

Devotional Reading and Novel Form: The Case of *David Simple*

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Although the novel as a form gained popularity throughout the eighteenth century, devotional texts such as the Bible, printed sermons, and books of practical divinity, including *The Whole Duty of Man*, continued to dominate the print market. These devotional texts establish and foster discontinuous, repetitive, and emblematic reading practices. The form of devotional texts and religious reading practices is essential to a more satisfying description of the formal development of the novel, most notably episodic, sentimental novels like Sarah Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple*. The complex relationship between devotional and secular texts involved authors borrowing and adapting forms from devotional texts, while readers adapted their own devotional reading practices to secular texts. The force and visibility of the novel in the eighteenth century resulted more from the novel form's familiarity than its novelty.

abstract

CRITICAL HISTORIES of the novel make two fundamental assumptions that this article challenges. First, that economic and social changes account for the emergence and development of different kinds of novels, and, second, that the gradual waning of religious involvement over the course of the century contributed to the relative popularity of novels.¹ As a result of these assumptions, scholars have not satisfactorily accounted for the influence of devotional reading practices on the development of the

¹ Ian Watt's foundational study assumes that novel reading was a secular practice. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957). Over the last three decades, many theories of the novel's development were predicated on social and economic change. See, for example, Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); and Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). J. Paul Hunter's study of the generic predecessors of the novel is a notable exception: *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990).

novel.² I focus on the impact not of change but of stability in the development of novel forms, specifically the stability of established religious reading practices. However influential social and economic changes were to the novel, the fact remains that eighteenth-century readers read novels much the same way they did their devotional texts. In this article, I approach Sarah Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744) as a case study in order to show how existing religious reading practices shaped the development of sentimental novel forms.

I examine *David Simple* because it incorporates a number of formal characteristics that become even more marked in novels as the century progresses: meandering plots, monotonous successions of inset narratives, calamitous trials, as well as irksome (to modern sensibilities) didacticism. These characteristics are familiar to eighteenth-century readers because they appear in a variety of popular texts throughout the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, including epic and heroic romance.³ Likewise, devotional texts possessed a remarkable number of the formal features that are associated with novels, such as emphatic, intrusive narrators, affective engagement, and elaborate introductory material that framed occasions for instruction. The original readers of *David Simple* encountered Sarah Fielding's novel not as a radically new genre, but as a text with structures familiar to them from their religious reading. Fielding adapts these well-known and recognizable forms to teach readers how to read novels and reform their actions. The moral lessons from devotional texts and the religious reading practices that attend them are instrumental in shaping the purpose and form of the novel.

² Ten years after Watt, both Hunter and G.A. Starr offered religious correctives for Watt's secular-economic narrative of the novel; however, Hunter's and Starr's perceptive studies only examine the works of Daniel Defoe. Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim: Defoe's Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in "Robinson Crusoe"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966); G.A. Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

³ For a collection of eighteenth-century documents that discuss theories of the emerging novel in relation to epic and romance, see Ioan Williams, *Novel and Romance, 1700–1800: A Documentary Record* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970). Although he does not address Sarah Fielding directly, Arthur L. Cooke's article discusses the similarity between Henry Fielding and the heroic romance writers that he attempted to distinguish himself from. Cooke, "Henry Fielding and the Writers of Heroic Romance," *PMLA* 62, no. 4 (1947): 984–94.

Devotional Reading

Devotional reading materials dominated the reading lives of most eighteenth-century readers. In addition to the Bible, readers consumed popular devotional texts such as Richard Allestree's *The Whole Duty of Man* (1658), John Tillotson's *Sermons* (1695), John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), and Anton Wilhelm Böhm's *Plain Directions for the Reading of the Holy Scripture* (1721).⁴ While these texts vary in doctrine and structure, each aims to provide the reader with instruction in moral reform. Publication and sales records reveal how devotional reading permeated the practice of everyday life.⁵ In the first half of the eighteenth century, religious texts pervaded the book market. Even when fiction was at its height, it only accounted for 4 per cent of published titles.⁶ Probate records show that if there was only one book in the house, it was the Bible. If the household owned two books, they were the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*. Statistically, if a reader were to encounter a book of any kind, it was likely to be the Bible or a devotional text. As the century progressed, readers did consume novels in increasing amounts, but children still learned to read from the Bible, which was, more often than not, read out of order by even the most devout Protestants.⁷ Devotional texts of all kinds

⁴ All of these texts were reprinted numerous times throughout the century. References are to these editions: Richard Allestree, *The Whole Duty of Man* (London: John Eyre, 1749); John Tillotson, *The Works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson, Late Lord Archbishop of Canterbury: Containing Fifty-Four Sermons and Discourses, on Several Occasions*, 6th ed. (London: W. Rogers, 1710); John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Anton Wilhelm Böhm, *Plain Directions for Reading the Holy Scriptures*, 4th ed. (London: M. Downing, 1735).

⁵ For a description of a household in which members read a variety of religious material alongside fiction, see Naomi Tadmor, "In the even my wife read to me': Women, Reading and Household Life in the Eighteenth Century," in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, ed. James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 162–75.

⁶ James Raven, *British Fiction 1750–1770* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 10. See also David Hall, "The World of Print and Collective Mentality in Seventeenth-Century New England," in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul K. Conkin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 170–71.

