

Addie Grenier

Professor King

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### **The Legacy of Shamela: Does Parody Have Value Outside of the Original Work's Shadow?**

From ancient Greek plays mocking gods and heroes, to modern creations like Thumbwars and Austin Powers, people have been creating parodies and responding to works for a very long time. One of these well-known literary parodies is *Shamela* by Henry Fielding, which parodied *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson only one year after *Pamela* was published in 1740. Like many parodies, *Shamela* imitates many of the important characteristics of *Pamela* in a ridiculous manner to make fun of its themes and writing style. *Shamela* is a worthwhile parody, but it doesn't have much value outside of *Pamela*'s shadow. Parody is most effective when it has a strong connection to the source material and distorts the original text's elements and themes in a meaningful way. When viewed as a standalone work, a parody loses most, but not all, of its significance.

An effective parody must be a clear response to the source material, and there must be valid reasoning behind what the writer chooses to imitate and change. According to the article "Parody and Pastiche", all parody "is interpretive of its source, and in interpreting that source it makes an argument about that source—its features and the value of those features" (Diepeveen). Firstly, Diepeveen is saying that a parody must interpret the source. Ideally, the audience is already familiar with the source material and has read it before seeing the parody. The parody will make an argument about certain aspects of the source material such as writing style, themes, plot points, etc. The interaction between the source material and the parody is vital; if the reader

is not familiar with the source material, they will miss important context and gain much less from their reading experience. Another important aspect of parody is that it “does not simply imitate, but distorts. The impulse of realism is to disguise literary conventions, whereas the mainspring of parody is to expose them” (Baguley, 94). Many parodies, including *Shamela*, criticize aspects of the original author’s stylistic choices by warping and exaggerating those techniques in their own writing. Lastly, parody often includes a commentary on the cultural norms presented in the source material. Parody “establishes or reacts to a norm”, which can be “at times in line with a cultural dominant and at other times opposed to it” (Diepeveen). Many works convey themes or values that fall in line with certain norms, and a parody might be used to communicate another writer’s distaste for those norms or the way they are portrayed. *Shamla* responds to several aspects of *Pamela*, including the writing style and certain themes supporting social norms that Fielding does not agree with.

Of all the novels being published during this time period, Fielding likely chose to parody *Pamela* due to its popularity and the controversial discussions surrounding it. In *Pamela*, our titular character becomes Mr. B’s servant and he repeatedly tries to seduce her and make her his mistress, but she repeatedly refuses and protects her virtue. Mr. B has a change of heart and falls in love with her, and she finally agrees to marry. In *Shamela*, Fielding flips the script. Actually, he says, *Shamela* is the opposite of virtuous - she is a manipulative woman who uses her feminine wiles to seduce Mr. B and get whatever she wants from other men. While most readers didn’t believe *Pamela*’s character to be as conniving and manipulative as *Shamela*’s, there was a decent amount of criticism and debate around *Pamela*. Many people were debating topics such as the veracity of *Pamela*’s account and the value of the story’s themes. Richardson was following some conventions and going against others, so both conservative and progressive

readers had criticisms and praise for different aspects of the book. Many people were closely analyzing Richardson's word choice to either attack or defend Pamela's character. *Shamela* is one of many books published in response to the *Pamela* debate, and Fielding is definitely critical of the novel. He specifically seems to take issue with Richardson's stylistic choices that made the letters feel "unrealistic", the dynamic of a low class woman falling in love with and marrying an upper class man, Richardson's emphasis on virtue above all for young women like Pamela.

To understand how *Shamela* is an effective parody, readers need to understand what aspects of *Pamela* Fielding takes issue with. One of the major aspects of *Pamela* that Fielding mocks is Richardson's unrealistic use of the epistolary format. Richardson wanted his story to be realistic, but he also wanted to be able to convey the characters' emotions and inner thoughts. By telling the story through characters' letters to each other, readers could have both realism and a clear view into characters' thoughts and feelings. However, Fielding did not believe *Pamela's* letters to be very realistic. One of his main gripes was the presence of far too much dialogue for a normal letter. He demonstrated the unrealistic nature of this by exaggerating the amount of dialogue included in letters in his parody. For example, in *Shamela's* second letter to her mother, she describes an entire conversation she had with a squire. She writes: "Pamela, says he...you was a great Favourite of your late Mistress's; yes, an't please your Honour, says I; and I believe you deserved it, says he; thank your Honour for your good Opinion, says I..." (Fielding, 14). Anyone familiar with normal letter-writing format will recognize that this is far too much dialogue to be realistic. No ordinary person would write out an entire conversation like this when writing a letter to someone. This exaggerated trait draws attention back to *Pamela*, and makes the reader consider how realistic Richardson's dialogue is in his book. Fielding's mimicry of Richardson's dialogue is an effective parody, as it mocks a specific aspect of the source

material and it is fairly obvious to readers what Fielding is criticizing if they have already read *Pamela*.

