“Remarks on Richardson: Sarah Fielding and the Rational Reader”

In this essay I will argue that through a set of techniques more interested in engaging minds than hearts, Sarah Fielding guides her readers towards right reading in ways different from the larger culture of the mid-century novel, particularly from both her brother Henry and her friend Samuel Richardson, the two heavyweights of the mid-century novel.¹ Throughout her writing life, but particularly after her experimental pieces in the late 1740s and early 1750s, Sarah Fielding sought not only to illustrate ideals or even to promote achievable good in an imperfect world, but to provide readers spaces for their own reflection and reason-based improvement, neither wholly sentimental nor overwhelmingly satiric.² This rational, but not heartless, space may well be unique to Sarah Fielding in the 1740s.

Because Fielding’s work does not quite fall into either the more satiric tradition of her brother Henry or the written-to-the-moment epistolary style of her friend Samuel Richardson, her work has suffered from misunderstanding and neglect.³ When it has not, her work is often nevertheless discussed as moving between these two poles, combining

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¹ The mid-century novel beyond the traditional trinity of Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett is receiving increased attention in recent years. Nevertheless, Jerry C. Beasley’s Novels of the 1740s (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982) remains a comprehensive study of the critical decade in the novel’s development, though more engaged with the justly-praised innovations of Henry Fielding in its pages than those of his sister Sarah.

² 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. In her “Sarah Fielding and the Salic Law of Wit” (Studies in English Literature 1500-1900 42:3 (Summer 2002), 541-557.) Sara Gadeken argues that Sarah Fielding combines a “masculine” satiric tradition with the sentimental discourse that, while she does not identify it as “feminine,” does seem to be suggested as such by the binary nature of her argument.

³ There is evidence to suggest that this is, of course, changing. Until the 1980s, Fielding studies were limited to a few unpublished dissertations, when a slow trickle of articles began to be published. Since the mid-1990s, particularly after Linda Bree’s biography (New York: Twayne, 1996), Fielding’s fortunes have continued to rise.
qualities of both or leaning towards one man’s influence or the other. However, this placement of Fielding’s work is inaccurate given her experimental work – those pieces of criticism, translation, didacticism, and genre-bending that cannot simply be understood as a conflation of Richardsonian and Henry Fieldingesque novelistic practices. And while her experimental and critical works (Remarks on Clarissa, The Cry, The Lives of Cleopatra and Octavia, her translation of Xenophon) are now receiving increased attention, their potential influence on her novels – and the history of the novel as a whole – has been less examined.

To understand Fielding’s project – and thus appropriately place her into the history of the novel – requires the sorts of alternative lenses that can be provided by placing her novels alongside her other prose works. In all of her work, Fielding promotes rational, cognitive reading practices that are designed to produce personal application and behavior alteration. Through essays, fables, allegory, literary criticism – discourse more reliant on logic than sentiment – cold hearts are chastised, but more importantly, hot heads are cooled. While this is not a new form of reading, Fielding’s application of these techniques is unusual, particularly given the values of 1740s didactic fiction, with its emphasis on the cultivation of proper feeling.

Viewing Fielding’s work through a lens of rational rather than emotional goals and techniques illuminates her rhetorical sophistication in a new way. By including non-novelistic elements of fable and concentrating on eliciting a more rational set of

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4 Even those critics most invested in freeing Sarah Fielding from these influences often fall into the trap of reifying this binary. In “Sarah Fielding’s Dashing Style and Eighteenth-Century Print Culture” (English Literary History, (63:3), 1996 Fall, (1996) 633-56), Janine Barchas convincingly argues that the “minor” edits by Henry Fielding should be taken seriously as a suppression of Sarah’s style, but she cannot resist connecting Sarah’s dash-heavy style to that of Samuel Richardson, casting Henry’s distaste for dashes within that rivalry of influence. Thus, Sarah’s “dashing style” becomes, at least by implication, a sign of her alliance to Richardson rather than her unique voice.
responses from her readers, Fielding allows for multiple “ways in” to the arguments she proposes in her various prose forms without sacrificing the ability to make her arguments stick. Moreover, these techniques were used neither by her brother Henry nor her friend Samuel Richardson, complicating the traditional binary of the mid-eighteenth-century novel as a contest between the two male novelists closest to her. Male and female, elite and common, young and old, Fielding’s broad net aims to address an audience far broader than those of either of the men she is most commonly linked to.

