A Palm for Pamela: Three Studies in the Game of Love

Ever since Joseph Fielding's hatchet job in Joseph Andrews and Shamela, Samuel Richardson's Pamela has been identified as one of the grubbies of middle class morality ever set forth as a serious model of sexual behavior. Originally framed to body forth the ideal of virtue rewarded, Pamela's story actually panders a virtue saleable in the marketplace, as Richardson's detractors would have it. No matter that her price tag reads marriage, the social-climbing servant girl holds and sells her chastity in a manner only superficially distinguishable from that Shamela who told her tortured master, "a settled settlement for me, and all my heirs, all my whole lifetime . . . or else crosslegged is the word, in faith." And who can deny that the very idea of a virtue in search of reward is a paradox stretched and corrupted into mere contradiction, a proper target for Fielding's ridicule? Clearly, Richardson deserved what he got: Fielding's lampoon of Pamela's earnest moralizing is a gratifying instance of unvirtue rewarded, an instance founded on the premise that bad art may be a moral as well as esthetic trespass.

But yet, though Richardson may have been justly punished for his turpitude, it is time that his ill-famed heroine received a word in her favor—not because her mercantile virtue deserves defending, particularly, but simply because it is defended, and not by the likes of Samuel Richardson, but by some of the world's great experts on the game of love. To substantiate this claim, I propose to examine three classic love stories, spanning fifteen centuries and three cultural settings, wherein we shall find that playing Pamela is by no means a monopoly of lower-middle-class serving maids. On the contrary, I believe we shall see that the game of love endures unchanging, codified and ritualistic as the peacock's dance, through all time and mutability. The three works are Shakuntala, the classic Hindu drama written by Kalidasa in the fourth century; Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet (abetted by a brief glance into Hamlet), set against a Renaissance Christian cultural

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backdrop; and Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, which embodies the precepts of modern naturalistic existentialism. In these three love stories, we shall see the lowly Pamela justified, at last, by dint of the parallel machinations of her aristocratic imitators.

Typically (as so often in real life), the classic game of love begins in blundering happenstance: King Dushyanta bumbles across Shakuntala’s hermitage while hunting deer; Romeo meets Juliet while crashing a party in hopes of wooing Rosaline; and Frederick Henry is dragged off to meet Miss Barkley only at Rinaldi’s strong insistence. Once the first encounter has happened, however, and the two partners have tacitly agreed to play the game, the rest of the affair is a strictly codified series of gambits and counter-stratagems, with the winner of the game determined by the skill and perseverance of one partner over the other in manipulating the code to his or her advantage. The stakes in the game are clear though never spoken: his objective being carnal pleasure, hers being marriage. The game is over when one of the partners has achieved his goal before the other has achieved his or hers — that is, when either she has lost her virginity, and so lost the game of love, or he has lost his patience, and so will settle for marriage rather than seduction.

II

The first stage in the game of love, which may be called the phase of the male advantage, is that of pursuit and enticement. The male holds strong cards here, because his role is simply to grab all he can, while she must manage the delicate act of maintaining his interest on one hand while never exposing her feelings too openly on the other. That is, she must balance carefully between not too much encouragement, lest he think her too easy a conquest, and not too much discouragement, lest he give up in despair. In *Pamela*, this phase comprehends most of that interminable series of advances and refusals in the bedchamber which many of us find unreadable, but in the great classics similar things happen which are very readable indeed. In *Shakuntala*, for example, it is the girl, totally inexperienced in sexual matters, who keeps the game going with consummate skill while he, the master of a whole harem full of wives, bumbles lamely from gambit to gambit as though a freshman in the school for inexperienced youths.

Indeed, it is precisely this inversion — Dushyanta the man of experience being less skillful than the virgin Shakuntala at the game of love — which has given the play much of its lasting appeal. Proof of her competence is seen in the way she maneuvers ruse after ruse to see that the game doesn’t flag: she asks help getting a bee away from her face, she feigns lameness, she pretends her dress is caught in a tree — anything to get him close to
and aware of her lovely body. And yet, until he overhears her declare her love by eavesdropping, she manages to keep him in a dither of uncertainty, so that he hardly knows how to read the most obvious signals, and thus suffers the game's classic ups and downs:

Although my darling is not lightly won, she seemed to love me, and my hopes are bright. . . . Thus does a lover deceive himself. He judges his love's feelings by his own desires.

