

THE POWER OF THE QUILL: EPISTOLARY TECHNIQUE IN RICHARDSON'S *PAMELA*

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I am fallen sadly behind in my journal. I should live no more than I can record, as one should not have more corn growing than one can get in. There is a waste of good if it be not preserved. And yet perhaps if it serve the purpose of immediate felicity, that is enough.

James Boswell

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, virtue rewarded* (1740), one of the first great English epistolary novels, is a brilliant collection of thirty-two letters (two, which we do not see, are taken by Squire B) and dozens of private journals written by a serving maid who finds herself socially elevated at the novel's conclusion by her marriage to B, her former master and would-be seducer. Yet the purpose of this article is not to examine the action of the novel nor the existential choices of its heroine but, rather, to illustrate the subtle yet poignant mechanics and techniques of *Pamela's* epistolary format and to show how the protagonist's act of writing personal journals (as opposed to her thirty-two letters which deal with character development and the action of the novel) enables her to improve her self-esteem and, eventually, her socio-economic status. Putting pen to paper in her personal journals allows Pamela the opportunity to temporarily escape from the responsibilities of her familial and social units, as well as to reflect and improve upon her psychological well-being. Indeed, Pamela's transcendental act of writing journals helps to develop, define and improve her self-disposition not by projecting her personality in social and domestic spaces (e.g. her community and household), but instead by privately reflecting upon

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her more intimate persona. Writing journals allows her to momentarily disengage herself from her material reality, and the more she writes the more self-confident and assertive she becomes, both temporally and spatially. Furthermore, by writing dozens of journals, Pamela, in a sense, succeeds at distancing herself from the raw reality of her low social position and she ultimately manages to move up the social ladder with her marriage to B in the final missive of the novel.

But before examining Richardson's novelistic craft, it would be helpful to preface this study with a brief introduction to the research already published on the narrative techniques in *Pamela*. In the past thirty-five years, for example, about a half dozen significant articles have been written on the mechanics of the epistolary approaches in the infamous Richardsonian novel. Nancy Armstrong (1987) has pointed out that Pamela's prose is very different, inherently unique and "uncommon," even for an English epistolary novel of the mid 18th-century. Edward Copeland (1971) has suggested that Richardson's seemingly straightforward narrative approach is actually more intelligent and sophisticated than it appears. Richard Costa (1970), in perhaps the most innovative study to date on *Pamela*, illustrates the underlying narrative power of the Richardsonian epistolary model. Donald Morton's (1971) ambitious essay attempts to equate letter-writing with human experience and suggests that Pamela's writing is fundamental to the recording of her Puritan conscience and existence. Dorothy Parker (1969) claims that Richardson's epistolary structure is a clever technique of organizing and controlling the pace and argument of his story. Finally, Roy Roussel (1987), in probably the most intelligent of all the important articles on *Pamela*, illustrates how the Richardsonian missive genre has the unique ability of decreasing the narrative distance between author and reader, and thus, producing a more immediate and intimate text.

In this study, then, I would like to go beyond this aforementioned research on Richardson's epistolary format and suggest that Pamela's act of writing private journals – as if they were narrative "asides" within a novel – actually enables her to structure a sympathetic yet empowered version of her consciousness that ultimately helps her deal with her everyday existence (in other words, in many sections of the novel, Pamela writes personal journals about her psychological disposition, as well as her struggles, in order to better understand and accept the world in which she lives). Indeed, Pamela's personal missives – those texts in which she writes about her psychological state of mind – appear to organize and improve her psychological well-being. Writing about her real-life troubles allows her to find peace and, eventually, stability and comfort. As the reader realizes at the close of the novel, Pamela's journal-writing

actually helps her improve her self-esteem and, consequently, change her material life when she eventually marries her ex-master, B. Her writing technique also seems to invite the reader to sit by her side, listen and sympathize as she reflects on her troubled life as an English serving maid constantly worrying about her future. The immediacy of this self-reflexive discourse produces a very believable and tangible “text-within-a-text”. In short, Richardson’s ability to transcribe such an immediate raw experience (in the form of a set of journals within a lengthy epistolary novel) is very convincing and believable as a narrative format and deserves more critical attention.

Pamela, in one of her early journals, tells her readers that she writes as a “diversion” from her troubles and indicates that she utilizes her missives as a vehicle for improving her psychological and socio-economic well-being (p. 106). For example, her parents, who often equate dishonor with death, criticize Pamela’s choices toward the beginning of the novel. Thus, when B tells her father that Pamela is “in a way to be happy”, her father replies, believing her defiled, “What! then is she dying?” (p. 248). In the face of this cruel, opinionated culture, Pamela turns to her art of writing journals to, in a sense, “disappear” from her social reality, at least temporarily, as well as provide some emotional and personal stability in her life.