⁷ Patricia Crain, *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from "The New England Primer" to "The Scarlet Letter"* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1–38.

anchored the reading programs of even the most avid novel readers. The first kind of reading that children practised was the discontinuous, devotional reading that permeated reading instruction and practice for almost every literate child in eighteenth-century England. Thus, novel readers were already students of the tradition of devotional reading long before they thumbed the pages of any novel.

Even allowing for the difficulties of collecting reliable, quantitative evidence about literacy, the dramatic increase in reading in England between 1600 and 1800 was largely due to religious motivations: good Protestants were supposed to be capable of reading and cross-referencing their Bibles, at the very least.⁸ In theory, one of the ways in which Protestants distinguished themselves from Catholics was by continuous reading of the Bible. In reality, the demands of the liturgical calendar made continuous Bible reading implausible;⁹ therefore, sanctioned scripture reading was necessarily discontinuous, and the Bible was experienced by readers largely as a collection of thematic episodes. Sermons and books of practical divinity followed suit. When devotional collections appeared in print, they were accompanied by elaborate tables of contents and index systems. The structure of these texts combined with religious observance made devotional reading fundamentally indexical, thematic, and driven by topical application.¹⁰ Readers did not routinely practice continuous reading, and there was nothing “natural” about an eighteenth-century reader consuming texts from beginning to end. Peter Stallybrass argues that “the novel has only been a

⁸ Hunter, *Before Novels*, 66–68; and N.H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth-Century England* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 135–37.

⁹ Even after the Reformation, readings for twenty-seven feast days remained in the Protestant liturgical calendar. The Protestant year’s theoretically continuous reading schedule was constantly disrupted by feast days, the juxtaposition of Old and New Testament readings, and the inclusion of apocrypha.

¹⁰ Steven Zwicker discusses how, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, reading was a politically charged activity, and reading practices tended towards topical application. Reading that blends “the mythic and the topical” is the same when discussing devotional reading more generally. Zwicker, “Reading the Margins: Politics and the Habits of Appropriation,” in *Refiguring Revolutions: Aesthetics and Politics from the English Revolution to the Romantic Revolution*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven Zwicker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 109–10.

brilliantly perverse interlude in the long history of discontinuous reading.”¹¹ I would argue that the early novel does not break with discontinuous reading at all, but modifies those devotional reading practices for application to fiction.

Because devotional texts dominated their reading lives, eighteenth-century novel readers, whether by choice, temperament, theology, or necessity, approached novels in the same way they read their Bibles and other popular devotional texts—that is, non-sequentially, repetitively, and divided into brief, accessible segments.¹² Like many mid-century novels containing didactic, inset narratives that seem to bear only a thematic relationship to the main plot of the novel, devotional texts likewise are separated into mid-length lessons, designed to be read individually.¹³ The similarity and sheer ubiquity of religious texts suggest that some of the eighteenth-century novel’s most recognizable forms come from popular eighteenth-century devotional texts. Devotional texts possessed a remarkable number of the formal features that are associated with novels like emphatic, intrusive narrators, affective engagement, and elaborate introductory material framing occasions for instruction. Part of the success of the early eighteenth-century novel develops from the familiarity of devotional forms adapted for fiction—not from the novelty of new forms. *David Simple*’s form then appealed to its original

¹¹ Peter Stallybrass, “Books and Scrolls: Navigating the Bible,” in *Books and Readers in Early Modern England: Material Studies*, ed. Jennifer Andersen and Elizabeth Sauer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 47.

¹² Many popular eighteenth-century texts were divided into brief accessible segments. For more on the popularity of the anthology, see Barbara Benedict, *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹³ Collections of sermons tended to be organized by familiar themes or Bible verses. Others, such as *The Whole Duty of Man*, contained numbered topics that enabled readers to read one chapter every Sunday and complete the entire text three times over the course of a year. Also, like many mid-century novels, devotional texts included instructions for reading, as well as moral lessons that readers were expected to interpret using both reason and feeling. Readers of devotional texts were implored to read with “True SIMPLICITY of Heart” (Böhm, *Plain Directions*, 28), and to “lay ... thy Head and Heart together” (Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, 9) while they used the moral lessons to reform their own actions.

readers because it used familiar forms from devotional texts to teach moral lessons. The relative endurance of existing devotional reading practices means that when the novel appeared on the scene it did not change reading practices so much as reading practices changed the novel. *David Simple* is an example of how, through a series of encounters between existing reading practices and new forms, the novel emerges as the genre capable of teaching readers moral lessons.

Reading Two Genres

In his preface to the novel, Henry Fielding argues that *David Simple* should be read in terms of Homeric epic.¹⁴ Yet, in her “Advertisement to the Reader,” which appeared in the novel’s first edition, Sarah Fielding calls her novel a “Moral Romance (or whatever Title the reader shall please to give it),” which playfully dismisses, even as it emphasizes, the importance of genre.¹⁵ The preface’s concern with names and the advertisement’s dismissal of them leads readers to interpret the novel in terms of genre and anticipate that existing genres are inadequate to the novel’s moral aim. Fielding alerts readers that she will develop a genre that helps readers to learn moral lessons. In order to accomplish this, David sets out on a journey the purpose of which is “to seek out one capable of being a real Friend” (21). David’s journey begins with the satiric-picaresque, which Fielding associates with amorality. Later in the novel’s second half, when David finds and builds relationships with Cynthia, Camilla, and Valentine, Fielding discards the satiric-picaresque and adopts the episodic-sentimental that she associates with moral righteousness.

