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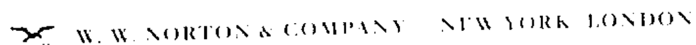
Inventing HUMAN RIGHTS

A History

Lynn Hunt



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riences (empathy), which in turn made possible new social and political concepts (human rights). In these pages I try to untangle how that process worked. Because my own discipline of history has for so long disdained any form of psychological argument—we historians often speak of psychological reductionism but never of sociological or cultural reductionism—it has largely overlooked the possibility of an argument that depends on an account of what goes on inside the self.

I am trying to refocus attention on what goes on within individual minds. It might seem like an obvious place to look for an explanation of transformative social and political changes, but individual minds—other than those of great thinkers and writers—have been surprisingly overlooked in recent work in the humanities and social sciences. Attention has been focused on the social and cultural contexts, not on the way individual minds understand and reshape that context. I believe that social and political change—in this case, human rights—comes about because many individuals had similar experiences, not because they all inhabited the same social context but because through their interactions with each other and with their reading and viewing, they actually created a new social context. In short, I am insisting that any account of historical change must in the end account for the alteration of individual minds. For human rights to become self-evident, ordinary people had to have new understandings that came from new kinds of feelings.

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"TORRENTS OF EMOTION"

Reading Novels and Imagining Equality

A YEAR BEFORE ROUSSEAU PUBLISHED the *Social Contract*, he gained international attention with a best-selling novel, *Julie, or the New Héloïse* (1761). Although modern readers find the epistolary or letter form of the novel sometimes excruciatingly slow to develop, eighteenth-century readers reacted viscerally. The subtitle excited their expectations, for the medieval story of the doomed love of Héloïse and Abelard was well known. The twelfth-century philosopher and Catholic cleric Peter Abelard seduced his pupil Héloïse and paid a high price at the hands of her uncle: castration. Separated forever, the two lovers then exchanged intimate letters that captivated readers down through the centuries. Rousseau's contemporary takeoff seemed at first to point in a very different direction. The new Héloïse, Julie, falls in love with her tutor, too, but she gives up the penniless Saint-Preux to satisfy the demand of her authoritarian father

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that she marry Wolmar, an older Russian soldier who once saved her father's life. She not only surmounts her passion for Saint-Preux but also appears to have learned to love him simply as a friend, when she dies after saving her young son from drowning. Did Rousseau mean to celebrate her submission to parental and spousal authority or did he intend to portray her sacrifice of her own desires as tragic?

The plot, even with its ambiguities, can hardly account for the explosion of emotions experienced by Rousseau's readers. What moved them was their intense identification with the characters, especially Julie. Since Rousseau already enjoyed international celebrity, news of the imminent publication of his novel spread like wildfire, in part because he read sections of it aloud to various friends. Although Voltaire derided it as "this miserable trash," Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, Diderot's co-editor of the *Encyclopédie*, wrote to Rousseau to say that he had "devoured" the book. He warned Rousseau to expect censure in "a country where one speaks so much of sentiment and passion and knows them so little." The *Journal des Savants* admitted that the novel had defects and even some long-winded passages, but it concluded that only the cold-hearted could resist these "torrents of emotion that so ravage the soul, that so imperiously, so tyrannically extract such bitter tears."[1]

Courtiers, clergy, military officers, and all manner of ordinary people wrote to Rousseau to describe their feelings of a "devouring fire," their "emotions upon emotions, upheavals upon upheavals." One recounted that he had not cried over Julie's death, but rather was "shrieking, howling like an animal." (Figure 1) As one twentieth-century commentator on these letters to Rousseau remarked, eighteenth-century readers of the novel did not read it with pleasure but rather with "passion, delirium,

FIGURE 1. *Julie's Deathbed*
This scene provoked more distress than any other in *Julie, or the New Héloïse*. The engraving by Nicolas Delaunay, based on a drawing by the well-known artist Jean-Michel Moreau, appeared in a 1782 edition of Rousseau's collected works.

