Sir Charles Grandison
and the Trial of Principle

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Stephen Osadetz

*Sir Charles Grandison* and the Trial of Principle

Among the more puzzling tendencies in eighteenth-century rhetoric was the vague yet remarkably common assertion that various things – plans of action, people’s minds, long books, and even whole disciplines of knowledge – could be reduced to fundamental principles. This gesture is made with remarkable regularity in the titles of many of the most famous treatises of the period: to name only a few, Newton’s *Principia*, Berkeley’s *Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, and Bentham’s *Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Such titles suggest – whether the promise is fulfilled or not – that readers will find within these treatises some basic proposition that encapsulates the whole work in question. In an era when books were heavy and expensive, many recognized the efficacy of this approach to framing ideas, the need to frame certain statements that could stand metonymically in conversation for whole works of natural or moral philosophy. David Hume put it succinctly when he wrote that a principle offers “a whole science in a single theorem” (254). Among these might be included Descartes’s *cogito*, Newton’s inverse-square law of gravity, Kant’s categorical imperative, and Malthus’s principle of population, as well as a great many more that have been forgotten. One of the most regular qualities of many of the groundbreaking texts that achieved broad success in the eighteenth century was that they were often associated with brief statements that could stand for the whole work in question. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the principle was the preeminent short form of eighteenth-century intellectual discourse.

It is harder to know how to take this tactic, this way of framing ideas, when it is applied to literary works, novels especially. Two of the more obvious examples of
principles occurring in novels might be Candide’s insistence that “Tout est bien,” and the opening sentence of _Pride and Prejudice_, “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” Both statements are tested and refuted repeatedly over the course of their novels, as though the confrontation between principle and fictional narrative were always played out in the ironic mode. Critics of the novel have often come to precisely this conclusion. Ian Watt, for instance, wittily echoed this irony in _The Rise of the Novel_, when he made Berkeley’s Philonous something of a prophet of novelistic realism: “it is an universally received maxim, that _everything which exists is particular_” (16). Geoffrey Bennington, too, has argued that sententious propositions seem “to want to transcend the contingency of the diegetical universe, and to be more ‘essential’” (5) than the two apparently essential components of that universe, narration and description.¹ One indication of this incompatibility, he rightly points out, is that general propositions can be evaluated for their truth or falsity, while the more properly fictional elements of a novel cannot. But the problem remains. The novel, these critics appear to concur, is a medium particularly suited to exploring only those instances when principles fail to describe the world of particular experience.

This is to say that critical accounts of the relationship between sententiousness and the novel have come up somewhat short on the topic of didacticism, the novelistic mode that seeks to make fiction a vehicle for inculcating principles, rather than for

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¹ Sarah Raff has recently extended Bennington’s position a step further to argue that didacticism by precept is itself a mode of seduction liable to quixotism: “precepts undermine standard distinctions between belief in fiction and real-world belief” (16).
exposing the incompatibility of these two forms. Samuel Richardson was one of the writers of the period most committed to exploring nuanced accommodations that might be possible between the general principle and epistolary fiction. On the title pages of *Pamela*, for instance, Richardson claims that the book is “Designed to Inculcate the Principles of Virtue and Religion in the Youth of Both Sexes”; in the preface to his second novel, Clarissa Harlowe and Anna Howe are said to be “endowed with the noblest principles of Virtue and Religion.” The preface to *Sir Charles Grandison*, too, uses the same terms to distinguish among the central male characters of the three books: Mr. B is ultimately saved, not only by Pamela’s good example, but also by “the foundation of good principles laid in his early years by an excellent mother”; Lovelace is “devoid of principle”; and Grandison is “regulated by one steady principle” (*Grandison*, 1.3-4). All this indicates that Richardson thought that principles were somehow foundational to both his characters and his books, to the very project, it could be said, of writing didactic fiction.

