[…].

When Richardson and Fielding began writing, in the early 1740s, the novel could hardly claim a form at all. Fiction, of course, had flourished since ancient times, but the notion of an extended prose work focused on nonaristocrats was recent. The moral and aesthetic status of such a composition remained uncertain; novelists of the 1740s had to justify their enterprise. They did so most often by invoking a classical rationale: literature instructs and pleases. The first of these purposes carried more weight than the second.

The familiar claim to offer moral instruction persisted in the eighteenth century—especially in the works of such writers as [Eliza] Haywood, where it might seem dubious. Fielding, though, a great innovator of the 1740s, offered a new kind of teaching. In *Tom Jones* (1749), he purported to instruct his readers about that large, vague concept, human nature: to teach them, along with his hero, how human beings operate in the world and on what principles. The claim aligned him with Hume, whose *Treatise of Human Nature*, his first major work, had similar aspirations if different methods or implicit criticism, and their incorporation suggests the novel’s ambition.

In *Clarissa*, a work conspicuously concerned with its characters’ intimate lives, social and political allusions occur mainly by analogy. Early in the novel, while Clarissa still believes that she can negotiate successfully for her own freedom, she comments that the “world is but one great family” (Clarissa, Penguin Edn. 1985, 62). Her comment acquires increasing ironic force as her own immediate family ever more clearly epitomizes the viciousness of the larger world. Helpless against her siblings’ machinations, her mother’s weakness, her father’s obsessions, and her uncles’ venality, she grasps with increasing clarity the degree to which, both before and after her defection from her father’s home, those around her, like most in society at large, operate on the basis of narrowly conceived self‐interest.

A series of apparently casual analogies strengthens the connection between intimate groupings and larger ones. The early part of the narrative, before Clarissa’s elopement, offers frequent comparisons between happenings in the Harlowe family and what Clarissa at one point calls “intrigues and plots carried on by undermining courtiers against one another” (82). Anna Howe, imagining herself married to her meek and compliant wooer, Hickman, fancies “how he ascends, and how I descend, in the matrimonial wheel, never to take my turn again, but by fits and starts, like the feeble struggles of a sinking state for its dying liberty” (277). Only two short paragraphs intervene before she begins generalizing about marriage. Two people who come together, she says, should have suitable tempers, yet need boundaries between them.

Unless each holds the other to these boundaries, encroachment threatens. She illustrates her assertion: If the boundaries of the three estates that constitute our political union were not known, and occasionally asserted, what would become of the prerogatives and privileges of each? The two branches of the legislature would encroach upon each other; and the executive power would swallow up both. (277) The novel’s vocabulary reinforces the implications of Anna’s comparison. Authority, liberty, independence are key words in the early part of *Clarissa*, abstract but potent nouns familiar from public politics. Clarissa, having inherited a house and money from her grandfather, already potentially possesses independence (meaning, primarily, financial freedom). Fear lest she assert that independence torments her family. Although she has turned the management of her estate over to her father, she could assert her legal right to reassume it. She professes no desire to do so, yet her family’s fear remains: fear of an overturning of established order, a miniature revolution.

In this narrative the language of national politics, belonging to women as well as men, calls attention to the novel’s concern with sexual and familial politics, both in their operations reminiscent of national and international possibilities. Young women’s awareness of political issues informs their responses to personal dilemmas. Politics generates wars—in families [1740] and in erotic pairings as on a larger scale. Analogical references to politics interpret personal experience, reflecting characters’ and shaping readers’ understanding.

Readers’ roles in relation to this early fiction of experience involve more than vicarious participation in the protagonist’s career. Readers enlarge their own experience by in effect watching and judging characters in action, as well as by imaginatively sharing their predicaments and solutions. They function simultaneously as spectators and as imaginative participants. That fact becomes especially apparent in works involving unmixed characters who do evil rather than good, as in as in Haywood’s *Anti‐Pamela* (1741) and Henry Fielding’s *Shamela*. Both works convey skepticism about Richardson’s *Pamela*, who guards her chastity against seduction and force and claims her primary commitment to Christian virtue yet, in the view of Haywood and Fielding, demonstrates an eye for the main chance that discredits her goodness. Richardson’s novel has long interested readers through the letters that convey Pamela’s lack of self‐awareness despite her constant self‐examination, and the degree of self‐interest that sometimes motivates her without her conscious knowledge. Thus, for a minor instance, Pamela decides (in the course of elaborate delays about leaving her master’s house, despite her proclaimed desire to depart) that she must dress as a country girl in order to return to her rural parents. She gradually acquires the necessary materials, attires herself in her new garb, and appears before her master. “To say Truth, I never lik’d myself so well in my Life,” she writes, after looking at herself in the mirror (Pamela, Oxford 2001, 55). That night, Mr. B for the first time attempts to rape her (rather half-heartedly, to be sure). Before he appears, Mrs. Jervis, the housekeeper, remarks that she has never seen Pamela look so lovely as she did in her country dress, and that of course she struck Mr. B— as attractive. Pamela declares that she “expected no Effect from [the clothes]; but if any, a quite contrary one” (62).

The remark seems disingenuous at best, in relation to her acknowledgment of how much she liked her image in the mirror. When Mr. B— sees through what he calls her disguise, he accuses her of hypocrisy—the accusation that would be made by numerous critics in Richardson’s time and later. In order to make that point, both *Anti‐Pamela* and *Shamela* represent unmixed figures, motivated and acting entirely in terms of self-interest, hypocrisy their consistent resource. Syrena Tricksy, the anti‐Pamela, trained from girlhood by her mother to find and get a profitable man, learns her lessons well and thinks herself cleverer than her mother. She consequently loses her virginity early and inadvertently but goes on to effect one rewarding liaison after another, until she is disgraced and banished to Wales, with no men in the vicinity. Shamela, like Pamela a servant, has, like Syrena, a mother of dubious morals. Although she has already had a baby by Parson Williams (who figures in *Pamela* as an honorable although unrewarded suitor), Shamela successfully presents herself as a frightened and chaste young woman, concerned mainly about her “Vartue.” Fielding has fun with his characters, making Mr. B into a man of dubious virility but extreme lewdness and having Shamela use talk about her Vartue as a resource in every extremity. Shamela gets her man, such as he is, and ends up pleased with herself. Experience teaches such characters nothing about virtue, and their machinations hardly invite imaginative participation. As spectators, readers witness their activities and perhaps internalize their implicit criticism of Pamela.

Shamela and Syrena differ from Pamela in their full awareness of what they are doing. Hypocrisy implies awareness, and Pamela’s revealing letters to her virtuous parents suggest that she doesn’t understand her own motives. But Haywood and Fielding implicitly mock Richardson for having it both ways: for representing Pamela as an innocent and demonstrating as well that more than innocence occupies her mind. They in effect criticize the character for being “mixed” while pretending otherwise, and they purport to demonstrate what Pamela might look like if truly “unmixed.” Incidentally, though, they raise a question about the valorizing of experience in more realistic novels. Shamela and Syrena learn nothing that can change their direction in life. Experience in itself has no necessary effect. To be useful, it must intersect with specific human qualities.

Reflecting on Shamela and Syrena calls attention to the limitations of Pamela’s education through experience. A good student, the girl has learned domestic skills and decorum from her late mistress. She takes advantage likewise of her experiences with Mr. B— but only, the perspective of Shamela suggests, to effect her advantageous marriage. Each encounter with her master sharpens her skills for dealing with him the next time. Experience demonstrates Pamela’s courage, ingenuity, and determination. It teaches her how to get and keep a husband: precisely the skill she needs. It does not greatly enlarge her human capacities.

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