Eighteenth-Century Fiction

Volume 23 | Issue 1 Article 1

10-31-2010

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Recommended Citation
Steele, Kathryn (2010) "*Clarissa*'s Silence," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 1.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/ecf/vol23/iss1/1

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Abstract
This article reconsiders interpretive struggle as a paradigm for Samuel Richardson's Clarissa and, in particular, for understanding the novel's eighteenth-century readers. Taking Clarissa as an exemplary character implies a reading strategy that understands female silence as modesty, piety, and passive obedience -- an obedience to the idea of authority that nonetheless questions its abuse. I compare modern and eighteenth-century responses, using approaches to the rape as a way to identify significant differences in strategies of interpretation. I also find traces of one of these alternate strategies of interpretation in the use and circulation of religious texts. I argue that religious reading, with concurrent forms of silent response, is an influential implied reading strategy even as this alternate framework of interpretation is difficult, if not impossible, to perceive. Suggesting that we might re-evaluate our readings of Clarissa to consider her as a religious example, this essay meditates on the problem of shifting interpretive protocols.

Keywords
Samuel Richardson, Clarissa, epistolary fiction, silence, reading, readers, religious example, interpretation, female sexuality

This article is available in Eighteenth-Century Fiction: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/ecf/vol23/iss1/1

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abstract

This article reconsiders interpretive struggle as a paradigm for Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* and, in particular, for understanding the novel's eighteenth-century readers. Taking Clarissa as an exemplary character implies a reading strategy that understands female silence as modesty, piety, and passive obedience—an obedience to the idea of authority that nonetheless questions its abuse. I compare modern and eighteenth-century responses, using approaches to the rape as a way to identify significant differences in strategies of interpretation. I also find traces of one of these alternate strategies of interpretation in the use and circulation of religious texts. I argue that religious reading, with concurrent forms of silent response, is an influential implied reading strategy even as this alternate framework of interpretation is difficult, if not impossible, to perceive. Suggesting that we might re-evaluate our readings of Clarissa to consider her as a religious example, this essay meditates on the problem of shifting interpretive protocols.

"YOU HAVE kindly accounted for your silence," Clarissa Harlowe writes to Anna Howe after a brief hiatus in their correspondence; such lapses, Clarissa continues, "turn even unavoidable accidents into slights and neglects."[1] We are poignantly reminded of this problem when the friends' correspondence is broken off after Lovelace rapes Clarissa, and Anna interprets Clarissa's silence as evidence of "a credulity so ill-placed" and of "intoxicating" love (993). Silence leads to misinterpretation. Here, Anna misreads Clarissa as intoxicated and credulous, when she is in fact shaken, ill, and imprisoned. This essay investigates epistolary and conversational silences, noticing in particular the silences surrounding the rape and about belief. Although the manipulation of silence in the novel begins as an aspect of feminine modesty, by the time Clarissa starts to die, silences more deliberately thwart earthly and material communications and come to indicate Clarissa's attempt at direct conversation with God. Silence in *Clarissa* demonstrates a pattern of deliberate diffidence, which

[1] Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* (1747–48), ed. Angus Ross (New York: Penguin, 1985), 280. References are to this edition, unless otherwise specified.

Eighteenth-Century Fiction 23, no. 1 (Fall 2010) © 2010
ECF ISSN 0840-6286 | E-ISSN 1911-0243 | DOI: 10.3138/ecf.23.1.1

appears as a principled refusal or reluctance to respond. But silence is not simply an indication of Clarissa's spiritual transformation; rather, the pattern of silence asks us to reconsider the critical history of *Clarissa*, which has relied recently on a noisy paradigm of debate. Perhaps more importantly, such a pattern also asks us to revise our evaluation of some of Clarissa's historical readers.

Clarissa responds to many of the situations in which the novel places her—the demand to marry Solmes and Lovelace's proposal, for example—at least partly with silence. This makes it difficult for the novel's readers and the novel's characters to understand the exact nature of these responses. While silence may be interpreted as a passive and accepting response, I will suggest that it actually indicates deep and active thought. Using patterns of silence or reticence as a lens for examining the novel is at odds, however, with dominant critical readings of *Clarissa*. Discussions of the novel in recent times employ, almost as a convention, the trope that the novel stages and values what William Warner called "interpretive struggles."[2] This has been especially true of critical evaluations that approach the text from post-structural theoretical positions, but examinations of the novel's eighteenth-century readers partake of this paradigm as well. Tom Keymer, for example, in a masterful study of the novel's earliest readers, contends that Samuel Richardson "knowingly fostered the active participation of his readers" and wanted to "[put] readers, morally and intellectually, on their mettle."[3] This active participation might be seen as a kind of critical reading. Richardson's responses to his contemporary readers are likewise situated in terms of interpretive struggle. His revisions (notably the guiding notes and blackening of Lovelace's character in the third edition) generally are understood to represent attempts to control this critical reading and wrest control of the text's meaning away from those Richardson perceived as misreaders.[4] Studies of

2 William Warner, *Reading Clarissa: The Struggles of Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

3 Tom Keymer, *Richardson's "Clarissa" and the Eighteenth-Century Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xviii.

4 Overviews of Richardson's revisions include Janine Barchas with Gordon D. Fulton, *The Annotations in Lady Bradshaigh's Copy of "Clarissa"* (Victoria: English Literary Studies, University of Victoria, 1998); Mark Kinkead-Weekes, "*Clarissa* Restored?," *Review of English Studies* 10, no. 38 (1959): 156–71; Shirley Van Marter, "Richardson's Revision of *Clarissa* in the Second Edition," *Studies in Bibliography* 26 (1973): 105–32; and Van Marter,

implied readers—which see various characters as ideal readers, or see characters as the instructors of the novel's readers, or propose different reading habits as normative—also tend to participate in the belief that the novel presents interpretive opacity.[5] In other words, whether examined from the perspective of the author, his historical readers, or the novel's internal readers, critical emphasis has been on interpretive friction and conflict.

This essay calls attention to interpretive strategies that deflect or avoid overt engagement in interpretive struggle; noticing this strategy requires focusing closely on readers and reading practices (within the novel) rather than on Richardson's intentions, frustrations about the novel's indeterminacy, and ensuing revisions and articulations of the novel's meaning. The novel has been read predominantly from within a model of debate; this has, I argue, occluded certain non-debative reading strategies practiced by the novel's historical readers and modelled in the patterns of silence in the novel. That is, in its own use of silence, the novel anticipates and implies an equally reticent reader. This essay re-evaluates the reception history of *Clarissa* as a way to recover a history of readers and reading practices, pointing out a model of silence—or a refusal to overtly engage in interpretive conflict—as an important eighteenth-century reading strategy. This strategy, I will show, appears in the first part of the novel as Clarissa negotiates the dictates of female modesty and filial duty. I will examine the way in which the first part of the novel places Clarissa in situations that emphasize the imperative of silence for a modest, unmarried young woman and heightens the implications and risks of speaking or not speaking. Such a strategy, as I discuss in the second section, also can be identified in responses to the novel and in sharp contrast to latter-day evaluations of the novel that overvalue and overemphasize indeterminacy and debate about meaning. In reviewing the reception history of the novel, I suggest that such awareness informed readers' understandings of the character and the novel in ways

"Richardson's Revision of *Clarissa* in the Third and Fourth Editions," *Studies in Bibliography* 28 (1975): 119–52.

[5] See, for example, Keymer, *Richardson's "Clarissa"*; Mary Patricia Martin, "Reading Reform in Richardson's Clarissa," *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 37, no. 3 (1997): 595–614; Julia Genster, "Belforded Over: The Reader in *Clarissa*," in *Clarissa and Her Readers: New Essays for the "Clarissa" Project*, ed. Carol Flynn Houlihan and Edward Copeland (New York: AMS Press, 1999).

that are less available to modern readers, especially those who read through the theoretical lenses of narrative structure, psychology, or ideology rather than with a sense of female modesty or religious forbearance. Section three explores how this reading strategy leaves traces in the novel's representation of certain modes of religious reading, which is the spiritual communication and interpretation most valued by Clarissa (the character, if not the novel).

I look to some of the eighteenth-century responses to this novel, seeking to supplement reader response theory with empirical evidence; I also re-examine the question of the implied reader of this text by considering scenes of reading represented within the novel. What I identify in both the text and some of its contemporary readers is a competing interpretive model that values reluctance to engage in interpretive struggle; this reluctance is marked by silence or reticence. Once we understand this model of silence, we should question whether Richardson and his readers valued (as modern scholars do) the ideas of interpretive struggle and active textual participation; at the least, these questions of the value of reading should be broadened to include diffidence, or the practice of avoiding direct interpretive struggle. I propose a re-evaluation of the interpretive struggle paradigm by seeing Clarissa's and *Clarissa*'s silences as models of extra-worldly and self-transcendent communication. To see the alternate model of spiritually directed communication is to problematize active response and participation in interpretive struggle.

