

(Absent) authenticity -
The transformation from didacticism to diversion
in the eighteenth-century novel

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The concept of authenticity plays a significant role in the early eighteenth-century idea of the relationship between reality and literature. Contrary to our modern ambivalence and uneasiness towards the authentic, the eighteenth century holds many examples of literary texts that candidly blur the borders between ‘the real’ and ‘the literary’. This is particularly conspicuous in the most popular literary genre of the century, the epistolary novel, where the letters that constitute the narratives are often presented as collections of real, authentic documents written by the correspondents themselves. Far from being a naïve or underdeveloped notion of literature, this convention of what we might call fictional authenticity should be read in relation to the overall investment in *verisimilitude* and credibility in the eighteenth-century novel. For such diverse writers as Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson, both of whom played crucial parts in the development of the novel, one of the most important aesthetic qualities of the genre was its ability to depict reality in a trustworthy way. In the literature of the period it is a short way from the belief in the capacity of fiction to describe the real, to the enactment of the fictional as something factual. Hence authenticity, and in particular the convention of presenting ‘real’ manuscripts for the reader, was a significant literary device used to strengthen the effect of credibility and genuineness

In this essay I have two main projects. First, I will introduce the use of and motivation behind authenticity as a literary device in the early eighteenth-century epistolary novel. Second, I will try to show how this literary device suddenly *disappeared* in novels from the late eighteenth century. Given the importance of verisimilitude and genuineness as basic tenets in the novel of the period, I will suggest that investigating the abrupt absence of authenticity as a literary device might point to important transformations in the history of literature. Hence a seemingly insignificant literary device will be confronted with such cultural occurrences as the emergence of literary criticism and the gendered shift in author- and readership. By tracing the question of authenticity

back to a transitional period in the history of literature, I hope to shed light on our modern ambivalence towards the concept of authenticity.

Staged editorial authenticity in the epistolary novel of sentiment

In the eighteenth century, authenticity was closely related to the convention of publishing novels anonymously. Although anonymous publication was the standardized way of issuing novels, leaving out the name of the writer from a title page or a preface may be seen as a strategic literary device: the authorial absence opens up a gap in which the writer can present the text as something other than fiction. The location of this gap is to be found in the paratext of the novels. That is in the title pages, prefaces and epilogues of the novels. A brief detour into the etymological background of this literary idiom is therefore relevant for our investigation of what I have here chosen to term the ‘authenticity device’. “Paratext” is a narratological term popularised by the French critic Gerard Genette in his book *Seuils* (1987). The French term “Seuils” equals the English word ‘threshold’, hence paratexts can be interpreted as textual entities located in the borderlines of a literary text, “a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and strategy, of an influence on the public”.¹ As the quotation makes clear, the paratext is a potentially influential site for performing specific literary strategies, yet its location “between text and off-text” also makes the paratext a place where communication with the recipient of the text can be enacted. A paratextual study is thus important because the paratext “bears on the most socialized side of the practice of literature (the way its relations to the public are organized)”.² In the following, then, the social practice of literature - the question of readership as well as the critical discourse on literature - plays an important role in my encounter with the authenticity device in the paratext of eighteenth-century novels.

Authenticity is, as mentioned, of particular importance for the eighteenth-century epistolary novel. In the epistolary form there is no narrator disturbing the flow of letters between the characters of the novel. The novel-in-letters thus has authorial absence as its basic tenet, and staging authenticity in the paratext is a way of framing the authenticity that comes naturally from the epistolary form *within* the narrative itself. In the epistolary novel this literary device, which I call “staged editorial authenticity”, consists of a fictional editor stating - on the title page or in a preface - that the authorial absence