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spasms and sobs." The English translation appeared within two months of the French original; ten editions in English followed between 1761 and 1800. One hundred fifteen editions of the French version were published in the same period to meet the voracious appetite of an international French-reading public.[2]

Reading *Julie* opened up its readers to a new form of empathy. Although Rousseau gave currency to the term "rights of man," human rights are hardly the main subject of his novel, which revolves around passion, love, and virtue. Nevertheless, *Julie* encouraged a highly charged identification with the characters and in so doing enabled readers to empathize across class, sex, and national lines. Eighteenth-century readers, like people before them, empathized with those close to them and with those most obviously like them—their immediate families, their relatives, the people of their parish, in general their customary social equals. But eighteenth-century people had to learn to empathize across more broadly defined boundaries. Alexis de Tocqueville recounts a story told by Voltaire's secretary about Madame Duchâtelet, who did not hesitate to undress in front of her servants, "not considering it a proven fact that valets were men." Human rights could only make sense when valets were viewed as men too.[3]

Novels and Empathy

Novels like *Julie* drew their readers into identifying with ordinary characters, who were by definition unknown to the reader personally. Readers empathized with the characters, especially the heroine or hero, thanks to the workings of the narrative form itself. Through the fictional exchange of letters, in other words,

epistolary novels taught their readers nothing less than a new psychology and in the process laid the foundations for a new social and political order. Novels made the middle-class Julie and even servants like Pamela, the heroine of Samuel Richardson's novel by that name, the equal and even the better of rich men such as Mr. B, Pamela's employer and would-be seducer. Novels made the point that all people are fundamentally similar because of their inner feelings, and many novels showcased in particular the desire for autonomy. In this way, reading novels created a sense of equality and empathy through passionate involvement in the narrative. Can it be coincidental that the three greatest novels of psychological identification of the eighteenth century—Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–48) and Rousseau's *Julie* (1761)—were all published in the period that immediately preceded the appearance of the concept of "the rights of man"?

Needless to say, empathy was not invented in the eighteenth century. The capacity for empathy is universal because it is rooted in the biology of the brain; it depends on a biologically based ability to understand the subjectivity of other people and to be able to imagine that their inner experiences are like one's own. Children who suffer from autism, for example, have great difficulty decoding facial expressions as indicators of feelings and in general have trouble attributing subjective states to others. Autism, in short, is characterized by the inability to empathize with others.[4]

Normally, everyone learns empathy from an early age. Although biology provides an essential predisposition, each culture shapes the expression of empathy in its own particular fashion. Empathy only develops through social interaction; therefore, the forms of that interaction configure empathy in

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important ways. In the eighteenth century, readers of novels learned to extend their purview of empathy. In reading, they empathized across traditional social boundaries between nobles and commoners, masters and servants, men and women, perhaps even adults and children. As a consequence, they came to see others—people they did not know personally—as like them, as having the same kinds of inner emotions. Without this learning process, "equality" could have no deep meaning and in particular no political consequence. The equality of souls in heaven is not the same thing as equal rights here on earth. Before the eighteenth century, Christians readily accepted the former without granting the latter.

The ability to identify across social lines might have been acquired in any number of ways, and I do not pretend that novel reading was the only one. Still, novel reading seems especially pertinent, in part because the heyday of one particular kind of novel—the epistolary novel—coincides chronologically with the birth of human rights. The epistolary novel surged as a genre between the 1760s and 1780s and then rather mysteriously died out in the 1790s. Novels of all sorts had been published before, but they took off as a genre in the eighteenth century, especially after 1740, the date of publication of Richardson's *Pamela*. In France, 8 new novels were published in 1701, 52 in 1750, and 112 in 1789. In Britain, the number of new novels increased sixfold between the first decade of the eighteenth century and the 1760s: about 30 new novels appeared every year in the 1770s, 40 per year in the 1780s, and 70 per year in the 1790s. In addition, more people could read, and novels now featured ordinary people as central characters facing the everyday problems of love, marriage, and getting ahead in the world. Literacy had increased to the point where even servants, male and female, read novels

in the big cities, though novel reading was not then, nor is it now, common among the lower classes. French peasants, who made up as much as 80 percent of the population, did not usually read novels, when they could read at all.[5]

