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Abstract

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Keywords

Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*, tragedy, providence, poetic justice, economics, scepticism, morality, theology, capitalism, bourgeois cultural norms, epistolary fiction

Cover page footnote

For her thorough reading and patient assistance in improving this essay, I thank Felicity Nussbaum. I also wish to thank Helen Deutsch and Christian Reed, both of whom offered invaluable criticism of prior versions of my argument, as well as astute suggestions for its improvement.

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Alex Eric Hernandez

The postscript to the 1751 edition of *Clarissa* provides Samuel Richardson's most definitive explication of what he was doing through the novel's unfashionably tragic turn. This essay considers his project in light of the period's taste for narratives that culminate in poetic justice, arguing that the postscript identifies such notions of moral compensation as symptomatic of an age of scepticism. Richardson is thus engaged in reimagining older modes of providence at odds with middle-class values of exchange and an ascendant providential economy, fashioning a distinctive mode of tragedy that drew on both classical and biblical sources in which the very form of his novel interrogates bourgeois cultural norms. In this way, he queries the relations between eighteenth-century theology, early capitalist political economies, and moral action being negotiated through the novel's formation.

abstract



“G——d——n him, if [*Clarissa* should die] ... [I] should no longer believe Providence, or eternal Wisdom, or Goodness governed the World, if [such] Merit, Innocence, and Beauty were to be so destroyed.”
—Colley Cibber, upon hearing of *Clarissa*'s rumoured death

“Is it contrary to the common method of Providence, to permit the best to suffer most? No. When the best do *so* suffer, does it not most deeply affect the human heart? Yes. And is it not your business to affect the human heart as deeply as you can? Yes.”
—Edward Young to Samuel Richardson, 1744

NO ONE much liked the tragic ending to Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa; or, the History of a Young Lady* (1748). But in the months leading up to 1751, Richardson reissued *Clarissa* in an expanded third edition that considerably reworked the 1748 and 1749 versions of the text.¹ Although he would go on to tinker further

¹ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady*, 3rd ed., 8 vols. (1751; New York: AMS Press, 1990). References are to this edition, except where otherwise noted. The first epigraph of this essay comes from the letter written by Laetitia Pilkington to Samuel Richardson (June 1745), *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, ed. Anna Laetitia Barbauld (London:

with his novel, no later edition would approach the astounding two hundred additional pages of alterations that appeared by the completion of volume 8 in early 1751.² To the author, none of these changes was unimportant; and he was careful to maintain that the revisions were restorations of the original manuscript intended to clarify various ambiguities that plagued the reading of the text, a claim that now seems highly unlikely.³

Among the alterations Richardson included in this edition was an expanded postscript, in which he abandoned the fiction of restoration. Instead, he offered newly calculated answers to objections to the tragic ending that had arisen during the years that separated the first awful rumours of Clarissa's eventual death from his most recent work on the revised text. These complaints are well documented, and quite often took the form of sentimental appeal exemplified by Lady Bradshaigh, who begged Richardson for a comic ending. She eventually asked him to refrain from sending her the final volumes since she could no longer bear the pain in reading them. Although their correspondence continued throughout the completion and publication of the novel, her complaint, in a letter dated 10 October 1748, that Clarissa's unjust death "would give joy only to the ill-natured reader, and heave the compassionate breast with tears of irremediable woes" (*CSR*, 4:178), nicely conveys the sort of popular sentiment that animated Richardson's defensive postscript. Critics and historians have long noted the manner in which the novel seemed to touch a raw cultural nerve, and Richardson struggled for years in order to justify his artistic choices to a public that preferred (to take only the most notable example) Nahum Tate's sentimentally

R. Phillips, 1804), 2:128–29. References to Richardson's correspondence are to this edition, cited as *CSR*. The second epigraph is from Edward Young to Samuel Richardson (20 June 1744), *CSR*, 2:4–5. For her thorough reading and patient assistance in improving this essay, I thank Felicity Nussbaum. I also wish to thank Helen Deutsch and Christian Reed, both of whom offered invaluable criticism of prior versions of my argument, as well as astute suggestions for its improvement.

² For a succinct discussion of the novel's publication history, see Angus Ross, introduction, *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady* by Samuel Richardson (London and New York: Penguin, 1985), 15–18. For a more detailed discussion of *Clarissa's* reception and development after its initial publication, see T.C. Duncan Eaves and Ben D. Kimpel, *Samuel Richardson: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 285–321.

³ Eaves and Kimpel, 310–11.

tragicomic version of *King Lear* (1681).⁴ And while Lady Bradshaigh's response to the novel is perhaps its most well known, it is by no means the most remarkable, to which we might recall Colley Cibber's fevered imprecation cited in the epigraph above (*CSR*, 2:128–29). Laetitia Pilkington, relaying the exchange to Richardson, observes: "I am not quite sure, whether Mr. Cibber is not so strongly enamoured of [Clarissa's] perfections, and touched by her distresses that, were they exhibited on the stage, he would not, like Don Quixote, rise up in wrath and rescue the lady" (*CSR*, 2:129). Pilkington describes the tears that welled in Cibber's eyes as he cursed Richardson and Lovelace alike for their "final destruction" (*CSR*, 2:128) of the novel's heroine, wishing that he could enact just recompense by somehow forcing the narrative reconciliation of act and consequence.

But here we need to pause, to linger on this anecdotal fragment long enough to soak up the curious vehemence with which a public figure like Cibber tantrums over the ending of a novel. What accounts for the pronounced disconnect between Richardson's tragedy and the poet laureate's response? How do we understand contemporary public frustration with Richardson's aesthetic choices? The answer, I suggest, lies in the precise relation between genre, theology, and emerging discourses of political economy deeply embedded in the experimental tragedy that Richardson is working out in *Clarissa*. The answer has to do with popular expectations for providence and, hence, the theological origins of the new economics of capital, both of which Richardson imaginatively assays in his text. What is all too easy to miss when reading *Clarissa* is the explicitly theological critique of violence and, at the same time, of the market framed by the almost typological death of Richardson's heroine, an approach that interrogates a logic of exchange coalescing most remarkably in notions of what we might term the "economics of providence."

⁴ For a biographical account of Richardson's writing process and critical reception during the period in which *Clarissa* was being written, see Eaves and Kimpel, chaps. 9–12. Several sources document the reception of the novel and offer invaluable critical analysis of Richardson's responses to his various readers, be they his interlocutors or his admirers. See, for example, Tom Keymer, *Richardson's "Clarissa" and the Eighteenth-Century Reader* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Linda S. Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), chap. 4; and Carol Houlihan Flynn and Edward Copeland, eds., *Clarissa and Her Readers: New Essays for the "Clarissa" Project* (New York: AMS Press, 1999).

Here, consequently, I wish to acknowledge the ties that bind theology to political economics in the eighteenth century, offering in part a material history for providence as it emerges in Richardson's poetics during the period spanning his composition of *Clarissa's* defensive postscript. In order to better understand the stakes of his ethical, religious, and formal considerations as they are framed in the novel, we need to begin at the level of genre, where we find most concretely the interrelated religious and economic discourses working themselves out in relation to a growing bourgeois social order for whom notions of tragedy and moral agency are freshly negotiated.

