

Faint or Feint?: Literary Portrayals of Female Swooning in the Eighteenth Century

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In contemporary popular media, the image of a corseted lady swooning onto a “fainting sofa” and being ministered to with smelling salts and plumed fans has become something of a kitsch emblem of eighteenth century Europe. Modern interpretations of eighteenth and nineteenth century novels often illustrate female characters’ references to their “nerves” as a sort of literary rap on the wrist of a particular brand of psychosomatic spectacle espoused mostly by pushy or manipulative women to obtain their needs. Fainting was certainly a noticeable, even quasi-ubiquitous presence in the literature of the eighteenth century. Treated at times ironically, at times in earnest by both male and female authors, it was abundantly present in novels ranging from the sentimental and amatory to the satirical or gothic.

For such a specific and conspicuous mode of behavior to be so omnipresent in the literature of its time naturally raises questions as to why and how it came to be so closely associated with the “fairer sex.” In this paper, I evaluate the sociopolitical implications of feminine identity by examining the diverse interpretations and motivations behind portrayals of the gendered social trend in eighteenth century fiction that was fainting, especially in the context of amatory relations. Swooning may appear impossibly contrived and dramatic to today’s reader but at the time, it was a legitimate manifestation of a social mentality and code of behavior that circumscribed the relationships between men and women, and that had multiple and often contradictory implications.

I have chosen as the principal text for analysis the first volume of Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, which, as the most fashionable novel *de rigueur* in Europe

upon its publication in 1740, features some of the most emblematic scenes that tie together swooning and sexuality. Its popularity shows that its protagonist struck a chord with the mainstream readership, either as a model to emulate or an object of ridicule. *Pamela* was an intensely controversial work, and the question of the authenticity of its heroine's sexual modesty and chastity is one that has never quite been settled, making it a doubly interesting subject. I do not believe that Pamela's swooning is merely silly affectation or duplicity. Frequent and well-timed, it hints at the type of woman she was, what (she believed) was expected of her, and the type of self-image she wanted to project.

While I choose to center the bulk of my analysis on *Pamela* for such reasons, I will make use of relevant scenes shown in Aphra Behn's pastoral parody "The Disappointment," and Eliza Haywood's *Love in a Maze, or Fantomina*. I also turn to *Shamela* — Henry Fielding's parody of *Pamela* — as a literary work that highlights the most disparaged facets of the original heroine. Each of these works exhibits notably divergent instances of swooning as a social phenomenon, and how it was both regarded and used differently by men and women. My objective is not to determine whether women were "faking" when they swooned, although this is a question that does come up. What I hope to uncover are some of the motivations that drove women to faint (and writers to use it in their works), the significance that it held for women and the men who witnessed them, and how fainting fit into a larger code of social comportment.

Fainting is characterized by a loss of consciousness, and of control over one's mind and body. In appearance, it also resembles death; when Mr. B. attempts to violate Pamela, she writes that just before fainting, she "was ready to die" (63), and when describing her swoon immediately following the climactic final attempted-rape scene, she was in a "deplorable State of Death" (204). Death, in turn, has historically had sexual connotations. For example, the orgasm was seen as a death-like experience, as can be deduced from the popular French expression "la petite mort," or "the little death" used to describe it.¹⁾ A metaphor

1) In its entry on "petite mort," the Oxford English Dictionary cites Michele Richman's explanation from her article "Eroticism in the Patriarchal Order": "An experience which pushes Being to the limit during orgasm, the 'petite mort' which simulates death."

for a sexually ecstatic fleeting moment of ostensible "death," the fainting fit's frequent use in sexually charged scenes highlight its strong erotic undertones. This is perhaps why it became the act of literary choice to be used in popular sentimental or amatory fiction. Of course, female characters swooned when struck with grief or shock, as well, but more often as the physical expression of overwhelming emotion caused by sexual advances, with pointed parallels to lovemaking.

