

2020

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Recommended Citation

Grisham, Leah (2020) "“Yield it up cheerfully”: Teaching Consent, Violence, and Coercion in Samuel Richardson’s Pamela," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*: Vol.10: Iss.2, Article 5. <http://doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.10.2.1237>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol10/iss2/5>

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Abstract

Drawn from the author’s experience teaching Samuel Richardson’s novel *Pamela* during the #MeToo movement, this essay argues that bringing current discourses of consent and gender-based violence into conversation with the novel deepens students’ engagement with and interest in the eighteenth century. While students identify specters of Pamela and Mr. B’s relationship in their own worlds, the novel is also a helpful tool in revealing the many ways in which consent can be coerced.

Keywords

Pamela, Samuel Richardson, #MeToo, consent, rape

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“Yield it up cheerfully”: Teaching Consent, Violence, and Coercion in Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*

As a historicist-leaning researcher, I often deploy the themes that drive my research in my classroom, immersing students in the contemporary worlds that are reflected in the texts we study. This was my strategy in my 2018 Print Culture and the Expanding World course, a survey of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British literature with an emphasis on the coterminous proliferation of print media and empire, taught at a large private research university in Washington, D.C. Our syllabus included William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Margaret Cavendish’s *The Blazing World*, and Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, just to name a few, and our discussions focused on topics like eighteenth-century gender roles, colonialism, politics, and literacy rates. As it turned out, these historical contexts provided the perfect foundation for infusing current events into our class discussion in a way that ignited a new level of enthusiasm and empathy into the course. Fall 2018 saw the #MeToo movement in full swing: Bill Cosby was sentenced to three to ten years in prison for sexual assault, new allegations against Harvey Weinstein continued to emerge, and Christine Blasey Ford provided testimony on her sexual assault at the hands of Brett Kavanaugh.¹ This last event coincided with our unit on Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, a novel that follows the relationship between Pamela Andrews – a young, vulnerable servant – and her abusive-employer-turned-husband, Mr. B. The novel’s framing suggests that Pamela’s defense of her virginity against Mr. B’s attempted rapes inspires him to give up his libertinism and reward Pamela’s virtue by elevating her to lady of the manor. It is a novel that was extremely popular in its own time and remains so among teachers and researchers today.

Pamela is mired in issues of consent, sexual violence, resistance, and patriarchal supremacy – the very issues that were on display during the Kavanaugh hearing. The following essay highlights some of the ways in which our contemporary conversations on consent allowed students to channel feelings of empathy into smart analyses of consent. Recognizing the horrific ways in which Pamela’s story was repeating itself in a Congressional hearing anchored our discussion of *Pamela* in the patriarchal power structures that #MeToo seeks to dismantle. This framing also led us to discuss deeper, less obvious forms of patriarchal hegemony through an examination of the ways Pamela is coerced into giving up her right to consent. Students are often taught that consent is a simple matter of saying “yes” (especially in sexual encounters), but *Pamela* reveals that consent is not always so simple – there are forces that apply pressure to say “yes.” Classroom discussion of this phenomenon allows students to see the social apparatuses in place that work to strip women of a right to consent to or reject patriarchal ideologies, resulting in the internalization of oppressive hegemony. These revelations fostered deeper levels of empathy and enthusiasm that shifted the whole dynamic of the course, awakening student interest in the texts we read together.

Some of the similarities between patriarchal power in our time and the eighteenth-century world in which Pamela lived deepened were immediately apparent to students, especially the ways in which Mr. B abuses his position of power. His attempted rapes call to mind many news stories from our period: from Harvey Weinstein’s and Bill Cosby’s prolific rap sheets to Brett Kavanaugh and the Stanford rape case, in which Brock Turner was convicted of sexually assaulting then-unconscious Chanel Miller behind a dumpster (which Miller recounts in her 2019

autobiography *Know My Name: A Memoir*). While in these specific instances the perpetrators eventually faced consequences for their actions, they were protected by their power, wealth, and/or – especially in Turner’s case – whiteness. This same dynamic operates in *Pamela*; as the heroine remarks, Mr. B “is greater than any Constable, and is a Justice himself” (60). That is, he has socio-political power in their community that he leverages over those in his domestic circle – especially Pamela. During the early portions of the novel that feature his persistent harassment, students were drawn into the narrative, easily identifying him as the villain and Pamela as his victim. The most glaring examples are his attempted rapes, which are quite violent in their nature. In one instance, Pamela recalls “find[ing] his Hand in my Bosom, and when my Fright let me know it, I was ready to die; and I sighed, and scream’d, and fainted away. And still he had his Arms about my Neck” (63). Students felt outrage toward Mr. B’s overt sexual violence and the more covert ways in which he preyed on his vulnerable employee. The novel’s emphasis on Pamela’s interiority – what Ian Watt refers to as the “attention...to the individualisation of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment” – displayed her emotions in a way that enabled students to feel along with her, so to speak, opening pathways to empathy (18).

