

VIEWS OF WOMEN IN 18TH CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE: RICHARDSON VS. FIELDING

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Abstract

The eighteenth-century British literature described middle-class life and debated what would later be called bourgeois morality. Its role was somewhat connected to the greater education of the ordinary woman. As soon as Richardson wrote *Pamela* the novel became major intellectual nourishment. In this period, females were able to express their cultural power by means of theatre and novel.

Issues of gender were widely debated in the eighteenth-century English society. The period witnessed an upsurge of argument about women's roles. The purpose of this article is to compare and contrast two of the most important works written in this period: Fielding's "An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews" and Richardson's epistolary novel "Pamela: or, Virtue Rewarded", focusing mainly on the views of the two feminine protagonists.

Keywords: femininity, masculinity, 18th century literature, *Pamela*, *Shamela*

1. OVERVIEW - HENRY FIELDING VS. SAMUEL RICHARDSON

Richardson's *Pamela*, published in 1740, had a significant effect on the status of the novel. The story of a young servant who preserves her virginity despite the repeated attacks from her master, Mr B, and marries him when he reforms offers the readers a variety of attractions. There are the satisfactions of female virtue rewarded by true love with honour, and lower-class virtue rewarded by true love with honour, and insight into the mind and heart of an innocent yet feeling heroine. The combination of romantic wish fulfilment and inflexible morality was very popular, and changed the concept of the novel. With Richardson, fiction became more respectable. He was following a long tradition of epistolary fiction, much of it written by women, and his achievement was based on the traditions established by women writers.

Meanwhile, Henry Fielding, Richardson's contemporary and rival, was also doing a great deal to raise the novel's reputation, but the tradition he followed was different. The differences were both technical and moral. The difference in the two writers' moral visions is obvious in the contrast between Fielding's comic and satiric realism and Richardson's creation of exemplary characters. Richardson hoped to have a good influence on his readers by depicting goodness. His *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, though highly individualized and not quite unrealistically perfect, were clearly intended as good examples worthy of imitation. For Fielding, exemplary fiction was out of touch with reality. He deliberately made his *Tom Jones* lack the proper heroic qualities, arguing that imperfection made him human. He warned his readers "not to condemn a character as a bad one, because it is not perfectly a good one. If thou dost delight in these models of perfection, there are books now written to gratify thy taste; but as we have not, in the course of our conversation, ever happened to meet with any such person, we have not chosen to introduce any such here." (Fielding, 1992)

In *Tom Jones*, Fielding distinguishes his own "heroic kind of writing" from novels and romances, insisting on his adherence to the Truth of Nature. Like Richardson, who tried to convince that he was not writing romances but "copying Nature", Fielding stressed the duty of the "historian" of private lives to "keep within the limits not only of possibility, but of probability too" (MacSiniuc, 2003).

The conception of character in eighteenth century fiction follows two main directions. On the one hand, novelists interested in the

re-creation of larger, more comprehensive pictures of contemporary life would inevitably choose to explore the surfaces of experience and would make their characters intelligible in terms of their "words and actions," as Fielding put it. To them a character is a certain type of social behaviour, more precisely, characters are defined through a particular interaction between their inner, private beliefs and their outward manifestation under the pressure of social demand. As Cornelia Macsiniuc shows, "characters conceived in this way, with an ultimate interest in their *social self*, in their capacity of integrating themselves satisfactorily in the social pattern, are best illustrated by Henry Fielding's fiction" (Macsiniuc, 2003). They are, in Dr. Samuel Johnson's terms, *characters of manners*, as distinguished from the *characters of nature*, best illustrated by Richardson's novels. On the other hand, this other direction in character delineation entails greater attention to the inner springs of action and to the psychological intricacies of the human personality.

Richardson and Fielding stood in contrast with regard to yet another aspect: point of view. The popularity of Richardson's *Pamela* was mainly due to the effective technique of revealing the story through the letters written by the protagonist and exchanged by characters. Thus a multiple perspective is offered, and also a greater sense of immediacy. In *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, Henry Fielding deploys a narrative mode in which a "reliable narrator" as the "dramatized spokesman for the implied author" offers his own perception and understanding of the events and characters, purporting to build the readers' confidence in his own judgements and thus to promote a certain vision of life. This kind of novel is linked with the comic mode, since the comic vision in fiction presupposes precisely such complicity between author and reader (Macsiniuc, 2003).

While Fielding's picaresque novel of manners was clearly masculine, Richardson's sentimental novel was essentially feminine, in eighteenth century terms. Expounding his theory of the novel as "comic-epic-poem in prose", Fielding gave the new form legitimacy by claiming a place for it within the classical tradition, which was outside the range of most

women novelists of the time, and outside of the unlearned Richardson's range, too. He also treated subjects that were now being indecent, and therefore out of bounds for moral and modest women writers. On the other hand, Richardson's concentration on female characters, on feeling, and his exemplary morality, meant that he wrote as women were ideally supposed to write.