Here I concentrate primarily on two experimental works from the middle of Sarah Fielding’s career, a time of extremely varied creative output. These works – Remarks on Clarissa and The Cry – are experimental, rhetorically deft texts that would affect her more traditional third-person narrated fiction thereafter. In these works, as in other, Fielding creates a space where her readers can and should examine their similarities with imperfect objects. Through both characters and in more particular forms, Fielding provides a number of “hooks” into her central message, all designed to hit home with more than one type of reader.

Samuel Richardson’s devotion to the epistolary form was his artistic triumph, creating richness and ambiguity that continues to be analyzed and debated. However, what is often elided over is that this triumph is also in many ways his pedagogical downfall. For example, the longevity of the “Pamela Media Event” described by William B. Warner relied on a tension between two opposing critical camps – those who held with

5 Work by Peter Sabor and others has begun this crucial process. See 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)

6 Including a novel for children (The Governess, 1749), a work of literary criticism (Remarks on Clarissa, 1749), and an experimental “dramatic fable” (The Cry, 1754 with Jane Collier).
the authorized reading of Pamela as “Virtue Rewarded” versus those who “misread” Pamela as insincere and calculating. Richardson’s attempts to circumvent such misreadings through third-person footnoting, cataloguing, epiloguing, and commentary could not suppress the alternative readings made possible by the first-person narrative form he had adopted.

Sarah Fielding, a friend of Richardson’s and an attentive reader of his work, shared his pedagogical aims but was well aware of the power and the dangers of Richardson’s chosen first-person, epistolary novel form. A rhetorically skillful novelist in her own right, Fielding harnessed rational, detached reading practices in her fiction in ways Richardson could not, as the nature of his exclusively first-person epistolary style of narration did not allow him to make definitive statements and judgments within his narratives. While both authors attempt to promote the right correct reading of their work, Fielding is able to do so from within her narrative by providing examples of misreading – readings that she encourages her audience to recognize as their own. In this fashion, potential misreaders are quickly redirected throughout the text, as they identify their reading practices in the fictional misreaders, and, through those misreaders, find ways “out” of that reading. Fielding’s fictions not only promote sympathy with proper objects, they also actively direct those readers who might be inclined to identify with less-than-exemplary characters. Readers are encouraged to see their own faults reflected in Fielding’s characters and then watch from an increasingly objective distance as those

7 In his Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684-1750 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), discussion of the warfare between “Pamelist” and “AntiPamelist” readers is extensive. See also: Thomas Keymer and Peter Sabor, ed. The Pamela Controversy: Criticisms and Adaptations of Samuel Richardson’s “Pamela,” 1740-1750 (London, Pickering and Chatto 2001).

8 Richardson did of course attempt to intervene within the space of his narrative through extratextual means such as footnoting, but by definition these techniques are set apart from the main text.
characters reform or become irredeemable.

The ambiguity and immediacy of Richardson’s multi-voiced novels makes such a narrative distance all but impossible in his work. As Elspeth Knights notes in her essay on *Clarissa’s* female readers, reactions to the sufferings of Clarissa Harlowe were far from uniform. Many of those who identified with Clarissa did not necessarily approve of Clarissa’s death. Indeed, some who identified with Clarissa because of their own experiences were not only traumatized by the rape and death of the heroine but came to question the very terms of that end, either in critique of the author, or, in many cases, the heroine herself.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu famously spoke of *Clarissa* as “a near ressemblance [sic] of my Maiden Days” but had harsh words for the heroine in the same breath, saying she “is so faulty as to deserve little Compassion”. This striking diversion from the dominant sympathetic, tear-filled mode of *Clarissa*’s reception so often described, particularly by one who so strongly identified with its subject, has caused some scholarly uneasiness. Scott Paul Gordon hypothesizes that Lady Mary’s “tendency to read all texts as *romans a clef*” might have retarded her access to sympathetic modes, as if this were a failure of imagination on her part.

