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The Rewards of Virtue: Richardson's *Pamela* and Sade's *Justine*

The publication of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* occasioned one of the first 'media events' in publishing history.[1] Many contemporary English authors, including Henry Fielding and Eliza Haywood, were quick to produce their own responses to *Pamela*. However, the *Pamela* media event was not confined to the shores of England: in France, *Pamela* was successful enough to warrant a literary rejoinder from the Marquis de Sade in the form of the novel *Justine*—a work unlike anything produced by contemporary English authors. This paper will argue that *Pamela* advances a moral which *Justine* overturns; that this moral gives rise to Sadean anxieties; and that the specificity of those anxieties—centred around notions of fraud—is peculiar to Sade, and is presented through both the plot and the form of the novel *Justine*.

Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded

Richardson's *Pamela*, published in 1740, became almost immediately the centre of British cultural interest. In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt argued that the success of *Pamela* was a formal one: the problem of episodic plots (such as those by Defoe) was avoided by creating a novel wherein the plot was based upon a single action—in this

[1] William B. Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684-1750* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 176.

case, the courtship of Mr. B and Pamela.[2] It is certainly overstating the matter to declare that this formal shift was solely responsible for *Pamela*'s success, significant as it may have been—the idea of Britons recommending *Pamela* to each other on account of its parsimonious plot structure fails to ring quite true. Perhaps more important was the marrying of a single idea to the progress of a single action: virtue rewarded and the courtship together in a single package.[3] Pamela follows virtue, and the text makes it clear through the changes her virtue creates in the world around her—though not, importantly, in her—that Pamela is right to take virtue as her single principle.[4]

And yet there is something terribly unreal about a person adhering to a single principle with such zealous devotion—the approach of saints and madmen, not ordinary mortals. Richardson's genius came in selling the unreal Pamela as a very real role model—a model which complimented the moralist's position that Richardson seemed eager to hold.[5] The epistolary form was an aid to *Pamela*'s verisimilitude, as were the title page and preface in which Richardson announced himself as the editor of a collection of letters, rather than as the author of a fictional text.[6] Realism was Richardson's focus—or rather, the concepts which people held to be realistic. Certainly,

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[2] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 135.
[3] Warner, 181 & 183.
[4] Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Female Changelessness; or, What Do Women Want?" in "Women and Early Fiction," Special issue, *Studies in the Novel* 19, no. 3 (Autumn, 1987): 278. Spacks observes that female changelessness actually facilitates a "genuine and active heroine".
[5] James Grantham Turner, "Novel Panic: Picture and Performance in the Reception of Richardson's Pamela," *Representations* 48 (Autumn, 1994): 76.
[6] Samuel Richardson, *Pamela* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1-3.

Pamela's changelessness, her infallible virtue, and the just world in which she is figured are not representations of an actual reality, but rather, are representations of how contemporary readers believed reality did—or should—operate.[7]

Yet *Pamela* was denounced as pornography in Henry Fielding's *Shamela* through Parson Tickletext's discreetly masturbatory opening remarks upon Pamela's virtue and to what directions it motivates him.[8] And the critique is not merely upon the sexually-arousing nature of *Pamela*'s content. *Shamela* also posits Pamela not as an indefatigably virtuous heroine, but instead as an empty-headed, money-grubbing adulteress. *Shamela* is not a tale of 'virtue rewarded', but rather the story of 'feign'd virtue' (to echo Eliza Haywood) first rewarded, then detected and prosecuted. These critiques are echoed in other works by the contemporary anti-Pamelists, establishing a pattern of dual concerns amongst the British society of letters: the danger of pornography masquerading as moral instruction, and the danger of shameless hussies masquerading as virtuous maidens. Both are frauds—notable, given their genesis in a text where the 'truth' of the text's origins and content are merely artifices designed to shift inventory. After all, Richardson's coy refusal to admit that *Pamela* was a work of fiction, not of fact,

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[7] Henry Seidel Canby, "Pamela Abroad," Modern Language Notes 18, no. 7 (November, 1903): 207.

[8] Henry Fielding, *An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1967), 310-311. Statements such as, "If I lay the Book down *it comes after me*," (emphasis mine) and, "Oh! I feel an Emotion even while I am relating this: Methinks I see *Pamela* at this Instant, with all the pride of Ornament cast off," surely need no explanation.

was itself a fraud—an eighteenth-century *DaVinci Code* moment, deployed to spectacular effect.