It would be meaningless to analyze fainting in the eighteenth century without first examining the idea of sensibility. The cult of sensibility is seen to have developed as a response to the seventeenth century feminist movement (Legates 26), and was based on the natural distinction between the sexes. At the outset, the process began by deviating from the widely prescribed view that the female physique was essentially comparable to, if derivative of, the male physique. Whereas the differences between men and women had previously been regarded as a result of acquired (as opposed to innate) experience,²⁾ this new perspective separated men and women onto completely different physical planes (Laqueur 5-8; McKeon 301; Mendelson & Crawford 18-20), allowing the patriarchy to write women off as being intrinsically different from men and exclude them from participating in or taking advantage of the Enlightenment's rights rhetoric that had begun to blossom at the time (Harvey, "Century" 902). When it became possible for the male hegemony to dismiss women as intellectually and physically inferior to men, women were also disqualified from the movement of self-improvement and progress that touched men.³⁾ While the far-reaching effects and multiple contexts of sensibility make it impossible to define it in

2) According to Michael McKeon, prior to this shift in medicine and human sciences, the modern distinction between "sex" and "gender" that we know today did not exist. Perhaps fuelled by the threat against patriarchal society, "It is as though the traditional, sociocultural embeddedness of the difference between men and women was now separated out and concentrated as an explicit and inescapable principle of social construction" (302).

3) In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft passionately condemned the adverse effects of sensibility on feminist progress, and lamented the "masculinization" of education and "the exercise of which ennobles the human character" (80).

succinct terms, I will only discuss those aspects that contribute to our understanding of swooning here. The concept of sensibility initially designated the human system of consciousness and responsiveness to cues from the external environment, but it was soon gendered to suggest that women's nerves were more delicate and sensitive than men's, and that they thus had less control over their nerves than men did (Barker-Benfield 27-29).

Sensibility, or delicacy, did have its merits; it included such qualities as "fineness in eating; pleasing to the senses ... feminine beauty ... neatness, politeness, gentleness of manners," according to Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (Van Sant 3), but women were usually described as possessing such qualities in excess, making them vulnerable, unpredictable, and inept. Under the banner of sensibility, women eventually came to represent domesticity and motherhood, stripped of their identity as sexual entities (McLaren 324), and setting them at greater odds with men. Michael McKeon writes that the "domestication" of women corresponded to a combination of economic trends that made female employment rarer and more poorly paid, while social trends among the bourgeoisie began to equate female idleness with gentility (299). Both no doubt contributed to increasing women's powerlessness in relation to men. Not surprisingly, a popular literary expression of this female sensibility was the scenario of "virtue in distress," i.e. the sexual virtue of a woman in distress caused by a man (Barker-Benfield xxvii-xxviii), which is also the implication underlying all of the three works that I discuss in this paper. This gendered approach to sensibility, heavily dependent on the "rake-victim" paradigm, consequently led to the sexualization of virtue (Barker-Benfield xxxvii), and allotted neatly compartmentalized standards of sexual behavior for men and women. As Lady John Booby indignantly rejects Joseph's claims of virtue in Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*,⁴ men were expected to make up for women's alleged lack of sexual desire. In the case of the fainting fits, the cause for stress was usually psychological (such as the fear of being raped and having ones reputation ruined), the expressions of sensibility psychosomatic (loss of

4) "I am out of patience," cries the lady: "Did ever mortal hear of a man's virtue! Did over the greatest, or the gravest men pretend to any of this kind!" (Fielding 32-33).

consciousness, cold sweats, trembling, etc.).

The concept of sensibility provides the socio-historical background for understanding the prevalence of swooning, which was arguably one of its most attention-grabbing physical manifestations. Common literary use of swooning as a way for women to avoid undesired sexual encounters (Benfield-Barker 32) seemed to confirm the circulated notion that women — especially unmarried ones — had no sexual desire, and were thus naturally virtuous. In fact, such modesty and concealment may have eventually become a factor of seduction that “increased women’s attractiveness and made men happy,” which is supported by its prevalence in eighteenth century erotica (Harvey, *Reading Sex* 218). The push-and-pull and drawn-out deferral of sexual gratification stemming from Pamela’s persistent protection of her chastity echoes what Ros Ballaster also points to as a pattern of the “pornographic pleasures of romantic fiction” (35). Pamela’s timidity in the face of Mr. B.’s kisses and embraces and her tenacious determination to remain chaste unquestionably fuelled his desire for her.

