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Samuel Richardson's Visual Rhetoric of Improvement

Erzsi Kukorelly

Samuel Richardson was deeply concerned with reader improvement, and used painterly elements in his writing to bring this about. In order to examine this claim, I read eighteenth-century literary critics and theorists Henry Home, Lord Kames's *Elements of Criticism*, and Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* to see how they understand visually descriptive language's capacity to sway readers. They agree that such language makes readers into eyewitnesses whose emotions are moved, and who can be led to change their behaviour. Richardson also believed that culture had this efficient quality; as such, it should be used to promote the cause of virtue and morality. He used visual description in a way that concurs with the theory laid out by Kames and Blair. However, his approach to using visuality in order to improve his readers changed over his career. As he became more proficient, and as he extended his practice as a novelist, he demanded more from his readers. If in his first printed text, *The Apprentice's Vade Mecum* (1734), visual description is used to improve readers in a straightforward but rather uncouth manner, in *Clarissa* (1748) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753) readers' hermeneutic abilities are taxed to the limit. Nevertheless, if we read with the proficiency and attention that Richardson expects from us, we can see that he positions readers so as to maximise the potential that the texts offer for improvement.

Samuel Richardson was deeply concerned with improvement, and he hoped that culture, especially the novel, would engineer the betterment Richardson bore witness to his conviction that culture had an effect on people's lives, and thus should have a strongly didactic function.¹ The

¹ See *Vade Mecum* and *A Collection*.

methods that Richardson adopted in his struggle to make his readers docile vessels for the middle-class morality that he wished to inculcate were various. Some were pointed out to readers by Richardson and his acolytes in prefatory paratexts: for example, in the letters that precede *Pamela*, our attention is drawn to the persuasive effectiveness of the natural and intimate epistolary prose (4-8). Other tactics have been identified in retrospect by scholars, such as the paratextual straightjacket of footnotes that Richardson added to *Clarissa* over the course of the different editions of the novel published during his lifetime (Castle 175). I would like to suggest that one of Richardson's tactics was his use of visually descriptive writing, that this painterliness is part of his rhetorical arsenal to improve readers.²

In order to investigate this claim, I have turned to Henry Home, Lord Kames's *Elements of Criticism* (1762), and Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783). Both discuss the merits of visuality in texts, and, crucially, how visuality affects and influences readers. In the first part of this essay, I will review the persuasive and phenomenological aspects of textual visuality as these eighteenth-century thinkers theorised it. Then I will discuss some sequences from Richardson's writings, as I verify how they accord with the ideas put forward by the theoreticians. Richardson's use of visual elements in his writing develops in line with his practice as a didactic writer and a writer of fiction: as he moves through his career, the lessons to be learned from the visual elements in his writing become more subtle, and demand more work from his readers.³

The first volume of Kames's treatise deals at length with the effect art has on its consumers. He sets out "to ascertain what power the fine arts have to raise emotions and passions," suggesting that "[t]he principles of the fine arts . . . open a direct avenue to the heart of man" (I 32),

² Although scholars have spent time investigating his use of visual writing, notably Lynn Shepherd, the focus has mainly been on aesthetic rather than rhetorical concerns. Shepherd devotes much of her excellent study to the congruence between developments in eighteenth-century portraiture and novelistic description in Richardson; she mainly focuses on portrait-like descriptions (of individuals, but also of groups i.e. "conversation pieces"), as well as illustration of the novels. Other studies include Murray L. Brown, Janet E. Aikins, and Alison Conway.

³ Tom Keymer makes the case that Richardson trains readers to be active and engaged readers, a practice that would enhance their "competence to understand, judge and negotiate the actual experience of living in the world" (xvii). Rather than "the blinkered dogmatist of modern caricature," we should acknowledge that Richardson knew "that his approach in the novels should be to withhold the simplicity of didactic imperatives and refuse to dictate a series of straightforward, uncontested meanings" (65-66).

and later, that a constant habit of well-regulated cultural consumption opens a "commodious avenue to the heart of a young person" (I 52). Blair, who seeks both to analyse literature (*Belles Lettres*) and to give training in persuasive language (*Rhetoric*), begins by claiming "Speech is the great instrument by which man becomes beneficial to man" (I 1). Both authors feel that people influence each other through the use of words. For Kames, this useful feature of language is God-given: "the author of our nature, attentive to our wants, hath provided a passage to the heart, which never can be obstructed while eye-sight remains" (I 301). Under divine auspices, texts function as channels of influence, and keeping this channel open depends on operations of the visual sense.

