

Thomasson, Amie L., *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. xii, 175, \$49.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by ACHILLE C. VARZI, *Department of Philosophy, Columbia University, New York NY 10027, USA*

(Published in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63:3 (2001), 723–727)

Pamela: “... but, I hope I shall copy your Example, and that of Joseph, my Name’s-sake; and maintain my Virtue against all Temptations.” Joseph, these are such kind words. I hope you were not being sarcastic.

Joseph: I am never sarcastic. But to tell you the truth, Pamela, I am not sure those words were addressed to you.

Pamela: It says “Dear Sister Pamela”—have you forgotten?

Joseph: I have not forgotten. We are talking about a letter that I wrote to my sister the day I was discarded. I’m just not sure that you are she. You are a creature of Richardson’s. My sister and I are creatures of Fielding’s.

Pamela: I’m telling you. The Pamela of *Pamela* and the Pamela of *Joseph Andrews* are one and the same.

Joseph: How can you be in two different stories? You are a fictional character, like me. And are we not defined entirely by the properties that our authors ascribe to us when they create us?

Pamela: That is what some philosophers think. Meinongian theories of fiction, for example, identify fictional characters with certain nonexistent individuals—the individuals correlated with all and only those attributes that the authors specify. Hence new characters are picked out whenever a new novel is written, or even when a single attribute is changed in a new edition of an existing novel, or in a sequel. Likewise, possibilist theories of fiction identify us with suitable *possibilia*. But all these theories are wrong. We are not possible or nonexistent individuals. We are actual characters.

Joseph: What is the difference?

Pamela: For one thing, we exist. We are not individuals that *would* have existed if the world had been otherwise. We are part of this world and when people talk about us they talk about something that exists, just as when they talk about the novels in which we appear. Second, we are not individuals in the ordinary sense. For example, we are abstract. We lack any spatiotemporal location.

Joseph: You are telling me that we are like sets and numbers?

Pamela: Not at all. We are more like laws, theories, governments. We are contingent entities, whereas sets and numbers have all their properties as a matter of necessity. We are ontologically dependent entities, whereas sets and numbers enjoy an autonomous existence, at least in a Platonist view. For example, we depend (rigidly) on our authors and on their creative acts. And we depend (generically) on the existence of some copy of some literary work about us. Moreover, sets and numbers are timeless while we are not: we are created in particular circumstances, and we can change as time goes on.

Joseph: We are not like sets and numbers and we are not *possibilia*. What else could we be?

Pamela: There are lots of other options. Philosophers tend to squeeze everything into a small number of ontological categories, but really one should be open-minded and allow for a broader, more varied categorial apparatus that does justice to the many ways in which an entity can depend on others. Among other things, one should have room for entities which, albeit abstract, are dependent on concrete entities such as real people. Call those entities *abstract artifacts*.

Joseph: All right, let us suppose we are abstract artifacts. How does that make you my sister?

Pamela: It doesn't. But it allows for the possibility. The actual identification follows from other facts, such as the fact that your author (Fielding) meant you to be writing your letter to me, the character created by my first author (Richardson). He meant you to be my brother, so you are my brother. Abstract artifacts such as us are *purely intentional objects*—we are what our authors want us to be.

Joseph: Come on. During my wedding with Fanny my sister laughed, provoking Abraham's solemn wrath. You would never have done that. You are so kind and virtuous!

Pamela: People change...

Joseph: People?

Pamela: You know what I mean. Characters may change—if their authors want them to. That's the whole point about treating us as artifacts.

Joseph: What about Shamela. Is that you again?

Pamela: Good grief, no! That is a parody.

Joseph: I don't see the difference. *Shamela* is fiction. And if fictional characters are what their authors want them to be.... "The true name of this Wench was Shamela, and not Pamela, as she stiles herself." Keyber (or shall I say Fielding?) couldn't have been more explicit.

Pamela: But then what prevents someone from writing a story in which I turn out to be a witch, or a monster, a mindless robot, a hologram?

Joseph: You tell me!

Pamela: Not much that I can say, I'm afraid. We are in the hands of our authors.

Joseph: ... if we insist that having the same properties is not a necessary condition for being the same character.

Pamela: It is not a sufficient condition, either. Suppose that some John Smith, who has no acquaintance with either Richardson or Fielding, writes a novel about a maid called "Pamela" and the attempts of an attendant to seduce her. That wouldn't be enough for it to be a novel about *me*. Even if Smith's Pamela had exactly the same properties that Richardson ascribes to me (so that she would be a better Pamela than Fielding's, if I may put it so), she would be a different character because the sameness of properties would be purely coincidental.

Joseph: This sounds like the case of the monkey that hits a piano keyboard and by sheer coincidence produces a sequence of sounds identical to (say) Brendel's latest performance of the *Wanderer*. Some philosophers would say that the monkey has not played a sonata because it did not intend to do so.

Pamela: I would agree. This is why I say that fictional characters are both artifacts and *intentional* objects. We are essentially created entities.

Joseph: It's an interesting theory.

Pamela: It is not my own. You can find everything that I have said, and much more, in Amie Thomasson's book. It is an interesting book and it has a lot to offer. Most importantly, it doesn't just try to show how fictional characters may find a place in some preconceived ontology. Thomasson's study seems to be driven by an independent sense of what is required to understand ordinary talk regarding fiction. I like that: look at the actual literary practices and see what sort of things would most closely correspond to fictional characters.