The British concerns about fraudulence do surface in France, but they are transformed in the crossing of the English Channel. *Justine* is explosive, but in deadly earnest. It certainly shows no fears about being considered pornography, though it was banned, and banned again: copies seized, publishers roughed up, and Sade himself denounced, arrested, and committed to an asylum. Yet copies sold like the cult hit that it was, for the message of *Justine* is a metaphorical challenge to society. Its concerns are about fraudulence as well: the fraudulence of Enlightenment reason over Natural reality, of self-denial over self-indulgence. In *Pamela*, Richardson presents a fictional image of steadfast virtue as truth, and some of his readers fear that the appearance of virtue may be used to hide impure motivations. Sade also has fears that society will take the worldview of Richardson's *Pamela* as truth: but for Sade, the supremacy of virtue itself is the fraud, as is the idea that one should pursue virtue whatever the cost to oneself. A fear of fraudulence, then, is the social concern that binds *Justine* to *Pamela*.

Justine; ou, Les Malheurs de la Vertue

The frontispiece of Sade's *Justine*, published in 1791, depicting Virtue between Licentiousness and Irreligion, left no one in any doubt as to the nature of the book's

contents.[9] *Justine* was the first novel that Sade had published in his own lifetime, and it would cause him trouble with every government thereafter. The bookseller's mark at publication read only, "In Holland, At Associated Booksellers," and the text did not bear an author.[10] Sade's desire to have his name struck from the title page is not mere self-preservation; he seeks the obliteration that he believes is the natural end of natural processes. Like the instructions in his will, *Justine* is an attempt at obliteration. Sade's refutation of popular 'reason' comes in the form of the limits of natural extremity—he seeks not merely to disprove certain aspects of Richardson's argument, but rather to destroy it utterly: iconoclasm, not measured reform. Sade smashes the monolithic and imposing images of virtue that have been the idols of civilisation, and he erects phalluses in their place. But at the end of *Justine*, even that message is exploded, and the reader is left empty-handed. Sade indicts the entire system of Enlightenment thought, for that system was based on continuity and rationality, and these were principles that Sade opposed quite literally with the very fibre of his being.

Furthermore, the obliteration that Sade desired in *Justine* is consistent with his beliefs expressed elsewhere. His will gives particular instructions that his body be buried in an unmarked grave sown with acorns so that no physical trace will remain.[11] It is the portrait of a man eager to be utterly sublimated into Nature. The plot and

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[9] Sade, 125.

[10] Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse, editors and translators, *The Complete* Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom*, and Other Writings* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1965), 450.

[11] Ibid., 157.

undoing of *Justine* is Sade's demonstration of his worldview in action. That worldview, utterly unlike Richardson's, is natural, not rational; self-destructive, not self-preserving (or self-improving). As David Allison puts it:

> For Sade, then, nature—the base of his whole system—becomes the justification for the individual's action, for his personal continuity, his unrestricted fulfillment of desire, passion, and so on. Natural principles therefore dictate morals and manners: On this basis his proposed revolutionary government would institute laws, but laws in accordance with the ways people—that is, libertines—would in fact behave, laws based on how libertines *do* act, not on how people in general *should* act. Thus, society becomes a society of libertines and the individual is free to be himself or herself. [12]

Sade's shrill cry of "Nature!" is his answer to Richardson's pious cant of "Virtue", for Virtue is just a tool of the Cult of the Supreme Being, against which Sade rails in a revealing, private letter written on the eve of his arrest.[13] For Sade, God is a fraud, a fiction that has taken hold in the minds of man: He is the embodiment of limitations, the one problem which faces the Sadean libertine.[14]

Prior to the opening scene of the novel, which sees Justine and Juliette part ways, Sade presents a dedication containing his argument:

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[12] David Allison, "Transgression and Its Itinerary," in Sawhney, *Must We Burn Sade*, 222.

[13] Sade writes of oblivion ("My body is nothing… my ambition is to disappear forever from people's memories") and of his "certain pleasure" in Article 11 of the Republic: "The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious rights of man; therefore every citizen may freely speak, write and publish." But Sade stops there, distressed at the limits that are subsequently imposed, adding defiantly—optimistically, even—that "there will always be some who will not resign themselves to any limitation of the rights of the imagination." For Sade, the unfettered act of imagining—to which, he held, writing was inextricably linked—is the supreme act of resistance against the forces which seek to restrain the liberty of mankind; the only sure defence of true personal freedom against those who would bind mankind in the chains of virtue, in service to some god or other.

[14] Catherine Cusset, "Sade: Critique of Pure Fiction," in Sawhney, *Must We Burn Sade?*, 183 & 187.