Both men focus our attention on language that uses visual elements to provoke a visual perception on the part of the reader. It is, writes Kames, the work of narrative to paint objects "so accurately as to form in the mind of the reader distinct and lively images." Indeed, "[t]he force of language consists in raising complete images; which have the effect to transport the reader as by magic into the very place of the important action, and to convert him as it were into a spectator" (II 614). A good description invites the reader into the text, and makes him into an eyewitness. Blair is delighted with the visual potential of language:

What a fine vehicle it is now become for all the conceptions of the human mind; even for the most subtle and delicate workings of the imagination! . . . Not content with a simple communication of ideas and thoughts, it paints those ideas to the eye; it fixes colouring and relievo, even to the most abstract conceptions. . . . It entertains us, as with a succession of the most splendid pictures; disposes, in the most artificial manner, of the light and shade, for viewing every thing to the best advantage. (I 289)

The most advanced form of language is that which renders "abstract conceptions" as painterly forms. Blair claims that the substitutive dynamic of metaphor is a function of visuality: "Of all the figures of Speech, none comes so near to painting as Metaphor. Its peculiar effect is . . . to make intellectual ideas, in some sort, visible to the eye, by giving them colour, substance, and sensible qualities" (I 297). Blair is certain that writing can call up emotions in the reader by using visuality:

Of all the means which human ingenuity has contrived for recalling the images of real objects, and awakening, by representation, similar emotions to those which are raised by the original, none is so full and extensive as that which is executed by words and writing. (I 93)

For Kames it is a question of “raising complete images” whereas for Blair it is one of “recalling the images of real objects”: subtly different, perhaps, but both authors are certain that the power of language to produce visual perception is almost as effective as the power of the object being described, and that this process has the potential to raise emotions.

For Kames, descriptive texts have the ability, through visual evocation, to influence the emotions and passions of readers, which in turn form desires that move them to action. This process was useful for a writer like Samuel Richardson, who intended that his novels improve their readers by moving them to change their behaviour. Kames develops a theory called “the sympathetic emotion of virtue” (I 48). This results in “a spectator . . . or reader” replicating the attitude that they find in what they read: “let us figure some grand and heroic action, highly agreeable to the spectator: . . . the spectator feels in himself an unusual dignity of character, which disposeth him to great and noble action” (I 50). This is sympathy because we project ourselves into the place of the protagonist through fellow feeling with him. “[T]he strongest branch of sympathy,” according to Kames, is “that which is raised by means of sight” (I 310), and “[w]riters of genius, sensible that the eye is the best avenue to the heart, represent every thing as passing in our sight; and, from readers or hearers, transform us as it were into spectators” (II 351). Such a writer “inspires [the reader] with the same passions as if he were an eye-witness” (II 351).

The effect of textual visuality is to make of readers eyewitnesses, to transport them “as by magic” to the scene that is described (Kames II 614); once they are there, they have access to emotion and passion. But they do not only have *access* to these; rather, emotions are forced upon them; there is an irresistible automaticity in this process. In an important sense, they are, as Scott Paul Gordon suggests, “responsive rather than responsible”; they respond to the texts they read in a passive manner, rather than interpret them in acts of will (8).

Both Kames and Blair use the word “transfuse” to describe the way in which writing affects readers. Kames writes that “the splendor and enthusiasm of the hero [is] transfused into the readers” (I 177), and Blair that “language is become a vehicle by which the most delicate and refined emotions of one mind can be . . . transfused into another” (I 98). Kames devotes a whole chapter to “Emotions caused by Fiction” where he develops his ideas around the automaticity of textual visuality to engender emotional reactions (I 66 fwd). “I am imperceptibly converted into a spectator” (I 67) he writes, and

the power of language to raise emotions, depends entirely on the raising . . . [of] lively and distinct images. . . [T]he reader's passions are never sensibly moved, till he be thrown into a kind of reverie; in which state, forgetting that he is reading, he conceives every incident as passing in his presence, precisely as if he were an eye-witness. (I 69)

For Kames, passions make us act: fear and anger move us to protect ourselves (I 63), whereas pity, "warming and melting the spectator, prepares him for the reception of other tender affections" such as "love or friendship" resulting in "tenderness and concern for the object" (I 60). Visual descriptions produce emotions in readers, which in turn spur them to act.

