Approaches to Teaching World Literature

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Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Samuel Richardson

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Teaching *Sir Charles Grandison* instead of *Pamela* to Undergraduates

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Having taught the first two volumes of *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* in an upper-division undergraduate seminar on the eighteenth-century novel, I am convinced that *Grandison* is the novel of choice for an instructor who feels that *Clarissa* is too long to tackle in a course alongside a fair selection of other works but believes that the post-*Clarissa* Richardson makes for a more interesting classroom presence than the Richardson of *Pamela*. In what follows, I discuss my experience teaching Richardson's last novel at the University of Kentucky, Lexington, and make a case for *Grandison* as both a viable and exciting alternative to *Pamela* and a default undergraduate offering.

Because throughout my essay I refer to the first two volumes of the novel (or the 465 pages that compose the first part of Jocelyn Harris's three-part Oxford University Press edition of 1972) as "the" *Grandison*, I should start by discussing the pros and cons of the decision not to teach the whole book. First, I have no doubt that reading the novel in its 1,600-page entirety would have left my students with a very different—and richer—view of Richardson's achievement, providing them with a more satisfying sense of closure than would any synopsis of the remaining five volumes (or parts two and three of Harris's edition). At the same time, something should be said for the gratification of having one's students read the remaining 1,135 pages on their own, as several of them did. One student borrowed the rest of *Grandison* and, on finishing it in a week, moved on to reading the unabridged *Clarissa*. Another asked her mother for the whole *Grandison* as a Christmas present. Several students contacted me after the grades were in (at which point they had presumably no reason to impress me with their zeal) and asked me how to order the remaining parts.

I have to pause here and explain that I ordered only the first part of Harris's edition for my class, which also meant that my students paid only one-third of the overall price. Those interested in acquiring the unassigned second and third parts could later contact the printer themselves (steve.williams@stonebow.otago.ac.nz). Indeed, the present situation with the availability of *Grandison* is uniquely favorable for such selective ordering because the novel is being reproduced under license from the Oxford University Press by Otago University Print, which is willing to sell the parts separately. In the hope that that this arrangement will last, I appreciate both the prescience of Harris and her original publisher who decided to bring out *Grandison* in three separate volumes, and the flexibility of the Otago UP manager, Steve Williams.

But aside from the satisfaction of having one's students want to finish the novel on their own, is there something particular about the structure of *Grandison* that renders the idea of assigning only the first two volumes somehow less

pernicious than the idea of assigning the curtailed *Clarissa*? Having successfully taught the unabridged *Clarissa* to Kentucky undergraduates, I shrink from the thought of withholding any part of *Clarissa* from my students. However, the end of the second volume of *Grandison* impresses me as a logical stopping point for an instructor wishing to whet his or her charges' appetites for Richardson while keeping in mind that they still have to read several long novels by other authors. By the end of the second volume, we have lived through Harriet Byron's postmasquerade ordeal and arrived at the point when the phrase "the vile Sir Hargrave Pollexfen" (1: 151) rolls easily off our tongue; we have registered Harriet's metamorphosis from a saucy satirist with a knack for ridiculing other people's self-delusions to a love-sick girl consumed with worry about her imperfections and yet endearingly "*frank*" about her feelings; we have been impressed, humbled, and annoyed by Sir Charles's bravery, endurance, grace, handsomeness, integrity, intellect, popularity, resourcefulness, and self-assurance and by his unwavering beneficence toward horses, servants, tenants, unfaithful stewards, wards, fathers, uncles, sisters, and illegitimate stepbrothers; we have been "*delightfully-scandalized*" by Charlotte's arch remarks and have learned about her and Caroline's cruel treatment at the hands of their "*mistress-keeping*" father; and we have pondered the rhetorical value of italicized words and hyphenated coinages. While the remaining five volumes reinforce these first impressions through a series of compelling vignettes and introduce the controversial topic of a perfect man troublingly in love with two women at once, they do not significantly change what we have learned about the protagonists in the first part. This is why the first 465 pages of the novel could in principle suffice in a course that considers Richardson as only one brilliant novelist in the constellation of talents that we associate with the eighteenth-century novel.

The fifteen-week course that I am describing featured Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Richardson's *Grandison* (the only novel we did not read in its entirety), Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Frances Burney's *Cecilia*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. We met three times a week, and for every class meeting, the students had to read from 80 to 150 pages, averaging 300 pages a week. To ensure that the students stayed on schedule in their reading and remained engaged with the text, I required them to write a series of short papers that called on their knowledge of specific details in the novels. These written assignments, each of them one- to two-pages long, had to be typed and turned in every week (no late or handwritten assignments were accepted). They served as a starting point for our class discussions and—more important—helped the students develop ideas for their longer essays. Instead of grading those assignments, I only marked them with brief comments, occasionally suggesting avenues for further thinking. In the case of *Grandison*, a novel that we read in three weeks, my students wrote short papers on the following topics: female friendships; fallen women; Harriet writes to her Lucy; and, does Harriet change on meeting Sir Charles?