As one of the most vivid symbols of female sensibility, swooning became an easy target for ridicule because of the huge paradox upon which it was based. Sensibility belonged to the bourgeoisie, around whom a prim, domestic identity had been constructed (Harvey, *Reading Sex* 4); the middle-class woman was expected to be the prude in the “prude-coquette” dichotomy. This dichotomy was so stark and uncompromising that sensibility meant *absolute* virginity, both bodily and mental; innocence in all matters regarding sex, and even love and courtship (Zschirnt 51). The inconsistency of this argument lay in the illogicality that for a woman to swoon out of fear of rape necessitated at least some sexual knowledge, which then signified that she was not entirely ignorant of sexual matters. For example, it is incongruous and highly amusing that the girl so intent on preserving her innocence that “there was not a man on Earth [she] wished to love” (149), is so well-versed on the lustful ways of gentlemen and the perils that their advances can signal for someone such as herself. Conversely, it is ironic that in their wish to guard their daughter’s chastity above all, Pamela’s parents probably endowed their fifteen-year-old daughter with a comprehensive familiarity of sexual and courtly propositions from men, and a mind that must

constantly contemplate sex in order to protect herself from it (Kreissman 27). Even Mrs. Jervis wonders "where gottest thou all thy Knowledge, and thy good Notions, at these Years?" (39) after one of Pamela's grave sermons on the proper conduct of an "attempted" woman:

"for I think, when one of our Sex finds she is attempted, it is an Encouragement to a Person to proceed, if one puts one's self in the Way of it, when one can help it; and it shews one can forgive what in short ought not to be forgiven. Which is no small Countenance to foul Actions, I'll assure you" (39).

If a woman were truly to think and act like a sexual "blank slate," she would surely be "undone" before long (Zschirnt 52). It is those who are well-versed in the matters of which they should be completely ignorant that are best equipped to thwart potential perils.

Such evident self-contradiction did not escape the skeptics of Richardson's morally preachy young heroine. Based on the paradoxical ideal of female sensibility, a woman who was prepared to protect her honor at all costs was a very thin line away from being a scheming seductress, because "prude and coquette are alike" (Kinkead-Weekes 21).⁵ M. Kinkead-Weekes also quotes Steele on the shared tendencies of the prude and the coquette: "the distinction of sex in all their thoughts, words, and actions" (21). This is what makes Pamela such an easy target; while she represents a beacon of chastity who never surrendered her "jewel" until after marriage despite persistent threats from her master, that very fact indicated that virtue was incessantly on her mind. Since virtue was irrevocably tied to sex, Pamela would be thinking about sex every time she thought of her virtue. On the flipside of his work's tremendous popularity with the public readership, Richardson was stridently attacked and mocked by critics and writers as a stuffy bourgeois puritan preacher who nevertheless filled his novels with graphically prurient scenes (Kearney 28; Kreissman 31). The best-known of these parodies was Henry Fielding's

5) M. Kinkead-Weekes also quotes Steele on the shared tendencies of the prude and the coquette: "the distinction of sex in all their thoughts, words, and actions" (21).

Shamela. As the very distortion of the title indicates, Fielding saw Pamela's timidity and insistence on chastity as part of a coy plan orchestrated and executed by "an hypocritical, crafty girl ... who understands the Art of bringing a man to her lure" (Kinkead-Weekes 21). Shamela is the model of artfulness, pretending to be angry or shy and counterfeiting fainting fits.⁶⁾ Whether or not such criticisms were true of women who suffered from fainting fits as often as Pamela does, a glimpse at how Fielding subverts the virtues of the original Pamela into manifestations of craftiness shows us clearly what it was about her that critics found problematic. Perhaps what disturbed them the most was Shamela's success in obtaining Booby's hand in marriage, which confirmed the theory "that modesty was the key to capturing a man's heart" (Harvey, *Reading Sex* 218). For men, especially, the fact that such modesty could at times be entirely artificial was a threat and insult to their intelligence and authority.