¹ Genette, *Paratext* 1997:2

² Genette 1997:14

proves the authenticity of the letters presented. Though this device is a generic convention in the epistolary novel, I would argue that it was particularly important in Samuel Richardson's novel of sentiment. In his two popular and influential novels, *Pamela* (1740-41) and *Clarissa* (1747-48), both revolving around issues of love, family relations and marriage among low or middle class women, the texts are presented as collections of authentic letters written by the female protagonists themselves. Richardson grants himself the role of editor of the letters that constitute the text. The title page of *Clarissa* thus states that the letters are "Published by the *editor* of Pamela"³. In the preface to the same novel, he furthermore explains his role as an editor thus: "The Editor [...] was referred to publish the Whole in such a Way as he should think would be most acceptable to the Public". The title page of *Pamela* states that the letters have their foundation in "Truth and Nature"⁴. If authenticity is a strategy rather than a coincidental literary convention, what exactly was Richardson's motive for using this device? Apart from the investment in realism, I would suggest that an important reason involved the emotional effect that reading the letters was supposed to have. Richardson may have thought that by discretely posing as an editor, he would establish a notion of intimacy between the readers and the fictional characters, allowing the readers more readily to indulge in the suffering of the heroines. Authenticity may thus be seen as a literary device that *opens* the text for the readers.

The editorial presence made possible by the authenticity device in these novels may on the other hand be considered differently, namely as an authoritative gesture that *closes* the text by pointing to specific strategies for the intended reception of the novel. For although the "editor" of *Pamela* and *Clarissa* appears as a discreet presence in the title pages, there is no holding back in his paratextual statements concerning the moral instruction which he expects his readers to gain by reading these novels. Thus, *Pamela* and *Clarissa* both have extended titles conspicuously revealing the didactic purposes of the novels:

Pamela or, Virtue Rewarded. In a Series of familiar Letters from a Beautiful Young Damsel, to her Parents. Now first Published to cultivate

³ Richardson, *Clarissa* 1985, my italics

⁴ Richardson, *Pamela* 2003

the Principles of Virtue and Religion in the Minds of the Youth of both Sexes.⁵

Clarissa or, The History of a Young Lady: comprehending the most Important Concerns of Private Life; And Particularly shewing The Distresses that may attend the Misconduct both of Parents and Children in relation to Marriage.⁶

Richardson was one of the most important writers associated with the emerging idea of the novel as a specifically bourgeois genre. Within this class of writers, the novel was a suitable place to perform the bourgeois values of Protestantism, hence Richardson's novel invest a lot in appearing morally instructional for young readers. The instructional purpose of the novel of sentiment is, however, not just straightforwardly enacted on the title page, but can also be connected to Richardson's overall motives for posing as an editor: in order for his novels to gain proper didactic value he chooses to present his fiction as factual. The flow of letters mimics actual true life correspondence, and the idea behind this is that moral instruction works better when the letters are presented as authentic correspondence. Allowing his texts to be "merely" novels is a risk that the bourgeois writer Richardson is not willing to take; hence staged editorial authenticity is enacted as a way to *lead* the reader in the right direction.

Because of the clearly stated didacticism of these novels, Richardson's texts were considered instructive for young women, and they were immensely popular among contemporary readers. His innovative genre was consequently imitated throughout the century. One of the most notable subgenres in the wake of Richardson's novels was *the sentimental epistolary novel*, published in the years 1760-1800. This genre, like its predecessor the novel of sentiment, is thematically focused on love, marriage and unfortunate attachments, and it is typically set in a domestic English middle-class sphere. Furthermore, these novels tend for the most part to be published anonymously, and most of them have a female name as their main title. Given the fact that Richardson's novel of sentiment, and *Clarissa* in particular, is the most important generic predecessor for the sentimental epistolary novel, one would assume that the staged editorial convention is kept up in the paratext of these novels. This is, however, not the case, with

⁵ Richardson, *Pamela* 2003:title page

⁶ Richardson, *Clarissa* 1985:title page

the letters of these later novels presented not as real correspondence, but as obviously fictional.

Why has this convention disappeared, and does this mean that the attempt to stage authenticity has vanished all together? This question may be addressed in several ways, but I will suggest that one of the most important explanations is related to the gendered shift in author- and readership.