¹⁴ Henry Fielding’s preface aligns *David Simple* with his own theory of the novel and suggests Sarah Fielding’s novel should be read as a “comic Epic Poem” comparable to *The Odyssey* because of its “Series of Actions, all tending to produce one great End” (345). Apart from those Henry Fielding developed, the critical terms in the 1740s for long prose fiction are distinctly lacking, particularly generic terms. Of the essays and prefaces that discuss novel theory directly, a good number of them use the terms from the preface to *Joseph Andrews*, especially the distinction between epic and romance. For a thorough discussion of the instability of romance as an ideological position, see Gary Gautier, “Henry and Sarah Fielding on Romance and Sensibility,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 31, no. 2 (1998): 195–214.

¹⁵ Sarah Fielding, *The Adventures of David Simple and Volume the Last*, ed. Peter Sabor (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1998), n.p. (“Advertisement to the Reader”). References are to this edition.

The satiric-picaresque society of the first half of the novel is characterized by pettiness, shallowness, and even brutality of one character against the next.¹⁶ Structurally, this section of the novel is composed of a series of unrelated but similar events that follow one another in rapid succession. David enters coffeehouses, merchants' homes, card parties, and political discussions in a succession of scenes of nearly equal length and structure. These scenes follow the same pattern: David meets a new group of individuals and admires their best qualities before becoming disillusioned with their selfish, unkind natures. David's journey through London in the first half of the novel resembles the struggles of the English picaresque hero. For the picaresque hero, the repetition of similar scenes magnifies society's corruption and emphasizes the eponymous hero's struggles to remain free from the hypocritical conventional morality of polite society. Like David, the hero struggles against an indifferent, often brutal world and is routinely in a position where he must make immoral choices in order to survive.¹⁷ The satiric-picaresque half of the novel robs David of any ability to feel pity for any of the characters he meets—a pity that is necessary for the novel to achieve its moral aims.

In addition to the genre's moral ambiguity, the satiric-picaresque also prevents any kind of reform through affect and instruction because its rapid pace prevents characters from reflecting on moral lessons learned. Because the satiric-picaresque moves quickly, it does not provide an opportunity for reform (the wholesale corruption of society that the form's satire reveals suggests that reform is impossible) and can only depict the hero

¹⁶ *David Simple* is often discussed in terms of its satire. See James Kim's illuminating essay on Sarah Fielding's satire and her use of "sentimental irony" as a defence against cultural change. Kim, "Mourning, Melancholia, and Modernity: Sentimental Irony and Downward Mobility in *David Simple*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 22, no. 3 (2010): 477–502. See also Patricia Meyer Spacks's discussion of how satire and sentiment coexist in Fielding's novel, *Novel Beginnings: Experiments in Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 128–36; and Felicity Nussbaum's discussion of how satire frees characters from gendered identities, "Effeminacy and Femininity: Domestic Prose Satire and *David Simple*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 11, no. 4 (1999): 421–44.

¹⁷ On the characteristics of the English picaresque novel, see John Barrell, *English Literature in History, 1730–1780: An Equal, Wide Survey* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), 185–86; and Robert Alter, *Rogue's Progress: Studies in the Picaresque Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 37–38.

moving from one relentlessly similar corrupt situation to the next. The satiric-picaresque moves too rapidly from one scene to another for David to have sufficient time to reflect on society's immorality before he is whisked away to his next encounter. The narrator suggests that the repetitive pattern and characters of the picaresque prevent David from finding meaning in these encounters: "the Generality of Scenes he saw, he could never mention without a Sigh, or think of without a Tear" (36). The "Generality" of the picaresque proves to be inadequate to David's quest (a failure that is fittingly branded by David's tear) because the rapid pace of these scenes prevents David from establishing any relationships. His adventures during the first half of the novel are unsuccessful, largely because David is unable to stop long enough to acquire a friend.

By contrast, the episodic-sentimental genre, which takes up the second half of Fielding's novel, emphasizes the importance of moral sentiments and slows down the narrative long enough to provide time for characters to reflect on instruction. The episodic-sentimental invests, quite simply, more pages to each encounter.¹⁸ The longer episodes and slower pace suggest that the characters are individuals, not merely metonyms of the larger, corrupt society. The longer stories and slower pace also leave ample time for reflection and reform. The episodes in the novel's second half allow David's group to reflect, feel pity, and restrain their feeling—they model correct instruction for readers. The moral purpose of the second half of *David Simple* is not to laugh at the foibles of society but to demonstrate how David's group of friends profits from instruction and how benevolent feeling can be made useful. At the end of the novel, Fielding explains that the reason her characters have achieved happiness is because they chose to surrender the values associated with the satiric-picaresque. After the members of David's family have been satisfactorily paired off with spouses, they experience a state of happiness only available to those who make it a priority to lessen the grievances of others. The narrator correlates the main characters' happiness with their rejection of wit, insult, and satire, saying that "if every Man, who is possessed of a greater Share of Wit than is common, ——instead of insulting and satirizing others would make use

