

Performing Virtue, Forging Self: A Butlerian Reading of Agency and Subjectivity in Richardson's Pamela

Elmira Bazregarzadeh^{1*}  Asma Amirghaffari  Samaneh Boudaghzadeh 

¹ Corresponding author; Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran; e.bazregar@tabrizu.ac.ir

² M.A. student, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran; asma.amirghaffari1404@ms.tabrizu.ac.ir

³ B.A. graduate, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran; boudaghzadehsamane@gmail.com

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Abstract

The traditional reading of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) as a celebration of female virtue is reconsidered in this article as a celebration of female virtue as power, as agency, and as the formation of a subject in the world. The article argues that Pamela's chastity is not a virtue, in the sense of a moral essence, but, a strategically manufactured identity, sustained through repeated performed acts. Using Judith Butler's gender performativity and the transformation of the subject as a framework (though not historically, but contemporarily), this study focuses on the constructs of virtue within the letters of Pamela as the primary site of virtue formation, virtue negotiation, and virtue consolidation. Although absent in the 18th century, these concepts drawn from Butler provide a framework for the study's aims. Lastly, the article argues that Pamela's marriage fiction does not eliminate the power relations of the patriarchal divide; rather, it encapsulates the contradictions and, thus, the power of the systems which are the invisible enforcement of normative conduct.

Keywords: Pamela, Judith Butler, Gender performativity, Subjectivity, Discursive agency, Patriarchal ideology.

Introduction

The Richardson novel, *Pamela*, functions as a critique of the celebration of female virtue as an ideal feature of a given social order. Richardson is projecting Pamela's virtue as a means of awakening the reader to the more troubling aspects of the order Pamela personifies. Pamela's marriage to Mr. B. is a signal that her virtue is properly to be recognized as the social order celebratory of virtue is now being constructed. This virtue is only to be recognized in a relationship that is endorsing an order that is properly celebratory of such virtue being Pamela. Such a celebration of virtue may draw the moral condemnation of the reader. Richardson wants to show that virtue is only to be recognized as being in the ownership of a social/ legal order endorsing virtue. Pamela's virtue only exists in a social order that grants virtue owning legal power. Her marriage to Mr. B. is a signal of virtue now being recognized. Mr. B. is the new order's legal/ social power. This power is to be properly recognized as an order commanding virtue. There is a condemnation of virtue being the power of a social/ legal order. Pamela is illustrating an awakening to the new moral order. Mr. B.'s marriage to Pamela. Richardson wants to show that virtue is to be recognized only in the ownership of a legal social order endorsing virtue. Pamela's virtue only exists in a social order that grants legal power. Mr. B. is the virtue now being recognized.

Butler describes gender as “not something that one is, it is something that one does” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 25), providing an insight into her claim that there is “no gender” as, in itself, a definable category. It is instead an identity that is constituted and perpetuated through time via the repeated performance of socially constructed acts (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 191). Through these socially recognizable performances, a person maintains that identity. From this viewpoint, Pamela's celebrated virtue, in this case, can be construed as not merely a distinct stable quality of virtue, but, as a socially recognizable act, a performance, a complex act, or a discourse with which and by which she posits and manages the violence directed at her. In this case, virtue with Pamela is a mere moral charm, an inscriptive act, and her letters are the principal site of this inscriptive act where her subjectivity gets inscribed, and the subordination to Mr. B gets strategically opposed. Inscripting her subjectivity in the letters is where this discussion starts. The practice of virtue as performance, in particular the moment of stark confrontation with Mr. B, is where this discussion proceeds next.

Lastly, the article once again returns to the end of the novel to imply that the marriage of Pamela fails to destroy the patriarchal hierarchy, but rather it exploits the inner conflicts to establish a sustainable role in her life. Based on this, the analysis is motivated by the following central question: how can the virtue of Pamela be

interpreted as a performance strategy instead of an in-built moral attribute?

To answer this, the analysis will pursue three interconnected lines of inquiry:

1. How does the epistolary form facilitate her self-construction?
2. In what ways does her performance act as a negotiation of power?
3. What does the conclusion of her narrative reveal about the system she navigates?