Despite the limitations in readership, the ordinary heroes and heroines of the eighteenth-century novel, from Robinson Crusoe and Tom Jones to Clarissa Harlowe and Julie d'Etanges, became household names, even on occasion to those who could not read. Aristocratic characters such as Don Quixote and the Princess of Cleves, so prominent in seventeenth-century novels, now gave way to servants, sailors, and middle-class girls (as the daughter of a minor Swiss nobleman, even Julie seems rather middle class). The remarkable rise of the novel to prominence in the eighteenth century did not go unnoticed, and scholars have linked it over the years to capitalism, the aspiring middle class, the growth of the public sphere, the appearance of the nuclear family, a shift in gender relations, and even the emergence of nationalism. Whatever the reasons for the rise of the novel, I am concerned with its psychological effects and how they connect to the emergence of human rights.[6]

To get at the novel's encouragement of psychological identification, I focus on three especially influential epistolary novels: Rousseau's *Julie* and two novels by his English predecessor and avowed model, Samuel Richardson, *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–48). My argument could have encompassed the eighteenth-century novel in general and would then have considered the many women who wrote novels, and male characters, such as Tom Jones or Tristram Shandy, who certainly attracted their share of attention. I have chosen to concentrate on *Julie*, *Pamela*, and *Clarissa*, three novels written by men and centered on female heroines, because of their indisputable cul-

tural impact. They did not produce the changes in empathy traced here all on their own, but a closer examination of their reception does show the new learning of empathy in operation. To understand what was new about the "novel"—a label only embraced by writers in the second half of the eighteenth century—it helps to see how specific ones worked on their readers.

In the epistolary novel, there is no one authorial point of view outside and above the action (as later in the nineteenth-century realist novel); the authorial point of view is the characters' perspectives as expressed in their letters. The "editors" of the letters, as Richardson and Rousseau styled themselves, created a vivid sense of reality precisely because their authorship was obscured within the letters' exchange. This made possible a heightened sense of identification, as if the character were real, not fictional. Many contemporaries commented on this experience, some with joy and amazement, others with concern, even disgust.

The publication of Richardson and Rousseau's novels produced instantaneous reactions—and not just in the country of their original appearance. An anonymous French man, now known to be a cleric, published a 42-page letter in 1742 detailing the "avid" reception given the French translation of *Pamela*: "You cannot go into a house without finding a Pamela." Although the author claims that the novel suffers from many shortcomings, he confesses, "I devoured it." ("Devouring" would turn out to be the most common metaphor for reading these novels.) He describes Pamela's resistance to the advances of Mr. B, her employer, as if they were real people rather than fictional characters. He finds himself caught up in the plot. He trembles when Pamela is in danger, feels outrage when aristocratic characters such as Mr. B act in an unworthy fashion. His

choice of words and style of speaking repeatedly reinforce the sense of emotional absorption created by the reading.[7]

The novel made up of letters could produce such striking psychological effects because its narrative form facilitated the development of a "character," that is, a person with an inner self. In one of the early letters of *Pamela*, for example, our heroine describes to her mother how her employer has tried to seduce her:

> . . . he kissed me two or three times, with frightful Eagerness.—At last I burst from him, and was getting out of the summer-house; but he held me back, and shut the door. I would have given my Life for a Farthing. And he said, I'll do you no Harm, *Pamela*; don't be afraid of me. I said, I won't stay. You won't, Hussy! Said he: Do you know whom you speak to? I lost all Fear, and all Respect, and said, Yes, I do, sir, too well!—Well may I forget that I am your Servant, when you forget what belongs to a Master. I SOBB'D and cry'd most sadly. What a foolish Hussy you are! said he: Have I done you any Harm?—Yes, Sir, said I, the greatest Harm in the World: You have taught me to forget myself, and what belongs to me; and have lessen'd the Distance that Fortune has made between us, by demeaning yourself, to be so free to a poor Servant.