Unspoken Disobedience: Conversational Silence in "Clarissa"

In the series of confrontations between Clarissa and her family about the proposed marriage with Solmes and in conversations between Clarissa and Lovelace, silence is used as a deliberate and often aggressive argumentative strategy. Demonstrating conventional relationships between passivity and femininity, in which female desire must be unspoken, Clarissa's silence is an aspect of her feminine modesty; this modesty is passive in that it requires submission to these interpretations. But Clarissa and *Clarissa* exploit the interpretative possibilities of this female silence: silence foils and confuses the interpretations of others. By remaining silent, Clarissa resists being read by others, and, simultaneously, by remaining silent she persists as a model of

femininity and filial piety. Silence allows her to take no action that would overtly subvert the patriarchal hierarchies to which she professes allegiance.

Exhorted to silence by conduct literature, silent young women become texts for others to read. The ideology of propriety, as explained by Mary Poovey, allows the unspeaking woman's face to be read like an open book because there is no knowledge, in particular no sexual knowledge, to conceal; this ideology of propriety forces women to deny knowledge of their sexual desires.[6] At the same time, since conversation was a key aspect of sociability in this period, the ability to say the right thing at the right time was lauded as an ideal female attribute.[7] As an active, constructive aspect of the feminine self, silence served as an indicator of women's intelligence. Hester Mulso Chapone and John Gregory, both conduct book writers, concede that the female body and countenance are objects to be read, but they encourage a lack of correspondence between the countenance and the interior self specifically as a way to reveal one's knowledge. "Modesty," according to Gregory, "will naturally dispose you to be rather silent in company ... [But] one may take a share in conversation without uttering a syllable. The expression in the countenance shews it, and this never escapes an observing eye."[8] Mulso Chapone gives young women more latitude in conversation, writing that "silence should only be enjoined, when it would be forward and impertinent to talk."[9] She repeats the convention that women's faces, rather than their voices, carry the signs to be interpreted: "Even silence should be an attentive silence ... [and] your looks should shew your attention" (327).

6 Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

7 See Deborah Heller, "Bluestocking Salons and the Public Sphere," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22, no. 2 (1998): 59–82; and Lawrence Klein, "Gender, Conversation and the Public Sphere in Early Eighteenth-Century England," in *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices*, ed. Judith Still and Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester University Press; 1993), 100–115.

8 John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, ed. Gina Luria (1774; New York: Garland Publishing, 1974), 28.

9 Hester Mulso Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, in *Catherine Talbot & Hester Chapone*, vol. 3, ed. Rhoda Zuk, *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738–1785*, gen. ed. Gary Kelly (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), 328. References are to this edition.

Participation is signalled through the countenance as it is read by the other conversants. Moreover, as Mulso Chapone writes, "Christianity ... gives the best lesson of politeness" because it illustrates the "universal duty in society to consider others more than yourself—'in honour preferring one another'" (327).[10] Women have a double social and religious duty to be silent. Setting companions in advantageous light and preferring others in conversation are self-effacing and quiescent strategies, but they are not passive strategies. Silence in conversation, thus, should be understood as a deliberate strategy of femininity, a strategy that works with knowledge, including but not limited to sexual knowledge. Importantly, it is not a passive imposition but a deliberate, conscious, duty-bound, and faith-bound act of communication.

We see the workings of this actively chosen silence in the conversations Clarissa has with Lovelace as well as in the quarrels with her family that precipitate her elopement. Just after Clarissa leaves Harlowe Place with Lovelace, Anna urges her to marry him quickly. As the pair discuss this possibility, Clarissa, acting as a proper lady, contemplates the impropriety of speaking and acting for herself. She "wanted somebody to speak for" her when Lovelace proposes (423). Lovelace reads Clarissa's silence and physical reactions as signs of her love: "And oh how the mantled cheek, the downcast eye, the silent, yet trembling lip, and the heaving bosom, a sweet collection of heightened beauties, gave evidence that the tender was not mortally offensive!" (425). Propriety demands that a young woman not answer a marriage proposal for herself; the impossibility of the ideal situation, in which family or father would respond, means that only her silence and her body can provide answers. But Lovelace satirizes and manipulates the conventions of silence, making a self-feminizing show of modesty and reluctance as he "prefaced and paraded on" prior to finally proposing a "speedy solemnization" (422). Worried about "the irrevocable obligation," he thinks himself "obliged to speak in clouds, and to run away from the subject as soon as she took my meaning" (424–25). The ability to manipulate silence and modesty gives him a convenient escape route when he surprises himself by proposing. In detailing his reaction to her responses, he justifies his games by interpreting

[10] The quotation is from Romans 12:10. See *The Oxford Study Bible*, ed. M. Jack Suggs, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, and James R. Mueller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

Clarissa's reticence as artful, prudish manipulation: "Well do thy *arts* justify *mine*; and encourage me to let loose my plotting genius upon thee." He deliberately perverts the meaning of her silence, refusing to "take in thy full meaning, by blushing silence only"; thus, he asks, "What had I to do, but to construe her silence into contemptuous displeasure?" (425). Fully understanding silence as modesty, he disingenuously takes the physical signs that accompany it for sexual desire while pretending to understand the silence as anger.

Lovelace uses the instability of silence to torment Clarissa; his performance makes explicit the various possible mental states signified by silence: modesty, desire, anger. Clarissa and Lovelace's dance around the issue of marriage partakes of sexualized and feminized uses of silence. Like Terry Castle, I see Clarissa's physical responses as indeterminate, but not radically so.[11] I argue that we can read Clarissa's silence productively through scenes such as these where silence is defined more specifically and through historically situated perceptions of the possible meanings of silence. When we remember that the marriage-debate scenes between Clarissa and Lovelace recall, and to a certain extent replay, earlier scenes enacted by Clarissa's family about the proposed marriage with Solmes, we see a political aspect of her reluctance to speak. Castle suggests that Clarissa does not understand the politics of interpretation in these scenes, but, while Lovelace manipulates silence to manipulate Clarissa in the scenes just discussed, in the quarrels with her family Clarissa is as likely as the Harlowes to manipulate silence. The conversational silences of the family argument foreground a much more politicized aspect of silence, one that looks very much like passive obedience when employed by Clarissa to maintain an appearance of filial piety while following her conscience in refusing to obey her father.[12]

Richardson carefully manipulates silence as well, using it to characterize the Harlowes' misprision of authority. Consistently

11 Terry Castle, *Clarissa's Ciphers: Meaning and Disruption in Richardson's "Clarissa"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 88–89.

12 As F.J. McLynn argues, the ideology of passive obedience, usually understood in the context of the English Civil War, is still identifiable in mid-eighteenth-century England. He defines passive obedience as the desire to "reconcile obedience to a ruler with the rejection of his claims on active loyalty, which was a duty of conscience." McLynn, "The Ideology of Jacobitism on the Eve of the Rising of 1745—Part I," *History of European Ideas* 6, no. 1 (1985): 1–18; 9.

refusing to portray the parents as aggressively cruel, Richardson is able to vilify James while ameliorating the Harlowes' acquiescence to his plans by allowing them to remain silent. When, for example, James wants to prohibit Clarissa from seeing Lovelace while visiting Anna Howe, each character imputes a different meaning to silence:

> Let the *girl* then ... be prohibited seeing that vile libertine.
> Nobody spoke.
> Do you hear, sister Clary? taking their silence for approbation of what *he* had dictated; you are not to receive visits from Lord M.'s nephew.
> Everyone still remained silent.
> Do you so understand the licence you have, miss? interrogated he. (57)

The family, already under James's influence, provides no explicit response as an imperious James speaks for them. James hears his parents' silence as agreement and approbation, but Clarissa refuses to interpret their silence, to her they simply "remain silent." Silence often is made to intimate consent, as when the Harlowes "industriously avoid giving [Clarissa] opportunity of speaking to them alone," and she notes that the absence of communication makes her appear to approve: "they ask not for my approbation, intending, as it should seem, to *suppose* me into their will ... How difficult is it, my dear, to give a negative where both duty and inclination join to make one wish to oblige!" (61). The absence of speech, or more specifically the absence of a denial, can look like acceptance.

As a series of scenes between Mrs Harlowe and Clarissa makes clear, silence allows Clarissa to maintain an appearance of filial obedience, or the duty and inclination to oblige one's father. Clarissa hesitates before answering her mother's question about whether her "affections are engaged to" Lovelace, working through the implications of her answer and aware of "what the inference would be" (90). A denial allows her mother to infer that Clarissa is free to marry Solmes; her mother, though, interprets the silence as proof that Clarissa loves Lovelace, thus forcing her to speak and to make the reason for her silence more clear: "Oh madam, madam! Kill me not with your displeasure. I would not, I *need* not, hesitate one moment, did I not dread the inference if I answer you as you wish—Yet be that inference what it will, your

threatened displeasure will make me speak. And I declare to you that I know not my own heart if it be not absolutely free" (90). In this dilemma between speaking and silence, either choice opens her to emotional and interpretative manipulation. Silence will be taken as evidence of affection for Lovelace, but speaking and denying that affection, while still refusing to marry Solmes, forces her to incur parental displeasure. As these negotiations continue, silence increasingly becomes the only way Clarissa can navigate between duty to her conscience, which tells her she cannot marry Solmes, and duty to her filial obligations.

