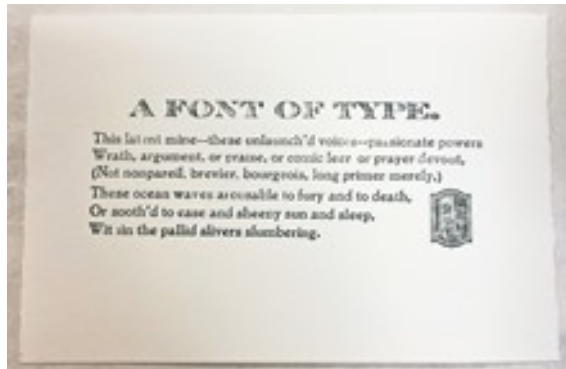


## Pamela's Letterbox

*CW: violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault*



At first, the move from in-person instruction to an online Zoom classroom seemed like it would hit us particularly hard in Dr. Matt Kirschenbaum's "BookLab: How to Do Things with Books" course. The course focused not only on the theoretical affordances of reading textual materiality, but also on getting our hands dirty with the physical production of material objects: using clay tablets, making paper, playing with a 3-D printed type matrix and punch, collation exercises, bookbinding, letterpress printing. On our last day of class, the same day our university announced its plans for a campus closure, we were all huddled around one of the presses pulling prints of Walt Whitman's "A Font of Type" on the paper we had made only a few weeks prior. (*Ed. note: You can also see [the syllabus for this class on In the Classroom](#).*)

Nevertheless, we kept creating electronically. Given the circumstances and our loss of the resources in BookLab, Dr. Kirschenbaum gave us an incredible amount of flexibility regarding our remaining assignments and final project, no longer requiring that we make a book. Unsurprisingly though, nearly every student in the course forged ahead with a modified "pandemic resources" version of their initial project idea, and the results were absolutely phenomenal across the board. I chose to pursue a book arts project I had envisioned for a few years that had recently become even more important to me. I would like to detail my framing for the project, *Pamela's Letterbox*, as well as a few methodological notes on its creation.



Richardson's Pamela, Vol. I; tied bundle of handwritten letters; quill pen; two faded written letters; two letters with a wax seal; one letter with a broken wax seal; book-shaped box with ribbon. Photo by the author and taken with an iPhone 11.

*Pamela's Letterbox* is a multi-object artistic staging of the epistolary frame in Samuel Richardson's 1740 novel *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*. This artist's book explores commodification, privacy, and sexual harassment through multiple representations of *Pamela's* material context, both within the novel and its frame. Quite literally, it responds to the epistolary novel's definition of a novel containing letters, whereby the hollowed-out book acts as a container for a bundle of letters with written excerpts from the novel itself. In hollowing out the book, I removed most of the printed text that makes up the novel and reinserted the handwritten letters in its place, reflecting the medium of *Pamela's* actual writing.

High praise for *Pamela* became commonplace within the literary marketplace and gave rise to what William B. Warner calls the "Pamela Media Event," in which the novel became further commodified through what we now identify as merchandise culture. Paula McDowell refers to *Pamela* (the novel as well as the character) as Richardson's "most successful textual commodity" (172), and Jürgen Habermas famously quipped that "the mediocre *Pamela* [was] the bestseller of the century" (43). Within the literary marketplace, several adaptations and remediations of the novel were written, and *Pamela* also became the subject of numerous artistic works such as paintings and engravings. Many of these illustrations were painted onto porcelain and china, and as Adelle Waldman notes "The novel was so popular that Pamela-inspired merchandise, from teacups to fans, quickly sprang up."

The external "Pamela Media Event" directly engages with the questions of consent and agency raised by the novel. Diana Rosenberger argues we "produce Pamela merely so we can consume her" (19), a practice that aligns readers more with the voyeuristic Mr. B than with Pamela since "the act of reading [her letters] is made equivalent to violation" (23). My artist's book participates in the "Pamela Media Event," but I have tried to do so in a way that rejects *Pamela's* commodification and, in its place, emphasizes her tenuous, yet persistent, ownership of her letters and the abuse she suffers at the hands of Mr. B.

