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The Domestic Dungeon: Representing the Carceral in *Pamela*

The idea of carcerality can exceed the confinement within physical prisons, suggesting that confinement can manifest itself in a variety of spaces. This gives rise to different representations of the carceral in relation to space, the consequences for the incarcerated individual, and the broader implications of these experiences. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* offers a depiction of incarceration within the home, rendering Pamela a domestic prisoner and Mr. B the agent of her confinement. The nature of her confinement, in conjunction with the epistolary form, has implications for the novel's claim to realism. By relocating the carceral to the household through Mr. B's dual authority as master and magistrate, *Pamela* makes the epistolary form function as a constrained form of testimony. This movement suggests that the rise of the novel produces a conditional form of realism, in which Pamela's suffering is real, yet its representation is structurally compromised because her account is produced within a structure of surveillance. This argument will be illustrated by tracing the novel through a causal mechanism: Mr. B's concentration of domestic and legal power forecloses Pamela's access to external legal recourse, thereby necessitating her letters as a constrained substitute for legal testimony before the marriage plot absorbs her injury into status conversion. Together, these linked movements produce a precarious form of realism.

The power Mr. B possesses as both Pamela's master and a magistrate - hereinafter referred to as a justice of the peace - is expansive, as it collapses domestic and legal authority into the same figure. As Allison Cardon argues, the convergence of these roles "implies that a

wealthy master can harm his servant ... which ... implies that a justice of the peace has disrupted the peace he is meant to protect” (Cardon 70). Pamela’s plea to be removed from “his House” after being “so barbarously used” (Richardson 60) demonstrates the practical consequences of this convergence. The possessive pronoun underscores Pamela’s subordination to Mr. B, as it marks the household as a space organized by his authority: both in his ownership and his exertion of power over her as his servant. This mistreatment occasions her assertion that she can “safely swear the Peace against him” (Richardson 60) as she attempts to remedy a domestic grievance within the realm of legal procedure. Yet her opportunity is immediately foreclosed because his status renders him “greater than any Constable” (Richardson 60). The use of the comparative is significant, as it not only suggests an element of dominance, but points to a hierarchy of authority which places Mr. B above other legal authorities. The explanatory note states that a constable is subordinate to a justice of the peace (Richardson 60un), meaning that the agents of the law that Pamela may appeal to remain under Mr. B’s authority. If the authority that occasions her grievance is also the sole authority that has jurisdiction to hear her grievance and adjudicate upon it, then Mr. B becomes both the perpetrator of injury and the arbiter of its remediation. It is in this way that justice becomes privatized: rather than existing as a mechanism external to the household, it is absorbed into it, fusing legal authority with Mr. B’s domestic power. The abuse Pamela endures in the domestic sphere therefore cannot be remedied through the law, as both spheres remain governed by the same man.

When domestic and legal authority are consolidated in Mr. B, the household itself becomes a carceral space. Richard Gooding describes Mr. B as having a “self-interested use of personal prestige and legal authority, and a corresponding refusal to recognize moral authenticity in social inferiors” (Gooding 19). Mr. B weaponizes his immense power to undermine Pamela’s credibility, helping to produce a space where her subjugation is

maintained through his power to deny her experience. After Pamela's complaint, Mr. B remarks that she has "made a Party of the whole House in her Favour against [him]" (Richardson 65). He imagines the household as an adversarial space, one where a case is being organized against him. Yet he immediately recasts the matter in self-interested terms, suggesting that Pamela voicing the encounter "may have stung to Death [his] Reputation" (Richardson 65). By focusing only on his social standing, Mr. B relocates the harmful consequences of this encounter onto himself. Instead of considering the injury he has inflicted upon Pamela, he redefines injury to mean how her complaint will damage his own reputation.

The concern for his reputation also shapes the way he responds to Pamela's suffering, recasting her experience as performance by claiming that she "has a lucky Knack of falling into Fits, when she pleases" (Richardson 65). The language he uses trivializes Pamela's response to bodily violence, reducing it to a convenient skill of performance she evokes at her convenience. Through this, Mr. B works to invalidate her experience by suggesting her distress cannot be evidence of the harm she has endured. This is the refusal of authenticity that Gooding refers to: Pamela's suffering cannot stand alone, but must be interpreted through Mr. B. He exerts his authority over her body and the meaning of what has been done to it. This is the mechanism that keeps her subordinate within Mr. B's home, since her suffering cannot be validated based on her own account. Forced to submit to his version of events, Pamela's experience is denied the status of truth, rendering her more vulnerable to his control.