The effect of this process of textual visuality leading to emotions and thence on to action is one of individual, but more importantly, social improvement. Social emotions, benevolence, sympathy, sensibility: all are engendered by visual description that moves the passions and results in action. This action can be individualistic, but it can also be strikingly social. When we perceive an object of beauty, its visual aspect, writes Kames, "concurr[s] in an eminent degree with mental qualifications, to produce social intercourse, mutual goodwill, and consequently mutual aid and support, which are the life of society" (I 149). By writing in such a way as to bring spectator-readers into the "ideal presence" of what happens in the text, the author makes use of

that extensive influence which language hath over the heart; an influence, which, more than any other means, strengthens the bond of society, and attracts individuals from their private system to perform acts of generosity and benevolence. (Kames I 74)

Visual descriptions, then, are central to the eighteenth-century goal of bringing about a better society through reading. Samuel Richardson was certainly a proponent of this goal. If in his early non-fiction texts (*Vade Mecum* and *Familiar Letters*) his use of visuality is quite straightforward, as he develops as a novelist his incorporation of visual elements becomes more sophisticated, and draws more and more heavily on his readers' skills. In the *Vade Mecum*, there is an exuberant description ridiculing the "modern *London-Apprentice* of the Gentleman-Class," who spend all their money and time on aping their betters:

All the Fopperies and Apish Fashions of the Men of Mode of the other End of the Town must be introduc'd into the City: And I have seen a prim young Fellow, with a *Cue* or *Adonis*, as they call the effeminate Wigs of the

present Vogue, *plaister'd* rather than *powder'd*, and appearing like *Twigs* of a *Gooseberry-Bush*, in *deep Snow*, his Shoulders also crusted or iced over with a White, as thick as a *Twelf-Cake*; with a plaited Shirt, ruffled at Hands and Bosom; a Coat, with a Cape reaching, like an *old Wife's Tippet*, half way down his Back; Stockens, milk-white; and perhaps Velvet-Breeches, with Silver Buckles at the Knee, Tassels hanging half way down his Legs; Spanish Leather Pumps, (without Heels), and the burnished peeked Toes, seeming to stare the Wearer in the Face; fine wrought Buckles, near as big as those of a *Coach-Horse*, covering his Instep and half his Feet; on his Head a diminutive Hat hardly bigger than such we have seen of *Gingerbread*, at a Country Fair, gallantly cock'd and adorn'd with a Silver Button and Loop. (32-33)

The bent towards improvement is clear, as the narrator invites the reader (who is addressed as "you") to look on aghast at the glittering accessories that accumulate on the surface of the young man's body. The reader steps onto the moral high ground, joining his gaze with that of the disapproving writer. The process of improvement is straightforward, as the vehement, overabundant description produces a visual image that none would wish to emulate.

Letters, Written to and for Particular Friends, on the most Important Occasions (1740) is situated somewhere between a letter-writing manual, a conduct book, and a collection of short stories. It includes a series of letters from a young woman to her relatives in the provinces about seeing the sights during her first London visit. At Westminster Abbey, she is exposed to the power of visual culture to change her for the better. She looks at the monuments and comments:

such was the solemn Effect the sacred Repository had upon me, that I never found an awful Reverence equal to what I felt on that Occasion. Whatever be the Intention of erecting these costly Monuments, they seem to me very capable of being made an excellent Sermon to succeeding Generations. (494)

One such sermon is:

The Body of Queen *Catherine*, Consort to *Henry* the Fifth . . . shewn us in an open Coffin; and what remains of Skin, looks like black discoloured Parchment. She is said to have been very beautiful; and surely, to view her now, is a most effectual Antidote against the Vanity rising from that dangerous Accomplishment. (495)

It is *seeing* the putrefied body of the dead Queen that is an “excellent Sermon” for the young lady, and readers of Richardson’s book partake in the improvement purveyed by precise description of “black discoloured Parchment.” Richardson’s visual rhetoric here is more sophisticated than in the *Vade Mecum*, as the reader’s gaze is aligned with that of the young lady. As a rhetorical tactic to foster reader improvement, this is more effective than the satirical denunciation of youthful behaviour by a middle-aged commentator in the *Vade Mecum*.

