“To such as are willing to understand” :
Considering Fielding’s Community of Imagined Readers
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I have somewhere read an Observation, I believe it is in La Bruyero, to this Effect,
That many Persons have endeavoured to teach Men to write; but none have taught them to read; as if Reading consisted only in distinguishing the Letters and Words from each other.
-- Preface to the History of the Countess of Dellwyn

Sarah Fielding’s works have been called bookish, episodic, didactic, rhetorical, and experimental; rarely have they been called unified. But when her brother Henry wrote a preface disclaiming authorship of her first novel David Simple (1744), 2 “unity” is precisely what he saw in the novel:

Of this latter kind is the Book now before us, where the Fable consists of a Series of separate Adventures detached from, and independent on [sic] each other, yet all tending to one great End; so that those who should object want of Unity of Action here, may, if they please, or if they dare, fly back with their Objection, in the Face even of the Odyssey itself. (x)

Here, Henry proposes that David Simple has a unity of purpose, though it does not observe the classical unities.3 However potentially patronizing his praise,4 Henry apparently wished to ally Sarah’s successful first work to his own notion of the novel as a “comic epic in prose,” and while they were self-serving given his own views as to the flexibility of dramatic unity, Henry’s observations of the structure and intention of Sarah’s work is apt, and they remain so when applied to her later fiction as well.

This essay seeks to incorporate experimental and episodic fiction — that sort of fiction that seems incoherent, digressive, unplanned — into our understanding of the mid-century novel. I focus on Sarah Fielding because her ever-evolving work illustrates a variety of forms the novel could — and did — take. Across a wide body of seemingly disparate generic experiments, Fielding is in fact consistent in her purpose: to promote right reading. Scholars such as Mika Suzuki have written of Sarah Fielding’s treatment and construction of a reader, but with a solitary, uniform reader in mind. Building off such sensitive accounts of Fielding’s work,

1 Sarah Fielding, The History of the Countess of Dellwyn. London: Printed for A. Millar, [etc.] 1759. All references are to this edition. xxxiii-vi
2 A move necessary because Sarah Fielding only once had her name placed on the title page of her work – her late-life translation of Xenophon’s Memoirs of Socrates. In the case of David Simple, she is “A Lady,” and thereafter most of her work would be credited to “the author of David Simple”. In contrast, her brother Henry was adamant about placing his name on his own work – or such is the point he makes at some length in the preface to David Simple.
3 Here, of action, though the novel does not observe unity of time or place either
5 For Henry Fielding’s playful treatment of the codified “nice Unity of Time or Place which is now established to be so essential to dramatick Poetry” see Chapter 1 of Book V of Tom Jones.
I argue that she aims at a wide variety of readers, modeling and seeking a diverse community whom she addressed with growing directness across her work in the 1750s. Bound together by the experience of reading the same novel — if alike in no other way — Fielding highlights particular reading practices, some of which she endorses and others of which she decries. Fielding encourages readers who examine carefully and consider her message throughout and criticizes superficial and antagonistic readers who are blinded by their biases and focus on only one part of a larger narrative. The many different sorts of bad or misguided readers often are embodied in the text as distinct in attitude and reading method in order to attract and educate the widest possible audience. That audience in turn learns to apply elements of Fieldings’ episodic narratives to their own particular situation, guided by Fielding’s presentation of appropriate and inappropriate application.

Thus, in her fiction, Fielding creates communities of right and reformed readers who improve in their reading through interaction with one another and support each other when criticized by bad readers. Because she emphasizes the moral within the bounds of her novel rather than placing it exclusively in the happy ending of a single supremely virtuous character, Fielding can afford to enrich her fiction with characters and situations that deviate from a uniformly perfect path. These imperfect characters sometimes have the capacity to reform their behavior, and sometimes they do not, but all directly implicate the wide variety of readers Fielding wishes to reach.

In this essay, I argue that Fielding’s work in the 1750s experiments with different ways of imagining — and thus reaching — wide, heterogeneous audiences, creating senses of community even within the intimate reading experience of the book. This work began in 1749, when she illustrated models for successful reading first in her Remarks on Clarissa and then in fictional form that same year in her novel for children, The Governess. In the 1750s, Fielding experiments with ways of reaching more a diverse community of readers. In the quasi-theatrical The Cry, Fielding models her desired reading practices and creates multiple focal characters in addition to the rowdy crowd of different misreaders that make up the titular Cry. And in her penultimate novel, The History of the Countess of Dellwyn (1759), Fielding addresses and guides her readers in a sustained fashion, beginning with a gallery of reader portraits in the longest preface of her career and continuing throughout a novel that, as I shall argue, is preoccupied with right reading of all sorts. All of these works address a widening audience — young and old, male and female, inclined to all sorts of biased reading practices — while encouraging members of the audience to come together as a community with a more unified purpose. Fielding attempts to reach her audience in their many mental mindsets while bringing them into a community that shares a common way of reading — one that looks beyond particulars and biases and toward a more comprehensive, universal vision.

**Early Instruction: Fielding in the 1740s**

From its earliest publication, Fielding’s work was invested in the promotion of

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6 Fielding’s work has received increasing attention, first with dissertations and then with a steady outpouring of articles and critical attention in the mid-1990s. It can now be said, as at the start of Allen Michie’s essay on the *Familiar Letters*, that “Sarah Fielding is clearly one of the most important novelists of the eighteenth century” (83) Among many others, see Linda Bree’s biography (New York: Twayne, 1996), Sabor’s “Richardson, Henry Fielding, and Sarah Fielding” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1740-1830*, Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)
appropriate reading practices. Fielding’s first novel, *David Simple*, is about the disasters that befall a young man who is seemingly incapable of reading people and situations at face value. The titular character is naive and easily duped, and *David Simple*’s happy ending comes after the reader has been shown many sorts of human folly and cruelty. But even at novel’s end, David Simple himself cannot — or, at least, does not — learn to read properly within his own text. It would not be until the mid-1750s, in the novel’s *Volume the Last*, that David, on his deathbed, learns to read situations with clear, if agonized, eyes.7