This observation, simple as it is on its face, when combined with another will come to involve some of the deepest problems attendant on the writing of fiction that seeks to project moral norms onto the vagaries of everyday life. That other observation has to do in particular with Richardson’s final novel, *Sir Charles Grandison*: an enormous amount of the scribbling done by Harriet Byron, the novel’s central letter writer, takes place not in the indicative mood – that is, not in the mood that narrates what has actually happened, is happening, or will happen – but in the conditional and the subjunctive. I will reiterate this point in somewhat different terms, because it is central to my argument. *Sir Charles Grandison*, to a remarkable extent, is not primarily a novel
about things that happen and actions that are performed. Rather, it is a much more a complicated woven texture of anticipations and suppositions, of things as they might be and things – in the cases when the conditional and subjunctive take over, as they often do – as they are not.

This article takes as its subject the confrontation between principle and fictional narrative in Richardson’s writing, particularly in his third novel, *Sir Charles Grandison*. The project of combining two divergent forms, the general principle and fictional narrative, provokes a peculiar formal effect that helps to make *Sir Charles Grandison* such a distinctive and experimental novel. I call this effect *speculative narration*. Broadly, this effect occurs because an order of general moral truth purports to exist over and above the exigencies of what happens in the narrative, creating a disjunction between what *should* happen and what *does* happen. Subjunctive narration is the formal effect that is symptomatic of the incompatibility between principle and real life, or, in the case of the novel, between principle and narrative action.² In this case, the conflict between principle and event causes Richardson’s letter-writers to shift out of the indicative mood of narrative action and instead to focus events through a hypothetical frame. This tendency, to shift into the conditional and the subjunctive, not only makes *Sir Charles Grandison*

² Lois A. Chaber has also remarked the preponderance of the subjunctive mood in Richardson’s final novel, although she suggests, in an almost deconstructive turn, that it undermines rather than supports Richardson’s theological concerns. As she puts it, “Richardsonian technique subverts Richardsonian doctrine” (299). My interest is to demonstrate that Richardson’s investment in imaginative grammatical moods is essential to the experimental nature of the novel.
Grandison a very peculiar sort of fictional narrative, but it also provokes certain strong normalizing effects, including a special set of transformations in grammatical person and verbal tense that are analogous to free indirect discourse but specially suited to the epistolary novel. Dorrit Cohn once suggested that, particularly in the Austen’s case, free indirect discourse arose when she sought to “cast the spirit of epistolary fiction into the mold of third-person narration” (113) More recently, Monika Fludernik and Joe Bray have pointed out that the narrative effects of this technique were available, even in the insistently first-person mode of epistolary fiction itself. Here, I show that the didactic effects of free indirect discourse could be accomplished by other, perhaps more quotidian but no less flexible transformation that were natural to the epistolary mode.

Given the decisive influence that Sir Charles Grandison had on subsequent literary history and its tendency towards the naturalization of third-person omniscience in

3 For Bray, see esp. chap. 4, “Reserve and Memory: Richardson and the Experiencing Self,” 54-80.

4 A great deal of critical attention has been paid to free indirect discourse, both to what it is, formally, and what it does. In my rather flexible account of speculative narration, I mean to develop something akin to the “indefinite” free indirect discourse that Susan Lanser identifies at certain points in Austen’s novels (73-75), where it is sometime unclear who is speaking, character or narrator. Similarly, in Sir Charles Grandison, it is sometimes unclear who is speaking, the characters as actors in the plot, or characters as idealized moral norms. Both Lanser and John Bender claim free indirect discourse entails certain normalizing effects: see Bender (211-13). For other seminal treatments, see Pascal, Banfield, and Bakhtin.
narration, it is worth wondering why the novel so often goes unread today. I want to emphasize that it has only been excluded from the canon fairly recently. Much of the reason why *Sir Charles Grandison* goes unread, I want to suggest, is that we continue to lack an adequate critical framework for reading eighteenth-century didactic literature. The case I want to make here is that in his final novel Richardson explored how the principle, which was so essential to the rhetoric of intellectual prose in the period in which he wrote, could be put to use in the novel.

*Sir Charles Grandison*’s didactic concern might suggest a certain narrowness of conception, but Richardson’s novel is much more expansive than its predecessors, not only in its emphatically public concerns, but also in the variety of its circumstances. The very notion that the book revolves around a virtually perfect central male character,

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5 Although *Clarissa* is indisputably Richardson’s most successful drama in terms of sustained drama, it has not always and unanimously been considered the greatest of the three novels. Upon finishing his final novel, Richardson was so inundated with requests to continue his drama that he appended a letter to its final pages, responding to a reader “who was solicitous for an additional volume,” and who wanted “to know if the story were intended to be carried further. Readers and authors both were slow to let go of characters they loved. See Brewer, esp. chap. 4, “Lewd Engraftments and the Richardsonian Coterie Public,” 121-53.

