that sort of thing. Richardson's heroes are nothing if not respectable.

Although Richardson uses the conventions of sensibility, he also questions them and their implications, for example, exploring the relationship between sensibility and sexuality. Sensibility caused a degree of unease at times in that extreme feeling could be regarded as in some way analogous to a degree of sexual feeling; Richardson presents sexuality as a threat to sensibility, which, for Richardson, consisted largely for women in refined moral discrimination or propriety. Sensibility in one sense espoused the contemporary double standard in that feminine sensibility was expressed in chastity, whereas for Sterne's heroes, sensibility is clearly linked to sexuality, as you see in *Sentimental Journey*. Later in the century sensibility became primarily associated with women and so the sexual element decreased.

Not only did the sentimentalists concentrate on the individual but the emotional response of the bystander, or, in the case of novels, the reader; writers explored the reader's vicarious emotional experience ie our ability to empathise with the characters and thus to experience distress or joy through them - a kind of catharsis. The fundamental aim of such writing was to arouse sympathy and charity; writers such as Richardson and Fielding interpreted this in a moral and practical sense respectively but later writers often focused on producing emotional response but not in encouraging an active, practical response - so, for example, one would cry if one saw a poor peasant but not actually do anything about it; it was this sort of essentially selfish and, despite appearances, unfeeling response, that Johnson criticised as 'the fashionable whine of sensibility' and that Austen attacked in her work, notably *Sense and Sensibility* of course. Richardson's characters are charitable - Pamela when she has the means after marriage and Clarissa, an heiress, are careful to use their resources to help others. Fielding's characters are charitable even when they have little themselves - think of Parson Adams and indeed Joseph himself.

Writers vary in their approaches to aspects of sentimentalism and sensibility. Richardson focused on the emotions of his characters and although his work, particularly *Clarissa*, elicited rather extreme emotional reactions from his readers, this was not his primary aim. Fielding's work celebrates benevolence, the concept of an open and generous heart, key sensibility concepts, but this is incidental to his concerns. It's not always easy to see to what extent writers are taking seriously the conventions they use.

Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768) can be read as an attempt to educate the reader in moral feeling through Yorick's own journey which, as the title indicates, is mental as well as physical. However, Putney comments usefully that *Sentimental Journey* is a satire in which Sterne 'records with amused irony the false, ludicrous or humiliating postures into which Yorick is thrust by his intrepid sensibility' [*The Age of Johnson*, ed.F.W.Hilles, London, 1964, pp.159-70]. You can interpret the novel in either way - its ironies are sufficiently complex to allow for either approach. Yorick himself is subject to a great deal of irony - his sentiment is at best ineffectual in that he never really helps anyone; at worst, it is hypocritical because the feelings he professes never find outward expression - without the proof of active expression of moral feeling, one inevitably questions it.

In 1773 Mrs Barbauld wrote *Inquiry into those kinds of distress which excite agreeable sensations*; she defined the sentimental process of reading, the response to pathos, as follows: 'This sentiment is love, esteem, the complacency we take in the contemplation of beauty, of mental or moral excellence, called forth and rendered more interesting by circumstances of pain and danger.'

Lady Louisa Stuart wrote with self-deprecating humour in 1826, in a famous letter to Scott, that when she read Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling* aged 14, she was afraid that she 'should not cry enough to gain the credit of proper sensibility'; just as people pretend to like arty films they don't understand but that everyone raves about, Stuart took her cue from her mother and sister, who sobbed while reading it. As an adult, she read the same novel to a group of friends at a time when sensibility was no longer fashionable; she relates: 'Nobody cried, and at some of the passages, the touches that I used to think so exquisite...they all laughed'.

Lest we feel too superior in the twentieth century, Steeves reminds us that sentimentalism is 'by no means dead; nor is it likely to die. We still see it in screen versions of human life and behaviour, and it accounts in substantial part for the depressing entertainment which interrupts TV commercials.'

To put things into a vague historical perspective, the novel of sentiment was popular in the 1740s and 50s, the novel of sensibility becomes popular in the 1760s but already by the 1770s the term 'sentimentality' had come to be associated with affected and self-indulgent, possibly improper feeling. Once sentimentalism became divorced from serious moral and literary purpose, there was a tendency for writers to pander to the masses, in search of emotional highs. J.M.S.Tompkins analyses the limitations of popular sentimental novels in *The Popular Novel in England*, pp.92-112.

Richardson is interesting because he is himself a 'man of feeling' in one sense, a moral man who explored the minutiae of his characters' feelings. Richardson had many female friends with whom he discussed everything from literature to manners to the problems people experienced in their everyday lives. His work often seems to be sympathetic to women; yet as Eva Figes notes, 'Richardson, as a male writer, could wallow in what he imagined to be female sentiments, even allow his heroines to sigh a little on the injustice of a woman's lot, from the safety of his male identity. It did not impinge on his own experience'(p.33).

## Richardson, Fielding and the Literature of Sensibility

This lecture will look at Richardson and Fielding and the ways in which their work relates to contemporary ideas, particularly in relation to the issue of what constituted a good man; we'll look at feminine virtue in a subsequent lecture.

### Richardson

Richardson's ideas became increasingly popular in the latter half of the eighteenth century. If women were to be educated companions as opposed to simply breeders of heirs, men had to adapt their behaviour and at least appear to be more civilised. Increasingly, virtues such as tenderness, kindness and sensibility, traditionally associated with women, became regarded as attractive, indeed necessary in men if they were to be good husbands; hence the rise of the 'man of sentiment' in fiction.

Eva Figes notes sensibly that although writers like Fielding were scornful of Richardson because he didn't have a classical education and therefore couldn't indulge in classical allusions in his fiction, his embracing of the idea of the man of sentiment and a strong moral code, made his work attractive not only to women but their fathers who, if they had to open up the family library to their daughters, would presumably prefer them to read Richardson than the racier Fielding.

It has to be said that *Joseph Andrews* has strong elements of the man of sentiment and the moral code associated with it but Fielding's exact moral position is unclear: he is ostensibly lampooning Richardson but they have some common ground. Fielding was suspicious of Pamela but it is her possible hypocrisy and unconvincing virtue that he lampoons, not the concept of virtuous behaviour *per se*. In *Joseph Andrews* he considers quite seriously the nature of true virtue for both men and women, arguing that outward and active expressions such as charity are important: virtue, for Fielding, consists not so much in not doing something but in being actively engaged with the world, cheerfully doing good.

Richardson objected strongly to Fielding's work, in particular *Tom Jones*, on moral grounds. Johnson appeared to support Richardson's moral stand in fiction, writing in *The Rambler*, 31st March, 1750 that although vice had to be presented in fiction, it should 'always disgust' and that virtue should always be presented as 'the highest proof of understanding, and the only solid basis of greatness'. Richardson's *Clarissa* may pass this test but *Pamela* is rather less clear cut.

The enigma of *Pamela* contains too many unresolved moral issues and as such caused concern to later writers, seeking literary models and traditions to work with. Steeves sums up critical disquietude about *Pamela* when he comments in his very useful book *Before Jane Austen*: 'Controversy has settled principally upon 3 questions, whether its 'morality' is really moral, or despicable; whether Richardson's characters resemble humanity as most of us know it; and whether he writes badly because he didn't know better or because almost nobody wrote well at that time'.

Richardson did not invent the sex and suffering novel, although he did take it to new heights - or depths - depending on how you look at it. Plot constructions such as abduction, seduction and rape attempts are common in earlier novels. In *Life and Adventures of the Lady Lucy* (1726), Aubin presents women's vulnerability in a masculine world, typified in sexual assault. Arminda is somewhat unfortunate, to say the least, facing several rape attempts. When Constantine attempts to rape her he threatens that if she cries out and a servant comes, 'I'll kill him in your sight, and lay his dead Body by you; so that your Reputation shall be blacken'd, tho you are innocent'(p.112). Arminda courageously defends herself by stabbing him in the thigh with his sword and shows surprising presence of mind in explaining the rope ladder and blood on the balcony, by saying that she has defended herself against a thief.