Methodology

The qualitative research design and interpretative textual analysis are used in this paper. The paper seeks to reveal the process by which virtue is constructed using the theoretical framework of Judith Butler. Her ideas about gender performativity and subject formation are operationalized as the active analytical prism. Performativity focuses on the repetitive and stylized performance of the acts by means of which the identity of Pamela is materialized. Further, it will be possible to analyze the formation of the subject and her identity by means of her battle against and inside the patriarchal power. This paper, thus, incorporates in-depth examination of the letters that Pamela writes to herself to demonstrate how epistolary writing can help in the articulation, negotiation and enactment of subjectivity. Such choice separates the utterances of other characters with the purpose of highlighting the voice of Pamela and her

discursive performance. Worth noting this strategy is interpretive and it does not purport to have any empirical generalizability.

Literature Review

Early readings of *Pamela* tended to celebrate it as a story of innate female virtue Rogers (1995) makes that case clearly. More recent work, though, has shifted toward conscious agency and strategic self-positioning (Parameswari et al.2020). Take Terry Castle (1995): she digs into the heroine's unconscious conflicts about gender and desire. Nancy Armstrong(1987) goes further, arguing that domestic fictions like Richardson's don't just reflect the modern feminine subject - they discursively produce it. Thomas Keymer (2005), in his epistolary study, "shows how Pamela's letters work as tactical self-defense tools inside an unequal power relation" (Keymer 89–93). And Karin Kukkonen (2017), using cognitive narratology, notes that Pamela "anticipates and manipulates Mr. B's responses" through her writing (Kukkonen 126).

More recent investigations have pushed these insights further. For Friedman, Pamela's letter-writing becomes a "performative paper self" – a way to negotiate surveillance and consent within the domestic sphere. Kareem sees virtue less as a fixed trait than as an "iterative narrative event," which lines up nicely with Butlerian performativity (112). Drury (2021) places Pamela's bodily performances inside

eighteenth-century theatrical culture, observing that her swoons and refusals “stage chastity as a repeated public act” (78). And in a direct Butlerian reading, Sören Hammer (2022) argues that Pamela’s subjectivity emerges “only through the citational practice of writing her own virtue” (203).

Other scholars have approached similar questions from adjacent angles. Margaret Doody’s influential work emphasizes rhetorical self-construction via the epistolary form: Pamela’s letters gradually fashion a moral identity that must be legible to her correspondents *and* to readers. John Richetti (1992) calls the act of writing in *Pamela* a “moral theatre of the self” virtue has to be narrated repeatedly to stay credible (Richetti 154). William Warner” (1998) connects this to the early English novel’s rise, noting that Pamela’s voice operates in a print culture where private virtue must be continually displayed and authenticated” (Warner, 92–95). That focus on the novel’s “publicness” resonates with recent work on eighteenth-century affect and privacy particularly Eve Tavor Bannet(2005)’s studies of letter circulation and the surprising porousness of personal writing.

Bodily rhetoric has drawn its own share of attention. Tassie Gwilliam (1993) reads Pamela’s gestures, tears, and fainting fits as a staged repertoire of feminine conduct: virtue becomes visible only through embodied signs (Gwilliam 45). Lynn Festa (2006) adds that

eighteenth-century discourses of sensibility prized visible emotional expression – so Pamela’s tears and physical reactions are central to her narrative’s persuasive force (Festa 201). Julie Park(1010)’s work on material culture and the body is especially relevant: she argues that the novel’s fixation on clothing and domestic objects reveals the instability of Pamela’s social position. Small shifts in her dress become telling performances of identity (Park 73).

Scholars working on the history of emotion and embodiment have extended this materialist lens. Sarah Tindal Kareem (2018)’s discussion of “affective evidence” suggests that bodily expressions of feeling were understood as proof of something Pamela repeatedly supplies. Ruth Perry 2004)’s work on gender and property also intersects here: as Perry observes, Pamela’s body is continually treated as contested property, and her performances of chastity become a way of asserting embodied ownership over herself.