This last was the least successful assignment because, as several students pointed out, the answer was prescripted by the question.

At one point during the semester, I asked my students to fill out an anonymous survey dedicated to *Grandison*, where they reported, among other things, that the practice of writing the short essays enabled them to "get into the novel," which was "important" because they read it "so quickly"; that such exercises were "one of the most rewarding aspects of the text" because they helped students "grapple with the text" and "engage the characters who might seem a little too distant otherwise"; and that the assignments made them "think more about the novel" than they would have if they had "only been reading for pure enjoyment." On a less positive note, one student wrote, "Much as I disliked the book, I liked the writing assignments," especially the one involving impersonating Harriet.

The assignment on Harriet writing to Lucy generated a remarkable series of short essays. It made the students aware of particularities of Richardson's style that they had previously paid little attention to, merely observing that it was "lively" and "funny." I told them to write a letter that Harriet might have sent home after attending the masquerade with Lady Betty and the Reeveses. Because I asked students not to read ahead of the schedule, they did not know that Harriet ends up being abducted by the vile Sir Hargrave Pollexfen. Most of them assumed that the masquerade would be the place where she finally encounters the long-expected hero. Here are several excerpts from their papers:

> Letter 23. Miss Byron. To Miss Selby.
>
> My Lucy, in obedience to your injunctions, I will attempt to relate all the particulars of last night's ball. Yet, shall I repeat the compliments without provoking the censure of my uncle? No, I am certain to receive them in his next letter. And how can I give accounts on a new admirer without condemning my sex with those charges of vanity and pride? But do go on, you say. So, I will.
>
> Who do you suppose to be the first person I encountered? That foolish man, Mr. Greville. It seems he thought fit to come so far again into town to ward off his competitors. . . .
>
> . . . All my Lovers (so the Reeveses call them) were to be found at the ball. Yet, Lucy, only one person did I see that I could ever imagine to earn that name from my lips. Oh! His person and his mind, as I well learned from his conversation, seem all too lovely and pure for that Sex. Forgive me, I am too vain to believe only virtuous souls to be found among my sex, am I not? I am. Let my uncle say so. Now however I know virtue is hiding among so many hyenas. But as this letter is long and the particulars of Sir Charles Grandison (for that is his name) are longer, I will break off just here.
>
> (Jaimee Bertram)

> My dress . . . just as I had feared, drew the attention of some familiar persons, but not familiar faces. The baronet quickly discovered me under my masque. However, he impressed me with his sprightliness and gentle nature that he possessed while we conversed, which probably was affected by the public. He wore a masque that transformed him into an Ostler, including the speech of that character, which I greatly laughed at.
>
> . . . Oh how I wished the evening had ended so much sooner on the account of [Mr. Greville's] prying and the several *unagreeable* men that pleaded for my hand. (Geoffrey G. Young)

> The wretched [Sir Hargrave] had carried his ill feelings over a fortnight and made these feelings well known to me at our first possible encounter. What, dear Harriet, did you ever do? you must be asking, my Lucy, and I am obliged to give you the conversation as closely as I will remember it. . . .
>
> A detail which I must not leave out, dear Lucy, is the costumes of others whom I have related to you in previous letters. Can you even guess what a certain Miss Barnevelt dressed herself as? Yes, she did come in the attire of a *man*, her wishes for one evening becoming true.
>
> (Cecily Galbreath)

Although the students did not anticipate just how frightening Harriet's masquerade adventure would turn out to be, they had registered enough negative vibes in Richardson's account of Harriet's preparation for her Haymarket excursion to know that she would not be able to enjoy it. In fact, one student, Brandon Meier, nicely captured Richardson's didacticism, if not the heroine's actual tone, when he wrote in his letter to Lucy, "My dear Lucy! I have to say the masquerade was as dull as I had previously told you I thought it would be. Of course am I ever wrong about these sorts of things? No, I am Harriet Byron and I am never wrong." Having learned shortly thereafter of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's sarcastic observation that Harriet might have been carried off by Sir Hargrave in the same manner if she had been going from supper with her Grandmama, my students became attuned to the possibility that Richardson had reimagined several eighteenth-century cultural icons to promote his favorite ideological points. *Grandison*'s treatment of masquerade as a place dangerous for virtuous young women thus provided both an ironic sequel to Lady Bellaston's seduction of Tom Jones at a masquerade and a prequel to the ominous skits played out in front of Cecilia during the masked ball at the Harrels.

