



# EPISTOLARY NARRATIVES AND THE 'PRIVATE SPHERE' IN THE EIGHTEENTH- CENTURY ENGLISH NOVEL

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The aim of the present paper is to investigate the ways in which some eighteenth-century English novelists simultaneously endorsed and challenged the narrative conventions of realism, by recourse to the epistolary technique and to a choice of narrators and narrative situations that conformed to the conventions of 'domestic fiction' and by resorting to irony and intertextual parody, respectively.

Keywords: verisimilitude, epistolary technique, private sphere, irony, parody.



It is widely acknowledged that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the great centuries of the realistic novel in English literature, with 'prescriptive realism' and 'verisimilitude'<sup>1</sup> as the narrative conventions that writers availed themselves of most often in the eighteenth century while denying, "whether explicitly or implicitly, the fact that they were writing novels (or 'romances')."<sup>2</sup> These narrative conventions were still powerful in the nineteenth century and they became the literary norm in the Victorian Age, the most illustrative example being that of Charles Dickens who, in writing his novels, often relied on his readers' response to previously written chapters.

As a literary convention, verisimilitude cannot neglect public opinion, which would have been a key element in the readers' acceptance of the new literary species in its early days. According to Michael Seidel, the main focus of the realistic novel in eighteenth-century England was a "a concentration on daily life in particularized settings; a sense of information and immediacy; conventions of behavior that would appear, at least to a reading audience, as part of its recognizable world."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in Elizabeth Ermath's opinion, authorial omniscience was meant to inspire belief and, in this respect, the 'author as nobody', standing above the text, was conceived, in the age of realism, as "the power to mediate what seems unrelated, [...] the power of collective/collected perception that creates realism's common horizon in time and

its rationalization of consciousness."<sup>4</sup>

However, many of the novelists of the early age of realism in England did not employ the 'author as nobody' as part of their narrative technique, but resorted instead to the ploy of letter writing, at a time when realism was yet to prove reliable and the use of the third person would have been more instrumental in ensuring the truthfulness and trustworthiness that the still reluctant readers of the time expected of a novel. Whether it was because of what Margaret Ann Doody called the 'early repudiation of the new species', stemming from its identification with the 'superficial' romance, or because some of the novelists reacted against the moralism and didacticism imposed on their creative enterprise in an age still imbued with Puritan morality, the eighteenth century was, perhaps more than the following one, an age of experimentation with novelistic narrative techniques, many of which would not, as per traditional accounts, fall within the definition of realism as a mode of representation.

Nevertheless, the norms of realism may be detected in most of the eighteenth-century English novels, but they become more problematic since, as part of their narrative enterprise, some authors challenged them, thus rendering their novels 'oppositional discourses'.<sup>6</sup> The novels subject to analysis in the present paper differ in many ways – Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) became an iconic book, Jane Austen's *Love and Freindship* (1787 to 1793) was rather obscure subsequent to its publication and

gained fame only later, in the light of feminist interpretations, while the authorship of Henry Fielding's *An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews* (1741) was deliberately withheld, to be merely guessed at on its publication and identified with precision only in the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> However, despite the differences in terms of narrative discourse and critical reception, they do share an extremely finely tuned blend of the narrative conventions of realism and a blatant, at times, challenge of the 'prescriptive realism' that was prevalent, according to Doody, in the eighteenth-century critical discourse.

The novels were written in tune with the notion of 'prescriptive realism', which "had the strongest hold in English fiction."<sup>8</sup> They are also novels that fall within the category of 'domestic fiction', a term to which Doody ascribed two meanings, one denoting "the novel of the home, of the drawing room, the women's domestic sphere" and the other pertaining to the deployment of the novel/s "in the capital or the provinces", the latter making the realistic English novel "nationally in-turned."<sup>9</sup> In tune with the notions of realism and domestic fiction, but also with the moralism incumbent in the eighteenth-century class-divided English society, Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela* (1740) advanced the idea of verisimilitude in the very title/subtitle:

"Pamela: or Virtue Rewarded. In a Series of Familiar Letters from a Beautiful Young Damsel, to her Parents. Now First Published in order to cultivate the Principles of Virtue and Religion in the Minds of the Youth of both Sexes. A Narrative which has its Foundation in Truth and Nature; and at the same time that it agreeably entertains, by a Variety of curious and affecting Incidents, is entirely divested of all those Images, which, in too many Pieces Calculated for Amusement only, tend to inflame the Minds they should instruct (1740)"<sup>10</sup>.