Fielding is a comparatively unobtrusive narrator in her first novel. She barely flirts with direct reader address — a brief appeal to the generosity of her readers graces the first page, and the first chapter of Book II is subtitled, “Which is writ only with a View to instruct our Readers, that Whist is a Game very much in Fashion.” (138) — a decidedly wry sort of statement of the obvious. The bulk of Fielding’s seventeen addresses to the reader in *David Simple* follow a formula of omission — that is, leaving it up to the reader to decide or imagine as he or she likes best. Those that do not follow this pattern are still more self-effacing, wishing, as in the final line of the novel, “this Tenderness and Benevolence, which alone can give any real Pleasure” for her readers. (322)

After the success of *David Simple*, Fielding grows bolder. In her first sustained piece of literary criticism, the pamphlet *Remarks on Clarissa*, she not only provides a reading of the novel that justifies its controversial ending, she does so in a manner that provides a set of reader portraits meant to implicate the skeptical reader.8 Fielding’s combination of reported dialogue and epistolary exchange allows her to display a wide variety of misreadings of Richardson’s novel, from the cranky old man who identifies too much with Mr. Harlowe to the young women too fond of Lovelace for their own good. In essence, Fielding not only rhetorically argues against various misreadings, she puts them on display for her readers.

Nor does Fielding limit herself to broad parodies and caricatures. Instead, both of her main readers, Ballario and Miss Gibson, are convincingly fallible. Through their final dialogue, they come to new insights about their reading practices. Bellario learns to appreciate the dramatic justice, moral rightness, and artistic unity of the death of Clarissa Harlowe, while Miss Gibson is forced to reflect on her own attraction to the charismatic but diabolical Robert Lovelace even though she knows it is more appropriate and sensible to desire the safe and virtuous Mr. Hickman.

Thus, by the end of the 1740s, Fielding is poised to tackle the misreaders and misreadings that threaten to destabilize her own fiction — protecting and shaping her readers’ responses from within her fiction in new and innovative ways. This interaction with a growing community of imagined readers would become her project in the decade to come.

**Directly Didactic: Reader Portraits at the Turn of the Decade**

Fielding’s next fictional project, *The Governess* (1749), often labeled the first novel written for children, continues the project she began in *Remarks on Clarissa* of promoting careful reading. Moreover, Fielding establishes an experimental interaction with her readers, here imagined as a young but not necessarily homogeneous group. The episodic structure allows

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7 Richard Terry argues that *Volume the Last* is a revision of *David Simple* in this fashion. Along this line, see also Carolyn Woodward’s “Sarah Fielding’s Self-Destructing Utopia: The Adventures of David Simple.”

her to draw many vivid portraits of various youthful faults that create a cycle of recognition and redemption throughout the work. These portraits are part of a process that opens the novel out beyond its frame story to encourage young readers to make personal application, perhaps by imagining their own histories in the cycle of stories told, remembered, and applied.

The novel is structured around a frame narrative featuring the young students of a girls’ school under the tutelage of Mrs. Teachum, a minister’s widow. Because of its heavily episodic structure, *The Governess*’s status as a novel is often insisted upon rather than merely taken for granted. There is, arguably, little forward narrative motion — or perhaps too much. Rather than one overarching external plot, the drama of *The Governess* lies in the conversion of each girl in her turn. A student hears a story, has a change of heart, regrets her bad actions, and narrates her prior bad acts in a semi-public act of spontaneous contrition. As one such narrative ends, it spurs either another such confession or the narrating of a related story, as periodically these personal histories inspire a listener to make a connection to another sort of story. Thus the novel contains fairy-tales, plays, and other narratives suggested by one girl or another.

In *The Governess*, Fielding is upfront in her desire to provide young readers not merely with objects of exemplary emulation but of poor conduct with which they might also identify. Fielding begins this immediately in the Preface, addressing her young readers directly and using two interpolated narratives to illustrate her points. To demonstrate the dangers of thinking oneself “too wise to be taught,” Fielding uses a “Fable” about foolish birds who, instead of building fully round nests like magpies do, boast of knowing more than their teacher and therefore only half-learn to build nests. Thus, says Fielding, “this same Fate will certainly attend all … who had rather please themselves with the Vanity of fancying they are already wise, than take Pains to become so.” (47) To prevent the opposite failing — claiming to be too ignorant to learn anything — she makes reference to the emblematic image of the foolish owl who shuts his eyes to the light of the sun “to keep himself in his beloved darkness” (47).

Fielding also discourages extensive reading “for the sake of saying, you have read them” rather than processing and making use of one’s reading. In order to illustrate this, she tells a story of two daughters who keep their clothes in gigantic heaps with no sense of order. Because they cannot find clean clothes in a timely manner, they miss the chance of accompanying their mother on an outing.

Thus will those foolish Children be served, who heap into their Heads a great deal, and yet never observe what they put there, either to mend their Practice, or increase their Knowledge. Their Heads will be in as much Confusion, as were Miss Watkins’s Chests of Drawers. And when in Company they endeavor to find out something to say to the Purpose, they will be hunting in the midst of a Heap of Rubbish, whilst they expose themselves and become a Laughing-stock to their Companions (48).

This laundry-centered story is very similar to one Fielding will later use in *The Cry* to illustrate alternate ways of dealing with moral and intellectual perfection: the secretive “slut” who fears discovery of her secret errors, the careless “slattern” who is openly unkempt, and the tidy person

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9 Jill Grey refers to *The Governess* as “the first novel for children,” as does Judith Burdan. Deborah Downs-Miers does not take this label for granted, instead emphasizing what she argues historians have confirmed “obliquely” — that it is “indeed a novel” (31). The space she gives to arguing for The Governess’s status as a novel would seem to suggest that it is not taken for granted.

who is suspected by the slut of being “truly” dirty.