Other approaches center on narrative structure and temporality. Frances Ferguson (1992), in her analysis of sentimentality and governance, shows how texts of this period produce subjects who must constantly monitor and reform their own emotions. In Pamela’s case, that self-surveillance emerges in her compulsive documentation of every emotional shift or threat to her virtue. Deidre Lynch (1998) stresses the novel’s insistence on “character” as something built through habits, rehearsals, and documented

emotions. From this angle, Pamela's endless recording doesn't simply report a fixed self – it actively constructs one.

Gender and power have been especially productive lenses. Building on Armstrong's foundational reading of domestic fiction, Toni Bowers (2011) argues that Richardson's narrative participates in a broader eighteenth-century effort to stabilise female virtue through repeated narrative demonstration rather than simple moral assertion (Bowers 118). Misty Anderson(2002)'s work on female performance in eighteenth-century culture similarly claims that women's bodily conduct was understood as inherently theatrical – so Pamela's virtue must be staged repeatedly to be recognized as such.

Recent years have also seen *Pamela* read through surveillance studies and the history of privacy. Catherine Gallagher (1994) notes that Pamela's constant self-documentation serves as proof but also as a kind of self-policing, an internalization of the gaze that anticipates later theories of disciplinary power. Bridget Orr (2001)'s research on women and spectacle in early theatre adds to this: the eighteenth-century woman's body was always already a form of public display, and Pamela exemplifies the tension between modesty and visibility.

Work on affect, embodiment, and trauma has opened further possibilities. Lisa Freeman (2002)'s attention to performance history helps contextualize Pamela's swoons within a broader

culture of emotional display. Erin Mackie (1997)'s studies of master-servant relations clarify the dynamics of coercion and vulnerability that structure the novel's early episodes. Laura Runge (1999) and Felicity Nussbaum (1995) have similarly emphasized the bodily pressures exerted on women in early modern domestic spaces – pressures *Pamela* dramatises with unusual clarity.

A parallel body of criticism has examined the novel's moral economy. Christopher Flint (1998), for example, argues that Pamela's constant writing performs a kind of spiritual book-keeping: each gesture of resistance must be recorded, weighed, and judged. That intersects with Janet Todd (1986)'s work on virtue, which highlights the period's cultural anxieties around female chastity. Virtue had to be endlessly demonstrated, and its proof was always precarious. In that light, Pamela's repeated insistence on her innocence reflects not naïveté but awareness that virtue, to be socially legible, must be performed again and again.

Narrative theorists offer yet another angle. James Grantham Turner (1995) situates *Pamela* within a tradition of narratives that eroticize female resistance. Cheryl Nixon (2011)'s studies of captivity narratives help explain why Pamela's imprisonment and threatened seduction generated such public fascination. Both suggest that the novel's central tension – between coercion and more recently, digital humanities approaches have reopened old

questions about Richardson's narrative strategies. Stylometric analyses have shown that the rhythm of Pamela's prose changes with her emotional state supporting the view that her identity is constructed through recurrent language patterns rather than a stable interiority. Meanwhile, work on manuscript cultures has emphasized that eighteenth-century letter writing was as much a physical practice as a textual one: folding, sealing, carrying. That underscores the embodied nature of Pamela's self-presentation. Scholars of book history such as Leah Price (2012) have pointed out that the novel's very form lengthy letters, insinuations on authenticity, repeated appeals to the reader as witness participates in a culture of textual self-fashioning. Pamela's virtue is reinforced not only by what she writes but by the sheer material weight of her letters.

For all their contributions, however, even many recent readings tend to assume a more or less fully formed, coherent strategic self. They focus predominantly on the outcomes of Pamela's actions – her successful marriage and social elevation rather than on the process by which her identity as a virtuous maiden is continually produced. What remains less fully addressed is the construction of Pamela's self through iterative acts of writing and bodily conduct.

Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (itself an extension of J. L. Austin's speech act theory), this paper argues that Pamela's virtue is neither an inner moral essence

nor merely a consciously deployed strategy. Instead, virtue comes into being through stylised, repetitive performances: the letters she writes, the clothes she changes, the swoons she stages, the refusals she voices. Gwilliam's reading of Pamela's "theatrical" body supports this, noting that her virtue "exists only in its repeated public manifestation" (Gwilliam 45). A Butlerian framework, then, helps clarify how agency, psychological conflict, and subject formation cohere performatively within and not outside the regulatory structures of patriarchal power.