In her own published *Remarks on Clarissa*, Sarah Fielding fictionalizes both sympathetic and unsympathetic reactions to Richardson’s second novel, specifically to its heroine. The piece is “Addressed to the Author” and the unnamed correspondent frames...
the *Remarks* as an extended quasi-epistolary record of a series of conversations heard by
the narrator, with interpolated letters that conclude the piece. Thus, the style might be
best described as a hybrid form, as Richardsonian epistolarity is joined to Fielding’s own
tendency toward illustrative fable and literary criticism. These pieces of criticism are not
exclusively of scenes or characters in *Clarissa* (though those abound), but also of poems,
personal anecdotes, and fables, as Fielding’s fictional readers contest various pieces of
*Clarissa*’s plot and characters and make connections between the novel and its potential
applications. In this way, the reader of the *Remarks* is presented with a variety of
potential interpretations of Richardson’s novel, countered by a sensitive and patient
“right” reader, Miss Harriote Gibson. Miss Gibson’s primary opponent in the *Remarks* is
Bellario, a misreader with near-Lovelacean appeal coupled with a desire for rationality
and impartiality:

…his known Taste and Impartiality made all those who wished Reason
instead of Prejudice might judge of the Subject before them, rejoice at his
Preference.12

Bellario’s arguments have some force to a skeptical audience, both within and outside of
the space of the fiction, until they are systematically questioned by Miss Gibson and
undermined by Richardson’s continuing narrative.

Fielding too notes the ways in which Richardson deals in various exempla, both
cautionary and ideal. As one speaker in the first dialogue argues, the private history of
*Clarissa* is more useful to the general public than ancient histories, as “every Parent,
every Child, every Sister, and every Brother, are concerned in the former, and may take

13. References are to this edition.
example by such who are in the same Situation with themselves” (7). However, as Fielding illustrates, misreaders often identify with the wrong characters: “an old Gentleman” expounds sympathetically upon Mr. Harlowe’s many pains before demanding his coach, while his daughter, “as submissive a Daughter as Mrs. Harlowe was a wife,” silently obeys (11). These misapplications cannot be avoided within the space of Richardson’s novel, but Fielding’s Remarks can highlight them—the first step, ideally, toward correcting them.

However, there are other ways to misread. The novel reader can also be misled by force of sentiment. Good-natured desire for a character’s happiness, when misguided as to the larger terms of what constitutes “happiness,” has the potential to cause more damage than cynical misreading. To this end, Fielding’s Miss Gibson adds another layer to her argument by retelling Matthew Prior’s “Henry and Emma; A Poem, Upon the Model of The Nut-brown Maid”—indeed, this extended passage in the Remarks is so striking that its presence is signaled on the title page: “With Some Reflections on the Character and Behaviour of PRIOR’s EMMA.” The poem is the story of a young woman, Emma, whose constancy is tested by her lover Henry, who tells her he is a murderer and fugitive who is in love with a younger woman. Henry asks Emma to follow him through the world, —“Name, Habit, Parents, Woman, left behind”—and Emma accepts (20). The original poem ends happily, as Henry’s innocence is revealed, but Miss Gibson proposes an alternate, disastrous ending: what if Henry was truly villainous, and Emma ended her life in infamy? Miss Gibson suggests that the alternative ending “was the natural consequence of her Actions” nor did Henry have “the least Reason to be convinced that she would not leave him for the first Man who would try to seduce her, provided the
Colour of his Complexion suited her Fancy” (21). The assembled listeners respond to this “what if” with a sense of the end justifying the means, which as our narrator reminds the reader, is decidedly problematic:

All the Company were very inclinable to yield up Emma’s cause, if Henry had indeed been a Villain and a Murderer; only great Part of them were very apt to forget one Circumstance, namely, that is was impossible for her to know, but that he was the Wretch he represented himself to be…

(21)

As Miss Gibson reminds them, one cannot judge actions based on the result or ending, as Bellario in particular is inclined to do. Before reading the final volume of Clarissa, Bellario says that the reported unhappy ending “must be a great Error, and destroy all the Pleasure a good-natur’d Reader might already have received” (24) and another lady “mutter’d out a strong Dislike, that the agreeable Mr. Lovelace should not become a Husband” (25). All of these responses were ones Richardson and the reading public would have known all too well, as Richardson was hounded by many of his correspondents to give Clarissa a “happy” ending by marrying Lovelace. These readers, while in error, are not malicious, but they are misguided, and Fielding takes great pains to demolish their arguments.