Each story is followed by narrative intrusion as the narrator guides the reader to a correct moral. This is continued in the novel itself, as every tale, whether personal or literary, models appropriate reading and interpretive practices, either implicitly or explicitly. Jenny Peace, the eldest of the students, guides her younger classmates into proper identification with the virtuous characters of Benefico and Mignon, but not before she anticipates and warns them of the dangers (and the likelihood) of their unwitting identification with Barbarico, which might show itself in quarrelling over their reading or in abuse of animals or others.

Indeed, the response to Jenny’s moral is a confession by Miss Sukey Jennet, who “herself had experienced the truth of that observation in the former part of her life” and who, with Jenny’s encouragement, is willing to narrate this story of her former life — or as she calls it, confession: “She answered, she would do it with all her heart; and, by having so many and great faults to confess, she hoped she should, by her true confessions, set them an example of honesty and ingenuity.” (87) While the pupils come to sympathize with virtuous characters, it is a process. One by one, the girls recognize their own errors and find, through fiction, ways to correct them. Appropriate behavior is connected to a moment of self-examination and scrutiny after applying a story’s moral to themselves. As one girl rapturously says to Jenny after recognizing her faults as being similar to those in a letter read aloud to the group, “What thanks can I give you, my dear friend, for having put me into a way of examining my heart, and reflecting on my own actions” (105).

The message of proper reading practices becomes more explicit as the novel continues. An explicit lesson in appropriate literary interpretation occurs late in the novel when the girls are gathered to hear a play read by the exemplary Jenny. After Jenny reads them the play, the governess, Mrs. Teachum, asks the students to give a précis of what they have just heard. One girl provides a synopsis of the play, and her words are also included in the novel, modeling implicitly the repetition that Mrs. Teachum then endorses explicitly: “Mrs. Teachum, addressing herself to them all, told them, that this was a method she wished they would take with whatever they read; for nothing so strongly imprinted anything on the memory as such a repetition” (153)

Mrs. Teachum asks Jenny to explain the moral of the piece, which Jenny correctly identifies as “that folly, wickedness, and misery, all three, as constantly dwell together, as wisdom, virtue, and happiness do” (154). Mrs. Teachum praises Jenny’s answer as true but expands upon Jenny’s explanation:

"Tis very true (answered Mrs. Teachum); but this moral does not arise only from the happy turn in favour of the virtuous characters in the conclusion of the play, but is strongly inculcated, as you see all along, in the peace of mind that attends the virtuous, even in the midst of oppression and distress, while the event is yet doubtful, and apparently against them; and, on the contrary, in the confusion of mind which the vicious are tormented with, even whilst they falsely imagine themselves triumphant.’ (154)

Mrs. Teachum here emphasizes a reading practice that examines diffuse elements of a work, not merely “the happy turn” at the end of a work. Mrs. Teachum follows her insight with a series of close readings of various characters in the play to emphasize the point. She particularly discusses the character of Trusty to illustrate appropriate resignation to one’s fate in the hope and conviction that good will come of “innocence and goodness”

Honesty and faithfulness shine forth in all their lustre, in the good old Trusty. We follow him throughout with anxious wishes for his success, and tears of joy for
his tenderness. And when he finds that he is likely to come at the whole truth, and to save his lord from being deceived and betrayed into unjustly ruining his noble son, you may remember that he makes this pious reflection:

All that is ours, is to be justly bent;
And Heaven in its own time will bless th' event.

'This is the natural thought that proceeds from innocence and goodness; and surely this state of mind is happiness. (155–6)

Mrs. Teachum proceeds to further emphasize this notion of patiently waiting “Heaven in its own time” by instructing her young charges in extracting a story’s moral not from its ending but from the “proof throughout”:

'I have only pointed out a few passages, to show you, that though it is the nature of comedy to end happily, and therefore the good characters must be successful in the last act; yet the moral lies deeper, and is to be deduced from a proof throughout this play, that the natural consequence of vice is misery within, even in the midst of an apparent triumph; and the natural consequence of goodness is a calm peace of mind, even in the midst of oppression and distress. (156)

Here, Mrs. Teachum notes that it is “the nature” of comedies to end happily, but she rejects the notion that it is there that interpretive power should be exclusively focused. Instead, the students are taught to look “deeper” and to seek the moral of a work of art in its entirety, examining closely all characters in their turn, however minor (like Trusty), and learn to seek out and judge the moral:

'I have endeavoured, my little dears, to show you, as clearly as I can, not only what moral is to be drawn from this play, but what is to be sought for in all others; and where that moral is not to be found, the writer will have it to answer for, that he has been guilty of one of the worst of evils; namely, that he has clothed vice in so beautiful a dress, that, instead of deterring, it will allure and draw into its snares the young and tender mind. (156)

Here, Fielding emphasizes “peace of mind” regardless of circumstance as the moral to be sought – the happy harmony that reigns in the school at the end of The Governess, after all the students have learned to apply their reading to the regulation of their own conduct. This “peace of mind” is what Fielding appreciated and defended in the death of Clarissa and what she sought to cultivate in the variety of young students who reflect and reform in The Governess. While Mrs. Teachum tells her charges that “it is the nature of comedy to end happily,” when Fielding goes on to compose her own “dramatic Fable” it would by no means be bound by the formulae of either comedy or tragedy — boundaries she can transgress by bringing a riot of audience members into the space of the work itself.