Editorial presence in the sentimental novels

Although the convention of staging authenticity via an editor is absent from the sentimental novels, this does not mean that the editor has disappeared from the paratexts of the novels. In fact, editorial presence is conspicuous in the prefaces in many of the sentimental novels, but the premise of this presence is altered. The most striking change is that the editor in the prefaces of these novels is not there posing as the alter ego of the author, staging the authenticity of the letters in question. Rather, the editor is present as a male mouthpiece for the female author. The motivation behind this new editorial presence has several layers, part of which is to make the reader familiar with the anonymous author:

The following sheets are submitted to the candour of an indulgent Public, by a Female, – ‘alike to fortune as to fame unknown’. Pecuniary motives were not the reason for her undertaking this Work: living as she has done for some time past, very retired, she took up the pen, in order to diversify those solitary hours which used to be mostly occupied by her needle and book.⁷

Of the fair Authress nothing more need to be added but that as she lives retired from the World, in a Manner suited to the sentiments contained in some of her letters. [She] conceals her name and Character for private Reasons.⁸

As the above quotations from *Louisa* (1771) and *Isabinda of Bellefield* (1796) make clear, the editors of both novels comment on the obscurity of the author yet simultaneously

⁷ Anon, *Isabinda of Bellefield. A Sentimental Novel* 1796, "Dedication to the public"

⁸ Anon, *Louisa. A Sentimental Novel* 1771, "Advertisement"

include personal information. These prefatory statements might be seen as a way of personalizing the impersonal concept of anonymous publication. Also, it implies that the writers were aware of the possible disadvantages of authorial absence and actively responded to this. This is particularly important in the sentimental novel, where a sense of intimacy is an important aspect of the ideal emotional response. The authors may thus have thought that by allowing the reader to obtain a glimpse of the writer-subject hidden behind the narrative, they might bring the reader *closer* to the requisite emotional reception of the novels. But the inclusion of authorial information has additional motives. The information about the authors has, as we can see from the quotations from *Louisa* and *Isabinda*, specific trademarks. The editors place the authors within the concept of ideal virtuous femininity, emphasising the “retired” and private lifestyle of the authors. The editor of *Isabinda* informs the reader that the author’s “solitary hours” are “mostly occupied by her needle and book”, thereby assuring the reader that the writer indulges in proper bourgeois activities. In the quotation from the advertisement of *Louisa*, the editor states that the “authress” lives “in a Manner suited to the sentiments contained in some of her letters”. These remarks are interesting in terms of authenticity precisely because they stress a concurrence and connection between the heroines of the novels and the authors, between fiction and reality. Authenticity as a literary device is therefore expressed in new terms in these sentimental novels, as intimacy between the author and the fictional characters. This intimacy may furthermore have been directed towards the female readers who were expected to identify with the bourgeois mode of living, and thus may have found grounds for this identification with both the fictional sentimental protagonists and the authors.

In addition to being interesting manifestations of a staged connection between the fictitious heroines and their authors, the specifications of virtuous femininity is important in relation to the real life ideal of moderation or bashfulness. In pointing out the retired lifestyle of the authors, the idealization of feminine discretion becomes apparent. One might even argue that the timidity functions as an excuse for the publication, an assurance to the readers that the public act of issuing a novel is a contrast to the otherwise private life of the author. The editor of *Louisa* states that the author has “a considerable Portion of that Modesty and Diffidence which constantly attend the humble Footsteps of the most meritorious of the Sex”.⁹ He furthermore makes clear that

⁹ Anon, *Louisa* 1771, “Advertisement”

it was not the author's idea to publish the novel: "[a lady of distinction] solicited the too timid Writer, to permit her to take a Copy to London, and consent to give them to the World".¹⁰ Since female publishing was considered immodest, the editor's presence secures the idea of female modesty; the editor functions as an objective guarantor of the exemplary conduct and personality of the author. As such it is interesting to observe the gendered aspects in the transformation from "the editor" Richardson to the author of the sentimental novel. One would assume that the concept of authorship constitutes the strongest and most powerful paratextual discourse, but in this case it seems to be the other way around. This paradoxical shift of authority is due to the male voice speaking for the author, but I would also suggest that staging authenticity in Richardsonian terms rests heavily on the authority of the editor, and this authority is not compatible with the idea of female bashfulness. Furthermore, female moderation is also visible in the above quotation from *Isabinda*, where the editor stresses that the author is 'alike to fortune as to fame unknown'. The editor points out that "pecuniary motives were not the reason for her undertaking this work". Writing for money, though an obvious stimulus for many authors in the period, has never been considered an elevated motivation for producing literature. The idealization of bashful femininity, in which bourgeois moderation and frugality were entwined, may have made it even more important to hide pecuniary motivations for eighteenth-century women writers. I would however suggest that the editor's effort to point out the author's artistic motivation in contrast to an economic incentive is not solely a question of a fashionable gendered mode, but rather points to a significant transitional shift in the history of literature.