In conclusion, the two distinct modes of the two famous rivals reflect the philosophical divide of the age. They approached reality from two different angles: "with Richardson, it is the *emotional reality* of the characters that counts and the focus is on the *inner world of feeling*; with Fielding, the "reality" becomes *panoramic*, and our attention is drawn to the larger pattern of relationships that define man in a community, to aspects of *typical behaviour* and to *social manners*."

2. RICHARDSON'S FEMININITY AND FIELDING'S MASCULINITY IN QUESTION

Richardson's alleged 'femininity' in *Pamela* may be thrown into question if one thinks of the implications that a woman's virtue was her virginity and the reward of staying a virgin was marriage. If one takes the next step to feminist implications, how can the reader reconcile the notion of a woman's virginity as her dowry - in effect, her worth - with any sort of feminist ideal? By the same token, Fielding should not be labelled a 'masculine' author, if this implies chauvinism. For one, while Richardson's *Pamela* is didactic, *Joseph Andrews* makes no pretentious moralizing claims. Apparently modelled after *Don Quixote*, according to Fielding's title page, *Joseph Andrews* is a sort of travel narrative, satirizing the preachy quality of *Pamela*.

It can be argued that the two novels cannot be compared as easily as attaching 'masculine' and 'feminine' labels to them. Judging from the first half of *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding is interested not in punishing or rewarding anyone, but in exposing the difficulty of making moral decisions. He seems to give female characters the benefit of the doubt, allowing them the freedom to be both promiscuous and honest - something Pamela

wasn't allowed to be in Richardson's novel.

However, it may also be argued that the feminist ideals embedded in Richardson's *Pamela* extend beyond her virginity. Pamela, despite her low-class standing, understands that her soul not only has worth, but it belongs to her. Pamela contains strands of feminism because her character believes in her equality. Juggling with possibilities and also challenging deep-seated perceptions of Richardson in terms of a masculine/feminine divide, Richardson can even be called a 'masculine' author, though 'masculine' does not necessarily imply 'chauvinism.' According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'masculine' can mean nothing more than referring to the male gender. The subject matter of *Joseph Andrews* is a male paragon of virtue, and this is an argument in favour of its alleged 'masculinity'. But the OED also defines masculine as "of a woman's qualities, attributes, or actions: characteristic of or befitting a man." This part of the definition may be extremely interesting, indeed unsettling. It may imply that although these characteristics (some good, some bad) are found in a man, they can be found in women as well.

3. PAMELA VS. SHAMELA

As a matter of fact, Richardson's treatment of femininity is a complex issue, which goes beyond apparent dichotomy. In "*The Anxiety of Affluence: Family and Class (Dis)order in Pamela*", Christopher Flint argues that Richardson is able to both destroy and support the patriarchal order of the novel. Flint begins this essay by noting that "Samuel Richardson, and by extension his art, perfectly embodied a bourgeois class that was consolidating its power, challenging aristocratic institutions of control, and transforming cultural as well as economic means of production". Because of this cultural influence, Richardson has Pamela learn that her identity is based on two distinct modes of behaviour: "one teaching the value of bourgeois industry, the other establishing her aristocratic behaviour" (Flint, 1989). Having established these two premises, Flint explores the influence of family and class on Pamela.

Flint's conclusion that Pamela's reward is "a kind of self-annihilation, a willed penetration into the system that victimized her in the first place" can be read in connection with at least two interpretations of femininity and the body in *Pamela* (Flint, 1989). Laura Fasick is concerned with the relationship between the attempt to split the female mind and body and authority (Fasick, 1992). She argues that Richardson constructed Pamela as a virtuous character whose body and soul move as one and that to deny the body inevitably diminishes female authority. One example from the novel cited by Fasick is when Mr. B refuses to allow Pamela to breastfeed. By asserting domination over her body, Mr. B is attempting to control her. "Whereas Pamela in the first volume has opposed Mr. B's patriarchal power with a claim for her autonomous worth that relied on the dissolution of gender and class hierarchies, she now draws her authority from him. His stature as a model husband proves her excellence as a wife and thus her expertise as an advisor in domestic matters". Fasick traces the development of the link between body and authority through both *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. She concludes by saying that to "accept a version of the body that strips it of moral meaning apparently entails an acceptance of a version of moral presence that upholds patriarchal norms" (Gwilliam, 1991).