Richardson’s narrative method, then, permits his main character – much like Tennessee Williams’ Laura Wingfield in *The glass menagerie* (1945) – to construct her own personal portrait, one that helps Pamela escape, at least momentarily, the material reality of her 18th-century life. From the very outset of this “novel in letters” she compares herself and B to various fictitious characters in books she has read including romances (p. 64), the Bible (p. 184, p. 99), *Aesop’s fables* (p. 224) and the history of Lucretia (p. 66). She even discusses the structure of her own epistolary narrative by referring to the “Indicting” of her letters (p. 57), the “Scene[s]” in them (p. 175), their “Part[s]” (p. 193) played by the other “Character[s]” (p. 201) and her own style or “Language” (p. 287). Indeed, Pamela offers us an excellent example of 18th-century metafiction, that is, fiction discussing the mechanics and problems of writing. She (and Richardson in the background) cleverly suggests that her “Story surely would furnish out a surprising kind of Novel, if it was to be well told” (p. 217). Richardson’s epistolary novel paints us a portrait of a heroine aware of the mechanics of her own epistolary narrative, and she uses this knowledge to write about her psychological well-being, seek emotional stability as a serving maid and, eventually, improve her life.

However, Pamela’s journal-writing – imaginative and powerful as it may be – does not always allow her to escape her material reality, and the relationship

between her act of writing and her anguish becomes more and more clear. Soon we realize, for example, that the act of writing journals helps her deal with (and forget about) her daily sorrows. Furthermore, the revelation of Pamela's troublesome feelings is in a sense dependent upon her private journals. Yet writing does not necessarily ease her suffering; rather, the anguish seems to have an existence of its own and it appears to grow more and more intense as she writes. For example, the first letter of v. I opens, "I have great trouble" (p. 43). Later she writes, "O my dear mother, I am miserable! truly miserable!" (p. 53) and "All the next day I was very sad, and began my long letter" (p. 58). Her "careful but loving" parents also write on her pain, stating that "[their] hearts bleed for [her] distress" (p. 59). Thus the following questions: Is Pamela's journal-writing therapeutic to her mental welfare? Do her cries of anguish do her any good? The short answer is no, because the writing and the feelings seem to evolve as one, both fostering one another, growing more intense as Pamela's journals pile up throughout the text.

Richardson enjoys hinting to his reader that Pamela's thirty-two letters and dozens of journals, somehow, have a life of their own. After catching a carp, for example, Pamela retires to her garden "to plant Life," as she says (p. 168). What she plants, of course, is not a tulip or a daisy, but, instead, a letter to Parson Williams. Just prior to this episode, she conceals her entire pocket of papers "in [her] Under-coat, next to [her] Linen", "for they grow large" (p. 120). Using the same phrase, Pamela calls attention to this sort of epistolary pregnancy once more, just before B jocularly threatens to strip her of the clothes that conceal her papers. She retires to her bedroom and complains that she "must all undress" before she can deliver the bundle (p. 204).

Many might argue that Richardson's epistolary format, although a very convincing literary approach in many regards, hardly affords a fast-moving account of Pamela's life and, furthermore, seems to be a lengthy preparatory "background" for the central act of *Pamela*, Mr. B's repentance, for through it are resolved the physical, social and spiritual conflicts continuously generated throughout the first half of the narrative. An excellent example of the narrative's meticulous pace appears on Friday morning, the fifteenth day of Pamela's "Bondage": "As I continue writing here, when I ought to act, that will shew you my strange irresolution, and how I am distressed between my hopes and fears!" (p. 192)

We get a strong feeling that Pamela hardly ever lays aside her quill throughout the entire novel. More importantly, as Morton states in his article, "Theme and structure in *Pamela*" (1971), her writings are the sole record of her Puritan conscience, which, as B comes to see, can both enjoy and evaluate

experience (Morton, p. 256). And as her fears grow, she writes more frequently and the pace increases tremendously. For example, after letter thirteen, nine letters follow in the next two months, approximately one every week. This number is increased even further in the final two weeks of her stay in Bedfordshire to an average of one every other day. Furthermore, the Lincolnshire section of the novel has a more successful correspondence of form and matter than the first Bedfordshire section and this constitutes Pamela's forty days of spiritual suffering (*Pamela*, p. 434-516). The final section of the novel, after Pamela's marriage to B, has a sense of emotional climax, reinforced by length and repetitiveness of her entries. Indeed there is a correlation between the frequency of writing and the build-up of emotional tension. The slow and moody nature of some of Pamela's letters clearly illustrates that, throughout the seventeen-month period of the novel, Pamela emotionally evolves greatly, and her conception of virtue grows from a mere legalistic obedience to principles in the first section to charity of mind in the second. She is even able to say of B's first love, Sally Godfrey, "I should rank such a returning dear lady in the class of those who are most virtuous" (p. 437).