> But throughout to present Vice triumphant and Virtue a victim of its sacrifices, to exhibit a wretched creature wandering from one misery to the next; the toy of villainy; the target of every debauch; exposed to the most barbarous, the most monstrous caprices; driven witless by the most brazen, the most specious sophistries; prey to the most cunning seductions…[15]

Vice triumphant—and not merely triumphant, but triumphant again and again in every conceivable combination. Always, the argument is at the forefront of his mind, and, like Richardson, his characters are difficult to read because they are the mouthpieces of extreme positions.[16] Where Sade differs from Richardson is that his philosophy is sometimes reduced to a string of descriptions of excess: an attempt at using language to encompass a sublime infinity: *Pamela* has limits, but *Justine* does not. In fact, Justine, Sade assures the reader, is as excessively virtuous as her sister is wily:

> To so many qualities this girl joined a sweet countenance, absolutely unlike that with which Nature had embellished Juliette; for all the artifice, wiles, coquetry one noticed in the features of the one, there were proportionate amounts of modesty, decency, and timidity to be admired in the other.[17]

Here, Nature appears as the force which has given Juliette her capability for exceptional vice, whereas Justine's virtues are given no origin. It is only *natural*, then, that Juliette's scolding of her sister should be pleasure-centric: "true wisdom consists infinitely more

[15] Seaver & Wainhouse, 455.
[16] Alphonso Lingis, "Deadly Pleasures," in Sawhney, *Must We Burn Sade?*, 43.
[17] Seaver and Wainhouse, 459. Sade is keenly aware of the insufficiency of language: he goes on to point out that the fullness of Justine's impressiveness is "beyond our power to describe."

in doubling the sum of one's pleasures than in increasing the sum of one's pains".[18] The natural state is indulgence; virtue is the unnatural abomination.

Justine eventually falls in with a group of monks who take it upon themselves to repeatedly torture and rape her. That it is monks who commit the deeds is obviously significant: Nature does not respect the cloth; its desires are universal to all mankind; and who better to serve as the apostles of libertinage than the former devouts of the fictional God? Dom Severino warns her that pleas and tears will only enflame his comrades further; better, then, that she should immediately submit. But Justine cannot submit; her nature prevents it, even as Sade creates a situation in which not screaming for submission would be a matter of practical self-preservation. Confronted with pleas for mercy, Dom Severino is as cruel and as implacable as Nature: " 'Take the bitch,' said Sévérino in a rage, 'seize her, Clément, let her be naked in a minute, and let her learn that it is not in persons like ourselves that compassion stifles Nature.' "[19] And Sade is anxious to prove the sincerity of the words with lurid descriptions: vast reams of text describing how Justine is encircled, held down, spread, pinched, bitten, torn, sodomised, whipped, covered in semen, forced into coprophagy, and brutally raped until she begs for death. But there are no limits to Sade's excess. Justine's pleas only serve to inflame her captors further: "'Let's go back to work,' quoth Clément, 'and in order to teach her to bellow at fate, let the bitch be more sharply handled in this second

[18] Seaver and Wainhouse, 460.
[19] Seaver & Wainhouse, 568.

assault.' " [20] In case one cannot imagine how Justine could be handled more cruelly on the second go round, Sade happily obliges by describing it.

Enough, then, of such fearsome and odious descriptions, for *Justine* is full of them—some much worse than this. In each case, the villains echo the words of Juliette at the beginning of the novel: embrace a little wickedness, or suffer greatly and terribly for your obstinate virtue. For it is Sade's ultimate goal to create through the lively depiction of such horrors a tacit agreement with the philosophy he avows: once the reader begins to wish that Justine would only relent a little, Sade has won; for such a compromise admits, in an instant, that the eternal carrot is ludicrous—the infernal stick equally so—in the face of the implacable, temporal reality of the Natural here-and-now.

The outcome that awaits Justine is that which must await the inverted heroine of Sade's answer to *Pamela*. Richardson's heroine escapes the physical violences which would sully her virtue; Justine does not. Pamela's changeless virtue changes the world in which she lives: she marries a reformed Mr. B and lives happily ever after with his newly Pamela-adoring family. Justine's changeless virtue dooms her to a life of unfathomable horrors, and she dies—as she must die—slain by the Nature to which she would not bend. For outside:

> Lightning glitters, shakes, hail slashes down, winds blow wrathfully, heaven's fire convulses the clouds, in the most hideous manner makes them to seethe; it seems as if Nature were wearied out of patience with what she has wrought, as if she were ready to

[20] Seaver & Wainhouse, 572.