In these scenes, Mrs Harlowe represents male authority—the patriarchal Mr Harlowe and the will of the family. Mrs Harlowe reminds Clarissa that her father is not known to "give up [a point] he thought he had a right to carry," and prompts this meditation on silence: "Too true, thought I to myself! And now my brother has engaged my father, his fine scheme will *walk alone* ... and it is become my father's will that I oppose, not my brother's grasping views. I was silent. To say the truth, I was just then *sullenly* silent. My heart was too big. I thought it was hard to be thus given up by my mamma, and that she should make a will so uncontrollable as my brother's, her will" (96). Mrs Harlowe again announces that Clarissa's silence indicates passive assent and imputes it to modesty. "Given up" by her mother, Clarissa sees that she must oppose not only James, but also, and more painfully, her father. To voice any of the conflicting feelings that are making her heart "too big" would be to undermine the filial piety that is (or has been) the foundation of her character. Her truthful admission of "sullen silence" then indicates her awareness of her resentment about the new family dynamic. Sullenness reveals that her position is not passive and modest assent, but is, instead, a position of opposition. Here she wants to be ambiguous, knowing that to be silent is the only way she can hide or deny her rebellious feelings. As her family pressures her, and as that pressure represents her father's will, Clarissa is forced to say less about what she thinks and feels: her silence increases as she becomes increasingly disobedient.

The problem of arbitrary authority, expressed as a problem of parental authority, is central to *Clarissa*. Richardson often articulated the novel's underlying "double moral, extending to tyranical Parents, as well as to Profligate Man." The double moral "lay[s]

down from [Clarissa] the Duty of Children, and that whether Parents do theirs or not."[13] The problem of arranged marriage allows the novel to test the limits of parental authority and filial obedience, especially of female children; its epistolary form, and more explicitly the character of Anna Howe, provides challenges to arbitrary authority.[14] The Harlowes, under the influence of their mercenary son James and urging a miserable marriage upon Clarissa, act against her interests and abdicate their parental responsibilities. Richardson nonetheless insistently repeats his belief in absolute parental authority in his letters and, more significantly, in Clarissa's (almost) exemplary filial piety and ensuing recourse to silence. Clarissa opposes the power of her father with a form of passive obedience. Accepting the legitimacy of parental authority, Clarissa's sullen, pregnant silences allow her to remain a dutiful daughter to the extent that they allow her to oppose her father's will as long as she refrains from voicing that opposition. Just as there is a conflict between sexual and non-sexual knowledge in remaining silent as a proper lady, there is a conflict between duty to one's own conscience and filial duty. Clarissa resolves the latter conflict, in time, by replacing her allegiance to her earthly father with a complete submission to her spiritual father.

I have been arguing that, rather than being simply indeterminate, Clarissa's silence is understood by her and by the other characters in the novel within a range of meaning made manifest when we place silence in an historical context and examine the characters' definitions in that light. Readers of Clarissa's motivations within the novel, such as Anna, Lovelace, and the Harlowes, were aware of the multivalence of silence even as they participate in fixing that silence. The Harlowes impute silence to passive acceptance or sullenness as it suits their purposes. Lovelace at least pretends to see Clarissa's silence as manipulation, using that, as do the Harlowes, as a pretext for self-interested machinations. Anna represents a more sympathetic interpreter, understanding Clarissa's dilemma as one of female modesty and

13 Samuel Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, 26 October 1748, in *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 94.

14 On authority and epistolary form, see Florian Stuber, "On Fathers and Authority in *Clarissa*," *Studies in English Literature* 25 (1985): 557–74. On Anna and the problem of authority, see Rachel Carnell, "Clarissa's Treasonable Correspondence: Gender, Epistolary Politics, and the Public Sphere," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 10, no. 3 (1998): 269–86.

delicacy, but also pointing out that those with less purity of mind will exploit silence for their own ends. Anna says that Clarissa has a "very nice part to act" and that her mind is "much too delicate for [the] part" (432). At the same time that she empathizes with Clarissa's feminine modesty, Anna knows that silence can be misconstrued. Clarissa must, she notes, "throw off a little more of the veil" (432) because silence leaves a space for too many interpretations. The different ways of understanding silence create a split between sympathetic and unsympathetic readers.

Contemporary readers of the novel, responding to her apparent coyness in the various marriage proposals, also suggest that Clarissa should be more aware of how Lovelace understands her and should manipulate him, and like the novel's internal readers they disagree about how to read her. Sarah Fielding, in *Remarks on "Clarissa,"* captured some of the conflicting responses. The fictional readers "accused [her] of want of Love" and suggest that "Clarissa herself was a Prude—a Coquet."[15] It matters little whether Clarissa is too confused, embarrassed, or modest to speak: she can be called a Coquet, or she can be called a Prude. Richardson was aware of the extra-novelistic criticism of these scenes and observed that "my Girl is thought over nice by many."[16] Even the most sympathetic readers of her behaviour, like Anna, recommend that Clarissa try to overcome confusion, embarrassment, or modesty to speak and thus direct interpretation. The truly sympathetic reader who understands why Clarissa never does so is an imagined reader hinted at in Anna's response, but otherwise truly imaginary. Responding to the very real readers who saw an ordinary, if coy, young woman in these scenes, Richardson added notes in the third edition directing attention to Clarissa's modesty.[17] Richardson defends Clarissa in all her niceties and delicacy because, in her, he delineates an ideal rather than a pragmatic female response; his notes only underscore his doubt about the existence of correspondingly ideal readers. He hoped to effect a change in morals: "If the present age can be awakened and amended, the next perhaps will not, duly weighing all Circumstances, think Clarissa too delicate or too good for

15 Sarah Fielding, *Remarks on "Clarissa,"* ed. Peter Sabor (1749; Los Angeles: Augustan Reprint Society, William Andrews Clark Library, 1985), 15, 13.

16 Samuel Richardson to Aaron Hill, 10 May 1748, in *Selected Letters,* 87.

17 On this issue see Kinkead-Weekes, esp. "*Clarissa* Restored?"

Imitation."[18] Look to her submission before she leaves Harlowe Place, Richardson often implies, not to her disobedience. The women of his own corrupt age cannot hope to imitate Clarissa's delicacy and goodness, but they might at least aspire to take her as an example. It is an interpretive error, this line of thinking posits, to get caught up in debates that conceive of Clarissa as an ordinary woman who would play games with silent modesty and virtue.

The controversy about whether Clarissa should throw off more of the veil indicates two splits in both internal and external readers. On the one hand, we see both sympathetic as opposed to unsympathetic readers, and, on the other, contemporary, corrupt readers as opposed to future, more "amended" readers who accept Clarissa as an exemplar. But the reader who does not think Clarissa "too delicate or too good for Imitation" might also be silent about her response to *Clarissa*. And, like Clarissa, such readers must also accept the possibility that silence will be misconstrued. It is, after all, the readers who made their misunderstanding legible to him to whom Richardson responds. The noisy dominant paradigm for understanding this novel—interpretive struggle—shows the future age just as caught up in the problematic of debating the pragmatic rather than the ideal meanings of silence as the past; more importantly, it fails to consider the ways in which the novel might create (or imagine) readers who silently accept the authority of the text and the authority of Clarissa as exemplar.

The "Vulgar": Histories of Reading "Clarissa"

After Lovelace rapes her, Clarissa retreats into an increasingly silent world. The rape and its aftermath have been both powerful and problematic for readers of the novel. In modern readings of the novel, the rape has been perceived through the lenses of political and gender-based ideologies. Such approaches only partially comprehend eighteenth-century readers' responses to the rape, or Clarissa's strategies of reading and writing after it. If we read Clarissa's retreat as deliberate and willed, rather than as passive acceptance of her fate, and if we see that Clarissa operates in the last section of the novel if not throughout by a religious

[18] Samuel Richardson to Frances Grainger, 22 January 1749/50, in *Selected Letters*, 142.

code, we might also read her behaviour after the rape in terms other than literary, ideological, linguistic, or even sexual. Taking into consideration the powerful ambivalence present in silence as discussed above, we might see that what looks like repression and misogyny to the modern eye may look like religious duty and piety to an eighteenth-century audience eager to read Clarissa as an exemplar of female modesty and piety. Before looking at the novel's representation of religious reading and misreading, it will be useful to compare some protocols of reading employed by modern and eighteenth-century readers. This comparison, especially of the differences in the way that Clarissa's rape informs interpretation, allows us to see why it might be especially difficult, now, to perceive the ramifications of a framework of reading dependent upon modesty and piety.