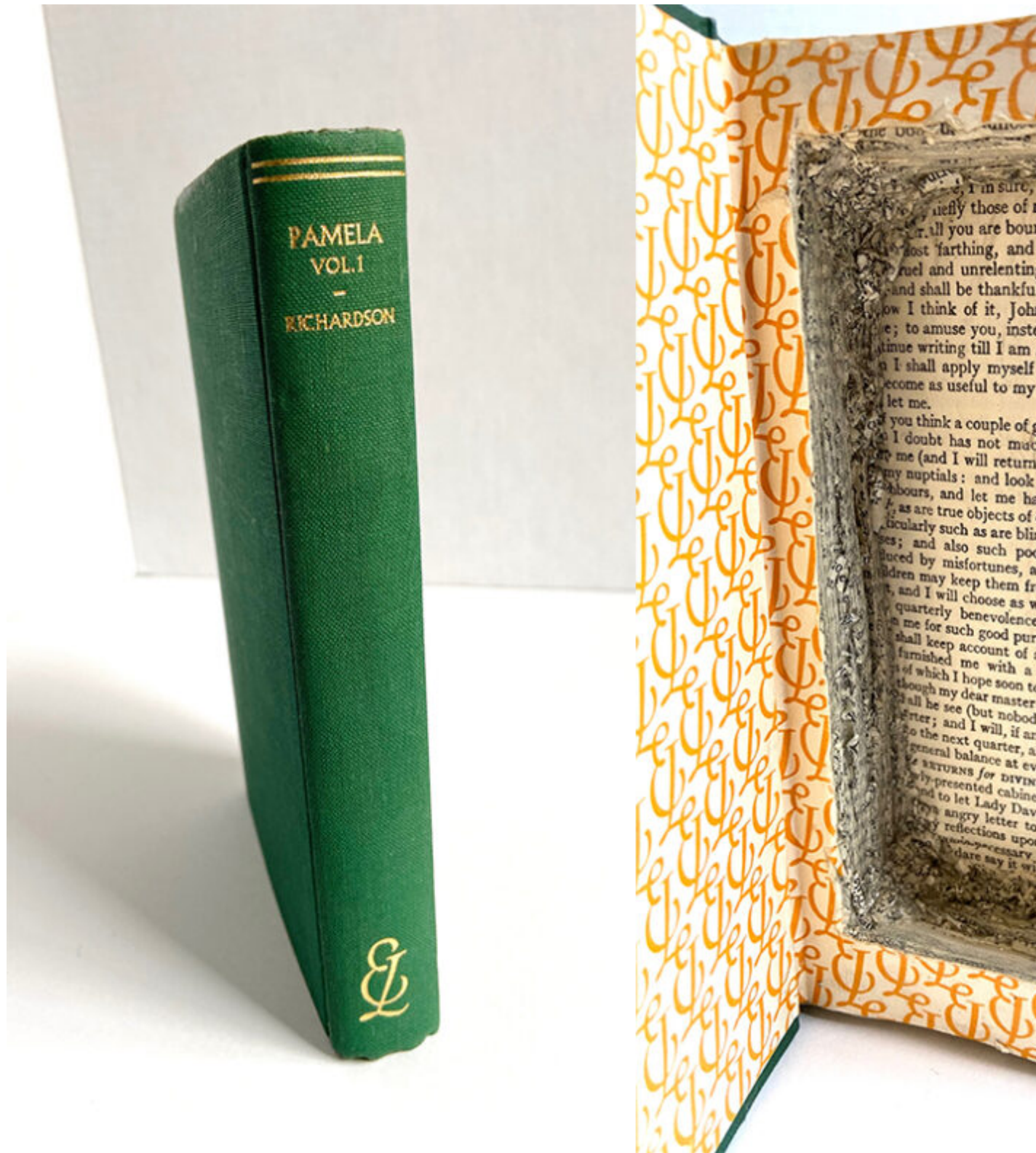
But Rosenberger also considers how we might shift our readings if we "examine how the novel stages [a] multiplicity of audiences and the representative stakes of addressing them" (23). My project thinks through this question. In recounting her abuse through her letters, "Pamela is forced to take into account the labor of reimagining the (blurred) present she is attempting to convey, as well as who she is attempting to recreate it for" (24), a reflexive narrative process familiar to the many men and women who have taken to Twitter to share their #MeToo stories.<sup>[1]</sup> This perspective influenced my framing in *Pamela's Letterbox*, not only because my project literally deconstructs and recontextualizes the book, but also because I was also telling my own #MeToo moment while working on it.

Shortly after the first COVID-19 lockdowns started in March 2020, *The New York Times* published an article about a professor who, out of jealousy over a colleague's job offer, posed as a student and manufactured a false sexual harassment claim against her and her wife in an attempt to destroy their careers (Viren). Though they were not able to name him when coming forward in the *NYT* article, I immediately recognized him as the creative writing professor who sexually harassed me while I was a

master's student at the university he taught at, and I came forward on Twitter for the first time about what happened to me. Re-reading *Pamela* and creating a project that materializes her loss of agency and sexual harassment at the same time I was reading a *NYT* article about my former harasser, dealing with my own public #MeToo accusations against him, and coping with the stress and isolation of the pandemic lockdowns made working on this project viscerally personal.

The main component of the project is the hollowed-out book that acts as a letterbox. I bought the hardcover *Pamela*, Vol I. on AbeBooks and it is part of the Everyman's Library series, printed in London at the Aldine Press for J. M. Dent & Sons in 1960. I had originally wanted a hardcover copy of the entire novel in order to have a deeper box, but I was not able to find one. In some ways this resonated better with my concept, since a majority of the scenes evoked in my piece depicting violence, sexual harassment, and the attempted sexual assault occur in the first volume of the novel. Before I started to hollow out the book, I glued all of the pages together with multi-purpose invisible craft glue. After the pages dried, I used a boxcutter to begin sawing out pages from the book. I used a (fairly dull) boxcutter because it was all I had with me during lockdown, but this proved to be a generative constraint; the frayed piles of words in the corner of the book highlights not only the violence inflicted against Pamela throughout the first volume of the novel, but this crudely hollowed-out section is also reminiscent of the various makeshift areas Pamela devises for her letters in an attempt to conceal them from Mr. B.