> confound all the elements that she might wrench new forms from them. [21]

Nature is raging at the escape of her lawful prey: the girl who would not submit. The panes shatter, and Justine is blown back from the window—a thunderbolt strikes her where she stands in the middle of the room: "the lightning entered her right breast, found the heart, and after having consumed her chest and face, burst out through her belly."[22] Her destruction is a Sadean obliteration writ by Nature upon a human form. Her useless heart is the target of Nature's fury; the identifying symbols of her sex and her individuality—her breasts and her face—are burned away; and her womb, the centre of her womanhood, is the shattered exit point through which the lightning bolt departs. Justine, unconquered by humanity, cannot, at long last, stand against the true power which rules the universe. Appropriately Sadistic, her destruction, Lisa Maruca has observed, comes in the form of *Rape by Nature*.

Unmoving in life, Justine could move no one; in death, she must finally relinquish control of her body to Nature. Through this change, further changes can, and do, immediately result: her sister Juliette takes the veil, repents of her former ways, and becomes an exemplar of her order. Sade offers a metaphysical reply to Richardson's *Pamela*: effects must have movers to create them. How can Pamela's unchanging virtue

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., 742. Why is Justine's heart the focus point of the thunderbolt? Sade believes that love, like virtue, is one of the great frauds meant to enslave people—as Marvin Mudrick says in "Must We Burn Mme. de Beauvoir?", "that love merely inhibits the lover from enjoying himself while he endeavours to please his beloved… that love is woman's revenge on man's stupidity; that solicitous men are sexually absurd and women bide their time; that love is bogus therapy for sexual paraplegics."

be the cause of change in anything or anyone? Here, at the text's end, at the last extremity of punishment, Sade inverts his inversion, seeking to obliterate the very message which the text itself propagates. The punishment of Justine's virtue has frightened her sister sufficiently to ensure a conversion. It is for this reason that the final paragraph appears to be, on the face of it, brilliantly insincere—in stark contrast to the message of the rest of the text, Sade ends with a declaration that Virtue will be compensated "by Heaven's most dazzling rewards".[23] Only once the underlying thrust towards obliteration is recognised does the final paragraph makes sense: the work is performative, as well as instructive. The message is cancelled out just as Justine's crimes and Justine herself are cancelled out. Sade, desperate for self-obliteration, ends by obliterating his message so that it cannot speak for him when his body is gone. It is no wonder that his will demanded the burning of his papers and the destruction of his correspondence.

Sade appeals to a Nature which stands opposed to the law of men; whose verity is obvious in that it transcends humanity and will exist long after men are gone. The misrepresentation of Enlightenment morality as fact can only delay humanity's reconciliation and happiness, just as the pseudonyms employed by Justine and Juliette serve only to delay their reunion; and the threat is ever present that the pseudonyms will never be cast off, that the two sisters could part with Justine never being saved

[23] Seaver & Wainhouse, 743.

from her pursuers. The revelation of Justine's true identity creates the opportunity for Nature to free her from the chains of virtue. Sawhney writes that Sade's Nature is the only thing that "can free the body from the confines of social, political, religious, and ethical constructions."[24] The acts of torture and rape are the enacted rejection of those self-same constructions: Sade's Nature-obeying libertines must torture and rape their way through the world in imitation of Nature, which tortures and rapes its way through mankind.

Conclusion

Sade's *Justine* is utterly concerned with philosophical anxieties: the idea of Nature as the true arbiter of human nature in place of a Judeo-Christian ethos. And, in presenting that idea, Sade seeks to smash his way forward, violent and extreme. Yet, his underlying concern is about the possibility of fraud, for Sade cannot accept the message presented by Richardson. Indeed, Sade wishes to refute the entire system of virtue as a man-made, arbitrary imposition upon the Natural world—a world to which virtue in no way corresponds.

Sade's commercial success with *Justine* implies that his concerns and anxieties resonated with a significant portion of the reading public. After all, he went on to publish further, similar works, and these were also widely read, despite the censorship

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[24] Deepak Narang Sawhney, "The Encyclopedia of the Embodied Earth," in Sawhney, *Must We Burn Sade?*, 83.

and bans imposed. Of course, it is true that on the other side of the channel authors such as Fielding and Haywood were also worried about the potential for fraud. But their condemnations came largely in the form of satire and parody, unlike *Justine*. Calling attention to the uniqueness of Sade's responses ought to open avenues of enquiry into the Romantic responses to the topics which so animated the Marquis. Certainly, a surfeit of Sadean scholarship would be ample reward for the indefatigable virtue of Pamela and Justine.

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