



Understanding the Ambiguity in Pamela: Contexts, Responses, and Debates

By Dr. Md Shaheen Akhtar

Abstract

This paper explores how eighteenth-century debates about femininity are played out in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; Or Virtue Rewarded*, and manifested in the responses to the novel, both literary and non-literary. The extensive debates that succeeded the publication of *Pamela* must be read keeping in mind the contemporary social position of women in the eighteenth-century, with the rise of the novel and transition to a bourgeois exchange-value based economy. The publication of *Pamela* divided readers and critics into two sharp camps: pamelists and anti-pamelists, those who either praised or sympathised with the novel and those who opposed it vehemently. Both these trends were engendered by the moral or social dilemma presented in Richardson's *Pamela* which is taken to be the crux of the novel. This paper looks at these trends and the questions that *Pamela* as a novel deals with, by locating them in the context of contemporary social position of women in eighteenth-century England. It is also an enquiry into the implications of the marriage between Pamela and Mr. B as either subversive or conforming to existing social structures and hierarchies.

The Ambiguity Question

Pamela; Or Virtue Rewarded is known to be among one of the very first novels ever written. What was ‘novel’ about *Pamela*, Ian Watt argues, was Richardson’s idea of “basing his novels on a single action, a courtship”.¹ Watt explains his statement by referring to the link that Madame de Stael made between literature and the social position of women, arguing that novels did not exist before as the Ancients had no interest in the emotional relationships between men and women, due to the inferior social position which women occupied throughout history.² The importance which eighteenth-century literature placed on the relationship between man and woman, love and marriage is a new phenomenon, which can be understood as a corollary of the socio-economic changes which characterized the eighteenth-century, mainly the rise of the bourgeois class, the emergence of capitalism, and a shift towards exchange-value production.

Marlene LeGates has examined the changing attitudes towards women in literature, and observed that a remarkable shift took place in the eighteenth-century with regards to the image of the woman and attitudes to marriage and family. According to LeGates, “The misogyny which had characterized traditional satire and philosophical thought from the ancient Greeks through the seventeenth century was replaced by the eighteenth-century version of the Cult of True Womanhood”.³ Earlier attitudes towards women and marriage reflect a fear of their untameable sexuality and the understanding of marriage as “second-best, symbolizing one’s earthy existence and its unavoidable burdens”. The higher ideal is religious or spiritual commitment or the pursuit of wisdom. However, marriage served useful purposes in practical life, and without it, there was “no housekeeper, no nurse in one’s old-age, and no heirs”.⁴ Fear of women’s sexuality and the anxiety to control it manifested itself in the figure of the henpecked or cuckolded husband and

woman as shrew in earlier literature up to the Restoration period. Men could control their sexual urges, while women could not.

This underwent a dramatic change in the eighteenth-century, “the image of the disorderly woman is replaced by the image of the chaste maiden and obedient wife, popularized in the sentimental novels particularly...The model is Samuel Richardson’s Pamela, virtuous unto marriage—and to convince those who have been sceptical about Pamela’s motives, Richardson’s Clarissa, virtuous unto death”.⁵The idea of marriage was also reconstructed. Whereas earlier literature ridiculed the state of the married man, eighteenth-century literature exalted it. Puritan values resurfaced, such as the spiritual compatibility between spouses, freedom of choice (as opposed to the arranged marriages between the aristocracy), friendship between man and woman as the foundation for marriage. “Particularly in the sentimental novels, the ideas of familial affection, marital fidelity, and female chastity were celebrated, and the satire of woman was replaced by the praise of Womanhood”.⁶

Nancy Armstrong has examined the new image of woman in the eighteenth-century with respect to the conduct book literature produced at the time.⁷ Although conduct books for women and men had always existed, the eighteenth-century saw a proliferation of the publication of conduct books directed at women, which far exceeded those addressing men. Conduct books for women have always sought to either “reproduce, if not always to revise, the culturally approved forms of desire”.⁸ While the form of the conduct book remains the same throughout history, its content changes along with the cultural practices essential to maintaining political order. Towards the end of seventeenth-century, conduct books for women were meant for socially aspiring groups. They sought to educate women in qualities which would make her attractive to men of a superior status, as opposed to an aristocratic woman who only had rank and fortune on her side. “This

writing produced a new kind of woman, a domestic woman, and established her as the most desirable woman to marry. It was she, and not her aristocratic counterpart, who ensured a man the sanctity and gratification of private life.”⁹Eighteenth-century literature with its drama centering on the encounter between an aggressive male and an innocent virtuous female, LeGates argues, was the traditional conduct book fictionalized. This provided greater results than pedantic tracts which came before.