It was by means of this lengthy, digressive title/subtitle that the readers were assured, from the very beginning, that the text would match their horizon of expectation, by the idea, prevalent at the time, that virtuous behavior, albeit in the case of a servant maid, would not go unrewarded, and that the text would confirm, and conform to, their shared cultural assumptions. Richardson's novel was an early example of the way in which the ideology of realism in literature influenced the writing of a novel. In order to have it accepted by editors and readers alike, the writer adopted particular narrative strategies, thus adapting the narration to the expectations of the public. *Pamela* was written as the typical, in many ways, story of a young servant girl; moreover, the fact that it was a story that Samuel Richardson himself had once heard, along with the mixture and profusion of realism and sentimentality, immediately granted it the air of truthfulness expected of novels at the time.

According to Ernest Baker, "*Pamela* was exactly the sort of book that Richardson's grave and tender-hearted contemporaries were waiting for. Everybody read it, without distinction of class, everybody in polite society was prepared

to talk about it. [...] It was recommended from the pulpit. In less than six months it had gone into a fourth edition."<sup>11</sup> Richardson's novel owed its success precisely to the fact that it mirrored the mentality of the time, largely derived, according to Doody, from "previous repudiations of the emerging genre"<sup>12</sup>, as well as from its simultaneous, albeit timid, acceptance, provided it was written as a serious, instructive text, featuring stories of virtue and morality.

Part of the set of conventions of 'prescriptive realism' was the fact that the literary text had to include elements that were reflective of the conventions of the time. The readers were expected to immediately resonate with the novel, which presumably mirrored their lives or the lives of those who were above or below them in social rank, but part of the same society and subject to the same social conventions. In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur (1985) called this process 'reconfiguration' and defined it as the writer's redeploying the elements of the text according to the readers' horizon of expectations, in tune with their own social and cultural background and with their own patterns of conceiving life. Similarly, Elizabeth Ermath claimed that, in the realistic narratives of the time, a fundamental idea took shape, namely that

"the medium of creation extends from [...] the page into our actual space and time [...]. In addition, this aesthetic invitation comes inscribed with a promise that realistic convention gives us a power of generalization that will enable us to subsume or eradicate whatever is inexplicable or mysterious."<sup>13</sup>

Richardson's novel was written in anticipation of the readers' expectations. Thus, the title (*Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*) was suggestive of the happy ending and the readers of the time were assured from the start that the novel would end in marriage. Marriage was the desired outcome in a novel and the 'marriage plot' would become a recurrent narrative convention in the novelistic discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, the protagonist, Pamela, never openly criticized her master, who, in spite of his initial vile behavior, would remain the embodiment of the upper classes, whom a servant girl had to respect. And indeed, according to Ernest Baker,

"[Pamela] is obviously an epitome of the excellences dearest to the Puritan mind. She stands there to enforce a lesson, not, unfortunately, the beauty of goodness, but what through Richardson's matter-of-factness looks too much like the policy of being honest. She has her vanities and weaknesses, however, which save her from being too offensive a paragon: in truth, she is often a minx, who certainly does not fascinate the reader of a different epoch as she did the friends of Mr. B. and lovers of sensibility in 1740. But it can be said with more appropriateness of Pamela than the poet Young said of the more ambitious but less successful figure of Lovelace: "'Tis the likeness and not the morality of a character we care about." Her self-portrait



betrays an infinity of those tiny, almost imperceptible touches of nature, the quirks of temperament, the feminine foibles, that Richardson had been quietly observing all his life, which slip unconsciously from her pen when the didactic purpose has for the moment been forgotten. Pamela was the first creation of that kind in our literature, and, however much we may criticize and even dislike her, there is no challenging her perfect life-likeness.”<sup>14</sup>

In *Pamela*, the narration is based on the use of the epistolary technique. Prior to the publication of the novel, Richardson had already established a reputation as a commissioned letter writer and he used his experience to portray life-like characters who would appeal to his readers. Richardson explained his choice of style in the *Post-script* to *Clarissa*, his other famous novel, published in 1748:

“The author thinks he ought not to prescribe the taste of others; but imagined himself at liberty to follow his own. He perhaps mistrusted his talents for the narrative kind of writing. He had the good fortune to succeed in the epistolary way once before. A story in which so many persons were concerned, either principally or collaterally, and of characters and dispositions so various, carried on with tolerable connection and perspicuity, in a series of letters from different persons without the aid of digressions and episodes foreign to the principal end and design, he thought had *novelty* to be pleaded for it: and that, in the present age, he supposed would not be a slight recommendation”<sup>15</sup>

The epistolary technique is neither third-person objective, authorial/authoritative, nor traditional first-person subjective, narration. With the appropriate hindsight, contemporary readers might question the novelist’s choice of the epistolary technique in the narrative process of *Pamela* to the detriment of either the fully trustworthy realistic third-person narration or of the relatively trustworthy first-person one. Yet, by resorting to the apparently least trustworthy narrative technique, Richardson may have, in fact, chosen the most reliable narrative approach in an attempt at making his female protagonist endorse the ideology and the social conventions of the time.

In the traditional realistic novel, the third-person/omniscient narrator grants objectivity to the narration, while choosing, or at least having the freedom to choose, what to reveal and what to hide in the narrative process, thus rendering the truth of the narration objective. While being involved or non-involved, the omniscient narrator may, and usually does, manipulate the events, the characters and the audience alike. By contrast, in the realistic novels written in the first person and characterized by narrative subjectivity, the narrator will choose to reveal almost everything in his/her narrative enterprise (as Jane Eyre, the subjective, first-person narrator of the eponymous novel would do almost a century later), revealing not necessarily an objective truth, but rather a symbolic, private one. In doing so, however, the same first-

person narrator has the liberty to emphasize certain facts and to leave out less propitious ones. In this sense, much like in the third-person narration, he/she may manipulate the events and the audience, but cannot manipulate the main character (him/herself) who, by being involved, wants to prove something to the readers and must therefore be revealed in his/her most honest and sincere narrative stance.

In the first-person type of narration, the events may be, and usually are, narrated after they occurred and the audience is presumed and taken into consideration (the character/narrator often addresses the readers, as, once again, the emblematic Jane Eyre would do). In this type of narration, the narrator may have an omniscient perspective over the events and over the characters, but not over the audience which, albeit often addressed, remains unknown and outside the text. By contrast, in the epistolary novel the narrator lacks an omniscient perspective over the events in their entirety (as they are narrated while they are unfolding, in the case of *Pamela* under the form of letters to her parents and diary entries).

In the epistolary novel, the narrator also lacks an omniscient perspective over the characters (which are still developing as part of the unfolding plot) and over the audience, be it an intra-textual or an extra-textual one. While the existence of an intra-textual audience (the readers of Pamela’s letters) is taken for granted, its reactions and response to the narrated text (the letters) cannot be anticipated, whereas the extra-textual readers (the readers of the novel proper) are not even imagined, for, had they been, the letters would not have been written or they would have lacked the air of sincerity that placed the female narrator in a highly vulnerable position.

From this point of view, the epistolary type of narration ensures a higher degree of truthfulness, because the narrator lacks the omniscient perspective over the readers, a perspective that does exist in the first-person type of narration, where it engenders a narrative situation that allows the narrator to leave out or modify certain events to his/her advantage. The epistolary type of narration leaves the narrator exposed and more vulnerable in revealing the subjective truth of his/her soul. It grants the extra-textual readers an omniscient perspective over the text, over the characters and over the narrator, thus rendering the narrator more reliable and trustworthy than both the third-person narration and the first-person one.

By employing this narrative technique, Richardson must have wanted *Pamela* to be received as a believable, albeit not frequently encountered, life-situation, given the marital rewards that proper behavior bestowed on young women irrespective of social standing, but also the slight possibility of a gentleman’s marriage to his servant maid. In this respect, *Pamela* may not necessarily have been imitation of reality, but it definitely posited the possible, if less probable, ‘what if’, indirectly forcing the readers into a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ and adding a slightly ironic margin to Richardson’s intended seriousness of the narrative approach.