6 It is worth pointing out, perhaps, that Richardson’s writing of *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison* was exactly contemporaneous with the publishing of two of the most important texts on the modern principle, Condillac’s *Treatise on Systems* (1749), and D’Alembert’s *Preliminary Discourse* (1751) to the French *Encyclopédie*. 
coupled with its most famous scene, the aborted duel with Sir Hargrave Pollexfen, might suggest to someone who has not read the novel that it is relatively devoid of action. The opposite is the case. There is a great deal of high drama in *Sir Charles Grandison*. The volumes tell of duels not only aborted but also fought, of vicious robberies, of multiple kidnappings, of women distracted with madness, as well as of a hundred other scenes that, though more quotidian, do not lack for drama.

Whereas the previous two novels are unified around issues of seduction and (in the case of *Pamela*) conversion and marriage or (in the case of *Clarissa*) rape and death, *Grandison* is much more various. Each volume takes up a more or less discrete problem. In the first volume, Harriet Byron goes to visit her relations in London and is confronted with a series of unsuitable suitors. When she refuses the advances of Pollexfen, a preening, violent man, he kidnaps her from a masquerade and attempts to force her into marriage. The volume revisits the plot of Richardson’s previous novel, with the important differences that Harriet’s family allows her to follow her own inclinations in marriage, and though the novel seriously entertains the possibility that she might be raped by Pollexfen, Harriet is rescued by Sir Charles Grandison. The second volume begins with Pollexfen challenging Harriet’s rescuer to a duel. In what is certainly the most famous circumstance of the novel, Grandison handily disarms Pollexfen and refuses the fight, but the volume is more centrally concerned with the development of Harriet’s feelings for her rescuer. Interwoven into this volume are the stories of how Grandison’s brilliant sister, Charlotte, has developed an unfortunate romantic entanglement with a military officer,

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7 Margaret Doody, for one, has written that Grandison is too obtrusively good, “so credible,” that “he could easily be intolerable” (274).
Captain Anderson (who has extracted her promise that she will not marry unless he allow her to do so) and of Grandison’s execution of a will left by Danby, one of his closest friends. In the third volume, Grandison must protect his ward, Emily Jervois, from being kidnapped by her horrid mother (a story that Frances Burney may have borrowed for *Evelina*), and he also reveals that he cannot entertain the possibility of marriage, because of an attachment he developed to a woman he met while in Italy, Clementina. The final four volumes follow this logic, each taking up a specific problem, as Grandison returns to Italy upon a summons by Clementina’s family, is freed of his commitment to her, and marries Harriet.

The very complicated nature of this narrative suggests that Richardson had to seek a nuanced accommodation between general principle and epistolary fiction in his final novel.\(^8\) When the marital negotiations between Grandison and the family of Clementina

\(^8\) This concern with principles was a preoccupation that Richardson began to develop in his earlier novels. Both these novels are written to test a particular proposition, the “dangerous, but too commonly received notion,” as Richardson calls it in the preface to *Clarissa*, that a reformed rake makes the best husband. *Clarissa*, too, can fairly be considered to be a battle waged, not only between two sorts of characters, the idealized woman and the depraved rake, but between two sets of opposing maxims. Lovelace, supposed to be a man of “free” or “loose” principles, as Richardson likes to call him, is thoroughly circumscribed in his conduct by that set of maxims that he refers to as his Rake’s Creed. Clarissa makes a similar sort of recourse to principles, but in her case she turns to the Bible, particularly in her meditations on Job that appear towards the end of her novel.
della Porretta reach a crisis, Grandison insists that the Italians “know my principles.” One is left to wonder what this means. Does his statement imply that he regulates his action on the basis of a canon of foundational propositions, somewhat akin to his own *Moral and Instructive Sentiments*? Or does he mean something altogether more vague and allusive? The very frequency with which Richardson appealed to principles, I think, suggests that these assertions would have meant something specific to those who read his books in the eighteenth century. But that frequency also marks a difference between the eighteenth century’s assumptions about foundationalism and our own.