Arminda is perhaps an early vision of the empowered woman; not politically emancipated but strong and crucially, victorious. Aubin reclaims a potentially tragic scene by humour, enabling the reader to enjoy Arminda's actions and encouraging her or him to identify with this strong and yet virtuous character.

Fielding lampoons such vigorous defence of chastity later in the century in *Shamela* (1741), where Shamela openly discusses her defence techniques: 'After having made a pretty free Use of my Fingers, without any great Regard to the Parts I attack'd, I counterfeit a Swoon'(p.330). Richardson may present

Pamela blushing and fainting sweetly but he was clearly aware of the ambiguities of such behaviour. Sir Simon quotes Swift: 'They blush, because they understand.'

The seduction and courtship plot hybrid carried certain inherent ambiguities which problematic attempts to moralise. However, its potential complexities made it an interesting and worthwhile form for writers to experiment with. Figs argues that it 'provided a viable female alternative to the male picaresque, as long as certain constraints were observed: the heroine must not lose her virtue, and must act in an unconventional manner only under duress'(p.57). This is an entirely valid point but Figs locates the beginnings of such plots with Richardson, whereas they were common in women's novels in the 1720s, 20 years before *Pamela* was published. Richardson was indeed tremendously influential to writers in his own time and later in the century but he too inherited literary traditions. It is impossible to determine to what extent Richardson was influenced by early writers, be they male or female, but what is clear is that Richardson did not invent either the plot motifs, the character types or the epistolary form he uses in *Pamela*, all of which may be found in fiction by writers such as Penelope Aubin, Jane Barker and Eliza Haywood.

Richardson's skill lies not in inventing these things but in deploying them in a more complex and subtle manner; Richardson's work is deeper and darker than that of Aubin and Barker but the darker elements in Richardson's writing may well owe more to his psyche than to his literary intentions; the sub text of *Pamela* is in some respects more interesting and certainly more disturbing than the 'official' text.

*Pamela* is problematic in that Richardson at times appears to dwell with perhaps unconscious enjoyment on the feeble struggles of his young heroine, arms pinioned to her sides, sitting on her master's knee. Richardson is a man of contradictions: he genuinely wrote with a moral purpose in mind but the way in which he presents issues such as seduction and rape suggests a degree of prurient interest he would presumably not have wanted to admit to himself, let alone his readers - a kind of relish of the forbidden.

### ***Pamela* (1740)**

In *Pamela*, Richardson transposes the popular romantic convention of heroines protecting their chastity into a seemingly incongruous area: the lower class. Pamela herself recognises society's economic evaluation of virtue: '*poor* peoples virtue is to go for nothing'(p.172). Sir Simon sums up attitudes to rape of the lower classes: he argues Mr B 'hurts no *family*'(p.172) by trying to seduce Pamela. Richardson and some would argue, male writers of all eras, isolate chastity as the essential element of femininity. This attitude, while no doubt partly based on ideas of mythologised feminine purity, is also derived from property laws. Pamela's insistence on seeing Mr B's sexual attempts in moral terms is comic to the other characters but it enables Richardson to question society's view of virtue and to expose its property origins, revealing a servant's virtue to have some value, even though property does not depend on it. Pamela herself seems to concentrate on chastity, which Fielding lampoons in *Shamela* as the famous 'diminutive mere Grain of Mustard-seed'(p.322), ie. something taken out of proportion until it becomes absurd.

However, *Pamela's* sub-title, *Virtue Rewarded*, provides a key to the way Richardson wishes us to interpret the novel. The Preface tells us that the intention is 'to inculcate *religion* and *morality* in so easy and agreeable a manner, as shall render them equally *delightful* and *profitable*'(p.31). Such a Preface owes much to literary convention but Richardson does seem to have genuine moral concerns; it is reasonable to assume that he intended Pamela to appear virtuous. Indeed he argues that the novel is designed 'to give *practical* examples, worthy to be followed in the most *critical* and *affecting* cases, by the *virgin*, the *bride*, and the *wife*'(p.31).

One of the reasons *Pamela* was so widely criticised was that it was thought to encourage young women of the lower classes to make a great show of chastity and rather than remaining chaste for moral reasons, to do so in order to try to ensnare their employer. Parson Oliver articulates such objections in his letter to Parson Tickletext at the beginning of *Shamela*, playing on the fact that Richardson argued that the novel provided moral teaching suitable for young women: 'The Instruction which it conveys to Servant-Maids, is, I think, very plainly this, To look out for their Masters as sharp as they can. The Consequences of which will be, besides Neglect of their Business, and the using all manner of Means to come at Ornaments of their Persons, that if the master is not a Fool, they will be debauched by him; and if he is a Fool, they will marry him. Neither of which, I apprehend, my good Friend, we desire should be the Case of our Sons'(p.324).

However, Pamela's behaviour and running commentary on her chastity seems in itself somewhat inappropriate and rather too 'knowing'; she jokes about the 'closet scene' and thus Mr B's seduction attempt in letter 25, writing: 'Now I come to the presents of my dear virtuous master; Hay, you know, closet for that, Mrs Jervis!'(p.110).

Pamela appropriates the genteel behaviour of women from a higher social sphere. She often uses the refined emotionally charged language of sentiment, for eg 'My heart is full'(p.116). It could be interpreted as a form of social pretension, something she 'puts on' just as she puts on different kinds of clothing in order to promote the image she chooses (pp.76-7). As such, Mr B is both amused and frustrated by it.

Fainting is associated with romantic heroines, not servants; her narrative is rather self-conscious, for eg, 'my story, surely, would furnish out a surprising kind of novel'(p.281). Mr B also likens the narrative of their lives to novels, for eg. pp.268-9; indeed he blames Pamela's novel reading as encouraging her to misinterpret his behaviour, eg. p.124. Ironically, if Pamela's interpretation of his behaviour comes from reading novels, then those novels are accurate because he is trying to seduce her. Richardson is encouraging us to think about novel reading here, albeit rather amusingly, playing with the fact that we are reading a novel with characters who speak as if they are real people wondering what sort of novel their lives would make.

Pamela is always aware of her 'audience' and her propensity for fainting could be seen as playing to that audience: Mr B comments, 'she has a lucky knack of falling into fits when she pleases'(p.98). Indeed Pamela admits to her reader that there are times when she acts a part. She tells Mr B, 'I want no husband', commenting in an aside to the reader, 'I thought I would a little dissemble'(p.118).

If Pamela is the locus of moral feeling, as the Preface would have us believe, deceit of any kind is problematic; is this the embodiment of feminine virtue promised by the Preface? If we take it at face value, with its assertion that Pamela's behaviour is designed 'to give practical examples, worthy to be followed' by women in various stages of life, what does it tell us about Richardson's notions of feminine virtue? Is a degree of deceit inevitable? Does virtue consist in hiding one's true feelings and if so, when does virtuous concealing of feeling become hypocrisy? Austen addresses the same issues later in the century in works such as *Sense and Sensibility*, albeit without the unintentional moral ambiguity of *Pamela*.

The convention of heroines fainting is worth noting briefly as the objective correlative of eighteenth century society's hypocritical notions of virtue, which mask concern for property with apparent moral delicacy. (objective correlative is a term coined by T.S.Eliot: a situation, set of objects or chain of events which evokes a particular emotion). Fielding lampoons such behaviour in *Shamela*, who, as her name suggests, uses sham fits to manipulate situations, openly admitting her subterfuge to the reader: 'imagining I had continu'd long enough for my purpose in the sham Fit, I began to move my Eyes, to loosen my Teeth'(p.349). *Shamela* embodies criticisms of Pamela's seemingly calculating awareness of the social advantages of virtue. She feigns reticence and fear because such things were thought to indicate feminine virtue. Fielding criticised the social hypocrisy engendered by such ideals, commenting wryly in *Tom Jones* (1749), 'how extremely natural virtue is to the fair sex...virtue they can all admirably well put on; and as well those individuals who have it not, as those who possess it'(pp.473-4).