In *Pamela* there are many painterly moments, especially after Pamela and B are engaged to be married, and the plot slows down to the stasis of conduct literature. I choose to focus on two passages, both from the 1742 sequel, *Pamela in Her Exalted Condition*. In the last volume, B. gives his wife John Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, and the young matron reads, summarises, and comments on Locke’s advice. Mainly she agrees with him, for example, when he advises against “*too straight Clothing*” for infants (503):

How has my Heart ached, many and many a time, when I have seen poor Babies roll’d and swath’d, ten or a dozen times round; then Blanket upon Blanket, Mantle upon that; its little Neck pinn’d down to one Posture; its Head, more than it frequently needs, triple crown’d like a young Pope, with Covering upon Covering; its Legs and Arms, (as if to prevent that kindly Stretching, which we rather ought to promote, when it is in Health, and which is only aiming at Growth and Enlargement) the former bundled up, the latter pinn’d down; and how the poor Thing lies on the Nurse’s Lap, a miserable little pinion’d Captive, goggling and staring with its Eyes, the only Organs it has at Liberty, as if it were supplicating for Freedom to its fetter’d Limbs. (503)

Like Locke, Pamela disapproves of swaddling infants. By the middle years of the eighteenth century, this practice was considered archaic, and, as here, associated with arbitrary rule and tyranny.⁴ Visuality is exploited in order to incur feelings of tenderness and pity for the infant. If we turn back to Kames, we find that he suggests that readers replicate and feel with their bodies that about which they read. This sort of *avant-la-lettre* mirror-neurone theory leads him to write that “A constrained posture, uneasy to the man himself, is disagreeable to the spectator” (I

⁴ See Wolff 392-93, where he discusses Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762), and Benzaquien 38, where she discusses Buffon’s *Natural History of Man* (1749).

130).⁵ If the effect of Pamela's description is to make the reader pity the swaddled baby, this is brought about by the phenomenological effect of reading visual descriptions of constrained and uncomfortable bodies.

Towards the end of the last volume, Pamela, who has attained the status of educator of her family, her neighbourhood, her correspondents, as well as readers of the novel, describes a storytelling moment to her friend Lady G.:

Then, Madam, we all proceed hand in hand together to the Nursery, to my *Charley* and *Jemmy*: And in this happy Retirement, so much my Delight in the Absence of my best Beloved, imagine you see me seated, surrounded with the Joy and the Hope of my future Prospects, as well as my present Comforts.

Miss *Goodwin* imagine you see, on my Right Hand, sitting on a Velvet Stool, because she is eldest, and a Miss: *Billy* on my Left, in a little Cane Elbow Chair, because he is eldest, and a good Boy: My *Davers*, and my sparkling-ey'd *Pamela*, with my *Charley* between them, on little silken Cushions at my Feet, hand in hand, their pleased Eyes looking up to my more delighted ones, and my sweet-natur'd promising *Jemmy* in my Lap; the Nurses and the Cradle just behind us, and the Nursery Maids delightedly pursuing some useful Needle-work, for the dear Charmers of my Heart. – All as hush and as still, as Silence itself, as the pretty Creatures generally are, when their little watchful Eyes see my Lips beginning to open. (590)

This is a textual tableau, which was considered to be a particularly efficacious literary form in the eighteenth century, as it precipitated an "epiphany of sensibility" and "persuaded [its readers] by a narrative composition founded not on discursive reasoning, but on soliciting the imagination" (Wenger 123, 126; my translation). Blair might have identified this scene as "a vision," a figure "proper only to animated and warm Composition . . . when, in place of relating something that is past, we use the present tense, and describe it as actually passing before our eyes" (I 359). He adds:

when well executed, [it] must needs impress the reader or hearer strongly, by the force of . . . sympathy . . . [I]t requires an uncommonly warm imagination, and such a happy selection of circumstances, as shall make us think we see before our eyes the scene that is described. (359-60)

⁵ Modern neurological research validates Kames's insight. As Edmund Rolls explains, "the firing of mirror neurons in the observer of a given action provides the observer with proprioceptive *awareness* of that action, and not merely proprioceptive *information*" (354).

