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71

THE APPEAL OF BEAUTY
IN DISTRESS AS SEEN
IN FANNY BURNEY'S
EVELINA AND SAMUEL
RICHARDSON'S *PAMELA*:
SOME TYPOLOGICAL AND
INTERTEXTUAL ISSUES

In his 1757 *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, in the Section entitled "Perfection not the cause of BEAUTY", Edmund Burke claimed that "beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty" (1998: 100). This statement may also be taken to describe the central idea of sentimental novel which, apart from featuring strong emotions, "attempted to show that a sense of honour and moral behaviour were justly rewarded" (Cuddon 1991: 858). The beauty-in-distress principle was rather popular with early English novelists, including Samuel Richardson and Frances Burney. Both of the said writers make "beauty in distress" the subject matter, and individual "beauties in distress" – protagonists of their successful epistolary novels, *Pamela* (1740) and *Evelina* (1778) respectively. The present paper focuses on selected issues of intertextuality concerning the two texts by discussing some of the ways in which Burney's *Evelina* reworks certain aspects of Richardson's sentimental classic, both texts staying focused on the Burkean dictum. Although the chief appeal of *Pamela* has been succinctly summarised in Ian Watt's memorable phrase as "the combined attractions of a sermon and a striptease" (1979: 196), it seems that the beauty-in-distress plot governing and character construction principles continued to be popular thirty years after the production of *Pamela*, even though the mixture of pulpit-preaching and pornography did not seem to fascinate the reading public as much as before.

To begin with, we need to consider the classification of both novels. The placement of either novel in the above categories does raise some problems resulting from typological ambiguities. The generic term of "sentimental novel" is the broadest and thus defined: "The sentimental novel is first of all a story of love,

N A U K A O K N J I Ź E V N O S T I

and second a story of trials and tribulations [emphasis added]. As the nature of the sentimental hero and heroine can be demonstrated completely only when they are involved in trying circumstances, the plot consists in a series of distressing situations” [emphasis added], which are needed to enable the protagonists to actually demonstrate their righteousness (Foster 1949: 16, 160). Yet there is another sub-classification to it. Doody makes a clear distinction between two types of sentimental fictions going back to pre-Richardsonian times: the seduction/rape tale and the courtship novel (1974: 18). Both may be linked to contemporary conduct books, and anticipate psychological analysis (1954: 20-21). While *Pamela* clearly falls into the seduction group, *Evelina* represents the other. The distress in each novel is of a different type, and the model of virtue presented also varies. As has been noted, Pamela’s virtue is that of ”passive and negative” resistance (McKeon 1988: 364), while *Evelina* demonstrates ”virtue in action” (Bloom 1970: xxii).

Needless to say, both novels are set in the long tradition of ”domestic” and ”feminine” fiction, focusing on the ”trials of love” (Doody 1980: 8). As such, both were very successful in their day, *Pamela* initiating a whole vogue, and *Evelina* bringing her author instant fame once the authorship was revealed. In particular, both texts enjoyed tremendous popularity with women readers of their day (Watt 1979: 171), which testifies to the enduring appeal of the beauty-in-distress motifs.

What the two novels have in common, apart from being sentimental, is the theme of disturbing courtship or seduction – the very cause of the distress at issue, ultimately leading to a happy end, i.e. marriage. However, saying that both follow the same pattern slavishly would be a gross overgeneralization. First of all, while both *Pamela* and *Evelina* have been generally labelled as courtship novels, which concentrate ”on the delaying actions that dot the road between a young woman’s emergence from her father’s protection and the subsumption of her identity into that of her husband” (Epstein 1996: 199), *Evelina* is clearly more than that. As Spacks says, Burney’s novel is also a novel of adolescence, one in which a young female adjusts to the surrounding system, and to do so ”she must learn how to deal with her feelings without being overwhelmed by them; she needs to find appropriate defenses and relinquish inappropriate ones; she must fit herself into her social setting” (1976: 129-133). In that sense, this text comes close to the novel of upbringing or education (Bildungsroman), but without discussing the early stages of the protagonist’s life.

Recent criticism suggests that this type of novel deals with certain rites of passage (sexual terms apart). Epstein claims that ”Burney insists that the period in which a young woman becomes quintessentially identified as marriageable [...] forms a crucially liminal proving ground, a period during which fundamental social barriers are traversed” (1996: 198). Or, as Russell has it, ”this ritualised emergence into public view is signified by the novel’s subtitle, but there is another sense in which *Evelina* is a story of its eponymous heroine’s appearance to the society: [...] *Evelina* must appear before the polite society in order to cast light on her obscure birth; literally, to show that she is alive” (2005: 382). That also means that the protagonist experiences a rebirth in social terms as she is officially recognised as a daughter of her true parent, Lord Belmont (Russell 2005: 383). Yet before that happens the heroine must learn the value of prudence in order to relieve her distress,

and conquer her doubts as to the most appropriate mode of conduct. Pamela also experiences "growing pains": as Donald Ball puts it, she is "in a state of indecision about whether to run to the austere but safe world of her parents or to remain in the world of Mr. B." (1971: 74). Such a quandary clearly adds to her misery.