We read the letter along with the mother. No narrator, indeed no quotation marks, stand between us and Pamela herself. We cannot help but identify with Pamela and experience with her the potential erasure of social distance as well as the threat to her self-possession.[8] (Figure 2)

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FIGURE 2. *Mr. B Reads One of Pamela's Letters to Her Parents*
In one of the opening scenes of the novel, Mr. B bursts in upon Pamela and demands to see the letter she is writing. Writing is her means of autonomy. Artists and publishers could not resist adding visual renditions of the key scenes. This engraving by the Dutch artist Jan Punt appeared in an early French translation published in Amsterdam.

Although the scene has many theatrical qualities, and is staged for Pamela's mother in the writing, it also differs from theater because Pamela can write at greater length about her inner emotions. Much later on, she will write pages about her thoughts of suicide when her plans for escape run awry. A play, in contrast, could not linger in this way on the unfolding of an inner self, which on the stage usually has to be inferred from action or speech. A novel of many hundreds of pages could bring out a character over time and do so, moreover, from the perspective of inside the self. The reader does not just follow Pamela's actions; the reader participates in the blossoming of her personality as she writes. The reader simultaneously becomes Pamela even while imagining him-/herself as a friend of hers and as an outside observer.

As soon as Richardson's authorship of *Pamela* became known in 1741 (he published it anonymously), he began receiving letters, mostly from enthusiasts. His friend Aaron Hill proclaimed it "the soul of religion, good breeding, discretion, good nature, wit, fancy, fine thought, and morality." Richardson had sent a copy to Aaron Hill's daughters in early December 1740, and Hill dashed off an immediate response: "I have done nothing but read it to others, and hear others again read it to me, ever since it came into my hands; and I find I am likely to do nothing else, for the Lord knows how long yet to come . . . it takes possession, all night, of the fancy. It has witchcraft in every page of it; but it is the witchcraft of passion and meaning." The book cast a kind of spell on its readers. The narrative—the exchange of letters—unexpectedly swept them out of themselves into a new set of experiences.[9]

Hill and his daughters were not alone. The *Pamela* craze soon engulfed England. In one village, it was said, the inhabi-

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tants rang the church bells upon hearing the rumor that Mr. B had finally married Pamela. A second printing appeared in January 1741 (the original was only published on November 6, 1740), a third in March, a fourth in May, and a fifth in September. By then, others had already penned parodies, lengthy critiques, poems, and knockoffs of the original. They were to be followed over the years by many theatrical adaptations and paintings and prints of the major scenes. In 1744, the French translation made its way onto the papal Index of Forbidden Books, where it would soon be joined by Rousseau's *Julie*, along with many other works of the Enlightenment. Not everyone found in such novels "the soul of religion" or "morality" that Hill had claimed to see.[10]

When Richardson began to publish *Clarissa* in December 1747, expectations ran high. By the time the last volumes (there were seven in all, ranging from 300 to over 400 pages each!) appeared in December 1748, Richardson had already received letters begging him to offer a happy ending. Clarissa runs off with the rake Lovelace to escape the loathsome suitor proposed by her own family. She then has to fend off Lovelace, who eventually rapes Clarissa after drugging her. Despite Lovelace's repentant offer of marriage, and her own feelings for him, Clarissa dies, her heart broken by the rake's assault on her virtue and her sense of self. Lady Dorothy Bradshaigh recounted to Richardson her response on reading the death scene: "My Spirits are strangely seized, my Sleep is disturbed, waking in the Night I burst into a Passion of crying, so I did at Breakfast this Morning, and just now again." The poet Thomas Edwards wrote in January 1749, "I never felt so much distress in my life as I have done for that dear girl," referred to earlier as "the divine Clarissa."[11]

