How reliable a narrator is Richardson's Pamela?

An Essay by
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Reading the literary criticism which has been written almost 250 years after the first publication of Richardson's *Pamela*[1] it is surprising to see how emotionally charged the Pamela-debate still is. Its central question, whether Pamela's narration is reliable, is still able to initiate a heated discussion. The reason for this is that Pamela's story is far more than the narration of the experience of a servant-girl. It always was and obviously still is a matter of politics and political correctness, almost comparable to the alleged sexual affairs of President Clinton. In Pamela's case, however, we do not ask whether *he* really did it. Nobody wants to spare Mr B. the embarrassment of being guilty of sexual harassment. Mr B., clearly, is not the point of interest. Instead, we ask whether Pamela is really telling the truth about *herself*. This aspect of her reliability turns out to be the most important one. What is at stake is Pamela's virtue, and this is the fate she shares with Mr Clinton. Both have been elected to hold a powerful public position, with the difference that Pamela has not been elected by the people but by her author Samuel Richardson. I want to argue that Pamela's problems apart from Mr B., i.e. our doubts about her reliability and in turn about her virtue and vice versa, start with the intentions her author had in mind while allowing her to tell her story. It is precisely the tension between her intended public position as an example of virtue and the fact that her story is told in letters written and copied almost exclusively by herself that we start to doubt whether she really is the virtuous and therefore reliable person she has to claim to be.

There can be no doubt that Samuel Richardson intended Pamela to be an example of virtue, a role-model for every woman's behaviour, an instrument to teach proper conduct. In his preface he solemnly declares that he hopes "to incalculate *religion* and *morality*" (P 31) with his book. In order to achieve this he "paint[s] VICE in its proper colours, to make it *deservedly odious*; and ... set[s] VIRTUE in its proper amiable light, to make it look *lovely*" (P 31). Both male and female readers are expected to draw their lessons from a story presented according to these principles. Since our "*practicle* example" of virtue in this case is Pamela the following description applies to her: she is regarded as "worthy to be followed in the most *critical* and *affecting* cases, by the *virgin*, the *bride*, and the *wife*" (P 31). In short, Pamela is a didactic representation of virtue.

[1] Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, (Penguin Classics: London, 1985) in the following text the book will be quoted as P with pagenumbers in parenthesis

This virtue is presented to us in the story of Pamela's resistance against the sexual advances Mr B. makes to her after his mother's death. Her unwillingness to comply with his desire – with or without payment – is motivated by her determination that she "will die a thousand deaths, rather than be dishonest in any way" (P 47). She is "resolved to be virtuous" (P 54) and remains virtuous through all the temptations Mr B. creates for her. In the end he is not only convinced that she means what she says but is also ashamed of his own behaviour. Pamela's exemplary virtue succeeds in converting Mr B. to a virtuous life and exerts the same influence over her growing audience in the novel.

As such an exemplary role-model of virtue Pamela has to be – at least consciously – a reliable narrator for, as Michael McKeon notes, in Richardson's *Pamela* "questions of virtue cannot be unraveled from questions of truth."[2] A narrator who is deliberately unreliable clearly forfeits her claim to virtuous behaviour. Consequently, Richardson cannot give the subtitle *Virtue Rewarded* to *Pamela* and present her as an unreliable narrator at the same time. And indeed, on the level of the narration itself Pamela is treated and presented as both an extremely virtuous girl and a reliable narrator.

First of all the "editor" of Pamela's letters assures his readers in the preface that "the following Letters ... have their foundation in *Truth*" (P 31). When he interrupts Pamela's narration in order to report her abduction to Mr B.'s Lincolnshire estate and events that happened without Pamela's knowledge he does neither contradict her version of the story nor expresses doubts about her virtuous behaviour, quite the contrary. The reader learns that Mr B. intends "to prosecute his base designs upon the *the innocent virgin*" (P 123). We also read that all Bedfordshire servants "greatly loved and honoured the fair damsel." (P 123) The editor confirms that Mr B. does not only plan to take Pamela's virtue but also misrepresents her character in a letter to and a conversation with her father. (P 123-129) His summary of Pamela's situation is that "thus every way was the poor virgin beset." (P 123)

Not only the editor but also the other characters in the novel share this evaluation. Mrs Jervis is convinced that Pamela "was one of the most virtuous and industrious creatures she ever knew." (P 60) She "never saw any thing but innocence in her." (P 60) Lady Davers remarks that "every body gave ... [Pamela] a very good character, and loved [her]" (P 47). Mr Jonathan, the butler, is "sure that I will sooner believe *any body* in fault than *you* [Pamela]" (P 80) and his colleague Mr Longman is convinced that "every body must be good to her" since she is "so mild and meek to every one of us in the house" (P 105). After Pamela's victory over Mr B. the whole neighbourhood is full of praise for her. Pamela is regarded as "an honour to our sex, and as a pattern for all the young ladies in the country." (P 322)