¹⁸ The three major stories that take up the second half of the novel are Cynthia's, Camilla and Valentine's, and Isabelle's. These three stories together consume more than half of the second part of the novel.

of his Talents for the Use and Pleasure of the Society ... what Happiness would Mankind enjoy” (238). The sentiment David and his friends share in the second half of the novel is explicitly opposed to the satire and wit of the satiric-picaresque in the first half of the novel. The narrator concludes the novel by arguing “—It was this Care—Tenderness- - -and Benevolence to each other, which made *David*, and his amiable Company happy; ... In short, it is this Tenderness and Benevolence, which alone can give any real Pleasure, and which I most sincerely wish to all my Readers” (238). The characters in Fielding’s novel achieve happiness because they reject the insult and satire associated with the satiric-picaresque and embrace kindness and compassion. What the narrator finally wishes for readers is the pleasure of the sentimental episode which not only generates sentimental feeling but also transfers that feeling into action.

The precedent of using reading to transform behaviour originates not with the novel, or even with prose fiction, but from popular works of practical divinity. The sentimental narratives of the second half of Fielding’s novel formally resemble the mid-length, thematically organized forms found in printed sermons and texts of practical divinity. *The Whole Duty of Man*, for instance, is specifically designed for readers to read small moral lessons individually. The title page explains that the book is “Divided into XVII Chapters. One whereof being read every *Lord’s Day* the Whole may be Read over Thrice in the Year.” The chapters (“Sunday I,” “Sunday II,” etc.) are structured with little, if any variation. Each chapter averages 25 pages and includes six to nine thematically arranged topics that are marginally numbered and italicized.¹⁹ Readers can easily locate any topic they wish and can stop at the end of that section and reflect on that topic before moving on to the next. Textual and paratextual apparatuses allow readers to separate each moral and reflect on each thematic lesson. Again and again in devotional texts readers are exhorted to seriously reflect on their behaviour, assess their choices, and amend their practices. Fielding adopts the structure of brief lessons from devotional texts and adapts them for fiction. The fictional lessons take the form of sentimental stories followed by characters’ reflections on these brief lessons. The narrated stories and the reflections on those stories show that characters learned the lessons.

¹⁹ For example, Sunday VI covers Pride, Vain-glory, Humility, and Meekness.

In addition to the brief, thematic lessons, Fielding also borrows the insightful, affectionate voice of the speaker from devotional texts. In printed sermons, the speaker obviously is the preacher—one who had, most likely, orally preached the sermon to a congregation.²⁰ In a book of practical divinity such as *The Whole Duty of Man*, the speaker is unnamed, but takes on the persona of the knowing compassionate cleric. To be sure, the issue of the afterlife of the soul was a serious one, and certainly readers of devotional texts were exhorted to take the best care possible of their souls by avoiding sin, but the tone of devotional texts is earnest and explanatory rather than judgmental. The speaker asks readers to consider with their reason and hearts the necessity of avoiding sin.²¹ In the first half of *David Simple*, the narrator demonstrates contempt for society (and occasionally for David), and a substantial amount of reading pleasure derives from knowing that David cannot detect society's superficiality. During the course of Cynthia's episode, which I discuss at greater length below, the narrator's role changes, and readers begin to sympathize with David, whose ability to respond to sentimental episodes allows him to build a coterie of friends.

While the first half of the novel is focalized through the narrator, the second half of the novel is increasingly focalized through David, and the narrator's voice becomes more compassionate. One of the scenes in which Fielding reveals the narrator's increased compassion is when Cynthia accepts David's help. While the narrator offers little pardon to characters in the first half of the novel, the speaker does excuse Cynthia with the following words: "I do not pretend wholly to justify her; *but without doubt there are some Circumstances in Life, where the Distress is so high, and the Mind in such an Agitation, that a Person may be pardoned, being thrown so much off their guard as to be drawn*

²⁰ Many sermons were printed with their original date of preaching on the title pages.

²¹ A brief passage illustrates the mild tone of the devotional texts. In an example from *The Whole Duty of Man*, the speaker exhorts readers to avoid the sin of "Vain-glory" and says, "This ... shews you likewise the great Dangerousness of this Sin; for if it be that which keeps Christ out of the Heart, it is sure it brings infinite Danger ... But besides the Authority of this Text, common Experience shews, that where-ever this Sin hath possession, it endangers Men to fall into many other ... I doubt there are many Consciences can witness the Truth of this, so that I need say no more to prove the Danger of this Sin" (Allestree, 129–30).

into Actions, which if they did in the common Occurrences of Life, would admit of no Alleviation" (97). The narrator's change from critical to benevolent is crucial because this shift allows the remaining episodes to function as an instructional tool. The focalization change anticipates forthcoming instruction in how to respond to the sentimental episode. The narrator remains but now possesses a kinder, more moderate outlook. Cynthia's narrative is the first of any length, and the combination of the change in focalization, the narrative's length, and the genuine feelings of indignation that Cynthia's story cultivates on her behalf subtly realigns the reader's sympathies to David. The narrator becomes a generous instructor, akin to the compassionate clerics from devotional texts.