Although it is possible to see Clarissa's rape and subsequent death as symbolic victories over aristocratic privilege and patriarchy,[19] the rape is frequently understood as the ultimate expression of powers that silence women. One prominent difference between eighteenth- and twentieth- or twenty-first-century interpretations of *Clarissa*, however, is the relative importance of the rape as the defining interpretative moment. A representative example of this importance for latter-day thinking is Terry Eagleton's assertion that "the 'real' *Clarissa*—the pivot around which this elaborate two thousand pages pivots—is the rape; yet the rape goes wholly unrepresented, as the hole at the centre of the novel towards which this huge mass of writing is sucked only to sheer off again."[20] Of course, the rape is not really a void of representation: Lovelace alludes to it in telling Belford that he "can go no farther" (883), and Clarissa makes the scene, if not the act itself, quite clear when she finally relates the events of that day in a letter to Anna. But what has changed in the ensuing centuries is a focus on the rape as trope for understanding the entire novel—and the character. The metaphorical link between interpretation and sexual penetration—what Castle calls "interpretation as penetration" or the violence of "an act of filling the gap left by the (incomplete) sign"[21]—is more relevant, quite

19 Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982).

20 Eagleton, 61.

21 Castle, 59.

clearly, when discussing Lovelace's or the Harlowes' models of reading, but less relevant when looking to readers such as Lady Dorothy Bradshaigh and her sister lady Elizabeth Echlin.

Early readers look away from the rape and minimize it in favour of Clarissa as a character defined, in some ways, outside of her gendered body. Commenting upon the rape as an "outrage" and a "Horror," they carefully contextualize it instead of dwelling upon it with the near obsessiveness displayed by later readers. Lady Bradshaigh and Lady Echlin, for example, both reject the need for the rape as an aspect of the novel's narrative trajectory and write alternate endings. In Lady Echlin's version Lovelace and Clarissa die, but Clarissa is not raped and Lovelace dies penitent. Lady Echlin accepts Richardson's premise that Clarissa's death makes for a happy and morally instructive ending. Her didactic impulse, like his, requires death and penance, but she refuses to subject Clarissa to rape because she believes Clarissa would never fall for Lovelace's schemes.[22] After protesting that she would not read the volumes in which the rape occurs, Lady Bradshaigh wrote two different alternative endings. In the first, Clarissa will be "brought to the verge of the grave"; restored to health, she will visit the grief-stricken and seemingly dying Lovelace, then marry and restore him to health.[23] Lady Bradshaigh's other ending allows Clarissa to live after the rape and serve as a kind of exalted governess to Anna Howe's children.[24] It is possible to situate these revisions within a model of repression, but that perpetuates a modern awareness of psychology and a modern need to overlay interpretation with issues of gender and sexuality. These revisions allow Clarissa to transcend embodied gender in a way that the modern emphasis on the rape does not. Lady Bradshaigh and Lady Echlin see plenty of meaning in the novel and in the character apart from the rape; these readers suggest that we re-enact eighteenth-century misogyny when we limit our own readings to the significance of the rape or to metaphors of interpretation that link physical acts (of violence or violent sexuality) to the act of reading.

22 Elizabeth Echlin, *An Alternative Ending to Richardson's "Clarissa,"* ed. Dimiter Daphinoff (Bern: Franche AG Verlag, 1982).

23 Lady Bradshaigh to Samuel Richardson, 20 November 1748, in *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson,* 6 vols., ed. Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1804; New York: AMS Press, 1966), 4:203.

24 Barchas, *The Annotations in Lady Bradshaigh's Copy of "Clarissa,"* 140.

This eighteenth-century reading experience of looking in other directions than at the rape is reflected in the way Richardson chooses not to represent the rape directly; he also separates the actual event from Clarissa's account of it by many letters. As seen in the responses by Lady Echlin and Lady Bradshaigh just discussed, the rape causes a reading problem for women. Richardson's narrative strategy (the separation of the event from its fullest representation by Clarissa) takes into account how the modest and delicate women readers may find it difficult to read even the most oblique reference to sexual acts, much less the horror of rape. As he writes to Edward Young: "Miss Lee [Young's stepdaughter] may venture (if you and she have patience) to read these two [volumes of *Clarissa*] to you. But Lovelace afterwards is so vile a fellow, that if I publish anymore, I do not know ... whether she, of whose delicacy I have the highest opinion, can see it as from you or me. And yet I hope, at worst, there will be nothing either in the language or sentiments, that may be so very censurable."[25] When the novel, with its vile actions, is read aloud and seems to be in a letter from a man ("as from you or me"), the young woman's delicacy may be offended. The structure of the novel, thus, works with delicate readers' needs by deflecting and distancing the event, and allowing readers to adjust to the idea before encountering the details, just as Clarissa herself must recover from it before describing it.

Some readers simply ignored the issue of the rape, seeing the significance of the novel in the details and nuances of Richardson's representation of Clarissa's piety and filial duty. Mulso Chapone, for example, pointed out failings in Clarissa's exercise of rational piety, noting in particular that her fear of her father's curse made her seem superstitious. Clarissa is "so fettered by prejudice that she does not allow her reason to examine how far her conduct is to be justified or blamed; but implicitly joins with her father to condemn herself, when neither reason nor religion condemn her." If her virtues are grounded in "blind prejudice and superstition" rather than reason, she asks, does not this "call in[to] question the foundation of her other virtues?"[26] Mulso Chapone was joined by her future mother-

[25] Samuel Richardson to Edward Young, 19 November 1747, in *Selected Letters*, 84–85.

[26] Mulso Chapone, *Letters on Filial Obedience*, in *Catherine Talbot & Hester Chapone*, vol. 3, *Bluestocking Feminism,* 207.

in-law, Sarah Chapone, in raising questions about the way Clarissa's deference to parental and patriarchal authority might interfere with her religious duty: "Clarissa has too strict a Sense of Duty to her Father."[27] Sarah Chapone argues that Clarissa was wrong in refusing to litigate with her father, suggesting that Clarissa misuses the powers given to her by God to fight such arbitrary authority.[28] Concerned about the issues of obedience and authority, these readers understand the ideological problems of power and gender but choose to discuss them in religious and pragmatic terms. Although I focus on what we can learn in these interchanges about reader's expectations, it is important to note that Richardson participated in these expectations and took these concerns seriously; as Shirley Van Marter has observed in her studies of the changes between first, second, and third editions of the text, he softens Clarissa's perception of the power of her father's curse.[29]

The resolution of the novel reveals conflicting interpretive strategies centred on the way it tells, or refuses to tell, stories. Clarissa's activity after the rape is marked by an increasing refusal and reluctance to tell her story or allow texts to circulate. As Tom Keymer has observed, Clarissa's refusals to interact, to narrativize, or to prosecute Lovelace frustrate many readers (in and of the novel) who desire resolution, consensus, and justice.[30] But a critical emphasis on narrative closure meshes with a form of bad reading; as Margaret Anne Doody points out, it is the Lovelacean reader who "can only think in terms of obtaining what he wants and avoiding unpleasant consequences."[31] The "lingering expectations" about a happy ending, according to Mary Patricia Martin, allow Richardson to place courtship and death in competition, thereby teaching the reader to turn away from the comedic

27 Sarah Chapone to Samuel Richardson, 22 February 1752, Forster Manuscripts XII, 2, f. 60 v., Victoria and Albert Museum. References to letters from this collection will be cited as FM.

28 Sarah Chapone to Samuel Richardson, March 1752, FM XII, 2, f. 48v.; and Sarah Chapone to Samuel Richardson, 22 February 1752, FM XII, 2, f.58 v.

29 See Van Marter, "Richardson's Revision of *Clarissa* in the Second Edition"; and Van Marter, "Richardson's Revision of *Clarissa* in the Third and Fourth Editions."