**Dramatizing the Readers: The Cry**

Fielding’s next published work, *The Cry* (1754), can be understood as a work not only about and for a community of readers, but also created in community — or, at least, by a closely-knit duo of complimentary writers. *The Cry* was written in collaboration with her friend Jane Collier, who the year prior had seen into print the only other piece she would live to produce, *An Essay on the Art of Ingeniously Tormenting* (1753). Like her friend, Collier had a talent for
satire, and unlike her friend, she began her career with that satiric edge blindingly apparent. The essay, which billed itself as a guidebook for how to crush friends and humiliate people, played its satire with a straight face, assuming its readers wished to make their family, friends, and servants’ lives miserable. When the two writers joined forces to compose *The Cry*, the shared tendency to goad readers into recognition of their failings as humans and as readers was further honed. Though their individual contributions to the piece are unclear, from their prior work one is inclined to think that Fielding made it subtle and Collier made it sting. The duo’s “Dramatic Fable” would be the most generically experimental piece of their careers — a statement that admittedly means more for the longer-lived Fielding than for Collier, who died two years later.

In *The Cry*, Fielding and Collier create a performance space with the help of their readers, who are not merely encouraged to imagine whatever space they will (which would be more like the Fielding of *David Simple*), but are guided through an envisioning process that resembles nothing so much as a sort of *composito loci*: “On the wings of Fancy, gentle readers, bear yourselves into the mid air, where by imagination you may form a large stupendous castle. Within is a magnificent and spacious hall; in which behold a large assembly….” (19) As with Fielding’s earlier work, reading practice and literary criticism are a vital part of *The Cry*. Taken in all its multifaceted, multivocal ferocity, the anti-chorus of the *Cry* is a portrait of nearly every kind of hostile, malicious, gossiping misreader. The *Cry* refuses to make proper application to themselves and willfully misunderstands Portia’s attempts to clarify for their instruction and her defense — and both misreadings are skewered. As in Fielding’s *Remarks on Clarissa*, this savage set of misreader portraits is not the only one made available to the reader. While the *Cry* is extreme, the other speakers of *The Cry* — save the Spensarian embodiment of truth, Una — are also convincingly fallible. In particular, the later speaker Cylinda, whom J. Paul Hunter has called “the most interesting… and arguably the most sympathetic” character of *The Cry*, provides a self-portrait of a philosophical Quixote, whose learning in a variety of classical thinkers leads her astray until her Christian conversion. Cylinda is first mentioned as the seductress who led the heroine Portia’s father astray, but by the end of the fable, she stands

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11 Some have attempted to place Sarah Fielding within a satiric tradition, but these attempts must necessarily be only partially illuminating given Fielding’s selective use and complicated attitude towards satire. Sara Gadeken argues that Sarah Fielding combines a “masculine” satiric tradition with the sentimental discourse that, while Gadeken does not identify it as “feminine,” does seem to be suggested as such by the binary nature of her argument.

12 *The Cry* is generally assumed to be primarily the work of Sarah Fielding, in some form of collaboration with her friend Jane Collier (and possibly with input from others). For more on the problematic nature of attribution of *The Cry*, see Carolyn Woodward’s “Who Wrote *The Cry*: A Fable for Our Times” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* Vol. 9.1 (1996), 91-7 and her more recent follow-up, “Jane Collier, Sarah Fielding, and the Motif of Tormenting,” *Age of Johnson* Vol. 16 (2005), 259-73.


14 Timothy Dykstal’s essay provides a useful discussion of the ways in which Fielding (a classical scholar) and Collier exploited and diverged from classical techniques in *The Cry*.


beside Portia as Una embraces both women, a curtain drop cutting off the trio from the howls of the Cry and the reader’s gaze in a scene of final judgment. Where *The Cry* marks a departure for Fielding (though not for Collier) is the extent of its direct address to the reader, who might usefully be imagined as standing between the howls of the Cry and the calm reason of Una and Portia. Collier’s *Art of Ingeniously Tormenting* makes extensive use of the second person to implicate its readers. Collier and Fielding together address their readers in a similar fashion, both directly in their preface and throughout the work. From the first page, the reader is not only addressed but exhorted to identify with their portrait of the candid reader:

> Our address is to the candid reader; to the morose critic we know that all address is vain; to such as are willing to understand, we will endeavour to be perspicuous; and to those who are desirous of being pleased, we shall greatly miss of our aim, if we give no entertainment. Nay, we will venture to affirm, that every reader by his own disposition, in a great measure, contributes to his own entertainment. (1)

The Readers are brought into the center of the narrative — they are literally the titular hero(ine)s of the text. While *The Art of Ingeniously Tormenting* had the endless thrum of "you," here the readers are asked to create both the rabble-clamor of the Cry and the pure voice of truth, Una. Readers are told they will get into the heads of such characters, particularly of those who clamor to criticize Portia and her ilk, in order “to shew what must be their sentiments, what the tendency of such sentiments, and how carefully they ought to be avoided” (20)

Moreover, the use of dialogue implies that speakers like Portia, Cylinda, and Una are speaking not only to one another but to the reader. The frequent use of “you,” particularly between Portia and the Cry, often seems as much directed at the reading audience as at the speaker’s opponent. Portia, like the narrators, offers to tell “you” a story or illustrate an anecdote, pleads for “you” not to mistake her meaning, and so on. Ultimately, Fielding and Collier hope that the reader they address will note their similarities to some element of the Cry, reject those similarities, and join the small but growing community on the side of Una, Portia, and Cylinda. Such allies would be willing to take a text (and people) at their word, discarding excessive cynicism while maintaining rational rigor.

While Fielding would not return to the form of the “dramatic fable” in her later works, the multiple “you”s that proliferate in *The Cry*, and the controlling hand of the narrator, were tools that Fielding would add to her existing arsenal of reader portraits and literary criticism. These techniques would prove invaluable to Fielding, particularly in her penultimate novel, *The History of the Countess of Dellwyn*.

**Non-Reader: The History of the Countess of Dellwyn**

17 While I do not wish to push this religious inflection too far, it seems appropriate to characterize the dénouement as steeped in a sense of “Last Judgment,” as noted by Ellen Gardiner’s discussion of Portia as Christ figure (“risen from the dead,” “the Word made flesh,” etc.) in her chapter on “Friendship, Equality, and Interpretation in *The Cry*” *Regulating Readers: Gender and Literary Criticism in the Eighteenth-century Novel*. (Newark: Delaware University Press, 1999).