What Richardson understood intuitively, I will argue, was the manner in which poetic justice and a benevolent providential economy were fundamentally homologous terms. So, for Richardson, arguments in favour of "a *Fortunate Ending*" (8:277), following the contemporary preference for poetic justice, were the literary manifestations of a flawed model of providence, both of which functioned according to market principles of rational exchange at odds with the faith he was defending through the novel. On this point, Cibber's tirade is quite telling since it encapsulates this shift in thought. The reading public, as his invective suggests, saw providence as organized in this way, according to precepts of exchange, profit, and the heroine's accumulation of "Merit, Innocence, and Beauty" as a sort of moral capital. Providence, like poetic justice, was understandable in part because it worked like the market: moral acts such as Clarissa's long-suffering purity and patient forgiveness thereby ought surely to be rewarded. A failure to reward the moral agent's virtue was thus not only proof that providence failed to "work," but also appeared scandalous to an age enamoured with a teleological view of historical progress. As some critics have noted, this may be what makes tragedy itself and the figure of Job in particular so problematic in the eighteenth century.⁵ It is not coincidental then that both tragedy and the Job story were attractive to Richardson as he advanced what inevitably took the strange shape of a transcendental theodicy.

⁵ On the scandal of Job in the eighteenth century, see Jonathan Lamb, *The Rhetoric of Suffering: Reading the Book of Job in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), chap. 1. Noting the unpopularity of tragedy in the eighteenth century, Susan Staves suggests, in passing, that its demise may be attributed to the prevailing optimistic mood of the early Enlightenment. See Staves, "Tragedy," in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730–1830*, ed. Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 88–89.

Richardson was uneasy with this familiar eighteenth-century model of providential economy. In *Clarissa* he disrupts the logic of exchange behind the bourgeois assumptions that society is ruled by an economy of equivalent transactions, preferring instead a more primal logic that refuses to efface the essential violence and incomprehensibility of this logic.⁶ In this way he resists the pretence of demythologization that Horkheimer and Adorno identified as the limits of enlightenment, preferring a more antiquated model for understanding the providential swerve of human history, a model that is overtly mythological, indebted as it is to the biblical wisdom tradition. Richardson's attempt to write a new, Christian tragedy problematizes these bourgeois cultural norms in spite of an interested ambivalence. (For example, the economic sphere that proves problematic to his heroine is also, at the same time, his own livelihood.)

Relatively little attention has been paid to the importance of Richardson's 1751 postscript in theorizing his generic experimentation. Interpreting *Clarissa* through the revised postscript allows a reassessment in light of the development of his distinctive form of tragedy. What I hope will emerge is the manner in which his tragic vision served as a conscious repudiation of poetic justice, a formal concept he identified as symptomatic of an age of scepticism and moral laxity. If we want to understand public frustration with *Clarissa*'s tragic final act, then we need to begin with the postscript's function as a radical apologetic against the "scepticism" of the age, an argument that proceeds precisely by way of a defence of the tragic. In this way, the postscript disputes the prevailing deistic trends that underwrote increasingly rationalized models of providence and the objectification of the economic sphere during the period.⁷ For Richardson, the representation of poetic justice was an aestheticization of scepticism. Consequently, providence

⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 4, 33. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that capitalist exchange lay dormant in the mechanism of primitive sacrifice, itself an economy of equivalent exchanges. For another view of the ideological violence that is problematized in *Clarissa*, see E.J. Clery's reading of Richardson's argument. Clery, "Clarissa and the 'Total Revolution in Manners,'" in *The Feminization Debate in Eighteenth-Century England: Literature, Commerce and Luxury* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

⁷ See Charles Taylor's study of "modern social imaginaries" and the secular. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), esp. 222–69.

is a highly contested term in both his novel and the ensuing public debate that surrounded its publication, and his deliberate preference for antiquated conceptual models of charity, justice, and commerce are deeply embodied in the tragic contours of his text.⁸ A critical reading of *Clarissa's* 1751 postscript reveals the extent to which he saw the novel as a generic negotiation of the economics of providence.



In the postscript, Richardson casts himself as a generic innovator intent on writing something profoundly new: a tragic novel invested in the claims of Christian dogma. Richardson's initial answer to his critics was to reject the poetically just ending they clamoured for, self-consciously claiming for the novel a simultaneously classical and biblical pedigree. Quoting Addison at length, as he did in the first and second editions of *Clarissa*, Richardson argues that the popular contemporary poetic that privileges this justice is a rupture, a disingenuous departure from these traditions that inevitably hamstring the pathetic work of a text. The *Spectator* thus forms the backbone of the postscript's theoretical work; tragedy functions mimetically, representing a world in which "good and evil happen alike to ALL MEN on this side of the grave" (8:281). By placing *Clarissa* alongside Aristotelian and neoclassical precedents, Richardson's use of Addison not only legitimates his own project but also reinforces the cathartic teleology of his work. If all would end well, he notes, affect can only be moved superficially, the appropriate moral effects negated by a pandering narrative that is unwilling to leave the reader uncomfortable. Still, what is interesting about Richardson's use

⁸ Chad Loewen-Schmidt, in his recent article "Pity, or the Providence of the Body in Richardson's *Clarissa*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 22, no. 1 (2009): 1–28, likewise argues that providence signals contested ideological terrain in the novel. According to Loewen-Schmidt, pity as a rhetorical discourse emerges during the period in order to mediate, in Richardson's case, between the individual body and the body politic; sentimentality's location in the nervous body thus offered an embodied psychology that was thought to be "evidence of God's providential care" while grounding a certain politics of sensibility (4). My argument is in fundamental agreement with his insight, although I locate the emerging discourse of providence less in the sentimental body than in certain generic conventions against which Richardson's postscript argues. My emphasis, therefore, tends more towards the aesthetics of poetic justice, which I take to share important structural similarities with narratives of capitalist exchange, both relying, I claim, on providence to imagine the relation of moral action to causality.

of Addison here is not his appeal to sentimentality but the way in which the postscript argument dwells in a creative tension marked by this border between the classical and the Christian. Richardson sees in Aristotle's definition of tragedy a framework for representing a world suspended "in a state of probation," perhaps slouching towards its eschatological consummation, yet nevertheless devoid of such deliverance on the immanent plane of a person's mortal life. To represent this is necessarily to dwell textually in the fundamental ambiguity of a world experienced as both just and unjust. As Richardson notes, the classical depiction of a tragic death is rife with such ambivalence: "rarely have" the classical tragedians made their heroes "in their deaths look forward to a *future Hope*. And thus, when they die, they seem totally to perish. Death, in such instances, must appear terrible. It must be considered as the greatest evil. But why is Death set in shocking lights, when it is the universal lot?" (8:279). If there is to be any sort of true justice for Clarissa, he explains, it only happens through the passage of death into the triumphant life to come of Christian salvation. What Richardson argues is that the tragedy of an unjust death, in which violence carries the day, actually takes Christianity seriously precisely because it asks the reader to defer notions of poetic justice as an act of faith that is never quite fulfilled representationally. *Clarissa* would not be a tragicomedy, as many had hoped, but rather a Christian tragedy in the Aristotelian tradition.