But then Richardson's intention to create such a pattern for every lady in the

[2] Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*, (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1987), p. 378

country in the form of an epistolary novel causes several problems. He knows that a story that intends to promote virtue has to be entertaining in order to be read, that is in order to be able to exert influence. Therefore he wants to "*divert* and *entertain*" and to "*instruct* and *improve*" at the same time. The story is supposed to be "equally *delightful* and *profitable*". He also wishes to do this "in so probable, so natural, so *lively* a manner, as shall engage the passions of every sensible reader, and attach their regard to the story" (P 31) . It becomes obvious that Richardson hopes to achieve extremely conflicting ends.

Much of the literary criticism written about *Pamela* proves that the epistolary form is a very suitable means to engage the passions of the reader and enable him to relate to the story. But a didactic novel that is almost completely told in – supposedly entertaining – letters written by the virtuous heroine herself puts the narrator in an extremely difficult position and creates numerous disadvantages regarding the intended lesson of the narration by making it almost impossible for her to maintain her virtuous image.

First of all it should be noted that Pamela is convinced that she is a reliable narrator. In her opinion her letters and journal entries contain all her "private thoughts ... and all the secrets of my heart." (P 263) What she records on paper is her "heart at the time; and this is not deceitful." (P 266) When Mr B. accuses her of having encouraged Mr Williams to love her by discouraging him explicitly in her letters Pamela claims that she "know[s] nothing ... of the practices of artful women! I have no art!" (P 267) Again and again she assures that "I have only writ the truth" (P 273).

But then everybody knows that a letter writer's judgement concerning her own reliability is not necessarily correct. Samuel Johnson's contradictory statements about the possibilities of the letter illustrate the difficult situation of Pamela. "In a Man's Letters", he writes in his own correspondence, "his soul lies naked ... Nothing is inverted, nothing distorted."[3] This attitude belongs to a tradition which recognizes the letter "as the true voice of feeling ... as a means of conveying authentic personality and experience."[4] At the same time, however, the letter was seen as a means of deceit and pretence. Accordingly, Dr Johnson states in his 'Life of Pope' that "there is, indeed, no transaction which offers stronger temptations to fallacy and sophistication than epistolary intercourse."[5] The reason for this is that the letter is a "calm and deliberate performance, in the cool of leisure, in the stillness of solitude" and Johnson cannot imagine that a "man sits down to depreciate by design his own character."[6] The reader might, therefore, be the victim of a fallacy when he believes in Pamela's assurances of reliability.

Obviously, we have to decide whether to trust Pamela's narration or not.

[3]this quotation is taken from the essay-topics handout

[4]Margaret Anne Doody, *A Natural Passion: A Study of the Novels of Samuel Richardson*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1974), p. 23

[5]this quotation is taken from the essay-topics handout

[6]this quotation is taken from Carol Houlihan Flynn, *Samuel Richardson: A Man of Letters*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1982), p. 277

We have to make this decision on the grounds of the novel by considering all the hints it gives us about Pamela's character and credibility. I have already outlined the support Pamela receives from the editor and from other characters in the novel. But the effect of this support, or rather the effect of the way it is offered to the reader is highly ambiguous. Pamela's story is presented to us as a first person narration written in letters in order to engage the passions of the reader. This means that the whole story, including her role in it and the lesson we are expected to draw from it, is told by the heroine herself. Apart from one short interruption of Pamela's letters by the editor no documents are included in the novel independent of her pen. She either speaks directly to her readers (initially her parents) in her own letters or copies letters written by other persons which might be important for their understanding of her situation. This circumstance creates the embarrassing situation that everything we learn about Pamela's exemplary behaviour literally has to go through her own hands. She has to be the person who informs us that every female reader should follow her praiseworthy example for there is no one who could do it for her. To make sure that we get the message Richardson makes her repeat it over and over again and – unfortunately for Pamela – we are taught to call this kind of behaviour vain rather than virtuous. Richardson seems to be aware of this problem. One way to solve it is the strategy that Pamela rarely praises herself on her own account but reports the praise others find for her. The reader thereby learns that not only Pamela but also other persons approve of her character and of her behaviour. There is, however, a difference in the effect of praise recorded by a third person narrator without the knowledge of the heroine and praise recorded and told by the heroine herself. A virtuous and modest woman is simply not expected to mention it. The fact that she does so makes her less virtuous. Of course, Pamela cannot really help it precisely because she is not only the heroine but also the narrator and even the mouthpiece of the author and his didactic intentions. She is the only one who can teach us what we are supposed to learn. Since Richardson seems to be obsessed with the almost paranoid fear that the reader might not be able to find the lesson on his or her own, Pamela is put into the difficult position of being not only her own but also her author's voice, ironically because she is meant to be the most reliable voice of the text. Clearly, Pamela has to use other strategies to regain the virtue which has been lost by supporting it and, thereby, to save the lesson of the novel. One of them is to report the praise for her behaviour and to acknowledge that other people or forces deserve the credit for it. Above all, her parents are the persons to whom she owes her virtue. Next to them there is her former lady and through them and through her own strength Pamela detects the work of God. In a conversation with Mr B. she points out: "My father and mother took care to instill into my mind lessons of virtue from my *very cradle*. My dear good lady, your mother, *found* them there, or she would not have honoured me as she did with her countenance." (P 269) And a few pages later she stresses: "I have reason to bless my dear parents, and my good lady, for giving me a religious education; since but for that, I should, upon