However, there are contemporary interpretations of

Richardson's novel that unquestioningly point to the artificiality of Pamela's character, casting doubt on the notion of verisimilitude as it was professed in the eighteenth-century narrative theory. Thus, according to Myra Jehlen, *Pamela* "represents the beginning of a new form to deal with a heroine as a novelistic construct, unlike the traditional view of a female character as defined by her vulnerability".<sup>16</sup> Thus, Pamela's "triumph" represents the symbolic "defeat of Mr. B.", with her individualism as a would-be member of the middle-class "[evolving] at the cost of his" as a proper representative of the middle-class. In this sense, Jehlen identified a contradiction, among the writers of the time, "between the art and the politics of the sentimental novel, at the point where they confronted the tradition in which they were writing and, for political reasons, they refused to perpetuate the image of the seduced and abandoned heroine, replacing it with the good girl who resists to the end."<sup>17</sup> In Richardson's case, the former narrative instance can be detected in *Clarissa*, while the latter is characteristic of *Pamela*.

Regardless of such interpretations, in writing *Pamela*, Richardson must have willingly endorsed the prescriptive realism of the eighteenth century. This stance is obvious in his choice of the epistolary technique as a means of validating a feminine narration deriving from the protagonist's physical and symbolic entrapment in the 'private sphere', in the narrator's (letter writer's) addressing a limited, yet judgmental, audience and, last but not least, in the enlargement of the same 'private sphere' in order to incorporate other narrators (readers and writers of letters as well) meant to fulfill the role of external, presumably objective, observers of the protagonist's turmoil and endeavors.

According to the above-mentioned contemporary interpretations, the first letters revealed Pamela as powerless, whereas the subsequent ones revealed her as eventually rewarded for her 'tenacious virtue' (which might, and should, be read as 'virtuous tenacity') with a husband, a household and a higher social status. By advancing a different reading of the novel, Jehlen concluded that Pamela should by no means be regarded as a victim, but as a pragmatic girl, one who was "careful, controlled, certain of her values, unwilling to be victimized"<sup>18</sup>, therefore able to emerge triumphant in the end.

It was not only in twentieth-century critical interpretations that the idea of verisimilitude in the novel was challenged. Richardson's contemporary, Henry Fielding, simply reversed the social paradigm of *Pamela* in his burlesque novel published in 1841, *An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews*. In it, the same character, called Shamela, was portrayed as a hypocritical woman, whose only aim was marriage. Published one year afterwards, in 1742, *Joseph Andrews* was also, in many ways, an intertextual approach to *Pamela*, both novels reflecting Fielding's revolt at what he considered the artificiality of Richardson's character. In the Preface to *Joseph Andrews* Fielding claimed, as an indirect reference to Richardson's *Pamela*, that it was the writers' vanity that made them create ridiculous and unbelievable characters, an allegation that was, in fact, an attack at the very ideology of

realism in the eighteenth century.

According to Wallace Martin, Fielding exposed the narrative conventions of *Pamela* through parody, whereby discrepancies would arise between the modes of presentation in the two novels. Paul Ricoeur called this type of intertextual rewriting of a realistic novel 'verisimilitude as parody and/or irony'. As both novels were written in the realistic mode, both presumably imitated real life situations and people, therefore the readers would invariably be estranged from either one of the two 'realistic' texts. Invoking Shklovsky's concept of 'defamiliarization', Wallace Martin argued that, by exposing the discrepancies between the (same) characters of two novels with the same plot, by shedding doubt on the notion of 'realistic' imitation of life, the writers who resorted to this ploy showed that the stories were "not imitations of reality"<sup>19</sup>, for, if they were compared to the real world, one of the characters (Pamela or Shamela in this particular case) would turn out to be unbelievable. Thus, as Martin suggested, by undermining the notion of 'verisimilitude', Fielding showed that the 'life-likeness' of the realistic mode of writing depended on narrative rules alone and was merely "an artificial effect", to be achieved by the writer's appropriation of a particular set of narrative conventions.<sup>20</sup>

