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Autor: Petter, Henry
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Clarissa's Family: False Friends, Fair Friends

Henri Petter

Any formula-like heading must appear unfair to Samuel Richardson's novel. What mine foregrounds is that Clarissa does feel, and even say, that she has false and fair friends about her. And this has to do with what seemed or was thought to be fair or false in familial and gender relations, in Richardson's 18th century. For this is the world partly reflected in a multi-layered story that could have happened in 1732.¹ On one's way towards making sense of the one million words in *Clarissa*, it may therefore be useful to raise some questions by means of applying "fair/false" to the novel as well as to Richardsonian contexts. I shall be paying attention to Richardson's text (and its built-in cautionary features) to begin with – especially some early portions of it – and then relate it to its social and cultural framework.

1.

There is a critical turn in Clarissa's life at the time of her brother James's return to Harlowe Place, after a longish absence devoted to money matters (taking possession of inherited estates). His immediate opposition to plans for marrying Clarissa to Lovelace ends a period of suspended animation among the Harlowes, an interregnum after years of – we assume – uneventful family life. The Harlowe nuclear family consists of the parents, one son, and two daughters, Arabella and Clarissa. The latter, we are to learn, has up to now seen in the others her "friends" – her affectionate advisers and companions; suddenly, she finds them false to this habitual benevolence.

If we extend "family" to close kinship, her father's two brothers and her mother's sister (Aunt Hervey) count as well, and they also prove unfriendly to Clarissa. Only her young cousin Dolly is sympathetic, but she cannot help. Nor can Mrs. Norton, Clarissa's nurse and thus a former member of

¹ Ross, "Introduction" to Richardson, *Clarissa*, 23.

the household (another meaning of “family”). Here several servants (“famuli”), while well-disposed towards Clarissa, are yet unable to do anything for her. Soon, then, she is virtually an opposition of one under the Harlowe régime.

Richardson’s novel begins with Anna Howe addressing her “dearest friend” Clarissa after hearing of “disturbances [. . .] in your [Clarissa’s] family” (1.39).² In Clarissa’s eyes Anna, unlike the Harlowes, does *not* change from fair to false; her faithfulness is a truly exemplary standard of conduct.³

There are also, alas, several truly false friends of Clarissa’s, with their own family ties, as if this made them more capable of relating to her. Lovelace, who never tires of invoking his respectable relatives, employs as agents a fake aunt and cousin of his (255-6.874-880), Mrs. Sinclair and her two “nieces” (130.1.470), and “Tomlinson,” who has children of his own (214.687-688).

Two devoted friends are with Clarissa in her last retreat, Belford and Colonel Morden. The latter, an ex-officio friend since he is a cousin of Clarissa’s and one of her trustees, in his first letter to her (from abroad) strikes a discouraging Harlowe majority note, but in the end he is the only one of her relations to side with her. As for Belford, Lovelace’s favourite fellow-rake, he mends his ways most thoroughly under Clarissa’s influence.⁴

2.

At the end of Letter 1, Anna allows herself to pass judgment on Clarissa’s family. Yes, she is an outsider, a friend “without doors” (1.40) not fully informed of all the goings-on at Harlowe Place; yet, an acquaintance of long standing, she cannot help liking the individual Harlowes more or less or not

² The reference is to Letter 1, p. 39, of Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa or the History of a Young Lady*, ed. with an introduction and notes by Angus Ross. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985). Ross’s text follows the first edition of 1747-1748 (but omits seven Letters). This Penguin *Clarissa* has continuous pagination, the “Introduction” running from pp. 15-29 and the novel from pp. [33] to 1499. There is a helpful “Table of Letter Numbers in Other Editions” (p. 1512).

³ Anna lapses only when duped by Lovelace (310.993-994).

⁴ In passing we may note two things here. First, Belford instances the reformed rake who *does* make a good husband, his return to virtue amply rewarded (which is to be read in the context of Richardson’s own references to his *Pamela*, see below). Second, Lovelace’s death at the hands of his challenger Morden equally has the look of a simplistic poetic justice; moreover, the Colonel by-passes Clarissa’s injunction that no revenge should be sought against Lovelace.

at all. Clarissa would wish to qualify her friend's judgments, Anna knows. But at this early stage, who is to say which of the two judges more fairly?