Tassie Gwilliam reads the relationship between body and femininity in terms of duplicity, which resonates with Flint's argument that *Pamela* both undermines and supports the patriarchal order of the novel and with Fasick's idea that the heroine moves from opposing patriarchal power in the first volume towards accepting patriarchal norms in the second. (Gwilliam, 1991). Gwilliam points out that the historical shift of the eighteenth-century from overt misogyny toward the "Cult of the True Womanhood" has been linked to "women's presumed loss of productive work to an increase in leisure under capitalism, and thus to the new status of women as 'consumers rather than contributors to the household economy'" (Gwilliam, 1991). Because of this ideological change, the view of women began changing. Women now must embrace this duplicity and behave in such a way as to provoke desire

without the (at least apparent) intention of doing so. As Gwilliam concludes, “feminine hypocrisy and duplicity are convenient fictions potentially covering masculine identification with femininity”. (Gwilliam, 1991). The critic concludes that “in *Pamela* Richardson attempts to legitimize possible means of self-display and self-exploration for women, while confronting the compromise and contortion necessary for living within a system that so strictly controls and limits women’s possibilities” (Gwilliam, 1991).

In 1740, three books appeared that particularly displeased Fielding. In addition to Richardson’s *Pamela*, there was *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber*, a book full of grammatical mistakes and misused words, and Conyers Middleton’s *Life of Cicero*, which was dedicated to Prime Minister Robert Walpole’s Privy Seal, Lord Hervey. *Shamela* satirizes all three of these works by imitating their content and style. In early 1741 when Fielding found himself in a “sponging house” because of his debts, he dashed off the manuscript of *Shamela*, which he published anonymously. Fielding thought *Pamela* a bad book, crude and pretentious in the writing and pernicious in the mentality it so piously inculcated: that Providence would reward with pounds and social position the virtue of shrewdly chaste servant girls by marrying them to their sexually obsessed masters. Richardson suspected that Fielding was the author of the parody, and never forgave him. His enmity was unremitting toward the man (i.e. Fielding) who produced what Richardson called “lewd and ungenerous engraftment” on his work (Gwilliam, 1991).

Hailed by Sheridan Barker as the “best parody in English literature,” Henry Fielding’s *Shamela* is the best known of a number of novels written in the 1740s that satirized Samuel Richardson’s hugely popular 1740 novel, *Pamela*. Fielding’s sixty-page book condenses and imitates Richardson’s two-volume epistolary novel, poking fun at the original work’s narrative method and pretence at moralizing. The heroine of *Pamela* is a paragon of virtue, a servant girl who resists the sexual advances of her master, and Richardson’s purpose with the novel was to “cultivate the Principles of Virtue and Religion in the Minds of the Youth of Both Sexes.”

Fielding’s heroine *Shamela*, on the other hand, is an artful insolent who uses her “Virtue” to rise in the world. By poking fun at every aspect of Richardson’s method and message, Fielding exposes the hypocrisy of contemporary mores. The work is more than a simple parody of Richardson, however, as Fielding lampoons political figures, the clergy, and contemporary writers.

Fielding takes special care to parody even the smallest details of Richardson’s work, and the form of *Shamela* closely follows that of *Pamela*. The novel is introduced by the “author,” one Conny Keyber (a combination of the names of the writers Conyers Middleton and Colley Cibber), who claims he presents the “authentic Papers” of the heroine of Richardson’s novel. Keyber dedicates his work to “Miss Fanny,” a parody of Middleton’s dedication to the supposedly effeminate Lord Hervey. He also includes letters to the editor (including one from the editor himself) congratulating him on his fine work, just as Richardson had appended letters in praise of his novel to his second edition of *Pamela*. The novel begins with a letter from the gullible Parson Thomas Tickletext, who, overcome by the loveliness of *Pamela*, writes to his friend, Parson J. Oliver, enthusiastically recommending the novel. Oliver, however, has in his possession certain letters that reveal the true nature and history of Richardson’s heroine. Oliver explains that *Pamela*’s name is actually *Shamela* and transmits her authentic correspondence. There follows a series of letters written between the various characters in the novel: *Shamela*; her unwed mother, Henrietta Maria Honora Andrews; Squire Booby, the master of Booby Hall; Booby’s housekeeper and *Shamela*’s confidante, Mrs. Lucretia Jervis; Booby’s more loyal housekeeper, Mrs. Jewkes; and Reverend Arthur Williams. The letters reveal that *Shamela*, formerly a servant in Booby’s household, becomes his wife by supposedly resisting his attempts to seduce her and flaunting her “Vartue.” She has done this with the help of Mrs. Jervis, who pretends to help Booby to win *Shamela* but who actually aids *Shamela* in her designs on his worldly goods. In the meantime *Shamela* has an affair with Reverend Williams, which according to Parson Oliver, is eventually

found out. Events and characters in the novel parallel *Pamela*, but things are seen in a very different light, with Parson Williams appearing as a scheming rogue, Mr. Booby as a fool, and Pamela as a calculating insolent girl.