To take up this issue is necessarily to revisit the period's fondness for plots that ended in the appropriate distribution of poetic justice, a notion that Richardson—following Addison's argument in the *Spectator*—maintained was "chimerical" (8:282). The postscript is fascinating in this respect, since it documents the extent to which Richardson, during the years leading up to the novel's completion, grappled with those who, as he notes: "*insisted that Poetical Justice* required that [Clarissa be made happy]" (8:277). Much of the public wanted Richardson to reprise the dramatic dénouement of *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) in *Clarrisa*; they argued that the reformation of the novel's principal antagonist, Lovelace, and his marriage to Clarissa would affirm the seemingly providential narrative of the triumph of virtue over vice. Under this plan, poetic justice would serve to reinforce the example of Clarissa's moral resolution much like poetic justice had raised the servant girl Pamela from the depths of lower-class

servitude into the arms of the once-menacing Mr B. As Adam Budd argues, such responses demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of what Richardson took himself to be doing through *Clarissa* in contrast to *Pamela*, a work which was much less invested in testing generic bounds despite its obviously important place in the history of epistolarity and the novel; and the later novel was to be, in part, an argument against the received wisdom that reformed rakes make the best husbands.⁹

Richardson avoids mentioning his first novel in the 1751 postscript, but the failures of *Pamela* clearly inform his thinking in the amendments to the *Clarissa* postscript that appeared in the third edition. In editorial additions to the 1751 postscript that consider poetic justice in *Clarissa*, Richardson asks: “And how was this happy ending to be brought about? Why, by this very easy and trite expedient; to wit, by reforming Lovelace, and marrying him to Clarissa—Not, however, abating her one of her trials, nor any of her sufferings (for the sake of the *sport* her distresses would give to the *tender hearted* reader as she went along) the last outrage excepted ... But whatever were the fate of his work, the Author was resolved to take a different method” (8:278). This different method, as the postscript implies, begins with a repudiation of his past literary sins. In a turn that is perhaps surprising in light of its acknowledgement of the ambiguities of the controversial *Pamela* whom Richardson had stubbornly defended, he goes on to argue that he finds “*sudden Conversions*” aesthetically questionable by virtue of their disingenuousness, clarifying in a characteristically Richardsonian tone that “they were moreover a very *bad* example” (8:278). Reformation, like virtue, Richardson suggests, is not something easily brought about after a life dedicated to the type of aggressively self-interested libertinism that the author felt was pervasive among the British elite. He laments this fact in a revealing passage in the 1751 postscript:

[The author] has lived to see Scepticism and Infidelity openly avowed, and even endeavoured to be propagated from the *Press*: The great doctrines of the Gospel brought into question: Those of self-denial and mortification blotted out of the catalogue of christian virtues: And a taste even to wantonness for out-door pleasure and luxury, to the general exclusion of domestic as well as public virtue, industriously promoted among all ranks and degrees of people.

⁹ Adam Budd, “Why Clarissa Must Die: Richardson’s Tragedy and Editorial Heroism,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 31, no. 3 (2007): 2–4.

In this general depravity ... the Author thought he should be able to answer it to his own heart, be the success what it would, if he threw in his mite towards introducing a Reformation so much wanted. (8:279)

This section gets at the complex circumstances that surround the postscript and inform so much of Richardson's thinking during the years that he wrote *Clarissa*. It lays bare how, by ending the novel as he did, Richardson understood himself to be engaging in a culture war of sorts, a struggle in which the preference for poetic justice was symptomatic of what he saw as "the present worse than Sceptical Age" (8:291), an age of widespread personal and cultural impiety. Whereas the public argued that the happy marriage of Clarissa and Lovelace would reinforce the providential narrative of the triumph of virtue over vice, Richardson himself argues that precisely the opposite is true; yet such a conviction was doubly pernicious since it not only set a bad example, but also failed to take into account that the only triumph possible for his heroine was a decidedly spiritual one obtained through a patient and faithful death—that is, through the tragic turn of the novel's third act. In Richardson's understanding, then, the desire for a happy ending was a mark of moral fault, an ameliorating concession to the religious laxity that plagued British culture at mid-century.

Richardson had claimed this before in his correspondence to friends, despairing that "religion was never so low as at present" (*CSR*, 4:187), and therefore assuming for himself the task of inculcating moral and social reformation through his novel. Commentators on *Clarissa* tend to emphasize the reformation point without adequately appreciating the theological program of such reformation; that is, the manner in which Richardson tied Clarissa's oppression to the type of scepticism he located in the general public. Even so, Richardson's argument is instructive since it intersects multiple discourses here, exposing the ideological connections between the aesthetics of poetic justice, deistic theology, and commerce. Of the 1751 postscript, he indicated: "Pains have been taken to obviate the objections arising from the notion of *Poetical Justice*, as the doctrine built upon it had obtained general credit among us" (*CSR*, 8:359). The figure of Lovelace comes to prefigure the reader who, after the rape, sees a comic marriage plot in the offing. The "trite expedient" (as Richardson would say) of such a dramatic turn thereby functions instrumentally, merely legitimating Hobbesian

power relations retrospectively, covering the transgression with a veneer of legality and material benefit so that they can be safely ignored. I shall return to this later, but here I wish to emphasize the way in which Richardson made this cultural pessimism public in the 1751 postscript and hence claimed the mantle of reformer. It befits us, therefore, to keep this point firmly in mind when discussing his work in relation to the novel's formal development. From its inception, the poetics of the novel are simultaneously involved in a program of collective moral formation and reformation; at least one major genealogical line of novelistic development (running through Richardson and Sarah Fielding to Frances Burney and Jane Austen, for example) purports to teach its readers how to be "good." In this respect, the early novel—well into the eighteenth century—resembles those moralized medieval narratives of trials and affliction, temptation and reward, now newly situated in a world in which estates, traffic, and capital accumulation are categories of acute concern.¹⁰

Significantly, however, Richardson also claimed that he could find no existing literary form by which to initiate this reformation. He goes on to say, in what must be a key moment for understanding Richardson's own perception of his project, that "he [the author] was resolved therefore to attempt something that never yet had been done" (8:279). Richardson saw *Clarissa*, consequently, as a fundamental departure from accepted and historical norms of tragedy by virtue of its explicitly religious shape, to which the postscript became the necessary theoretical explication. In the face of what he saw as widespread impiety, Richardson believed his novel to be the proverbial spoonful of sugar that would aid in disseminating the medicine of Christian teaching—a medicine he recognized as hard to swallow on its own.¹¹ This is the moralizing

¹⁰ Vivasvan Soni notes that the trial narratives of *Pamela* and *Clarissa* attempt to navigate new discourses concerned with a secular "right to happiness" throughout the eighteenth century, arguing that they form a "narratological unconscious" cutting through disparate modes of thought in the period. "Trials" as form, he suggests, remain inherently related to our contemporary narratives of reward and the possibility of later happiness. My argument echoes this line of reasoning, but I point out that *Clarissa* radicalizes this. See Soni, "The Trial Narrative in Richardson's *Pamela*: Suspending the Hermeneutic of Happiness," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 41, no.1 (2007): 5–28.

¹¹ It is difficult to overemphasize the way in which Richardson's project is self-consciously Miltonic on this point; both authors, it seems, were trying "Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme," recasting the classical as Christian. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flanagan (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), line 16, p. 354.

hand that Richardson sought to force in his second novel by rejecting the “doctrine built upon” poetic justice. *Clarissa* was to be a self-conscious attempt to redefine the formal parameters of sentimental tragedy in a manner that frustrated contemporary notions of the providential exchange of poetic justice, most notably—although not only—by drawing inspiration from the biblical model of Job. In light of this, the postscript argues that if regarded from the angle of the author invested in religious education and reform, the novel takes the shape of a theodicy “under the fashionable guise of an amusement.”



For Richardson, demands for poetic justice exposed substantial underlying changes occurring in the fabric of British society. The popular desire for a poetically just ending represented not only a bad moral example, but also—and more fundamentally—a misrecognition of the constitutive exceptionality that partly defined theological orthodoxy, an exceptionality the causal obscurity of which stubbornly threatened both textual and social worlds. As Carl Schmitt argues, the modern state banished such exceptions—indeed, the very category of the miraculous—with the rise of deism and attendant changes to political economy that sought to ground authority in constitutional and rationalized natural law.¹² What was thus lost was precisely the possibility of a sovereign intervention that disrupts the supposedly rational order of things, for good or ill. Much like the logics of capitalist exchange and surplus value, poetic justice exhibits this tendency to gloss over an ideological violence by insisting that everything is earned, neatly balanced, inevitably self-reconciled by the rational mechanisms of the market despite their fundamental inequities.¹³ Richardson’s work here interrogates the ways in which poetic justice functions akin to early capitalism in this respect, both modelling and extending the moral economy as a series of predictable, efficient causes.