Just as real-life situations of consent are rarely black and white, my students’ reading of *Pamela* was indicative of the complexity of consent. As our *Pamela* unit wore on, I felt their opinions of Pamela Andrews shift. Both Lisa Zunshine and Kristina Straub note in their contributions to *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Samuel Richardson* that students sometimes have a difficult time parsing the many layers of Pamela’s characterization. As Straub puts it:

Why doesn’t she just leave? is my students’ common response to Pamela’s claustrophobically contained verbosity...A girl who writes at times when, in students’ opinions, she ought to be exerting some form of agency, such as packing her bags, hailing the next stagecoach, or reporting an attempted rape to the authorities, makes *Pamela* a text that seems implausible, unrealistic, and just plain boring to my students (70).

While the immediacy of the #MeToo movement helped my students relate to *Pamela* better than Straub’s students, many of them still struggled to rectify Pamela’s spirited defense of her body with the fact that she eventually marries her attacker and accepts him as “the kind Protector of my Weakness, and the Guide and Director of my future Steps,” as she articulates (337). After fielding complaints and confusion about this apparent bifurcation, I encouraged my students to compile a list of examples when they found themselves confused by or frustrated with Pamela so we could better examine the underlying issues. Many of the items on their lists included moments when Pamela praises the goodness of Mr. B while deprecating her own personal value. For instance, she calls him: “good dear Master, my kind Friend, my generous Benefactor, my worthy Protector, and, Oh! all the good Words in one,” and reminds herself to “be conscious of thy [own] Unworthiness!” (340). Students who previously cheered on Pamela’s sense of autonomy and empathized with her struggle against an employer’s attempted rapes found themselves irritated at the praise she lavishes on Mr. B. Why, they wonder, does this change happen?

I used this discomfort as an opportunity to teach students about the devious ways in which systemic gender oppression operated in the eighteenth century. While the first part of the novel

celebrates Pamela's non-consent to Mr. B's desire for extramarital sex, later letters glorify her internalization of patriarchal hegemony through her belief that, as a wife, she owes her husband unwavering obedience. Pamela is effectively coerced into consenting to patriarchal rule. While reading conduct guides alongside *Pamela* is second nature to seasoned academics, I found that students in my largely-freshman survey course had never encountered these before, rendering them valuable in exemplifying the ways women were indoctrinated into the patriarchy. Breaking class down into small groups, each group was given examples from various conduct guides and asked to provide brief close readings of these with an eye to their relationships with *Pamela*. Their analyses highlighted the pervasive subordination of women to men, such as is found in Richard Allestree's *The Ladies Calling* (1673), where he argues that women have a "natural imbecillity [*sic*]" and thus must be guided by their *paterfamilias* (36).² Allestree also emphasizes meekness as an important quality in women, since "[m]eekness is generally subservient," and subservience is, to him, the ideal manifestation of womanhood (46). Another useful example is found in Francis Lynch's *The Virgin's Nosegay, Or the Duties of Christian Virgins* (1744), where he claims:

Home is where a Woman shines most, 'tis her proper Sphere; it was assign'd her by Nature; and does she behave as she ought there, she is sure of Applause from all her Acquaintance, of Reverence, Duty and Respect from her Children and Servants and what she should ambition above all Things in this Life, of Love and Esteem from her Husband. (188-9)

Most students are not surprised to learn that that eighteenth-century configurations of femininity were tethered to domesticity, but many are shocked at the bluntness of these directives that so blatantly prescript obedience and deny free will: consent to these beliefs was compulsory. The fact that women were instructed to be meek, humble, "subservient," and care about pleasing their husbands above anything else, though distasteful to twenty-first century students, helps them to see the systemic nature of misogyny. These are all "systemic social apparatus[es]," as Gayle Rubin explains in "Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," "which takes of females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products" who uphold patriarchal order (158). These examples, coupled with some context about women's legal and economic status in Britain in the time (such as coverture, primogeniture, and the Clandestine Marriage Act of 1753) enlightened my class' analysis of Pamela Andrews, illuminating the social and structural mechanisms that subordinated women. Though they express discomfort with her actions in the narrative, these contexts lead them understand why she acts the way she does.