Because her testimony fails to gain recognition in a space that suppresses her account, and because she cannot access legal recourse, this structure ultimately necessitates Pamela's letters. Her writing emerges as a substitute for legal testimony through which she documents what she has suffered in the absence of any traditional public forum in which her case might be adjudicated. This substitute is what John B. Pierce describes when he argues that her

letters constitute “a textuality giving voice to an identity Mr. B would willingly debase and silence” (Pierce 9). Simon Stern furthers this claim, suggesting that Pamela’s use of the epistolary form functions as a kind of “forensic defence” because of the letters’ “efforts to yoke particular and plausible details” (Stern 232). As a consequence, Pamela’s letters are a constrained form of testimony: their accumulation of detail is not a matter of stylistic choice, but an evidentiary necessity produced by the foreclosure of legal remedy. In recording events with precision, the terms of her injury are preserved, much like those of a forensic legal record. This becomes apparent when Pamela responds by letter to Mr. B’s Articles, a series of proposals that he claims “will absolutely decide [her] Fate” (Richardson 188). Unable to access such a legal mechanism on her own terms, Pamela responds through the only medium that is available to her. Her reply begins to read like a written record of self-defence: “I will make no Free-will Offering of my Virtue ... my Will bore no Part in my Violation [of virtue]” (Richardson 190–191). Pamela carefully specifies the terms of her suffering by highlighting the distinction between Mr. B’s force and her consent, separating what Mr. B may do to her from anything she authorizes. In doing so, her letters work to preserve in writing the injury that Mr. B’s household suppresses and that the law cannot meaningfully address. Her letters are the only means by which Pamela can sustain her claim to suffering in the absence of justice.

Yet the novel does not allow Pamela’s letters to secure her public vindication. Instead, it offers the marriage plot between Mr. B and Pamela as the remaining mode of resolution, one that forecloses her access to justice altogether. This is because marriage does not remedy Pamela’s claim to suffering, but rather renders it obsolete by transforming her relationship to Mr. B, failing to acknowledge her injury. Robert Folkenflik characterizes the marriage between Mr. B and Pamela as one where “her silence becomes part of a pattern” (Folkenflik 267). It can be argued that this pattern is what constitutes the novel’s causal mechanism, as

Mr. B's dual authority first silences Pamela by foreclosing legal recourse. This silence becomes intensified when his power is relocated into the home - effectively transforming it into a carceral space - in which her letters emerge as a constrained substitute for an evidentiary account. The marriage plot finally completes this sequence by converting Pamela's unresolved injury into a change in marital status, thereby foreclosing her opportunity to seek a public form of justice within the framework of the novel.

This is especially evident in the novel's conclusion, where after the marriage, what Mr. B has done to Pamela is blatantly disregarded. Additionally, Pamela's epistolary form is abandoned in favour of third-person omniscient narration to reveal: "She made her beloved Spouse happy in a numerous and hopeful Progeny. And he made her the best and fondest of Husbands" (Richardson 499). This shift is significant as it eradicates the mode through which Pamela had sustained her claim to suffering throughout the novel, suggesting that her letters are no longer necessary because marriage has offered closure for what she has endured. With Pamela's written perspective removed, the novel recasts marriage as a scene of mutual fulfilment, where both Mr. B and Pamela appear to have contributed equally to its happiness. Yet this apparent symmetry instead reveals an imbalance: Pamela's worth as a partner is defined through her reproductive offerings, whereas Mr. B's is measured through his performance of ideal husbandhood. It is precisely this imbalance that enables the erasure of the harmful history that has preceded the marriage, as she is reduced to a functional value, while he is elevated to a moral one. In this way, the novel preserves the structure of subordination inherent in the master-servant hierarchy, merely converting Pamela's position in that hierarchy rather than publicly vindicating the injuries she has suffered. As a result, Pamela's opportunity to seek justice is foreclosed, since the harm Mr. B has inflicted upon her is not adjudicated but instead absorbed into an image of harmonious union. The

conditions of subjugation imposed upon Pamela are overwritten by a form of domestic harmony whose apparent reciprocity depends upon, rather than resolves, their unequal terms.

As the novel ultimately absorbs Pamela's injury into status conversion rather than publicly vindicating it, the causal sequence traced thus far has reached its terminal consequence. What this completed sequence reveals is that the household's carceral function is not limited to Pamela's physical confinement within it, but extends to the conditions under which her letters are produced. If Mr. B's dual authority privatizes justice, transforms the household into a carceral space, necessitates Pamela's letters as a substitute for legal remedy, and forecloses public adjudication through the marriage plot, then her writing does not emerge freely. Rather, because the same authority that constrains Pamela, compels her letters, and governs the space in which they are produced, Pamela lacks any protected means of speaking beyond Mr. B's authority. The result is that the very structure of domination that shapes Pamela's circumstances structurally compromises the written representation of her suffering.