30 Keymer, *Richardson's "Clarissa,"* 218.

31 Margaret Anne Doody, *A Natural Passion: A Study of the Novels of Samuel Richardson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 170.

ending and see Clarissa's apotheosis as central.[32] Reading for plot and for happy endings, however, works against the rich texture for which the novel is celebrated by some eighteenth-century readers who were happy to enjoy "prolixity" and sentiment: "I do honour his prolixity," Mulso Chapone asserts, since the "minute strokes and observations ... are the principal beauties" of the novels.[33] Samuel Johnson commented along the same lines: "if you were to read Richardson for the story, your impatience would be so much fretted that you would hang yourself."[34]

Although asserting that Clarissa's death was a Christian victory, Richardson was aware that many readers wanted a narratively satisfying conclusion, which included overt justice if not a comedic ending. For him, this problem turned in part on the difference between reading for amusement and reading to learn. He questioned the expectation that the novel should have a happy ending simply because Clarissa was a good character, and he justified his approach, in his "Postscript," on the grounds that "poetical justice" works against God's will to "distribute" good and evil "equally":

> Nor can it be deemed impertinent to touch upon this subject at the conclusion of a work which is designed to inculcate upon the human mind, under the guise of an amusement, the great lessons of Christianity, in an *age like the present*; which seems to expect from the poets and dramatic writers ... that they should make it one of their principal rules, to propagate another sort of dispensation, under the name of *poetical justice*, than that with which God by Revelation teaches us he has thought fit to exercise mankind; whom placing here only in a state of probation, he hath so intermingled good and evil as to necessitate them to look forward for more equal distribution of both. (1495)

Richardson anticipated and decried the readers and critics who read for plot and poetic justice (or who read in terms of narrative theory). He also rejects reducing the novel's primary events to dualistic ideological significance; the intermingling of good and evil countermands assigning aristocratic/bourgeois or masculine/feminine values to the novel's events (or to the

32 Martin, 607.

33 Hester Mulso to Elizabeth Carter, 18 May 1751, in *The Works of Mrs. Chapone to Which is Prefixed, an Account of Her Life and Character, Drawn up by Her Own Family* (Boston, 1809), 22.

34 Cited in Castle, 182.

rape itself). Such sentiments are reiterated in the correspondence, when Richardson counters the objections to the "Sort of Happiness (founded on the Xn. System) for my Heroine." Readers wanted her to live (and maybe marry), but here he defends his plan to let Clarissa die: "And to rescue her from a Rake, and give a Triumph to her, over not only him but over all her Oppressors, and the World beside, in a triumphant Death (as Death must have been her Lot, had she been ever so prosperous) I thought as noble a View, as it was new. But I find, Sir, by many Letters sent me, and by many Opinions given me, that some of the greater Vulgar, as well as all the less, had rather it had had what they call, an Happy Ending."[35] Richardson distinguishes between religious and non-religious ways of reading: the "Vulgar" are those readers who read for plot (and the sense of poetic justice), not those who read for moral and spiritual guidance.

Richardson divides up readers: some read for plot or reduce the novel to its ideological narrative structures, and these same readers also may employ more secular frames of reference in comprehending the novel's significance. While these readers are not necessarily coterminous with modern readers, Richardson conceptualizes this split in historical terms as he does when suggesting that Clarissa is an example for a future age; here he situates the better readers in the more pious past: "an *age like the present*" expects narrative resolution, while past ages, he implies, accepted whatever good or evil God meted out. His novel is meant to "inculcate upon the human mind" this religious lesson. The ideal reader of Richardson, thus, is one who will accept both Richardson's lessons and "the great lessons of Christianity." An age like our present—in which secular, critical reading is valued and taught—has more in common with the "Vulgar" than with the projected age of the select few who accept the intermingling of good and evil, as it comes from God's or, it would seem, Richardson's hand.

These different modes of understanding and reading accord with what Michael Warner calls "rival frameworks" of reading. Situating its emergence in the eighteenth century, Warner worries that scholars have insufficiently defined and historicized critical reading. Simply taking self-conscious or self-reflexive reading

[35] Samuel Richardson to Aaron Hill, 5 May 1748, cited in T.C. Duncan Eaves and Ben Kimpel, *Samuel Richardson: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 218.

as a norm, he argues, prevents the investigation of alternative frameworks, such as religious reading.[36] This has, I suggest, been a problem in reading *Clarissa*. Rather than situating its readers within the dominant critical-reading paradigm, by making them engage in interpretive struggles, we might look—as Richardson himself seems to do—for different and historically contingent ways of reading *Clarissa*. Some of Richardson's correspondents are critical of the novel, questioning Richardson's representation of women's subordination and dependence (like Sarah Chapone), his insistence on the necessity of the rape (like Lady Bradshaigh and Lady Echlin), or his perception of Clarissa's piety (like Hester Mulso Chapone). But many of these same readers agreed with Richardson's didactic, religious conception of the novel, and they saw Clarissa's piety as key to comprehending the character and novel. These readers, it seems, are different from the "Vulgar," which we might say includes those modern scholars who look to this novel as a literary working out of historical, political, cultural, or gendered problems. Even though many of his readers accepted Richardson's professed Christian purpose, interpretive strategies that see the novel as a Christian triumph remain difficult to perceive and are underexplored.

In an earlier section of this article, I emphasized Clarissa's passive obedience—her attempt to find a way in which to participate in a hostile interpretive system without voicing filial disobedience. Here, I am sketching out the problem we have identifying readers who participate sympathetically in this aspect of the novel's project. Modern readers find it difficult to enter into interpretive practices that refer themselves to perceived higher authorities. Situating resistance within a framework of submission or conversion better helps us to understand the responses of non-resisting readers such as Mulso Chapone, who not only enjoyed the novel's prolixity, but also professed at one point that she strove to understand Richardson and to "think with" him "on all subjects."[37] Other readers, such as Lady Bradshaigh and Lady Echlin, while protesting some aspects of the novel, confess to being converted (if over the course of several readings) to Richardson's overall religious argument. Lady Bradshaigh eventually comes

36 Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 13–38.

37 Mulso Chapone, *Letters on Filial Obedience*, 3:247.

to accept Clarissa's death as a happy ending, arguing only about the early date of her death: "The only difference between us is," she assures Richardson, "whether she ought to have it now, or after some more years of happiness in this world."[38] During their correspondence, Lady Bradshaigh often mentions her desire to think like Richardson. "Is there a similarity in our thoughts, I hope so," she writes in 1754; years later, while going through her letters for their possible publication, Lady Bradshaigh reiterates that she has been his "convert" on several issues, not the least of which is the issue of whether Clarissa should die.[39]

Religious reading practices cannot be ascribed to historical readers any more than secular reading practices can be ascribed to modern readers. The two modes exist side by side at this historical moment, and the two ways of reading are in competition with each other, as Richardson himself suggests. Similarly, we must see that the same readers who profess to be converted by Richardson are also, at other times, critical of him. My aim here is to shift our focus, at least momentarily, onto conversion and away from criticism. The alternative strategy of "thinking with" the novel becomes invisible, for a reader of any time, as that reader fails to take feminine modesty seriously on the one hand and to see the persuasiveness of religious belief on the other. Most significantly, though, dividing readers into believers and sceptics serves as a heuristic for recognizing the continuing utility of religious ways of reading, and for interpreting key absences and silences in *Clarissa*. This is not to suggest that one might read only in a religious and agreeing mode, as opposed to a secular and resistant mode. Rather, noticing such a division allows us to perceive the extent to which critical and scholarly interpretations are shaped by the kind of reading practices we value and thus look for in literary works. It allows us to ask about the kinds of reading that are excluded or occluded.

It is necessary to attempt to understand the rival frameworks that are most unfamiliar to us now and the ways of reading that rest on faith in particular. The critical accounts of Clarissa's rape work primarily on the assumption that readers and characters operate in a world shaped by language and narrative, not in a world

38 Lady Bradshaigh to Richardson, 20 November 1748, *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, 4:211.

39 Lady Bradshaigh to Richardson, 3 March 1754, FM XI, f. 93. Lady Bradshaigh to Richardson, 21 April 1758, FM XI, f. 240.

shaped by communication with God. When we look to non-religious or non-revelatory forms of discourse to explain Clarissa, we become like the frustrated early readers—the "Vulgar"—who will only be satisfied with a narrative resolution or with endings that distribute justice in accordance with aesthetic or material expectations. Richardson's comments, and the reading practices of some of his readers, suggest an alternative strategy of reading. This alternative strategy of reading, as I discuss in the next section, is limned by the way religious books circulate in the novel; it is also suggested in a strategy of deferred, or silent, meaning that is employed in the texts Clarissa creates after the rape.

The Rest, in Silence: Silence and the Material Contexts of Reading

Although it has been argued that Clarissa exhibits a will after the rape that she does not appear to have before, Clarissa's suffering, death, and retreat from the world can be quite painful for readers. Reading from within the context of the novel as a Christian comedy, Lois Chaber, for example, sees Clarissa as "both an epitome of Christian heroism—redemption achieved through suffering—and of classic female masochism—an internalization through guilt of society's misogyny."[40] In keeping with the division of readerly interests and values I have been tracing, the most thoroughly theorized and therefore easiest access to Clarissa is as a gendered subject internalizing misogyny. Seen through a feminist lens, patriarchal discourse breaks Clarissa; her dying is, then, is what Castle calls an autistic move "out of the realm of human interpretation into silence."[41]

My argument continues the lines of thinking that see Clarissa's refusal to narrate as distrust of language and as a form of resistance to patriarchy and patriarchal language, but I am more interested in exploring alternative strategies of interpretation that might be at play. Clarissa's textual activity at the end of the novel, to the extent that it indicates Clarissa's movement away from the world of earthly communication, complicates our ability to read Clarissa

40 Lois Chaber, "Christian Form and Anti-Feminism in *Clarissa*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 15, nos. 3–4 (2003): 537. On Clarissa's will after the rape, see Castle, 109.