As a parody of *Pamela*, *Shamela* aims to overturn what Fielding considered to be the sententious moralizing of Richardson's novel. Richardson claims that Pamela is a model of virtue, whose chastity is rewarded, but Fielding in his novel equates morality with expediency, as Shamela behaves as she does in order to secure material comforts for herself. Throughout the novel Shamela uses words such as "feign," "act," and "pretend." She tempts Booby but pretends to do so unwittingly, thus retaining her virtuous image, resisting him in order to appear virtuous and lures him into marriage and elevates herself socially. Shamela is not the virtuous woman Richardson supposes but rather a calculating, conniving creature. While Fielding parodies Richardson's views on morality and virtue, at the same time he presents his own moral message about hypocrisy and feigned goodness. His criticism of hypocrisy also extends to the clergy (represented by Parson Williams), the gentry (by Squire Booby), and the political establishment. The theme of faith versus good works is also explored in the character of the parson. Fielding's *Shamela* attacks corruption on many levels, from the perversion of language to the exploitation of the nature of decency and uprightness for political purposes.

The differences between the two women are both obvious and deep-seated. Pamela, on the one hand, was created as a pinnacle of virtue and steadfastness. It is true that she withstands both temptation and difficult circumstances, but she may also be seen as weak and stupid. She does not possess the strength to change her situation, and so she complains about it instead. Rather than even asking for assistance, she assumes that her tormenter is 'greater than any constable.' When he finally realizes that she will not gratify his desires and asks for her hand in marriage, she consents.

Conversely, Shamela presents only a mirage of virtue. From a distance it seems solid and true, but in reality it is sham. She does not care for her virtue, but rather realizes that pretending to be

virtuous will gain her greater rewards in her situation. She is conniving and clever, although uneducated and amoral. She does not passively sit and await life's whims for her pain and pleasure, but rather seizes her opportunities. It may very well be argued that even if she is doing the wrong thing, at least she is doing something.

Richardson's and Fielding's narrative point of views seem almost as sharply contrasted as their heroines' characters. Richardson is incredibly optimistic. Although life has forced him to recognize that negative things do happen, he insists on finding positive results from them. The narrator interprets Pamela's reserve as epitomizing her great virtue. It is not that she does not like the man and/or likes someone else, or some other reason; she becomes merely a vessel for the narrator's ideal virtuous woman.

Fielding's narrator is comic where Richardson's is grave, insightful while the other is fanciful. Fielding's narrator is the voice of a sceptic, a cynic, and a good-natured comic. There are no pretensions to the character's actions, and they are not idealized into something greater than life. This contrast shows the two writers' opposite worldviews.

Tiffany Potter argues that Fielding's more relaxed attitude to female sexuality is part of a complex of ideas she calls 'Georgian libertinism' - a kinder version of the Restoration variety, encouraging freedom where others are not harmed. As a result of this, he writes favourably of women seeking self-determination (Potter, 1999).

With a rather different emphasis, Jill Campbell has also challenged the Richardson-Fielding polarity, suggesting that we turn from the differences between the writers to an analysis of "differences within" them (Campbell, 1995). Her own discussion of the differences within Fielding draws attention to his interest in the blurring of gender distinctions, shown in the cross-gender casting of his plays, his treatment of male impersonation in *The Female Husband*, and his movement from burlesque "treatment of a woman in the hero's role in *Tom Thumb* to the serious development of an ideal of female heroism" in *Amelia*. In this last novel she finds a recurrent ambivalence, as Fielding moves between older codes of masculine honour and

new sentimental conceptions of manhood, between allegiance to a new ideal of domestic femininity and fear of the independent female authority that might issue from it (Campbell, 1995).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The eighteenth century developed a significant interest in defining woman as a special being. Women were not inferior, just different. Because of their dependence on marriage, and the pressure to attract a husband while living up to newly strict ideas of feminine property, many eighteenth century writers were interested in defining types of feminine sexual behaviour. The coquette, the prude and the modest woman were described and compared with one another.

Richardson and Fielding effectively marginalized women's writing within the new tradition each sought to establish. Writing among this change in the status of the novel, mid-century women writers could not escape questions of gender and generic identity. The number of women writing fiction rose dramatically in response to the popularity of Richardson and Fielding, and much of this new work reveals a self-conscious awareness of the controversy around the novel, and of its implications for women writers.

Richardson's and Fielding's place in eighteenth-century women's fiction is evidence that women writers at mid-century did register the controversy around the novel, and felt

themselves to be participating in it. Moreover, women writers recognized the arguments about the novelty of the new fiction as gendered arguments, and responded strategically to this distinction. Despite the gendered literary histories which seek to marginalize women within the authorized "new species," women writers are participating in its definition, shaping the practices of reading it produces, and contesting the terms of their own exclusion.

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