more occasion than one, have attempted a desperate act" (P 276). Her parents are assured that "by God's grace, I will never do any thing that shall bring your grey hairs with sorrow to the grave." (P 47) Another strategy the author employs is to signal Pamela's embarrassment about the praise she receives and the pride she feels about it and to give a somewhat altruistic reason for reporting it. A good example of all the above mentioned methods is the following passage which introduces a description of the tributes that are paid to Pamela by Mr B.'s Lincolnshire neighbours:

> My master, with pleasure, told me, afterwards, all they said of me. Will you forgive your vain daughter, if she tells you all that he was pleased to tell me? *Vain* you will think me, and I cannot but say I am proud to be distinguished by him. Then these agreeable circumstances are so *new* to me! When I am more used to these honours, I hope all my pride will be lost in my gratitude to God, and to him. I know, moreover, that my now happy tale rejoices your worthy hearts; and you will not think I can be too particular on these occasions. So, my dear father and mother, you must have some pride to answer for, as well as your daughter. (P 321)

Of course, Pamela's *honesty* about the pride she feels when she is praised is not embarrassing but disarming. When Pamela tells her parents that "I have nothing to say but what will make me look more like a vain hussy, than any thing else" but says it anyway because "there is a secret pleasure one has to hear one's self praised" (P 47) we see the probable, natural and lively character Richardson has promised his readers in the preface. At this point we have to come back to Richardson's conflicting aims for presenting the novel to us. Pamela's character is intended to be probable and exemplary at the same time. Her naturalness makes it easier for us to relate to her, while her task to be a pattern for every lady in the country, all innocence and virtue, puts her in a distance. When the reader admires her exemplary behaviour he or she feels to have a right to resent the inconsistencies her naturalness brings into it. And when the reader relates to her naturalness it is hard to understand why she should be so exemplary. Again, Pamela as a narrator who has to satisfy all of Richardson's intentions is caught in the tension they create.

Pamela's obligation to report again and again that she is a worthy role-model and therefore deserves our attention is only one of the traits of her narration that, although intended to support her authority, at the same time undermines it. Another trait of this kind is her habit of enriching her letters with biblical and other religious allusions. According to John Pierce "Pamela invokes different texts – in particular . . . those of scripture and fable – to strengthen her claims to truth and authority."[7] Her narration as a "sacred record of events" is "supplemented by

[7]John B. Pierce, 'Pamela's Textual Authority', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 7 (1995), 131-146, (p. 132)

sacred and secular texts" which "reinforce her ... claims to textual authority."[8] And Pierce continues:

> For Pamela, the effects of participating in this tradition is to validate her experience and align 'even ... seemingly trivial happenings' with profound events containing divine shape. Thus her actions and, more particularly, the records of them take on an even greater significance[9].

A strengthening of Pamela's authority as a narrator and of the significance of her narration accords completely with Richardson's didactic intentions. Only when the reader recognizes the full weight of the story will he or she be persuaded to take it as an instruction and try to follow its example. At the same time, however, since it is her narration, Pamela is characterized by the use she makes of religious texts. This use does not only testify to her piety but also to the importance she and not only her author attributes to her experience. The reader of the 1990s has (or should have) no problem to take the story of sexual harassment told by a lower-class girl seriously and, likewise, he or she hopefully does not feel offended by every sign that the victim takes herself seriously. But even the modern reader's readiness to acknowledge the significance of Pamela's narration hesitates when she compares her attempt to "scour a pewter plate" motivated by her prospect to return to the poor life of her parents with the fate of "a good bishop that was to be burnt for his religion; and tried how he could bear it, by putting his fingers into a lighted candle" (P 109). Again, we see the sixteen years old servant-girl who is not only a little vain but also tends to exaggerate the significance of her experience. And the, however refreshing, view of this exaggerating servant-girl instantly diminishes the authority of Richardson's exemplary Pamela. Pierce notes, moreover, that Pamela by making use of sacred texts in order to support her authority "comes close to usurping divine omniscience"[10] and this in turn brings her close to arrogance and possible unreliability. Once more, Pamela's reliability is diminished by the wish of the author to support it..