18 This was not for lack of encouragement — Samuel Richardson, a vocal supporter of *The Cry* (and Fielding and Collier’s other projects, for that matter), proposed a sequel to *The Cry* describing the married state (*The Correspondence of Henry and Sarah Fielding*, Martin C. Battestin and Clive T. Probyn, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 135 and 136, n.11.)
Fielding’s subsequent fiction also bears the marks of the didactic, conversational framework that Fielding set up in her earlier works, though in her later fictions moments of direct reader address would constitute a smaller part of the reading experience. In Fielding’s later third-person fiction, readers are presented with authorial asides that include direct address to various sorts of readers and reading practices that one must identify with in order to recognize (and presumably correct) one’s errors. In contrast to the benevolent readership assumed by the narrative voice of David Simple, these later novels do not assume such generous reading practice. By the writing of the 1754 Volume the Last of David’s story, Fielding makes lengthy addresses to readers who seek only for novelty (I.iv) or commit other readerly sins, and she periodically divides her audience into those she writes for and those she cannot amuse:

Those, therefore, of my Readers, who have a Relish for the same kind of Conversation, will, I doubt not, make use of their own Imaginations, in drawing the Picture to the life: but to those, who mistake bon-mots, insulting Raillery, malicious Ridicule, and murderous Slander for the Attic Salt of Society, I write not. Indeed, to such I cannot write, concerning David, and his Company; as no Words are equal to the raising in such Minds, any true Image of the Pleasures of our happy Society: for to them, Cynthia’s Spriteliness (wanting the Relish of biting Jokes and tart Repartees) would appear trifling Insipidity; and the cheerful Softness of the gentle Camilla, would, by such, be termed Dullness and Want of Sensibility. (247)

Fielding still refers to judicious, sensible, or feeling readers with regularity, but also makes a point of guiding erring or “mistaken” readers to appropriate readings. These works are filled with directives to the reader toward right reading of the text under consideration. Reflection and self-examination are highlighted again and again as Fielding rejects the reading style of those who look for romans à clef everywhere; she hoped that The Cry would “avoid giving the least handle for the aspersing any living character” (I.23). Fielding continues to discourage this type of reading in her later work, critiquing those who “fail not to peruse modern Books with equal, or rather with a superior Degree of Eagerness, to find an Individual on whom to bestow a Character justly satirized” (Countess of Dellwyn xli-ii) and who are blind to the identifications they ought to draw upon themselves:

It is also very observable that these Conjecturers are very generous in bestowing on others those Characters which they can spare without any Reluctance, as they are by no means desirous of applying them to themselves; but those exemplary Pictures of human Nature, which are drawn as proper to shew forth what ought to be imitated, are very uncommonly given away (Dellwyn vi)

Indeed, Fielding’s portraits of bad readers grow to become her sharpest criticisms by decade’s end. These portraits are increasingly diverse, explicitly addressing men and women, young and

19 After The Cry, Fielding published four more works of fiction: David Simple’s third volume, entitled Volume the Last (1754), a pair of first-person narrated dialogues published as The History of Cleopatra and Octavia (1757), and two complete novels: The History of the Countess of Dellwyn (1759), and the quasi-epistolary The History of Ophelia (1761).

20 Indeed, Fielding’s later first-person fictions (Cleopatra and Octavia and Ophelia) lack the authorial voice that most successfully guides a reader’s response. And the third-person novels (Dellwyn and The History of Ophelia), Linda Bree argues, are also far more concerned with displaying the economic and social realities in a “recognizably contemporary” setting than working in the realm of fable and allegory. (123)

old. Through this corrective, Fielding forces her potential readers to identify and correct potential bad habits before they begin to read. This in turn prepares them for the continuing authorial interventions and correctives to both patterns of reading and patterns of thought throughout the novel’s body. The passages cited above, from the preface to Fielding’s *The History of the Countess of Dellwyn*, set the stage for a text that is, at its heart, concerned deeply with reflection, right reading, and the regulation of passions before they are set in stone by adult habit. It is her hope that her community of improving readers will unite and reflect on the cautionary tale centered around those who choose to read poorly—or not at all.

*The History of the Countess of Dellwyn* (1759) marks Fielding’s most sustained narrative interventions in a traditional-form (rather than experimental) novel. Techniques that Fielding experimented with in earlier fictions are pushed further in this penultimate novel. Like *Remarks on Clarissa*, *The Governess*, and *The Cry*, *Dellwyn* is filled with moments of literary criticism that describe various forms of misreading practices while modeling more appropriate ones. Adult readers and characters are often likened to children, a strategy that is indebted particularly to *The Governess*. The self-effacing direct address that marked Fielding’s early novel *David Simple* and the address to Richardson in the *Remarks on Clarissa* has become a more authoritative voice particularly thanks to *The Cry*, where, as I have shown, Fielding becomes a stage-manager of the quasi-theatrical dialogues that occur in that experimental “dramatic Fable.”

When she returns to a more traditionally structured novel form at the end of the 1750s, Fielding is able to weave together the skills she has acquired through her previous work to confidently shape the reading experience. In a letter to Samuel Richardson, who printed the novel, Fielding notes that she “never wrote so much for two Vollumes [sic] before”—an exaggeration, but one indicative of the effort Fielding put into its composition. In the Preface, Fielding sets up a great deal of the rhetoric that she will use throughout the novel itself. As with *Remarks on Clarissa* and the preface to *The Cry*, *Dellwyn*’s preface is highly intertextual, touching upon a massive sweep of eighteenth-century canonical literature, from direct quotations from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Ben Jonson’s *Every Man out of his Humour*, and Horace to an extended discussion of Virgil’s *Aeneid* to the invocation of Plutarch’s histories, Bossu’s criticism, and more.