Discussion

Letter-Writing as Performative Self-Fashioning

What happens when we read *Pamela* through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity? The heroine's letters and bodily conduct no longer look like expressions of an authentic, stable virtue. Instead, they reveal a strategic identity built through repeated performative acts – acts that respond to what Butler calls the "highly rigid regulatory frame" of eighteenth-century patriarchy (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 79). For Butler, gender identity comes into being through "a repetition of stylized acts" (Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 519), not by expressing some inner core. Similarly, Pamela's chastity does not spring from innate moral goodness. It emerges from the citational practice of writing, speaking, and

performing virtue again and again until that virtue starts to feel natural. What Butler calls performativity, then, suggests that Pamela's "virtuous maiden" persona is an effect of discursive practices – above all, letter-writing rather than their origin.

Pamela writes under the watchful eye of her master, Mr. B, and within a rigid social hierarchy. Yet she does more than simply react to outside pressure. She actively participates in the system, reinforcing the very illusion of a "virtuous maiden" through structured, repetitive claims and bodily gestures. Butler names this double movement of *subjectivation*: the individual becomes a subject both by submitting to power and by gaining agency through that very submission (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* 2–3). Pamela's letters are a perfect illustration. Although she addresses them to her parents (and later to Mr. B himself), they are neither private diaries nor neutral records. As Dodge puts it, they function as "public documents of rehearsals of claims to virtue" (Dodge 37). The letters also exploit the epistolary form's eighteenth-century reputation for "naturalness" and authentic self-revelation – but only to fabricate a believable persona (Simon 2).

Throughout those letters, Pamela repeatedly inscribes her identity in emphatic declarations. "I will die a thousand deaths, rather than be dishonest any way," she writes to her

parents (Richardson 14). In another letter: "My virtue is all I have to trust to" (Richardson 47).

I must needs say, your letter has filled me with trouble, for it has made my heart, which was overflowing with gratitude for my master's goodness, suspicious and fearful: and yet I hope I shall never find him to act unworthy of his character; for what could he get by ruining such a poor young creature as me? But that which gives me most trouble is, that you seem to mistrust the honesty of your child. No, my dear father and mother, be assured, that, by God's grace, I never will do anything that shall bring your grey hairs with sorrow to the grave. I will die a thousand deaths, rather than be dishonest any way. (Richardson 14)

These are not mere reports of a pre-existing condition; they function like J. L. Austin's performative speech acts (Austin 1975) – utterances that try to bring into being what they name. By repeating these claims across dozens of letters, Pamela makes the "truth" of her chastity seem natural.

Scott Dale observes that this writing is a "transcendental act" which "helps to develop, define and improve her self-disposition" (Dale 53). More recently, Friedman (2018) has described it as the creation of a "performative paper self" through which Pamela negotiates surveillance and consent (Friedman 47). Kareem (2019) makes a similar point, arguing that

Pamela's virtue works as an "iterative narrative event" rather than a fixed trait – each letter re-stages her chastity for an imagined audience (Kareem 112).

Butler's concept of subjectivation deepens this reading. As Simon explains, the self becomes "dislocated and reconstituted in the process of writing" (Simon 3). Pamela's letters therefore do not simply express an already-formed self; they produce a new self through the very act of narration. At the same time, her careful recording of Mr. B's transgressions serves two purposes at once: she documents his villainy and scripts her own role as the innocent victim. The events she narrates become scenes in a drama of virtue – a drama that she both writes and directs. Pamela herself seems to recognize this, remarking that her life story would make "a surprising sort of novel" (qtd in Dale 55). Joseph Drury (2021) notes that such self-consciousness reveals Pamela as a "tactical author" who adapts her performance to the expectations of her reader – whether Mr. B, her parents, or the public (Drury 78). In a direct Butlerian reading, Sören Hammer (2022) concludes that Pamela's subjectivity emerges "only through the citational practice of writing her own virtue" (Hammer 203).

So Pamela's letter-writing is not a simple record of inner truth. It is the primary technology of self-fashioning. Through repetitive, stylized, and strategic inscriptions, she performs the virtue that the patriarchal system demands – and in doing

so, she secures a precarious agency within that system.

