

BODILY SIGNS AND DISEMBODIED NARRATIVE IN «PAMELA II»

ABSTRACT

A rendere *Pamela* problematico agli occhi dei suoi detrattori, in particolare di Henry Fielding, fu anche la corporeità dell'eroina. L'operato e la narrazione di Pamela sembravano dettati dal desiderio, tradizionalmente legato alla sfera delle passioni e del corpo. La corporeità del Pamela minava, in particolare, la sua affidabilità come testimone, suggeriva che l'eroina di Richardson non potesse aspirare al “disinteresse” necessario a conseguire credito nello spazio virtuale della sfera pubblica. Per rispondere alle critiche, in *Pamela II* Richardson adottò una nuova tecnica narrativa e diede alla corporeità dell'eroina connotazioni meno problematiche. In *Pamela II* c'è una maggiore distanza tra storia e discorso. Inoltre, in linea con gli stereotipi della «sensibilità», Pamela reagisce agli spettacoli di virtù con una forte commozione: le sue risposte somatiche diventano espressioni del suo valore morale. La nobilitazione del corpo in *Pamela* implica anche la cancellazione del desiderio e, inevitabilmente, la disgregazione della trama. Spinto dalla necessità di conciliare la rappresentazione del corpo e del desiderio, necessaria allo sviluppo del racconto, con una visuale oggettiva e disinteressata, Richardson avrebbe di lì a poco messo a punto la polifonia epistolare di *Clarissa*.

To a large extent, the detractors of *Pamela* criticized Richardson's focus on the body. Pamela's actions and narrative style appeared to be motivated by her desire, namely, by her passions, traditionally located in the body. In particular, Pamela's bodily identity undermined her authority as an impartial eyewitness, suggested that she could not act as a disinterested narrator and that her voice was not creditable enough to acquire public relevance. Responding to his critics, in *Pamela II* Richardson set up a different narrative technique, and inscribed the body of the heroine with new, less problematic meanings. In *Pamela II*, there is a chronological gap between story and discourse. Moreover, in keeping with the codes and stereotypes of sensibility, Pamela is deeply moved by virtuous behaviour, her bodily reactions signaling her moral value. Along with the new representation of the body goes the effacement of desire and, inevitably, the disintegration of plot. However, Richardson's experimentation with narrative was not yet over. Reconciling disinterestedness and desire, in *Clarissa* he wove a polyphony of epistolary voices, enabling the disinterested assessment of an external interpreter.

To a large extent, the controversy sparked by the publication of *Pamela* centered on the body of the heroine.¹ In spite of Richardson's attempt to present *Pamela* as a didactic work, his early detractors suggested that the novel's appeal to readers depended on its titillating scenes. On the one hand, in *Pamela*'s prefatory apparatus – expanded in the second edition – Richardson affirmed the public significance of his work, deny-

¹ On the reception of *Pamela*, see WARNER 1998, in particular chap. 5, and SABOR - KEYMER 2005.

ing the influence of early eighteenth-century amatory fiction, which was deemed too explicit, especially for female readers.² On the other hand, however, Richardson was ambivalently trying to cash in on the appeal of novels like Aphra Behn's and Eliza Haywood's. Too similar to the genres it rejected, *Pamela* teemed with allusions to seduction narratives, whose purpose was both to highlight its commitment and, covertly, arouse the interest of readers.

Pamela's body, moreover, impinged on the credibility of her narrative, diminishing its exemplary value. Nowhere is this idea more apparent than in Fielding's criticism of *Pamela* in *Shamela* and *Joseph Andrews*. In these works, Fielding threw into relief a key aspect of Richardson's experiments with the mode of presentation we now call "realism". In his view, *Pamela* is too deeply implicated in the facts she reports: not only is she an object of desire, she also appears to be a desiring subject. Besides pointing to the inconsistencies in *Pamela*'s behaviour, Fielding warned that personal involvement could trigger self-interest and undermine a character's credibility. This idea shapes, in fact, his own approach to fictional narrative. The authority of Fielding's narrator depends on his status as a disengaged observer. While he is humorous, genial, and shows a liking for some characters, he is also supremely impersonal.³

Personal involvement, I want to suggest, can be equated with bodily involvement. Unconstrained by a bodily identity, Fielding's narrator can be free from material desires such as lust or greed. As has often been noted, he is an empowered version of Mr. Spectator, himself almost disembodied. The narrator of *Tom Jones* exists to represent an intrinsically «public» perception, one that is not warped by the self-interest or the low appetites that drive most of Fielding's characters. In spite of his individualized voice, he sounds objective and reliable. His view seems, in fact, to escape too close an identification with specific individuals and groups, all the more so because, as commentators have highlighted, in Fielding's novels all characters, including the most pious ones – like Parson Adams and Squire Allworthy – are, in various degrees, short-sighted.⁴ His display of authority implies that impersonal, spectatorial awareness that, in the early eighteenth century, became closely associated with the point of view of the «public».