It begins with an introduction of the author’s work to its readers, assuming the gentlemanly responsibility of making acquaintance. Fielding’s purpose, as she makes clear from the outset, is to circumvent readers’ tendencies to jump to inappropriate conclusions through “far-fetched Deductions”. Fielding’s responsibility, as she puts it, is to know the implications of the comparisons and parallels she draws, and she parallels that with the obligations a reader has towards the texts they read:

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22 The appropriate attribution of Fielding’s final novel, *The History of Ophelia* (1760), continues to be debated in light of developments in the study of computational stylistics. Although I find the claims that the novel was composed primarily or entirely by Henry Fielding to be shaky, there is nevertheless a striking difference between Fielding’s final novel and her prior work, and for that reason I end this essay with *Dellwyn*. The central essays in the debate as to the novel’s attribution have been published in *Script & Print*: see John Burrows, “Sarah and Henry Fielding and the Authorship of *The History of Ophelia*: A Computational Analysis” [S&P 30.2: 69–92], Anthony J. Hassall, “Sarah and Henry Fielding and the Authorship of *The History of Ophelia*: Literary Considerations” [S&P 30.2: 93–100], Joseph Rudman, "Sarah and Henry Fielding and the Authorship of *The History of Ophelia*: A Riposte" [S&P 31.3: 157-63], and John Burrows and Anthony Hassall, "Sarah and Henry Fielding and the Authorship of *The History of Ophelia*: A Reply" [S&P 31.4: 220–29]

23 Sarah Fielding to Samuel Richardson, 14 December 1758. (Battestin and Probyn 149)
…so also it is necessary that the Reader, who delights in making Applications, should first be cautious in considering whether he hath informed himself of every Circumstance relating to the Two Pictures which he would represent as like each other, before he draws the Parallel, and remember well, that

*Man differs more from Man, than Man from Beast.* (v)

As noted earlier, Fielding saves her choicest criticisms for those who refuse to heed her warnings against such misguided parallels. As in the *Remarks* and *The Governess*, she presses her point by illustrative portraits of such readers, who come in many shapes and sizes. She castigates the “narrow-minded and illiberal Peruser of Books” who instead of making application to themselves, search texts for implied scandal and “pointed Satire” (xviii). In comparison, the sailor who reads Virgil to examine the author’s understanding of geography is less “confined and illiberal” than such seekers for scandal; their treatment of books displays …an undoubted Proof of a smaller Degree of Understanding than that which belonged to the honest Tar, added to that Failure of Candour and Benignity of Heart, which is a much greater Blemish in their Nature, than the highest Degree of mere Ignorance and Want of Taste can ever deserve to be accused of. (xix)

Fielding performs proper readings of several passages of Virgil, concluding, “to the judicious Reader the Moral of this Story is very conspicuous” (xxxiii). She follows this with commentary “found in the Study of an old Gentleman” that is in part a catalogue of different sorts of readers, and how reading practices reveal readers’ values and temperament:

"A curious Eye might perhaps as justly trace Mens different Dispositions, from the Delight they place in, or the Observations they make on, the various Parts of the Writings of Imagination, as in observing them in any other Situation whatever. And I never went into any Man's Library, but, by casting an Eye on those kind of Books, I could employ my Fancy with forming Conjectures on the Man's Bent of Disposition, by seeing what Characters, and what Parts of such Writings, shewed visible Marks of having been oftenest opened; and I have really found, on farther Acquaintance, that these Conjectures were built on a good Foundation."
The portraits that follow show how different readers might respond to different aspects of even a single character: the ambitious might beat quicker at Achilles’ triumphs in battle, while the filial weep at his rescue of his father, for example. Her imagined community of readers expands quickly — those who created “soiled” pages when dazzled by Dido, the active beautiful youth who delights in Ascanius, the friends who follow Nisus and Euryalus, the loving mother who sympathizes with Euryalus’s mother and laments with Andromache. Nor are these portraits limited to readers of classical epic — the portraits progress into readers of English letters, moving swiftly from readers of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and into contemporary pastorals and novels.

As in Fielding’s earlier works, these portraits of a variety of reading practices are deployed to hit a wide potential audience: the mother, the friends, the heroic young man, and the amorous young people are all types of readers who may encounter Fielding’s novel. While not all are examples of poor reading practice, they do suggest multiple ways a single text might be read — a reality Fielding anticipates. Moreover, by reminding readers that not all sympathy is positive, the prefatory reading portraits prepare readers to encounter a less-than-exemplary heroine in an unusual novel. Its heroine, the titular Countess, Lady Dellwyn, who begins the narrative as Miss Charlotte Lucum, is an innocent but imperfect young woman who marries the decrepit Lord Dellwyn against her better judgment. This bad decision leads by association to still worse ones. Devoid of domestic happiness and unable to quietly reflect without pain, Lady Dellwyn throws herself into the fashionable circles of the ton, a path that leads to adultery, divorce, and exile.

The novel opens with this disastrous marriage, and then in Chapter II flashes back to Lord Dellwyn’s youth before telling the story of how his and Miss Lucum’s marriage came about. In a childhood that is reminiscent of Arabella’s in Charlotte Lennox’s *Female Quixote* (1752), Charlotte Lucum is raised in the depths of the country after her mother dies in childbirth by a father whose political ambitions have been thwarted. Both Arabella and Charlotte are the sole concerns of their fathers, who teach them to read and give them access to massive libraries. Arabella’s head is turned by the romances she reads, while Charlotte learns better than her father the lessons of the philosophical treatises to which Mr. Lucum turns when his political ambitions are spent.

Lord Dellwyn comes calling for Charlotte, and the political preferment he brings for Mr. Lucum immediately snaps him back into his old ambitious ways. But his daughter, who has never known anything other than retirement, refuses the proposed match, calling it prostitution. In a fit of pique, Mr. Lucum decides to take her to London as punishment. There, sensible Miss Lucum is initially frustrated and harried to the point of illness by the “turning Night into Day, the flying from Place to Place, to Routs, Drums, &c. &c. and the being Mistress of no One Moment of her Time” (36). Her father’s anger keeps her out and about for as much time as possible, leaving no time for quiet reflection, much less reading.

