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Dress and the Discourses of the Mind

To understand the relationship between body and dress, and the connections among body, dress, thoughts, words, gestures, history, and mind, is to understand the epistemology that underlies Richardson’s use of dress as discourse in his novels. And the place to begin understanding these relationships is by comprehending how the majority of eighteenth-century English men and women, in particular, Samuel Richardson himself, understood the relationship between body and mind and between mind and soul.

As Roy Porter, Christopher Fox, and others have demonstrated, numerous and often conflicting notions about the relationships among body, mind, and soul circulated during the early part of the eighteenth century, framed by religious, scientific, and philosophical debate. However, Richardson’s published writings and personal correspondence show compelling evidence of engagement with and admiration for the philosophical works of John Locke, as does Richardson’s appreciation for The Spectator, among the first literary productions to advocate and promote Locke’s ideas. Locke’s treatises, then, serve as a base point for discussion, and, through an examination of those precepts of Locke’s philosophy that Richardson embraced and those that he clearly rejected, Richardson’s own philosophy regarding the mind and its outward expressions may be determined.

As any reader of Pamela, Part Two, can attest, Richardson had studied Locke’s treatise, Some Thoughts Concerning Education, as Pamela comments extensively on the work and on Locke himself. Although Mr. B. “holds a very high regard for this Author,” Pamela finds “some few things which I think want clearing up” in regards to Locke’s treatise, and, indeed, she is able to find “fault with such a genius as Mr. Locke.” Yet Pamela’s fault finding is over minor points and “little matters” (IV:224),
not larger theoretical principles; she largely subscribes to Locke’s thoughts on the education of children, though she offers small, yet sensible, modifications.3 As Pamela notes, “… I thought it an excellent piece, in the main” (IV:217), and, from this, we may assume that Richardson himself approved of Locke’s theories on education, “in the main.” In addition, in The Apprentice’s Vade Mecum, Richardson paraphrases Locke’s thoughts on the soul, as articulated in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, and some of the language of Clarissa vividly echoes An Essay, Locke’s most renowned text.4

For Locke, the body, soul, and consciousness work in unison to fashion the individual. The body, consisting of “the cohesion of solid, and consequently separable, parts and a power of communicating motion by impulse,” is “but a participation of the same continued life, by constantly fleeting particles of matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized body.”5 Locke’s description of the body allows for aging, change, loss of limb, as it is “the same continued life” and “the same organized body.” This physical body is animated by the soul. As Locke writes, “our idea of soul, as an immaterial spirit, is of a substance that thinks, and has a power of exciting motion in body, by willing, or thought.”6 George Cheyne, the celebrated Bath medical doctor, both friend and physician to Richardson, viewed body and soul in a similar, though rather more mechanical, way, with the body as some complicated piece of machinery, operated and overseen by the soul:

the Human Body is a Machin of an infinite Number and Variety of different Channels and Pipes, filled with various and different Liquors and Fluids, perpetually running, gliding, or creeping forward, or returning backward, in a constant Circle, and sending out little Branches and Outlets, to moisten, nourish, and repair the Expences of Living. That the Intelligent Principle, or Soul, resides somewhere in the Brain, where all the Nerves, or Instruments of Sensation terminate, like a Musician in a finely fram’d and well-tun’d Organ-Case; that these Nerves are like Keys, which, being struck on or touch’d, convey the Sound and Harmony to this sentient Principle, or Musician.7

Within the brain, “the Intelligent Principle, or Soul” resides. Cheyne further notes that “the Intelligent Principle is like a Bell in a Steeple, to which there are an infinite Number of Hammers all around it, with Ropes of all Lengths, terminating or touching at every Point of the Surface of the Trunk or Case.”8 Thus, the soul or spirit animates, regulates,