Conceived, in part, as a response to Richardson's fiction, Fielding's narrator, both in *Joseph Andrews* and in *Tom Jones*, personifies the epistemological ideals that jeopardize *Pamela*'s authority, highlighting, *ex negativo*, the problems raised by an embodied narrator. On the one hand, with the rise of empirical thinking, the body had been valued as a medium for collecting data. At the same time, however, empirical epistemology was keenly aware that individual perception could be fallible. Experience became indisputable only on condition that its findings were submitted to, and sifted

² On this fiction, its impact, and its development, see, in particular, BALLASTER 1998.

³ On the Richardson-Fielding controversy, see MICHIE 1999. On the epistemological meaning of the controversy, see McKEON 1987, chap. 11 and 12. On the public commitment of Fielding's fiction, see BENDER 2012, chap. 6.

⁴ On this point, see ISER 1989, chap. 1.

by, the public.⁵ As is evident in Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society*, empirical knowledge results from both individual and collective judgment. Individual findings are creditable only if a private subject has internalized the point of view of a judging assembly and has made his findings available for public scrutiny. On a broader scale, these same principles came to inform discourse in the Habermasian public sphere. In the rational-critical discourse of the public sphere, the ideas that arise from private experience can be acceptable as pieces of knowledge only if they can be examined and institutionalized by the public, that sanctions their common relevance.

Self-interest, which was hardly separable from bodily drives, could interfere with the making of knowledge. Of course, we need to unpack the idea of the «body». In order to do so, it is useful to consider one of its early modern components: the «passions». In a long philosophical tradition that goes back to Plato and the Stoics, the passions had been characterized as subordinated, and sometimes inimical, to reason. Reason, of course, became itself more and more corporeal in the early modern period. However, it retained the higher attributes that had for a long time belonged to the soul: consider, to make an obvious example, Cartesian dualism. In his *History of the Royal Society*, Thomas Sprat characterizes the passions as the unruly «slaves» of reason, restless and prone to rebellion.⁶ It is notable that in Sprat's work, passions are always presented as a cause of irrational behaviour and in two cases are even coupled with «interests».⁷ Overruling reason, the passions – part of the bodily system – constitute intrinsically individual urges that cloud understanding and disrupt one's sense of the public good. By the same token, in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, passions are integral to consciousness, but unruly passions disrupt rational thinking. Moreover, Locke, too, couples «passions» and «interests», characterizing them as forces that impede our apprehension of truth.⁸

We don't know a great deal about Richardson's familiarity with epistemological works.⁹ However, having decided to adopt an empirical rhetoric in *Pamela*, he knew what it took to write a creditable narrative in the age of empiricism. He was probably aware that the display of a narrator's body could undermine her trustworthiness. In the early eighteenth century, this aspect had been brought to the fore by a number of genres, for example by empirical travelogues such as *A New Voyage Round the World* by William Dampier.¹⁰ In works such as Dampier's, hardly any information is provided about the physical response of a traveller to a foreign environment, about what he likes or dislikes: knowledge appears disembodied. When the story of Pamela attracted criticisms along with praise, Richardson – highly sensitive to trends in contemporary

⁵ On the public construction of empirical knowledge, see MCKEON 2005, pp. 347-353, which includes useful references to the *History of the Royal Society*.

⁶ SPRAT 1667, p. 112.

⁷ Ivi, pp. 48, 360.

⁸ See book IV, chap. 19, «On Enthusiasm».

⁹ As critics have highlighted, however, Richardson was familiar with Locke's work. See TAYLOR 2009, chap. 1.

¹⁰ See DAMPIER 1697.

culture – already knew that its blend of empiricism and feeling could be considered peculiar and undermine the credibility of his heroine.