Although "beauty in distress" is the focal point of both novels, the purposes of the two writers in producing their works seem to have been quite different. The very title of *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* spells its author's intentions quite clearly. The title page leaves no doubt: Richardson means his text to be didactic, "published in order to cultivate the principles of virtue and religion in the minds of the youth of both sexes" (1980: 27). In his Preface the writer, hiding behind the veneer of an editor, advocates the above once more, in keeping with the Aristotelian dicta – "diverting and entertaining" (1980: 31). In her Preface Fanny Burney claims to be presenting the text "to the public [...] happily wrapped up in a mantle of impenetrable obscurity" (2004: 7), a reference to the originally anonymous publication of *Evelina*. She does not seem to aspire to the teaching function, but wishes "to mark the manners of the times, [which] is the attempted plan of the following letters" (2004: 7). She then disclaims any similarity between her work and the already pejorative notion of the romance: her fiction will not be "coloured by all the gay tints of luxurious Imagination, where Reason is an outcast" (2004: 8), she insists. Interestingly, Burney mentions Rousseau, Richardson, Fielding and Smollett, only to declare: "I yet presume not to attempt pursuing the same ground which they have tracked" (2004: 8).

Yet, as already indicated, Burney overtly refuses any identification of her novel with popular romances of the day, and her book does more than recount a successful but somewhat troubled courtship. The novel brilliantly depicts the manners of the writer's epoch, offering an amusing gallery of character types drawn from contemporary upper-class spheres. While Captain Mirvan, the Brangthons and Madame Duval embody the somewhat lower and more vulgar groups, Lord Belmont, Lady Howard and others represent the positive aspects of aristocracy. The petty quibbling over theatre ticket prices of the former stands in marked opposition to the persistent refinement, self-control and moral superiority of the latter. Which, of course, is not to say that *Pamela* is merely a romance because it omits to dwell on contemporary manners. As Doody puts it, Richardson's novel "allows us to see that the Romance proper offers a critique of this tale of prosaic people in the flat eastern counties of England. The story is both a universal human action, dealing with matters as serious as the perversion of sex into power, and the human need for freedom – and equally and at the same time the story of two countrified young people, bumptious, ignorant, egotistical" (2004: 18). Perhaps this is why in both novels the female protagonists remain static, each resting satisfied with her catch of a husband at the novel's conclusion, which puts an end to her distress (cf. White 1960; Spacks 1976, 1994).

Now let us focus on the novels' protagonists. That a large degree of similarity exists between *Evelina* and *Pamela* in the above-discussed respects is easy to demonstrate. Both females are adolescents: *Evelina* is seventeen and *Pamela* fifteen when their adventures begin. Both are morally upright and strikingly attractive because they are meant to typify beauties in distress. *Evelina*'s outward appearance

and behaviour are thus characterised by Lady Howard, to whom she is initially entrusted: "Her face and person answer my most refined ideas of complete beauty: [...] so striking, it is not possible to pass it unnoticed. [...] Her character seems truly ingenuous and simple; [...] she has a certain air of inexperience and innocency that is extremely interesting" (Burney 2004: 22). Pamela's virtue, in turn, never falters, and leads its owner to desired marital union. She successfully resists all B.'s passes at her, including his hiding in a closet to enter her maiden bed or the prolonged incarceration at Mr. B.'s remote country house. The ultimate need to preserve her integrity, even if excessive – considering her servant-girl social status, is compulsively stressed by Pamela's parents, for instance: "Resolve to lose your life rather than your virtue" (Richardson 1980: 52), or "Our hearts bleed for your distress, and the temptations you are exposed to" (1980: 59). By fellow workers at the B. household, Pamela is well-appreciated: "I was overwhelmed with tears on the affecting instances of their love" (1980: 131). This is when Pamela is about to leave her workplace, and about to be abducted by Mr. B. Naturally, in the end, her goodness wins over everybody, even her upper-class enemy – her husband's sister, Lady Davers.