Here Fielding’s narrative flashes forward to December, and the “long expected, much wished for Conclusion” of the novel (25). The first critique – that of the marriage of Anna Howe – is debated primarily among the women, each of whom imagines marrying Lovelace or Hickman. Even Miss Gibson, the Remarks’ most pitch-perfect reader, is reproved for her mild denigration of the “dull” Hickman:
…in every Word you speak, you prove how necessary the Author’s Moral
is to be strongly inculcated; when even your serious and thoughtful Turn
of Mind will not suffer you to see through the Glare of what you call
Humour and Spirit with that clearness which would enable you to
distinguish how very seldom that Humour and Spirit is bestowed on a
Wife. … you have plainly proved, if a Lovelace and a Hickman contended
for your Favour, which would have the best Chance of succeeding (28)

Thus, even those readers who align themselves with Miss Gibson may find themselves
critiqued by Fielding. In this way, Fielding, friend and supporter of Richardson’s work
and didactic aims, guides the reader toward a right reading of Richardson’s novel, as
modeled largely by Miss Gibson and then the “converted” Bellario, who enters “so
heartily into the Design of the Author of Clarissa”. Bellario acknowledges the rightness
of Richardson’s “Management” in a final letter to Miss Gibson:

…nor am I ashamed to confess, that the Author’s Design is more noble,
and his Execution of it much happier, than I even suspected till I had seen
the whole. (34)

Bellario’s “reformed” reading occurs after he reads the conclusion of Richardson’s novel
and has learned to appreciate the author’s plan in the language of tragedy (30-1). Fielding
seems to hope that Richardson’s misreaders will see themselves in the portraits she
draws, and, like Bellario, shift their reading accordingly. Thus, for those likely to
“misread” Richardson’s Clarissa, Fielding provides a corrective. By drawing various
portraits of misreading through which readers can recognize their own bad habits, then
critiquing them, Fielding directs readers to an appreciation of Clarissa Harlowe’s (and
Clarissa’s) greatness. This sort of intervention is not possible within Richardson’s first-person novel.

This is reflective of Fielding’s didactic methods in her own prose. Unlike Richardson, whose first-person narration required unwaveringly moral heroines contrasted with monstrous foils whose lives and words must be their own justification (and are often not), Fielding’s third-person style allows room for improvement in ways unavailable to most Richardsonian characters. Even the most exemplary of her characters, such as David Simple, suffer greatly, often for precisely the reasons they are to be emulated. In Fielding’s world, virtue is sometimes rewarded and sometimes cruelly thwarted. Her sense of proper judgment cannot be sought exclusively in her endings, in the disbursement of rewards and punishments.

This complex moral vision can be seen most strikingly in Fielding’s most genre-bending work, The Cry: A New Dramatic Fable (1754). Named for the rowdy audience that criticizes and scolds the heroine, Portia, The Cry is, like the prior works, an episodic piece that weaves together literary criticism, interpolated stories, and other forms. The voices of the titular Cry both model misidentification and reflect all-too-common reading practices, while a secondary heroine, Cylinda, is the “bridge” identification that allows readers to transition from a recognition of their Cry-like misreadings to a closer sympathy with the virtuous Portia.

Published by Robert and James Dodsley as “by a Lady,” the work is usually attributed primarily, if not entirely, to Fielding. It is, of course, far more than a mere 13

13 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). I hold with this attribution, particularly as traces of both Fielding’s and Collier’s concerns can be seen in the text. For the purposes of this essay, I concentrate on Fielding’s contributions and concerns, but I am far from desiring to ignore Collier’s. For
The Cry is often called an "experimental fiction" – written in five "books" over three volumes, it calls itself a "dramatic fable" and is in a quasi-dramatic structure (it has "scenes" not "chapters," for example), though it is as much influenced by allegory, the periodical essay, the novel, epic, and classical forms. The piece is framed as a trial-like dialogue between Portia (named for Shakespeare's heroine) and two allegorical figures as she tells what we eventually discover is the story of her courtship and marriage. However, Portia is endlessly digressive, peppering her account with exemplum, Addisonian essay-anecdotes, painstaking definitions of misunderstood words and some neologisms of her own coinage – a hodgepodge that resembles the miscellany of sources in Remarks on Clarissa and Fielding's other work.