According to Richardson's early detractors, in fact, Pamela was driven by appetites, passions, and self-interest, which informed her narrative and self-presentation. Spurred by these responses, Richardson decided to clear up Pamela's reputation. He published a sequel to his novel: *Pamela in her exalted condition*, commonly called *Pamela II*, presented to the public as the third and fourth volumes of the story of Pamela. Of course, Richardson had, himself, interests. *Pamela II* was an obvious attempt to cash in on the success of *Pamela*, as Defoe had done with *The Further Adventures* and *The Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe*. At the same time, however, it was also an attempt to craft a first-person didactic narrative that could be perceived as truly exemplary and, therefore, worthy of public attention. In *Pamela II*, Richardson redefined Pamela and her voice. He ensured that her viewpoint squared with dominant epistemological, as well as moral, principles.

The publication of *Pamela II* had, of course, also an intertextual dimension. The new text was meant to stabilize the meaning of the old one. In response to polemical attacks, Richardson tried to establish an unproblematic interpretation of his previous novel. This intention is made clear by the details *Pamela II* adds to the characterizations of both Pamela and her reformed husband. For example, it goes back to their past in retrospective sections that rationalize the behaviour of Mr. B. and provide further evidence of Pamela's disinterestedness. However, the most persuasive demonstration of Pamela's and, by implication, Richardson's own reliability was constituted by the new narrative as a whole. *Pamela II* was meant to produce evidence of the true purpose of its prequel by enriching, through a slew of actions and opinions, the identity of its protagonist/narrator.

A key part of this process centers on the body of Pamela. On the one hand, Richardson effaced the body of his heroine, changing the focus of Pamela's narrative. On the other, he tried to make it less problematic, turning it into a signifier of her trustworthiness. The effacement of the body entailed a radical change in narrative technique: Richardson reduced plot organization to a minimum, thus widening the gap between this new novel and amatory fiction. To understand his motives and purposes, it is perhaps useful to consider what a contemporary critic, the anonymous author of *Pamela Censured*, had written about Richardson's work, reporting the way in which a «sober Gentleman» had responded to the story of Pamela:

This then, said he [the Gentleman] in short is my Opinion of *Pamela*; that the Story is prettily related, the Passions finely wrought up, and the Catastrophe beautifully concluded, but in the Course of the Narrative, and almost interspersed throughout the Whole, there are such Scenes of Love, and such lewd Ideas, as must fill the Youth that read them with Sentiments and Desires worse than ROCHESTER can, and for this Reason, they will start at a gross Expression, which if nicely and artfully convey'd they'll dwell on with Rapture. Therefore I think it wholly unfit for Youth, and declare freely I would by no Means trust my Daughters with reading it.

This Gentleman's Opinion induced me to read over your *Pamela*, and I really find it too true: There is a perfect System of Intrigue, and they begin so gently by Degrees,

and are led on so methodically to the last Grand Attack, and this with amorous Attacks in View, even thro' the gravest Sentences of Morality that it is impossible to read it without endeavouring to gratify the Passion he hath raised; let us view *Pamela* then, divested of the Drapery in which she is enclos'd, tho' not hid, and then her Charms will appear thus: The wise Father will never think it proper for his Son's Closet, and the careful Mother banish that with other Novels and Romances from her Daughter's Cabinet.¹¹

In this view, which has aesthetic as well as moral significance, *Pamela's* «System of Intrigue», namely, its plot, has the effect of raising the passions of readers. Part and parcel of this «system» are the «lewd» scenes in which desire takes center stage, that alarmed the «sober gentleman» whose opinions are reported. These comments concern the form, scope, and effects of fictional narrative: plotting desire entails, by synecdoche, representing of the body, displaying arousals and unruly drives which can prove contagious to hitherto innocent readers.

Richardson must have taken this kind of criticisms seriously, because *Pamela II* is far from being truly novelistic – by «novel» meaning, of course, the amatory fiction of Manley and Haywood. In a sequence of long letters, the newly married Pamela describes episodes from her everyday life. She focuses on her household management, on the birth and education of her children, and on the people she has encountered, both in her community and in London. The climactic episodes are the illness of her son, and her suspicion – quickly dispelled – that Mr. B may be having an affair with a London lady. Her letters do not describe an overarching action. On many occasions, moreover, Pamela shifts to other modes of writing, which resist narrative treatment. In fact, *Pamela II* begins as a series of scenes from conjugal life and ends with thoughts on education – commenting on Locke's *Treatise on Education* – and with a set of cautionary fables inspired by *The Spectator*. The change in narrative technique is radical. Richardson decided to discard his «writing to the moment», to distance his heroine from the events she recounts. Unlike in *Pamela*, epistolary writing in *Pamela II* is for the most part retrospective, with a lag between story and discourse – a key aspect, to which I will return shortly.

