Approaches to Teaching World Literature

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Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Samuel Richardson

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The Modern Language Association of America

New York 2006
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 unbridged 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 Press, 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 unbridged 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 Follexfen” (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 friendship; fallen women; Harriet writes to her Lucy; and, does Harriet change on meeting Sir Charles?
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 gentleness 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 Barnewelt 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 Belcaston'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 counterpart to our analysis of the unhappy marital 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 just not 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 Barnewelt, and feels the need to disclaim responsibility for that overenthusiastic parody, “something like this, my Lucy, did Miss Barnewelt once say” (1: 69). In her letter to Lucy, Jamee 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 their 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 effec-