Another major aspect of *Shamela* is its commentary on *Pamela*'s storyline, particularly the fact that Pamela is a lower class woman marrying a high class man. Richardson's writing is conservative in some ways and progressive in others, accepting some aspects of the class system while embracing some newer ideas about seeing people as individuals rather than members of a class. This made the book a bit controversial, since it was not common for people to marry into different classes during this time period. Fielding emphasizes this class difference through Shamela's coarse language and frequent misspellings in her letters. While Pamela's writing is beautiful and reads more like an educated noblewoman's letters, Shamela embodies the stereotypical stupidity and crassness of the lower class. For example, in Shamela's sixth letter to her mother, she writes: "my Master cryed out, Hussy, Slut, Saucebox, Boldface, come hither..." (Fielding, 17) and describes her attempt at seduction in detail. While Pamela acts demure and writes like a proper noble lady, Shamela's letters are littered with crude language and poor grammar. Through his characterization of Shamela, Fielding argues that Pamela is not a realistic character. As a servant, she should behave like someone of the lower class, rather than the proper ladylike way she behaves in the novel. Sometimes it's easy to forget that Pamela is actually a lower class servant, since she behaves like a lady and is treated with special care by the other characters. So instead of showing a realistic process of a lower class person rising a higher class, Pamela is a special case - she's just so perfect, and she's already acting like an educated lady before Mr. B marries her and raises her to that station.

The last major aspect of *Pamela* that Fielding parodies is Richardson's emphasis on virtue. Since Pamela is poor, Richardson implies that the only thing of value she possesses is her

virtue. Throughout the book, Mr. B makes repeated attempts to take her virtue, but she only agrees after he's fallen in love with her and they marry. Pamela's determined defense of her virtue is what makes her so special, and is the reason that Mr. B ultimately falls in love with her. Fielding mocks this emphasis of virtue by having Shamela behave in an opposite manner. Shamela is crude, crass, and promiscuous. She uses her feminine wiles to try to manipulate all the men in her life. Shamela works hard to seduce and marry Mr. B, but she plans to step out of her marriage often, especially to have a relationship with Pastor Williams (who does not return her affection). Shamela discusses her "Vartue" several times throughout the story - a mockery of both Richardson's fascination with virtue and Shamela's unrefined lower class accent. Pamela is portrayed as a genuinely virtuous girl who holds strong against temptation and only marries for love. Shamela is a devious woman who puts on a mask of false virtue to manipulate Mr. Booby into falling for her and marrying her. This is yet another way that Fielding paints *Pamela* as unrealistic; by framing the conniving and crude character of Shamela as the "true" version of events, Fielding tells us that he doesn't think a girl in Pamela's position would actually behave as Pamela does. He thinks it more realistic that a lower class servant like Pamela would manipulate her master and use her body to her advantage to gain a higher place in life.

Overall, Shamela is an effective parody. It mimics the epistolary format of the source material and distorts it in a meaningful way to show Fielding's criticisms of *Pamela*. But does *Shamela* have significance as a standalone work outside of Pamela's shadow? I think it has some value even if the audience has not read *Pamela*, but that value is greatly decreased if readers lack the very important context of knowing the original work. For example, if one has not read *Pamela* first, the excessive dialogue won't mean anything to them. They'll just think that Shamela is poorly written, rather than recognizing it as an intentional stylistic choice that is

making a commentary on *Pamela*'s unrealistic amount of dialogue. The same goes for the discussions of Shamela's "Vartue"; without knowing the context that Pamela's virtue is central to the themes and plot of *Pamela*, Shamela's false modesty and protection of her "Vartue" don't have much meaning beyond being another demonstration of her two-faced nature. *Shamela*'s portrayal of the class differences and emphasis on her low class status has the most meaning when *Shamela* is viewed as a standalone work, but it still lacks the depth that it has as a parody of *Pamela*. When viewed as a parody, the emphasis on Shamela's class position as compared to her master reminds the reader that despite how special and amazing Pamela is, she was still a servant for most of that book and was acting unrealistically refined and educated for someone who grew up poor. When viewed as a standalone, we still see Fielding's interpretation of how people of this time period think lower class people speak and behave.