41 Castle, 26. On Clarissa's resistance to patriarchal discourse, see also Isobel Grundy, "Seduction Pursued by Other Means? The Rape in *Clarissa*," in *Clarissa and Her Readers: New Essays for the "Clarissa" Project*, ed. Carol Flynn Houlihan and Edward Copeland (New York: AMS, 1999), 255–67.

as a gendered subject, and thus complicates assertions about female masochism or internalization of misogyny. Discussing seventeenth-century Quaker women, Phyllis Mack points out that acts of personal surrender are problems for feminist scholarship "validating religious women's efforts to achieve self-realization and enlightenment through pain." The concept of agency is tied to ideas of autonomy and individuality. The "religious person's desire for self-transcendence," she points out, is therefore difficult to account for, especially if this self-transcendence and "the energy to act in the world is generated and sustained by a prior act of personal surrender."[42] Saba Mahmood argues that women's participation in the Islamic movement poses similar conceptual challenges to feminist theory; she asks how ideas of the self and agency can be brought to bear on women in patriarchal religions, since the existing models define women's agency as resistance. Mahmood suggests that "we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create."[43] By loosening the connection between gendered agency and resistance, a theory that action might require personal surrender helps us to understand some of Clarissa's final texts.

As we have already seen, Clarissa makes decisions in accordance with a prior surrender. Initially that surrender is to patriarchal authority: in her passive obedience to her father, she is willingly circumscribed by the tenets of filial obedience. Later, the surrender is to God; like silence, this act is difficult to perceive and describe in material terms. But exchanges of books, conversations about books, and many of Clarissa's final writing acts leave traces of a reading strategy that exists largely outside of the letters of the novel; we glimpse the way in which Clarissa directs herself towards God in this alternative strategy. Although the novel itself is relatively silent about this way of reading (Clarissa's final texts thwart interpretation, thereby constructing another form of silence), examining these traces illuminates Clarissa's final weeks and indicates how some readers might have perceived her final textual activities. Clarissa attempts to transcend immediate

[42] Phyllis Mack, "Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism," *Signs* 29, no. 1 (2003): 153, 150, 156.

[43] Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 203.

understanding by earthly readers, and, indeed, character readers find it difficult to situate what Clarissa is doing in human or social terms. By delaying interpretation, she moves their judgment of her out of the realm of the material world; paradoxically, we can only perceive this by examining the material traces of this self-transcendent textual practice.

It is, as Mack and Mahmood suggest, difficult to imagine agency without resistance; it is even more difficult for us, modern readers, to imagine a corresponding reading experience. Can we read without agency? Without resistance? Perhaps, but interpretive acts—the main evidence we have of reading—presuppose a distinction or difference between text and reader. As the previously discussed contrasts between scholarly accounts and historical response show, the various ideologies of interpretation create blind spots for different readers at different moments. If it is difficult for any reader of any time to enter fully into Clarissa's experience of filial duty or virginal modesty, it is more difficult to perceive a reading experience that refers itself to non-material frames of reference like God's knowledge. Scott Paul Gordon argues for the significance of crying, or sentimental responses to reading *Clarissa*, and he suggests one way to understand this problematic: "Pathetic reactions," he claims, "provide readers with an experience immune from rational challenge, and should perhaps be more closely tied to radical, personal religion than to the rational latitudinarianism invoked by intellectual historians ... the pathetic response is, like faith, a private experience—unprovable to others but irrefutable to the individual feeler."[44] Once again the sympathetic reader is more imaginary than the unsympathetic reader. Although attempts to find such readers, or evidence of such reading practices, will always—to some extent—confound empirical methods, we might begin to theorize this private, pious reader whose responses are unprovable and yet irrefutable, by examining the kinds of reading in which the pious Clarissa engages, and in the kinds of texts she creates.

As material signs of her withdrawal from the world, the mad letters and her meditations frustrate communication. These texts, especially the mad papers addressed to no one or seemingly to herself, are not meant for circulation; except for Lovelace, Belford, and Dorcas, who finds the letters, no other character reads the mad

[44] Scott Paul Gordon, "Disinterested Selves: *Clarissa* and the Tactics of Sentiment," *ELH* 64, no. 2 (1997): 488–89.

papers. Because they indicate habits of reading, I am more interested in the meditations. Clarissa keeps a book of meditations; she is supposed to have been writing them all along, although the novel only reproduces five examples. Richardson added to the meditations and, in 1749, printed them with the dates of their fictional composition. As Keymer argues, Richardson limited their public circulation, perhaps because they would make Clarissa appear to be imposing her own religious construction on events, thus aligning her with manipulative interpretive strategies.[45] They are, moreover, her private way of communicating with God and of preparing for death. These texts work in ways that deflect or distance the reader from meaning.

One of the final texts Clarissa creates is, of course, her will. The will works within this framework of alternative strategies of deferred interpretation to a certain extent, but it also illustrates the dominant reading strategies we have seen in some responses to *Clarissa* (and which I am trying to displace or supplement by looking more closely at the circulation of religious texts). This text literally distances Clarissa from her readers since it is read only after she is dead. Clarissa defers finishing the will, hoping for final blessings and forgiveness from her family. But more generally the will works in explicit contrast to deferred reading, or frameworks in which judgment is referred away from the writer. A will is, by definition, a document outlining the decedent's intentions, and it is built on an assumption of personal authority; notably, Clarissa takes pains to avoid ambiguity in her will. She begins with an apology for "expatiating" and goes on to state that such explanation will clarify her intentions, since reason will obviate "all cavils about words" (1412). In spite of her pursuit of clarity, it takes six hours to read the will because the listeners interrupt and protest. Colonel Morden understands the will, against Clarissa's intention, but as it confirms her generosity, as a form of "revenge" resulting in "silent reproach" towards the family's less generous treatment of her. More importantly for

[45] Keymer, "Richardson's Meditations: Clarissa's *Clarissa*," in *Samuel Richardson: Tercentenary Essays*, ed. Margaret Anne Doody and Peter Sabor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 89–109. The full title of the collection is *Meditations Collected from the Sacred Books; And Adapted to the Different Stages of Deep Distress; Gloriously Surmounted by Patience, Piety, and Resignation. Being Those Mentioned in the History of Clarissa as Drawn up by Her for Her Own Use*.

my purposes here, the will is an example of the kind of reading for which we have plenty of evidence already: the readers argue about it, debate and resist its meaning, and in going off alone to "their own reflections" (1422) appear to come to a variety of interpretations. The will, and the scene of reading it engenders, replicates in miniature the paradigm of interpretive struggle that marks readings of *Clarissa* itself.

But, while Clarissa writes her will intending to be explicit, she uses her meditations to respond more obliquely to events such as her arrest, her uncle's letter, a letter from Arabella, and Lovelace's continued pursuit. Meditation 1 is entirely copied from various places in Job, Meditation 5 from Psalms, and the others combine scriptural and original sources. Although Clarissa never directly sends the meditations to anyone, she intends them for later readers who will read them at a temporal distance from the events to which they respond. The meditations are a tool for reflection and remembering, and, as such, call for non-linear and indirect reading strategies.[46]

The circulation of the meditations is covert, illegitimate, or private. Belford takes the first one from Mrs Lovick, but Clarissa "is not to know that she [Mrs Lovick] has taken such a liberty" (1124). Lovelace acquires one secretly because Mrs Lovick thinks it will help to reform him: Clarissa "transcribed into her book a meditation on your persecuting her thus. I have a copy of it. If I thought it would have any effect, I would read it to you" (1221). Carefully controlling its circulation, Mrs Lovick consents to Lovelace's taking it if he shows it to Belford, whom Clarissa designates as protector of her memory (1221). Meditation 3, written in response to a letter from her Uncle John Harlowe asking whether she is pregnant, is "stitched to the bottom of this letter with black silk" (1192). Clarissa replies to John's letter, but the original letter with the attached meditation, expressing her desire for death as a way to avoid the shame of being accused of living willingly with Lovelace, remains in her private correspondence. Even the final disposition of the book of meditations is frustrated: Clarissa leaves them to Mrs Norton, but Mrs Harlowe asks "Mrs. Norton to get the little book of *Meditations* transcribed, and to

[46] Janine Barchas has pointed out that some of the printers' ornaments interrupt the narrative and create moments of reflection. Barchas, *Graphic Design, Print Culture, and the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 134–35.

let her have the original" (1425). Clarissa's attempts to control the circulation of these texts—to direct them to certain readers or to keep them private—is thwarted just as her readers' attempts to understand them will be thwarted. According to Robert Erickson, Richardson believed in the necessity of writing—in the copying of passages or writing spiritual biographies—as part of one's relationship with God. The meditations are written in Clarissa's heart for God, "her ultimate and final Reader."[47] They have to be because her immediate readers are all bad readers. The way that Clarissa's texts defer meaning separates her readers in a way similar to the roughly historical division I have identified; while sometimes that historical difference might make it more difficult to perceive certain interpretations and reading habits, here the distance in time makes it likely that the future reader will have a better, not an inferior, understanding.