The description here is indeed visual. First, it focuses our attention through acts of gazing. Lady G.'s extra-textual gaze is shared by readers as she is told to "imagine [she] sees" the delightful scene. Then, we are asked to observe the gazes of the children and Pamela as the former's "pleased Eyes look[] up to [her] more delighted ones"; indeed, this is habitual when the children's "little watchful Eyes see [her] Lips beginning to Open." As we follow the gaze, we are drawn to the very font and source of improvement, Pamela's lips and the words that will issue forth. Second, its descriptions are precise and pictorial. The personages are placed in space and the objects that emplace them are described. Blair writes that the "best describers . . . set before us such features of an object as, on the first view, strike and warm the fancy: they give us ideas which a Statuary or a Painter could lay hold of, and work after them" (I 384).⁶ This is exactly what happened, as both Joseph Highmore and Hubert Gravelot copied this scene in their illustrations of the novel, the former in a series of paintings, the latter in the engravings included in the 1742 deluxe octavo edition of the novel (Shepherd 56-57; Richardson *Pamela in her Exalted Condition* 692).

The rhetorical effect here has gained sophistication, requiring more readerly skill. When Pamela asks Lady G. to picture the scene in the B nursery, readers are to do the same thing. This solves a number of problems, logical and rhetorical. First, Pamela is contained within the scene; were we to gaze *with* her, we would not be able to gaze *on* her, and the point is for us to see how domestic well-being emanates out from her. Logically, we need a point of view that is outside the scene. Second, there is the problem of self-adulation. If Pamela praises herself, she is guilty of pride and vanity and is not worthy of imitation; this would render her rhetorically useless. By couching the nursery scene as textual tableau, Richardson inserts the distancing mechanism of Lady G.'s gaze, and the onus for developing admiration for the protagonist's maternal perfection is shifted to viewers and readers, fictional and real. As we are not privy to Lady G.'s response, there is no inscribed reader, no model for reading; we are left alone to interpret and profit from the scene as best we can.

⁶ This sentiment was shared by Denis Diderot during his advocacy of bourgeois drama in *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel* (1757), when he distinguishes between a *coup de théâtre* and a *tableau*; the former is "[a]n unexpected incident that happens in the course of the action and that suddenly changes the situation of the characters," and the latter "[a]n arrangement of those characters on the stage, so natural and so true to life that, faithfully rendered by a painter, it would please me on canvas" (qtd. in Fried 95).

In order to illustrate Richardson's developing use of visuality as rhetorical tactic in *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison* I have chosen to focus on scenes of breastfeeding. This is an apt topic to explore the rhetorical effect of visual writing, given that breastfeeding was a complex ideological, political, and cultural domain in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, and contemporary readers would have recognised the novels' participation in the ongoing polemic. On one hand, there was the modern, sentimentally and affectively correct, stance (mothers should breastfeed), and on the other, the old-fashioned stance, motivated by a husband's proprietary notions about his wife's body (mothers should not breastfeed).⁷ How, then, do the painterly descriptions of breastfeeding in Richardson's two last novels position their readers to adopt the correct stance?

Whereas the passage from *Sir Charles Grandison* is complex and dynamic, the passage from *Clarissa* is a tableau, and one of the more sexual scenes in the novel. Lovelace, who has sequestered Clarissa but not yet raped her, imagines being a father:

Let me perish, Belford, if I would not forgo the brightest diadem in the world for the pleasure of seeing a twin Lovelace at each charming breast, drawing from it his first sustenance; the pious task continued for one month, and no more!