To further illustrate this point, I shared excerpts from Richardson's sequel to *Pamela*, *Pamela II* (1742). One of the central points of conflict in the sequel is whether Pamela will breastfeed their child. Though many genteel women employed wet nurses, in the mid-eighteenth century the benefits of a mother's milk were appreciated. It was, as Toni Bowers describes, "the ultimate indicator of maternal virtue...distinguishing the selfless, virtuous, and affectionate domestic mother from the idle, selfish aristocrat" (142). "[W]here there is good Health, free Spirits, and plentiful Nourishment; I think [nursing] an indispensable Duty," Pamela contends, "[f]or this was the Custom, of old, of all the good Wives we read of in Scripture. Then the Nourishment of the Mother must be most natural to the Child" (4:10). Mr. B, however, forbids her from nursing since – as he claims – breastfeeding will diminish Pamela's beauty and spending time around a

nursing baby will be bothersome to him. The narrative makes it clear that Pamela's desire to breastfeed is justified, but social customs dictate that a husband's will must be obeyed. A host of pressures are exerted on Pamela to pressure – coerce – her into relegating her own will to her husband's. For instance, Mr. B threatens to cheat on Pamela if she breastfeeds. "You have been often somewhat uneasy, when I have talked, for Argument's sake, in favour of Polygamy," he argues, "my Dear: Suppose I put you in mind, that while Rachel was giving her little one all her Attention as a good Nurse, the worthy Patriarch had several other Wives" (4:14-15). He meets Pamela's argument that Old Testament wives nursed their children with his own biblical precedent, taunting her with his predilection for "Polygamy." If you nurse, he threatens, I will turn to other women. The goal of this emotionally abusive behavior is to coerce her compliance. As he puts it himself: "I insist upon it, my Pamela, that you acquiesce with my Dispensation, and don't think to let me lose my beloved Wife, and have an indelicate Nurse put upon me instead of her" (4:18). Mr. B then goes a step beyond threats; to mitigate any future differences between the two he instructs her to consent to his orders happily – to "yield it up cheerfully," as he later says to her (4:23). In his role as family patriarch, Mr. B wants his word to be law and, moreover, he expects Pamela to submit "cheerfully" – to be so dutiful that she will never – even internally – resist.

Bonnie Latimer argues that through the breastfeeding saga, "Pamela hints at the fictionality of submissive femininity, denaturalising it: it is dependent upon the consent of the submissive, and is not natural or inevitable" (83). That is, even though she does consent to Mr. B's directive against breastfeeding, Pamela's ability to think rationally – rather than blindly follow her husband's order – indicates her internal rebellion against his authority. While Toni Bowers originally argued along a similar vein, making the case that *Pamela II* showcases a sense of rebellion in its titular character, she later wrote about a shift in her perspective.³ "What seems most illuminating about the episode now is its suggestion that Pamela's identity as privileged wife shuts down her ability to resist B.'s arrogance...she must finally submit to it, even at the expense of her child's welfare and her own values" (151). Submission – not subversion – characterizes Pamela. Bowers brings up another episode from *Pamela II* in which Pamela and Mr. B confiscate Sally Godfrey's daughter (fathered by Mr. B) to raise themselves. "The two episodes are intimately connected," Bowers explains, "as Pamela learns not only to submit to B's prerogative herself but also to collude in forcing the submission of others" (151). Pamela becomes so indoctrinated into the cult of feminine submission that she becomes an active agent of the patriarchy herself.

Discussing conduct guides and the breastfeeding incident from *Pamela II* with students and then turning back to the original volumes of *Pamela* helped them better understand the interactions between Mr. B and Pamela as a part of the process by which patriarchal indoctrination takes place. Even when he is still attempting to rape Pamela, Mr. B emphasizes his desire for the sex to be consensual. "I abhor the Thought of forcing her to any thing," he tells Mrs. Jervis (35). While I do not accept this assertion as completely as Michael A. Donovan does, I do think there is something valid in his argument that Mr. B "regards rape as beneath him because it is a concession that he must resort to force to have what is his by a kind of *droit de seigneur*" (383). Having an unwilling partner – in sex and in marriage – is in this sense demeaning to Mr. B's sense of entitlement. Similarly, many students expressed outrage at the later conversation between Pamela and Mr. B in which he lays out his "Rules" of marriage (which Pamela

succinctly compiles in a 48-point list) (448). Describing an ideal wife, he tells Pamela: “The Word Command, on my Side, or Obedience, on hers, would I have blotted from my vocabulary” (446). Pamela records this as point number 26 on her list of rules “That the Words COMMAND and OBEY shall be blotted out of his Vocabulary” along with her commentary: “*Very good!*” (450). Read alongside his earlier comment that he does not want to force a woman to have sex with him, his statement in *Pamela II* that he expects her “cheerful” compliance, and the relevant conduct guide material, students interpreted this rule as his notice that he never wants to have to order or command her to do anything; he feels entitled to a wife who submits completely. Rule number 27 – “that [a wife] must not shew Reluctance, Uneasiness, or Doubt, to oblige him; and that too at half a Word; and must not be bid twice to do one thing” – also supports this reading (450). For wives in the eighteenth century, consent was compulsory.