Clarissa appealed more to highbrow readers than to the general public, yet it nonetheless went through five editions in the next thirteen years and was soon translated into French (1751), German (1752), and Dutch (1755). A study of French personal libraries set up between 1740 and 1760 showed that *Pamela* and *Clarissa* ranked among the three English novels (Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* was the other) most likely to be found in them. *Clarissa*'s length no doubt put off some readers; even before the thirty manuscript volumes went into print, Richardson worried and tried to cut it. A Parisian literary newsletter offered a mixed judgment on reading the French translation: "In reading this book I experienced something not at all ordinary, the most intense pleasure and the most tedious boredom." Yet two years later another contributor to the newsletter announced that Richardson's genius for presenting so many individualized characters made *Clarissa* "perhaps the most surprising work that ever came from a man's hands."[12]

Although Rousseau believed his own novel to be superior to Richardson's, he nonetheless ranked *Clarissa* the best of the rest: "No one has ever yet written, in any language, a novel equal to *Clarissa*, not even one approaching it." Comparisons between *Clarissa* and *Julie* continued right through the century. Jeanne-Marie Roland, wife of a minister and informal coordinator of the Girondin political faction during the French Revolution, confessed to a friend in 1789 that she reread Rousseau's novel every year, yet she still considered Richardson's work the acme of perfection. "There is not a people in the world who offer a novel capable of sustaining a comparison with *Clarissa*; it is the chef-d'oeuvre of the genre, the model and the despair of every imitator."[13]

Men and women alike identified with the female heroines of these novels. From letters to Rousseau, we know that men, even military officers, reacted intensely to Julie. One Louis François,

a retired military officer, wrote to Rousseau: "You have driven me crazy about her. Imagine then the tears that her death must have wrung from me. . . . Never have I wept such delicious tears. That reading created such a powerful effect on me that I believe I would have gladly died during that supreme moment." Some readers explicitly acknowledged their identification with the female heroine. C. J. Panckoucke, who would become a well-known publisher, told Rousseau, "I have felt pass through my heart the purity of Julie's emotions." The psychological identification that leads to empathy clearly took place across gender lines. Male readers of Rousseau did not just identify with Saint-Preux, the lover Julie is forced to renounce, and empathized even less with Wolmar, her bland husband, or baron d'Etange, her tyrannical father. Like female readers, men identified with Julie herself. Her struggle to overcome her passions and live a virtuous life became their struggle.[14]

By its very form, then, the epistolary novel was able to demonstrate that selfhood depended on qualities of "interiority" (having an inner core), for the characters express their inner feelings in their letters. In addition, the epistolary novel showed that all selves had this interiority (many of the characters write), and consequently that all selves were in some sense equal because all were alike in their possession of interiority. The exchange of letters turns the servant girl Pamela, for example, into a model of proud autonomy and individuality rather than a stereotype of the downtrodden. Like Pamela, Clarissa and Julie come to stand for individuality itself. Readers become more aware of their own and every other individual's capacity for interiority.[15]

Needless to say, everyone did not experience the same feelings when reading these novels. The English novelist and wit