As for her good looks, Pamela's beauty is thus remarked on by her mother and father: "Don't let people's telling you, you are pretty, puff you up" (1980: 52). Miss Andrews may be a bit vain on that account, even if confirming what others have already noticed: witness her "To say truth, I never liked myself so well in my life" (1980: 88), uttered when she believes herself going home to her parents and tries on her country-girl outfit. This scene has been commented upon differently: either as a manifestation of despicable female vanity, or simply seeking to re-establish her identity before leaving the lap of luxury (Doody 1980: 18). When one of many ready-to-drop-dead-for-love suitors of Evelina's, a Mr. Smith, strives to pay her a compliment, he declares: "If I was that lady [=Evelina], I'd never take any thing from a woman [...] because I should be afraid of being poisoned for being so handsome" (Burney 2004: 208). Another unlucky suitor, Sir Clement Willoughby, whenever addressing the young woman, chooses pet names such as "the most charming of women", or "the loveliest of thy sex" and the like, hardly ever calling her simply "Miss Anville". This, in keeping with the beauty-in-distress principle, effectively upsets the object of his attentions, well before his sexual intentions are incidentally made clear. In terms of the volume of stress thus caused to the sufferer, these are comparable to the scene in which Pamela has no choice but to listen to brazenly indecent remarks about "pretty maids wear[ing] shoes and stockings" (Richardson 1980: 51).

From the early stages of the narratives' progress, "beauty in distress" equals innocence. A significant parallel between the narrative situations in which the heroines find themselves is that while the innocently unsuspecting protagonists, ignorant of male mischief, simply relate the first meaningful acts of their potential lovers, it is Pamela's parents and Evelina's father-figure, Villars, who understand what is going to happen before the heroines do. Both females almost refuse to heed their elders' warnings. When in her first letter Pamela mentions the way in which she was befriended by the young squire after her lady's death, rejoicing in his kindness, her father and mother definitely know better. Even if this seems somewhat far-fetched, they are soon demonstrated to be right: "our chief trouble is,

and indeed a very great one, for fear you should be brought to any thing dishonest or wicked” (Richardson 1980: 45). Similarly, as regards Evelina's potential for distress, a lot depends on her correspondence with the Rev. Villars. Her adopted father proves to be perceptive about Sir Clement “whose conversation and boldness are extremely disgusting” (Burney 2004: 61) and his schemes, as well as being initially right about Orville (“I was gratified by the good-nature of Lord Orville” (Burney 2004: 61); “Lord Orville appears to be of a better order of beings” (Burney 2004: 129)). This continues as long as she does not openly profess her emotional involvement with the latter: then Evelina is repeatedly urged by Villars to “hasten [...] to the spot of thy nativity, the abode of thy youth” (2004: 282), and finally the following exhortations are uttered: “Alas, my child! – that innocence, the first, best gift of Heaven, should, of all others, be the blindest to its own danger” (2004: 341), including the ultimate: “You must quit him! [...] his society is death to your future tranquillity” (2004: 343). That transpires to be wrong soon enough, and Evelina finds her well-deserved marital bliss with who else but Lord Orville himself.

In terms of themes discussed in both novels, twentieth-century criticism (Watt, Spacks, Doody, Mellor, and others) indicates that both texts reflect the changing status of marriage, gender issues and female subjection, conveniently placed behind the beauty-in-distress plot. That the institution of marriage was undergoing profound transformations reaching their climax by the beginning of the 19th century has been noted by historians and sociologists alike. Lawrence Stone has invented a name for the social phenomenon of affective individualism (1979: 149), based upon companionate marriage (1979: 217). This tendency manifested itself in growing numbers of love-marriages contracted in England, beginning roughly from the 17th century, and the changing status of women, seeking partnerly positions in their families (Stone 1979: 217). In the novels at issue, when the distress of both beauties comes to its long-awaited end, their expectations as they enter the houses which they had once left under very different circumstances are not that advanced. After all, this is still the age of transition, and at the other end of the spectrum there is the economic marriage (Watt 1979: 161). Pamela, for one thing, has by the time she is wedded upgraded her social position from a servant girl to the lady of Mr. B.'s house. Evelina has come into her birthright, acquiring financial and social privileges due to the rightful offspring of Lord Belmont. This was possible to happen in both cases because neither of the heroines was really averse to marriage, once it promised the desired amount of respectability or financial improvement. It was then easy to forget the distress, which had come as part and parcel of future happiness. Evelina's attitude, however, can be summarised as follows: “This seventeen-year-old heroine differs from most of her fictional contemporaries in her apparent lack of any wish to marry, her failure even to manifest awareness of marriage as inevitable female destiny” (Spacks 1994: 140). This may be related to Burney's idea (later picked up by Jane Austen, her admirer) that “reason should control sensibility” (Spacks 2003: 63). So it did in the cases of both Evelina and Pamela. To fully comply with her new position, Pamela accepts the forty-eight articles of marriage, presented to her by her new lord, Mr. B. (Richardson 1980: 467-470). Evelina, in contrast, has no special rules to abide by, and no special hopes of her own, taking whatever happens for granted. In her last letter,

75

she merely mentions "fearful joy and trembling gratitude" on starting her married life with "the object of her dearest, her eternal affection" (Burney 2004: 450).