Ignoring its connection to Pamela, Shamela still has some significance as a piece of writing from this time period. *Shamela* gives some insight into society back then, even if it is an exaggerated and warped perspective in some aspects. When it was published back in 1741, higher class people were considered to have higher moral value. They could spend more on credit, their court testimonies were trusted more, and they were generally given more benefit of the doubt just because they were high class. This societal mindset is shown in Shamela. As a lower class person, Shamela justifies that lack of societal trust through her wicked ways and selfish desires. Although Mr. Booby is a fool, he's naïve rather than malicious. None of the characters in this story are good people, but he is definitely not as bad as some of the other characters like Shamela or Reverend Williams. Since *Shamela*'s relationship to *Pamela* is so vital for its messages and significance, judging the work alone is always going to be much shallower than the rich interactions between parody and source material.

However, there are some other relatively significant things that can be extracted when looking at *Shamela* alone. *Shamela* is a commentary on the gender roles presented within *Pamela* - looking through a modern lens, Pamela is a weak young woman who ultimately succumbs to the man who repeatedly sexually harassed her. *Shamela*, on the other hand, is strong-willed and not afraid to do what it takes to get what she wants, which is mostly to have as many men as possible and to benefit from her marriage while completely ignoring her vows. The comparison is striking and really highlights the antiquated gender roles that Richardson supports with his novel. Although *Shamela* is not a particularly flattering representation of women, at least she's strong enough and smart enough to go after what she wants and take it. Even without comparing her to Pamela, *Shamela* still serves as a comparison to the societal expectations for women during this time period. Lower class women were seen as less pure and trustworthy than their upper class counterparts, but they were still a far cry from the character of *Shamela*. Through Fielding's work, we can get a sense of societal expectations at the time by observing the way *Shamela* breaks them. She's a prostitute who uses her body and feminine charms to manipulate the men around her. Since *Shamela* is mocking romantic stories like *Pamela*, the audience can infer, even without knowing the context of *Pamela*, that *Shamela* is inverting the typical romantic tropes and gender roles found within those stories.

Another important aspect of *Shamela* is that nobody is as they appear. All of the characters hide behind various masks, pretending to be good people while secretly having selfish intentions. This theme has more depth for the reader when they are actively comparing *Shamela* and *Pamela*, but it still has some significance when considered alone. *Shamela* pretends to be a blushing virgin to lure Mr. Booby in, but she's actually a prostitute who manipulates everyone around her to get what she wants. Reverend Williams wears the mask of a good and pious man,

but he's just as greedy and manipulative as Shamela. Mr. Booby tries to play the role of the seducer, but it is actually he who is getting seduced. Even without the comparison to *Pamela*, the omnipresence of masks and hidden motivations is a commentary on society. Many people are not as they seem. Shamela is a particularly egregious example of this, since she will tell others about her "Vartue" while actively manipulating them and working to fulfill her greedy and amorous desires. There are many people, past and present, who are extremely skilled at hiding their true nature behind masks. For example, there are many modern celebrities with good reputations who have gotten exposed for shocking bad behavior. Sometimes the public only hears about those misdeeds decades after the fact, and I'm sure that there are plenty of people who have gotten away with terrible behavior. By exaggerating the gap between appearance and truth for all of its characters, *Shamela* reminds us to be careful and not blindly trust appearances. There are people out there like Shamela and Reverend Williams who would gladly use or manipulate anyone if it benefited them.

In conclusion, Shamla is a good example of an effective parody, and it even has some significance outside of its connection with Pamela. It's successful as a parody because it has a strong, obvious connection to the source material and it distorts and rearranges aspects of *Pamela* in meaningful ways. By warping and exaggerating features of *Pamela* such as the "unrealistic" amount of dialogue, the dynamic of a low class woman marrying an upper class man, and the emphasis of virtue, Fielding persuades readers to reconsider *Pamela* from a different perspective and question the veracity and value of the novel. *Shamela's* importance as a work of literature mainly comes from it being directly associated with Pamela. While Shamela does have some value when viewed as a standalone story, it would be missing a vital piece since it was specifically crafted with the expectation that readers would know the context of Pamela's



story and themes. Overall, *Shamela* is a well-crafted parody that has some, but not much, significance if one does not understand its dynamic with *Pamela*. However, like all great parodies, its greatest strength comes from an intimate understanding of and meaningful interaction with the source material.

## Works Cited

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