Her glance was loving — but 'twas not for me;
Her step was slow — 'twas grace, not coquetry . . .
She smiled — but not to me — and half denied it . . .
Yet did not try so very hard to hide it.1

Finally, the clown finds it necessary to remind the king that according to the game's rules, Shakuntala's number one injunction is that she must initially constrain her enthusiasm: "Did you want her to climb into your lap the first time she saw you?" And so the game is kept going until, as we shall presently observe, its second stage begins to fire.

But meanwhile, to justify poor Pamela, we have other evidence of the first phase of the game, pursuit and enticement, to consider. Juliet, for example, is a girl acutely conscious of the strictures of the game of love. Like Shakuntala, she is overheard confessing her love in what she takes to be night's solitude, and is startled when Romeo steps forward after getting an earful: "What man art thou that thus bescreened in night/So stumblest on my counsel?" (II, ii, 52) And here it is again: the innocent, inexperienced girl knowing by simple intuition what a mistake it is to reveal her passion too openly: "Thou know'st the mask of night is on my face, Else would a maiden blush bepaint my cheek/For that which thou hast heard me speak tonight" (II, ii, 85). She knows that she should be keeping him guessing, playing hard to get in the classical pattern: "Fain would I dwell on form, fain, fain deny/What I have spoken." What she should be doing, indeed, looks suspiciously much like playing Pamela: "... if thou think'st I am too quickly won, I'll frown and be perverse and say thee nay, So thou wilt woo" (II, ii, 95).

And a third wench to play Pamela is Catherine Barkley, who, although a modern skeptic in most things, is not so skeptical as to toss away her cards in the game of love. She aims, like Shakuntala and Juliet, at parlaying her lover's lust for her body into a permanent relationship, and she knows, like them, that to do this she will for a while have to play coy. And so even in this most up-to-date, à-la-mode version of love's game, we find ourselves not

so far removed from Pamela’s bourgeois machinations after all. Consider this scene, for example:

We looked at each other in the dark. I thought she was very beautiful and I took her hand. She let me take it and I held it and put my arm around under her arm.

“No,” she said. I kept my arm where it was.

“Why not?”

“No.”

“Yes,” I said. “Please.” I leaned forward in the dark to kiss her and there was a sharp stinging flash. She had slapped my face hard. Her hand had hit my nose and eyes, and tears came in my eyes from the reflex (p. 26).²

And if this isn’t enough to confirm the traces of Pamela in Catherine Barkley, there is the ritual of the good-night kiss yet to consider. The smart girl will not yield up too much passion in this phase of the game:

She stood up and put out her hand. “Good-night.”

I wanted to kiss her.

“No,” she said. “I’m awfully tired.”

“Kiss me, though,” I said. . . .

We kissed and she broke away suddenly. “No. Good-night, please, darling.” We walked to the door and I saw her go in and down the hall (p. 32).

The scene ends, as Shakuntala or Pamela might have planned it, with the lover in the desired state of bafflement and uncertainty: “I went on home. Rinaldi came in while I was undressing. ‘Ah ha!’ he said. ‘It does not go so well. Baby is puzzled.’” With his pride as well as his lust thus committed to the game, Catherine now has her Frederick where she wants him. Her failing to come see him the next time he pays a call on her (“She’s not awfully well,” Miss Ferguson tells him, which may or may not be true) is the right move to keep him in the game until the next, more serious phase of the affair can get under way. It leaves him feeling an emotional need he hadn’t reckoned on: “I went out the door and suddenly I felt lonely and empty. I had treated seeing Catherine very lightly . . . but when I could not see her there I was feeling lonely and hollow.” Is not this after all the same ace that Pamela waited (through interminable pages) to pull from the deck, and that she finally got and deployed into marriage? But let us proceed to the trumps of the game.

III

Each partner, in the classic pattern of the game of love, holds a trump in his hand to be played at the right strategic moment. Her trump card, at least up to the moment her lover begins having the “lonely and hollow” feeling noted by Frederick Henry, is simply her unsullied body, which she

²Ernest Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957), paperback edition.
uses to fire his lust, by all prudent means, but never to slake it until marriage
with the proper ceremony and social witness. Thus, in the initial “Peeping
Tom” scene in Shakuntala, King Dushyanta first peers from behind a tree at
a body so curvaceous as to cause this exchange between Shakuntala and her
two girl friends.