Another consequence of conflicting author intentions is the tension between a story that is supposed to be based on truth and the patterns of fairy tale and romance that can be found in the novel. A true story convinces the reader that its lesson is important for and applicable to his or her life while traits of fairy tale and romance ensure that the lesson is entertaining and diverting. In principle, there is nothing wrong with that, but in this case Pamela has to prove her reliability as a narrator and a narrator who tells fairy tales and romances is far from being regarded as trustworthy. The first person who exploits this argument to serve his own ends is, of course, Mr B.. In a letter to Pamela's father he claims that

> ever since the death of her kind lady, she [Pamela] has given herself up to the reading of novels and romances ... and now takes it into

[8] John B. Pierce, 1995, p. 132
[9] John B. Pierce, 1995, p. 135
[10] John B. Pierce, 1995, p. 138

> her head, because her glass tells her she is pretty, that everybody who looks upon her is in love with her. Hence, silly girl! her misrepresentations of those innocent familiarities of mine to her, on certain benevolent occasions . . . about which she so much alarms you; (P 124)

Her head full of novels and romances Pamela, according to Mr B., is unable to perceive reality adequately and instead arranges everything in a way that pleases her imagination. B. does not only use this strategy to discredit Pamela version of "certain benevolent occasions" in the eyes of her father but also to refuse responsibility for his own behaviour. During one of their fights Pamela accuses Mr B. of being "Lucifer himself" and he warns her that "You have given me a character, Pamela, and blame me not if I act up to it." (P 248) In this turn of the argument Pamela does not only misinterpret events in her own mind but also forces the outside reality into the shape of her imagination. The instrument of witchcraft seems to be her narration. A few days later Mr B. returns to this point when he insists on reading Pamela's letters and journal entries because "there is such a pretty air of romance, as you tell your story, in *your* plots, and *my* plots, that I shall be better directed how to wind up the catastrophe of the pretty novel." (P 268) Despite the fact that this interpretation of Pamela's alleged influence on reality is offered by the rake of the story who later converts to the opinion that he has caused Pamela "so much danger and distress" (P 276) and wants to "make my Pamela amends for all the hardship she has undergone by my means" (P 277) literary critics are fascinated by Mr B.'s old account of what had happened why. Michael McKeon, for example, diagnoses "the projective and constructive powers" of Pamela's mind and proposes that "it is a mark of Pamela's imaginative powers that, so far from being invalidated in her most unassimilated fantasies of persecuted maidenhood, she gets from others considerable help in their construction."[11] He therefore concludes that Richardson does not use the romance model because he as an author wants to have Pamela's story told in this way but because the use of the patterns of romance "is functional primarily in characterizing the volatility of his protagonist's imagination."[12] If we take Richardson's intentions into account it is extremely difficult to support this point of view. It proves, however, that Richardson's use of romance and fairy-tale endangers Pamela's reliability as a narrator.

Ruth Bernard Yeazell identifies another tension which works against Pamela's credibility when she argues that "Richardson's moralizing tag did more harm to the reputation of his heroine than to help it."[13] Yeazell speaks about the tension between Pamela's narration that develops day after day in her letters and the teleological aspect Richardson gives to it by calling it *Virtue Rewarded.* He thereby produces a "tendency to sort out all the contradictions and confusions