When Fielding presents Pamela in *Joseph Andrews*, he capitalises on the ambiguities in Richardson's presentation of her: she appears vain and rather arrogant, telling Joseph that Fanny 'was' her equal in rank but that 'I am no longer *Pamela Andrews*, I am now this Gentleman's Lady, and as such am above her'(IV,ch.7,p.271). She even has the gall to tell her supposed brother, 'It would become you better...to pray for the Assistance of Grace against such a Passion, than to indulge it'(p.271) because she and Booby don't want to be related to someone of Fanny's lowly social status. Ironically of course, Fanny turns out to be her sister.

The discussion concerning the nature and protection of virtue ran throughout the century. *Pamela*, *Shamela* and *Joseph Andrews* are only three of the novels involved in this debate. In *Shamela*, Fielding exposes the problem of hypocrisy inherent in the reduction of virtue to physical chastity, as embodied by Pamela, but he does not suggest an answer; in *Joseph Andrews*, he explores the possibility of an answer. Richardson was also wrestling with the problem of what constituted true virtue. In *Clarissa* (1747-8), he created a profoundly Christian heroine with none of the potential ambiguities of Pamela's behaviour; but his ultimate answer appears to lie in a male character, Sir Charles Grandison.

In *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-4) Richardson moves beyond the traditional notion of rake or would-be rake, eschewing the notion that reformed rakes such as Mr B make good husbands. Novelists, particularly male, had traditionally conspired with society's double standards in relation to virtuous behaviour; characters such as Tom Jones whizz around cheerfully sowing their wild oats and only repenting and marrying after they've dallied with half the women they meet. Sir Charles travels and has adventures but wouldn't dream of seducing the servants.

Richardson suggests that Grandison is chaste but, in order not to compromise his status as hero, he is presented as adventurous and, unlike Joseph Andrews, he is flirtatious at times, which lessens the impact. The essential difference between the two heroes lies in their social status. Grandison is an aristocrat and so can express his virtue actively: he can use his power and status for good and thus appear as the rescuing hero. Richardson is thus able to reconcile the demands of literary heroism with his concerns regarding virtuous behaviour in an often hypocritical social environment. Joseph, on the contrary, appears to come from a lower social echelon and cannot express his virtuous standards equally publicly. The narrative strategy of the novel underlines this: whereas Grandison consistently rescues people, Joseph sometimes needs to be rescued, for example when he is in trouble with the law. Grandison represents an ideal held by many during the period. Joseph Andrews has the same potential in terms of moral goodness but his behaviour, his sometimes excessive language, his social class and his blundering naivete render him a comic figure rather than an ideal. Joseph is described in ch.8, pp.33-4 - this is the sort of physical description one usually associates with heroines, not heroes - reflects the fact that Joseph is amorously pursued as well as pursuing!

Fielding wants us to consider the issues raised in the figure of Joseph but he refuses to commit himself. His concerns are aesthetic as well as moral. With Richardson, the moral argument is uppermost but Fielding is also concerned with satirising a literary type (the pursued maiden and the good man rolled into one) and with making the reader laugh. For Richardson, the issue is perhaps too serious to laugh; for Fielding, laughter, or at least smirking, is a means of potentially serious evaluation and criticism. Grandison is Richardson's answer to the vexed question of what constitutes a 'good man'; Joseph Andrews is Fielding's answer to the same philosophical and ethical issue.

### ***Joseph Andrews* (1742)**

*Joseph Andrews* is a logical progression in the fictional debate concerning virtue. *Pamela* (1740) is satirised in feminine form in *Shamela* (1741) and then in masculine form in *Joseph* (1742). The humour of *Joseph Andrews* is predicated on the legal absurdity of a man worrying about his chastity. The debate concerning masculine honour or virtue was centuries old. The masculine equivalent of female honour or chastity, which protected family lineage, was actively defending the family name. Masculine virtue has roots in epic tales and traditions of heroism and is usually presented as something akin to Hotspur's romanticised and heroic concept of honour in Shakespeare's *I Henry IV*, often finding its expression in duelling. Interestingly, Richardson's chaste hero, Sir Charles Grandison, is a skilful swordsman and so fulfils contemporary ideals of masculine virtue as well as Christian ethics.

In *Joseph*, Fielding lampoons Pamela, his supposed sister, but also questions the social concepts of virtue. Like Pamela, Joseph affects to dress simply. IV, ch.5, p.261: Joseph borrows some of the Squire's clothes, just as Pamela was given some of her mistress's clothing and 'was soon drest in the plainest Dress he could find, which was a blue Coat and Breeches, with a Gold Edging, and a red waistcoat with the same'(p.261). Like Pamela, Joseph appears a little vain; 'His Hair was cut after the newest Fashion, and became his chief Care'(I, ch.4, p.22) - more appropriate for a rich fop than a servant.

Joseph resists Lady Booby's sexual advances in a neat parody of Pamela's behaviour. In I, ch 5 Lady Booby is lying in bed and comments hopefully, 'I have trusted myself with a Man alone, naked in Bed; suppose you should have any wicked Intentions upon my Honour'. Joseph protests, somewhat fatuously, 'that he never had the least evil Design against her'(ch.5, p.25). His letter to Pamela parallels her letters to her family in Richardson's novel: it is apparently modest but the detail is inappropriate to true modesty and suggests some vanity. He comments, like Pamela, 'I never loved to tell the Secrets of my Master's Family'(I, ch.6, pp.26-7) but proceeds to do just that. Were it not for his constant protestations of innocence, we might be tempted to assume that the prurient detail suggested a rather more knowing character, as has

been suggested of Pamela. Joseph writes: 'she ordered me to sit down by her Bed-side, when she was in naked Bed; and she held my Hand, and talked exactly as a Lady does to her Sweetheart'(p.27) which, he assures us, he only knows from seeing plays.

Lady Booby expostulates angrily, 'Did ever Mortal hear of a Man's Virtue! Did ever the greatest, or the gravest Men pretend to any of this Kind!'(I,ch.8,p.36). Clearly the answer to her rhetorical question is 'yes'. While seriously considering the issue of virtue, Fielding seems amused by the idea of male chastity and enjoys playing with the incongruity. Fielding's Tom Jones, a likeable and slightly roguish character, does not 'pretend to the gift of chastity, more than [his] neighbours'(p.668).

Fielding exposes this double standard satirically but never fatally. He presents playfully an issue which he knows will provoke amusement but serious questions are implied about masculine and feminine chastity. Joseph, being male, is less problematic than a female character and provides an alternative forum for discussion. Fielding is able to avoid the social implications of female chastity and can give free rein to his humour. Joseph's comment 'I hope, I shall have more Resolution and more Grace than to part with my Virtue to any Lady upon Earth'(I,ch.10,p.41) satirises Pamela and the strict notion of virtue as chastity which she embodies but its comic context precludes us from taking him too seriously.

Joseph's position as a serious commentator on virtue is undermined by his comic presentation: he argues that he 'is the Brother of *Pamela*, and would be ashamed, that the Chastity of his Family, which is preserved in her, should be stained in him'(I,ch.8,p.36) - (he is ostensibly her brother). It would be obvious to an eighteenth century reader that the 'stain' he is referring to is connected with patrilineal inheritance: his comment is absurd because as a male, he will not be bearing heirs and so his family cannot be 'stained' by his behaviour; he sees the stain as moral and Fielding seems to have some sympathy for this but it is a legal and social absurdity. When Joseph comments, 'What Riches, or Honours, or Pleasures can make us amends for the Loss of Innocence?'(I,ch.13,p.52), he breaks down into a parody of Pamela, rendering his argument amusing rather than convincing. Joseph is constantly pursued by women but Fielding recognises the essential difference between his situation and that of Pamela: as a male 'his Chastity is always in his own power'(p.76). Hence when Betty's passion 'mastered both her Modesty and her Reason', Joseph is able to take 'her in his Arms' and 'shut her out of the Room'(I,ch.18,p.76).

The novel of sentiment was, at least in theory, deeply concerned with moral issues. *Joseph Andrews* questions the definition of virtue, clearly bearing its property basis in mind. Sometimes playfully, sometimes seriously, Fielding advocates the importance of male virtue in Christian terms: charity, long-suffering, even chastity.