Instructing Sentiment

The first half of Fielding's "Moral Romance" establishes the insufficiency of the satiric-picaresque and exposes the need for a genre that encourages sympathetic identification and teaches readers how to moderate their responses to sentimental tales. David senses Cynthia's unhappiness when he first meets her, so he attempts to learn what caused her to be dependent on a rich friend. Cynthia's "fix'd Melancholy" (78) motivates David to arrange an opportunity to speak with her, after which Cynthia reluctantly tells her story. In brief, Cynthia, independent and bookish as a child, refused her father's choice of husband for her. As a result, her family rejects her and her father cuts her out of his will. Alone and unprotected, Cynthia accepts a wealthy female friend's offer to be her companion, but the supposedly altruistic friend quickly reveals a nasty disposition. Unfortunately, Cynthia remains totally dependent on the woman, and as a result she is treated spitefully.

Cynthia's story shares formal devices with devotional texts, including organization around brief, instructional episodes with a clear theme and a kind, cleric-like narrator. In devotional texts, moral lessons are separated into chapters; each lesson is independent and separated from the others to allow time for reflection. Likewise, Cynthia's story could easily stand alone as a brief essay about the importance of being kind to those less fortunate. The introduction to Cynthia's episode also slows the pace of the novel's main narrative. A significant number of pages

are devoted to describing David's initial response and lack of understanding of Cynthia's situation, and to recording Cynthia's unwillingness to tell her story. Narrative time slows as several days pass while Cynthia weighs her willingness to share her tale. When Cynthia tells her story, she is the wise instructor tasked with providing a moral lesson. Because it provides indirect instruction, the novel departs from devotional texts, the majority of which provide direct instruction by advising readers to avoid sin, or explaining how to apply a Bible passage to their lives. In adapting these structures for fiction, Fielding does not use indirect instruction to stage occasions of instruction for a fictional character. In the case of Cynthia's story, the readers' lessons derive from David's response to the sentimental episode. Readers learn with David how to respond to the fictional sentimental episode. The moral essay structure, auditory learning, and indirect instruction all remind readers of the structure of devotional texts, thus alerting them that a moral lesson is about to begin.

The aim of *David Simple*, like devotional texts, is to exhort readers to live moral lives.²² Cynthia's episode exemplifies how devotional reading practices are adapted so that fiction can function as a guide for moral instruction. In order to accomplish this, Fielding has to address two barriers to incorporating moral lessons into fiction: first, the ethical dilemma posed by cultivating extreme feeling for fictional characters, and, second, the dangers of misreading and over-reading. While the overt fictionality of the moral lesson as sentimental episode cultivates a certain amount of reader distance, readers of the sentimental episode are also confronted with the ethical problem that fiction encourages readers to feel strongly for people whose sufferings are not real. In other words, fiction encourages readers to weep for fictional characters. When David indulges in his feelings of pity for Cynthia's sufferings, he functions as a surrogate for the reader who likewise can be held captive to the feelings that sentimental episodes generate. While the form of the moral lesson is familiar

²² The editor's preface to *The Ladies Calling* (1720) reads as follows: "Whoever takes this Book in hand, would seriously consider it, and doing so, receive the infinite Benefits of uniform Virtue, and sincere Piety, the documents whereof are here with all possible advantages propos'd." Similar instructions appear in all the editions of the text throughout the century, as well as in other manuals of practical devotion such as *The Pious Man's Directions*, an abridgement of *The Whole Duty of Man*.

to readers, the new fictionalized episode is aimed at an audience who still lacks the tools to learn from its indirect instruction. Fielding provides readers with a series of instructional sentimental episodes to tease out how to read the episodic-sentimental—a novel constructed out of sentimental episodes. For example, commentary before Cynthia's story emphasizes the social consequences of her telling the story to David. When considering sharing her story with David, Cynthia comments, "that she dared not ever receive any more Obligations; for she had already suffer'd so much by accepting them" (79). Cynthia is anxious about her dependence and role as the victim in a sentimental episode. While David generously offers her financial assistance, his feelings of pity blind him to the reality that for Cynthia to accept his help only results in a new dependence for Cynthia, this time on a single man. David's sentimental response causes him to disregard the moral and social consequences of a woman in distress accepting financial assistance. David's blunder results from his feeling too strongly about Cynthia's misery. His untutored response warns readers against feeling too much for the sentimental episode.

Under Cynthia's worldly guidance and with the sanctions of the narrator, David and Cynthia together take decisive actions to remove her from her wealthy friend and devise a plan that protects Cynthia from scandal. Her rescue from an intolerable situation is the occasion for Cynthia to shape David's well-intentioned but extreme sympathy into constructive and socially acceptable action. Likewise, when it comes to the fictional sufferings of others, readers must learn to feel and then restrain those feelings so they can become the basis for just behaviour in the real world. When Cynthia teaches David to respond with "rational feeling," she exposes and overturns one of the potentially dangerous pleasures of reading the sentimental episode: the reader's vicarious pleasure in learning about someone else's suffering.²³ Cynthia's episode and her shaping of David's response illustrates how the sentimental feelings of the listener can be shaped in ways that realistically assist the victim of the episode. Rather than allowing David to indulge in pity, Cynthia's instruction

²³ This useful term is Emily C. Friedman's: she applies it to Sarah Fielding's *Remarks on Clarissa*. Friedman, "Remarks on Richardson: Sarah Fielding and the Rational Reader," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 22, no. 2 (2009): 309–26.

shapes David's assistance in a way that enables her to leave London in search of a cousin in the country. Instead of remaining a fixed victim of a sentimental tale, Cynthia is depicted as using David's assistance to transform herself into a suitable member of David's developing new family. As Cynthia instructs David, readers learn how pure sentimental pity always threatens to descend into self-gratifying indulgence in feeling. This is the hazard of the pleasure of sentiment.²⁴ Feeling for others always threatens to tip into personal gratification.