I now, methinks, behold this most charming of women in this sweet office, pressing with her fine fingers the generous flood into the purple mouths of each eager hunter by turns: her conscious eye now dropped on one, now on the other, with a sigh of maternal tenderness; and then raised up to my delighted eye, full of wishes, for the sake of the pretty varlets, and for her own sake, that I would deign to legitimate; that I would condescend to put on the nuptial fetters. (706)

The scene is mediated through Lovelace's imagination. He is not recalling a scene, but creating it. He is in a sort of reverie, in which a future of parental bliss is rendered real to him through an almost unwilling act of imaginative seeing. A few lines down, it is Clarissa's ideal, imagined,

⁷ In both William Cadogan's *An Essay upon Nursing* (1748) and James Nelson's *Essay on the Government of Children* (1753) the physician writers strenuously advocate maternal breastfeeding. In addition to these self-help books, *The Gentleman's Magazine* contained lengthy discussions of the practice in 1748 and in 1752, a sure sign that this was a matter for public debate in the mid-decades of the century. Richardson himself had already spent time discussing the topic in the sequel to *Pamela* (309-22), and in later editions of *Clarissa* a footnote to the breastfeeding scene refers us to the correct place in the earlier novel.

gaze that is described, as she looks down on their children, and then up towards Lovelace.

In the last volume of *Sir Charles Grandison*, Lady G., the eponymous hero's feisty sister, is burst in upon by her husband as she is breastfeeding. "[H]e entered my chamber; and surprised me, . . . how? Ah, Harriet! In an act that confessed the mother, the *whole* mother! – Little Harriet at my breast" (III 402). The nursery maids panic, and rather than shielding their mistress from her husband's gaze, they run around ineffectually. Charlotte too panics, is "ready to let the little Leech drop from [her] arms," and tells her husband to "begone! – begone!" (403). To her surprise, though, she finds that "Never was a man in a greater rapture." She continues:

He threw himself at my feet, clasping me and the little varlet together in his arms. Brutel said I, will you smother my Harriet – I was half ashamed of my tenderness – Dear-est, dear-est, dear-est Lady G. – Shaking his head, between every *dear* and *est*, every muscle of his face working; how you transport me! – Never, never, never, saw I so delightful a sight! Let me, let me, let me (every emphatic word repeated three times at least) behold again the dear sight. Let me see you clasp the precious gift. . . to that lovely bosom – The wretch (trembling however) pulled aside my handkerchief. I try'd to scold; but was forced to press the little thing to me, to supply the place of the hand-kerchief – Do you think, I could not have killed him? – To be sure, I was not half angry enough. I knew not what I did, you may well think – for I bowed my face on the smiling infant, who crowed to the pressure of my lip. (403)

In this scene, movement, gaze and effect are tightly choreographed. At first Lord G. drops to his knees and clasps wife and child in his arms. At this point he cannot actually see them, but their image remains in his mind's eye as a "delightful . . . sight." Instantly, though, he wishes to replace memory with reality and begs: "let me . . . behold again the dear sight. Let me see you clasp the precious gift to that lovely bosom." He becomes insistent and "pull[s] aside [his wife's] handkerchief," baring her lactating bosom to his eyes. As readers, we do not see the bosom or the baby's mouth; rather we are given their effect in the husband's enthralled and panting reaction.

In the earlier passage from *Clarissa*, the paternal gaze through which we see the breastfeeding mother is that of Lovelace, arch-villain and rapist; here it is that of very proper Lord G. As readers, we process our feelings about the scenes via our judgment of the respective paternal gazes. Lovelace's imaginative vision of Clarissa nursing their non-

existent sons is practically pornographic and, perhaps because of this, ineffectual, as Lovelace does not aver that it would bring him to legitimate the children through marrying their mother. In contrast, Lord G.'s actual sighting of the maternal breast and suckling daughter confirms his status as a man of sensibility, perfectly attuned to the abounding parental love of the newly nuclear family. Here, visuality takes its effect in both the fictional world and in the reader's imagination, as the latter is pushed to value the sight of a breastfeeding mother as a symbol for proper parenting and a happy marriage.