Richardson's epistolary form has many advantages to other forms of narrative. For example, it succeeds at situating his reader alongside the heroine while she narrates the plot of her life; some critics call this celebrated Richardsonian technique "writing to the moment". The author himself explains this advantageous "novelistic immediacy" and discusses the benefits of the epistolary format in his "Preface" to *Clarissa* (1759):

Letters...written while the hearts of the writers must be supposed to be wholly engaged in their subjects... abound not only with critical situations, but with what may be called *instantaneous* Descriptions and Reflections... Much more lively and affecting. (p. xx, italics mine.)

Likewise, Pamela's correspondences (letters and journals) invite the reader to sit next to her as she puts pen to paper. As Roussel points out in his study, "Reflections on the letter: the reconciliation of distance and presence in *Pamela*" (1987), this technique decreases the narrative distance between author and reader and creates a very close and immediate relationship between the two (Roussel, p. 101). For example, Pamela writes: "But I am forced to break off [from writing]. Here comes Mrs Jervis" (p. 77); "I must write on, though I shall come so soon; for now I have hardly any thing else to do" (p. 108); and "I will

now, my honoured parents, proceed with my journal” (p. 491). The directness of the narrative is evident, and this immediate structure helps to eliminate the “foreignness” of the letters.

Although a contemporary reader might discard *Pamela; or, virtue rewarded* as merely a collection of two or three volumes of moderately-paced fictional letters, Richardson argues in his “Preface” to *Clarissa* that his epistolary format is a valid and animated novelistic form:

Much more lively and affecting... must be the Style of those who write in the height of a present distress; the mind tortured by the pangs of uncertainty... than the dry, narrative, unanimated Style of a person relating difficulties and dangers surmounted, can be; the relater perfectly at ease; and if himself unmoved by his own Story, not likely greatly to affect the Reader. (p. xx)

Moreover, in his “Preface” to *Pamela* the author hints at this same view, calling his novel of letters “natural”, “lively”, and “mov[ing]” (Richardson, 1740, p. 31). This direct and immediate technique is closely related to the self-reflexive effect by which the narrative incorporates, as its subject matter, the process of its own production and consumption. The Richardsonian epistolary method permits his characters (e.g. Pamela) to engage in self-reflexive discourse, an advantage Richardson fully exploits in order to insinuate the documentary “objecthood” of his material. As illustrated above, the success of this narrative scheme derives from its ability to provide a temporal closeness to the raw experience of reality and a consciousness which reacts to that reality.

An excellent textual reference point that illustrates the power of Richardson’s epistolary format to project the psychological development of Pamela appears towards the end of the novel, when the heroine returns triumphantly to Bedfordshire and stops writing in order to “apply [herself] to the Duties of the Family” (p. 387). Here the trajectory of her writing pursuits throughout the text can be fully understood if we look back to her first letter which calls attention to her uneasy social position when she achieved “Qualifications above [her] Degree.” At the beginning of the novel B does not at first think of Pamela as fully human; she exists for him simply as an object of sexual pleasure. Nor does he respond to Pamela’s threats, expostulations, faints, or prayers; nothing the girl does affects him. A little more than servant yet less than B’s kind, Pamela struggles throughout her epistolary world, and most of the novel’s first volume in order to escape both B and her concurrent moral and social dilemmas. The

crucial note here is that not until she establishes a secure place in his social class – when Pamela finally becomes the mistress of the household – does she lay down her quill. Upon her climatic arrival at Bedfordshire, she realizes she has established her place, both as daughter and wife, within familial and social units. Pamela is satisfied to a great extent at this point, and her writings appear to have empowered her emotionally and psychologically.

But Pamela is not the only case of social mobility in the novel. Mrs Jervis, for example, is a “Gentlewoman born, tho’ she has had Misfortunes,” and we are reminded on several occasions, as Michael McKeon points out in *The origins of the English Novel: 1600-1740*, that Pamela’s father has not always been obliged to engage in “hard Labour” (McKeon, p. 365). In other words, *Pamela* is a narrative world already primed for status inconsistency. Pamela’s epistolary approach enables her readers to intimately understand how she, and others in the novel, have managed to move up and down the social ladder. What is unique here is not *what* is revealed in her letters, but rather, the intimate, up-close and clever perspective in which Pamela describes her narrative world. The letter-writing genre does not “enable” other characters to become socially mobile; however, the missive format offers the reader an “insider’s view” of the narrative world in which the main character exists. For these reasons, it is difficult to deny the very real power of the epistolary format and the magnetic force in Richardson’s narrative that pulls the reader towards the close of the story.