Fielding is not subtle in his ridicule of both the author and the original text, explaining from the outset that in his work, "the many notorious FALSEHOODS and MISREPRESENTATIONS of a Book called Pamela are exposed and refuted; and all the matchless ARTS of that young Politician, set in a true and just Light" (229). He makes it abundantly clear that he believes Pamela has obtained her "Reward" through hypocrisy and artifice. "Pretend" is a term Shamela frequently uses to describe her outwardly modest and timid demeanor. It forecasts the trickery in her first false swooning scene: she lies in bed with Mrs. Jervis, "both shamming a Sleep" (247) when Mr. B. steals in. Shamela pretends to faint, adding that all the while, "*O what a Difficulty it is to keep one's Countenance, when a violent Laugh desires to burst forth*" (247), a comment that accentuates her brashness and lack of virtue in comparison to Pamela. This pattern is repeated; later on, Shamela is alone in her room when Mr. B. makes his final attempt. She skillfully portrays a true fainting fit down to the smallest detail, clenching her fists and teeth, and screwing her eyes shut. By showing how swooning could be abused by the artfully seductive, Fielding's

6) More than once, Shamela counterfeits swooning to such a degree that she tires herself out. Even her pretensions to regaining consciousness are carefully planned out, and only enacted when she is "likewise unable to continue the sport any longer" (247).

depiction of the heroine mocks the original title, "Virtue Rewarded."

In her poem "The Disappointment," Aphra Behn describes the maiden Cloris who has fainted, similar to Pamela, when confronted with the fervent sexual attempts of her lover, Lysander. While he "By swift degree advance[es]" (44), and has no problem ravishing her,

"Cloris half dead and breathless lay;
Her soft Eyes cast a Humid Light,
.....
And now no signs of Life she shows,
But what in short-breathed Sighs returns & goes" (55-60).

However, Behn calls Cloris' state of unconsciousness a "trance" (a word with connotations infinitely more romantic than the typical "fit") "Which Love and soft Desire had bred" (102), implying that this maiden's swoon is not one of fear, but of overwhelming pleasure. Of the three women at hand, Cloris displays what is probably closest to the death-like sexual ecstasy mentioned earlier. In Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina*, the heroine, who disguises herself as a widow to seduce her lover, realizes that a woman mourning her husband should display some reluctance when being seduced by a strange man, so she "counterfeited a fainting...." (274). Whether or not Pamela's fainting was genuine, it *did* prevent Mr. B. from ravishing her. From the contrasting grounds for and effects of swooning among these three cases, it is made clear that swooning serves a variety of purposes for both its performer and spectator.

While it may seem like a reiteration of the obvious, we must not forget that the cult of sensibility, and in extension swooning, derives its significance when examined within the context of the interaction between the female manifestation of sensibility and male reaction to it.⁷⁾ In *Pamela*, the heroine

7) David Daiches argues for the importance of the "relational" in Richardson's work, arguing that Richardson's model letters reveal a world in which relationships "between master and servant, between parents and children ... between suitor and sought" are of the utmost importance, because they "condition what is proper in human behavior ..." (18). I believe this relational nature of sensibility may also contribute to its theatrical aspects, which require give-and-take between performer and spectator.

experiences three key fits of fainting. As the novel progresses, each fit becomes more lengthy and intense in degree, shadowing the sophistication and tenacity of Mr. B.'s attempts and the development of the plot. The first of these, which occurs early on in the novel, lays out the essential debate between virtue and passion that underlies all future conflict between Pamela and Mr. B. Mr. B. refers to the rape of Lucretia, insisting to Pamela that her honor would not be ruined if he raped her, for "Who ever blamed *Lucretia*, but the *Ravisher* only? and I am content to take all the Blame upon me" (32). He is so obviously pulling at straws that we cannot help but smile at his forced argument, and when Pamela is able to provide a fitting retort that turns his logic against him, he resorts to physical force (much like a child), prompting Pamela to lock herself in a room and faint.