As Richardson progresses as a novelist, the work that readers must do in order to understand and interpret what they see, and to use the knowledge gained for self-improvement, becomes more complex. Tom Keymer discusses "the reader's role within the terms of Richardson's aim of enhancing, through the mental experience of reading, the reader's competence to understand, judge and negotiate the actual experience of living in the world" (xviii). Readers need to work to attain the didactic intention encoded in the work, presumably because the world itself is a complex and unforgiving place, which needs to be read and interpreted before social activity can safely take place. For Keymer, *Clarissa's* greatest value as an engine of improvement is that it enables readers to hone their skills in reading. The ideal reader of the novel is

a careful subordinate prepared to work his way obediently through the text, filling in its gaps and indeterminacies in response to the text's internal signals and thereby realising a set of meanings which in the last resort remains authorially governed. (72)

The breastfeeding scenes from both novels provide a case in point.

In *Clarissa*, Lovelace is the villain; readers are intended to follow neither his conduct nor his opinion. A cursory reading of the breastfeeding scene, however, shows him to hold the correct sentimental opinion. As readers, we can align our gaze with his, and revel in a scene that in many points resembles the model sentimental family: a mother, suckling babies, and a paternal onlooker. However, this is problematic. First, *Clarissa* and Lovelace are not married; theirs is an illegitimate family. Second, Lovelace transforms the scene into one of predatory desire, disturbingly located at the juncture between babies' mouths and mother's breasts. Lovelace describes "the purple mouths of [the] eager hunter[s]," recalling his own voracious sexuality rather than filial dependency viewed with parental love (706). Third, *Clarissa's* "maternal tenderness" is suspect, as it is cast as part of a strategy to get Lovelace to marry her. The situation is all wrong, and its wrongness was initiated by

the event that precipitates Lovelace's vision: the removal, in the previous scene, of Clarissa's handkerchief in order to reveal "the beauty of beauties," and his "press[ing] with [his] burning lips the charmingest breast that ever [his] ravished eyes beheld" (705). Lovelace the predator is replaced by his envisioned "eager hunter" sons. The parallel between father and sons emphasises their illegitimacy, and their very presence assumes that Clarissa and Lovelace have had sexual intercourse; as such, they are an imaged foreshadowing of the protagonist's rape. All viewers of the scene are illegitimate: Lovelace, Belford, and we readers. Clarissa's handkerchief should never have been removed since all that is revealed is practically incestuous sexual desire.

There is a different reading of the scene, though, one that sets it up as a test for Lovelace. The tableau he paints of Clarissa is an object of cultural consumption which has the potential to reform him; indeed, he suggests that he might "put on the nuptial fetters" (706). However, Lovelace fails the test: watching breastfeeding Clarissa does not make him reform, does not bring him to "deign to legitimate," because he is impervious to sentimental culture. He does not recognise the vision of himself watching Clarissa suckle his sons as the central composition or tableau from which correct familial and social existence must emanate. Readers must be clever to gain improvement from the scene, but once the work of interpretation is done, we have drawn two important and linked conclusions. Lovelace is a bad consumer of cultural production who does not understand the image he has conjured up, and, in a society that equates improvement with correct sentimental reactions, he is beyond reformation.

Quite the opposite happens in *Sir Charles Grandison*, as the scene results in the improvement of both husband and wife. Readers are provided with dual positions in the text, wife and husband; these are then judged from a third position, three letters later, when Harriet Grandison tells us that Lord and Lady G. have improved as husband and wife. The first who improves is Lady G. She is somewhat surprised at her own reaction to her husband's behaviour: she is "half ashamed of [her] tenderness" for her daughter, then she is "not half angry enough" at him (III 403). In the end, she revels in "[her] *maternity* so kindly acknowledged, so generously accepted" by her husband (III 404). Lord G. too is improved. In the early days of their marriage, he had felt that his feisty bride did not respect him enough; however, the sight of his lactating wife has brought about a change:

I have seen that it was all owing to a vivacity, that now, in every instance of it, delights my soul. You never, never, had malice or ill-nature in what I called *your* petulance. You bore with *mine*. You smiled at me . . . O my Charlotte! Never, never, more shall it be in your *power* to make me so far forget myself, as to be angry. (III 403)

Charlotte is delighted, and exclaims “[t]he infant is the cement between us; and we will for the future be every day more worthy of that, and of each other,” a speech that draws from her husband the ultimate sign of the correct sentiment, tears: “My lord hurried from me in speechless rapture; his handkerchief at his eyes” (404). Readers, whether men or women, must align their gaze consecutively with the husband, stimulated by the sight of his nursing wife to recognise her inherent goodness and lack of malice, and with the wife, who becomes more tender and less angry at the sight of her enraptured husband. The child is “the cement” that holds husband, wife and child together in companionate sensibility, fixing the tableau for reader inspection.