¹² Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. and intro. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36–52.

¹³ The key text here is, of course, Marx himself. On the valorization of capital as the exploitation of labour see Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867, 1885, 1894), trans. Ben Fowkes (1976; reprint, London and New York: Penguin, 1990), vol. 1, part 3.

This gesture of imaginative analogy in poetic justice, where ethical behaviour (and in Clarissa's case, laborious suffering) is supposed to act as an advance on later material recompense, works to provide a conceptual framework for calculable exchanges, exchanges that render market practices causally coherent and predictable, thereby stabilizing shifting standards of value. In this sense, narrative was essential to imagining the mechanisms of capitalist exchange in a manner roughly equivalent to a "*Fortunate Ending's*" insistence on a correspondence between action and punishment or reward.¹⁴ One way in which this correspondence was imagined, to take a concrete example, was in the early formation of systems of credit and obligation. Recent studies in economic history show that well into the eighteenth century, early credit and exchange networks relied in large part on interpersonal relationships founded on mutual trust in order to facilitate markets, since money itself tended to be in short supply. For early financiers, to speak of credit meant also to speak of moral probity, to indicate that they believed (*credo*) a person was trustworthy.¹⁵ Financial transactions were rarely just the trading of commodities then, but also—and essentially—tied to the circulation of family and personal reputations, which is to say, behavioural narratives extended over time. Poetic justice is, along these lines, the literary supplement to the normalizing processes necessary to make markets work—a process of exchange that marries moral and commercial conduct in order to efficiently derive calculable, profitable results. "Good" actions are the narratological commodity-form of labour, advanced against future wages from on high. After all, poetic justice appear to be precisely this retributive imposition of the Fates upon the narrative of human agency.

Similarly, Fredric Jameson claims that one feature of the early capitalist experience was that shifting standards of value were rendered concrete in the form of narratives, cast as events and therefore tied to accounts of trans-generational piety and fiscal prudence, but also—crucially, for my argument—financial windfall and misfortune.¹⁶ In such narratives, the (theological and Machiavellian) language of providence and fortune become

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Ideology of the Text," in *Situations of Theory*, vol. 1, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971–1986* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 52.

¹⁵ See Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

¹⁶ Jameson, 52.

vital discursive modes of representation, naming the causally obscure in order to make sense of action. How does Robinson Crusoe amass a small fortune? Precisely by marrying the assiduous Protestant scruples embodied in primitive accumulation to a discourse of providential blessing—fortune here does double etymological duty. So if one way to read the early novel is as an attempt to understand the interrelations between commerce and agency during a period in which both the novel's generic conventions and capitalist social conventions are under cultural negotiation, "providence" and "fate" become ways for causality to be understood as new and unrecognizable market practices emerge, practices as yet not codified by the repetition of collective social routine. Thrust into new forms of collectivity, moral agents revert to archaic concepts (like providence, fortune, and fate) in order to make sense of causality when antecedent causes prove obscure; perhaps paradoxically therefore, the invocation of providence tends "to signal its absence" in such narratives, as Christian Thorne puts it.¹⁷ Fortune comes to name an epistemic threshold for the early novel, the point at which causality becomes seemingly irrational if not totally inscrutable, when causality must warrant reason from on high.¹⁸

But in *Clarissa*, the truth is yet more complex. For, as the 1751 postscript suggests, well into the novel's development and rise to cultural dominance, this archaic model of providence—in which "fortune substitutes for causality"¹⁹—is undergoing fundamental changes, becoming increasingly theorized as immanently economical, to Richardson's dismay. So, while for the early modern novel providence named that which was causally unfamiliar in modern commercial practice, it later—under the guise of "sceptical" poetic justice—figured a controversial new way of understanding moral behaviour in terms of an economics of capitalist exchange. The crucial point of difference here is that far from merely naming the unintelligible or simply substituting for causality—as it did a generation earlier—providence during the period of Richardson's composition of *Clarissa* (unlike fortune, perhaps),²⁰ was actively employed in order to

¹⁷ Christian Thorne, "Providence in the Early Novel, or Accident If You Please," *Modern Language Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2003): 335.

¹⁸ Thorne, 325–26.

¹⁹ Thorne, 326.

²⁰ Thorne notes, rightly in my view, that "fortune" comes to figure the sceptical, Machiavellian response to providence in the eighteenth-century novel as

make philosophical sense of economies of exchange. For Cibber and the likeminded readers that Richardson worked to rebuff, providence was the mechanism that guaranteed the novel's intelligibility, what rendered its moral and financial rewards rational, which is to say poetically just—not merely what effaced its unintelligible causal connections. What is key here is the way in which this critique works as a generic modality for Richardson; so although it is tempting to reduce his tragic project to one of pure explication, into merely a doctrinal exercise in the content of his religious narrative, in *Clarissa*, Richardson attacked the very formal structure of this providential model. That is, he called into question attempts to reconcile the anomalous, the very exceptionality of a “catastrophe,” back into the tidiness of a balanced moral economy of efficient causes. *Clarissa* contests the emerging model of providential economy on both fronts: in the sexual violence directed against his heroine within the text, and the false model of moral recompense that would have been furthered by a pat comic ending. This is, in its deepest sense, what it meant for him to write a Christian tragedy; beyond the moralizing plan of pious reform, the author found himself working out a generic counterargument against this sceptical model.

Before turning to Richardson's use of genre, however, there remains a prior historical question: how was it that *Clarissa*'s readers had come to assume that the heroine's actions warranted a poetically just, which is to say benevolently providential, end? How might we characterize this emerging logic of exchange? If terms like “fortune” and “providence” named registers of causal opacity in the early novel, how did they come to name causal efficiency only fifty years later? Intellectual historians have noted the way in which shifts in theological models of providence during the period gradually took on the character of an objectified economy even as they articulated a mutually beneficial morality based on just such a series of self-interested causes and exchanges. Of course the concept that God ordered society towards benevolent ends was in circulation well before the optimists and natural philosophers of the modern period, but what emerged during this time was an increasingly complex understanding of the role of the human to better account for early

narratives become gradually more immanently causal and less particularly God-directed (341). My argument here suggests, however, that according to Richardson providence had itself also become entangled in a certain sceptical problem that sought to rationalize the philosophy of causality.

psychologies of self-interest and a burgeoning mercantilism.²¹ Providential models of the political and social increasingly come to view God's purposes as immanent, knowable causes within the sphere of human behaviour. In contrast to older (more Catholic) models, Protestant doctrines of providence during this period take on the character of a Newtonian principle, rationally directing finite causes according to universal laws.²²

Yet contrary to the historical narrative that tells of the desecularization of Western culture during the period, a vision of providential economy arises first within the discourses of eighteenth-century religious thinking in Britain. So, for a thinker like Bishop Richard Cumberland, self-interested moral agency is not threatening to public welfare, but rather designed to further it. A contemporary of the Cambridge Platonists, Cumberland argued in *De Legibus Naturae* (1672; translated into English under the title *A Treatise of the Laws of Nature*, 1727) that the natural order was profoundly mechanistic and harmonious, ordered towards certain predictably beneficial ends and long-term equilibrium.²³ Where he departed from previous lines of argumentation was in his extension of this ordered economic view of the natural to the social sphere of the new ethics. In the same way that the series of natural causes brought about a harmony, so individual human actions "preserve the Whole" and contribute to the larger providential scope of human history. Cumberland concedes that such actions may indeed be self-interested, but nevertheless maintains that the moral agent is simultaneously directed by a rational benevolence seeking the "publick good." Causality in both moral and commercial spheres is by this means fused, figured in terms of harmoniously orchestrated divine ends. Already then, a picture of the social realm of political economy

²¹ This section is indebted to the recent work of Taylor, who attempts to account for this shift as part of his theoretical exploration of contemporary secularism (157–269); on this point in particular, see 176–85. See also Jacob Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order: An Essay in Intellectual History* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1972), 55.