Fielding plays with sentimental conventions regarding heroines too in the figure of Fanny, who is described in II,ch.12,pp.136-7. She's 19 and attractive but not perfect: plump, slightly uneven teeth and marked, albeit not badly, by smallpox. Her complexion is 'a little injured by the Sun, but overspread with such a Bloom, that the finest Ladies would have exchanged all their White for it'. She's not perfect in terms of romantic conventions of beauty but she has a natural, healthy beauty, 'a Sensibility [which] appeared almost incredible; and a Sweetness...beyond either Imitation or Description', together with 'a natural Gentility'.

Sentimental constructs of character are related to debates concerning nature versus nurture in terms of character determination. In Bk IV, ch 7 Fielding addresses the issue of whether or not femininity is a social construct. The delightfully named Slipslop is also part of this debate, providing a humorous view of a different side of feminine sexuality to that embodied by Fanny - have a look at Bk 1, ch 6. Fielding reveals some common ground with Richardson, arguing that women need masculine protection: 'Learn...my fair countrywomen, to consider your own weakness, and the many occasions on which the strength of a man may be useful to you'(III, ch 2). Yet going by his presentation of Slipslop, Joseph would appear to be the one in need of protection!

Sentimental literature considered a variety of moral issues as it sought to present ideal moral behaviour for both men and women. One of the most important issues was charity.

In *Joseph Andrews* we find Trulliber, who talks a lot about charity but does nothing, embodying a criticism of contemporary society and its concern for talking about virtue and social goodness but its lack of

action. Bk II, chs 14 and 15 is important in this context because Adams debates Christian behaviour, in particular charity, with Parson Trulliber, who is 'reputed a Man of great Charity: for tho' he never gave a Farthing, he had always that Word in his Mouth'(II,ch.15,p.152). We have an example of this kind of hypocrisy earlier in the novel when Joseph is robbed and stripped and thrown in a ditch; a coach passes and the passengers don't want to have anything to do with him but the poor postillion gives Joseph his coat, which Fielding tell us is his 'only garment'; he chooses to suffer the cold to protect Joseph. Interestingly, this lad is subsequently transported for robbing a hen-roost, underlining his lack of social respectability but also his poverty, not to mention the lack of moral perspective in a legal system which will transport a fundamentally good young man for something so trivial.

Fielding felt very strongly about active expressions of virtue such as charity and often lampoons the contemporary obsession with propriety and the appearance of virtue; the passengers on the coach would regard themselves as considerably more respectable than the postillion, and would have a better social reputation, but their morality is at best skin deep, something they confuse with propriety, merely an appearance of virtue.

To put things in a modern context, it's the equivalent of expensively dressed people walking past the Big Issue sellers and complaining that they lower the tone of the neighbourhood. Charity may be a familiar construct of moral literature of sentiment but it is also a genuine expression of social concern in an age of brutal poverty contrasting with almost unimaginable riches and privilege.

Sterne satirises such attitudes in *Sentimental Journey*. Yorick initially rationalises his lack of charity to the monk, later admitting 'A better reason was, I had predetermined not to give him a single sous'(p.30). The narrative is full of such self-conscious irony, undercutting the narrator but also those around him, for eg, he reveals the basis of some charity to be self-interest: think of the beggar in Paris who gains charity by flattering people (p.133). Jean Paul Sartre commented, 'The poor don't know that their function in life is to exercise our generosity'.

Sterne employs the conventions of sensibility but simultaneously questions them by exposing them to humorous analysis. 'What a large volume of adventures may be grasped within this little span of life by him who interests his heart in everything' - this is central to the notion of the man of feeling - the ability to interest his heart in what he sees. The experience of travel is inevitably important in that it provides opportunities for wider experience of life or the opportunity to react voyeuristically to other people's problems, to live vicariously, reacting emotionally to their experiences, rather than having experiences of one's own.

Sterne problematises sensibility: 'with what a moral delight will it crown my journey, in sharing in the sickening incidents of a tale of misery told to me by such a sufferer? to see her weep! and though I cannot dry up the fountain of her tears, what an exquisite sensation is there still left, in wiping them away from off the cheeks of the first and fairest of women'(p.66).

Fielding consistently exposed the hypocrisy he saw as underpinning his society, its concern for the appearance of virtue rather than genuine moral concern. Sensibility, with its focus on proper behaviour, could be interpreted in 1 of 2 ways: Richardson appears to be asking us to take its moral concern seriously; Fielding approaches it with a rather more cynical eye, recognising its potential for moral teaching but also its potential for hypocrisy and absurdity.

For example, Fielding lampoons the teachings of conduct books, which contained moral advice for young women, teaching them how to behave in various situations. Richardson's *Pamela* is related to this kind of literature in that it is in some respects a fictional conduct book. Such literature often warned women against masculine wiles. Fielding lampoons this in *Joseph Andrews*: 'at the Age of seven or something earlier, Miss is instructed by her Mother, that Master is a very Monstrous kind of Animal, who will, if she suffers him to come too near her, infallibly eat her up, and grind her to pieces...that she must never have any Affection towards him; for if she should, all her Friends in Petticoats would esteem her a Traitor, point at her, and hunt her out of their Society'(IV,ch 7,p.268).

Fielding's comic irony can render his exact moral position unclear at time but he addresses some 'sentimental' issues such as marriage with a degree of seriousness, for eg the question of whether or not economic factors should be taken into account in one's choice of partner. Think of the story of Leonora,

which acts as a warning against mercenary marriage choices, with Leonora left with neither her beloved Horatio nor Bellarmine's fortune. See II,ch.4,pp.90-104;ch.6,pp.111-5.

Just as Pamela embodies feminine ideals of conduct appropriate to her status as conduct book heroine, Joseph embodies ideals of masculine moral conduct, at times in spoof form but at others very seriously. His choice of marriage partner is based on love and virtue, not materialistic concerns and of course he spends much of his time discoursing on virtue.

Joseph's insistence on chastity leaves him open to the criticism that his virtue is passive and negative, consisting simply in 'not doing something'. During his adventures on the road, adventures we would associate with a picaresque hero (hero of the picaresque novel with its panorama of life and the associated 'spice'), Fielding is able to show that Joseph has a more active side to his virtue: he shows charity and what Fielding refers to as 'good nature'. Tom Jones is perhaps Fielding's ultimate embodiment of 'good nature', that is, the ability to empathise with others and feel their joys and their misfortunes. Tom doesn't have Joseph's chastity or his spiritual standards but, like Joseph, he cares for people and actively helps them.

In *Joseph Andrews* Mr Wilson learns to appreciate this active virtue (III,chs.3-4,pp.179-204) and marries someone who embodies charity: he fell in love with a coquette but learns to value (not surprisingly!) the goodness of the daughter of the man who bought his lottery ticket. It wins and she sends him £200 when he is destitute - huge amount of money in those days. They marry and live in peaceful and virtuous retirement.

This idea of virtue as charity is related to the latitudinarian teaching that salvation is earned by good works. Fielding uses Adams as a mouthpiece for such ideas when he argues against Whitfield's 'detestable Doctrine of Faith against good Works' in Bk I,ch.17,p.72 and Bk III,ch.13,pp.244-6. Fielding is commenting on the contemporary debate about faith versus works. The well known preacher Whitfield taught that all men were equal and all were sinners who could only be saved by repentance and faith in Christ. Some misinterpreted this to mean that works are irrelevant. Whitfield followed biblical teaching that faith alone saves but that faith will be expressed in good works so they do matter.

Fielding had some sympathy for the Latitudinarian focus on good works; hence both Joseph and Adams are actively engaged in them. However, Fielding approaches most things with a mixture of cynicism and humour and we certainly see this in this novel. Fielding's attitude to relationships is much more blunt than Richardson's, which caused some offence, but it is perhaps more honest. Even the virtuous Joseph Andrews experiences desire for his beloved. We see this clearly in Bk IV,ch.7,p.274: the Ravisher 'tore her Handkerchief from Fanny's Neck' and so she stands 'bare-neck'd in the Presence of Joseph'. He is divided between 'the greatest Delight which the Organs of Sight were capable of conveying to his Soul' and respecting her embarrassment, 'so truly did his Passion for her deserve the noble Name of Love'. Adams lectures Joseph about his desires: 'All Passions are criminal in their Excess, and even Love itself, if it is not subservient to our Duty, may render us blind to it'(p.277). Adams tells him his love 'savours too much of the Flesh'(p.279) but Mrs Adams retorts, 'A Wife hath a Right to insist on her Husband's loving her as much as ever he can', reminding him, 'I am certain you do not preach as you practise...you have been a loving and a cherishing Husband to me'(p.280).