It was precisely this set of narrative conventions that Jane Austen also challenged in her juvenilia. Written from 1787 to 1793, *Love and Freindship* was, as the subtitle (*A Novel in a Series of Letters – Deceived in Freindship and Betrayed in Love*) suggested, a parody of the false narrative conventions that had shaped women's lives since the beginning of the eighteenth century. In sharp contrast to her later novels, in which she "[undertook] the domestic subject matter congenial to the consensus of realism, with its emphasis on common time and common understandings"<sup>21</sup>, in *Love and Freindship* Austen criticized, in a more or less overt manner, the rigid morals, the flimsy occasional escapes from the social conventions of the time, but also "the overvaluation of love, the miseducation of women, the subterfuges of the marriage market, the rivalry among women for male approval, the female cult of weakness and dependency, the discrepancy between women's private sphere and public (male) history."<sup>22</sup>

Austen's *Love and Freindship* apparently veers from the fiction of the 'private sphere', written for and about women, as the two female protagonists travel with their husbands or, when their husbands are amiss, take the liberty of travelling by themselves in search of them. But, in the assumed flight from both the comfort and the confinement of the private sphere, the two protagonists embark on a journey with picaresque overtones, even if their endeavors are narrated with an air of derision and in too intimate a manner for the narrative to be taken seriously. The picaresque novel of the eighteenth century hardly portrayed respectable young girls of the upper classes or of the gentry, but focused instead on the unfortunate or on the marginalized. In allowing her female protagonists to flee the private sphere and to travel unaccompanied as far as Scotland and back, Austen challenged both the rigid social and narrative conventions of the time and the way in which





superficial young ladies/readers internalized them or reacted against them.

But it was precisely by resorting to irony that Austen played her card of challenging conventions, perhaps more blatantly than she would do in her later novels, where she actually seemed to fully endorse them. Although not written for the public at large but for her family alone, Austen's early novel is innovative inasmuch as it endorses Wallace Martin's allegation (with regard to Fielding's intertextual approach to *Pamela*) that verisimilitude in realistic novels is merely a narrative ploy. And indeed, while tackling the private sphere from a woman writer's perspective, *Love and Freindship* can be read both as a combination of Richardson's *Pamela* and Fielding's *Shamela* and as a woman writer's response to, and intertextual rewriting of, what she considered to be the superficial literature for and about women at that time.

Nevertheless, in writing *Pamela*, Richardson must have firmly believed in the trustworthiness of the epistolary technique, both in terms of revealing the essence of a character/narrator and in terms of an accurate deployment of the plot. Referring to his later novel, *Clarissa*, he emphasized the idea that letters were a more insightful way of rendering the protagonist's inner turmoil in a novel:

"Much more lively and affecting ... must be the story of those who write in the height of a *present* distress, the mind tortured by the pangs of uncertainty [...] than the dry, narrative unanimated style of a person relating difficulties and danger surmounted, can be [...] the relater perfectly at ease, and if himself unmoved by his own story, not likely greatly to affect the reader."<sup>23</sup>

The differences between Richardson's *Pamela* and Austen's *Love and Freindship* may be identified precisely in the urgency and immediacy of the narrative pace, in the lack of perspective stemming from one's writing in the urge of the moment in the former, as opposed to the elaborate, cautionary writing of letters with the hindsight of mature age, in the latter. Austen began her epistolary novel with an emphasis on the flimsiness of the four characters (the two young women who became best friends the minute they set eyes on each other and their husbands), deployed the events of the plot at an alert pace, with dramatic events succeeding one another so speedily that they eventually lost all drama and, in doing so, rendered the two female protagonists insensitive to serious life matters and oversensitive to superficial ones. In this respect, the way in which the two young female protagonists superficially internalized their experiences during their flight from home is consonant with, but also an ironic inversion of, M. M. Bakhtin's 'device of not understanding' that characterizes the protagonist/s of picaresque fiction.

In many ways, Austen's novel is resonant with the assumed superficiality of *Shamela*, but, in the final letters, it is consonant with the intended seriousness of approach of *Pamela*. Whereas in *Pamela* the epistolary style is defined by inwardness, with the protagonist craving the security (and confinement) of the

'private sphere' in the solitude of her almost diary-like letters to her parents, in *Love and Freindship* the epistolary style is defined by outwardness. The cautionary letters are written by the mature Laura and are addressed to a young woman whom she warns against the flight from the security of the same 'private sphere':

"Letter 3<sup>rd</sup>. Laura to Marianne/ As the daughter of my most intimate friend I think you entitled to that knowledge of my unhappy Story, which your mother has so often solicited me to give you..."<sup>24</sup>