Summing up, in *Pamela II* the adventures and misadventures of desire give way to retrospection, reasoning, and exemplary remarks. However, Richardson was still a writer of fiction. Although *Pamela II* is closer to manuals of conduct than most eighteenth-century novels, he made sure that his work preserved some of the features that were, and are, integral to narrative experience. Although it lacks an overarching plot and avoids displaying or stimulating desire, *Pamela II* is not entirely devoid of emotions. And this takes us to the other main way in which Richardson treats the body in this novel. As we have seen, he establishes a distance between story and discourse, and focuses on new themes. However, he doesn't efface emotions altogether. Instead, he modifies both the way in which they are described and their nature.

¹¹ Anon. 1741, pp. 24-25.

In *Pamela II*, Richardson represents emotions objectively, from the outside, rather than inscribing them in Pamela's first-person narrative. In order to do so, he focuses on their bodily signs. However, much more than objective distance was needed to assuage critics. The nature of the emotions represented was equally important, especially if they were Pamela's. In *Pamela II* Richardson's heroine appears, at times, highly sensitive to what happens around her: she has a «throbbing heart», a «blushing face», her «eyes overflow with joy», and she is so deeply in love with her husband that she presses his hand with her lips.¹² But her feeling is not caused by the characteristic events of amatory fiction. Pamela's emotions are raised, conversely, by the undramatic spectacle of other people's, and especially her husband's, virtue. Whenever Mr. B. proves a good man, and seems to have genuinely reformed, Pamela is overwhelmed with joy, and her intense feelings find bodily expression. For example, at the beginning of *Pamela II*, Mr. B. decides to trust Pamela's parents with the management of a substantial part of his estate, discharging them from rent obligations. Upon hearing of this act of generosity, Pamela exults:

I could only fly to his generous Bosom (for this is a subject which most affects me), and, with my Eyes swimming in Tears of grateful Joy, and which overflowed as soon as my bold Lips touched his dear Face, bless God, and him, with my whole Heart; for speak I could not!—But, almost choked with my Joy, sobb'd to him my grateful Acknowledgments.—He clasped me in his Arms, and said, “How, my Dearest, do you overpay me for the little I have done for your Parents! If it be thus to be bless'd for conferring Benefits so insignificant to a Man of my Fortune, what Joys is it not in the Power of rich Men to give themselves, whenever they please!—Foretastes, indeed, of those we are bid to hope for: which can surely only exceed these, as *then* we shall be all Intellect, and better fitted to receive them!— 'Tis too much!—too much! said I, in broken Accents: —How am I oppress'd with the Pleasure you give me!—Oh, Sir—bless me more gradually, and more cautiously—for I cannot bear it! And, indeed, my Heart went flutter, flutter, flutter, at his dear Breast, as if it wanted to break its too narrow Prison, to mingle still more intimately with his own.¹³

Another similar example is the way in which Pamela welcomes her husband's decision to give 40 pounds to Mrs Jervis, his housekeeper, who is now in financial straits. Pamela and Mrs Jervis are both struck by the generosity of Mr. B., and remain speechless:

Thus, with the most graceful Generosity, and a Nobleness of mind *truly* peculiar to himself, was he pleased to *act*: And what, does your Ladyship think, could Mrs. *Jervis* or I say to him?—Why, indeed, nothing at all!—We could only look upon one another, with our Eyes full, and our Hearts full, of a Gratitude that would not permit either of us to speak, but which express'd itself at last in a Manner he was pleased to call more elegant than Words, with uplifted folded Hands, and Tears of joy.¹⁴

The display of Pamela's emotions in *Pamela II* is part of Richardson's attempt to continue his experiments with fiction while at the same time modifying the public perception of his previous work. Establishing a continuity with Pamela's original story,

¹² RICHARDSON 1742, pp. 135, 154, 217.

¹³ Ivi, p. 15.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 91.

he maintained his focus on her emotional responses. At the same time, however, he sought to make the representation of her body morally acceptable. Pamela's body is no longer a cause of unrestrained desire, nor can it be taken to be a decoy she uses to pursue her own desire, as both Fielding and the author of *Pamela Censured* suggested. *Pamela II* extends the fictional world of *Pamela* by adding new features to it and its main actors so that Pamela's motivations appear unambiguous, and Mr. B.'s repentance more probable.