It is perhaps difficult to do justice both to Fielding's humour and to his moral and socio-legal concerns, but we need not see them as incompatible: Fielding uses humour to gain the reader's sympathy for his ideas, to sustain interest, to surprise and of course to entertain. Fielding seems to see the humorous potential in most situations; but although he revelled in comic irony, he also wrestled with the most serious socio-legal problems of his day, not only as a magistrate but as a writer.

The novel is a satire influenced by the picaresque and, as such, provides the reader with a variety of diverting adventures, through which Fielding is able to comment on social issues: marrying for money (Leonora), gambling (Mr Wilson) inheritance (Wilson) and of course charity (Adams versus Trulliber), the social divisions of rank and the attendant privileges, ineptitude and corruption within those representing the legal system and injustice manifested within the laws themselves.

On the one hand, Fielding wants us to laugh at our follies and those of our fellow man; on the other, he expects us to be moved by the injustices he presents.

## The Woman of Feeling I

There appears to be some confusion regarding the moral focus of the literature of sentiment so I'm going to recap. If you're worried about the distinction between the literature of sentiment and sensibility, to be simplistic, there's one easy test: is it fundamentally moral and rational? If so, it's the literature of sentiment. Richardson and Fielding present characters who experience heightened states of emotion, expressed in blushing, shaking and specific use of language eg Pamela's 'My heart is full'(p.116). If these expressions of emotion were the primary element of interest, they would be novels of sensibility but in both novels the moral message is paramount - they're encouraging moral and rational behaviour in the reader.

Sentimental literature is designed to convey moral teaching relevant to our daily lives - relationships between children and parents, husbands and wives, courtship and marriage, the right use of money and power, the right way to treat others eg servants, the poor, or in the case of magistrates, the right way to treat people in court, ways to serve justice. The two most significant virtues in sentimental literature are chastity, the quintessential private virtue, and charity, the quintessential public virtue. The assumption was that these virtues indicated other virtues so if you were a chaste woman, you were likely to have other necessary domestic virtues; if you were charitable, it indicated that your public life, your relationships with others, were virtuous.

The sentimentalists concentrated not only on the emotional experience of the individual but that of the bystander, or, in the case of novels, the reader; writers explored the reader's vicarious emotional experience ie our ability to empathise with the characters and thus to experience distress or joy through them - a kind of catharsis. The fundamental aim of such writing was to arouse sympathy and charity; writers such as Richardson and Fielding interpreted this in a moral and practical sense but later writers often focused on producing emotional response but not in encouraging an active, practical response.

The literature of sentiment presents us with examples to follow, in the figures of heroes and heroines, the men and women of feeling and of ideal figures of mothers, fathers, priests etc. Look at the Preface to *Pamela*, Richardson's moral and literary manifesto. The moral claims of the Preface are very strong; Richardson's supporters were suggesting *Pamela* as moral education for young women in particular. It's not presented as a narrative which will entertain and possibly titillate the reader but as the answer to young women's moral dilemmas. This is what Fielding objected to - it's too ambiguous to live up to the moral standards it sets itself in the Preface.

The literature of sentiment isn't a self-indulgent activity concerned with creating emotional highs for the sake of it (which was the criticism levelled at the later literature of sensibility) - it actively engages with the social world by commenting on people's lives and how they should live them. People tend to look to two institutions for moral guidance: the Church and the State in the form of politicians and legislators. In the eighteenth century there were serious flaws in both institutions; dissatisfaction with public role models led to writers taking on the role of moral teaching and social comment.

To put things into a vague historical perspective, the novel of sentiment was popular in the 1740s and 50s, the novel of sensibility becomes popular in the 1760s but already by the 1770s the term 'sentimentality' had come to be associated with affected and self-indulgent, possibly improper feeling. Once sentimentalism became divorced from serious moral and literary purpose, there was a tendency for writers to pander to the masses, in search of emotional highs.

Look at the difference in response to someone in need in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* and Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*. When Joseph is beaten, stripped and thrown in a ditch, the postillion helps him in spite of opposition from the coach passengers and his own poverty; Fielding gives us many examples of the good characters coming across someone in need, feeling for them and acting on that feeling. Joseph is a man of feeling in that he has strong feelings but they are natural and fundamentally moral, not artificial and self-indulgent. Compare this moral feeling with that which is presented in *Sentimental Journey* eg p.66: 'with what a moral delight will it crown my journey, in sharing in the sickening incidents of a tale of misery told to me by such a sufferer? to see her weep! and though I cannot dry up the fountain of her tears, what an exquisite sensation is there still left, in wiping them away from off the cheeks of the first and fairest of women'.

To use Austen's terminology, in the literature of sentiment, moral 'sense' predominates over sensibility or emotion; in the literature of sensibility, as the term suggests, refined expressions of heightened emotion take centre stage.

Bear in mind also the fact that although writers share knowledge of the conventions of sentiment or sensibility, they use such conventions differently: they may use them straight or rework them, challenge and subvert them, lampoon (ie take the mickey out of them) or simply present them ironically so that we're not quite sure how to take them. Richardson focused on the heightened emotions of his characters (key convention of sensibility) but although his work, particularly *Clarissa*, elicited strong emotional reactions from his readers, this was not his primary aim. Fielding's work celebrates benevolence, the concept of an open and generous heart, key sensibility concepts, but, as with Richardson, moral concerns are uppermost.

It's not always easy to see to what extent writers are taking seriously the conventions they use. *Sentimental Journey* can be read as an attempt to educate the reader in moral feeling through Yorick's own journey which, as the title indicates, is mental as well as physical.

Just as the conventions of tragedy are used in different ways by different writers but their plays are still labelled tragedies, so writers use the conventions of sentiment and sensibility in different ways. Remember also that ideals of sentiment are not simply literary but related to contemporary philosophical debates which literature is reflecting. The French philosopher and writer, Rousseau is important in this context; he was influential with his belief that natural emotions were inherently good and innocent - something akin to Marianne Dashwood's attitude in *Sense and Sensibility*. Rousseau argued that society and its institutions, in particular its laws, had corrupted man from a state of natural innocence.

Sensibility also had implications for the class system, as we see in *Pamela*. Pamela appropriates the genteel behaviour of women from a higher social sphere. She often uses the refined emotionally charged language of sentiment, for eg 'My heart is full'(p.116). This could be interpreted as a form of social pretension, something she 'puts on' just as she puts on different kinds of clothing in order to promote the image she chooses (pp.76-7). Fainting is also associated with romantic heroines and respectable 'ladies', not servants.

The literature of sentiment reflects contemporary debates about moral and social behaviour. The issue of chastity, for example, was debated in religious, intellectual and legal circles as well as in literature. Writers throughout the eighteenth century were concerned with the nature of virtue, the legal double standard and the disabilities forced on women by the laws regulating sexual conduct; in an eighteenth-century context, virtue is a legal as well as a moral issue. Mullan argues in *Sentiment and Sociability* that Richardson, and male writers of all eras, 'isolates virginity as [the] essential representation' of femininity (p.67). Yet this attitude, while no doubt based partly on ideas of mythologised feminine purity, is also derived from property laws. Rakish lechery is fuelled partly by ideas of destroying another man's property. Equally, concern for a mother's or a wife's chastity is strongly related to a desire to protect patrilineal inheritance structures.

Bernard Mandeville argued in 1723 in *Remarks added to The Fable of the Bees* that honour, a word used almost synonymously with virtue, is 'a Chimera...an Invention of Moralists and Politicians', which 'signifies a certain Principle of Vertue not related to Religion'. While Mandeville is deliberately provocative and so not an entirely reliable mouthpiece for eighteenth-century thinking, he does highlight the disparity between twentieth-century assumptions about eighteenth-century virtue and those which actually framed eighteenth-century behaviour.

