

The sexual gaze in richardson's pamela



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Formula fiction is common in the canon of seductive fiction. It relies on standard themes, plot devices, and characters that indulge the reader with a combination of predictability and intrigue. Seduction novels, already a staple of formula fiction by the time Pamela was first published in 1740, shared several key plot points, including the tantamount and titillating scene of the heroine's dishabille. The hero's gaze upon his yet un-fallen heroine in dishabille is sexual and voyeuristic, meant for the gratification of the hero and the reader. Overall, it is a moment that seems completely out of place in Samuel Richardson's novel Pamela. The moments of unwarranted gaze in the traditional seduction novel are meant to sexually titillate both the hero and the reader. However, Richardson's goal is not to titillate us, but quite the opposite: he means to write this new hybrid of seduction and conduct novel "without raising a single idea throughout the whole, that shall shock the exactest Purity". (31) But the gaze is a key part of the seduction novel; without the gaze, the hero is denied his impetus for his declaration of love, and the reader is denied seeing, and understanding through seeing, the heroine as a sexually tantalizing figure. So then how can Pamela, as part seduction novel, exist without the sexualizing gaze of the hero, which is sure to offend "the exactest Purity"? The answer is that Pamela does not avoid the gaze, but, rather, rewrites what the gaze looks like, so that it becomes a more chaste version of itself. Since the concept of gaze is of primary importance to the seduction plot, as a way to move the plot forward for the hero, and to facilitate the reader's participation in the seduction, Pamela cannot altogether avoid it. However, Richardson does change, and even disguise the gaze, so that in Pamela it is perpetrated by the epistolary form of the novel and by Pamela's own complicity with the seductive narrative in <https://assignbuster.com/the-sexual-gaze-in-richardsons-pamela/>

her writing. To understand the ways in which the gaze is different in Pamela, let us first recap what the gaze looks like in the more traditional seduction novel. For instance, in *Love in Excess*, the moments of gaze are sexual and extremely visual. Take this passage: “ He found her lying on a Couch in a most charming Dishabille; she had but newly come from bathing, and her Hair unbraided, hung down upon her Shoulders with a Negligence more beautiful than all the Aids of Art could form in the most exact Decorum of Dress; part of it fell upon her Neck and Breast, and with its lovely Shadiness, being of a delicate dark Brown, set off to vast Advantage the matchless Whiteness of her Skin: Her Gown and the rest of her Garments were white, and all ungirt, and loosly flowing, discover'd a thousand Beauties, which modish Formalities conceal.” (Haywood 83) Melliora, the heroine, is written in a detailed, physical description, in apparently perfect dishabille from top to bottom. Delmont, the hero, is watching her unnoticed, and thus the reader is watching her as well – and, through the third-person narration, watching Delmont watching her. The voyeuristic watching, then, is threefold: hero, narrator, and the reader, with all three layers intently focused on the heroine's beauty that is above all “ the Aids of Art”. It is this moment that causes Delmont to declare his love to Melliora. The gaze provides the necessary impetus to the hero to grow in affection for the heroine, and to voice his love, from whence the true seduction can occur. In Pamela, the reader is not given nearly so titillating a description of Pamela. This is because the gaze is not through the rake's eyes: it is mediated through Pamela's letter writing and her own knowledge and understanding of what is happening to her. When we are provided with any physical description of Pamela, it is not an itemized listing of her, as we saw above with Melliora,