By degrees, she becomes acclimated to the social whirl and she moves from tolerating it to becoming “totally wrapped up in it” (40). At this point in her acculturation, she is introduced to her “distant relation” Lady Fanny Fashion. Lady Fanny’s love of dress is at first “Wormwood” to the younger woman, but a suite of brilliant diamonds Lady Fanny wears one night dazzles her eyes and hurts her head. Miss Lucum’s mental disturbance is likened to the depths of madness to which Macbeth, Richard III, and Othello sink, the last suggesting that Lady Fanny’s diamonds, like Desdemona’s handkerchief, will be the misinterpreted source of tragedy.
Miss Lucum’s illness is taken by her circle as a sign of romantic disappointment, that she secretly wishes to be the Countess of Dellwyn, and that Lady Fanny is her rival for the title. This misreading of the situation, coupled with the materialistic greed that is the true source of her disorder, causes Miss Lucum to retaliate, removing a significant amount of her distaste towards her elderly suitor. Her transformation, as the subsequent chapter headings call it, is as irrational and unnatural as the Ovidian transformations Fielding compares it to (62).

Miss Lucum’s mental alteration is shown in the change of her writing style, as Fielding places two responses to Lady Fanny from Miss Lucum side by side. Two brief epistolarily exchanges between the friends are included, one before Charlotte’s rivalry with Lady Fanny, and one afterwards. Charlotte’s first note in the exchange is a brief one, without much ceremony:

I am obliged to dear Lady Fanny for her kind Desire to see me, and will certainly be at Madam De ---’s this Evening. I am

Your Ladyship's sincere humble Servant,

C. Lucum . (68)

In her early notes, words work to produce meaning in a straightforward fashion. As Charlotte’s jealousy of her potential rival increases, her formality grows. The same sort of slight note is now padded with excuses and formulaic deference and stripped of real affection:

Your Ladyship's Notice does me great Honour; but a little Cold and Indisposition prevents me the Pleasure of seeing your Ladyship often in public. Your Ladyship is not ignorant how little I love going abroad when I am indisposed; but I hope your Ladyship will not impute it to any Slight; for I am, Madam,

Your Ladyship's Most obedient humble Servant,

Charlotte Lucum (70)

Not only is Miss Lucum likely hiding behind the pretense of a “little Cold,” she uses the increased bulk of language to further embellish the plain truth: that Miss Lucum is avoiding Lady Fanny. As Miss Lucum continues in her process towards becoming the sort of woman who would willingly marry an elderly husband solely for material wealth, her increasingly opaque and formal writing style is the first external sign of the change.

When Fielding returns the narrative to where it began — the marriage of Lord and Lady Dellwyn, she emphasizes the blankness of the new Countess’s gaze, dazzled by the lavish display of things that obscure the reality of what is legally occurring:

The Wedding was completed, as described in the First Chapter of this Book; and, from this visionary State of the Bride's Mind, arose that vacant Look, which indicated such a total Insensibility at the Ceremony of her Marriage: For when she answered I will, she never imagined that she had promised more than that she would thenceforward follow implicitly wheresoever Vanity should lead; and add to the Liberty of a free-born Briton, all the Privileges of an English Woman of Quality. (78)

Lady Dellwyn is very nearly brain-dead — reactionary, superficial, and unable to exercise her imagination even to the limited extent of understanding the implications of her marriage vows.

While Lady Dellwyn is not uniformly bad, the narrator intervenes constantly to highlight Lady Dellwyn’s fatal flaw: her increasing unwillingness to reflect. From the prologue on, the narrator intervenes implicitly and explicitly to expound upon right reading. Lady Dellwyn, after
her fatal marriage, finds through reading that she must condemn her own actions: “Reading was like setting a Glass before her, which represented her to herself in so many deformed Lights, that she could not bear the disagreeable View” (103). Indeed, the reading she hates most is precisely the sort that Fielding specializes in, “mostly she disliked those Authors who have penetrated deeply into the intricate Paths of Vanity in the human Mind” (102). Fielding paints a portrait of a reader stung by conscience, but

…for in them her own Folly was continually brought to her Remembrance, and presented to her View, that, like the Clown in the Play, whenever any Person was to be set down an Ass, she could not help saying, tho' perhaps only inwardly (That's I); but such an Acknowlegement was always accompanied by a very unpleasing Sensation. (102)

In her heart of hearts, Lady Dellwyn can say, “That’s I,” but the “unpleasing Sensation” that accompanies such illumination is too much for her to bear. Rather than a spur to reformation, Lady Dellwyn finds it easier to stop reading — and thus stop reasoning and feeling — rather than stop the behavior that gives her the stinging conscience. Thus, she stops reading — and, by extension, ceases even to reflect slightly on the way her life is progressing, which is the source of all her sorrows.

Lady Dellwyn is not alone in her refusal to reflect. She is surrounded by an increasing swarm of nonreaders and nonthinkers — a nightmare version of the community Fielding paints in the novel’s prologue. Lady Dellwyn’s friend Lady Fanny leads her away from books and towards the superficial glitter of diamonds and social engagements, which ultimately leads to Lady Dellwyn’s marriage. And as we know from the beginning of the novel, Lady Dellwyn’s elderly husband’s inability to understand the ridiculousness of his proposal — much less his marriage — is his chief characteristic. Wheeled into his private wedding ceremony, he is too feeble to even place the ring on his bride’s finger. The narrator interjects to comments upon this ominous sign:

On this Occasion the learned Augurs would have thought it unnecessary to consult the Entrails of Birds or Beasts. A Soothsayer less instructed than he was, who warned Cesar to "Beware the Ides of March," might have read a Prophecy in the different Countenances of the beauteous Bride, and the noble Bridegroom. The very Gold seemed endued with Sense, and as if it had learned all the Knowledge of the moral Philosopher Square, appeared to be so fully acquainted with the Fitness of Things, as with great Indignation to decline being placed on the taper Finger of the blooming Virgin, by that withered Hand, so visibly inadequate to its destined Purpose. (5-6)

Even the inanimate ring has more sense and wisdom than the groom, even the slowest soothsayer could clearly read the coming disaster — and Fielding intends that her readers be able to read this as well. However, Lord Dellwyn is oblivious to the contrast between himself and his young bride, and thus he serves as a cautionary example to those who might share his thought-processes.