Perhaps we can get at these questions by looking at a crucial moment in the fifth volume of Richardson’s last novel. Here, *Grandison* admonishes his cousin for having lost a great deal of money after being duped into gambling with loaded dice: “Adversity,” he says, “is the trial of principle. Without it, a man hardly knows whether he is an honest man” (2:513). This was a sentiment that Richardson liked to repeat. It is one of the first maxims listed in his collection of extracts from *Sir Charles Grandison*, and it also occurs, somewhat modified and in very different circumstances, at a crucial moment in *Clarissa*. In this earlier case, the words are written by Lovelace: “Necessity, after all, is the test of principle” (838). Here, Lovelace is speaking of Captain Tomlinson, but it is a sentiment that he often likes to apply to Clarissa. In the last letter he writes before raping her, he pens these lines to Belford:

> *Is not this the hour of her trial* — And in her, of the trial of the virtue of her whole Sex, so long premeditated, so long threatened? — Whether her frost is frost indeed? *Whether her virtue is principle*?⁹ (879)

⁹ emphasis mine.
For Lovelace, rape is a means of putting Clarissa’s principles on trial. This itself would seem a completely perverted idea unless one believes that rape will transform a woman’s resistance into welcoming passion or meek submission. As he continues with this letter, he cites various of his favorite sentiments from his Rake’s Creed (whether “once subdued, she will not be always subdued,” for instance), setting them off in italics as if to emphasize that Clarissa’s rape should be a test of certain abstract propositions, just as much as it is a test of her character.

For Lovelace, rape is the trial of principle. For Grandison, adversity is that trial. That two of Richardson’s most important characters, though apparently so different, can express such similar sentiments encourages Richardson’s reader to take this pronouncement as a description of his fictional project more generally. He is suggesting not only that rapes and gambling debts are means of testing abstract propositions but that fictional narrative itself is a means of putting principle on trial. This is a fascinating problem that gets to the very heart of why Richardson wrote fiction. The exigencies of narrative are meant to test certain universal moral truths that exist on another order, that, by its very nature, transcends particular circumstances. Evidence for this sensibility can be found everywhere in Richardson’s prose. Appended to the end of Sir Charles Grandison is a “Concluding Note” with which he sought to answer the criticisms that had been raised about the volumes of the novel that had already been published. He took this opportunity to reflect, finally and more generally, on the purpose of his fiction: “Sir CHARLES GRANDISON,” he writes, “is therefore in the general tenor of his principles and conduct . . . proposed for an Example” (466). Richardson’s use of the word principle is important here. There is often a certain ambiguity that crops up when principles are
invoked. On one hand, a principle can be a basic proposition, one that makes sense of a large body of particular data, whether those contained in a systematic treatise, or, as in Richardson’s fiction, where moral sentiments give shape and meaning to the circumstances of narrative exposition. On the other hand, the word *principle* is often invoked to mean something much more diffuse, a multivalent ideal that transcends the particularities of empirical fact and everyday experience. It is this second, more powerful and expansive sense of principle that Richardson invokes when he proposes that Charles Grandison be taken as an example of moral action. In *Grandison*, adversity – that is, narrative itself – is figured as the trial of principle, and the variety of the narrative reflects this different and more diffuse orientation.

I. Sir Charles Grandison as Formal Experiment

I would like to turn now to consider my second observation, that with *Sir Charles Grandison*, Richardson tested the degree to which a story could be related in verbal moods other than the indicative; that is, in moods other than that which is used for narrating actions. Instead, the letters written by Charles and Charlotte Grandison and, especially, by Harriet Byron, are set to an astonishing degree in the verbal moods of the conditional and the subjunctive. In other words, *Sir Charles Grandison* is much less concerned with what happens than with what could happen and what might happen, were circumstances different. In a long novel such as this, such an assertion of a general trend is all but impossible to prove anecdotally. Specific passages may only allude to the general character of the prose, but one or two instances of this heavy use of speculative narration will help, nonetheless, to indicate the special character of the novel. This
transposition out of the indicative mood happens for various reasons that are essential to
the thematic investments of the novel. *Sir Charles Grandison* is wholly preoccupied with
certain sorts of thematic and situational circumstances that have grammatical
consequences: the characters in the novel constantly attempt to anticipate the long-term
consequences of proximate actions; they try to discern other characters’ internal states,
especially their intentions and their emotions; they wonder what might have happened,
had circumstances been different; they are constantly imagining themselves in another’s
situation; and at all costs they struggle to behave in ways that are polite.