In the second scene, Pamela is in bed with Mrs. Jervis when Mr. B., who has been hiding under the bed, literally forces himself on Pamela. Again, she writes that "I was ready to die; and I sighed, and scream'd, and fainted away" (63). Interestingly, Richardson specifies the amount of time for which Pamela is rendered unconscious. The first time, she had fainted for only two hours. This time, she is unconscious for three; it is as though the amount of time for which she remains unconscious corresponds to the audacity of Mr. B.'s actions and the intensity of her distress. The third and last episode is the climax of both her fainting fits and of the entire novel. In conspiracy with Mrs. Jewkes, Mr. B. concocts an elaborate plan to disguise himself as a maid and stay in Pamela's room until the latter is undressed and in bed. They both pin her down so that Mr. B. can rape her. When Pamela refuses to accept Mr. B.'s ultimatum to make her his mistress, he puts his hand in her bosom, and Pamela, "With Struggling, Fright, Terror... fainted away quite, and did not come to myself soon; so that they both, from the cold Sweats that I was in, thought me dying..." (204). It is the faint to end all faints; not only does Mr. B. immediately stop, he is so frightened that he vows never to make an attempt on Pamela's virtue again, although the stoic Mrs. Jewkes remains unimpressed, scolding her master "for a Fit or two, give up such an Opportunity as this?" (204). The episode is so taxing that Pamela is bedridden until the next day.

Whatever may be the motivation behind Pamela's timely fits, they certainly

serve the purpose of repelling her assailant each time they occur. Of course, there is no guarantee that swooning will always persuade the assailant to desist, and in this case, Pamela was lucky that Mr. B. is such a maladroit blunderbuss (or comparatively courteous, however one chooses to look at it); the eponymous heroine of Richardson's subsequent novel, *Clarissa*, was not so fortunate. Interestingly enough, Shamela, who despite her devious, promiscuous ways also does *not* want to be ravished before obtaining Booby's hand in marriage (having already once experienced the inconveniences of unwed motherhood), has learned that the best way to fend off an undesired attack is by counterfeiting a swoon; in a letter to her mother, she writes that "I remembered, Mamma, the Instructions you gave me to avoid being ravished, and followed them, which soon brought him to Terms..." (259).

In *Fantomina*, swooning takes on the interesting characteristic of a "move" in a game. Disguised as a young widow, Celia "counterfeited a fainting, and fell motionless upon [Beauplaisir]'s Breast" (274) in response to the latter's physical advances. However, he, far from displaying alarm or concern in the manner of Mr. B., "had no great Notion that she was in a real Fit," and calmly carries her to her bedroom (presumably so the couple will be able to move to the "next step" more quickly and efficiently once the widow has regained consciousness), and "endeavour'd to bring her to herself" (274). The widow "was too grateful to her kind Physician at her returning Sense, to remove from the Posture he had put her in, without his Leave" (274). Here Celia feigns fainting in order not to appear too easy a "prey." Beauplaisir, obviously well-versed in such feminine customs, lets the lady perform her ritual, and prepares for the next "step." After Celia has refuted doubts on her "easiness," it seems the two can carry out their lovemaking with peace of mind.

The above scenes show women who are very different from each other in social station and virtuous fiber using the fainting fit for their own reasons. In the case of Pamela, she writes that she faints from "Fright and Terror" (whether or not we believe her, attempted rape is surely a traumatic enough experience to warrant such a reaction). Cloris swoons from pure pleasure. Haywood explicitly discloses Celia's swooning as a display of what is deemed to be a "suitable" response to sexual advances from a man. Whatever the motivation, swooning

clearly has a functional role, that is to say, it is both triggered by, and intends to trigger, a particular chain of events. For example, Shamela's letter to her mother tells us that it was believed that women (of a lower class, with aspirations of ensnaring socially desirable husbands, implies Fielding) commonly used fainting as an effective way of highlighting their maidenly virtue and deterring potential rape, and that this knowledge was circulated throughout the female community. Whether or not Pamela would have been taught the same things from her elders, she does seem well-versed on the waywardness of men, and is certainly clever enough that it is not impossible that she had a few tricks of her own in repelling undesirable men.