Portia is nearly forced to be digressive because she is dealing with a very hostile audience; the Cry, who quickly identify Portia as their enemy and cannot deviate from that interpretation. Like Remarks on Clarissa, The Cry is concerned with the problems of appropriate interpretation of text and talk, illustrating the real problem of misreading, though here the skeptical audience depicted in the text is far more hostile. The Cry is a chaotic anti-chorus of angry voices that mock, mishear, misinterpret, and cynically denounce Portia's high ideals, rarely allowing Portia to speak for very long before


Fielding was a very learned classical scholar and knew Greek so well her translation of Xenophon was still in use in the early twentieth century. In her own day, Fielding's classically-influenced works were highly popular.

Nor am I the first to note this connection between text and talk – G.A. Starr touches on it lightly in his essay “From Socrates to Sarah Fielding” in Passionate Encounters in a Time of Sensibility, Maximillian E. Novak and Anne Kostelanetz Mellor, ed. (Newark: Delaware University Press, 2000), and Ellen Gardiner provides a close reading of the two texts 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).
reacting. Portia is supported by Una, the voice of truth (an acknowledged Spenserian character) who can sometimes quell the Cry, but never for very long.

Unlike a classical chorus, the Cry is a collection of characters in their own right, often at war with each other, and including several named individuals who pop up from the crowd at various points. The Cry is first introduced in the Prologue, when readers are encouraged to “form a large castle” through the force of their imagination, and within that castle

… behold a large assembly, composed of all such tempers and dispositions as bear an inveterate hatred to Truth and Simplicity, and which are possess’d also with a strong desire of supporting Affectation and Fallacy:

Such is Error and her NUMEROUS TRAIN.

To this assembly, when cloathed in mortal forms, we beg leave to give the general name of THE Cry: for although their whole hearts are fill’d with discord and dissension; yet whenever they meet with a common foe, they are generally unanimous.

The Cry are indeed composed of all those characters in human nature, who, tho’ differing from each other, join in one common clamour against Truth and her adherents. By bringing all such characters together, we would wish to dive into the bottom of their hearts, to shew what must be their sentiments, what the tendency of such sentiments, and how carefully they ought to be avoided.16

As the castle is a product of the reader’s imagination, there is a subtle implication that the population within it – the Cry, Portia, Cylinda, and Una – may also be the product of the same imagination. The proper use of imagination is not only guided here, but throughout the piece, as the narrator later reminds readers that “The Cry by no means wanted imaginations, they only wanted the power of using them for their real amusement or profit” (102).

Thus, readers are consistently reminded that they are in danger of becoming part of the Cry, even as the narrative allows for readers to look "above" the Cry. To forget that the Cry is a reflection of real reading practices is perilous. As with Remarks on Clarissa, The Cry is designed to sting readers who recognize how closely the Cry’s responses can mirror their own reading practice. Like the misreaders in Remarks on Clarissa, the Cry seize on the wrong points of an argument or narrative and make inappropriate conclusions from what they hear. Like Miss Gibson, Portia enacts the role of literary critic, performing close readings of multiple Shakespeare plays, classical authors, and Addisonian fables and “familiar stories” to illustrate her points, which nevertheless the Cry persists in misunderstanding, to Portia’s frustration:

You have shewn me, O ye Cry, that besides the word to the vulgar, and the word to the wise, which may be found in all good fables, there is also a word to the malicious: for no other name can be given to such a narrow application as you have made of the merchant’s daughters. But to extract private libels from public satire hath ever been the office of malevolence and folly. (II.180)
Unlike the misreaders of *Clarissa*, however, the members of the Cry steadfastly persist in their error, and its members are deaf to rational argument.

As Portia’s narrative unfolds, she introduces the character of Melantha, Portia’s rival and the villainess of the piece. In their hatred of Portia, the Cry seize on Melantha as their heroine, and Portia does little to prevent them from doing so: as she ventriloquizes the fantasies of Melantha, she “perceived the inward pleasures dancing at their [the Cry’s] hearts, and thus went on” (I.149). Because they perceive Melantha as “like them” – i.e., they identify with Melantha – the Cry continue to champion her despite the dead end that such an alliance represents. They are, as Portia tells them, guilty of a “willful blindness” (I.166).