This ideological shift has been attributed to the rise of capitalism and the shift towards exchange-value production which resulted in women’s loss of productive work and made them economically superfluous. Critics such as Lucien Goldman see the novel as a reflection of the material reality of its times. Goldman made the link between the rise of the novel and the growth in exchange-value production with the emergence of capitalism as the dominant economic form during the seventeenth and eighteenth-century. This was accompanied by the subsequent devaluation in use-value production.¹⁰ Josephine Donovan expands this argument further to explain the connection between the rise of the novel and women, pointing out the missing part of Goldman’s thesis, the connection between women and use-value production.¹¹

Marx made a distinction between “use-value” and “exchange-value” of a commodity; use-value depends on the utility of the thing whereas exchange-value appears in relation to the exchange of commodities, where money acts a mediator and stands for the value of the thing in bourgeois economy. ¹²“Production for use” and “production for exchange” distinguishes between commodities produced either for immediate consumption, or for barter or sale. Production for use involved domestic work and sustenance agriculture, which provide for the family. In a capitalist society, the economy came to depend on industrial exchange-value production, with men stepping out to work for wages, while women were rendered economically superfluous,

especially those belonging to the upper or middle classes. With the division of men and women into public and domestic spheres, women were given the mantle of maintaining psychological and emotional relationships and ties within the home.¹³ In literature, eighteenth-century thought emphasized the virtue and strength of its new heroine. This enabled the shift to capitalism, as LeGates argued “The idea of the morally superior woman contributed an ideological prop to the family seen as a means of social consolidation in an increasingly class conscious society”.¹⁴

The rise of the nuclear family placed increased importance in the marriage choice. This choice was very important for women, because of their subordinate position in the new economy. As Ian Watt pointed out, this choice determined “not only her most important personal relationship, but also her social, economic, and even geographical future”.¹⁵ The rise of the nuclear family and a decline in arranged marriages, which became confined to the aristocracy largely, “women had themselves become commodities in the marriage-market exchange”.¹⁶ Since women had little economic importance now, they were dependant on a handsome dowry in order to get a husband. Marriages became more of a commercial matter. At the same time, there was a decline in the status of unmarried women. The idea of the ‘old maid’ arose in the late seventeenth-century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first usage of the term ‘spinster’ in 1719. Additionally, women were no longer useful in their traditional occupations of weaving, spinning, or other economic tasks, which left them with the unfavourable choice of working for very low wages or being superfluous dependants on someone else.¹⁷ The economic changes which characterized the eighteenth-century left women in a very disadvantageous position: their future depended on their marrying well while it was all the more difficult for them to find a husband.

Under this new system, women had to advertise themselves in order to attract a husband. There was a rise in the use of make-up and cosmetics, which were earlier used mainly by

prostitutes. The increasing attacks on women as duplicitous in the Restoration period and eighteenth-century can be said to directly reflect contemporary concerns. Women were seen as split selves, between mind and body, and the body itself as liable to transformation by age, disease or decay. Nancy Armstrong sees Pamela as promoting the ideal woman whose inner self or depths are to be valued over her outer self or surfaces (the body or clothes and ornaments covering the body).¹⁸ However, Tassie Gwilliam argues, the fear and hostility to feminine duplicity in the eighteenth century covertly required women to act in ways that can be considered duplicitous—“women's behaviour and bodies were supposed to provoke desire, but women were forbidden from intending to provoke desire, or from being conscious of their desirability”.¹⁹ According to Gwilliam, this contradictory ideology of gender and femininity in the eighteenth century are both mimicked and reproduced in the ambiguities of Pamela's narrative. Ian Watt favoured a contextual reading of the ambiguity in Pamela by pointing out that “when later critics suggest that we must choose between Fielding's interpretation or Richardson's they are surely overlooking the possibility that the ambiguity need not spring from conscious duplicity on Pamela's part, since it is implicit in the feminine code by which she acts.”²⁰

This provokes the many charges of hypocrisy and duplicity both on the part of the novel and its heroine in the anti-pamelist literature which followed its publication. *Pamela Censured*, published anonymously as a response to *Pamela*, attacks Richardson's didactic claims for Pamela, accusing it of inflaming the passions of young men and leading women wayward instead of inculcating virtue. It accuses the novel of immorality and charges Richardson's heroine as corrupting its young women readers “into believing they can seduce a man into a lucrative marriage without any moral or physical danger”.²¹ Henry Fielding's *An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews* attacks Pamela and her virtuous character as a part acted by her, in hopes

of securing a great fortune. Fielding sought to expose Richardson's novel as a sham and reveal Pamela's motives as mercenary—"I thought once of making a little Fortune by my Person. I now intend to make a great one by my Vartue".²² Eliza Haywood's *The Anti-Pamela; Or Feign'd Innocence Detected* comes with the warning on its cover page—"Publish'd as a necessary Caution to all Young Gentleman".²³ Haywood's protagonist is Syrena Tricksty, as the name suggests, tries her best to trick rich men into marriage in hopes of financial security. Her plots are always foiled some way or other, in contrast to Pamela's remarkably lucky fate. Gwilliam argues that Fielding's attacks on Pamela's hypocrisy in *Shamela* are only echoes of similar attacks by Mr. B in the novel until he is ultimately convinced that her claims to virtue are authentic.

