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Women and the Epistolary Novel

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Abstract:

The article analyzes that novel of letters is highly political and fairly unsubtle about its opinions on race and gender. It also describes that it is a woman's story, and it celebrates the feminine sphere of living. Community is formed around female activities; it becomes a symbol of female friendship. The traditionally feminine occupations are in fact what saves the men in the epistolary novels from their misery.

Keywords: Epistolary woman, epistolary novel, male and female, female activity, feminine occupation, novel of letters, race and gender.

Introduction

One peculiar aspect of the classical novel of letters is its connection to women. The British literary canon has its most infamous examples as *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, both penned by Samuel Richardson in the voice of young women who, deprived of other means of confidant communication, write letters telling about their desperate situations. Across the channel, the Portuguese Nun was set as an example for other women writers to follow[1], which contributed to the evolution of what K. A. Jensen calls "The Epistolary Woman". This is a figure she detects in a particular mode of women's writing in France, and which she believes was a particularly dangerous manner of representing the feminine mind. The letters of the suffering Nun were largely believed to be genuine, on the argument that the passion they express could only have been penned by a woman. Literary theorists – inevitably male – posed the doxa that while men studied language, women attained it subconsciously; lacking the training to write proper literature and being victims of a biology that was believed to limit them to naïve emotion, their natural talent was for the kind of writing in which primitive passion was preferable – in love letters[2]. The trend was supported by editors and publishers who would publish letter collections that deliberately framed female letters differently than male ones[3]. According to Jensen, this had the ultimate effect of turning the letter novel into an inviting trap for women writers: the only acceptably feminine mode of writing was the love letter, preferably that of an "anguished and abandoned" woman desperately writing to the lover who had left her, and it was not considered on a par with the male forms of writing: the feminine love letter was seen as anything *but* literate. Its designation as a feminine art, however, helped to glamorize its marginal status and encourage women to engage in a cultural practice to which they were purportedly naturally

[1] Gabriel- Joseph de Lavergne: Les Lettres Portugaises. Paperback – January, 1983
[2] Jensen, Katharine Ann: Writing Love: Letters, Women and the Novel in France, 1605 – 1776. Carbondale, Edwardsville: Souther Illinois University Press, 1995.pp10-11
[3] Jensen, Katharine Ann: Writing Love: Letters, Women and the Novel in France, 1605 – 1776. Carbondale, Edwardsville: Souther Illinois University Press, 1995.p.169

suited and that, of course, supported male literary and sexual hegemony[4]. Jensen's claim is that the letter novel became a female way of writing a form that was invented by men, in a period when publication and editing of literature was controlled entirely by men. She believes that this happened as a reaction to the salon culture of the Enlightenment France, where women participated along with men and where the idea of *galanterie* came to question a culture where love and marriage were institutions in which women acted as possessions traded between men. "The Epistolary Woman", eventually established as the norm of the French woman writer, became the antithesis of the "sexually dominant, literary empowered" woman writer of the salon culture[5]. Now, the ideal image of the writing woman is one who has been seduced and abandoned by her lover, and who is writing her unfulfilled emotions. Female suffering became a virtue, and pain something positive: it might persuade the lover to come back. Women's letters which did not conform to this were often not published until centuries later, if at all. Women's place in public writing became locked to the form of the personal letter, an influence that likely was felt on the other side of the channel; Ruth Perry notes on the popularity of epistolary fiction in pre-Richardson Britain that "epistolary fiction flourished in England long before Richardson wrote *Pamela*. Some of it was original, some translated from the French"[6]. Perry's *Women, Letters and the Novel* is a historical study of the growth of the novel in England, particularly the epistolary novel. She is interested in the social status of women at the time, and charts how industrialisation brought on women's gradual loss of economic independence and social influence, and ultimately reduced them to an infantile legal status, where their survival was fully dependent on men (the father or the husband), where any possessions they brought into marriage fell to their husbands, where they received no education, and where the separation of workplace and home excluded them from influence on the dawning capitalist economy. The wife was the servant of the husband, and even their bodies – their chastity – were seen as male possessions. There was a shift in how woman's place in society was seen: where the nun had once been an independent, scholarly and respected figure in the Middle Ages, she was now an object of pity because she was not married, and became a staple figure of repressed female passion in the novels of the time. Perry notes that the development of the novel corresponded with a period when women – particularly in the growing middle class – were reduced to a state where they were expected to stay away from public life and devote themselves to their families, living on the mercy of their fathers and, as they grew older, their husbands. The women of this social group were often deprived of meaningful activities, brought up with the instruction that their foremost ambition was to find love in marriage, and that their most important occupation was to please men. Perry believes that this was a contribution to the popularity of the novel, as the focus on the individual and its scrutiny of thought and psychology in turn fostered a focus on emotion, which ultimately made for fiction more easily focused on the idea of romantic love as the fulfilment of a woman's life: "The epistolary novel was the perfect vehicle for stories of romantic love because its very format demanded a subject matter in which emotional states were most prominent"[7]. She also shows that the motivation of the letter-writers in epistolary fiction is a passive response to emotional tension, which gives the genre a tendency to value emotion over plot. Perry also discusses the novel's focus on women's sexuality, and the implications this had for the epistolary form. If women's value to society had been reduced to their sexuality, then the same process was seen in the novels: "if a novel had a male protagonist it could be about almost any sort of subject and circumstance, but if it was about a woman, it was almost certain about her relation to a man; nothing else was germane" (Perry 138). The epistolary form foregrounded subjective experience and emotions, which made it a perfect vessel for romantic fantasy, but this had an insidious flip side: the connection between consciousness and sex. In a medium where a person exists solely as