¹⁰ Anon, *Louisa* 1771, "Advertisement"

From didacticism to diversion: the emergence of literature as a consumer commodity

The eighteenth century was on the verge of the consumerist society, and this had consequences for the literature of the period and the novel in particular. The emergence of a consumerist society is closely related to the middle classes and their involvement in the expansion of the print trade, i.e. a significant increase in the number of book-sellers, publishers, printing houses, and circulating libraries. An important consequence in the development of a more or less free literary marketplace was an expansion of readers and writers. The most significant group was women of the middle and lower classes. Increased skills in reading, as well as new *ways* of reading, made this group important both as consumers and producers of literature, and the sentimental epistolary novel was the dominant genre associated with women in the latter part of the century. The sentimental novel became a genre *about* women, written *for* women, *by* women. The development of a culture of reading is furthermore related to the emergence of leisure time as an important concept within the middle classes. Although this concept was neither completely new nor a strictly gendered phenomenon, it is a well known fact that the eighteenth-century middle-class woman was, to a larger degree than her husband, confined within domestic spheres and entangled in domestic activities. Reading novels became the middle-class domestic activity par excellence. Consequently, the demand for novels exploded, with the result that new writers sought the opportunity to help satisfy the market. The novel became part of the new sphere of consumer commodities to a larger extent than other genres and the inclusion of the novel within this concept, both as an object of consumption and of production, had implications for the novel form itself. Instead of innovative artistic approaches to literature, many authors chose to work within the already existing popular genres and would often enhance the aesthetic devices that were considered most appealing. This is one of the important points of departure for identifying the relationship between the novel of sentiment and the sentimental novel.

Thus far I have treated the sentimental novel as a continuation of the novel of sentiment. Although this genre does have the basic Richardsonian trademarks, the differences between the two genres are nevertheless conspicuous. What distinguishes the sentimental novel from the novel of sentiment is, simply put, an increased indulgence in feelings. This is reflected on a stylistic as well as thematic level, with more dramatic and less realistic enactments of distress, attachments and courtship between characters whose

excessive sensibility (or insensibility) is often brought way beyond the borders of probability, written in a exclamatory language dominated by tropes of the sentimental body (melancholic postures, weeping and tableau-like scenes). One might say that the sentimental novels use the sensibility that is an important yet quite subtle and *implicit* part of the narrative in the novel of sentiment and makes it more *explicit*. So although the sentimental novel, like the novel of sentiment, aims at a sense of realism by placing its heroine within a well-known domestic setting, the idea of probability is not kept up, either thematically or stylistically. As I have argued earlier, the didactic effect of the epistolary novel rests heavily on the investments in credibility and realism. The fact that the sentimental novel invests less in this aesthetic ideal may point to a shift from didacticism to diversion in the understanding of what constitutes the purpose of literature.

This shift is also traceable in the paratextual changes from the novel of sentiment to the sentimental novel, and I will suggest that the absence of the authenticity device may be seen in this context. The sentimental novel often states its own genre on the title page with the phrase “a sentimental *novel*”. This is not the case with the novel of sentiment, and the reason for this may seem obvious, as this would be incompatible with the staged editorial authenticity. In *Paratexts*, Genette offers an additional explanation why the genre indication “a novel” was commonly avoided: “the classical taboo still lay heavily on this genre and [...] authors and publishers did not consider the indication ‘a novel’ sufficiently glittering to warrant their bringing it to the fore”.¹¹ Genette’s explanation may be true in the case of Richardson, whose novels were published at a time when the generic implications of the genre were still diverse and obscure. But Genette’s dating of this genre indication needs to be contested. Genette tracks the generic demarcation to the twentieth century, but this genre indication is conspicuous already in the novel of the late eighteenth century. In the latter part of this period, the use of the classification “A novel” became customary on title pages. I would suggest that the extensiveness of this categorization indicates that staging editorial authenticity, and thereby linking fiction to reality, is no longer necessary. Where the novel of sentiment points to a connection between fiction and reality, the novels of the late eighteenth century do the opposite: they point to their own fictitiousness.