This issue – how people form their opinions, at what point an opinion sets – in fact permeates Anna's first letter. "I long to have the particulars from yourself," she says to Clarissa and elaborates, implying that hearsay is unreliable and prejudicial, "I must desire you to enable me, on the authority of your own information, to do you occasional justice" (1.39, 40). In reply Clarissa asserts, "I will recite facts only," so as to counter rumours about Lovelace's courtships, of Arabella first and then of herself, "the reports raised that the younger sister has robbed the elder" (2.41). Anna, wary of haphazard and fragmentary information, asks for "the whole of your [Clarissa's] story" written "in so full a manner as may gratify those who know not so much of your affairs as I do" (1.40). (She means acquaintances, Richardson means his readers at large.)

"Partial" information is information (i) incomplete and/or (ii) biased. Anna's mention of gossip and testimony vaguely outlines a story whose gaps she wants Clarissa to fill. But at the same time she articulates her own less vague opinions or, who knows, prejudices. Look at what she does to James. A first slighting touch is found when she writes that she has enquired after James's health, in her emphasis, "for *your* [Clarissa's] sake" (1.39). James next comes off rather badly in the accounts of the duel and its aftermath, before Anna warns Clarissa, "Your sister and brother will certainly put you out of your course" (1.40).

A partial informer, in either of the senses mentioned, is a sort of false friend, whose discourse may well be deceptive. Anna's own partisanship, if false, is not without its appeal, since to the reader she appears to speak up for one treated unfairly and to aim at eliciting the truth at first hand from the victimized individual.

Her Letter 1 is a liminal or liminary text, introducing a story that has already run through decisive stages. Made up of bits of information and of suggestions, it thus hints at both past events and possible consequences. If it is liminary, its preliminaries are the title-page of *Clarissa*, the "Preface" and the list of "The Principal Characters" (pp. [33]-38). After pointing to informative but possibly misleading statements in Anna's letter, let us (re)turn to these preliminaries. They also, as we shall see, contain statements whose implications are capable of infiltrating a reader's inchoate assumptions concerning Clarissa and her family in particular.

3.

The title-page names the heroine, “a young lady,” and states a purpose: to show “the distresses that may attend the misconduct both of parents and children, in relation to marriage.” It attributes *Clarissa* to “the Editor of *Pamela*,” a book whose message is alluded to in the “Preface” as a warning against “that dangerous but too commonly received notion, *that a reformed rake makes the best husband*.” Readers are likely to remember *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* as a story ending when the still virginal maidservant Pamela marries the squire who has been harassing her.⁵

From Richardson’s title-page we gather that *Clarissa* will be involved in problematic marriage negotiations; the “Preface” further specifies that the novel means to caution “children” not to fall for “a man of pleasure.” Evidently, then, “children” stands for girls like *Clarissa*, “young ladies of virtue and honour,” an endangered species because certain to be set upon by “gentlemen of free lives” (like Lovelace or Belford) at best perhaps offering to demonstrate that “a reformed virgin makes the best wife” (Stevenson 30).

This clash between feminine virtue and masculine licence does not, of course, affect unmarried young people only but is treated in *Clarissa* as one of the tensions inherent in the relations between the sexes. The institution of marriage contributes to codifying such relations (as a Lovelace is bound to deplore); and marriage soon comes up in the brief characterizations that make up the third of the preliminaries in *Clarissa*.⁶

The heroine’s parents, it goes without saying, are honourably married. What this has come to mean, after a quarter of a century, is that “James Harlowe, Esq., [. . .] despotic, absolute,” rules over “his wife, mistress of fine qualities,” but helplessly subjected to “her arbitrary husband.” The Harlowes are patently an example of the family as a “major site of women’s oppression” (Humm 68), for Mrs. Harlowe also submits to her son, “proud, fierce, uncontrollable and ambitious” (and destined to become an implacable persecutor of another woman, his sister *Clarissa*). (At this point Anna must be acquitted of unfairness towards James. Her view, we see, is vindicated and has in fact been anticipated by Richardson’s own preliminary sketch of the young man, surely a prejudicial opinion).