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but rather a passing comment related to her parents in her letters about being told that she is "very pretty". (50) When we do understand that Pamela has been gazed upon, it is through her own relation of the events. Thus, Pamela becomes our lens through which to gaze. In this way, Pamela is guilty of perpetrating and perpetuating the gaze on herself. In one of Mr. B's failed attempts on Pamela, he dresses up as the maid Nan and pretends to sleep in the room where Pamela is. The traditional elements of the gaze are set up for the reader: the hero has entered the room to the ignorance of the heroine, who has undressed herself and is proceeding under the assumption that she is not being watched by the hero. However, we are not watching Pamela: we are, instead, reading her account of the immediate moment in which Pamela lived the event. Therefore, Pamela takes on two roles in the act: the role of the gazed upon, as well as the role of the gazing narrator. The gaze that Pamela guides us through is usually filtered so that the sexual intensity of the gaze is diminished. We are told by Pamela that, in this scene, she is naked, with her "under clothes in [her] hand". (240) But instead of lingering on the details of herself in dishabille, she simply mentions her state of undress. The construction of this desexualized lens begins to fall apart when we realize that she is telling the reader about seeing Mr. B gazing upon her. In this way, despite the dry and non-indulgent nature of the language, we come to understand that Pamela is engaging with the other two levels of the traditional tertiary structure of gaze, and is becoming like the hero, watching herself, which we see in her describing her state of undress, and like the reader of a seduction story, by watching Mr. B watch her. Pamela is, as I asserted earlier, one of the great perpetrators of gaze in Pamela, and is, in fact, the source that provides us with the most sexual glimpse of her. The

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more important form of gaze, though, is not as explicitly sexual, but is the gaze that holds the most power in the novel – it is the gaze of reading. The epistolary form does two things to the gaze: the first, as shown above, is that it creates Pamela as the object, as well as the three-fold objectifier of the gaze; the second is that it allows the reader, and Mr. B, to constantly be voyeuristic gazers of the expose of Pamela's virtue. Mr. B reads Pamela's letters without her knowledge or permission. Written to her parents, the letters contain what we presume to be something very close to emotional honesty. Although there is some debate as to the authenticity of the events and emotions that Pamela writes in her letters, they are, nonetheless, filled with what are meant to be fairly private thoughts, especially those that are written when she is in captivity, which are not truly expected to make it into her parents' hands. I say that this form of gaze, the reading gaze, is most important and most powerful, because it allows Mr. B an unwarranted view of her character. It is when her character and virtue are laid bare that Mr. B finally has the impetus to admit his virtuous love for her, and it is this that ultimately allows him to win Pamela. As Mr. B says, "It was indeed her person that first attracted me, and made me her lover: but they were the beauties of her mind, that made me her husband." (427) In this chaste seduction, Mr. B's feelings of love are sexual at first, but then are transformed by a long, penetrating reader's gaze into Pamela's character, in this way serving the same purpose as the dishabille's sexual gaze does in the traditional seduction novel. If this is what the gaze looks like in the novel, then Richardson has forced his readers to commit the same act of gazing as Mr. B. We are all using a reading gaze to view Pamela, and her great virtuous qualities are thereby exposed to us. We are then implicit in Pamela's chaste

seduction, because we are meant to be taken in by Pamela's virtue as was Mr. B. Since the gaze plot point is not removed by Richardson, but rather reworked and hidden into the form of the novel, then how does this affect our understanding of the seduction? Richardson has set up a new style of seduction in Pamela; that is, instead of the hero being seduced by Love and then in turn seducing the heroine, we instead see Pamela seducing Mr. B and the reader. She has perfect agency when it comes to the gaze: she constructs visual scenes so that she occupies all positions in the gaze, and with the letter-writing. Although she does not control Mr. B's reading of the letters, Pamela has the agency to show all the parts of herself that she wants to reveal: her character is dressed in her writing, in a way that allows us to see all of her virtue. This "dishabille" that allows us to see her character through her writing, also is physically manifest in her failed efforts to conceal her letters from Mr. B in her clothes. But there is agency even in this dishabille, because Pamela has written all of the letters, described for us all of the events and all about her feelings, and we have no other understanding of who Pamela is or what events occurred. Thus, even in her apparently helpless state, wherein her letters are forcefully taken from her and read, Pamela remains the ultimate seducer. She seduces Mr. B into marriage through her virtue, and the novel attempts to seduce the reader as well.