Joseph: And to do this properly one must be open-minded—one must have room for all sorts of ontological categories.

Pamela: Exactly. A good theory of fiction is an ontological theory on a par with any other.

Joseph: I am looking at the multidimensional system of categories of Chapter 8. Quite impressive. Still, from what I understand the system is not as general as it could be. There is no way one can do justice to certain distinctions.

Pamela: For example?

Joseph: Take two entities from two distinct ontological categories, say a person (a physical entity) and her thought that she should quit smoking (a mental state). There is a corresponding distinction in the realm of fiction; I am a fictional person and my thought that I should quit smoking is a fictional thought. Yet the theory only tells us that we are fictional entities and draws no ontological distinction. By the same token, you are categorially homogeneous with my head-

ache, with the letter that I wrote to you, with my smile. Don't you find that disturbing?

Pamela: Of course I find it disturbing. But I accept it. Ontologically, there is no significant distinction between me and other fictional entities, though readers are supposed to pretend that I am a person and that your smile (say) is an event. Alas, this is why someone *could* write a story in which I turn into a smile. A real person cannot turn into a real smile.

Joseph: Here is another thing that puzzles me. Suppose someone writes a novel in which you interact with Richardson. I mean the real Richardson, your author. Would that make Richardson a fictional character, too?

Pamela: Surely not. All ontological categories are mutually exclusive, so a real person cannot also be an abstract artifact. On the artifactual theory the scenario that you have concocted is impossible. One can write a book about Richardson. But one cannot write a *fictional* story featuring him—the author of *Pamela*—as a character.

Joseph: So the London mentioned in *Pamela* is not the real London either? The Sun and Moon mentioned in *Joseph Andrews* are not the real Sun and Moon? What are they? How can a reader understand a novel if the words in the text don't have their usual meaning?

Pamela: ... Hold on. I think I was wrong. There *can* be fictional stories featuring real people and real objects as characters. We just have to be careful. I am a fictional character created by Richardson, hence I belong to the category of abstract artifacts. Richardson himself is a real human being, hence he does not belong to that category. That's the metaphysical story. But there is more to fiction than metaphysics. In particular, we need a good account of the semantics of fictional discourse. And this need not proceed from the assumption that every character of a fictional story is a fictional character. Some characters are fictional, others are real. Only, when we read a story we are supposed to interpret every statement in it as being implicitly tagged by the prefix "according to the story." So, with reference to your example, what the story says about me or about Richardson (or about London, the Sun, the Moon, etc.) will be true by definition if understood within the scope of the prefix "according to the story." But what the story says about us can be true or false, as the case may be, if understood outside the scope of the operator. It is false that I am a woman and it is false that Richardson married me, even if there may be stories according to which this is true.

Joseph: You cannot have your cake and eat it too.

Pamela: Some trade-offs are demanded, and these are not bad ones to make. They have several other advantages, too. For example, possibilist theories of fictions are in trouble when it comes to explaining the fact that my stories give an in-

complete description of my character. Many possible individuals fit the bill, and there seems to be no non-arbitrary way of selecting one and identifying it with me. Would that individual be of bloodtype A? Of bloodtype B? Other theories bite the bullet and identify me with a truly *incomplete* individual. This is what the Meinongians would maintain. They would say that I am indeterminate with respect to bloodtype—that I neither am nor am not of bloodtype A, for example. I say all this stems from a misunderstanding of how fictional discourse works. There is no genuine indetermination. All one can say is that the statements “According to the stories, Pamela Andrews is of bloodtype A” and “According to the stories, Pamela Andrews is not of bloodtype A” are both false.

Joseph: Yet the *unprefixed* statements “Pamela Andrews is of bloodtype A” and “Pamela Andrews is not of bloodtype A” have opposite values—correct? The first is false and the second is true, for abstract artifacts have no blood.

Pamela: Correct.

Joseph: So, some of your properties are internal to your stories but other properties are external. Internally you are a woman; externally you are Richardson’s most popular heroine. Internally you are made of flesh and bones; externally you are bloodless. Doesn’t this bother you?

Pamela: Actually it is the other way around. The distinction between two sorts of property—say “internal” and “external” properties, as your terminology suggests—is a typical expedient of Meinongianism. Other theories stick to one type of property but distinguish two kinds of predication—say, “exemplifying” versus “encoding.” These are *ad hoc* distinctions and I would be bothered by them. But the artifactual theory need not resort to such maneuvers. On the artifactual theory there is only a difference of contexts, not of facts. Some of the things people say about us are to be understood within the relevant (often implicit) fictional contexts—they are meant to be true according to the stories in which we appear. Other things that people say about us are to be understood from an external critic’s perspective, as any other statement about the real world. Remember what I told you at the beginning: we are actual entities, we *are* part of the real world.

Joseph: Speaking of that, I meant to ask you: we are not eternal, right? We were literally created by our authors.

Pamela: That’s correct.

Joseph: But do we ever go out of existence?

Pamela: Of course. We cease to exist when all evidence about us is gone. As I said, we are ontologically dependent on the creative acts of our authors *and* on the existence of some literary work about us. No literary work, no characters.

Joseph: I see...

Pamela: Problems?

Joseph: I'm just slightly worried about this business of being an actual entity. But I'll learn to live with it—and to die.

Pamela: Look at the good side. Technology has made giant steps. Memory and storage are no longer a problem. Chances are we'll live forever.