SHAKUNTALA: Oh, Anusuya! Priyamvada has fastened this bark dress so
tight that it hurts. Please loosen it.

PRIYAMVADA: [Laughing] You had better blame your own budding charms
for that.

His desire thus inflamed, the King’s interest is intensified by his assumption
concerning her purity:

KING: This too is in my thought.
She seems a flower whose fragrance none has tasted,
A gem uncut by workman’s tool,
A branch no desecrating hands have wasted,
Fresh honey, beautifully cool.

Likewise, even Catherine Barkley is not only beautiful but sexually innocent,
as she informs Frederick Henry indirectly on two occasions, the first being
when she describes the fiancé killed at the Somme —

_We sat down on a bench and I looked at her._
“You have beautiful hair,” I said.
“Do you like it?”
“Very much.”
“I was going to cut it all off when he died. . . . I wanted to do something
for him. You see I didn’t care about the other thing and he could have had it
all. He could have had anything he wanted if I would have known” (p. 19).

—and the second occasion being when she says, after they consummate
their “private marriage,” “I’m afraid I’m not very good at it yet” (p. 106).
The wise wench, then, parleys her beauty and chastity into a relationship
more lasting than her partner’s urge toward the physical and psychological
satisfactions of seduction.

But against this strategy, her partner also has a trump card—he tells
lies: that he loves her, that he will marry her, and so on. This lying, or at
least the suspicion that he lies, is one of the most constant and interesting
elements in the game of love. It seems to appear in even the most idyllic
of romances, as when Shakuntala is warned that the mere promise of
marriage is not enough to win the game—“Be slow to love, but yet more
slow with secret mate” (p. 150) — and when even the pure and high-minded
Juliet feels it necessary to culminate the great balcony scene with the follow-
ing pair of “if” clauses:

_THree words, dear Romeo, and good night indeed._
_If that thy bent of love be honorable,_
Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow . . .
Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite . . .
But if thou mean’st not well, I do beseech thee . . .
To cease thy suit, and leave me to my grief. (II, ii, 143ff.)

And certainly when we pass from the idyllic to the realistic mode of literature, we find men’s lies as a given quantity in the game of love, as something to be taken for granted. Thus in Hamlet, for example, both Ophelia’s brother and father try to set her straight concerning Hamlet’s protestations. First, Laertes —

Then weigh what loss your honor may sustain
If with too credent ear you list his songs,
Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmastered importunity.
Fear it, Ophelia, fear it . . . (I, iii, 29)

— and then Polonius dismisses Hamlet’s avowals of love as a pack of lies:

OPH. My lord, he hath importuned me with love
In honorable fashion . . .
And hath given countenance to his speech, my lord
With almost all the holy vows of Heaven.

POL. Aye, springes to catch woodcocks. I do know
When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul
Lends the tongue vows . . . For Lord Hamlet,
Believe so much in him, that he is young. (I, iii, 110ff.)

And in the modern period, with honesty ranking as the highest virtue, Frederick Henry frankly describes his use of this male gambit:

She looked at me, “And you do love me?”
“Yes.”
“You did say you loved me, didn’t you?”

So there it is — the lie as trump, and so identified in the card game metaphor which at this moment passes through Frederick Henry’s mind: “I knew I did not love Catherine Barkley nor had any idea of loving her. This was a game, like bridge, in which you said things instead of playing cards.” And indeed, to continue the metaphor, Frederick’s lie very nearly does turn the trick, for it brings him to that stage of love’s game where he is permitted to put hands on forbidden parts of her body:

(Catherine) “I love you so and it’s been awful. You won’t go away?”
“No. I’ll always come back.”
“Oh, I love you so. Please put your hand there again.”
“It’s not been away.”
At this point, however, when she seems in danger of muffing the game, she recoups her hand by topping his trump with a truth:

She looked down at the grass.
"This is a rotten game we play, isn't it?"
"What game?"
"You're a nice boy," she said. "And you play it as well as you know how. But it's a rotten game. . . . You don't have to pretend you love me. That's over for the evening. . . ."
"But I do love you."
"Please let's not lie when we don't have to" (p. 31).