²² John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 26–47.

²³ Milton Myers, *The Soul of Modern Economic Man: Ideas of Self-Interest, Thomas Hobbes to Adam Smith* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 41. Myers notes that Cumberland imagined the mechanized physical world as a series of finely tuned vortices, in mutual tension: "The outstanding feature of the operation of Cumberland's 'whole material system' might be described as one of reciprocation and accommodation. Parts move towards and then away from each other in a pattern of mutual adaptation and adjustment" (41).

emerges in which the “invisible hand” is nevertheless implicit, given the importance placed on its design and the inherently programmed character of moral agency.²⁴

For Lovelace, the reconciliation of self-interested agency and long-term public benefit ironically serves to underwrite his cynical detachment from moral obligation. In a letter to Belford, he draws on the controversial satire of Bernard Mandeville to justify his own self-interested behaviour in the pursuit of Clarissa, claiming: “At worst, I am entirely within my worthy friend Mandeville’s assertion, that *private vices are public benefits*” (5:222). As Christopher Hill points out, such actions by the novel’s antagonist are “sordidly financial,” framed in the terms of economic transaction so that his machinations (what he suggestively calls “providences”)²⁵ result in ownership of Clarissa “by deed of purchase and settlement.”²⁶ Lovelace thus ignores the stopgap measure put in place by moralists who advocated the central importance of moral sensibility. While passages such as these suggest that he comes to recognize the economic character of his social existence as providentially designed for the public good, he contemptuously disregards the sentimental foundation upon which moralists such as the Third Earl of Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson grounded their systems and sought to prevent such abuses. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, for example, retained the mechanistic aspects of modern providential design while adopting Stoic notions of an innately sympathetic impulse or “moral sense” in humankind.²⁷ This impulse exists in tandem with notions of the natural benefits of self-interest that fuel the

²⁴ As Stephen Darwall puts it, by the time Francis Hutcheson develops his system of moral philosophy, popular opinion held that “the thorough use of theoretical reason leads simultaneously to universal benevolence and to calm self-love, and God has further orchestrated their coincidence.” See Darwall, “Norm and Normativity,” in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2:1002.

²⁵ Considering the importance placed on the contested term “providence,” it is perhaps pregnant that Lovelace’s use of this word is amended from the original “precautionaries” in the third edition. Subsequent editions maintain the authorial correction, a point previously unnoticed in the critical literature that is nevertheless provocative. See Richardson, *Clarissa* (1751), 5:160.

²⁶ Christopher Hill, “Clarissa Harlowe and Her Times,” *Essays in Criticism* 4, no. 4 (1955): 323.

²⁷ Taylor, 246; Milbank, 28–31; see also Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1982), 321–27.

broader good of the commercial sector. For Shaftesbury, the morality of everyday life takes on the structure of a transaction in which calculation assumes a central role: “[it is] philosophy to inquire where, and in what respect one may be most a loser, which are the greatest gains, the most profitable exchanges, since everything in this world goes by exchange.”²⁸

It is very possible that Richardson’s earlier work in *Pamela* reflects this strain of thought, received through friends such as Patrick Delany, for whom Richardson had printed sermons that claimed: “Rewards and Punishments are the great springs and wheels that set the whole world in motion.”²⁹ Church moralists like Bishop Joseph Butler attempted to reclaim such psychologies of self-interest as part of a properly Anglican theology; however Butler’s psychology was much more overtly apologetic in character, seeking to rationalize the design of this moral economy as a *proof* of God’s omnibenevolence.³⁰ While he made allowances for social evil, he also argued that benevolence and enlightened self-interest were identical, thereby producing simultaneous civic and personal goods. In this way, some church figures underwrote a moral economy in which virtuous action entailed a certain recompense for the actor. Providence was figured as a series of causes and exchanges within the social. This logic of exchange was thus baptized in the religious discourse of the period forming in ways that—were they transmuted to the novel—would have been understood as part of the fashion for poetic justice.

Max Weber, in slightly different terms, famously suggested a sociological connection of this sort between early capitalism and what he calls the Protestant ethic. According to him, Protestantism’s distinct emphasis on the “vocational calling” as a central feature of the believer’s faith tended to result in a this-worldly asceticism, a rationalization of one’s time and labour as an extension of religious moral practice that he termed the “spirit of capitalism.” As a result, certain forms of low-church theology that stressed prudence, austerity, and self-disciplined

²⁸ Viner, 69–70.

²⁹ James Louis Fortuna, *“The Unsearchable Wisdom of God”: A Study of Providence in Richardson’s “Pamela”* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1980), 47. Delany, “The Duty of Masters to Their Servants,” in *Twenty Sermons Upon Social Duties and Their Opposite Vices* (London: J. and J. Rivington, 1750), 228.

³⁰ Taylor, 225; Myers, 59–60.

labour were amenable to the rise of capitalism.³¹ From the very inception of capital then, political economics was an extension of a certain theological behaviourism. Weber goes on to stress that since the private subject's own religious certainty of their inclusion in the ecclesial body is the initial motivation behind this "spirit," financial success was paramount for the labouring believer, the logical result of labour as a religious practice.³² In the fledgling rationalization of capital, providence is realized in profit. Because providence, election, and capital are often unproblematically fixed together in his argument, trial narratives become mere precursors to comedies of profit. Unlike Richardson, who defended the capriciousness of fate, Weber's reading of Job stresses its poetically just ending and therefore curiously elides the biblical figure's suffering.³³ Job's material restoration at the book's close becomes in his view a sort of founding moment for capital, resolving (temporary) financial misfortune by again yoking material well-being with its pietistic moral counterpart, a narrative structure Richardson held to in *Pamela. Clarissa*, by contrast, radicalizes the providential against the Weberian view, and thereby self-consciously queries how moral action is yoked providentially to discourses of credit, obligation, and rewards both personal and financial for Pamela.

The logic of poetic justice is in some senses crystallized in the "Virtue Rewarded" subtitle of Richardson's first novel, about which he remarked: "[Extraordinary providences] have many times happened ... for the *punishing* of obstinate Sinners, and for the *Deliverance* of such as were Religious, in answer to their Prayers." Moreover, he claimed at the end of the first edition of *Pamela* that "Providence never fails to reward ... God will, in his own good Time, extricate [the virtuous reduced to a low estate], by means unforeseen, out of their present Difficulties, and reward them with Benefits unhop'd for."³⁴ Unlike in *Clarissa's*

³¹ Max Weber, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism with Other Writings on the Rise of the West*, trans. Stephen Kalberg, 4th ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 61–159.

³² Weber claims that "work without rest in a vocational calling was recommended as the best possible means to acquire the self-confidence that one belonged among the elect" (111).

³³ Weber, 146–47.

³⁴ Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, ed. Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (1740; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 501.

case, however, these rewards seemed to eschew the problematic obstacle of death; Pamela would be extricated from her difficulties—Clarissa would have to embrace them. To this apologetic strain of the providential economic tradition, Clarissa was therefore quite an anomalous figure. Her reward, Richardson maintained, broke the balanced order of these moral economies.