Later, Lord Dellwyn “chose not to behold” the contrast between himself and the exemplary Mr. Saunders. Lady Dellwyn digs deep into her memory for a story she had “somewhere read, or heard” whose disparaging application to her husband was “too obvious to be mistaken by an Infant” (145-6). Even so slight an attempt at narrative is sufficient to rhetorically overpower her husband. Lady Dellwyn’s deployment of this anecdote is compared to forcing her husband to look directly into a mirror:
Lady Dellwyn held up a Glass before him, in which she forced him to view himself in the same Piece with Mr. Saunders; so artfully managing it, that the whole Company could behold the Two Figures at Length. Lord Dellwyn’s Eyes had been accustomed to turn all the Objects of Nature into Profiles, to look but on one Side, and on that only which his Inclination prompted him to behold; and a whole Face was to him a Kind of Prodigy. (147)

Lord Dellwyn is forced to do what Lady Dellwyn ceased long ago to do — to make application of narrative to himself. Such application is salutary for the minds of children and readers of *The Governess*, but Lord Dellwyn, like the unthinking Cry, is unable to profit from this truth-telling. He is no better equipped than his wife to profit from such a moment of naked recognition, and the result is disastrous for both. Lady Dellwyn’s ill-considered remark causes her husband to realize what was appallingly clear to everyone else from the beginning: “that he had not done a very prudent Action in marrying Miss Lucum” (149). This marks, the narrator says, the beginning of Lord Dellwyn’s hatred of his wife, which will ultimately lead to their divorce and Lady Dellwyn’s downfall.

Even in this nightmare world, there are signs that Lady Dellwyn might have chosen a better path. Miss Cummyns, Lady Dellwyn’s early friend, appears suddenly near the end of the novel and tries to convince Lady Dellwyn to “recollect herself, and view the Errors of her Conduct” (169). She does so by narrating the story of her own life, but the entrance of Lady Fanny Chlegen renders it all but impossible for Miss Cummyns to successfully touch the heart of her old friend. Lady Fanny jostles her lapdog and causes it to bark as Miss Cummyns expounds upon the joys of gratitude, forcing an end to the chapter. Miss Cummyns resumes, but as we hear at the end of her recounting of her quiet and humble life, Lady Fanny has been silently mocking Miss Cummyns: “From the Moment Miss Cummyns had uttered the Word Grace, Lady Fanny began to sneer; till at last she was so filled with the Pleasantry of her own Ideas, that she could not forbear laughing so visibly, that Miss Cummyns perceived it” (185).

In the face of such open hostility and mockery by Lady Dellwyn’s more fashionable friend, Miss Cummyns begs leave to tell a story she, like a pupil from *The Governess*, “met with in a Book of Travels” about Piedmontese people afflicted with large growths, or wens, on the sides of their faces:

> There is a Place behind a Ridge of Mountains, which separate one Part of Piedmont from the other, where all the Natives have a Wen growing on one Side of their Cheeks; and if a Stranger appears amongst them with smooth Cheeks, where there is no Swelling to be seen, the Inhabitants set up a loud Laugh at him; esteeming such a Deficiency full Cause enough to mark a human Creature as an Object of Scorn. (185-6)

The reaction of Lady Fanny to this story is indignation — her anger showing that she recognizes the parallel between her own conduct and that of the Pietmontese natives. But the sting is only temporary, as she immediately finds a way to rationalize her behavior and response, muttering as she sweeps out “the Words Methodist, Enthusiast, &c.” and moving on to other acquaintances, with whom she could securely mock the “ridiculous Creature she had met with that Morning” (186).

Once Lady Fanny storms out of the room, Lady Dellwyn herself “wept at the Reflexion” but not from recognition, but instead “that Miss Cummyns could thus preserve her Tranquility through such Scenes of Distress and Grief, whilst she had rendered herself so miserable” (187). She has not even heard the story that so enraged her friend Lady Fanny, nor has she properly
understood the import of Miss Cummyns’ personal narrative. This failure of comprehension is not immediately apparent, as tears would normally indicate an appropriate emotional response. Thus, Miss Cummyns is pleased at Lady Dellwyn’s emotional response, but her pleasure is short-lived. She recognizes quickly that her tears are more of vexation than true reflection, and after another week of attempts gives up her project to make Lady Dellwyn reflect and reform.

In the end, there is no hope for the Lady Dellwyn, but to Fielding, there is always hope for readers. Throughout her writing life, but particularly after her experimental and innovative pieces in the late 1740s and early 1750s, Fielding sought not only to illustrate ideals or even to promote achievable good in an imperfect world, but to provide readers diverse spaces for their own reflection and reason-based improvement. Fielding attempts to create these spaces for a wide community, addressing real readers’ often-varying demands in the hopes of leading them to a refined, shared sense of how to read and how to apply that reading to their own moral lives. Including parallel narratives, interpolated tales and personal histories, Fielding’s work contains multitudes. While diverse in their origins, Fielding’s multiple plot threads, characters, and reader portraits are, in the end, many streams leading to one great purpose: to teach men, women, and children to read sensitively, past their biases, and beyond merely “distinguishing the Letters and Words from each other”. United through method and purpose, Fielding hoped to then move her readers towards shared values. If this was ultimately not as rhetorically successful as she had hoped, it was nevertheless artistically influential, showing what the novel could do.
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