Much crestfallen, Frederick Henry tries to salvage what he can from this debacle, but he is so set back now as to fail to get even a passionate good-night kiss (as noted above). Thus has Miss Barkley played her hand to perfection, steering the careful passage between her two necessities — those of thwarting "the nurse's-evening-off aspect of it" (Catherine's reproachful term for his aggressiveness — p. 26) while simultaneously stirring his fantasies:

After supper I would go and see Catherine Barkley. . . . I wished I were in Milan with her. I would like to eat at the Cova and then . . . go to the hotel with Catherine Barkley. Maybe she would. Maybe she would pretend that I was her boy that was killed and we would go in the front door and . . . I would stop at the concierge's desk and ask for the key . . . and I would put the key in the door and open it and go in and then . . . we would not wear any clothes because it was so hot and the window open . . . and we would drink the capri and the door locked and it hot and only a sheet and the whole night and we would both love each other all night in the hot night in Milan. That was how it ought to be. I would eat quickly and go and see Catherine Barkley (p. 37-8).

Not Pamela, not even Shamela, could have played her hand to better advantage than this. Clearly, by now Catherine's skillful play has elevated her product in the market of Frederick's mind toward the sale price Catherine has held out for: their private marriage. This may not quite be Virtue Rewarded, but at least it shows that shrewdness and restraint pay off. And so the game of love passes into the phase of the woman's advantage — when the male partner, wearied of thwarted aggressions and yet enticed by unbearably vivid fantasies, and beset moreover by unexpected "lonely and hollow" feelings, is about ready to sign the marriage contract.

The moment he signs — with whatever social or religious sanction the cultural setting makes necessary — she has won the game of love. In Juliet's (like Pamela's) case, the Christian cultural backdrop requires a prescribed religious ceremony and social witness, both supplied in anxious haste by Friar Laurence. "Come, come with me, and we will make short work;/ For, by your leaves, you shall not stay alone/Till holy church incorporate two in one" (II, vi, 35). In Catherine's and Shakuntala's case, however, the
“private marriage” credo, involving a simple mutual exchange of vows without witnesses or ritual, is both necessary and permissible, legitimized in either case by Hindu tradition or by Hemingway’s existential skepticism. Shakuntala gets her way by twice fending off physical seizure until she brings him to terms, thusly:

KING: Why should I not have my way?
SHAKUNTALA: Oh, sir! Be a gentleman. There are hermits wandering about.
KING: Do not fear for your family, beautiful Shakuntala. Father Kanva knows the holy law. He will not regret it.

For many a hermit maiden who
By simple, voluntary rite
Dispensed with priest and witness, yet
Found favor in her father’s sight.

And lest there be any doubt about it, the next act (Act IV) of the play begins with a flat announcement that “Shakuntala has been properly married by the voluntary ceremony and she has a husband worthy of her.” Catherine Barkley too gets properly married by the voluntary ceremony, as we might call it. Having passed beyond the phase of casual lust and that of the “lonely empty” feeling into real love (“God knows I had not wanted to fall in love with her. . . . But God knows I had”—p. 93), Frederick Henry wants in fact a formal wedding and it is Catherine who negates the idea: “I wanted to be really married but Catherine said that if we were they would send her away and if we merely started on the formalities they would watch her and would break us up” (p. 114). And so in the latest existentialist style they create their own marriage values, which are for them as good as any:

We said to each other that we were married the first day she had come to the hospital and we counted months from our wedding day. . . . I know one night we talked about it and Catherine said, “But, darling . . . we’re really married. I couldn’t be any more married. . . . We are married privately” (p. 115).

And indeed they are, as the remainder of the book eloquently bears testimony.