As I have suggested, however, what is more deeply at stake in *Pamela II*'s treatment of the body is Pamela's credibility. Her emotional reactions and their bodily signs have an epistemological meaning, one that is easily discernible, especially if we call Pamela's emotional responsiveness by its eighteenth-century name: "sensibility". The faculty of "sensibility" was regarded, among other things, as an internalization of virtue, a capacity for sociability that is grounded in a subject's physical identity. The focus on sensibility was part of a broader intellectual and imaginative effort to locate one's moral capacity in nature rather than in nurture, an effort aimed at undermining aristocratic claims to virtue. In this light, the cult of sensibility appears consistent with the social ethos that Michael McKeon has called «progressive ideology», based on the idea that virtue does not depend on rank, but on the intrinsic qualities of a subject.¹⁵

This kind of progressive ethos is dominant in Richardson's works – especially in *Pamela* – and the representation of Pamela's bodily signs in *Pamela II* is, I want to suggest, a rendition of sensibility that elaborates on the ideological attitude of Richardson's previous novel. Pamela's sensibility is a mark of her inborn truthfulness. Of course, this version of sensibility is to a significant extent shaped by Richardson's need to complement *Pamela* and defuse the controversy. In *Pamela II*, there's not too much emphasis on the phenomenon of sensibility itself and on its moral implications. The bodily signs that make Pamela's emotions visible only serve to furnish further evidence of the specific kind of virtue that has already been showcased in her previous narrative. Unlike in most novels of sensibility written in the years that followed, in *Pamela II* there are no recurring spectacles of pain. Richardson stuck to his didactic agenda, inspired by manuals of conduct, the purpose stated in his preface to *Pamela II* being to describe «the more exalted condition in which *Pamela* was destined to shine as an affectionate *wife*, a faithful *friend*, a polite and kind *neighbour*, an indulgent *mother*, and a beneficent *mistress*». ¹⁶ More interested in domestic life than in the extremes of tragedy, in *Pamela II* Richardson avoided scenes of distress that could easily be regarded as a legacy of amatory fiction.

As we have seen, *Pamela II* values the idea that virtue is grounded in our emotional responses, which arise from the body. Bodily signs make us credible, show how virtuous we are. We have also found, however, that Richardson placed some value on Fielding's criticism. He came to believe that, in order to be creditable, his heroine needed to be disengaged, free from the passions that arise from bodily involvement

¹⁵ McKEON 1995 and 1987.

¹⁶ RICHARDSON 1742, p. II.

and willing to submit her reports to the judgment of the public. On the one hand, he gave bodily shape to Pamela's virtuous feelings. On the other hand, as I have shown, he made sure that her viewpoint was disembodied, that her voice was similar, though not identical, to that of an omniscient narrator. By bolstering his heroine's exemplarity, he also bolstered, of course, his own credit. Pamela's voice shows that the implied author knows how to produce well-grounded truths.

By using a disengaged narrator, Richardson meant to establish the public significance of his fiction. He aligned his work to didactic narratives designed to generalize from particular experience, such as periodical essays. It is indicative that, towards the end of *Pamela II*, Pamela writes down her nursery stories: cautionary tales, modelled on *The Spectator* papers, she uses to educate her children. In this respect, too, Richardson and Fielding do not seem to be at odds. They both realized that in order for their works to achieve relevance in the public sphere, they had to strike a balance between particularity and generality. This, once again, entailed taming the body. The experience of reading had to invite not so much sympathetic identification with bodily responses as a perception of patterns of behavior that came from, and could be found in, social experience.

This balance was a difficult one to achieve, however. Disembodiment could neutralize pathos, preventing immersion and aesthetic pleasure. This is, in fact, what happens in *Pamela II*, which was probably boring also for eighteenth century standards. It is not surprising that in his subsequent work, *Clarissa*, Richardson changed his focus and technique once more. He wanted his readers to sympathize more deeply with characters, to experience desires and dangers. However, he also meant to provide an example of disengagement and truthfulness – of disinterestedness. In order to do so, he wove a polyphony of letters, a multiplicity of viewpoints that evaluated events in radically different ways and therefore called for an external interpretation. The public value of private experience was not given, it needed to be found. Readers of *Clarissa* are invited to turn into a disembodied narrator, an arbiter that should try to abstract an unquestionable truth from a tangle of desires.

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