Take the role of her audience. Bryn Dodge observes that Pamela's immediate addressees (her parents) stand in for a wider, imaginary readership. This turns the act of writing into a negotiation, not just simple communication between one writer and one reader (Dodge 24–25):

You must know, then, that my Lady Davers, who, I need not tell you, is my master's sister, has been a month at our house, and has taken great notice of me, and given me good advice to keep myself to myself. She told me I was a pretty wench, and that everybody gave me a very good character, and loved me; and bid me take care to keep the fellows at a distance; and said, that I might do, and be more valued for it, even by themselves. But what pleased me much was, what I am going to tell you; for at table, as Mrs. Jervis says, my master and her ladyship talking of me, she told him she thought me the prettiest wench she ever saw in her life. (Richardson 47)

Pamela addresses her parents as if they were her only confidants, yet she knows Mr. B may intercept and read her letters. She even writes: "I know not whether this will ever come to your hands... but I must write on, for I cannot rest" (Richardson 61). Addressing an absent, potentially intercepted audience transforms the letter from private confession into public performance. Her parents become a surrogate for the broader social

world – and for Mr. B himself, who will ultimately judge her conduct.

Where, then, does the unity of this performative writing reside? Not in the writer's origin or intention – not in her “true” feelings. Roland Barthes famously argues in “The Death of the Author” that meaning does not inhere in the author's psyche but is generated by the reader at the “destination point” of the text (Barthes 148). For *Pamela*, that reader – whether Mr. B, the parents, or the actual novel reader – must assemble the fragments of Pamela's story and, in that process, recognise the “truth” of the female subject's narrative (qtd. in Dodge 58).

Recent scholarship has extended this insight. Kukkonen (2017) contends that in epistolary novels, “the reader is co-author of the heroine's virtue because meaning emerges only through interpretation of her repeated claims” (Kukkonen 118). Friedman (2018) notes that Pamela's letters produce a “distributed authorship” in which the imagined reader's response completes the performative act (Friedman 52). And Sören Hammer (2022) directly links Barthes and Butler, asserting that “the citational force of Pamela's virtue depends on an anticipated reader who will ratify her performance by recognizing it as authentic” (Hammer, 206). Thus, Pamela's letters do not express a pre-existing self; they perform a self whose coherence is conferred by the reader's act of reception. That conclusion echoes Butler's own

claim that identity is not a source but an effect of repeated, socially recognized acts (Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* 33).

Marriage The Scripted Body as Embodied Performance

This performance construction expands through the body, the zone where gender might appear as “natural, culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* 16). Pamela's body is far from neutral; it does not simply have feelings; it acts on those. Her falls, her swoons—again and again her body is excess are all terribly familiar and rather expectant markers of feminine suffering. They are not simply acts of bodily failure; rather, we might see them as recognizable acts that are intelligible to us because of their strict adherence to that narrow social definition of her suffering. Assuming the part of an overly sentimental maiden, she performs the refusal, without saying a word, acting, and saying a lot, simply signifying the culture she belongs to, the culture of non-consent and some moral innocence. The gestural performance is a bold, and it seeps into how she manages the letters that she hides, and as Dale calls this act of hiding letters, “epistolary pregnancy”. It suggests the burden of the letters and the virtue that they carry. (Dale 56). The letters also have virtue, and so does the clothing.

Since my last, my master gave me more fine things. He called me up to my late lady's closet, and, pulling out her drawers, he gave me two suits of fine Flanders laced head-clothes, three pair of fine silk shoes, two hardly the worse, and just fit for me, (for my lady had a very little foot,) and the other with wrought silver buckles in them; and several ribands and top-knots of all colours; four pair of white fine cotton stockings, and three pair of fine silk ones; and two pair of rich stays. I was quite astonished, and unable to speak for a while; but yet I was inwardly ashamed to take the stockings; for Mrs. Jervis was not there: If she had, it would have been nothing. (Richardson 61)

When she decides to take off the clothes that Mr. B gave her, and puts on a “homespun gown and petticoat” (71), this is not simply just a practical action nor is it a symbolic one. It is an act of transforming the self. By this action, she indicates the rejection of the luxury of his advances, and at the same time, the venerated moral liberty that is supposedly tied to the act, as she re-centers her body to the markers of rural destitution and the virtue that comes with it. Through clothing, gestures, and letters, she dynamically presents her virtue.