Take, for example, this extended paragraph, which Harriet Byron writes
immediately after having read about Charles’s refusal of Clementina’s hand in marriage,
not because he does not love her, but because the marriage would entail his conversion to
Catholicism. “Would to Heaven I had never come to [London]!” she writes, wishing, in
effect, that she had never met and fallen in love with Charles Grandison. This
expostulation leads to a flood of regret, which is cast into the conditional mood, as she
wishes that her circumstances were different:

> What of pleasure have I had in it? – This abominable Sir Hargrave Pollexfen! –
> *But for him, I had been* easy and happy; since *but* for him, I *had* never wanted the
> relief of Sir Charles Grandison; never had known him. Fame *might perhaps* have
> brought to my ears . . . some of his benevolent actions; and he *would have*
> attracted my admiration without costing me one sigh. And yet, *had it been so*, I
> *should* then have known none of those lively sensibilities that have mingled
> pleasure with my pain . . . O that I *had* kept my foolish heart free! . . . And I
> *should* have passed many a happy winter evening, when my companions came to
work and read with me at Selby-house, in answering their questions about all these; and Sir Charles would have been known among us principally by the name of The Fine Gentleman; and my young friends would have come about me, and asked me to tell them something more of The Excellent Man (2: 180-81).

Almost every verb in this paragraph is cast into the conditional, but with an orientation toward the counterfactual (“but for him, I had been easy and happy”). Harriet is articulating a wish that her situation not be what it is. Certainly, this is something of an extreme case, but it illustrates the tendency for the novel’s letter writers to fixate on what may be and what might have been.

More often, the shift into speculative narration happens for more pragmatic reasons. It occurs not only in moments of heightened emotion, but also when characters want to smooth over uncomfortable truths. In the first volume, for instance, a legion of hopeful suitors is paraded before Harriet, including, in the first case, John Greville, Richard Fenwick, and Robert Orme, the somewhat more suitable James Fowler, whose appeal is made by his uncle, Sir Rowland, and, finally, Sir Hargrave Pollexfen. In her delicate refusal of Sir Rowland’s nephew, her speech shades into the conditional and the subjunctive as a means of protecting his dignity:

I never would give an absolute denial, Sir, were I to have the least doubt of my mind. If I could balance, I would consult my friends, and refer to them; and their opinion should have due weight with me. But for your nephew’s sake, Sir Rowland, while his esteem for me is young and conquerable, urge not this matter farther. I would not give pain to a worthy heart. (1: 102)\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{10} my italics.
In these four sentences, six verbs occur in the conditional or the subjunctive. Again, they occur for strictly pragmatic reasons. Unlike the last examples, they indicate, not vehement emotion, but rather Harriet’s perfect ability to finesse a difficult social situation. In a very different case, Harriet shifts into the conditional when she reflects on the moment when Hargrave Pollexfen, after kidnapping her and trying to force her to take his hand in marriage, threatens to rape her:

He would have snatched my hand. I put it behind me. He would have snatched the other: I put that behind me too: And the vile wretch would then have kissed my undefended neck: But, with both my hands, I pushed his audacious forehead from me. Charming creature! he called me, with passion in his look and accent: Then, cruel, proud, ungrateful: And swore by his Maker, that if I would not give my hand instantly, instead of exalting me, he would humble me.  

(1:220)

In this case, the conditional performs a sort of double-duty, at once allowing Harriet to invest these painful memories with a degree of grammatical unreality and also permitting an important modulation, allowing her imaginatively to enter into Pollexfen’s thoughts, the threats and attempts that he so clearly intended but was unable to realize. The important point that Harriet is making is that, no matter how heinous Pollexfen’s intentions, she was not raped.