The responses to *Pamela* suggest outrage at Richardson's novel as a subversive text which destabilizes class hierarchies, endorsing the marriage between an upper-class man and his maid-servant. In *Anti-Pamela*, Haywood denies its heroine Syrena Tricksty an undue happy ending like that of Pamela. Even other pamelist literature, those which do not parody the novel but are more like grub-street imitations of it, alter the original plot in an attempt to give Pamela a noble birth or heritage. In *Pamela's Conduct in High Life* by John Kelly, Pamela's father reveals during a dinner party at Sir Simon Andrews' estate that he has actually descended from his host's great-grandfather and Mrs. Andrews owes her heritage to the respectable Jinks family.²⁴ They descended into poverty after a series of unfavourable business dealings. They did not reveal their ancestry to their daughter in order to prevent an undue pride of station in her. This entirely alters the ideology of Richardson's original novel as Kelly rejects its critique of hereditary honour and virtue, reaffirming the aristocratic beliefs that the original Pamela attacks.²⁵ In *Joseph Andrews*, where Fielding parodies Richardson's novel, as its protagonist Joseph is Pamela's brother who is

inspired by her morals and similarly wishes to protect his virtue from the advances of Lady Booby whom he serves as footman. The ending of *Joseph Andrews* reveals that our hero is actually a gentleman Mr. Wilson's son, which explains his uncommonly attractive features and qualities.²⁶ These responses as well as the critical readings which condemn *Pamela's* outcome, Gooding argues, "suggest a longing to read *Pamela* through the correcting spectacles of social conservatism".²⁷

Pamela's marriage to Mr. B, which is often read as subversive of class hierarchies, actually conforms and reinforces existing social structures. As LeGates puts it, "the drama of the aggressive male checked by the virtuous woman is paradoxically a reaffirmation of the patriarchal authority of the family".²⁸ In *Pamela*, the best fate that the heroine can imagine is surrender to her aggressor. Richardson gives the credit for her virtue and principles to her parents and the religious education they have imparted to her. Her virtue is not natural but rather the effect of a traditional education. The new woman is not only the product of traditional controls but also serves to strengthen these structures, as *Pamela* is supposed to be an example to all women. She is morally superior but not above the authority of man. According to LeGates, this explains the shift in the image of the woman, where the family, religion and the state are now identified with her instead of being threatened by her. "What is divine about the female" LeGates argues, "is her embodiment of the traditional pieties of religion, the family, and even the state".²⁹

What is important in *Pamela* is that the narrative does not end with her marriage to Mr. B, but rather continues into her life after marriage. *Pamela* insists on referring to her husband as "Master" even after marriage. *Pamela* may have been an artful seducer who has tricked her social superior into marriage, but the long list of rules and behavioural requirements which Mr. B demands from *Pamela* transforms the silly squire into a cold, calculating and manipulative

master, as argued by LeGates. She has no rules to set in her turn, but only to obey. Pamela herself acknowledges that Mr. B chose her because she would be more submissive and more deferential towards him than any other lady of equal status. Pamela is paraded in her rustic garments before Mr. B's guests and she is praised on being a very "dexterous carver" many times throughout the novel, a skill which is valuable in a servant. Pamela joyfully exclaims "my prison is become my palace" at her betrothal to her almost rapist, but her station remains that of a servant as the terms of the unequal master-servant relationship reappears in the unequal husband-wife relationship. Although Fielding's *Shamela* derides Pamela for being a social climber who post-marriage spends her husband's fortune swiftly and takes lovers, Pamela's own words indicate that her position in the household remains unchanged. Post-marriage, Pamela exclaims one day, after she is visited by the ladies of the neighbourhood, "When all these tumultuous visitings are over, I shall have my mind, I hope, subside into a family calm, that I may make myself a little useful to the household of my dear master; or else I shall be an unprofitable servant indeed!"³⁰

Notes

1. Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957). University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles. Chapter V, "Love and the Novel: Pamela", pp. 134.
2. Ibid.
3. LeGates, Marlene. "The Cult of Womanhood in Eighteenth-Century Thought", pp. 21.
4. Ibid.
5. LeGates, Marlene. "The Cult of Womanhood in Eighteenth-Century Thought", pp. 23.
6. LeGates, Marlene. "The Cult of Womanhood in Eighteenth-Century Thought", pp. 24.