Eighteenth-century legislators did not simply translate moral concerns into law. Eighteenth-century concepts of virtue are surprisingly pragmatic and are predicated not on religious ethics as we might expect but on issues of power and property, which were often related by way of inheritance law.

Female virtue was defined almost exclusively in terms of chastity, a term which ostensibly indicated many moral qualities but which ultimately ensured that brides would be pure and that heirs would thus be legitimate. Virtue was one of the most important issues in an eighteenth-century woman's life because it helped determine marriage opportunities and therefore her economic situation for life.

The discussion concerning the nature and protection of virtue ran throughout the century. Attitudes vary but writers show consistent discomfort, sometimes anger and at times dark amusement at the

outrageousness of women's chastity being reduced to a property issue and of sexual misdemeanours being viewed, directly or otherwise, in terms of property.

Issues such as sexual assault and rape tend to be viewed purely as narrative strategies within a sentimental framework. Janet Todd notes usefully in *Sensibility: An Introduction* that poverty is the test of the sentimental man, for example Sarah Fielding's David Simple and Goldsmith's Dr Primrose, but that sexual assault is the test of the sentimental woman (p.97). Yet sexual assault is also presented in a clear legal context which writers assume we recognise; it thus has a dual significance, as moral test and social critique; eighteenth-century women were 'ruined' after sexual experience not because of moral principles but because they were no longer marriageable. Both these aspects must be borne in mind when dealing with novels like *Pamela*.

McKeon notes in *The Origin of the English Novel* that 'female chastity [was] required far more insistently of gentlewomen than of those lower down the social scale, where the transmission of property is less at issue' (pp.157-8). Apparently falling victim to eighteenth-century apologists of the system such as Dr Gregory, who argued that women were dignified by preserving family honour, McKeon argues that women 'increasingly come to be viewed...as the repository of an honor that has been alienated from a corrupt male aristocracy'. In so doing, he ignores the legal and social disadvantages this view of women gave rise to. Steeves notes rather more usefully in *Before Jane Austen*, 'The fears and compunctions of the heroines of fiction were not illusions and not mere pietistic sentiments' but 'practical wisdom', commenting that 'ruin' generally meant prostitution (p.99).

### ***Pamela* (1740)**

In *Pamela*, Richardson transposes the popular convention of heroines protecting their chastity into a seemingly incongruous area: the lower class. Pamela herself recognises society's economic evaluation of virtue: '*poor* peoples virtue is to go for nothing'(p.172). As Mr B's servant, Pamela is effectively his property; she later becomes his wife and the novel exploits the legal parallel between servants and wives as property. When she attempts to escape, he tells her, 'you *have* robbed me'(p.91).

For this reason, Pamela's insistence on seeing Mr B's sexual attempts in moral terms is comic to the other characters but it enables Richardson to question society's view of virtue and to expose its property origins, revealing a servant's virtue to be more profound than society's hypocritical notions. Richardson establishes a Christian family background for Pamela, perhaps to add credence to her status as pious heroine. Steeves recognises that 'Richardson makes his whole case for virtue on pious grounds'(p.72), but he also notes its "'commodity" value', arguing that Pamela, far from being prudish, shows 'good sense', since 'sexual freedom generally meant for a woman satiation, abandonment...and ultimately complete degradation'(p.73).

McKeon links the sexual struggle between Pamela and Mr B to their struggle for 'epistemological status'(p.358). He argues that Mr B regards power as 'the ability to make others accept one's version of events as authoritative'. He argues, without taking into account the rather excessive nature of the infatuated Mr B's comments to Pamela, 'To B., Pamela is a witch, a sorceress, an enchantress, an artful gypsy who transforms reality', claiming that Mr B works 'to reverse the spell of Pamela's progressive plotting' with what he calls aristocratic 'inventions', an ingenious term for attempted rape. He argues: 'Although the rape of Pamela can appear to be Mr B's irreducible and obsessive desire, his real view seems to be that it is a distastefully crude expedient for enacting' what McKeon regards as 'the venerable aristocratic plot that is his genuine ambition'(p.359).

McKeon regards Mr B's attempt to deceive Pamela by the sham marriage as a 'touchingly inadequate' attempt to reconcile her 'elevated position' in 'the servant hierarchy' with the impossibility of marriage as he sees it. Hence 'the proposals soberly imitate the concerns of a formal contract'(p.372). Mr B may give Pamela the jewels intended for the gentlewoman he was to marry but he states quite clearly that the document would be 'as if you were my wife' - this is not in any sense a marriage contract and future presents are to be earned: he writes that he 'will confer upon you still *other* favours, as I shall find myself obliged, by your affection and good behaviour'.

The contract seems to be part of a long line of deceptions, a means to accomplish what he failed in his rape attempts, rather than an expression of concern for her status. The 'articles' of his financial proposals

(pp.227-31) do indeed resemble those of marriage settlements but the language is threatening: '[your] answer, will absolutely decide your fate'(p.227). He even offers the possibility of marriage in the future but this should not blind the reader: his document effectively makes provision for Pamela as a mistress, or 'low-born prostitute'(p.231) as she phrases it. It seems probable that Richardson also conceived of the proposals in a moral context, rather than purely as an attempt to resolve class conflict.

Ian Watt reads *Pamela* simply in terms of class struggle, arguing that Pamela and Mr B's conflicts 'mirror larger contemporary conflicts between two classes and their way of life'(*The Rise of the Novel*, p.173). The novel does in one sense dramatise class conflict, with Mr B threatening Pamela constantly with the power derived from his social status: 'I will not meanly sue where I can command'(p.232). When Mr B recognises Pamela's worth, he has to face the reaction of his family. His sister writes to complain: 'ours is no upstart family...for several hundreds of years, it has never been known, that the heirs of it have disgraced themselves by unequal matches' ie marriage with a social inferior (p.293). Pamela comments on this letter, 'One may see by it how poor people are despised by the rich and the great! And yet we were all on a foot originally'(p.294). Pamela is articulating radical Christian views that all men are equal, something which many of Richardson's readers would have been uncomfortable with. As such, Pamela can be read as a strong moral heroine, a woman of feeling who is genuinely concerned with moral feeling rather than worldly values such as wealth and status.

His exact position is, as ever, unclear. He presents Pamela sympathetically, courageously standing up to someone who, as a magistrate, should uphold justice rather than subverting it by exploiting his privileged status as aristocratic male. Mr B's status is compromised somewhat by the humour of his presentation: he's constantly trying to impress Pamela with his status and power but what self-respecting eighteenth-century aristocrat would spend so much of his energy trying to impress the servants? Richardson further undercuts his pretensions by showing that attending St James's is a big deal for him. He is in some respects rather weak, blustering and threatening almost to reassure himself that he has power over this impertinent little servant; he's not very good at being a rake.

However, Richardson is not advocating equality in terms of class any more than he would advocate it in terms of gender. As someone who was outside the upper classes he may well have had some personal interest in presenting an example of virtue in the lower classes and in presenting the upper classes as morally weak. Pamela is working class in name only - she hardly ever does any work and she expresses herself in very middle class terms. She can read, has been educated by Mr B's mother in the accomplishments associated with middle and upper class women.

Witness the scene where Mr B calls Pamela, 'a pretty *rhimester*; I will not flatter you by calling you a poetess; yet I admire that beautiful simplicity which in all you do, all you write, all you speak, makes so distinguishing a part of your character. Did I not see on your toilette yesterday a few lines begun in praise of humility?'(p.514). Pamela is displaying the hallmarks of the woman of feeling - simplicity and delicacy of feeling, expressed in poetry but not poetry of such skill that she could be confused with a poetess, exposing her thoughts to public scrutiny in an unseemly way.

Pamela behaves with feeling delicacy when she meets Mr B's illegitimate daughter, reacting as all good sentimental heroines do and weeping. She recounts: 'She sat down, and leaned her head against my bosom, and made my neck wet with her tears, holding me by the hands; and I wept for company'(p.452). Pamela cries because she is moved by the child's story and because she responds to the child's emotion and her beauty but her emotion is not presented as a fashionable affectation; it is a sign of her compassion; indeed she wants the child to come and live with them, which is a pretty radical approach to illegitimate children in eighteenth-century terms!