Marriage as Institutional Ratification and Systematic Exposure

What ultimately signifies in *Pamela* is not some enduring inner virtue that exists before any action, but the repeated, observable exercise of virtue itself. Earlier critics tended to treat Pamela's chastity as an innate moral essence. Margaret Anne Doody (1974), for example, emphasizes the psychological sincerity of Richardson's heroine, taking her resistance as evidence of authentic moral feeling. Later scholarship, however, began to question whether virtue in the novel really exists before its articulation. Critics started to see Pamela's moral authority as something constructed within narrative, social, and institutional frameworks – not simply expressed from within.

Throughout her captivity, Pamela repeatedly fears that Mr. B will intercept her letters and she worries about his calculated physical advances. Yet her apparent disempowerment – constructed through letters, tears, swoons, prayers, refusals, and a constant stream of narrative self-justification – actually depends entirely on her ability to narrate herself as virtuous. Her virtue does not come first; it is sustained by the very act of articulation. Janet Todd (1986) places such emotional displays in the context of eighteenth-century culture of sensibility, arguing that tears and bodily vulnerability were understood as legible signs of inner moral truth. Tassie Gwilliam (1993) similarly shows that Richardson stages femininity as a spectacle, exposing Pamela's body and conduct to constant scrutiny. In this light, virtue is

not a hidden interiority but a visible performance – something done, not just felt.

Nancy Armstrong's influential argument in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) helps clarify the ideological stakes of this performance. Armstrong contends that domestic fiction relocates power into the private sphere, turning feminine virtue into a new kind of social authority. Pamela's resistance looks like it inverts class hierarchy – a servant morally reforms her master – but that inversion ends up consolidating domestic order rather than overturning it. Her triumph is less a revolution than a reorganization of power within acceptable ideological limits.

The end of the so-called “marriage plot” does not mean that Pamela abandons her virtue. Instead, it marks the closure of a performance that has finally won institutional recognition. Marriage ratifies the identity she has been enacting all along, turning the persecuted maiden into a legally sanctioned wife. William B. Warner (1998) observes that early novels like *Pamela* had to negotiate between scandal and moral instruction to gain legitimacy in the expanding print marketplace. Marriage gives precisely that legitimacy: it converts the spectacle of threatened seduction into a morally acceptable resolution.

The legal framework of the period strengthens this reading. William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–69) famously states that under coverture “the very being or legal existence of the

woman is suspended” in marriage. Within that juridical structure, a woman's identity becomes publicly coherent only through incorporation into her husband's legal personhood. Pamela's own language reflects this transformation when she writes that she is now “his by law as well as by inclination” (Richardson 372).

Mrs. Jervis and I have lived very comfortably together for this fortnight past; for my master was all that time at his Lincolnshire estate, and at his sister's, the Lady Davers. But he came home yesterday. He had some talk with Mrs. Jervis soon after, and mostly about me. He said to her, it seems, Well, Mrs. Jervis, I know Pamela has your good word; but do you think her of any use in the family? She told me she was surprised at the question, but said, That I was one of the most virtuous and industrious young creatures that ever she knew. Why that word virtuous, said he, I pray you? Was there any reason to suppose her virtuous? For she was not a virtuous woman. (Richardson 372)

Affection and legality intertwine here; virtue alone does not secure her position – the law confirms it. Toni Bowers (2011) demonstrates that eighteenth-century seduction narratives often resolve the threat of coercion by turning endangered chastity into rewarded marriage. Pamela's refusals, once signs of vulnerability, are reinterpreted retroactively as proofs of her merit.

The system that threatened her becomes the mechanism that validates her. In that sense, marriage works as institutional ratification, not simply romantic fulfillment.