A few letters later Harriet validates their happiness and good conduct. Harriet’s opinion is highly valued in the novel, and provides readers with an unambiguous judgment: “they are both so much improved as husband and wife!” (III 412). Indeed, Charlotte is “one of the most obliging of wives, tenderest of mothers, and amiable of nurses” and “[m]y lord appears, even in her company, now that his wife has given him his due consequence, a manly, sensible man” (III 412). The couple have mutually improved each other by engaging in negotiation and compromise, and by recognising correct behaviour in each other. The moment at which the marriage moves from potentially disastrous to effectively perfect is the breastfeeding scene, where readers see mutual improvement gravitating around the sight of the nursing wife. The visibility that Richardson puts into play at this point, the effects of seeing and correctly reading a scene of family life, are central in purveying the correct message to readers: the ground zero of a good marriage is the lactating bosom, viewed by a sentimental but manly husband.

The reader’s role in engineering his or her improvement in these two breastfeeding sequences is complex. In the case of *Clarissa*, the reader must learn to read the scene backwards: it does not so much propose to improve readers by having them adopt the correct, sentimental opinion on breastfeeding; rather it seeks to improve them by producing Lovelace as a conduct conundrum. If we read his vision of breastfeeding Clarissa at face value, we will misjudge his behaviour as adhering to the tenets of newly valued masculinity, permitting the mother to nurse her children, and looking on with satisfaction. However, such a reading is

hasty and superficial. Once we place the scene more precisely in its context, once we make the link between Lovelace's predatory behaviour and his sons', and once we examine the implications of legitimacy and legitimising in the scene, we are led to see the scene as it should be understood, as a test for Lovelace, one that he fails.

In *Sir Charles Grandison*, the case for readerly activism is equally sophisticated. As we read the scene, we must be nimble readers, successively adopting feminine and masculine viewpoints in order to understand the dialectical way in which correct behaviour is produced. The scene enacts feminine behaviour, masculine reaction to it, then masculine behaviour, and feminine reaction, and so on, at each stage showing incremental but real improvement in the conduct of the principals. If we have read correctly, our interpretation is validated by Harriet's subsequent authoritative praise for the G. couple. Delaying validation of the couple's behaviour gives us time to develop our own interpretation of the scene and to hone our reading skills; however, as the novel moves towards closure, the text makes sure that we have learned our lesson.

Samuel Richardson, as I stated at the outset, was preoccupied with improving his readers, and visual descriptions not only permitted him to give them didactic lessons, but also to set them exercises in reading. The promotion of active reading, which demanded that readers piece together useful and virtuous interpretations of the novel in order to become better in their private and social existences, jars somewhat with the contention that textual visibility provokes automatic responses from readers.⁸ However, it is surely possible to break down the reading process into a succession of events: first, the visual descriptions transform readers into eyewitnesses, transporting them "as by magic" to the scene described (Kames II 614). At this point, emotions and passions are automatically stimulated, and action follows. Between emotions and actions, though, readers will be drawn into interpretation and activism. There is no "magic" in acquiring didactic lessons from complex novels, only in setting the (passive) passions in motion. One canny reader of Richardson, Denis Diderot, remarks on this process in his *Eloge de Richardson* (1762), as he describes both automatism and passionate response, and reflection and interpretation. Although he draws attention to the painterly aspects of Richardson's writing, stating that "the passions he paints are such that I experience them in myself," he begins his

⁸ These positions are those held, respectively, by Keymer and Gordon, though Gordon locates the automaticity of response not so much in the visual qualities of Richardson's writing, as in its pathos and sentiment (185).

remarks with the statement that a “man of sense, who reads his work with reflection recreates most of the maxims of the moralists.”⁹ Passion, on the way to improved conduct, needs the input of careful, thoughtful, active reading.

⁹ “Les passions qu’il peint sont telle que je les éprouve en moi” (31), “Mais un homme d’esprit, qui lit avec réflexion les ouvrages de Richardson, refait la plupart des sentences des moralistes” (29).

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