¹¹ Genette, *Paratext* 1997:97

If we consider the paratext as a site of authorial strategy, we may furthermore see the genre indication as a conscious approach to target specific readers. For women in the lower and middle classes, the genre indication might have been a generic tool to easily track down the literature they desired. When Genette states that, “authors and publishers did not consider the indication ‘a novel’ sufficiently glittering” he overlooks this new group of readers, writers and publishers in the eighteenth century. The group he does refer to, however, is the one that makes itself notable and accordingly shapes the history of literature: the artistic and innovative writer and the educated reader. In the eighteenth century, this elevated reader develops into the literary critic.

The influence of literary criticism

An important part of the development of a literary market and a new public sphere of literature was the establishment of numerous literary periodicals. The first literary periodical involved in reviewing literature was *The Monthly Review*, first published in 1749. The critics in the periodicals considered themselves taste-testers of new publications, and making value judgments was an important way to let the public know whether or not they should spend money on a new publication. In addition to comments on specific texts, the critics would often include general remarks on narrative technique and literary devices commonly used in novels. Staged authenticity is one of the literary devices addressed by the reviewers:

The pretence is so common, and hath been so much played off, like the trick of a juggler, to amuse and deceive the credulous, that it needs uncommon dexterity to give it, in these days, the power of imposition. It hath, indeed formed miracles [...]; but when a trick is found out, it ceases to be wondered at; and such is the ill effect of imposition, that it frequently brings a suspicion on truth itself [...] Let her not insult our understandings by delusive pleas. If it be fancy’s work, let it pass as such. It will not less amuse, if it be well executed.¹²

As the above quotation makes clear, the convention of the editor posing as someone in possession of “real manuscripts” is by the early 1780s considered an exhausted literary

¹² *The Monthly Review*, Vol. 68, 1783:455-456

device that has lost its former effect. One obvious reason for the authors in this period to avoid the mask of authenticity might therefore be that critics in the periodicals repeatedly state that they are tired of this convention. The absence of prefaces stating the authenticity of the letters may accordingly be considered as an indication that the authors of the sentimental courtship novels were affected by, and responded to, literary criticism. The above quotation is taken from the review of Sophia Lee's gothic novel *The Recess* (1783), but I would still suggest that the critic's argument explaining why the authenticity convention is unnecessary is transferable to the sentimental novels of the period. The gothic novel adopts many of the narrative and aesthetic trademarks of the sentimental novel, in particular the emphasis on excessive emotionalism and virtuous sentimental heroines in distress. The two genres furthermore met with the same harsh criticism from contemporary reviews, and the core of this critique was the lack of probability and realism in these novels. The reviewers would confront nearly all the new novels with the aesthetic standards and qualities of realism, credibility and rational morality inherent in the novels of Richardson, and the sentimental novels were repeatedly judged improbable and unrealistic.

In addition to being interesting expressions of realism's importance as an aesthetic category, the reviews of sentimental and gothic novels in the latter part of the period point to what I would suggest is one of the first examples of a distinction between *highbrow* and *lowbrow* literature. These "brow" distinctions are related to the emerging notion of differentiating groups of readers and writers. The sentimental novel is one of the first genres involved in this emerging system of hierarchies: with its development in the late eighteenth century, the sentimental novel is one of the primary genres simultaneously appreciated by a large audience and depreciated by the critics. The "brow" distinctions have two sides operating within their own literary spheres, the writers/readers of novels on the one hand and the critics of the novels on the other. But the two sides intervene, particularly the literary critics positioned in the highbrow, as exemplified in the above quotation, where the critic argues that the purpose of these novels is *amusement*. But I would argue that the new groups of authors, among these the writers of the sentimental novels, also helped conceptualize the emerging brow distinctions. For in spite of the fact that they would not have classified their novels as lowbrow fiction, and although they still claimed to be more or less morally instructional, there is still a new *acceptance* of the purpose of novels as entertainment for a larger audience. Reading for the sake of diversion became as natural as reading for the sake of

moral instruction, and there was no longer any need for staging authenticity in the paratext of the novels. Not necessarily because the “trick has been found out” as the critic says in the above quotation, but because of an emancipation from the didactic grasp that entangled the novel earlier in the century, as well as an emerging modern sense of what constituted “the literary”.

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