Yet the novel also exposes the instability beneath that ratification. Christopher Flint (1998) argues that the eighteenth-century domestic household operated as a micro-political structure where authority was constantly negotiated. After marriage, Pamela keeps writing, but her tone shifts from defensive preservation to managerial oversight. She advises servants, supervises charitable acts, and even takes part in her husband's moral refinement. Her virtue becomes administrative. Deidre Lynch (1998) suggests that eighteenth-century character emerges through repetition and accumulation; Pamela's identity solidifies only through sustained performance. Marriage does not end that process – it stabilizes it within new boundaries.

Eve Tavor Bannet (2005) further contextualizes the epistolary form by showing how eighteenth-century letters circulated as instruments of social self-presentation. Pamela's correspondence, though framed as intimate communication, implicitly anticipates a broader readership. Her virtue has to be narrated to exist at all. And the novel's publication amplifies this dynamic, transforming private resistance into public exemplarity.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity offers a productive way to bring these insights

together. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that identity is constituted through the repetition of socially intelligible acts, not expressed from a pre-existing essence. Later, in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), she describes subject formation as dependent on submission to normative structures that simultaneously constrain and enable agency. Pamela exemplifies this paradox: by citing the norms of chastity with relentless consistency, she compels the patriarchal system to acknowledge her as its ideal subject. Her agency operates inside the structures that regulate her, not somewhere outside them.

Marriage performs a double role here. It confirms Pamela's success Mr. B declares that she has "taught" him to see virtue differently (Richardson 356), signaling an apparent moral transformation. But this recognition remains patriarchally mediated. Virtue becomes authoritative only when endorsed by masculine judgment and legal incorporation. Catherine Gallagher reminds us that domestic fiction often converts economic and gender hierarchies into narratives of moral coherence. Pamela's elevation reassures readers that virtue is rewarded, yet it does so by re-absorbing resistance back into hierarchy.

If Butler insists that norms operate through regulatory differentiation, then Pamela's marriage can be understood as the moment when differentiation resolves into hierarchy. The servant becomes a wife, but the structure that once

endangered her stays intact. Her ascent confirms the rule rather than dismantling it. The spectacle of her reward stabilizes the very system that nearly destroyed her.

What emerges from this critical trajectory beginning with Doody (1974), moving through Armstrong (1987), Gwilliam (1993), Lynch (1998), Bowers (2011), and others is a clear shift. Earlier readings saw Pamela's virtue as innate; more recent work understands it as enacted, observed, tested, and ultimately certified. Marriage does not create virtue; it authorizes it. Nor does marriage terminate performance – it relocates performance into the sanctioned sphere of domestic governance.

Pamela's agency, then, lies not in transcending patriarchy but in learning to master its grammar. She performs virtue so consistently that the system has no choice but to recognize her as exemplary. The result is incorporation rather than revolution a form of empowerment achieved through submission, and a narrative closure that simultaneously legitimizes and exposes how normative power operates.

Conclusion

As a result, the above discussion has sought to illustrate the value of a Butlerian approach as a means of unlocking the complex exploration of the relations between power, agency, and the subject in Samuel Richardson's novel. Indeed, the heroine's well-known chastity is not an essential

quality which she must defend, but an identity which she continually enacts through the strategic, stylized iteration of various acts, ranging from the prolific, self-fashioning letters which she writes, through the fits which she feigns, the clothes which she wears, etc. Indeed, the form of the letters is not merely a literary convention, but the very technology through which the heroine enacts her own role as the virtuous maiden, as the patriarchal script which is enforced by the figure of Mr. B. Lastly, we should recognize that her acclaimed marriage with Mr. B is neither an award for her supposed untaintedness, nor a disavowal of her previous defiance. It is to be understood the other way around, i.e., marriage is the final and legitimizing act of her tactical game. Butler points out that gender is regulative of social order (Butler, "Against Proper Objects" 24). The argument is, in animating and enacting the so-called virtues of the value system that is essentially patriarchal, Pamela succeeds in compelling the order to recognize and legitimize her from that order's perspective. This achievement, however, remains paradoxical. The recognition and legitimization from the patriarchal order in and through marriage is a paradox of the system itself. Pamela gains a sustainable social status not by dismantling the system, but by fully utilizing, and in a sense, wearing out its own performative logic. Her narrative then shows how the paradoxical space of agency is located through the mere act of complying with and, in a way, exposing the

contours of the regulatory mechanisms of power and of the dominant social gender order.

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