Moreover, philosophical and theological interventions of this sort had the unintended—and perhaps to modern readers counterintuitive—consequence of gradually narrowing the reach of distinctively Christian theological concepts, breeding the very scepticism that so alarmed Richardson. In his study of modern social imaginaries, Charles Taylor argues that by the middle of the eighteenth century, one sees the effect of these providential models in the way people understood their social existence in progressively more deistic terms, and correspondingly, the proper role of the state. Since the social was ever more objectively rational and organized by models of providential exchange, devoid of the particular categories of “grace,” “the miraculous,” and other revelatory categories of exception that previously played a central part in Western thought, political economy becomes the sphere of normalized discipline. The state is thus understood to be the (divinely sanctioned) regulator of the means of production, the political guarantor of financial equilibrium.³⁵ As the “economy” becomes a more concrete social realm, providential deists fashioned a notion of natural order that nevertheless maintained the ideological valence of the religious, albeit now in a reified, mechanistic theodicy of the economic.³⁶ For Richardson, the preference for poetic justice seemed to be one of the practices that accompanied this deistic shift, and he linked the public’s failure to honour Christian doctrinal tenets (for instance, “the great doctrines of the Gospel” and the importance of self-sacrifice) to this view of an immanent moral justice (8:279). In the postscript, he complained that such views marked a new “dispensation” that departed from the biblical tradition, appealing instead to this logic of exchange out of a growing scepticism of the particulars of the faith. My point here is that poetic

³⁵ Donna T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 146–49.

³⁶ See Taylor, 176–85, 228–30; and Milbank, 37–41. Hill notes that predestination in its strong, Reformed Protestant forms was a predominantly middle- and lower-class theology (327). One may see here a compromise between such views and those of the higher classes.

justice, as the literary manifestation of these shifting models of providential economy, works in quite the same way: it reflects a simultaneous rationalization of Christian ethics even as it relied on essentially theologically deistic precepts by which to legitimate itself. Under this dispensation, *Clarissa* argues, the domestic and public spheres she inhabits threaten to obliterate Christian *caritas*. And on the contrary, she finds herself the victim of violence enacted through various forms of sovereign power (the Harlowe patriarchs, Lovelace, Mrs Sinclair, debtor's prison) operating according to accepted notions of decorum, obligation, and, in the latter case, debt policy.

Even before the rape, then, Clarissa is figured as the one to whom violence is directed with relative impunity, herself the object of unjust persecution and abstraction, eventually inhabiting a legal void that somehow binds her even though it can offer her little means to recourse. Part of what Richardson is doing in *Clarissa*, suggests Ruth Perry, is enacting the larger problem of "the dispossession of daughters in the new capitalist dispensation, and the daughters' difficulty in finding a place in the world to belong to once this dispossession has taken effect."³⁷ As production shifts from subsistence to capitalist modes, Clarissa comes to inhabit a space (both legally and literally in the tawdry settings of her various captivities) between families and therefore between identities. In reality though, the process of dispossession is simply the final, formal acknowledgment of Clarissa's diminished status in the family. Her refusal to marry Solmes is problematic not only because it is financially inconvenient for the ascendant Harlowes, as Perry argues, but also because it reveals the violence undergirding Clarissa's "responsibilities to the family," responsibilities that are financial obligations to ensure the consolidation of James Harlowe's estate. One can hear her naïveté when she writes, astonished, to Anna Howe of her disappointment upon being told: "If I mean to show my duty and obedience, I must show it their way, not my own" (95). Similarly, the uproar over her grandfather's will exposes the violence of which Clarissa's dispossession is only the formal acknowledgment, initiating a power grab amongst the family. It is not so much that Clarissa hands away her rights to her inheritance but that she saves face by preserving the fiction

³⁷ Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture, 1748–1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 76.

of relinquishing it freely instead of having it wrested from her by a litigious family. Her sincere desire to maintain the family cohesion only serves to highlight Anna's deafness to her generosity in the latter's repeated calls to sue them for her rights. Similarly, the Harlowes' threats are rendered literal in scenes where their coercion exposes itself, when violence can no longer be diverted through the transmission of a letter, and James's will to subdue Clarissa gives rise to domestic physical abuse.³⁸ Here it seems, as some scholars have pointed out, that Richardson likely drew on Hobbesian thought for his representations of the Harlowes and Lovelace. For Thomas Hobbes and Mr Harlowe alike, the family functions as a monarchy with the father as absolute sovereign.³⁹ While this is no doubt true, Richardson is also making clear the way in which economic transactions now structure earlier modes of domesticity; his heroine is abstracted into the potentiality of a faceless numerical value, a representational object of commodity exchange.

Yet by repeating this violence in the household, the Harlowe patriarchs illustrate concrete social shifts that attended the objectification of the economy. Here I offer one important example. The move to mercantile capitalism entailed, among other effects, that poverty and class distinctions were understood as divinely ordained so that charitable giving went from being considered "mere justice," to being considered special acts of merciful dispensation, a giving out of a person's surplus towards socially engineered causes instead of a broader redistribution of resources.⁴⁰

³⁸ Letter 33 (Penguin edition, letter 78) provides a number of examples of this dynamic. See esp. *Clarissa* (1751), 2:194–97, 204, 215–16.

³⁹ Jocelyn Harris, "Protean Lovelace," in *Passion and Virtue*, ed. David Blewett (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 95. Compare Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. Macpherson (New York and London: Penguin, 1985), 257.

⁴⁰ Andrews, 146–49. See also Viner, 86–113 ("The Providential Origin of Social Inequality"). Viner argues that by the mid-eighteenth century, social theorists had adapted older doctrines of "The Great Chain of Being" to the newer, economic views of a providential "nature" that I have presented here, so that not only was social inequality providentially ordained, but also poverty was understood as self-inflicted and thus immune to broad social remedy. James Thompson, drawing on Joyce Appleby's *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), characterizes the decline in distribution models of charity as naturally coincident with the objectification of the economy: "Significant advances in food production led explanations of economic events away from harvests (good or bad) to an objectified system of exchange and such concepts as balance of trade: 'disentangling the economy of sales and exchanges from

In the sphere of the domestic, by contrast, the accumulation of estates and the attendant annual income, as many scholars have noted, became an acceptable end for the household as indeed, for the state. In *Clarissa*, as Richardson made sure to point out, the Harlowes' plan to consolidate their landed interests with an eye towards class mobility throws the novel into motion (8:297). Yet, unlike her family and in particular Arabella, Clarissa resists these practices, instead redistributing God's wealth to the poor out of a responsibility to rectify the essential unfairness of economic distribution, a responsibility that recognized the fragile causality inherent in agrarian modes of production; it is no mistake that Clarissa, in negotiations with Lovelace, stipulates that this charity should go to those poor "whom *accident* has made so" (4:219, emphasis added). Instead of accumulating the surplus of her resources and collecting interest (as political economists, such as James Steuart, argued was essential to the vitality of the nation and, in particular, the middle class) she allocates it as charity to be redistributed, effectively refusing to acknowledge that the boundary of the family ends at the household and simultaneously repudiating the providential moral economy. John Milbank is helpful here since he illuminates the stakes of this shift for the understanding of philanthropy and the accretion of capital: "the preference for 'accumulating' the surplus, and not distributing it as charity, marks the refusal of the idea that the boundaries of 'the household' are, as in Christian familial conceptions of the social whole ('the household of faith') coterminous with the boundaries of the *polis*."⁴¹ Encapsulated in Clarissa's charitable giving then is not only the belief that the moral economy, if indeed it is economical, is fundamentally capricious and unpredictable, but also the functional negation of a properly secular "public" sphere to be cordoned off from "private" domesticity. Even from the beginning of the novel then, Clarissa's familial bonds extend to the wider boundaries of the parish, if not the city, and eventually grow to include Belford, Mrs Norton, Mrs Moore, Miss Rawlins, Mrs Bevis and others. As she tells Anna Howe, in a passage that highlights her refusal to fetishize the domestic: "In my opinion, the world is but one great family" (1:46).

the moral economy of production and sustenance,' away from concern with poor relief, wage and price regulation, ultimately toward abstract, objective, and mathematical models." Thompson, *Models of Value: Eighteenth-Century Political Economy and the Novel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 27.