Although some critics might complain about a lack of coherence in *Pamela*, or its obvious subjectivity, a closer examination shows that the content and form of Pamela’s letters actually have a tremendous amount of textual authority when compared to other narrative forms. I find myself in agreement with Costa in his article, “The epistolary monitor in *Pamela*” (1970), who stresses the coherence and underlying power of the Richardsonian novel (Costa, p. 38-41). In short, Richardson’s epistolary form, as defined by the author himself, has an efficacy beyond the merits most commonly ascribed to it.

As Parker has demonstrated in her essay, “The time scheme of *Pamela* and the character of B” (1969), the time line and plot of Richardson’s text are actually deciphered by subtle details in both Pamela’s writings and those addressed to her (Parker, p. 697-699). The writing of letters in the narrative gives the reader an idea – and this is the only instrument of time that we have – of how many days have passed in Pamela’s life, and also when certain events have occurred. Thus, key phrases, especially those that open and close the first thirty-two letters, such as “I know, my dear parents, that you longed to hear from me soon; and I sent to you as soon as I could” (p. 65) and “so I will make use of it now, and tell you all that has happened since my last letter” (p. 70), are

fundamental clues to figuring out when events happened in relation to others. In fact, the entire structure and trajectory of the novel's development depends on these types of subtle clues. What else does the reader have? As McKeon states in his aforementioned book, the claim to historicity in *Pamela* is "inextricable" from its epistolary form (McKeon, p. 357). Richardson's epistolary posture maintains this narrative authority, and the reader is *required* to participate and play the role of a detective in Pamela's life in order to put the pieces of the text together.

The Richardsonian epistolary technique not only manages to cleverly hold the narrative framework together but also, in a sense, Pamela's fragile life. Pamela – constantly worrying about her fate – is always busy writing: "I slept but little last night, and arose, and pretended to sit by the window which looks into the spacious gardens; but I was writing all the time, from break of day, to [Mrs Jewkes] getting up, and after, when she was absent." (p. 149)

Scribbling these letters helps Pamela organize her life and remember the past. She relies on her written correspondences and without them, she has trouble recollecting past experiences. She writes: "Well, my dear mother, I can't find my letter, and so I'll try to recollect it all" (p. 54). As for the Californian novelist, Joan Didion, who once said that "Order and control are terribly important to me; writing has not yet helped me to see what it all means" (Didion, p. 165), remembering and writing are not always pleasant experiences for Pamela. She writes "I shall not be obliged to return back to be a burden to my dear parents" (p. 43) and "I went to the window, and sat down in it, and [Mrs Jewkes] took her place at the table; and her saucy nephew, fleering at me most provokingly, sat down by her" (p. 410). Her references to the past – most of them vivid with details – seem to organize her memory and help her sort out and clarify her troubles: "I must still write on, till I come to be settled in the station to which I am so generously exalted, that you may participate with me the happiness that arises from my new condition" (p. 386).

As Copeland has suggested in his article, "Samuel Richardson and naïve allegory: some beauties of the mixed metaphor" (1971), the epistolary form of *Pamela* is actually more complex and intelligent than it may appear (Copeland, p. 231). The number of references to miscellaneous letters and documents in *Pamela*, for example, is tremendous and the very document composed by Richardson is characterized by many cases of reflection, inflection and even the use of marginalia and gloss. Pamela writes "I have just received a letter from my best friend. This is a copy of it" (p. 400). The references to other correspondences – whether known or unknown to the reader – create a kind of sub-genre within *Pamela* and require that the reader be aware of this complex intertextu-

ality, this elaborate epistolary web. To it also must be attributed Richardson's incessant emphasis on the letters as not only the technique but the persistent *deus ex machina* for his novel. Alan D. McKillop, for example, has already illustrated in his study, "Epistolary technique in Richardson's novels" (1951), that these missives are shared and discussed by many characters and are circulated like chain letters (McKillop, p. 36). In sum, the underlying complexity of *Pamela's* narrative format is almost overwhelming.