The pieces of paper are all standard pieces of printing paper. My mom wrote out the 34 letter fragments. All of the letter fragments contain quotes that detail the violence, abuse, and loss of agency Pamela suffers at the hands of Mr. B. By removing the influence of the fictional Editor who printed her manuscript letters, I have tried to reinstate Pamela as the source of authority over her letters, giving

“*Pamela* as Pamela wrote it; in her own words” (Richardson 9). I stained the paper with tea extract and heated up the sheets in the oven in order to age and blur most of the text. The aging effect represents how Pamela’s narrative has persisted several centuries, now becoming more relevant than ever during the #MeToo movement. Numerous times in the novel, Pamela apologizes to her parents that the letters are difficult to read since she has been crying and accidentally blotting the pages with her tears. Additionally, her letters are misplaced, stolen, destroyed, or withheld from their recipients multiple times throughout the novel. The blurred, hard-to-read effect of the staining emphasizes both of these narrative points, but it also enables her letters to resist commodification since the staining and blurring makes them illegible. I folded and stacked several of the letter fragments and then tied them together with kitchen twine to create the letter bundle.









The wax seals on a few of the letters were created with a wax seal stamp kit I ordered online. My decision to use a "P" stamp was to reattribute Pamela's agency over her letters right at the same moment they become, yet again, commodified and circulated beyond her control. The seal also protects her letters as one would have to commit Mr. B's offense and break the seal without Pamela's permission in order to read its contents. His violation of her privacy is represented by the letter with a torn seal.







I created the quill pen by removing all of the afterfeather on the shaft, and then carving out part of the feather's calamus to form a quill nib for the ink. I also dipped the nib in some ink to make it appear used. To write her letters, Pamela would have likely used a standard eighteenth-century pen rather than a quill, but details in the novel about her exact writing utensils are scarce. Because she writes a majority of her letters while at Mr. B's Bedfordshire or Lincolnshire estates, using the utensils kept in the house, I used the quill to further emphasize the class and power inequality between Pamela and Mr. B. The quill represents how Pamela crafts her letters while she is confined in the estate of a rich, powerful man who uses his status to control and trap her. Her reliance on writing supplies provided by Mr. B is part of the novel's plot. Several times, she has to rely on bartering or pleading for writing supplies from members of the community in order to conceal from Mr. B the quantity of paper and ink she is going through to produce her clandestine letters. But the phallic quill also reminds us that Pamela is the product of a male author's ventriloquism, as Julie Park notes. This reading provokes additional discussion about the limits of Pamela's agency as the victim of Mr. B, the literary creation of Richardson, and the subject of my own artist's book.

The sections in Vol. I which document her numerous attempts to escape Mr. B's violence, psychological abuse, sexual harassment, and an attempted rape were particularly popular among contemporary critics participating in the *Pamela* Media Event. In a review of the novel included in the front matter of the second edition, Jean Baptiste de Freval writes to the Editor (meaning Richardson) praising the entertainment and titillation associated with reading "the fair Writer's most secret Thoughts" (Richardson 5). Another paratextual review, written by Revd. William Webster, delights in the novel's representation of the "beautiful Sufferer's" plights with sexual harassment and attempted assault, saying: "Thus her very Repulses became Attractions: The more she resisted, the more she charm'd; and the very Means she used to guard her Virtue, the more indanger'd it, by inflaming his Passions: Till, at last, by Perseverance, and a brave and resolute Defence, the Besieged not only obtain'd a glorious Victory over the Besieger, but took him Prisoner too" (8).

Creative projects such as this allow students to take risks and explore the personal dimensions of their scholarly interests in ways that are not often intuitive or welcomed in the traditional grad seminar term paper assignment. My project returns Pamela's letters to her and seeks to restore the privacy of her trauma without erasing the violence of her experience. Working on *Pamela's Letterbox* while telling my own #MeToo story completely recontextualized for me the stakes of reading and writing about *Pamela* and her audiences: fictional and real, private and networked, eighteenth-century and present.

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[1] I want to acknowledge Kerry Sinanan's ODSECS talk "Clarissa and White Supremacy: Race, Gender, and Erasure," in which she reminds us that the suffering of Richardson's heroines Pamela and Clarissa is the suffering of specific *white women* rather than being representative figures of the suffering of *all women* in the period, as they are too often framed in scholarship. This does not mean that Pamela is not victim or that her letters cannot be read as a #MeToo narrative, but it is important to recognize how the extended and singularized suffering of Richardson's white heroines both obscures and relies upon its counterpoint: the swift, un-narrated, multitudinous rape and suffering of nameless Black women whose suffering enables the material and financial "Rewards" of Pamela's Virtue by the novel's conclusion.

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