⁴¹ Milbank, 35.

While in a sense this may seem to reinscribe a certain logic of economic equilibrium (since Clarissa, in her charity, seeks to balance the scales, as it were), it proceeds from a recognition that providence, according to Richardson, does not work like the market but rather proclaims itself as fundamentally unknowable and uncontrollable. Indeed, she acknowledges that providence is fraught with the possibility of catastrophe that repeatedly calls the household to reinstate justice in the face of personal tragedy. What Clarissa insists on here is the frailty of credit, that multivalent form of morality *cum* commerce tied most closely to predicting the future precisely because it is so jeopardized by that same future's opacity. She refuses to view the social as a market for purely rational exchange. And might we not extend this gesture then to its literary formalization? By repeatedly cancelling moral and financial debts, Clarissa destabilizes retributive economic *and* literary apparatuses. Her gift economy is itself a denial of the power of poetic justice to structure narrative as capitalist exchange.



For Richardson, the objectified providential model marked a failure to recognize this constitutive exception, the traumatic excess that cannot be definitively reconciled into the system. Nowhere is this more explicit than in Clarissa's recurring identification with Job, a figure that Jonathan Lamb suggests serves to illustrate the heroine's simultaneous exemplarity and exceptionality.⁴² He sees this ambiguity epigrammatically expressed in Lovelace's scoffing quotation of what becomes Clarissa's life-slogan after the rape: "Miss Harlowe, indeed, is the only woman in the world, I believe, that can say, in the words of her favorite Job (for I can quote a text as well as she), *But it is not so with me*" (7:145–46). The direct use of the verse appears earlier, however, in the unpublished—although privately circulated—*Meditations Collected from the Sacred Books* (1750) that purported to be the deathbed meditations of the dying Clarissa (five of which are printed as part of the text of *Clarissa*, albeit without editorial comment).⁴³

⁴² Jonathan Lamb, *The Rhetoric of Suffering: Reading the Book of Job in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 229.

⁴³ Richardson, *Meditations Collected from the Sacred Books ... Being Those Mentioned in the History of Clarissa as Drawn up by Her For Her Own Use To Each*

In an entry dated June 30 (as opposed to Lovelace's derisive appropriation of the text in late August), the Job text becomes the emblematic marker of her status as the one who suffers alone. Richardson's ingenious use of Job in *Clarissa* relies on a gesture of self-negating identification with the biblical figure whereby Clarissa's "impersonation of Job's curses means she does not curse: rather, she instances the fault of impatience in the very act of sidestepping it."⁴⁴ Job becomes a cipher for her pain; by utilizing the biblical book and its powerful cries of lament in the face of inexplicable injustice—even those cries that seem to indict God—Richardson enlists the power of the Job figure to his heroine's advantage.⁴⁵ The very same cries of impatient oppression that characterize the bitter dialogue of the book of Job are used in *Clarissa* as evidence of not only exemplary patience in the face of such suffering, but also her innocence.⁴⁶ As Terry Castle notes: "the scriptural passages Clarissa chooses have a metacritical function ... they comment, hermetically, on her own linguistic exploitation, and the essential uselessness of words except as tools of violence."⁴⁷

Nevertheless, for Richardson and his heroine, the biblical text remains a valuable source of regenerative power precisely because its words have the subversive potential to break the cycle of violence in which she finds herself. Her interpellation into the biblical narrative is paradoxically figured in Clarissa's letters as the moment of protest against the illusion of Lovelace's genteel world, the moment at which she embodies a counter-subjectivity that resists the grotesque violence of the novel—most of which is sublimated into the protocols of decorum and legality that are employed by the Harlowes. Clarissa's usage of Job gives her just this type of textual foothold, a place from which to stand against a public that no doubt saw themselves as Christian while inflicting systemic violence under the guise of bourgeois family values. More fundamentally however, the usage of Job in *Clarissa* lays bare a scandalous subversion of providence, of

of Which is Prefixed, A Short Historical Account, Connecting It With the Story (London: J. Osborn, 1750), viii. References are to this edition.

⁴⁴ Lamb, 237.

⁴⁵ The reference, of course, is to Terry Castle's influential reading of the novel in *Clarissa's Ciphers: Meaning and Disruption in Richardson's "Clarissa"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

⁴⁶ Lamb, 237.

⁴⁷ Castle, 130.

just the sort of logic of exchange to which Richardson's reading public and Clarissa's peers repeatedly appeal, and against which both figures are set. The figure of Job renders early capitalist principles of economic reward problematic, since it cuts against the fundamental principle that moral virtue in the marketplace reaps systemic benefits for all involved. For Job, as for Clarissa, virtue is devastatingly unprofitable; the promises of bourgeois exchange and "sweet commerce" are shown to be tragically illusory. As Lamb points out, the scandalous usage of Job lies in this split that inevitably persists between representational ideals and actual practice, between social norms and the anomalousness of particular individuals.⁴⁸ It is just this split that Clarissa comes to figure herself: an unresolved figure of causal exception. For precisely this reason, Slavoj Žižek has claimed that the Book of Job is the Ur-text of ideology critique: "laying bare the basic discursive strategies of legitimizing suffering." In *Clarissa*, the scandal of Job is the failure of poetic justice to reconcile moral economies, a failure to appropriately reward virtue and expose her suffering as intolerably meaningless.⁴⁹

As early as Bishop Warburton (who at one point wrote an unpublished preface to the novel), critics have read in the relationship between Lovelace and Clarissa a typological reactivation of Job's torment at the hands of a Satan.⁵⁰ Indeed, the figure of sovereign power is distilled in Lovelace's protean ability to be "at once lawmaker and lawbreaker," as Harris points out.⁵¹ This identification becomes clear even to Clarissa who says, almost immediately following the rape: "Oh Lovelace, you are Satan himself; or he helps you out in everything," recalling the Job text in which Satan is granted authority over the possessions, family and eventually, body of the patriarch (5:310). Similarly, in Clarissa's second meditation, the editor interposes the words of the psalmist: "*Take thy plague away from me*, says she as it is in the old translation. And might well she call Lovelace her plague" (*Meditations*, 4).⁵² What is most striking about

⁴⁸ Lamb explicates the scandal of Job in his introduction (1–17).

⁴⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 124–25.

⁵⁰ On the Warburton affair, see Eaves and Kimpel, 193–196; see also Lamb, 232–38.

⁵¹ Harris, 92.

⁵² The biblical reference that Clarissa and the editor draw from is Psalm 39:10.

Lovelace's treatment of Clarissa is the persistent suggestion (by Richardson and his heroine) that such treatment, while not exactly sanctioned, at least takes advantage of ambiguities in laws governing marriage, consent, and rape whereby the victimizer could receive protections precisely by appealing to law and social convention. After all, it is Clarissa's decision to leave with Lovelace that, producing the illusion of elopement, destroys her reputation beyond repair and leaves her with one option by which to legitimate herself: marriage. Lovelace hides behind English common law, which protected the rapist who married his victim by retroactively legitimizing sexual assault, "insisting that what looks like rape is, from a certain perspective, merely courtship."⁵³ What is important to note, for my argument here, is the manner in which the law functions like the subliminally violent decorum that demands Clarissa "give" her inheritance for the good of her family; the veil of legality allows the adversarial figure of Lovelace to perpetuate what Richardson identifies as a systemic cultural hostility towards women as commodities to be purchased. Indeed, what is most pernicious is that such a law operates simultaneously as a disavowal of the brutality waged against those who find themselves victimized in a similar manner. In this way (and much like John Milton) Richardson uses the dramatic structure of his text to reveal, gradually, the illusory qualities of his antagonist's charms. The reader is thus involved in a process of disillusionment with Lovelace that gradually (unmistakably, Richardson believed, *pace* William Warner) foregrounds and renders comprehensible his abuses. Likewise, Richardson can be said to enact the reader's disillusionment with the prospect of the reformation plot his readers clamoured for, revealing it to be, in actuality, a perpetuation of the societal ills of the period and a forced reinscription of the logic of exchange that had gained currency during the period.⁵⁴ This acute gesture can be seen, accordingly, as the type of realization that the 1751 postscript sought to justify in tandem with the author's avowed purpose of inculcating lost Christian values, a realization that Richardson was shocked to discover rarely occurred to a readership that applauded Lovelace.