⁵ *Pamela*’s story did not end with the wedding-bells, of course, but went on in a sequel as long again, about her trials when married to an only half-reformed rake and peremptory husband.

⁶ Richardson introduced “The Principal Characters” in his “Preface” to the first instalment of *Clarissa* (December 1747).

The reader, it is clear, crosses the threshold into Richardson's spacious house of fiction with a preliminary idea of its didactic thrust. Next, the liminal Letter 1 provides hints as to how we should read the other 530-plus. It obliquely advises us to beware of false friends and to remember the likelihood of meanings more intricate than the denotation of the epistolary surface. And indeed we soon find the overt issues, especially of marriage, parental authority and filial duty, linking up with underlying basic assumptions about the concept, the structures, and the practical workings of the family.

4.

Clarissa's experience foregrounds two concerns above all. The first is the one announced by Richardson, the choice of a husband as a potential crisis in the relations between parents and daughters. To grasp this issue, we need do no more (and no less), to begin with, than read *Clarissa*, carefully and with Anna's cautions in mind.

The second large concern is that of marriage as a social reality conditioned, Clarissa learns, by material criteria rather than the moral and emotional needs of individuals. Our reading of the novel must now be connected with a store of knowledge contributed by many disciplines: by social historians and sociologists (see Habakkuk, Hill, Laslett, Porter, Stone); by Foucault, especially on sexuality; by scholars in feminist and gender studies and in 18th-century cultural and literary history (Armstrong, Brophy, Eagleton, Hunter, Keymer, McKeon, Spacks, Todd, Watt). Let us apply some of their findings to "family" as conceived of and experienced by Clarissa herself, and in the worlds she and her creator inhabit.

There are two aspects to be considered in particular: First, the family as a nuclear unit, with a definite structure and affected by the linked notions of "relative [i.e. reciprocal] duty" and affectionate ties; and second, the family as an economic organism, in a generational sequence and within a pattern of social dependences.

In either of these perspectives on the family, a partly political element is at work, the practice of either subordination or insubordination. James uncompromisingly exemplifies one mode of the latter, motivated by an egotistical will to power. By contrast, his sister Clarissa after pleasant years of "belonging" comes to stand for dissent, from a conviction that any individual both has a distinctive moral identity and must be willing to assume social responsibility.

5.

On her nineteenth birthday, a melancholy Clarissa imagines how unhappy her relations must be and then adds, "Say not that those are cruel who suffer so much for my fault: and who, for eighteen years together, rejoiced in me, and rejoiced me, by their indulgent goodness" (362. 1122). Clarissa's distress at what has been happening to her family combines with her determination to judge fairly. She characteristically thinks in terms of "fair *and* false" rather than "fair *or* false."

This is a bone of contention between her and Anna, as it was to be one between Richardson and his readers. In several letters Richardson endorsed the principle held on to by Clarissa, that a child's duty towards her or his parents remains even when they fail in theirs towards her or him. Anna thinks Clarissa unfair to herself, given the other Harlowes' intransigence. She caustically reports Uncle Anthony's vision of Lovelace, "who is to *wade* into her [Clarissa's] favour (this was his expression) through the blood of her brother" (1.40).

Clarissa clings to a belief in an ideal family united by love and a consequent acceptance of "relative" duties and mutual considerateness. But Richardson himself made a distinction between parents prudently strict and parents "quite unreasonable, [. . .] absolute Harlowes" (*Selected Letters*, 131; and cf. 139, 204). At what precise point, however, do such strict parents turn into Harlowes? Here is a question Clarissa would answer differently not just from Anna, but also from Lovelace, Belford or Morden. Her conscientious strictness conditions that sense of guilt which makes her so agonizingly sensitive to her father's curse. Hardly has she left Harlowe Place when she feels as guilty as Adam and Eve, cast out of her paradise, "my father's house" (94. 382).