Cloris, who initially attempts (if only with words) to keep Lysander at bay with the following pleas and threats —

And breathing faintly in his Ear,
She cried, 'Cease, Cease your vain Desire,
Or I'll call out What would you do?
My Dearer Honour ev'n to You
I cannot, must not give Retire,
Or take this Life ... (24-28).

changes her mind quickly. Her first instinct, upon regaining consciousness, is not to scream, flee, or struggle, but to reach out for "that Fabulous *Priapus*" (105). Although it is difficult to evaluate the authenticity of Cloris' fainting, judging from the fact that Lysander had no qualms about persisting in his lovemaking even while she has lost consciousness, and judging from her reaction upon awakening, she is getting just what she wants. The above protestations indicate that Cloris is just as aware of the importance of guarding her honor (or at least appearing to do so) as Pamela is, if her willpower to resist the temptation is not as strong. At the end of the conflict between man and woman, and within the woman herself, Cloris turns out to be vulnerable to her lover's seduction, with sexual desire eventually winning over the concern for virtue. From that point of view, losing consciousness can be a convenient way to sidestep responsibility for fallen virtue. Of course, whether or not she was conscious at the time, Cloris' undoing would have resulted in the loss of her

honor either way. But by losing control over her mind *and* body, Cloris could allow Lysander to continue on with his lovemaking without actively struggling against him, and yet without explicitly condoning or encouraging his behavior. Her swooning allows her to enjoy (if but briefly) carnal pleasures that she could not openly enjoy as a virtuous maiden. If not for Lysander's impotence, there is no doubt the two would have consummated their love. The "Disdain and Shame" (118) expressed in Cloris' face is disdain of Lysander's impotence (i.e. disappointment of sexual expectations) and shame from having revealed herself as a sexual being.

In *Fantomina*, the swooning is so clearly theatrical, and is accepted as such, that we can easily see it for what it is: a necessary part of extra-marital (i.e. frowned-upon) sexual relations. The woman, in order to maintain some appearance of virtue (not necessarily her virginity in the case of a married woman, but rather a demureness close to what Karen Harvey described above as appealing to men) must express "modesty" by invoking her feminine sensibility through the act of fainting. Beauplaisir has the "courtesy" to pretend to believe the sincerity of her fainting fit, even while he understands that it is done mostly for theatrical value.

From a male point of view, swooning was probably seen as a means of obstructing the act of sexual intercourse. Mr. B. accuses Pamela several times of swooning conveniently to suit her needs: "As for Pamela, she has a lucky Knack of falling into Fits, when she pleases" (65). He is, of course, oblivious to the fact that he himself has a "Knack" of pouncing on her whenever *he* pleases. Whether or not a man finds it disruptive enough to actually refrain from the act of raping an unconscious woman depends on his character. Lovelace in Richardson's *Clarissa* purposely drugs the heroine and rapes her while she is unconscious, while Pamela's fits cause Mr. B. to desist, and even, in the end transform his lust into concern for her wellbeing. In "The Disappointment," the eager Lysander shows no signs of desisting, even while Cloris lies unconscious. Apparently swooning is not always a dependable enough device with which to stop a potential rape.

I have used the term "show," "theatrical," or "performance" to describe some of the swooning scenes. Although it is difficult to determine the authenticity of

Pamela's swooning, it is telling that she seems to be quite aware of its effects on those around her, and has contemplated how others may view her while she is unconscious. In the first major fainting scene that I described above, Pamela, who has fainted after locking herself in a room away from Mr. B., envisions the latter watching her through the keyhole:

"I fell into a Fit with my Fright and Terror, and there I lay, till he, *as I supposed*, looking through the Keyhole, spy'd me lying all along upon the Floor, stretch'd out at my Length,; and then he call'd Mrs. *Jervis* to me" (32, emphasis mine).

Realistically, we are to assume that she is simply reiterating what Mrs. Jervis has told her, but there is such a degree of self-awareness that we can almost imagine Pamela lying on the floor, perhaps squinting at the door, trying to catch a glimpse of her master's shadow. Deprived of consciousness, she is able to later re-imagine herself from the other's point of view. In doing so, she simultaneously becomes self-aware actor *and* spectator; her actions are, consciously or not, theatrical. By this I do not necessarily mean that she is actively shamming, but rather that she takes the risk of "allowing" herself to faint in the hopes that it will both stop B. in his tracks while physically communicating her own feminine delicacy. Authenticity aside, the fact that fainting was, in these cases, psychosomatic rather than purely physical, lands us to believe that willpower had some control over fainting. In a similar vein, Christiane Zschirnt, who used the expression "unconscious consciousness," believes that fainting in the sentimental novel was "the self-contradictory act of unwittingly pursuing a goal: the initiation of her marriage" (48), a paradox exemplified by Pamela's complete lack of knowledge in sexual matters, which becomes her ultimate means of obtaining a marriage proposal from Mr. B.⁸⁾