In addition to the danger of feeling pleasure at another's misfortune, another danger of adapting moral instruction to the sentimental novel is that readers can become over-involved in the episode and either misread or over-read, which causes them to miss the instruction altogether. The possibility of misreading fiction is greater than that of misreading devotional texts because devotional texts, although frequently read independently, are read in conjunction with other more public devotional practices. An individual's persistence in misreading a devotional text is unusual because discussions of these texts are socially acceptable and reasonably widespread. Bible misreading is even more monitored since many sermons provide biblical explication. Without the safety net of institutional monitoring, fiction readers must be instructed within the moral lesson itself, as they are in *David Simple*, of how to adapt devotional reading practices to the novel.

Fielding engages with the dangers of misreading and over-reading when David, Cynthia, Camilla, and Valentine, having found each other, commence "riding thro' all the parts of this great metropolis, to view the various countenances of the different sorts of People that inhabit it" (146). Their journey underscores the insufficiency of the satiric-picaresque because it replicates the problems associated with the genre. Although the group rides through London meeting other characters, these brief encounters—with a group of drunken young men, a gossip,

²⁴ Spacks describes how sentimental novels are accused of being "fictional representations [which] solicit the reader's tears rather than arouse awareness" in *Novel Beginnings: Experiments in Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 129. See also John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); and G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

and a young woman crying because her husband will not buy her clothes and instead chooses to pay his debts—reaffirm the impossibility of finding kindness or compassion within the satiric-picaresque model. Fielding establishes the inadequacy of the satiric-picaresque for moral instruction, but she also begins to suggest the danger of isolating oneself in a community of like-minded individuals as in the episodic-sentimental. During the group's ride through London, the characters share their individual thoughts. Despite their resolution to listen to the sadness of others, the characters' private thoughts—shared aloud with each other—remain self-absorbed. Cynthia, who suffers from genteel poverty, muses on the danger of expensive luxuries. Camilla, accused by her stepmother of incest with her brother Valentine, worries about the numbers of “Mothers-in-Law, working underhand with their Husbands, to make them *turn their Children out of Doors, to Beggary and Misery*” (148). Valentine, secretly in love with Cynthia but stripped of his position and fortune because of the incest accusation, worries about those who cannot marry as they please. Here, just as they should be embarking on an all-out effort to comfort the suffering of others, even this well-meaning group remains self-absorbed about their own difficulties. Fielding shows that only listening to sentimental tales is not enough. The kind-hearted are even more at risk because they are more likely to become over-invested in the sufferings of others and indulge in narcissism.

During this section of the novel, the characters receive no instruction and are guided only by their own sensibilities. As the journey through London demonstrates, untutored sensibility underscores the need for instruction to encourage the characters' sensibilities at the same time that it shapes those sensibilities in constructive ways. The group's unsuccessful journey demonstrates that while the satiric-picaresque's lack of feeling is insufficient, feeling without proper instruction means that those feelings never move beyond the person who feels badly. David learns (along with the reader) the proper way to respond to the sentimental episode.

Reading Restraint

If Cynthia's episode and the group's failed journey through London demonstrate that the reader, like David, needs to be trained so that raw sympathy can be transformed into useful

action in the world, then Isabelle de Stainville's narrative allows David's family an opportunity to practise responding to sentimental episodes.²⁵ Isabelle's narrative provides the most fully realized instance of fictionalizing a devotional text's moral lessons. David, Cynthia, and Camilla and Valentine listen to Isabelle's story, a moral lesson about the dangers of unrestrained sentiment. Isabelle's episode—the novel's longest—takes up approximately one-third of the novel's last two books. Isabelle's narrative appears at a critical juncture of the text, just after David, Cynthia, Camilla, and Valentine find each other and establish a metaphorical family. Isabelle's narrative tests the group's ability to respond to the moral lesson.

Like Cynthia's episode, Isabelle's is distanced from the main narrative in a number of ways. Although she is marginally acquainted with Cynthia, Isabelle herself is not a member of David's foursome. Isabelle's narrative stands alone because as a French expatriate with only a tenuous acquaintance with Cynthia, she is not a member of David's family and therefore is unnecessary to the main narrative. Before Isabelle can tell her story, Cynthia must reintroduce herself to Isabelle, re-establish a relationship with her, and introduce Isabelle to the group. As in Cynthia's episode, narrative time slows as the narrator describes the difficulty of meeting Isabelle, persuading her to tell what is assumed to be a tragic story given her social withdrawal, and developing what the narrator calls a "Method ... for her relief" (152). The group waits several days before Cynthia is able to introduce Isabelle to them, and she spends several more days in their company before she will tell them her story. In addition to emphasizing the separateness of Isabelle's story, the elaborate preparation for her narrative allows readers narrative time to prepare for the episode to come. Cynthia had previously found Isabelle a "gay sprightly Girl" (152), but now observes how she has transformed into a melancholy recluse. Isabelle's sadness shows her delicacy and verifies her sensibility. The group's emotions, reactions, and speculations, as well as those of the narrator, dramatize the effects of the fictionalized moral lesson on the reader.