Mrs. Thrale records Johnson's remark about Clarissa, "there is always something which she prefers to truth" (Sherbo 134). This would no doubt apply to her refusal to acknowledge Lovelace's appeal to her sexuality. More to our purpose, it seems that Clarissa has blinded herself to the degree of her mother's subjection no less than to the threat (in pre-Lovelacean days already) of James's and Arabella's envious egotism.

Once James has nominated Solmes as a husband for Clarissa, that threat is recurrently dramatized. At that stage, though, Clarissa chooses to see in this offence against "relative duty" above all a challenge to her father's authority. It is striking that Mr. Harlowe is not explicitly mentioned in that first letter of Anna's criticizing James. His low visibility here foreshadows

his physical absence from many of the confrontations to follow at Harlowe Place. His angry voice, however, is often heard, last when Clarissa peeps fearfully at him in the Harlowe garden just as he decrees, "Son James, to you and to Bella, and to you, brother, do I wholly commit this matter" (80.327).

6.

What looks like delegation, perhaps abdication, might be construed as the father's assent to James's virtual usurpation, a term which surely fits the accelerated process of the son's arrogation of power (as when he causes the duel with Lovelace). But James is more than a fictional bully and the black sheep of the family. Rather, he is the typical only son of a prosperous and ambitious family of the time, benefiting from the practice of "strict settlement." From the late 17th century onwards, in order to turn money invested in or supported by landed property into social and political influence, fathers were encouraged to consider their ownership of property as stewardship on behalf of their firstborn son. Yet they could remain contentedly in possession, as does Mr. Harlowe, and carry on their social and financial activities. James, heir presumptive, strikes Clarissa as overruling their father's residual authority with rebellious presumption.

At the time *Clarissa* was being composed and revised, in 1745 and 1746, Bonnie Prince Charlie landed in Scotland and invaded the north of England. To Richardson and his contemporaries, this may well have recalled memories of the earlier Jacobite uprising of 1715 and revived fears of chaos and violence such as had marked the previous century.

7.

Yet if "prerogative Harlowe" (the tag is Lovelace's), perhaps like Charles I unwisely delegating his powers, facilitates James's usurpation, he may be reacting to that most unconventional disposition which affects both of them: his own father's will favouring Clarissa. "Although everyone loved me," Clarissa tells Anna, "yet being the youngest child, father, uncles, brother, sister, all thought themselves postponed [. . .]; and my father himself could not bear that I should be made sole, as I may call it, and independent, for such the will [. . .] made me" (13.78).

The "feme sole" is an anomaly to the Harlowe males, as it was to their real-life social equals (and superiors) of the early 18th century. What makes Clarissa singularly obnoxious is that she is in a position to determine her

own value on the marriage market. We remember James's cynical view, "that a man who has sons brings up chickens for his own table [. . .] whereas daughters are chickens brought up for the tables of other men" (13.77).

Mr. Harlowe bears with the male usurper in his family, but treats "the rebel" (78.312) Clarissa as something of a female usurper. He is no doubt the more inclined to do so because his own wife has clearly dwindled into a proper "feme covert," legally powerless, her marriage portion and inheritance merged into the Harlowe estate.

With different emphases, both Clarissa and Anna voice a firm protest against the status quo in the relations between the sexes and its consequences for marriage and family life. Clarissa's is grounded in a social theory deriving from Christian values and stressing moral obligations. This view is reduced to its simplest form when she deplores the Harlowes' greed: "One great estate is already obtained at the expense of the relations to it [. . .]; and this has given the hope [. . .] of procuring others [. . .]. And yet in my opinion, the world is but one great family; originally it was so; what then is this narrow selfishness that reigns in us, but relationship remembered against relationship forgot?" (8.62). Clarissa's wording aptly expresses her personal sense of the deteriorating relations between herself and the other Harlowes.

Anna, who often strikes a political note, resents men's privileges and the inferiority afflicting women. She sees men exploiting conventionalized advantages especially in their pursuit of love, as formal courtship or otherwise, and in marriage. The substance of her discourse was heard throughout the 18th century and resonates in the syntheses of Wollstonecraft's writings.