Terry Castle describes the eighteenth century as "a culture of travesty" (83) where disguise and dissimulation were used to embark on otherwise prohibited

8) Zschirnt uses this expression to describe fainting as a form of communication by an individual who subconsciously realizes the contradictions she embodies as a sexually hyper-aware, yet de-sexualized being.

sexual exploration, the site and medium for such adventure being the masquerade. The masquerade in eighteenth century British society and the ways in which writers treated it made it a site for the liberation of sexual decorum and class boundaries where the dissimulation of identity led to sexual freedom: "to go "backstage" was to go "on stage, to adopt a new self, to play a new role" (96). In *Fantomina*, the protagonist's exploitation of various disguises to seduce a lover who thrives on novelty is a representative use of the masquerade as a facilitator of sexual deliverance. In that sense, a swooning, virtuous young virgin may seem to be the polar opposite of the masked seductress. But could we not consider the swooning of virtuous young woman as a type of mask itself? As discussed above, the social function of the fainting fit was to relay sexual timidity, which in turn implied virtue. Therefore, it was only natural and desirable in the eyes of the supposedly righteousness bourgeoisie for a respectable young lady to respond to fervent sexual advances by losing consciousness. In *Fantomina*, Celia's various disguises are not the only masks she wears to seduce Beauplaisir; whether as a maid or widow, with each new identity she takes on, there is also the mask of feminine modesty to fit each character she plays (although it is acknowledged by both parties and quickly set aside). Pamela's swooning has often been interpreted — by contemporaries of Richardson like Fielding or Haywood, and by characters within the story like Mr. B. and Mrs. Jewkes — as a false display of chaste righteousness. Even if we do not doubt the sincerity of Pamela's wariness of Mr. B.'s advances as fiercely as Fielding does, her awareness of B.'s response to her swooning indicates that she understands its effectiveness. Of course, losing consciousness did not always bring about the desired reaction in the male assailant, but there are indications that had swooning not obtained her the desired results, Pamela would not have resorted to it as often as she does.

A most interesting scene unfolds toward the end of the first volume of *Pamela*. Pamela, accused by Mr. B. of being perverse and ungrateful, falls to the floor in tears. She "trembled so, I could not stand" (183), and is about to faint when Mr. B. interrupts her, declaring that "She is a Mistress of Arts, I'll assure you; and will mimick a Fit, ten to one, in a Minute" (183). Ironically, this statement, although it wounds Pamela (perhaps precisely *because* it wounds her), seems to

keep her from fainting. Whether it is shock at the preposterousness of his words, or shock at the truth of his words, Pamela refrains from doing just what Mr. B. predicted she would. Later, when Mrs. Jewkes demands her presence downstairs, Pamela initially refuses, saying she is physically incapable of standing. When Mrs. Jewkes threatens to call the physically grotesque Mr. Colbrand, Pamela manages to walk downstairs on her own, though trembling the whole way. This scene establishes that Pamela does have some control over her body and her nervous attacks.

Of course, if we judge Pamela's display of virtue to be just another measure of her artfulness, her credibility as a narrator becomes greatly weakened. Even if we consider her modesty to be genuine, as readers, we are forced to reckon with the fact that her swooning inevitably causes a gap in the first-person communication of her observations. Her unconsciousness of the truth becomes the reader's, and these narrative "holes" always occur at the crux of the action. This narrative instability is at times emphasized by the narrator herself. After Mr. B.'s second attempt on her, Pamela writes that she

"knew nothing more of the Matter, one Fit following another, till about three Hours after, as it prov'd to be, I found myself I Bed.... When I think of my Danger, and the Freedoms he actually took, tho' I believe Mrs. Jervis saved me from the worse, as she says she did, (tho' what can I think, who was in a Fit, and knew nothing of the Matter?) I am almost distracted" (64-65).