²⁵ Scholars mention Isabelle's episode only in passing, and her narrative is described as either a counterpoint to the main narrative or variations on a theme because of the similarity of David's family to Isabelle's. See Linda Bree, *Sarah Fielding* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 43–44; and Gautier.

Isabelle's story reveals the effects of unrestrained sympathetic response and over-identification. Before Isabelle's story, each member of David's new family imagines that Isabelle's troubles are directly related to his or her own. Camilla, victim of a cruel stepmother, imagines that Isabelle's father took a second wife who caused Isabelle's misfortune. David, the dupe to an avaricious brother, speculates that Isabelle has been reduced to such misery by the ill-treatment of a brother. The narrator then both interrupts and summarizes these speculations: "In short, everyone guessed at some Reason or other, for a Woman of Isabelle's Quality leading a life so unsuitable" (152). The narrator notes that the group's speculations reveal a tendency to assume that other lives are identical to their own. Sentimental feeling for others depends on this kind of affective transfer, and this is the danger of reading and then feeling for the fictional sentimental episode. When listeners identify with Isabelle, her suffering becomes subsumed by the characters' own misfortune. Isabelle's story demonstrates how unrestrained feeling for others leads to dangerous self-absorption and solipsism. The narrator reveals how the group's sympathetic identification, in its rawest form, is at best unimaginative, and at worst narcissistic.

The dangers of that self-absorption are described in horrific detail. Isabelle's story is about a woman who becomes mired in solipsism and narcissism after hearing a tale of unmitigated misery. Isabelle, her brother the Marquis de Stainville, his wife Dorimene, and a school friend of the Marquis, the Chevalier Dumont, once created a group similar to that of Cynthia, David, Camilla, and Valentine. When Dumont visits the brother, wife, and sister threesome, Dorimene secretly falls in love with the Chevalier Dumont when he tells his own sentimental narrative. After Dorimene hears Dumont's story, she "was affected with it to an incredible degree; whole Days and Nights passed, and she could fix her Thoughts on no other Subject" (179). Dorimene becomes so inflamed with love for Dumont that she threatens to kill Isabelle if she follows through with their planned wedding. When Dorimene's husband, the Marquis, finds Dorimene pursuing Dumont in a bedchamber, he kills Dumont. When he discovers Dorimene's culpability and his friend's innocence, the Marquis attempts to kill himself, after which Dorimene grows

ill and dies. Upon his recovery from his self-inflicted wound, the Marquis joins a monastery, and Isabelle is coerced into coming to England to live with relatives, prohibiting her from joining a convent as she wishes. When those relatives die shortly after she arrives in England, Isabelle is left alone in the boarding house to await her return to a French convent. Isabelle suffers painfully because of Dorimene's adulterous passion. Importantly, Dorimene's passion is ignited by hearing Dumont's narrative of suffering. Her subsequent actions as a result of those feelings foster jealousy and mistrust, culminating in murder within the group. Dorimene's obsession results from feeling too much when confronted with a sympathetic episode. Isabelle's story shows how the bonds of sympathy can easily dissolve into murderous passion. Isabelle's story suggests that listeners to sentimental stories must learn to restrain their feelings.

In particular, the self-absorption of David's family (not to mention their somewhat prurient interest in a near-stranger's misfortune) before they hear Isabelle's story positions them as readers who are in need of instruction. Isabelle's narrative provides corrective instruction to David's group and suggests proper ways to respond to the sentimental episode. In Isabelle's case, the novel suggests a particularly pious solution: she removes herself to a convent. In the novel's earlier episodes, when David meets storytellers who become his group of "real friends" (that is, Cynthia, Valentine, and Camilla), he feels sympathy for their misfortune and takes action to relieve it. Rather than giving Isabelle money, a place to stay, or membership in David's group, all the listeners agree that she must retire from the world. Even when Isabelle expresses a most unchristian despair of hope for the future, the group passively assents to her return to a French convent. Isabelle's narrative leaves the group more or less resigned. It is the group's noticeably studied inaction when they encounter a tale of suffering that is both a necessary and correct action to take. Why should this be?

The answer has to do with the relative fictionality of Isabelle's episode and its role in Fielding's formal experiment. The focus on Isabelle's radical otherness, her tenuous relationship to the group, and her encounter with David's already near-perfect family (they have not yet married, but otherwise are already

tidily paired off) all suggest explicitly that this is an occasion of reading fiction. In the first place, Isabelle has the looks and manner of a fictional heroine: “They were all surprised at the Grandeur of her Air and Manner, and the perfect Symmetry of her Features” (153). Even before Isabelle’s narrative begins, a moment of indirect discourse suggests that her story will arouse feelings, but that those feelings will not change Isabelle’s misery: “she [Isabelle] should only make them feel her Afflictions, without any possibility of relieving them” (153). Isabelle’s episode not only demonstrates ways of right feeling, interpretation, and action in response to overwhelming sentimental feeling, it also provides a *mise en scène* of feeling for fictional characters. Additionally, that *mise en scène* is punctuated by breaks in Isabelle’s narrative. These breaks occur at the chapter divisions and are accompanied by a paragraph or two during which David’s group demonstrates their careful listening by either recounting the lessons they have learned from the previous section or summarizing Isabelle’s narrative. The group does not over-indulge in those feelings, however. Feeling for characters in novels and their flagrant misery cannot be translated into action in the world not only because it leads to quixotism, but also because it erodes the potential for instruction.²⁶ The correct response to sentimental episodes in novels is a prudent sympathy that resists over-involvement.