Not only is the structure of *Pamela* complex and cleverly conceived, but also tremendously reflexive and intertextual. Pamela is constantly reflecting on previous correspondences; she writes: "As my last was to my father, in answer to his letter, I will now write to you" (p. 47) and "I made a thousand sad reflections upon the former part of this honest gentleman's kind letter" (p. 174). Her reflexive comments about the letters she is actually writing remind us of the marginalia of glossed medieval texts, the handwritten opinionated notes and palimpsest that refer to the main text or document. It is as if Pamela is commenting in the margins of another person's text, although it is actually her own; she states: "I am going on again with a long letter" (p. 48) and "I should have nothing but silliness to write" (p. 87).

In conclusion, this intriguing narrative complexity and "reflexive intertextuality" illustrates that, for its time period, it would be best to classify this Richardsonian epistolary technique, as Armstrong (1987) argues, "as something other than common fiction, not a novel according to the standards of his day" (Armstrong, p. 109). Can Richardson, then, have been a true novelist in any sense worth the name if he produced a work where the chief character could be open to such diverse psychological interpretations? Isn't Pamela, whom Richardson had naively presented as an instructive example of Virtue Rewarded, understood more plausibly as a complete sham? I argue that this type of interpretive ambiguity to which the text is susceptible does, in fact, add to the total meaning, that is, an intentional ambiguity of which the author was at least in part aware. Furthermore, the greatness of Richardson's literary achievement should be seen as an example of how his narrative technique enabled and encouraged him to reveal much more about his heroine and her story than was consistent with other narrative formats of eighteenth-century Europe.

RESUMO

Pamela (1740) de Samuel Richardson, considerada uma das primeiras e mais importantes obras do gênero “romance epistolar”, consiste de uma coleção de cartas e entradas em diário escritas por uma serviçal que, ao final do romance, encontra-se em uma posição social elevada. Nesse estudo, procuro ilustrar os procedimentos sutis, mas contundentes, do formato epistolar observado em *Pamela*, bem como demonstrar como o ato de escrever diários por parte da protagonista alavanca a sua auto-estima e, por consequência, seu nível sócio-econômico. Ao escrever em seu diário, Pamela foge temporariamente de suas responsabilidades sócio-familiares a fim de refletir e melhorar seu bem-estar psicológico. É dessa forma que Pamela define e reflete toda a intimidade de sua personalidade. Eu ainda demonstro que a técnica epistolar richardsoniana habilmente sustenta não só a estrutura da narrativa, mas também, de certa forma, a existência frágil da personagem. O ato de escrever cartas ajuda a protagonista a ordenar a sua vida assim como a recordar o passado. As suas correspondências se constituem na única forma de relembrar esse passado. Essa curiosa abordagem da narrativa, no contexto literário de sua época, seria melhor traduzida nas palavras de Nancy Armstrong (1987) como “algo que foge da ficção habitual, um romance que não trilha os padrões vigentes.” A magnitude do êxito literário de Richardson deve ser vista como um modelo de como a sua técnica narrativa se propôs a revelar muito mais acerca de sua heroína e sua história do que uma consistência com os padrões narrativos encontrados na Europa do século XVIII.

Palavras-chave: literatura epistolar, Samuel Richardson, Pamela; or, virtue rewarded.

ABSTRACT

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), one of the first great epistolary novels, is a peculiar collection of letters and journals written by a serving maid who finds herself socially elevated at the novel's conclusion. In this study I attempt to illustrate the subtle yet poignant mechanics of *Pamela's* epistolary format and to show how the protagonist's act of writing personal journals enables her to improve her self-esteem and, eventually, her socio-economic status. Putting pen to paper in her personal journals allows Pamela the opportunity to temporarily escape from the responsibilities of her familial and social units, as well as to reflect and improve upon her psychological well-being. Indeed, Pamela's writing helps to develop, define and improve her self-disposition by privately reflecting upon her more intimate persona. I further demonstrate that the Richardsonian epistolary technique not only manages to cleverly hold the narrative framework together

but, also, in a sense, Pamela's fragile life. Scribbling these letters helps the protagonist organize her life and remember the past. She relies on her written correspondences and without them, she has trouble recollecting past experiences. In short, this intriguing narrative approach illustrates that, for its time period, it would be best to classify this Richardsonian epistolary technique, as Nancy Armstrong (1987) argues, "as something other than common fiction, not a novel according to the standards of the day." The greatness of Richardson's literary achievement should be seen as an example of how his narrative technique enabled and encouraged him to reveal much more about his heroine and her story than was consistent with other narrative formats of eighteenth-century Europe.

Key words: Epistolary literature, Samuel Richardson, Pamela; or, virtue rewarded.

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DALE, S. The power of the quill: epistolary technique...

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