7. Armstrong, Nancy. (Ed.), Tennenhouse, Leonard. (Ed.). (1987). *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays in Literature and the History of Sexuality*. Routledge Revivals. London. Introduction, pp. 1-24. See also: Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987), Oxford University Press.
 8. Armstrong, N; Tennenhouse, L. “The literature of conduct, the conduct of literature, and the politics of desire: an introduction”, pp. 1.
 9. Armstrong, N; Tennenhouse, L. “The literature of conduct, the conduct of literature, and the politics of desire: an introduction”, pp. 9.
 10. Goldmann, Lucien. *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* (1964). Trans. Alan Sheridan. Travistock Publications. New York. 1975. Originally published in French as *Pour une sociologie du roman*.
 11. Donovan, Josephine. “Women and the Rise of the Novel: A Feminist-Marxist Theory” (1991).
 12. Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One* (1867). Trans. Ben Fowkes. Penguin Books in association with New Left Review. London. 1976.
 13. Donovan, Josephine. “Women and the Rise of the Novel: A Feminist-Marxist Theory”, pp. 447.
 14. LeGates, Marlene. “The Cult of Womanhood in Eighteenth-Century Thought”, pp. 26.
 15. Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957), pp. 139.
 16. Donovan, Josephine. “Women and the Rise of the Novel: A Feminist-Marxist Theory”, pp. 448.
 17. Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957), pp. 145.
-

18. Armstrong, Nancy. "The Rise of the Domestic Woman", *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality* (1987), pp. 114.
19. Gwilliam, Tassie. "Pamela and the Duplicitous Body of Femininity" (1991), pp. 106.
20. Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957), pp. 168.
21. Anonymous. *Pamela Censured: In A Letter to The Editor* (1741). Batten, Charles (Ed.). Augustan Reprint Society 175. Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library. Print.
22. Fielding, Henry. *An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews*(1741).
23. Haywood, Eliza. *The Anti-Pamela: Or Feign'd Innocence Detected* (1741).
24. Kelly, John. *Pamela's Conduct in High Life* (1741). Published in two volumes. Vol. 1 pp. 35-36.
25. Gooding, Richard. "Pamela, Shamela and the Politics of the Pamela Vogue" (1995), pp. 117.
26. Fielding, Henry. Joseph Andrews (1742), Book IV.
27. Gooding, Richard. "Pamela, Shamela and the Politics of the Pamela Vogue" (1995), pp. 111.
28. LeGates, Marlene. "The Cult of Womanhood in Eighteenth-Century Thought", pp. 31.
29. LeGates, Marlene. "The Cult of Womanhood in Eighteenth-Century Thought", pp. 29.
30. Richardson, Samuel. *Pamela; Or Virtue Rewarded* (1741).

Bibliography

Armstrong, Nancy. (Ed.), Tennenhouse, Leonard. (Ed.). (1987). *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays in Literature and the History of Sexuality*. Routledge Revivals. London.

Anonymous. *Pamela Censured: In A Letter to The Editor* (1741). Batten, Charles (Ed.). Augustan Reprint Society 175. Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library. Print.

Donovan, Josephine. "Women and the Rise of the Novel: A Feminist-Marxist Theory". The Chicago University Press. JSTOR. *Signs*, Spring, 1991, Vol. 16, pp. 441-462.

Fielding, Henry. *An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews* (1741).

Fielding, Henry. *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams* (1742).

Goldmann, Lucien. *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* (1964). Trans. Alan Sheridan. Travistock Publications. New York. 1975.

Gooding, Richard. "Pamela, Shamela and the Politics of the Pamela Vogue". University of Toronto Press. Project Muse. *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, Volume 7, Number 2, January 1995, pp. 109-130.

Gwilliam, Tassie. "Pamela and the Duplicitous Body of Femininity". University of California Press. JSTOR. *Representations*, Spring, 1991, No. 34, pp. 104-133.

Haywood, Eliza. *The Anti-Pamela: Or Feign'd Innocence Detected* (1741).

Kelly, John. *Pamela's Conduct in High Life* (1741). Published in two volumes.

LeGates, Marlene. "The Cult of Womanhood in Eighteenth-Century Thought". The John Hopkins University Press. JSTOR. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Autumn, 1976, Vol. 10, pp. 21-39.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One* (1867). Trans. Ben Fowkes. Penguin Books in association with New Left Review. London. 1976.

Richardson, Samuel. *Pamela; Or Virtue Rewarded* (1741).

Richardson, Samuel. *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady* (1747).

Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957). University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.