*Love and Freindship* largely endorses *Pamela*'s compliance with social conventions, in the sense that young women, irrespective of social rank and class, are advised not to step out of the 'private sphere' and cautioned that, should they do so, it would be at their own expense. What Laura's letters to the young, inexperienced daughter of her friend suggest, is that stepping out of the realm of the domestic, as she and her best friend heedlessly did as inexperienced young girls, will not bring her true liberation. At the end of the eighteenth century, women's confinement to the 'private sphere' was still a stronghold of social life and one's choice of ignoring the status quo (the family inheritance, parental control and the status provided by an arranged marriage) could not, as yet, be ignored.

The novel equally posits one's acceptance and rejection of the entrapment in the conventional roles ascribed to women, as the two young protagonists, Laura and Sophia, are what the readers of the time might have called emancipated women, flimsy and superficial, heedlessly entering dramatic situations the consequences of which they do not anticipate or acknowledge. When they flee with their husbands, they symbolically flee their enclosure into the private sphere of home, but they do it on a whim, not as a result of mature consideration, ignoring the consequences of their actions altogether.

The letters are written by Laura, who retrospectively describes the events that marked her youth. They are written with an emphasis on communication, as their sender is aware of the generation gap that might prevent the young addressee from receiving the message as intended. Consequently, the narrative pace is accelerated and the air of superficiality is preserved so as to appeal to a younger generation, but what lies at the core of the letters is the idea that one should acknowledge the establishment and be aware of the fact that women cannot escape it, a theme tackled seriously in all of Austen's later novels. However, there is a certain ambiguity regarding the maturity of the narrator/letter writer for, although advanced in age, Laura has apparently remained a superficial woman. There is a certain degree of superficiality in her letters that is reflective of a youthful outlook on life, but there is also authorial derision, suggestive of a more mature view, but one subtle enough to be left to the readers of the letters to discover.

Perhaps it was not a coincidence that Mary Wollstonecraft's

*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the founding text of feminism, was published in 1792. Whether Austen was familiar with it or not, her novel was resonant with the author's allegation that women had been taught for centuries to be something other than their nature, a theory that preceded the famous 'nature vs. culture' debate of the feminist project. In spite of the air of derision that pervades the letters in Austen's novel, there is a hint at a possible, albeit limited, escape for women. What Laura emphatically advises young Marianne to do is to get a voice, to speak her mind, instead of giving in to induced notions of female frailty, and this may indeed have been the only liberty that women could indulge in at the time:

"My beloved Laura (said she to me a few hours before she died) take warning from my unhappy End & avoid the imprudent conduct which has occasioned it ... beware of fainting fits ... Though at the time they may be refreshing and Agreeable yet believe me they will in the end, if too often repeated and at improper seasons, prove destructive to your Constitution ... My fate will teach you this ... I die a martyr to the loss of Augustus ... one fatal swoon has cost me my Life ... Beware of swoons dear Laura ... A frenzy fit is not one quarter so pernicious; it is an exercise to the Body & if not too violent, is I dare say conducive to Health in its consequences – Run mad as often as you chuse; but do not faint' – [...] These were the last words she ever addressed to me ... It was her dieing Advice to her afflicted Laura, who has ever most faithfully adhered to it".<sup>25</sup>

By her extensive use of irony, Austen resorted to another way of dismantling the ideology of realism, shedding doubt on the notion of 'verisimilitude'. What the cautionary letters of her protagonist suggest is that, far from being a fictional rendering of eighteenth-century young middle-class women's lives, the letters are rather words of advice against one's entrapment in traditional roles and, more importantly, against one's attempt at escaping the symbolic 'drawing-room' and the 'private sphere' at a time when the 'public sphere' was reserved for men only.