While Fielding depicts the rewards for the correct response to reading sentimental novels and shrewdly points out the dangers of over-identification, in Isabelle’s episode she anticipates the opposition to reading sentimental novels that has only begun to emerge. By the end of the century, a full-scale war would be conducted in print against novel reading, complete with dramatic examples of children who starved while their mother sobbed uncontrollably over the miseries of a fictional woman.²⁷ Fielding’s novel promotes restrained sympathy because she anticipates the problem of overindulging in the suffering of

²⁶ The paradox, of course, is that David’s family is also fictional and the text is a novel, but the lesson remains of how readers should read novels and translate their moral lessons into their own lives.

²⁷ See John Tinnon-Taylor for a full account of the opposition to novels that became widespread from mid-century onward in *Early Opposition to the English Novel: The Popular Reaction from 1760 to 1830* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1943).

fictional characters. Fielding's message about the importance of restrained sympathy is echoed formally as well. Structurally, neither Isabelle herself nor her episode has any bearing on the outcome of the novel. Isabelle's episode does provide David's family with an opportunity to practise and perfect their restrained sympathy (while the reader watches), but, unlike the other two stories that make up the episodic-sentiment part of the novel (Cynthia's and Camilla's stories), Isabelle's episode can be entirely removed from the novel with little or no change in the novel's plot or outcome. Fielding sidesteps potential opposition to novel reading first by championing a specific kind of restrained sympathy and second by structuring Isabelle's episode so that it can be entirely erased from the novel with no changes to the text. Fielding repurposes the sentimental episode as an instructional tool so long as readers respond with restrained sympathy.

Teaching readers how to respond with restrained sympathy is the moral aim of *David Simple*. To achieve this, the novel includes forms from devotional reading. When these forms are adapted for fiction, readers are taught to practise casual engagement with fictional suffering. Fielding's novel demonstrates that the satiric-picaresque is unsuitable for both feeling and instruction because its form encourages reading practices which disable the processes that permit learning and sympathy. Devotional reading practices themselves are likewise unsuitable for novel reading—repetitive reading that leans towards topical application is unsuitable for reading fiction, particularly sentimental episodes, because this kind of reading, when applied to sentimental episodes, results in the kind of absorption and over-investment that Fielding found unsuitable and later novel readers found dangerous. When devotional reading practices are adapted for novel-reading, therefore, they must be adapted in ways that will result in a reader's restrained sympathy rather than in unrestrained tears. Through *David Simple*'s formal experiments Fielding suggests that the form of the sentimental novel is not itself inherently dangerous or ethically uncertain, but that readers are in need of instruction in how to read those novels and put them to use. For Fielding, particular kinds of fictions can be put to didactic use.

Here I make a case for a relationship between existing devotional reading practices and the development of the (seemingly)

secular novel. This relationship was conducted through the borrowing of the form of one genre and adapting and repurposing it to accomplish considerably different ends in another genre. This approach sheds light on a number of assumptions about the form and purpose of the eighteenth-century novel. Locally, Sarah Fielding can be understood as a formal innovator with an abiding interest in how form influences and shapes reading response.²⁸ Examining an early novel like *David Simple* through the lens of enormously popular devotional reading practices challenges the assumption that what was attractive about the novel to the growing reading public was its novelty. More likely, the novel's appeal resulted from feelings of familiarity that readers experienced when they encountered familiar forms in novels. Consequently, it is the pleasure of the known and recognizable that transforms the novel into the force it becomes from the 1740s onward. Those feelings of familiarity resulted in a reading experience far more attuned to religious practices than secular ones, perhaps even in spite of the novel's overtly secular plots. Finally, understanding the relationship between devotional and not quite secular reading experiences helps to explain the changing ontological status of fictionality. By looking at the way that forms are adopted and adapted from devotional texts, we can begin to translate the imagined relationship between forms and the world of action.



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²⁸ Her wide-ranging writing includes the David Simple narratives, *The Adventures of David Simple*, *Familiar Letters between the Principle Characters in David Simple*, and *David Simple: Volume the Last* (even pieces of the same narrative written across the span of nearly 10 years were told using different fictional forms), the pedagogical *The Governess, or The Little Female Academy* (1749), *Remarks on Clarissa* (1749), and *The Cry* (1754), the latter two of which defy generic categorization, and her later works, which add historical fiction (*The Lives of Cleopatra and Octavia*, 1757), tragic fiction (*The History of the Countess of Dellwyn*, 1759), and epistolary fiction (*The History of Ophelia*, 1761) to her generic experiments.