Similarly, Richardson's take on dueling provided an important if deeply ambivalent counterpoint to our analysis of the unhappy martial exploits of both Tom Jones and Mortimer Delvile. Sir Charles's refusal to duel when challenged by Sir Hargrave, who is surrounded by his pals, seemed to the class boringly commonsensical until I asked them for a modern equivalent. James Yonts

immediately pointed out that we could compare it with the action of a new member of a sport team or a new recruit in the army who refuses to go through some ridiculous, strenuous, or humiliating initiation rite that other members of the team or squad hold sacred and had gone through themselves. Once we envisioned the new guy trying to explain to an increasingly hostile and contemptuous crowd of seasoned athletes or soldiers how unethical, unnecessary, and silly their demands are, the eighteenth-century honor code suddenly came alive in the classroom. We realized that not just anybody would be allowed to turn down the challenge. First, the person refusing to duel would have to prove that he is capable of fighting and not just covering cowardice with noble words about the evils of dueling. Second, it would help if a sterling reputation and a good standing in society preceded the man's refusal and earned him a respectful audience. Third, he would have to be eloquent and self-assured. A person who dares to decry the code of honor thus has to be strong, famous, persuasive, confident, and of the right social class. In other words, that person has to be a Sir Charles Grandison, a realization that subtly undercuts the power of the noble sentiment about the wrongs of dueling. (Just so, Richardson's insistence that only his inimitable Pamela deserved to skyrocket to nobility and that only his nonpareil Clarissa could be forgiven for running away with the rake undercuts the subversive thrust of his previous novels.)

From Richardson's discussion of a perfect hero, we moved on to his view of the perfect heroine. Here we noticed that even if Harriet Byron is "never wrong," as Brandon Meier intuits, Richardson sets careful limits on her agency. To offset the fact that Harriet has potentially more power than even Sir Charles, because her interpretations of events constitute our main source of information, particularly in the first two volumes, Richardson makes sure that Harriet qualifies and indirectly relegates her authorial prerogatives. Hence her frequent interpolations such as, "so my uncle says" (1: 66) or, after she has mimicked the epistolary style of her lesbian acquaintance, Miss Barnevelt, and feels the need to disclaim responsibility for that overenthusiastic parody, "something like this, my Lucy, did Miss Barnevelt once say" (1: 69). In her letter to Lucy, Jaimee Bertram parodied this tendency of Richardson's heroine when she had Harriet interrupt her casual chat with an obligatory qualification: "All my Lovers (so the Reeves call them) were to be found at the ball."

Paradoxically, then, the apparent excess of authorial presence could lead to a radical circumscription of agency. Together we considered the situation of a young man or woman, particularly a woman, coming to the big town for the first time, leaving behind her parents who trust and respect her (as Harriet's surrogate parents do) yet worry about her potential reproductive choices—a scenario that most of my students could immediately relate to. In these circumstances, writing sophisticated and grammatically impeccable letters that report her every move and every thought to the anxious family not only would occupy the time that could otherwise be spent partying but also would evolve into the most effective form of self-chaperoning or self-policing. Sharing those letters later with the devoted sister of her love interest would cement the friendship between the two women and tacitly assure any Charlotte that her future sister-in-law is a "good girl" worthy of the "good man" (note the different meanings of the word *good* when applied to a man and a woman [1: 234, 223]). Our discussion of the epistolary form as a crucial eighteenth-century literary technique was thus informed by the realization that considerations of gender profoundly inform any actual instantiation of this technique. Later in the semester, we returned to this point again, observing Henry Tilney's mock amazement at Catherine Morland's lack of interest in keeping a journal that would allow her "absent cousins to understand the tenour of [her] life in Bath" (Austen, *Northanger Abbey* 24).

The question of who controls the narrative and how the narrative controls the narrator dovetailed with our larger discussion about the author's power over the text (a discussion that we continued later over *Tristram Shandy*). I suggested to my students that Richardson's previous novels had, in a sense, run away from their author. Despite Richardson's efforts to forestall them, *Pamela* generated a series of cynical readings, such as Fielding's *Shamela*. Later, the readers of *Clarissa*, and—most mortifying—the female readers who were Richardson's target audience, actually fell in love with the villainous Lovelace. Early on, I asked my students to pay attention to those moments in *Grandison* that could be understood as Richardson's attempts to prevent any future misinterpretations of his last novel. Having accumulated a list of such moments (for example, the main villain of the novel is about as attractive as a snake) and of the instances in which Richardson failed to keep *Grandison* under his thumb (for example, every topic discussed above), we began to believe that sometimes the novel has to run away from its anxious author. Sometimes the runaway novels kick harder and live longer, however defeated the writer may feel about their unruly tendencies during his or her lifetime.

I have concluded that *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* works extremely well in a course on the eighteenth-century novel because it engages a broad variety of issues that students can both relate to and recognize as constituting the driving energies of other novels of the period. The search for a perfect hero and perfect heroine with all its attendant ironies and ambiguities; the peer pressure and the code of honor; the complexities of female friendships; the relationship between parents and children; the adventures in delayed, relegated, and reasserted narrative authority—all of which *Grandison* deals with in a lively and yet ambivalent manner—render *Grandison* a rewarding choice for the instructor who wants to convey enthusiasm for Richardson to students. We take for granted *Grandison's* status as one of the most influential novels in European literary history, but it is only when our students begin to discuss the connections between Richardson's last work and the novels of Sterne, Burney, Radcliffe, and Austen—and they grasp those connections right away—that we discover the true meaning of that influence.