IV

Following the act of marriage, in the classic pattern of the game of love, there remains only the matter of the “defeated” male partner taking possession of what he has purchased at so much higher a sale price than he had originally intended. Hemingway’s elaborately detailed love-making episodes are familiar enough to need no discussion here, but our other two stories might merit some attention. For example, it is interesting that Juliet awaits her consummation using metaphors of the market-place to describe her success in the game of love: “O I have bought the mansion of a love [Romeo’s
body],/But not possessed it, and, though I am sold,/Not yet enjoyed"
(III, ii, 26). The well-known lyric passages that follow this “bought” and
“sold” image make clear that for both partners the game gave forth a solid
bargain. Like Hemingway, Shakespeare knew well how to celebrate the
rites of conjugation. And over in the voluptuous Orient, Kalidasa was much
too clever a playwright to pass up a chance to titillate the senses of his
audience. Following the marriage troth of Shakuntala and King Dushyanta,
Kalidasa embarks upon what might be called the “tiptoe” method. That is,
he figuratively draws his viewers up on tiptoes of expectation, half-prepared
to actually witness onstage the consummation. The principle of inversion
still holds as it is the virgin Shakuntala rather than her experienced lover
who thinks up several ruses whereby he might physically touch her body.
First she drops a bracelet which he gratefully and lingeringly fastens about
her, thus:
SHAKUNTALA: ... this lotus-bracelet has fallen from my arm.
KING: I will restore it on one condition.
SHAKUNTALA: What condition?
KING: That I may myself place it where it belongs ....
SHAKUNTALA: [Feeling his touch] Hasten, my dear, hasten.
KING: [Joyfully to himself] Now I am content. She speaks as a wife to her hus-
band. [Aloud] Beautiful Shakuntala, the clasp of the bracelet is not very
firm. May I fasten it in another way?
SHAKUNTALA: [Smiling] If you like.
And when the gimmick of the bracelet exhausts itself, Shakuntala artfully
keeps things going by thinking up another, something that will not only
bring his face close to hers but will also allow her to issue a subtle invitation:
SHAKUNTALA: ... The pollen from the lotus over my ear has blown into
my eye.
KING: [Smiling] Will you permit me to blow it away?
[He gently blows her eye.]
SHAKUNTALA: Thank you. I can see quite well now. But I am ashamed not
to make any return for your kindness.
At this point, the king bungles the game with a wretchedly stupid question:
“What more could I ask?” Belying all his experience in the game of love,
he compares himself to a bee contented with only a flower’s fragrance, not
nectar:
It ought to be enough for me
To hover round your fragrant face;
Is not the lotus-haunting bee
Content with perfume and with grace?
And yet once more, Shakuntala saves her bungling lover, this time by turning his bee metaphor into a very unsubtle invitation:

SHAKUNTALA: But what does he [the bee] do if he is not content?
KING: This! This!

At this juncture, with his audience straining on tiptoes, Kalidasa rudely cuts the scene off. Old Gautami, the mother superior of the hermitage, comes to take Shakuntala off to bed, leaving both partners in the game of love cursing themselves for shoddy technique — Shakuntala because she had been too coy ("Oh my heart, you delayed when your desire came of itself. Now see what you have done"), and Dushyanta because he had not been smooth or fast enough ("Why was I not a little bolder? . . . Alas! I did wrong to delay when I had found my love"). But next time, his technique will sure enough be foolproof — no more of these wasted opportunities: "If she will grant me but one other meeting, I'll not delay." That the king makes good his intention is attested by the fruition of love that follows the game. The Hindus perhaps show more maturity than Western people in that their classic romance pattern includes the bearing of children instead of ending with the affair's sexual consummation. (Shakuntala goes on in the play to bear as son the great warrior hero Bharata, after whom the greatest of Indian epic cycles, the Mahabharata — the "Great Bharata" — is named.) That is, they know that the game of love is not just a game, but is the form for life's most serious business.

Probably it is in the follow-up to the game of love where Richardson disappoints most. His genteel evasion of the sex play following the girl's triumph in the game of love makes a sharp contrast to the robust male exuberance animating the language of Fielding, Hemingway, Shakespeare or Kalidasa in treating this phase of the affair. But then, I have no intention of defending Richardson's style, his moralizing, or his concept of character. What I have sought to defend is Pamela's much-parodied salesmanship. Far from rousing our contempt, her holding out for marriage might rather deserve some respect as she takes a modest place alongside the more celebrated conqueresses in the game of love. She, no less than these others, was after all responding to a pattern far deeper than middle-class morality. On the contrary, all the evidence would seem to indicate that this is a pattern beyond all concept of class or culture or ideology. Springing from the innermost processes of nature, the game of love — whether involving a Juliet, a Catherine Barkley, or a petty bourgeois servant girl — takes as its motive that most inexorable of purposes: the transmission of life, the orderly preservation of the species. Though we would more likely call it cunning than virtue rewarded, a girl need hardly feel disgraced for playing and winning
love's game according to the laws of nature, those that transcend all time and change, whether in high society or low, Hindu or Christian, ancient or modern.