She is keenly aware of the fact that she must rely on others (whom she does not always trust) to fill in the gaps of her own experiences. If we are unsure of Pamela's re-telling of the story, which is after all based on hearsay, how far can we trust her? On the one hand, we could argue that the epistolary format, especially when carried out between two such close parties (parent — daughter), is probably fairly "honest" (particularly since by the second half of the novel it becomes more of a private journal than a collection of letters). Furthermore, letter-writing is already such a private act, one upon which we as readers are intruding. On the other hand, the chief shortcoming of the first-person narrative is that it is seldom able to be truly objective or honest, especially when it

concerns the narrator herself. There is something almost excessively self-aware in Pamela's acknowledgement of her gaps of consciousness that cause the reader to wonder about the truthfulness of her words. If she were intentionally shamming her fits, we could hardly expect her to own up to it. But Pamela has such strong convictions on virtue and morals, and has internalized them so thoroughly, that we are faced with the added complication that she may very well not see her own disingenuousness.

The debate between the Pamelists and Anti-Pamelists has still not been settled. While Pamela was all the rage at the time of her creation, this also made her a wildly popular target of mockery. From a wider perspective, this divisive response may reflect the ambivalence felt toward the woman of (excessive) sensibility. The fainting fit stems from and brings with it such tension that it is easy to label it as characterized by manipulation and melodrama. Indeed, in many eighteenth century literary works, it is. However, swooning could hardly have achieved such primacy in literature if that were its sole purpose. As evidenced in the works of Behn, Fielding, Haywood, and Richardson among others, swooning could be used by women of different backgrounds, and with different motivations, to communicate various emotional states, and it seems that many men were aware of this. Swooning was an act of social communication, perhaps not so different in its expressiveness from a handshake or a kick in the groin.

Although the question of whether or not women "faked" their faints is an interesting — (and to some degree an inevitable) — one, I do not believe it is the central one we must ask in order to understand the basic nature of fainting. Rather, it is the existence of social meaning in the act of fainting that has guaranteed its eternal place in the pantheon of popular imagery. Swooning was a way for women to express their desires and sexuality, and hopefully protect the most intimate and personal space that was their body, this at a time when most women did not have the economic means, moral authority, or sociopolitical status to go about openly doing so. Of course, swooning was far from being a guaranteed means of female "victory" over men. This is a point made clear from the varied responses of the male characters in different literary works, and especially driven home in the rape of Clarissa by Lovelace. Ultimately, *no act*

could have provided fail-proof protection against a determined rake figure. Therefore, the “success” of swooning can only be measured within the very limited confines of female influence. Yet it proves that women seized upon what was available and found a way to use it to their advantage. This image eventually came to be interpreted as one of craftiness and deviousness. Then again, are those not merely different terms for clever, pragmatic, and resourceful? All in all, it is impossible not to admire their ability to turn a symbol of the theory of feminine sensibility — initially designed to restrain the growth of women’s movement and activity — into a tool for influence.

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ABSTRACT

**Faint or Feint?:
Literary Portrayals of Female Swooning in
the Eighteenth Century**

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This paper examines the social and political implications behind the prevalence of female swooning in Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela* (Volume 1), Henry Fielding's parody of this novel *Shamela*, Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina*, and Aphra Behn's poem "The Disappointment." While swooning has today become a caricature of a particular brand of hyper-feminine manipulation, each of the three works mentioned above show that it was used by women of different socioeconomic backgrounds and personal desires to both project and protect aspects of their feminine identity. This identity was a combination of a desexualized, chaste ideal imposed upon women by a patriarchal society that was becoming increasingly conservative in response to a brief wave of feminism in the seventeenth century; and a more realistic character of a woman with sexual awareness and desires who sought to live out her true identity to whatever degree was possible within the tight realm of virtue that was ascribed to her by father, husband, or brother. The virtuous Pamela, for example, swoons in order to fend off potential rape, and consequently ruin, but her actions also have the effect of ultimately gaining her the respect of her would-be assailant, Mr. B. On the other hand, the sexually precocious Fantomina mimics a fainting fit in order to play the role of a demure young widow while continuing to fulfill her sexual desires. As such distinct heroines reveal, swooning was used by women as a clever instrument to subvert the constricting virginal ideal of a model lady.

Key words feminine identity, sexuality, sensibility, swooning, theatricality, virtue