Pamela may refer to herself as a servant but everyone in the novel is constantly reminding us how unusual she is - she is hardly designed as a credible representative of the lower classes to articulate their concerns; rather, she speaks as one whose nobility of character transcends the accident of her birth. Social mobility in terms of marrying someone higher up the social scale, and social equality, are traditionally primarily of concern to the middle classes. At this period social equality was undreamt of and social mobility was very limited, except in the middle class. There was a clear social structure and people would have recognised readily enough that there was a lower, middle and upper class in the middle classes too. The

upper middle class, as it increased in wealth and influence, came to aspire to marry into the lower gentry on occasion but in the 1740s you must remember that social mobility was neither common nor desirable in the minds of the moral majority.

J.H.Plumb sums up 18th century culture usefully: 'The age of Walpole was rough, coarse, brutal; a world for the muscular and the aggressive and the cunning. The thin veneer of elegance and classic form obscured but never hid either the crime and dissipation or the drab middle-class virtue and thrift.' It's worth bearing in mind this contemporary association of the middle classes with dull moralism and the upper classes, with frivolity and, particularly in the case of the men, with sexual immorality. In this sense, Richardson is using popular stereotypes, with Pamela embodying middle class virtue and Mr B upper class vice. Richardson may be advocating more respect for the virtues of the middle classes, of which he was a member.

If you view the novel in this way, as a clash of moral and social cultures, you may want to look at McKeon. He argues that the attempted rape is intended to force Pamela to accept Mr B's quasi-marriage proposals and that, 'by assuming the levelling disguise of a servant girl' Mr B attempts to 'lower himself to her status'(p.372). This interpretation does not account for the ugliness of the language in this scene, which underlines the reality and brutality of the threat. Rakes dressing as women in order to seduce or rape is a recognised motif in fiction; McKeon may interpret the situation in terms of class but Mr B seems conscious of baser motives, 'trembling like an aspen-leaf'(p.241) and threatening that if she does not 'comply with [his] proposals, [he] will not lose this opportunity'(p.242) for rape.

Mrs Jewkes, a grotesque example of feminine betrayal or 'vile unwomanly wickedness'(p.245) as Pamela phrases it, helps Mr B hold Pamela down and incites him to rape, 'Don't stand dilly-dallying, sir. She cannot exclaim worse than she has done; and will be quieter when she knows the worst', as if she has been involved in such situations before. Abetting rape was a capital offence but it is reasonable to assume that Mrs Jewkes expects Mr B's status to shield both him and herself from prosecution.

Like Lovelace in Richardson's novel *Clarissa*, Mr B has seduced a number of women but has misgivings about rape, commenting, 'I abhor violence'(p.242). Lovelace is clearly more dangerous than Mr B but one wonders if Mr B would be equally dangerous if he had Lovelace's intelligence and attractive form. Mr B does not act on Mrs Jewkes's suggestions because, unlike Lovelace, he is afraid. This allows Richardson to recuperate the text from potential tragedy and to bring about resolution and eventual marriage.

Mr B does not pose the same magnitude of threat as Lovelace but his social position and powers as a Justice put Pamela in real danger. If Mr B did rape Pamela, her father would probably not have the means to take him to court and even if he did, Mr B would face a jury of his own class, since noblemen were tried by their peers. Upper class attitudes to rape of the lower classes are summed up in Sir Simon, who argues that Mr B 'hurts no *family*' by trying to seduce Pamela. Mr B represents the ruling classes and their laws. Richardson criticises not only the legal view of virtue as property but also aristocratic privilege and lack of protection for the poor.

### **Richardson and the moral epistolary tradition**

For Richardson, the notions of sentiment and sensibility could be used to reaffirm Christian values; hence the moral didacticism of his work. In the Preface to *Clarissa* Richardson comments on the epistolary style, or 'writing to the moment': '*Much more* lively and affecting...must be the style of those who write in the height of a *present* distress, the mind tortured by the pangs of uncertainty (the events then hidden in the womb of fate); than the dry, narrative, unanimated style of a person relating difficulties and dangers surmounted, can be...the relater perfectly at ease; and if himself unmoved by his own story, not likely greatly to affect the reader.'

Richardson's novels are all written in the epistolary form - its advantages include a sense of immediacy which contributes to the reader empathising with the characters' emotions. Richardson and those influenced by him associated the epistolary style particularly with women and a subjective, emotional voice. Writing demands time and time is a commodity of the leisured. Thus the style became associated with privileged ladies. Figs notes usefully that as such, the style was not a useful model for women writers. She comments, 'Conformity was required of her both on a personal level and as an author, and in this situation

she is at her best when she employs the detached irony of the authorial third person. Richardson, as a man who had no doubt of the ultimate superiority of his own sex, could afford subjective outpourings on the part of his female heroines. A woman writer could not'(p.17).

This is no doubt a useful starting point when considering why women writers wrote as they did but Figs extrapolates from this a theory of feminine complicity with the system of patriarchy; while she makes a number of pertinent points concerning the social pressures and restrictions facing women writers, I think she overestimates the extent to which they allowed their writing to be governed by such things. This is a perennial problem for feminist critics: in rightly pointing out the different social conditions under which women wrote, they can present women as constant victims, unable, even unwilling, to challenge the status quo. Yet it was precisely the desire to challenge and indeed subvert the status quo that motivated many women to write.

Figs argues that a woman writer, 'trying to come to terms with a world and with values where she is object and not subject, an outsider, regarded as an inferior dependant with no rights or voice of her own, must at all costs avoid the subjective voice if she is to conform to standard morality and at the same time remain in control of her material'(p.17).

I am again going to take issue with Figs's assumption that women writers were concerned primarily with internalising the values of the dominant patriarchy - they clearly were not. However, her point that the epistolary style may be more difficult to control is valid enough. Austen's heroines are ultimately defined by their rationality, not their capacity to feel; they are active, walking and travelling, not sitting for hours in cushioned boudoirs writing to a coterie of friends about their latest sentimental adventure - they inhabit a world that is much more real in some respects. The issue of authorial control is also relevant of course - the detached comic voice works better outside the epistolary form.

Having criticised Figs, I must recommend her book, *Sex and Subterfuge* - it provides an interesting and informative account of the rise of women's fiction.

### **Plot tradition**

Richardson was influential in terms of style and plot structures. Some would argue that he is the father of the sentimental novel, someone writers imitated or reacted against but could not avoid being influenced by.

Writing from the point of view of women, he follows both the courtship and seduction traditions. Pamela, he argued, was a moral exemplar; her virtue is rewarded by marriage to Mr B, the traditional reformed rake; in *Clarissa* he returns to the topic of female virtue but with a tragic eye: Clarissa is virtuous, more convincingly so than Pamela. She refuses to marry the morally and physically repugnant Solmes and so her parents literally imprison her in her room, threatening to force the marriage. Clarissa is duped by the rake Lovelace, who promises to rescue her; she resists his attempts at seduction but is drugged and raped; she ultimately dies. It is perhaps significant that Fielding lampooned *Pamela* but was so impressed with *Clarissa* that he was influenced by it in writing *Amelia* (1751).

The picture of suffering maidens crying feebly for help and at the mercy of rapacious rakes has always been problematic for women readers in particular. *Pamela* was an immensely popular novel but its heroine came in for a degree of criticism and her situation caused some concern to women readers, who felt that her behaviour was not entirely in keeping with propriety. Of course the novel is ultimately comic and so such objections are largely invalidated - the sexual 'freedoms' taken by Mr B are, to some extent at least in the eighteenth-century scheme of things, sanctioned retrospectively by marriage.

Marriage had traditionally been offered to women and particularly their families as recompense for injured honour; Richardson may find this acceptable but many of his contemporaries, both male and female, objected strongly to the idea of a nobleman marrying so far beneath his rank. In addition, women were also questioning the acceptability of marriage as a reward for varying degrees of sexual assault. *Pamela* is ultimately comic and so Richardson does not allow us to focus on Pamela's situation; we have the vague feeling that all will be well.

