Nancy Armstrong, in Desire and Domestic Fiction (1987), argues that “domestic fiction” constructs an alternative to public politics by introducing “a new form of political power” that actively seeks to “disentangle the language of sexual relations from the language of politics” (3). For Armstrong, the novels of Samuel Richardson (1689-1761) create a space separate from law as a public medium of exchange; thus, “literature devoted to producing the domestic woman” appears to “ignore the political world [of] men” (4). I believe that Richardson’s novels, as Armstrong claims, valorize the heroine as a paragon within the home; however, unlike Armstrong’s theory that “domestic fiction” creates a separate alternative to public politics, I would stipulate that Richardson, by publishing writing which is presented as being the very private work of women, makes women’s writing available and its subjects public through print. Richardson’s letter-writing heroines demonstrate how “women’s writing” develops the writing of other women in many consequential ways, thereby suggesting that this is how he imagines they would write rather than pontificating about how he believes they should. Richardson redefines the authoritative authorial voice; thus, the author’s voice, though present in the novels, engages in a dialogue through narrative letters that gives the character’s voice an autonomy equal to that of Richardson’s.

In Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics (1929), Bakhtin analyzes “a plurality of independent and unmerged consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices,” which enables characters equal voices and rights with the author (6). Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony defines how the dialogue between selves--author and character(s)–is unfinalized and open-ended; the result is a self-consciousness that, as Bakhtin suggests,
is the artistic dominant image of the character, rather than a fixed characterological definition imposed by the author. Alex Townsend, in *Autonomous Voices* (2003), applies Bakhtin’s analysis of polyphony from the novels of Dostoevsky to Richardson’s novels and further explains how the dialogue of letters (being written and read) between characters is what gives each character its autonomy and equality, not only between characters but also between characters and the author. Townsend’s analysis, however, ends within the dialogue between character and author and excludes the dialogue and link between the letter-writing heroines and the women writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and those writing after that time. The letters of Pamela and Clarissa can be seen as taking from and refining the work of seventeenth and eighteenth-century women novelists such as Eliza Haywood, by not only using many of their techniques and subjects but also bringing to the surface contradictions implicit in the work of female writers through Richardson’s novels.

Richardson uses the epistolary narrative form, then, both to question certain social assumptions implicit in his novels and to analyze social forces which lie behind such assumptions. The stories of Pamela Andrews and Clarissa Harlowe symbolize the oppression of women in eighteenth-century England; however, because these stories are told as

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1 Townsend emphasizes how in, the later development of Bakhtin’s theory, the conceptual parameters shift significantly; polyphony no longer relates to the specific context of the relationship between author and characters but rather functions as a subdefinition of “heteroglossia.” Bakhtin uses the term, heteroglossia, to describe the perpetual and complex contest between social, cultural, historical and personal forces that determines the nature of language. Therefore, as Townsend explains, it is difficult to generalize about Bakhtin’s work because of the shifts and changes of this kind in his theoretical thoughts. (10-15)

2 For readings of *Pamela* and *Pamela, Volume Two* as negotiating class-conflict, see Robert A. Donovan, “The Problem of Pamela, or Virtue Unrewarded,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 3(1963), pp. 377-95; and Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982). Donovan claims that *Pamela*’s purpose is to emphasize the impact of the middle classes upon the aristocracy. Eagleton argues that *Pamela* is a “sickly celebration of male ruling-class power” and that Richardson’s “turgid idealizing” of the heroine, Pamela, is both a “mystification” that flatters the absorptive powers of patriarchy and a “critique” that also questions the class bias between the subordinated and ruling classes.