Horace Walpole derided the "tedious lamentations" of Richardson, "which are pictures of high life as conceived by a bookseller, and romances as they would be spiritualized by a Methodist teacher." Yet many quickly sensed that Richardson and Rousseau had struck a vital cultural nerve. Just one month after the publication of the final volumes of *Clarissa*, Sarah Fielding, the sister of Richardson's great rival and a successful novelist herself, anonymously published a 56-page pamphlet defending the novel. Although her brother Henry had published one of the first sendups of *Pamela* (*An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews, In which, the many notorious Falsehoods and Misrepresentations of a Book called "Pamela," are exposed and refuted*, 1741), Sarah had become good friends with Richardson, who printed one of her novels. One of her fictional characters, Mr. Clark, insists that Richardson has so succeeded in drawing him into the web of illusion "that for my own part I am as intimately acquainted with all the *Harlows* [sic], as if I had known them from my Infancy." Another character, Miss Gibson, insists on the virtues of Richardson's literary technique: "Most truly, Sir, do you remark, that a Story told in this Manner can move but slowly, that the Characters can be seen only by such as attend strictly to the Whole; yet this Advantage the Author gains by writing in the present Tense, as he himself calls it, and in the first Person, that his Strokes penetrate immediately to the Heart, and we feel all the Distresses he paints; we not only weep for, but with *Clarissa*, and accompany her, step by step, through all her Distresses."[16]

The noted Swiss physiologist and literary scholar Albrecht von Haller published an anonymous appreciation of *Clarissa* in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1749. Von Haller struggled mightily to grasp the nettle of Richardson's originality. Although he appre-

ciated the many virtues of earlier French novels, von Haller insisted that they provided "generally no more than representations of the illustrious actions of illustrious persons," whereas in Richardson's novel, the reader sees a character "in the same station of life with ourselves." The Swiss author paid close attention to the epistolary format. Although readers might have trouble believing that all the characters liked to spend their time writing down their every innermost feeling and thought, the epistolary novel could offer minutely accurate portrayals of individual characters and thereby evoke what Haller termed compassion: "The pathetic has never been exhibited with equal power, and it is manifest, in a thousand instances that the most obdurate and insensible tempers have been softened into compassion, and melted into tears, by the death, the sufferings, and the sorrows of Clarissa." He concluded that "We have not read any performance, in any language, that so much as approaches to a competition."[17]

Degradation or Uplift?

Contemporaries knew from their own experience that reading these novels had effects on bodies and not just minds, but they disagreed about the consequences. Catholic and Protestant clergy denounced the potential for obscenity, seduction, and moral degradation. As early as 1734, Nicolas Lenglet-Dufresnoy, a Sorbonne-trained cleric himself, found it necessary to defend novels against his colleagues, albeit under a pseudonym. He teasingly rebutted all the objections that led authorities to prohibit novels "as so many pricks that serve to inspire in us sentiments that are too lively and too marked." Insisting that novels were appropriate in any period, he conceded that "at all times

credulity, love and women have reigned; thus in all times novels have been followed and savoured." It would be better to concentrate on making them good, he suggested, rather than trying to suppress them altogether.[18]

The attacks did not end when novel production took off at midcentury. In 1755, another Catholic cleric, abbé Armand-Pierre Jacquin, wrote a 400-page work to show that reading novels undermined morality, religion, and all the principles of social order. "Open these works," he insisted, "and you will see in almost all of them, the rights of divine and human justice violated, parents' authority over their children scorned, the sacred bonds of marriage and friendship broken." The danger lay precisely in their attractive powers; by constantly harping on the seductions of love, they encouraged readers to act on their worst impulses, to refuse the advice of their parents and church, to ignore the moral strictures of the community. The only reassurance that Jacquin could offer was the lack of staying power of novels. The reader might devour one the first time around but never read it again. "Was I wrong to prophesy that the novel of *Pamela* would soon be forgotten? . . . It will be the same in three years for *Tom Jones* and *Clarissa*."[19]

Similar complaints flowed from the pens of English Protestants. Reverend Vicesimus Knox summed up decades of lingering anxieties in 1779 when he proclaimed novels degenerate, guilty pleasures that diverted young minds from more serious and edifying reading. The upsurge in British novels only served to broadcast French libertine habits and accounted for the corruption of the present age. Richardson's novels, Knox admitted, had been written with "the purest intentions." But inevitably the author had recounted scenes and excited sentiments that were incompatible with virtue. Clerics were not alone in their