Conditional speculation is also provoked, crucially, by Richardson’s preoccupation with principles, with the constant need to reflect upon what happens in the light of moral rules that stand over and above the exigencies of the narrative. The courses of action taken by the characters are constantly being qualified by the insertion of certain

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11 my italics.
abstract moral rules, of the sort that Richardson extracted for the volume of *Moral and Instructive Sentiments* that he assembled from his novels. As Leah Price has helpfully made clear in *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel*, the very possibility of “writing to the moment,” in which Lovelace takes so much delight towards the middle of *Clarissa*, is fundamentally at odds with the assertion of general truth. As Price notes, echoing Samuel Johnson, the temporal orientations of the two forms are diametrically opposed: “‘Story’ becomes synonymous with speed, ‘sentiments’ with enforced stasis” (21). The extended novel is entirely concerned with propelling its reader through hundreds of pages of text, from one narrative moment to the next. The general truth, on the other hand, is at once compressed and also outside of narrative time, immune to the exigencies of plot. This fundamental incompatibility between rule and fictional reality reveals much of the reason why *Sir Charles Grandison* is so insistently thrust into the verbal moods of the conditional and subjunctive. Richardson subscribes to a certain kind of Platonism, according to which the morally problematic demands of fictional narrative are constantly being qualified by higher principles that indicate what people should do, but do not.

To a large degree, these tendencies toward speculative narration help to explain why the novel is so long. As Harriet narrates what happens over the course of her courtship with Charles, she embroiders her letters with a host of regrets, anticipations, imaginings, and speculations. These conditional dilations delay the completion of important actions and provide the reader with multiple ways of imagining what may happen, increasing the suspense. As Harriet writes to her family, “What a great deal of writing does the reciting of half an hour or an hour’s conversation make, when there are three or four speakers in company; and one attempts to write what each says in the first
person! I am amazed at the quantity, on looking back. But it will be so in narrative letter-writing.” Certainly, this is the case, when one attempts to narrate what people say, but the problem of length is only compounded by her tendency to speculative narration. 12 This sort of writing, after all, requires the limited perspective of a first-person narrator. Richardson made this point emphatically in his preface to Sir Charles Grandison:

> The Nature of familiar Letters, written, as it were, to the Moment, while the Heart is agitated by Hopes and Fears, on Events undecided, must plead an Excuse for the Bulk of a Collection of this Kind. Mere Facts and Characters might be comprised in a much smaller Compass: But, would they be equally interesting?

(1: 4)

Richardson’s epistolary style is often associated with writing “to the moment,” but here he seeks to qualify that formula, by insisting that that writing is done by a “heart agitated by hopes and fears.” This is an important difference. It helps us to see how Richardson is not only concerned with narrative immediacy, but also with the special sort of temporal tension that occurs when what is happening in the moment is seen through the lens of what may happen in the future. These effects contribute, not only to the novel’s length, but also to the special sort of psychological realism that Richardson is interested in producing. By having his letter writers so regularly interrupt the progress of their narrative to worry and anticipate and regret and finesse, Richardson exposes one of the

12 This problem, of conditional and subjunctive dilation, surely accounts for some of the reason why Richardson sometimes experiments, as he did in Clarissa, with casting his narrative in the form of a dramatic dialogue. At certain moments in the text, Richardson’s own impatience to get on with things is entirely evident.
most important qualities of the didactic novel, that it is an emphatically imaginative way of writing, one that is constantly comparing accounts of what did happen and is happening to another order of moral reality, in which people behave just as they should.

II. The Amatory Crisis

I want to focus now on a passage that demonstrates why this preponderance of the conditional and subjunctive is important to the novel and to Richardson’s project of reconciling epistolary narrative and principle. This passage is a miniature masterpiece of subtlety and circumspection. One of the greatest pleasures of Richardson’s fiction is that we observe his characters falling in love before they are even aware of the ardor of their own emotions. The passage in question, which I shall refer to simply as the “amatory crisis,” presents us with Charles Grandison in love. It occurs towards the end of the second volume. Harriet Byron has just privately confessed to Charlotte Grandison that she is in love with her brother. Curious about Charles’s own heart, Charlotte and Lord L. raise the issue of courtship with their brother at the first opportunity. Here is the crucial part of what he has to say when his relations ask him for his thoughts on courtship:

Some think, proceeded he [Sir Charles], that the days of courtship are the happiest days of life. But the man, who, as a lover, thinks so, is not to be forgiven. Yet it must be confessed, that hope gives an ardour which subsides in certainty.