[11] Michael McKeon, 1987, p. 363

[12] Michael McKeon, 1987, p. 363

[13] Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1991), p. 87

in her [Pamela's] account of herself in the light of their end."[14]This end is the reward of her virtuous behaviour, her marriage to Mr B., and if we look at her story from this point of view we are not far away from accusing her of having it planned all the time. This is of course the greatest charge that has ever been brought forward against Pamela's reliability, the charge of hypocrisy. She has been suspected of acting virtuous only because she wants to marry Mr B., or, even worse, of pretending to be virtuous in order to be able to marry him. Yeazell argues that a narration in letters is by definition not directed towards an end since it is written to the moment and not with the overall design in mind.[15] Pamela possesses "neither the reader's retrospective knowledge of this 'unifying element' [her marriage to B.] nor any anticipatory awareness that virtue will be rewarded . . . at the time of her writing."[16]. In fact, the only possible outcome she is aware of is "the old story of a poor girl's seduction"[17] and this story has no happy ending. Yeazell's point is that the reader's knowledge of Pamela's reward which he or she receives from Richardson's subtitle interferes with Pamela's moment to moment narration. In her opinion this effect becomes especially strong when we reread her story because then it is "especially difficult to distinguish our knowledge from hers."[18] I want to argue, however, that this is only one aspect of the stated interference of teleological knowledge with the narrator's limited knowledge of the moment. For Richardson did not only give a subtitle to his novel, no doubt in order to direct the reader's attention, but also wrote it with this end in mind. It is not only the reader's knowledge that interferes with Pamela's knowledge, but, as stated earlier, the author's knowledge and voice that interferes with Pamela's voice. The result is "a modest heroine with too strong a sense of an ending" and such a heroine, as Yeazell observes, "is in danger of undoing her story."[19] She becomes unreliable because we suspect her of arranging her narration in order to justify or bring about its outcome.

Other objections against Pamela's virtue and in turn against her reliability are created by a tension between the author's intention to attach the reader to Pamela's story and historical concepts of female behaviour and modesty. In order to ensure that he engages the reader's passions Richardson uses Pamela as a first person narrator and in doing so forces her to offend against the rules with which she should comply in order to convince her readers of her virtue. Yeazell points out that

> Richardson may be said to have compounded his own difficulties by confining his narrative of his heroine's triumph almost solely to that heroine's voice, thereby violating an implicit rule of feminine behavior

[14]Ruth Bernard Yeazell, 1991, p. 87
[15]Ruth Bernard Yeazell, 1991, p. 92
[16]Ruth Bernard Yeazell, 1991, p. 87
[17]Ruth Bernard Yeazell, 1991, p. 92
[18]Ruth Bernard Yeazell, 1991, p. 101
[19]Ruth Bernard Yeazell, 1991, p. 101

> that the *Lady's Magazine* would later spell out for its readers in one of its numerous essays 'On Modesty': 'take care you do not make yourself the heroine of your own story.[20]

This is not the only rule Pamela violates. Ivor Indyk notes that Richardson's early readers had objections to "all aspects of her activity – her letter-writing, her piety, her knowledge of sexual implications, her use of clothing, her aggression and her submission, her verbal strength". All these aspects of her behaviour "complicate Pamela's presumed role as modest Virgin, chaste Bride, and obliging Wife"[21] and thereby her reliability as a narrator because she can be suspected of hypocrisy by claiming to be an example of virtue while violating numerous rules of virtuous behaviour.

So far, I have not dealt with the question of subjectivity which is, of course, an important aspect of every epistolary narration. Pamela herself acknowledges this when she admits her subjective perception of harmless cows as dangerous bulls that prevents her from carrying out her escape from B.'s estate. Since Pamela is able to identify the influence of her subjectivity it is unlikely that her report of events is highly distorted by it. I would further argue that the problem of subjectivity is not the aspect of the novel which initially causes the reader to doubt Pamela's reliability. Pierce points out that in the context of *Pamela* the "sincere heart" is seen as a "measure of truth"[22] and not as an organ that distorts reality. It is, therefore, Pamela's sincerity which has to be established or undermined by the narration in order to allow as a judgement about her reliability. I have tried to show that this sincerity is supported on several levels of the novel. Obviously, Pamela is intended to be reliable but, ironically, her credibility is endangered by precisely the same means that are used to support it. Conflicting author intentions are the reason for this, that is conflicts between the demands of an epistolary novel that wants to entertain and engage the reader's passions and the demands of a didactic story that wants to teach a specific lesson. Especially Richardson's use of a female narrator in order to attach the reader to this story causes problems with historical concepts of female modesty. This is not to say that the character of Pamela is free of inconsistencies and that she does not share most of her author's intentions for recording and telling her story. However, since Richardson clearly does not intend to expose an inconsistent character – remember the subtitle – a critical reading that concentrates on Pamela alone has difficulties to explain why her reliability is supported by the editor and is yet always in danger of being doubted by the reader. I have argued that her difficulty seems to be founded in the fact that she is created in order to serve conflicting author intentions. She has the fate of being the narrator and the heroine of a story which is not entirely hers.

[20]Ruth Bernard Yeazell, 1991, p. 86

[21]Ivor Indyk, 'Interpretative Relevance, and Richardson's *Pamela*', *Southern Review*, Australia, Vol. 16 (!983), 31-43, (p. 32)

[22]John B. Pierce, 1995, p. 134

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