This discussion of *Pamela* highlights the “systemic apparatus[es],” to use Rubin’s phrase, that coerced women into consenting to demeaning patriarchal ideology in the eighteenth century. Students see that, within the novel, Pamela is praised for her sense of “cheerful” duty and obedience to her husband: a process that is completed in *Pamela II* through the breastfeeding incident, where she accepts that a wife must always follow her husband’s will. Our class discussions revealed that consent is not a black-and-white issue, but one that is both complicated and historically fraught. That is, #MeToo ignited many discussions about the importance of clear, positive verbal consent in sexual encounters, especially among college-aged individuals. However, acknowledging that consent can be coerced – and using literature to study a clear example of this – gives students new tools in understanding the complex nature of consent in our own time. For instance, Nicole Chavez, Eric Levenson, and Lauren del Valle reported for CNN that Harvey Weinstein’s defense team attacked Miriam Haley and Jessica Mann, two of Weinstein’s victims, claiming that their respective assaults must have been consensual since both women continued to have personal relationships with Weinstein after he assaulted them. As the trial exposed, many of Weinstein’s victims were aspiring actors to whom he dangled the prospect of advancing their careers in exchange for sex, a misuse of his power that mirrors Mr. B’s treatment of Pamela after the death of his mother. He provides her with a job, food, and living quarters and sees her social subordination as justification for attempted rapes. When they are married, her compliance is compulsory; her right to consent or not is taken away. Recognizing that these uneven fields of gendered power impact a woman’s ability to consent or not – and whether her non/consent is respected – helped students grapple with Pamela’s extreme obedience to Mr. B after their marriage. Empathy for Pamela – a young woman coerced into consenting to her husband’s patriarchal definition of marriage – not condemnation of her post-marriage behavior, became the predominant attitude toward Pamela.

Issues of consent abound in our society, but – as most college students could explain – are often more complicated than a simple matter of saying “yes.” The power structures that enabled Mr. B’s sense of entitlement to Pamela’s body (and her consent to his will) still operate in our own moment. An alarming number of students shared their experiences with a romantic partner, boss, teacher, or stranger at a party (just to name a few examples) who attempted to pressure or coerce them out of the opportunity to say yes or no to a situation. Typically, my classroom discussions and students’ writings remain anchored in the literature and the historical moment from which it came. However, allowing students to explore connections between these personal experiences and *Pamela* provided a pathway for new avenues of analyzing literature and understanding white

patriarchal power structures in our own moment. Students empathized with Pamela's experiences, recognizing that sometimes-hidden power structures consciously and unconsciously within our individual worlds. In a recent interview Tarana Burke, founder of the #Metoo movement, describes the basis of her movement as "empowerment through empathy" (n.pg). That is, understanding shared experiences across time and space creates a sense of community: a community motivated to enact change and restore the luxury of consent to those from whom it has been stolen.

¹ For more information on these events, see: “These are the women who testified against Harvey Weinstein” by Chavez, Levenson, and del Valle and “Bill Cosby sentenced to 3 to 10 years in prison for sexual assault” by Levenson and Cooper. Both CNN articles are centered on the experiences of the survivors. Chanel Miller’s *Know My Name: A Memoir*, in which she chronicles her rape and the subsequent miscarriage of justice that followed, is also an excellent source. Nicole Carroll’s recent profile of Tarana Burke, founder of #MeToo, gives a useful overview of that movement.

² Allestree is the author of religious conduct guides including *The Whole Duty of Man* (1658) and *The Ladies Calling* (1673), both of which provide advice on living a moral life (as defined by Allestree). The latter is specifically addressed to young women and glorifies subservience to men. Both conduct guides were popular well into the nineteenth century. Lynch’s *The Virgin’s Nosegay* follows a similar pattern, decrying the immoral state of English society and instructing women to be meek, obedient, domestic angels.

³ Bowers initially argued: “Though ventriloquized, contradicted, and finally neutralized, Pamela’s subversive maternal voice sounds clearly in the breastfeeding episode, and its echoes disrupt the presentation of virtuous maternity as unproblematically submissive to patriarchal authority” (148).

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