Some of the two novels' distress-related settings introduce additional meaning to the plots: Evelina's intention to accompany her husband to Lincolnshire (Burney 2004: 421) after spending a month at Berry Hill straight after her wedding parallels Pamela's captivity at B.'s Lincolnshire estate. This is more significant than it may appear since it carries both Fanny Burney's recognition of Richardson's locales and simultaneously introduces a marked difference. Indeed, what Lincolnshire represents to Pamela and Evelina stands in marked opposition. Pamela's sojourn in Lincolnshire was a frustrating and debilitating experience in the confined space of the house, and as such – part of the distress pattern. As a reward for satisfactorily compliant behaviour, she was occasionally allowed into the manor-house grounds, surrounded by a fence featuring locked gates. Confinement, limitation, deprivation of fundamental personal liberties – all these are implicated by the closed space of B.'s Lincolnshire residence. To Evelina, in contrast, the very same geographical location embodies marital bliss, and paradoxically – freedom from the stresses and limitations of the London society. These are represented by, although her personal liberties are not infringed (with few exceptions), the manners and conventions of the polite society which she frequently finds confusing, simply because she remains unaware of real meaning of verbal exchanges or occurrences. Consequently, the stressful constraints of Evelina's are associated with the literally (but not metaphorically) open space, inhabited by the London society, while true freedom comes with her marriage to Orville who accepts her for what she is. Whether in or out of Lincolnshire, either heroine finds her eventual liberation from the distress pattern, and a confirmation of male recognition of her beauty, both inner and external.

As has been demonstrated, one could venture a statement that in the case of *Evelina* we are dealing with Frances Burney's tribute to, and imitation of, Samuel Richardson, somewhat less dramatic than the original, but still drawing on the resources which he had introduced and augmented into the rising English novel. Both novels appear to be constructed according to the sentimental Burkean beauty-in-distress assumption; the success that both of them achieved in their day was indisputable, which testifies to the appeal of the principle applied. Finally, the way the author of *Evelina* defines a novel is the following: it is "a picture of supposed, but natural and probable human existence. It holds, therefore, in its hands our best affections; it exercises our imaginations; it points out the path of honour; and gives to juvenile credulity knowledge of the world, without ruin, or repentance; and the lessons of experience, without its tears" (*Early Diaries*, qtd. in Bloom 1970: xxiv). Sheer virtue and beauty in distress, well-camouflaged didacticism and an adventure story of sorts: a recipe for eighteenth-century novelistic success.

1 In the Preface, Richardson himself thus set out to define one of the goals of his first novel, "to raise a distress from *natural* causes, and excite compassion from just ones" (1980: 31).

2 Which is not to say that there were enthusiastic reviews only. Fielding's criticism of Richardson is well-known; a certain Charles Povey went as far as to call *Pamela* "lubricious" (qtd. in Doody 1974: 71); Walpole, in contrast, ironically compared Pamela to snow because she "covers everything with her

whiteness" (qtd. in Day 1987: 15). There are also accounts of common people's response to *Pamela*, focusing on the marriage between a servant and master (Hill 1994: 143). Frances Burney, in turn, could boast famous admirers of her literary talents such as Dr Johnson, Edmund Burke, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Mrs. Thrale, and – naturally – her father, Dr Burney, but their admiration was not wholly devoid of criticism, either. This issue is discussed in detail by Bloom (1970: xvi-xviii).

3 *The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*.

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S U M M A R Y

THE APPEAL OF BEAUTY IN DISTRESS AS SEEN IN FANNY BURNLEY'S *EVELINA* AND SAMUEL RICHARDSON'S *PAMELA*: SOME TYPOLOGICAL AND INTERTEXTUAL ISSUES

The article aims to demonstrate that two 18th-century novels, Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and Burney's *Evelina* (1778), were produced according to the same principle, which may be succinctly summed in Edmund Burke's phrase: "Beauty in distress [is] much the most affecting beauty" (*Philosophical Enquiry*, 1757). The narrative patterns and protagonists have a lot in common. Needless to say, both novels enjoyed tremendous popularity and success in their day, mostly with female audiences.

KEYWORDS: beauty-in-distress, sentimental fiction, narrative pattern, character construction.