Being called upon by Lord L --- to be more explicit:

I am not endeavouring, said he, to set up my particular humour for a general rule. For my own sake, I would not, by a too early declaration, drive a lady into reserves; since that would be to rob myself of those innocent freedoms,
and of that complacency, to which an honourable lover might think himself entitled; and which might help him . . . to develop the plaits and folds of the female heart.¹³ (1: 429)

Deft, gentle, and precise, these six sentences touch a number of the novel’s key thematic concerns: the incompatibility of vehement love and public exemplarity, the difficulty of reconciling moral rules and personal inclinations, and the basic question of how closely Richardson needs to be read.

I would like to pause over this passage in order to give Richardson his due. Perhaps it is bizarre to attempt a close reading when considering a novel of this length, but this is a passage that rewards concerted attention. This passage shows us why Richardson’s last novel is worth reading, not only for the way in which it anticipates Burney and Austen – although these are important authors to keep in mind here – but because it is a subtle, crafted, compelling piece of prose in its own right.

In reading these six short sentences, there are a number of observations that need to be made immediately. The first is that these are very uncharacteristic things for Grandison to say. The gist of what he is suggesting is that undeclared love is more vehement than love that is declared and returned, and, more shocking still, that it is better to secret away one’s love than to declare it openly. Effectively he is saying that, if he were in love, in order to enjoy and foster that emotion, he would strive to cultivate a stark disjunction between his internal emotional state and his outward behavior. If Grandison’s

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¹³ What Grandison has to say is somewhat longer, but this is the most important part of the passage.
romantic inclinations were determined entirely by Harriet’s or Clementina’s virtue (and clearly they are not), these sentiments would be unthinkable.

The point is not that Grandison is lying or being duplicitous about his feelings for Harriet. Rather, what this passage gives us is a particular instance in which personal inclination cannot accommodate general rules. This is a difficulty of which Grandison himself is very much aware: “I am not endeavouring, said he, to set up my particular humour for a general rule.” This is perhaps, the single most uncharacteristic statement that Grandison makes in the entire novel. His whole raison d’être, as Richardson made clear both in the preface and later in the “Concluding Note” was to exemplify general principles.

Richardson’s readers were quick to recognize this problem, none more so than the publisher of the fourth edition of the novel. The first two editions of the novel were published virtually simultaneously between 13 November 1753 and 14 March 1754, and the third edition followed only five days later, on 19 March 1754. All of these editions have Grandison diffidently suggest that his comments on love should not be taken as a general principle: “I am not endeavouring, said he, to set up my particular humour for a general rule.” The fourth edition, however, published in 1762, only seven months after Richardson’s death, was different. In this case, the passage was revised so as to sound more “Grandisonian,” even though the sentiment makes no sense in the context of what

14 An overview of the early publishing history of *Sir Charles Grandison* can be found in Pierson, whose essay is generally very helpful, except that he somehow overlooks this alteration, which is without question one of the most significant, given its crucial location and the complete semantic reversal that it entails.
he is saying, for the crucial *not* is omitted: “I am endeavouring, said he, to set up my particular humour for a general rule.” This reading continued unchanged through all the subsequent editions of the novel, up until the 1810 London edition, which used an earlier version as a copy text. This is a remarkable revision, a substantial reversal of meaning that occurs at a crucial point in the text. Certain readers, apparently, would rather alter the novel than believe that Grandison would refuse to frame principles. This revision alone should cause us to pay special attention to what Richardson has to say in this passage. In reading this amatory crisis, I would like to pay close attention to two competing registers of speech: one public, impersonal, and dispassionate; the other, private, personal, and driven by inclination. Grandison, of course, is purportedly the locus of the former, more public form of discourse, but as we shall see, this passage is shot through with eruptions of personality.