Several of these texts are concerned with judgment, but not just God's final judgment. They meditate on different ways of reading or judging a text. The first meditation, a collage of verses from Job, expresses Clarissa's desire for death and judgment. Written just after her arrest, the meditation reflects the shame of the public nature of the arrest and her discomfort as a prisoner. Its first line—"Oh that my grief were thoroughly weighed, and my calamity laid in the balance together" (1125; Job 6:2)—is the beginning of Job's answer to Eliphaz, who has suggested that those whom God rebukes will be happy eventually and live to a "full age" (Job 5:26). Like Job, Clarissa wants God to end her suffering and more quickly judge her, which implies her own speedy death. And, while eleven of the twelve lines of this meditation come from Job 3 through Job 7, the twelfth line skips to Job 19. Job 19:25—"I Know my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth"—references final judgment. But Clarissa quotes, and slightly misquotes, the verse just before that assertion of certain redemption: "Oh that my words were now written! Oh that they were printed in a book! / that they were graven with an iron pen and lead in

[47] Robert Erickson, "'Written in the Heart': *Clarissa* and Scripture," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 2, no. 1 (1989): 42. Cynthia Griffin Wolff also writes about the significance of writing, in diaries specifically, as a form of reflection and self-examination, situating that practice firmly in Puritan traditions. Wolff, *Samuel Richardson and the Eighteenth-Century Puritan Character* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1972).

the book for ever!" (1125; Job 19:23–24). The image of being graven suggests a material finality. But Clarissa (or Richardson) replaces "rock" in the second verse with "book." While writing on a rock would allow a more public judgment, this change contains Clarissa's story to the more private medium of the book, and appropriately so, since one of her woes is the publicity of the arrest.[48] Moreover, she is more concerned with judgment than she is with redemption; relying on redemption, she anticipates the time when her story will be known, and by implication, written and complete. As Richardson well knew, the text remains quite flexible while it is still in manuscript but is less so after it has been printed in a book. No longer writing to the moment, Clarissa's wants all of her words to be already written, and wants to put distance and time between the events and their reading.

The need for distance, or deferral, is translated into a reading event in the allegorical letter she writes to Lovelace. In an attempt to convince him to stop trying to visit or write to her, Clarissa tells Lovelace that she is setting out for her father's house and hopes for a reconciliation "through the imposition of a dear blessed friend" (1233). She is busy preparing for the journey, asks him not to disturb her, and suggests that they might meet at her father's house. Clarissa later explains the allegory to Belford: "Read but for my *father's house, Heaven*, said she; and for the interposition of my dear blessed friend, suppose the mediation of my *Saviour*; which I humbly rely upon; and all the rest of the letter will be accounted for" (1274). Belford and Lovelace are mystified and angry: "I read it so," Belford writes, "and stood astonished for a minute at her invention, her piety, her charity, and at thine and my own stupidity, to be thus taken in" (1274); Lovelace claims that he is "cut to the heart by *this* Miss Harlowe's interpretation of her letter. She ought never to be forgiven. *She*, a meek person, and a penitent, and innocent, and pious, and I know not what, who can deceive with a foot in the grave!—'Tis

[48] Engraving Job's story on a rock would allow for judgment by "others who are more honest than [Job's] friends" (*The Oxford Study Bible*, 528). In the third edition, Richardson removes the verse containing this allusion and replaces it with an excerpted version of Job 36:5. In *Meditations Collected*, Job 19:23–24 returns, but "book" is replaced with the more standard "rock." Keymer suggests that the change in the third edition reflects Richardson's desire to show Clarissa's humility ("Richardson's Meditations," 108).

evident she sat down to write this letter with a design to mislead and deceive" (1301). To see the allegory as an attempt to "mislead and deceive" is to reveal an inability to participate in Clarissa's belief, especially in the way that belief manifests itself through allegorical reading practices.

Allegorical reading, a tradition of biblical hermeneutics, is only one alternate reading strategy. The novel alludes to, but does not represent, religious reading modes; we can actually understand these modes more precisely by examining patterns of misreading religious texts. Exploiting Clarissa's religious feelings as he plots to ensconce her at Mrs Sinclair's, Lovelace employs devout books as props to construct an appropriately pious, if fictional, environment. He sends Mrs Sinclair, as part of the "minutiae of [his] contrivances," a list of "books to be procured for the lady's closet" (473). The books include "Stanhope's *Gospels*; Sharp's, Tillotson's and South's *Sermons*; Nelson's *Feasts and Fasts*; a sacramental piece of the Bishop of Man, and another of Dr Gauden, Bishop of Exeter; and Inett's *Devotions*" (525). These "devout books" along with sentimental plays, *Spectators* and *Tatlers*, and works by Pope, Swift, and Addison, are key in influencing Clarissa to "think better of the people of the house" (525). Later, when her family finally sends her some clothes and books, Clarissa surmises that her brother chose the books: they include "a *Drexelius on Eternity*, the good old *Practice of Piety*, and a *Francis Spira*" (561). Like Lovelace, James exploits Clarissa's piety and uses the books to send a message to her. Clarissa sees them as evidence of her "brother's wit": he wants to "to point out death and despair" (561). Although she cannot yet interpret Lovelace's contrivances through the books in her room, James's choices are clearly legible to her in two different ways. As evidence of James's wit, they are read in a secular sense because that "wit" sees death as a punishment; but in reading them religiously Clarissa sees confirmation of her own feelings: she "wish[es] for the one [death], and every now and then, [is] on the brink of the other [despair]" (561). For the pious reader, these books (except the one by Frances Spira) confirm belief and the conviction that death brings happiness. To a worldly reader such as James, they would speak of despair and a punitive afterlife. Clarissa already knows Drexelius, Spira, and Tillotson—manuals of practical piety—well enough that the metonymic relationship between

the books as objects and meditations on the end of life needs no explication. But this comprehension of the religious mind welcoming death is not itself represented. What is represented is the Lovelacean/Jamesian strategy that uses the object to send a message. The circulation of these books signals the existence of modes of reading that Richardson alludes to but does not find necessary to represent even though it is these modes that Clarissa and, perhaps, the good reader of *Clarissa* employ.

The pattern of suggesting alternative but unrepresented (or unrepresentable) strategies of reading continues when Lovelace intercepts Anna's letters and finds a reference to John Norris's *A Collection of Miscellanies* (1687), a book that Anna had sent to Clarissa with money interleaved. Wondering about the meaning of Anna's reference, he sees "Norris" as a code: "She says in it, *I hope you have no cause to repent returning my Norris—It is forthcoming on demand*. Now, what the devil can this mean? ... The devil take me, if I am *out-Norrised*" (634). Although James and Lovelace use the books' metonymic functions to convey messages, Anna uses the Norris as a pragmatic way to deliver paper money. The Norris code is quite simple, but Lovelace worries that he will be out-Norrised.[49] His reaction, even as it is based on a misapprehension, points to a competing model of interpretation (or deployment of texts) that he does not fully comprehend. Without fully understanding it, Lovelace suspects that model to be female and religious; although they are, it is more significant to see that they are not accessible to Lovelace.

Paradoxically, Lovelace uses this alternative mode, again using books as props, on the day he convinces Clarissa to return to London from Hampstead. Lovelace looks at a seventeenth-century manual of practical piety, which, according to Clarissa, "had there not been a preconcert, would not have taken his attention for one moment. It was *Taylor's Holy Living and Dying*" (1001). "A smart book, this, my dear!" Lovelace writes, "this old divine affects, I see, a mighty flowery style upon a very solemn subject. But it puts me in mind of an ordinary country funeral where the young women, in honour of a defunct companion,

[49] E. Derek Taylor suggests that Lovelace is indeed "out-Norrised." A reference to Norris, according to Taylor, suggests the will of God in everything, even in the seemingly free choices of a non-believer such as Lovelace. See Taylor, *Reason and Religion in "Clarissa": Samuel Richardson and "The Famous Mr. Norris, of Bemerton"* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009).

especially if she were a virgin, or *passed for such*, make a flower-bed of her coffin" (1002). Eerily foreshadowing Clarissa's rape, death, and funeral, Lovelace's comment also foreshadows his own later scepticism about Clarissa's nearness to death. Because he does not conceive of death as a "triumph," the "flowery" style hypocritically hides the unattractive, sexually defiled body—and the subject of death. Lovelace's understanding of death is at odds with Taylor's and with Clarissa's; Clarissa lives and dies by rules such as Taylor's.[50] But, outside of this scene, no one in the novel is portrayed in the act of reading these pious texts. When it comes to actual reading, in many scenes a book is mentioned solely for the purpose of pointing up a misreading. Clarissa's understanding of Taylor, Norris, and Tillotson comes from her previous experience of reading them; her actions and aura of piety speak this to an equally knowledgeable reader. The reading represented in the novel more frequently is Lovelace's critical and sceptical style.