This becomes especially apparent in Mr. B's interception of Pamela's letters. In a letter to Pamela's father, he writes that he has "discover'd the strange Correspondence carry'd on between [her father] and [Pamela]" (Richardson 92). In presenting himself as having discovered something, Mr. B refers to the literal uncovering of these private communications between Pamela and her parents. In being able to physically seize her written testimony, Mr. B extends his power into the only medium of communication she has - her letters. Once her writing exists, it is immediately uncovered, confiscated, and rendered accessible to him. Yet his discovery of her letters is only the first step in weakening their evidentiary force, as his wording also suggests investigative exposure. In calling her letters "strange" (Richardson 92), he treats them as suspicious material that warrants his interference with their circulation and authorizes his scrutiny of their contents. It is here that the logic of

surveillance becomes most visible, as Pamela's letters are not merely read, but examined by Mr. B as potentially incriminating material that could expose his injurious conduct. He then asserts interpretive control over them by redefining what she has written on his own terms, describing Pamela's writing as being marked by a "pretended Simplicity and Innocence" as well as possessing a quality of "romantick Invention" (Richardson 93). Not only does he accuse her of writing a fabricated tale, but he recasts the sincerity through which she presents her account as a calculated device designed to deceive her parents. In doing so, he attacks the very claims to innocence that her letters seek to establish and preserve, moving beyond his desire to violate them in practice to refute them in writing. Therefore, if Mr. B is able to both physically threaten Pamela's bodily integrity and control the way in which she represents that threat, then her letters are structurally compromised from the moment Mr. B intercepts them. Although Pamela can document her experiences, these letters cannot function as independent testimony, since the same authority vested in harming her also possesses the power to discredit her account of that harm.

This has important repercussions for the rise of the novel's claim to realism. In *Pamela*, realism does not emerge despite coercion, but rather through it. Once Mr. B's dual authority as both master and justice of the peace privatizes justice within the household, the home becomes a carceral space in which Pamela turns to the epistolary form out of necessity. Deprived of external legal recourse, Pamela's letters assume an evidentiary quality as a means to preserve her suffering. The specificity of her articulations - what Mr. B himself refers to as "so exact a Journal" (Richardson 230) - begins to resemble realist representation in their detail, yet still fails to authenticate her claim to suffering. This is because the same figure who occasions her injury also governs the conditions under which her account of that injury may be recorded, circulated, and understood. Pamela herself acknowledges this limitation when she notes that his understanding of events "does not appear so in the Text"

(Richardson 230) - that is, what he believes occurs does not align with her own writing. It is not that her testimony is unreasonable, incoherent, or lacking in detail, but that the truth of what she has endured is constrained by an oppressive structure, unable to circulate beyond it. This renders the epistolary form of the novel structurally vulnerable, as her account is produced under circumstances of confinement, forcibly intercepted, and subjected to Mr. B's imposition of interpretive control. Therefore, if the novel as a whole consists of written correspondence that is produced under such constraint, its claim to realism can only emerge through writings whose authority is already compromised. The issue is not that *Pamela* fails to depict reality or misrepresents it - as the ongoing enactment of sexual violence could very well objectively "exist in the real world" (Stern 236) - but that Pamela's account never emerges independently of the coercive conditions that govern its production and reception. Realism, then, is necessarily conditional: it is the formal consequence of a narrative structure in which Pamela's suffering can only be recorded through letters compelled by the foreclosure of justice and compromised by the surveillance that subjects them to Mr. B's control.

Pamela represents the carceral as a structure that can be relocated into the household when domestic and legal power are situated within the same figure. This is the initiating condition that not only forecloses Pamela's access to external legal recourse, but necessitates the epistolary form as a constrained substitute for legal testimony. The marriage plot completes this causal sequence, as it prevents the possibility of justice within the framework of the novel, instead absorbing Pamela's claim to suffering by converting her status from servant to wife. All of this culminates in a claim that *Pamela*'s realism is conditional: although her account of suffering is tangible, the manner in which it is represented is compromised: her testimony is forced by confinement and made vulnerable to interception, surveillance, and reinterpretation. In this way, *Pamela* suggests that in the rise of the novel,

representations of reality are not the sole determinant of a work's claim to realism, but how these depictions can be impacted by themes of uncontested power, confinement, and injustice.

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