Throughout this passage, Grandison is making subtle distinctions between what, as a lover, one does, one thinks, and one says. Even though Richardson’s reader cannot strictly have free indirect discourse in this passage (after all, the scene is narrated from Harriet’s first-person viewpoint), Richardson achieves an effect very close to it. Grandison denies that he is attempting to raise his particular feelings to a general rule, but as he employs the methods of speculative narration, shifting from the first person to the third, and from the indicative tense to the subjunctive, he is doing precisely that. The impersonal style of the principle – its impersonalizing grammatical effect – invades Grandison’s tortured account of his own emotions. The effect is something akin to free indirect discourse, only in reverse. The grammatical transformations are subtly different, but their didactic effect is nonetheless powerful.
A similar sort of transposition happens with the grammatical mood of this passage. Throughout, Grandison avoids ascribing any emotion to himself by stating it directly in the present-tense indicative. Instead, he transposes all of his own most private thoughts into the moods of the conditional and the subjunctive: “he should not, perhaps, were he in love”; “I would not . . . drive a lady into reserves”; “that would be to rob myself of those innocent freedoms . . . to which an honourable lover might think himself entitled; and which might help him . . . to develop the plaits and folds of the female heart.” In this case, the only sentences that are most clearly conducive to the present indicative are general rules: “Some think . . . that the days of courtship are the happiest of life”; “the man, who, as a lover, thinks so, is not to be forgiven”; “hope gives an ardour which subsides in certainty.” This leads to a remarkable point that, as I have already suggested, is not only true of this passage, but of the novel Sir Charles Grandison as a whole. When characters speak of themselves, and especially of their emotional states, they tend to be enormously circumspect, to shift into forms of impersonality and into conditional and subjunctive verbal constructions that make these statements appear sometimes merely possible, sometimes conjectural, and sometimes blatantly counterfactual. Statements of general truth, on the other hand, tend to be framed grammatically in the indicative, and so to have a degree of reality that characters’ internal states – their roiling thoughts and emotions – do not.

What Richardson is attempting is an effect that is analogous to that of free indirect discourse, but appropriate to the first-person narrative frame of the epistolary novel. Richardson’s didactic fiction is accompanied by subtle shifts in pronoun reference and grammatical mood, by heavily ironized language, and by the enmeshing of the
impersonal, public voice with that of personal privacy. But I want to insist – perhaps
counterintuitively, given the length at which I have examined this passage – that there is
nothing special about this. Or, what I mean to say is that this is not a special narrative
technique that is exclusive to Richardson’s prose, or even to the didactic novel. What I
am remarking in Richardson’s prose, as similar as it seems to free indirect discourse, is
much more quotidian. The shifts entailed by speculative narration are entirely normal to
everyday speech.

This is exactly the point. It is the very everydai*ness of this effect that makes it so
significant, and also so useful to Richardson as a novelist. There are, however, two
qualities that make Richardson’s use of these techniques remarkable: their predominance
in the novel, and the focus they put on interpretive ambiguity. Although I have already
dealt with the first quality, it is important enough to bear restating. The dominant text of
the novel is cast in the conditional and the subjunctive, not indicative. That is to say, The
History of Sir Charles Grandison is not much of a history at all, in that the letters that
Harriet writes are much less concerned with describing actions (although there are certain
scenes of high drama, such as her abduction by Pollexfen and Grandison’s crossing of the
Alps), and much more interested in engaging in various sorts of speculation. This,
perhaps, cuts to the heart of why so many readers today find the novel so frustrating, and
why it was so beloved by readers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Sir
Charles Grandison is not primarily concerned with actions, but with intentions and
consequences. Three sorts of questions preoccupy Harriet: how to discern other
characters’ intentions and emotional states, how to discern complicated long-term
consequences from various sorts of available actions, and how to behave decorously. All
these concerns push the narrative mood out of the indicative and into the subjunctive. They make the novel less about what happens and more about why things happen. This is why so many readers complain that *Sir Charles Grandison* is a novel in which nothing seems to happen. A great deal happens, but it happens internally, in the heart, as Richardson put it, agitated by hopes and fears.
Works Cited