Yet all was not well for servant girls who were seduced or raped by their employers. They would lose their jobs and often not be able to find alternative employment, particularly if they were pregnant (it was

believed that pregnancy implied consent and so compounded guilt). Many of them were forced to turn to prostitution and ended up literally in the gutter. Richardson and his readers could not have failed to be aware of the fate of such women (indeed Richardson was involved in setting up an institution which looked after such women. It was a well meaning enterprise but the women were effectively incarcerated and had to work hard for their keep). Richardson glosses over such things because they are not relevant to the narrative enterprise, which focuses on virtue rewarded.

Later women novelists took precisely this plot construct and presented it in a much uglier and more disturbing form. Mary Wollstonecraft appropriated sentimental plot constructs but used them to reveal the inequities of her society, particularly in relation to women and the poor. For her, as for earlier women novelists such as Penelope Aubin and Eliza Haywood, the vulnerability of young women to sexual and other assault was not to be enjoyed pruriently but to be challenged. It is important to note that narrative motifs such as sexual assault or imprisonment are also symbolic of general vulnerability and oppression. In narratives throughout the century, eighteenth-century society and its laws and institutions such as marriage and the family, is symbolically depicted as a vast prison for women and the poor.

This radical reworking of the sentimental tradition needs to be borne in mind when we approach the work of women writers such as Frances Burney and Jane Austen, both of whom were writing at the time Wollstonecraft's work was being published. Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays and others helped to pave the way for women such as Burney and Austen, apparently much less radical in their views and certainly in their conduct, to rework the sentimental tradition in a way that would reflect women's interests and experience, be it in harmony with or in contradistinction to the dominant patriarchal ideology. Whatever their apparent sympathies towards women, Richardson, Fielding and Sterne, were part of this patriarchal tradition; Richardson and particularly Fielding did much to challenge the inequities of their society but they largely supported the patriarchal hierarchy in terms of class and gender. Late eighteenth-century women writers inherited plot and character traditions from such writers but often reworked them in order to subvert the patriarchal values they embodied.

When one comes to look at Austen's work in depth it is clear that she engages with social reality as effectively as Wollstonecraft, but she approaches it in a different way, a manner which will be acceptable to her readers and their parents. Austen and Wollstonecraft both deal with seduction and potential ruin, their society's obsession with money and its nefarious consequences, the inability of respectable women to earn a living, the problems inherent in the laws concerning marriage and inheritance. Both writers deal with issues which were of fundamental concern to their readers and as such, both consciously enter into contemporary debate on such issues, using the literary tradition of sensibility to examine contemporary society and its problems and to suggest ways forward.

The essential difference lies not in concern for such issues but in the presentation of them - both writers present women of feeling and explore the nature of those feelings as they affect the woman's relations with the outside world. Wollstonecraft's heroine follows her heart and commits adultery; Austen's heroines control their emotions, although she does present characters who value their emotions above social convention - think of the young woman Colonel Brandon was in love with and her daughter, who falls in love with Willoughby, becomes pregnant and is abandoned by him.

If it weren't for the kindness of Brandon, who ensures that she is looked after, she would be forced to consider back street abortion or having a child and paying someone else to look after it, as happens in *Moll Flanders*, and being kept by another man, possibly ending up in prostitution and thus probable disease and death. Brandon could refuse to have anything to do with her - she is illegitimate and has had an illegitimate child herself - she's not the sort of woman a respectable man would have anything to do with. Yet he values his affection for her mother and the duty he feels to protect the daughter above social convention; his concern is with genuine moral action, as opposed to superficial moral concern of the kind that leads people to reject someone who might damage their reputation. Brandon is sometimes regarded by twentieth-century students of literature as being prissy and as vital as a bit of damp cardboard. Yet he and by definition Austen, is actually being pretty radical in his reaction to the young girl as a victim of her feelings in need of help, not rejection.

Contemporary readers would probably have taken issue with Austen's morality if she had focused in greater detail on this story and it would have been unthinkable to many contemporary readers for Elinor to help the girl - Brandon is a man of the world - but Elinor would be tainted by association if she were to meet and help the girl. Austen had to be careful in the way she dealt with such a controversial issue. It is shocking enough that Brandon tells Elinor the truth about Willoughby - quite a daring breach of decorum to speak of such things but Brandon weighs up the matter carefully and, it would seem with Austen's approval, he tells Eleanor the awful truth about Willoughby so that one day Marianne will realise that she has been lucky to escape such a man who is such an egocentric moral coward that he is in some respects quite dangerous. Traditionally, Willoughby has been seen as the man of feeling but if this is so he is the man of feeling gone wrong - he embodies the selfishness of feeling as long as it is conducive to his interests, something akin to the morally irresponsible sentimental literature earlier in the century. Brandon is an older, wiser version of the man of feeling, a man who combines feeling with rational and courageous moral action.

Austen's subtle but nonetheless incisive approach was perhaps wiser in some respects than the impressive but ultimately tragic figure of Wollstonecraft, whose contribution to literature and debate concerning human rights was not recognised until well after her death. We are fortunate in that our literary heritage incorporates the work of both writers and so we can learn about two significantly different but not unrelated approaches to the literature of sensibility and the culture it explored.

Eva Figs argues: 'Writers of the generation of Burney, Edgeworth and Austen were not feminist revolutionaries. Trying to accept the world as it was, and teach their readers to adapt to the standards of a male world in order to survive, they had little use for the tragic outlook. Only by adopting a detached comic voice could they hope to give conviction and consistency to their portrayal of a world where they and their heroines were required to obey and submit without question'(p.16). Not only does this fail to account for the radical women novelists of this generation - women like Mary Hays and Wollstonecraft, it is a fundamental misreading of the work and intentions of the writers Figs here dismisses. They do of course take on the detached comic voice Figs identifies but this does not negate the very serious points they make; the comic voice is generally more sympathetic to the reader, encouraging him or her to agree with a fundamentally reasonable narrator; a more stridently radical style tends to put readers on their guard; apparent sentimental comedies of manners are reassuring in appearance; their humour sugars the pill of the sometimes unpalatable truths they present.

It is also worth noting that writers rarely use only one narrative voice - Austen's mode of discourse cannot simply be described as detached and comic. There is no comedy in Austen's treatment of Lydia's elopement and potential ruin in *Pride and Prejudice*, nor in her presentation of Willoughby's seduction and abandonment of the young woman in *Sense and Sensibility*. Austen appropriates different narrative voices according to what may be expedient; the dominant mode may be that of comic detachment but it is not the only one.

This is important when dealing with comic sentimental novels, many of which are characterised by this dominant comic detachment - think of *Joseph Andrews*. Such novels by their very nature can deal with issues which would be too ugly for readers to face if they were dealt with in a different manner - tragic novels such as *Clarissa* invest their characters' sufferings with tragic grandeur and dignity but they require a degree of emotional investment on the part of the reader that comic novels appear not to demand. Students usually prefer reading comic novels but they prefer to write essays on tragic novels, feeling that they are somehow more 'meaty', that there is more going on in them, that if the mode is serious, then the subject matter must be too. Yet we must be wary of dismissing comic novels; to return to Figs's comment, serious consideration of the work of Edgeworth, Burney and certainly Austen will reveal that far from seeking to internalise the values of the dominant patriarchal hierarchy, they use the sentimental mode to explore and challenge these values.

Radical behaviour such as Wollstonecraft's Maria living with her lover, were neither practicable nor desirable for most women. Elizabeth Bennet's insistence on marrying for love and her courage in refusing anyone not intellectually her equal, is more than most women would have been able to do in Austen's world - her independence, symbolised in her walking to Netherfield through the mud and rain to visit Jane, is a breath of fresh air in the restrictive society in which Austen has to operate. Her defiance of her mother in

refusing to marry Mr Collins is the stuff of eighteenth-century parents' nightmares. Elinor's behaviour in *Sense and Sensibility* is interesting in that she is guided not by her mother's judgement, as respectable young women were encouraged to do, but her own - all Austen's heroines rely on their own judgement - they make mistakes and learn from them but they are morally and intellectually independent - Austen is encouraging young women to think for themselves - a pretty dangerous thing to do in an eighteenth-century context. She created not so much women of feeling but women of rational feeling.

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