[4]Jensen, Katharine Ann: Writing Love: Letters, Women and the Novel in France, 1605 – 1776. Carbondale, Edwardsville: Souther Illinois University Press, 1995.p.35

[5]Jensen, Katharine Ann: Writing Love: Letters, Women and the Novel in France, 1605 – 1776. Carbondale, Edwardsville: Souther Illinois University Press, 1995.p.21

[6] Perry, Ruth: Women, Letters and the Novel, New York: AMS Press, inc., 1980.

[7] Perry, Ruth: Women, Letters and the Novel, New York: AMS Press, inc., 1980. p.138

the words they put onto paper, and where these words are assumed by the reader to be the unguarded view into the writer's mind, the conflict around which the story centres is often not physical, but mental. Seduction is sexual persuasion, and many epistolary novels seem to suggest that a woman who opens her mind to a man, in due time will open her body to him as well. Perry connects this to the "proper" courtship rituals of the day, when young men and women interacted only within strict social rules – to the point where a young man writing a letter directly to a woman was displaying unpardonable frankness. Ultimately, the letter becomes a representation of the self that cannot physically be with the addressee, and violation of the confidence placed in the letter works as a metaphorical rape; the spiritual penetration forebodes the physical. The lives of Pamela and Clarissa were written in a time when women were not expected to enjoy sex (another considerable change from Chaucer and the literature of the Renaissance which acknowledged women as sexual beings, for good and bad)[8]. Romantic love played a big part in the tradition of epistolary fiction and certainly inspired unrealistic expectations and outright foolish choices in some of its female readers, a consequence that many writers of the time were aware of and made use of in the very novels they wrote. Many epistolary novels of the time seem to have intentionally catered to the desire for romantic and/or sexual fantasies in their readers. Indeed, the very construction of epistolary novels of the time mimicked the sexual expectations of the plot, and many writers emphasised the voyeuristic aspect of a novel made up of letters – many epistolary novels include a third figure standing outside the main correspondence, acting as a confidante to one or both involved and acting as an in-story stand-in for the reader, and even in the examples that lack it, you will frequently find that the letters are "always being forged, intercepted, or even just read, legitimately, by a third person"[9]. Women's lives were disproportionally well represented in epistolary fiction, even as the majority of writers and primary consumers of it were men. Epistolary fiction was also more available for women writers than other genres, and like in France, women were believed to be particularly suited for the emotional, unpretentious letter form – "Letters were the one sort of writing women were supposed to be able to do well. Literate women wrote letters even in the days when they put pen to paper for no other reason, and so the public was ready to buy volumes of letters published under a woman's name".

Conclusion. Perry and Jensen both show that the epistolary novel might have given women writers a "respectable" manner of being published in a period when their social position was otherwise inhibited, but that it also was both a result of, and perpetrator in maintaining, a view of the women's place in society that was limiting the ways in which it was appropriate for them to express themselves, and what kind of female writing was judged worthy of being published. Both show that the writing of novels, and epistolary novels in particular, might have been empowering to women; but they also agree that the ideology apparent in this novel was perpetuating the ruling view of women of the day. This was the simple lesson that persists even in contemporary stories: the most important part of any woman's life is her love of a man.

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