But the Cry should – and could – not be dismissed as a collection of bogeyman, satirical subjects readers can dismiss with impunity. Indeed, as with the *Remarks on Clarissa*, the Cry’s objections and sneers at some points illustrate common reader responses circulating about contemporary fiction or drama. The Cry is often compared to the unruly audience of a theatre’s “pit,” though Fielding’s most sustained illustration of a particular literary subject is her representation of critiques of Richardson’s final novel, *Sir Charles Grandison*, which was brought out in 1753-4.°

In Richardson’s novel, a young woman named Harriet Byron meets the titular “good man,” Sir Charles, and his family. The Grandison siblings have been luckier than their counterparts in *The Cry*, as their profligate father, Sir Thomas, died before utterly bankrupting his estate and threatening the futures of his daughters,

° Jocelyn Harris’s introduction to the Oxford University Press edition of *Sir Charles Grandison* is the most comprehensive account of the publication history of the novel. A Cambridge University Press edition of the novel is forthcoming.
Charlotte and Caroline. The Grandison siblings are uniformly virtuous and loving, and when Sir Charles returns from his time abroad, he quickly repairs and improves the family estate so that his sisters can marry advantageously. While Harriet stays with the Grandisons, she finds a close friend in Charlotte and begins to fall in love with Sir Charles, who is Richardson’s perfect virtuous gentleman.

The first volume of *The Cry* is particularly concerned with this connection to *Grandison*, as Fielding’s Portia recounts her acquaintance with a family whose fortunes echo those of the Grandisons. In the Cry, the father Nicanor has more or less succeeded in running through the entire family estate while his sons were abroad, lured into profligacy (it is suggested) by a woman named Cylinda. While the sons (the selfish Oliver and Grandison-like Ferdinand) have already received their inheritances, Nicanor’s profligacy has completely destroyed his daughter Cordelia’s chances of marrying well. When Portia meets Nicanor’s family, she immediately befriends Cordelia, and it quickly becomes apparent to the Cry that Portia is in love with the gentlemanly and virtuous Ferdinand – a claim that Portia makes no effort to conceal, and indeed repeats often:

> I have already confess’d the sincerest love for Ferdinand; to discover him therefore to be unworthy my regard, is the only point which could touch my soul with sorrow: for as my love for him had no other foundation than thinking he deserved it better than the rest of mankind; the knowing him guilty of any action that would rob me of that thought, must rob me of my love. (I.75-6)

Portia defends herself against the Cry’s imputations that she spouts “romantic nonsense” at some length, arguing that women ought not to be “persuaded” into love, nor is it proper
that women’s desire be reactionary. She boldly asserts that she loves without expectation that Ferdinand loves her in return – a bold statement in a period when conduct literature repeatedly encourages young women to repress desire until such time as they are formally courted and fiction overwhelmingly punishes the expression of untimely female desire. Moreover, Portia insists that she could be happy if Ferdinand married another, as her happiness is directly tied to Ferdinand’s.

Her defense of women’s legitimate desire of good men – and the potential for truly disinterested love – echoes Richardson’s heroine Harriet Byron. Because Harriet, like Portia, is absolutely candid in her descriptions of people and things, her family is quickly made aware of the state of Harriet’s heart, and while they fear for her, they have faith in her prudence and good sense. However, as the novel progresses and it appears more likely that Grandison will marry another woman, Harriet is increasingly besieged by well-meaning advisors who, while loving, are not that far removed from Portia’s hostile audience, as this letter from the Countess of D. illustrates:

Pure and noble as your heart is, it is misleading you, my Love; Oh, my Harriet, into what a labyrinth!—… Shall I, my child, save you from being run away with by these tyrannous over-refinements? … Let us then consider a little the bright fairy schemes, for so I must call them, which you have formed…

Unlike Portia’s continual methodical repudiation of her attackers, Harriet’s response to this argument (which is enclosed in a letter from Charlotte to her sister) is not disclosed

in the text. Harriet’s fortitude is unclear at this point, as her concerned friends and relatives write amongst themselves, and Sir Charles is far away in Italy, possibly married. While many characters (and readers) question Harriet’s “noble” sentiments, Harriet is ultimately rewarded for them – Sir Charles’s potential marriage falls through (the noble “other woman” refuses to marry him for religious reasons), he returns, marries Harriet, and they show every sign of living “happily ever after”.