This critical reading style is further illustrated with the meditations; as read by Belford and Lovelace, these texts are aesthetic objects rather than spiritual guides. Belford helps Richardson sell the "beauties" of the Bible (which can affect even rakes) to one of his target audiences: the readers who are more likely to read a novel than attend, or attend to, a sermon. Although reading the Bible through Clarissa's meditations begins his process of reformation, Belford resists Clarissa's authorial intention (we will see Lovelace do the same). After reading Clarissa's first meditation, Belford looks into a borrowed Bible in order to compare the texts. He thinks the book of Job is "apposite" to Clarissa's situation, but does not comment upon, or understand, Clarissa's desire for death or judgment, nor does he comprehend her comparison of herself to Job. He perceives their use as spiritual tools, but he explains that function in psychological terms: "We may see by this, the method she takes to fortify her mind" (1189). Voicing a series of conventional observations, he notes that the biblical style is "easy, simple, and natural," and the scriptures are an "all excelling collection of *beauties*" (1125, 1126). Belford generalizes about the way children and young men are taught the Bible: boys' progress in reading, he recalls

[50] As Doody points out, Richardson follows Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying* (1651) closely in the death scenes in a formal and allusive way. On the relevance of piety manuals in *Clarissa*, see Doody, *A Natural Passion*, 151–87.

from his school days, is judged by "the books we are advanced to, and not by our understanding" (1125), and supplemented or supplanted by histories. Noting the beauty and simplicity of her expression and then the "divine beauty" (1124) of the scripture itself, Belford resituates the reading experience within the realms of aesthetics, pedagogy, general interpretation, and even psychology; he thus deflects their possible applications away from himself or Clarissa.

Belford distances himself from the reading experience, making it an intellectual rather than a spiritual exercise, and moves towards generalization and abstraction; Lovelace moves in the opposite direction, reading himself so thoroughly into the meditations that he fails to comprehend their larger significance. Lovelace, who laughs at Belford for his belated recognition of the "beauty and noble simplicity" (1146) of the Bible, understands aesthetic and intellectual reading, but he performs his own often-intentional misreadings. Lovelace sees (or pretends to see) the meditations as expressions of Clarissa's feelings for him, refusing to recognize her attempts at self-transcendence. Lovelace reads the "arrows of the Almighty are within me" (1125) as code suggesting that Clarissa is pregnant, "in the way to be a mamma" (1147). When he sees the fifth meditation, Lovelace assumes that "the *gin*, the *snare*, the *net*, mean matrimony" (1221), but Clarissa intends them to represent his plots against her. Deliberately obtuse, or deliberately disregarding the intertext that, by referencing the Psalms (Psalm 102, in particular), situates the two of them in a Manichean conflict, Lovelace insists on reducing her text to material meanings. "A sad mistake," he comments on the line suggesting that she has "eaten ashes"; and, he continues, "as something is undoubtedly meant by the *lonely sparrow on the housetop*, is not the dear creature at this very instant ... concealed in Mrs Smith's cockloft?" (1222).

Belford comments upon Lovelace's self-interested and overly literal interpretations: "See if thou, in the wicked levity of thy heart, canst apply it as thou didst the other, to thy case: if thou canst not, give way to thy conscience, and that will make the properest application" (1207). Lovelace's misreadings focus on a non-spiritual reading of Clarissa's state of mind and body. His refusal to read Clarissa's writings as her preparation for death reflects his refusal to believe in her imminent death ("*nineteen*

cannot so soon die of grief" [1308]) and his consistent misreading of the nature and depth of her faith; he believes that Clarissa will act like the other women he knows and bow to social conventions. Rejecting her "earnestness" for death, Lovelace argues that this expressed desire is a result of her study of the Bible, rather than of her religious conviction: "As for the earnestness she expressed for death," he writes, "she has found the words ready to her hand in honest Job; else she would not have delivered herself with such strength and vehemence" (1148). Only grasping it superficially and, like Belford, rationalizing and psychologizing her belief, Lovelace criticizes Clarissa's piety, saying that "death desired merely from worldly disappointment shows not a right mind" (1148). Defending Clarissa and correcting this misinterpretation, Richardson appends a note to Lovelace's claim that Clarissa is merely disappointed. Clarissa's letters, this note asserts, reveal that she initially despaired but came to believe her desire and preparation for death sprang from a "better root" (1148, note a). Richardson understands that some readers, including his own characters, will rely upon a range of explanations—influence of the written word, emotional instability, or aesthetic enchantment—to explain away Clarissa's unwavering belief in the certainty of her salvation. The fact that Lovelace and Belford perform them sufficiently condemns these ways of reading in contrast to the deferred and unrepresented religious reading.

A refusal to explain one's response begins early in the novel with the establishment of silence as a gendered form of protest. It continues in the non-narrative, non-argumentative, and intended to be non-circulating way that the meditations put distance and silence (even death) between events and responses to events. This strategy of deflection, or the refusal to directly respond, mirrors Richardson's similarly deflective or postponed representation of the rape and is carried through the novel by a valued, but largely unseen, mode of religious reading. The coffin, as many scholars have observed, also dramatizes meanings that refuse to be pinned down as the semiotic possibilities of the emblems and verses proliferate.[51] These interpretive possibilities, like the meditations, thwart human communication.

[51] Both Castle and Doody suggest the range of these possibilities: Castle, 136–47; and Doody, 151–87.

Ironically, Richardson's response to interpretive possibility is to more forcefully direct and control reading; his response to each of the interpretive conflicts I have discussed suggests that the ideal reader must be forced into existence with ever more explicit textual direction. Richardson seemed to see his ideal reader, variously, in the past, in the future, or on the wrong spiritual plane. What I have been arguing, in examining the moments of misreading of religious texts, is that alternative strategies of reading—some of which conform to this sense of the ideal reader—do exist in the novel and among its readers. Richardson, as commentator on his own novel, is one among many who fail to fully perceive the existence of these strategies; the form of reading that the novel values most is also the form of reading that Richardson finds unnecessary or impossible to fully delineate. This is not surprising; indeed, the strategies of reading I have been identifying are deliberately difficult to perceive and are marked by deferral, deflection, and submission to unworldly authority.

But while we, the future readers, seem intent upon perpetuating the kind of reading underscored as wrong-headed when performed by Belford and Lovelace, I have noted evidence that some historical readers entered more fully, and more sympathetically, into Clarissa's situation, taking her as an example. The existence of such readers only raises additional questions. Many of Richardson's readers confessed that they would never dare to compare themselves to Clarissa. Sarah Fielding apologized about her *Remarks on "Clarissa*," writing of her "vanity in daring but to touch the hem of [Clarissa's] garment."[52] Sarah Wescomb thanks Richardson for "giving [her] so amiable a Sister as Clarissa" but admits she would never have had the "confidence to call myself *Hers*."[53] She later apologizes for writing at all; she apologizes for not learning from Clarissa to be silent: "yet you may observe how flagrant an Instance I shew of the little I have gained with regard to the former of these Advantages; for shou'd I else, after a Perusal of the most Excellent Letters ever wrote, have so much as touch'd Paper, Ink, or Pen, even to the Feathers again? ... For ought not a sense of my Incapacity to have deter'd me?"[54] Reading *Clarissa* and reading Clarissa,

52 Sarah Fielding to Richardson, 8 January 1748/49, in *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson,* 2:61.

53 Sarah Wescomb to Richardson, 21 May 1747, FM XIV, 3, f. 19.

54 Sarah Wescomb to Richardson, 25 January 1749/50, FM XIV, 3, f. 37.

while it does not stop either woman from writing, gives each pause. They emulate Clarissa's modesty in their diffidence about their own writing. And that hesitation—or, perhaps, the fully realized refusal to touch even the feathers of a pen—finds its source in Clarissa (and *Clarissa*). Given the model that Clarissa herself presents, can we ever find the best readers of *Clarissa*? Are the ideal readers of *Clarissa* like the ones we can see—the Harlowes, Belford, and Lovelace—whose interpretive practices we more readily understand even as we must see them as inadequate to Clarissa, both character and novel? Or is the ideal reader the one whose spiritually based opacity makes her difficult, even impossible, to see? These questions have serious implications for readers attempting to see themselves apart from the "Vulgar" mass of misreaders.

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