In comparing the narrative styles of the three writers, Miriam Allott claims that "the wit and politeness which color with refinement [Fielding's] crudest scenes and thereby add to their comic effect are quite alien to the style of his great contemporary, Richardson", who "supplements by an attractive immediacy and realism what he lacks in ease and elegance".<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Allott believes that what

Fielding and Austen share are "irony, concealments and withdrawals", so that "both their methods leave us wondering whether the peculiar force of their irony does not after all depend much less on the firmness of their moral beliefs than on the vividness with which they recognize the existence of ambiguity, contradiction and anomaly."<sup>27</sup>

The epistolary style was by no means an innovation of the eighteenth century. When he analyzed autobiographical narration in ancient literature, Bakhtin discussed the relation between the 'familiar letter' and the 'drawing-room rhetoric', positing that the epistolary style emerged when "the shaping of a life into a biography – success, happiness, merit – began to lose their public and state significance and passed over to the private and personal plane [...] into the drawing-room world".<sup>28</sup> The English narratives of the eighteenth century reshaped the expanse of the initial narrative attempt. In writing in tune with 'prescriptive realism' and with the new conceptualization of the 'private sphere', the English novelists of the eighteenth century confined the epistolary narratives of the drawing-room world to the 'private sphere' alone, perhaps slightly trivializing the importance of the genre by repositioning the focus of the narrating 'I' from men to women, from the public sphere to the private one.

Nevertheless, the epistolary novel of the eighteenth century did not completely veer from the original epistolary narratives invoked by Bakhtin, in that it still emphasized "a new relationship to one's own self, to one's own particular 'I' – with no witnesses, without any concessions to the voice of a 'third person'."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, with its emphasis on the confinement to the 'private sphere' as the women's sphere alone, it did secure a special emotional connection between the readers and the protagonist, given both the degrees of solitude in the use of the first person and the unintended intimacy generated by the act of reading letters addressed to an audience which the readers are not actually part of. It is a kind of emotional sympathy that might be achieved in reading *Pamela*, the novel in which the sincerity of the protagonist is apparently unquestionable. It might also be achieved in *Love and Freindship*, were it not for the pervasive use of irony that eventually estranges the readers from the experience of reading this particular epistolary novel in the same key. Much like Fielding's *Shamela*, Austen's *Love and Freindship* can be read as an 'oppositional discourse', as a parody of the well-made epistolary novel and of the conventions of the realistic novel and as an illustration of the ever-shifting nature of the novel, a species constantly reinventing not only itself, but also the very rules that define it.

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#### Notes:

1. Margaret Ann Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 288 *et passim*.
2. Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 43.
3. Michael Seidel in Jeremy Hawthorn, *Studying the Novel* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 17.
4. Elizabeth Ermath, "Realism and the English Novel", in *Encyclopaedia of Literature and Criticism*, ed. Martin Coyle *et al.* (Detroit and New York: Gale Research Inc. Routledge, 1991), 571.
5. Doody, *The True Story of the Novel*, 262.



6. Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative*, 40 et passim.
7. Ernest A. Baker, *The History of the English Novel. Volume 4. Intellectual Realism: From Richardson to Sterne* (London: Barnes and Noble, 1936, reprinted 1976), 87.
8. Doody, *The True Story of the Novel*, 292.
9. *Ibid.*, 278.
10. Samuel Richardson in Ernest A. Baker, *The History of the English Novel. Volume 4. Intellectual Realism: From Richardson to Sterne* (London: Barnes and Noble, 1936, reprinted 1976), 30.
11. Baker, *The History of the English Novel. Volume 4. Intellectual Realism: From Richardson to Sterne*, 31.
12. Doody, *The True Story of the Novel*, 260 et passim.
13. Ermath, "Realism and the English Novel", 568.
14. Baker, *The History of the English Novel. Volume 4. Intellectual Realism: From Richardson to Sterne*, 28.
15. Richardson in Miriam Allott, *Novelists on the Novel* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 256-57.
16. Myra Jehlen, "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism", in Robin Warhol and Diane Herndl-Price (eds.), *Feminisms: An Anthology* (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 90.
17. Jehlen, "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism", 90.
18. *Ibid.*, 91.
19. Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative*, 47-48, 180.
20. *Ibid.*, 47-48.
21. Ermath, "Realism and the English Novel", 569.
22. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1985), 207.
23. Richardson in Miriam Allott, *Novelists on the Novel*, 256.
24. Jane Austen, *Love and Freindship*. In Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English*, 209.
25. Austen, *Love and Freindship*, 227.
26. Miriam Allott, *Novelists on the Novel* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 223.
27. Allott, *Novelists on the Novel*, 223.
28. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 143.
29. *Ibid.*, 145.

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