Nevertheless, the Countess’s argument is so often echoed throughout the text one might suspect Richardson of deploying negative identification to guide the reader. However, the extratextual correspondence, indices, and collections of sentiments, as well as the internal evidence of the text, suggest that Richardson indeed sympathized with and endorsed the sentiments espoused by Harriet’s critics about the ephemeral nature of first loves – in the world of the novel, Richardson imagines all parties either safely dead or married within a few years’ time, regardless of their initial inclinations.20

Richardson does not seem to intend his readers to identify with those who criticize Harriet’s choices, but as mentioned earlier, the nature of his exclusively first-person epistolary style of narration doesn’t really allow him to make definitive statements one way or the other. It is possible to criticize Harriet’s continuing affection for Sir Charles, even when all hope is lost. Indeed, Richardson provides many cases parallel to Harriet’s that complicate our attitude to her constancy.

20 In his later supplementary volume *Collection of the moral and instructive sentiments, maxims, cautions, and reflexions, contained in the histories of Pamela, Clarissa, and Sir Charles Grandison* (1755), Richardson devotes swathes of his “sentiments” to highlighting the fallibility of first loves. He devotes one section to “First Loves,” which repeats continuously variations on the theme “Few First Loves are fit to be encouraged” (320). Lady G— (nee Charlotte Grandison), herself a wife of a second love, is quoted ironically at some length, critiquing the ephemeral nature of such “constant nymphs” whose constancy lasts only for a short season. Richardson connects this to another section on the “Vincibility of Love” which again emphasizes, “Few women marry their first loves” (388).
Fielding seems much more inclined than Richardson to endorse and support the notion of disinterested love and enduring friendship disconnected from a foundation of heterosexual pair-bonds. Unsurprisingly, Fielding is also far more comfortable with the idea of permanently single women. Thus, her depiction of Portia and her sentiments is far more uniformly privileged by the text. To criticize Portia or her arguments is to identify with or make party with the Cry. No doubt many readers turning from Richardson’s novel to the Richardson-authorized The Cry found themselves caught in the trap of identifying with some of the Cry’s critiques of Portia’s “overly-refined” ideals.21

In the later volumes of The Cry, Portia recounts a different sort of suffering than that of Harriet. The initially-Grandisonian Ferdinand is tarnished through the machinations of Ferdinand’s selfish older brother, who convinces her that Ferdinand has been profligate and unfaithful. However, Oliver’s plot would not have succeeded in swaying Portia had it not been combined with Ferdinand’s own misguided desire to test Portia. This was the only circumstance under which she claimed she would lose her affection for him, and she accordingly rejects him and flees to the coast. There, Portia becomes gravely ill, and Ferdinand rushes to her, revealing the deception that has occurred. To the outrage of the Cry, Portia reports that she married Ferdinand two years ago, and the final Epilogue reports that they “enjoyed a state of uninterrupted peace and prosperity” and lived to see their grandchildren. (III.303)

21 Richardson was a vocal supporter of The Cry (and Fielding and Collier’s other projects, for that matter), though he sparred with Fielding, advocating potential changes to a proposed second edition to bring the piece more into line with his own Grandisonian sentiments, making “Ferdinand as worthy of his mistress at last as he was at first… by the help of a few cancellings” (135). Richardson also 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.)
Interpolated between episodes of Portia’s narration is the story of Cylinda, whom J. Paul Hunter has called “the most interesting… and arguably the most sympathetic” character of *The Cry*. Certainly she is the liminal figure of the text, as she narrates her movement through various philosophical systems based on her classical education – from Platonism to Stoicism to skepticism to Epicureanism and, eventually, a Christian confession and conversion. But sympathy is not uniform, given the way she has been introduced into the narrative. Before she appears to tell her own story, Cylinda has been mentioned within the early part of Portia’s story as the woman who was involved with Nicanor, who frittered away his estate while in her company. At the beginning of the fourth part, the reader is asked to place Cylinda within the space of the piece, for reasons the narrator promises will become clear. As Portia realizes near the end of Cylinda’s narration, she has known Cylinda previously – Portia, it turns out, was the twelve-year-old young friend of Cylinda who was nearly “corrupted” by her friendship with Cylinda.