Clarissa's Anna-like remark, "the men were the framers of the matrimonial office, and made *obedience* a part of the woman's vow" (40.182), occurs as she weighs a young woman's options. She is sure she would find it easier to obey a husband of her choice than one imposed upon her. But no more than Anna does she probe the internalized assumptions that legitimate a husband's rule and a wife's promised obedience. Vivien Jones among others has recently compiled texts spelling out such notions: woman as morally frail and sexually susceptible; the courtly and romantic view, reviving in the sentimental current of the 18th century, that idealizes woman's beauty and purity, her sensibility and sense of social proprieties; the code of her domestic responsibilities: to tone down a husband's masculine earthiness, to educate their children, to manage the servants.

Anna's arguments fuse generalizations about male arbitrariness with personal protest against her prescriptive widowed mother. Clarissa, on the

other hand, has long been a witness of, and more recently a sufferer from, the inequities practised at Harlowe Place. Hence her doubts about the viability of marriage and of a new family of her own. Moreover, apart from (perhaps) unconsciously loving Lovelace, she objects to becoming Mrs. Solmes for quite articulate reasons.

Solmes disgusts her physically, she repeats, and she conveys this, too, in her rendering of his person (as in 16.87-88). She even brings up, in her confidences to Anna, her revulsion at the thought of "the marriage intimacies [. . .] so very intimate" (145.507). Her sexual aversion to Solmes is not likely to be lessened when he attributes her reasoned refusal of his offers to a conventional show of maidenly reserve. Nor is she inclined to disbelieve hints that he will punish her, once she is his wife, for scorning his willingness to dispossess his own relatives. Solmes is definitely not the man Clarissa can promise to love and obey.⁷

8.

She believes in the sanctity of the marriage ceremony in church; a vow before God must make duties towards her father and family relative indeed, irrelevant if she is to obey her heavenly Father. There is in Clarissa a permanent acute sense of the here *and* the hereafter, suggested already in Anna's Letter 1. She knows Clarissa to be "desirous [. . .] of sliding through life to the end of it unnoted" (1.40). Clarissa mentions an illness that might mercifully have carried her off before she became innocently involved in escalating disputes (2.41; echoed, 374.1154). She will repeatedly contrast temporal and eternal consequences of actions expected of her.

And the motif of her "father's house" (within which she is alienated before she exiles herself from it) recurs in her letters as a reminder that she and her environment think differently of the reach of moral laws. She means to fulfill the commitments that arise from her religion and its social corollaries; but her family are false to them, appealing to allegedly superior authorities located in any "father's house:" parental, patriarchal, and male power, the honour of a newly-rich and ambitious "house." Yet, relentlessly persecuted at Harlowe Place, she briefly lapses into filial disobedience, agreeing to meet Lovelace in the garden. Having given her quintessentially

⁷ That her fears, her unmaidenly anticipations, are neither implausible nor unexpected, is suggested by Lovelace's hint about a nursery being planned at Solmes' and by the Harlowes' offer to delay her "cohabitation" with Solmes, should she at last accept him (76.297; 85.345).

false friend that opening, she becomes the victim of another persecution, launched by her abduction from her father's house.⁸

9.

The social world evoked in *Clarissa* is apt to pay lip service only to Christian morality and glibly to equate the concepts of honour, virtue, chastity, virginity and reputation. Clarissa's encounters with this world have been sobering and exhausting; and so in the end she makes one deliberate, self-conscious, gesture of accommodation to it, in the hope of securing her definitive retreat. A fruit of her experience of the people she has contended with, the gesture is well-considered. She counts on Lovelace's misreading her when she writes that she is about to return to "her father's house" (421.1233). His priorities are worldly, like the Harlowes', and wishful thinking will therefore cause him to read her text partially, catching at its flattering surface message while missing its allegorical real meaning.

What Clarissa is telling Lovelace is that she has acquiesced in her death. In other words, she sets down her credo: She is on her way to "her *Father's* house," assured of being one of *His* family.

⁸ At that juncture Clarissa must feel rather like the Sophia Western whom Richardson could dismiss as "a Young Creature traipsing after him [Tom Jones, her lover], a Fugitive from her Father's House" (*Selected Letters*, 127); certainly this is the view of her that is adopted by her "friends" and most of her neighbours.

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