Cylinda is early a favorite of the Cry for her independence and self-gratification, but, unlike the Cry, she “had not obstinacy enough in my disposition to retain an error, and to stick by an absurdity that was glaring” (II.313) and is ultimately embraced by Una and Portia when she repents. Thus, Cylinda functions as a bridge between the two poles of human capacity, demonstrating a way out of bad or sloppy habits of mind, the capacity for improvement. As in *Remarks on Clarissa*, Fielding provides in Cylinda an improving character who can serve as a transitional identification for readers who have Cry-like impulses.

The end of the piece effects "the great divorce" of heaven and hell as Una embraces Portia and the repentant Cylinda, and the members of the Cry are literally shut out of Portia and Cylinda’s happiness:

But this matter was soon decided by the falling of a large curtain, which on one side left Una, Portia, and Cylinda, and on the other side the Cry: who were no sooner without a common enemy on whom to vent their spleen, than they began to wrangle, contend, and abuse each other in such a manner that it was impossible for them to remain in one collective body. They separated therefore for the present, but continue ever restless in seeking for mischief. They roam about upon the earth sometimes single (each closely embracing that favourite motto of their leader "Evil, be thou my good") and sometimes in small parties. They know each other’s voice, nor ever fail resolutely and unanimously to support affectation and fallacy, and to oppose simplicity and truth. (III.293-4)

But it is more than the Cry that are shut out of this closing scene – the reader of the text is given a comparatively scanty account of what immediately follows:

Portia and Cylinda, after many friendly instructions given them, were kindly dismissed by Una, who quitting her mortal form, ascended all bright and glorious to her native blest abodes. (III.294)

23 My choice of religiously-tinged language for the end of The Cry is bolstered by Ellen Gardiner’s discussion of Portia as Christ figure (“risen from the dead,” “the Word made flesh,” etc.) within the space of the piece. 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”
Una, the Spenserian embodiment of truth, isolates the repentant Cylinda and the exemplary Portia from the Cry – and from the reading audience. The reader’s perception of this final conversation between the three is somewhat obscured here – no details of the “friendly instructions” or the kindly dismissal are offered. Thus, complete communion with the “blessed” is denied to the reader in what Timothy Dyskal calls this “weirdly effective” book. While those who make up the Cry are the voices of the damned, their reactions reflect common reading experiences – reading experiences Fielding continued to confront throughout her writing life.

After The Cry, Fielding would publish four more pieces 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 (1759). Each of these productions bears the marks of the rhetorical framework that Fielding set up in her earlier works, though in her later fictions these moments of negative identification would constitute a smaller part of the overall fictions. This is particularly true of Fielding’s first-person fictions (Cleopatra and Octavia and Ophelia), which lack the authorial voice so often necessary to guide a reader’s response.

But in Fielding’s later third-person fictions, 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. Where the narrative voice of David Simple assumed a benevolent readership, these later novels do not assume such a generous reading practice. Fielding’s later works are filled with

24 Timothy Dykstal’s “Provoking the Ancients: Classical Learning and Imitation in Fielding and Collier” College Literature, Summer 2004; 31, 3 (2004), 102-22.
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, like Lady Mary, look for romans à clef everywhere, and which she hoped that The Cry would "avoid giving the least handle for the aspersing any living character" (I.23). Indeed, Fielding’s portraits of bad readers grow to become her sharpest criticisms. 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, maintains the author’s authority, and provides correctives to both patterns of reading and patterns of thought throughout each novel’s body.

For Fielding, there is always hope for readers. In a world she knows is full of Cry-like chaos and cruelty, she nonetheless perseveres, creating works that continue to promote and cultivate reason. Sentiment alone is not enough, and thus Fielding’s works endorse the power of the intellect to begin to remedy an unthinking – and unfeeling – world. The continued power of Sarah Fielding’s work lies not merely in the amplification of a “forgotten” or neglected voice, but in the effectiveness of that voice for active, didactic, experimental ends that do not fit into the tidy rise of the novel as we now tell it.