⁵³ Sandra Macpherson, "Lovelace Ltd," *ELH* 65, no. 1 (1998): 108.

⁵⁴ Rosemary Blecher, "'Trial by what is contrary': Samuel Richardson and Christian Dialectic," in *Samuel Richardson: Passion and Prudence*, ed. Valerie Grosnever Myer (London: Vision Press, 1986), 100. Blecher argues that much like Milton, Richardson gradually reveals his chief antagonist's evils, allowing the former attractions of the Satanic Lovelace to slowly fade.

Although Richardson argued that Clarissa's reward was spiritual, he also meant his text to be socially effective and therefore brazenly political—cathartic according to biblical precepts of “*humble and modest, yet steady and useful, virtues.*” It was these virtues that Richardson argued had reached perfection in his heroine and would, if only taken seriously, bring about reformation in “British dominions” (8:298). This point is sometimes lost on critics who read *Clarissa* simply as a puritanical manual on bourgeois sexual ethics and miss the important fact that Richardson saw Clarissa's death as the necessary antidote to the reformation plot and, I am claiming, as intuitively positioned against the rationalized moral economy that drew on deistic notions of providence. Like Job, she frustrates her friends and readers, insisting that her acceptance of the suffering to which she is subjected paradoxically signals her refusal to suffer in a more appropriate manner. One hears echoes of Job (the singular “perfect and upright man”) in Clarissa's defiance to Lovelace: “That I have not *deserved* the evils I have met with is my consolation” (5:200).⁵⁵ Her argument breaks this system of causes and exchanges precisely because she recognizes it as undeserved and also her burden to carry. Much like Job refuses to admit a secret transgression that has brought disaster upon him, Clarissa will not legitimate Lovelace's violence by toeing the party line and accepting a role in her sexual “ruin.”

This is, in other words, what Clarissa's death finally accomplishes for the reader: it renders sin legible. Her death makes literal what was already, in some sense, true: that she was a ruined commodity according to the economic logic structuring the contemporary social imaginary. No longer are her motives, her purity, enough; to the marriage and credit markets, so intimately beholden to that ephemeral quality—“reputation”—she is factory seconds.⁵⁶ Yet despite this, what Clarissa does, in effect, is refuse to play by the rules, refuse to legitimate the cruelty perpetrated against her, first through psychological coercion, then in the brutal appropriation of her body as property and indiscriminate object of violence, and finally the ideological glossing over of such violence in a poetically just ending. This will not be a marriage plot for Richardson or his heroine, despite

⁵⁵ See Job 1:8.

⁵⁶ Hill, 332.

Lovelace's hopes. On this point, the latter epitomizes the reader who demands a marriage plot and a comic end. "But after all," he tells Belford: "it would be very whimsical, would it not, if all my plots and contrivances should end in wedlock? What a punishment would this come out to be, upon myself too, that all this while I have been plundering my own treasury? ... I prithee, now exert thyself to find out my Clarissa Harlowe, that I may make a LOVELACE of her" (6:231).⁵⁷ Likewise, at an earlier point he suggests writing a comedy, *The Quarrelsome Lovers*, the title ironically portraying the perverse misunderstanding of those who fail to recognize the stakes for women in Clarissa's position. The marriage plot becomes an enactment of this disavowed violence, for to employ it as easy reward for Clarissa was to say ominously with Lovelace: "marriage covers all."⁵⁸ The reader who demands a comic ending is tone deaf in the same way, refusing to acknowledge a violence that masquerades as genteel marital convention. Clarissa, unlike the laughing Lovelace, understands that the author's experiment in Christian tragedy requires her to subject herself to one last outbreak of violence. But crucially, neither will she turn this violence outward, a point the editor of the *Meditations* is keen to stress. As a result, in the second meditation, after noting that Lovelace can be seen as the plague that haunts the heroine, he hastens to note: "but yet she neither execrates him, nor the wicked women, with whom she is detained by violence." And then, as if to underline the point, he makes explicit the fundamentally religious nature of this radical pardon: "CLARISSA WAS A CHRISTIAN" (*Meditations*, 4). Because of this, Richardson argues, she also metonymically takes upon herself the burden of this cultural aggression and attempts (perhaps naively, but nonetheless heroically) to become a vehicle for atonement. As she tells Belford towards the end of her life: "'Tis a choice comfort, Mr. Belford, at the winding-up of our short story, to be able to say I have rather *suffered* injuries *myself*, than *offered* them to *others*. I bless God, though I have been unhappy as the *world* deems it, and once I thought more so than at present I do; yet have I not wilfully made any one creature so" (7:401–2). Read from this vantage point, Clarissa's death attempts a Christian

⁵⁷ The comic plot imagined by Lovelace is nicely captured in vol. 6, letters 57–58 of *Clarissa* (1751) (letters 325–26 of the Penguin edition).

⁵⁸ Richardson, *Clarissa* (Penguin edition), 331.

containment of violence, appropriating the Job story and its Christological valence in a willed act of kenotic self-emptying for the sake of the community.⁵⁹ Whereas the use of the biblical wisdom tradition allows Richardson to mount a theodicy, the more explicit usage of the gospel story implies a certain social action, a turning of the cheek in protest. Richardson thereby sees himself as offering a counterexample to a society experiencing a “general depravity,” in which, to once again refer to the postscript that figures centrally here, “self-denial and mortification [have been] blotted out of the catalogue of christian virtue” (8:279).

Discussions of tragic form are replayed in the text by the manner in which Richardson upholds Clarissa’s preference for “sacred precedents” against Lovelace’s usage of classical and modern sources of inspiration when framing the novel’s narrative arc. Against the Job model that Clarissa understands herself to be re-enacting, Lovelace casts himself as a latter day Aeneas, Alexander, and Julius Caesar.⁶⁰ Richardson nicely subverts the Virgilian myth of imperial beginnings by having his satanic antagonist hold to the fantasy that, compared to Aeneas, he has done little wrong: “Let me tell thee upon the whole, that neither the Queen of Carthage, nor the Queen of Scots, would have thought they had any reason to complain of cruelty, had they been used no worse than I have used the queen of my heart” (7:5). Similarly, Lovelace is likened to Tarquin in the text, in a discussion with Belford in which he seeks to justify himself by arguing that he cannot be held responsible for Clarissa’s death. Referring to the myth of Lucretia, he reasons that she is an exemplary figure, “a single wonder” in his words, by virtue of her extreme piety and willingness to commit suicide. Richardson made sure to exonerate Clarissa of the charge of suicide; Belford, for instance, records a conversation

⁵⁹ See esp. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979). See also Rita Goldberg, *Sex and Enlightenment: Women in Richardson and Diderot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 106–18. Keymer notes that *Meditations* makes the typological importance of Richardson’s argument quite central to understanding Clarissa’s voluntary death in this light. See Keymer, “Richardson’s *Meditations*: Clarissa’s *Clarissa*,” in *Samuel Richardson: Tercentenary Essays*, ed. Margaret Anne Doody and Peter Sabor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 95.

⁶⁰ Jocelyn Harris, “Richardson: Original or Learned Genius?,” in *Samuel Richardson: Tercentenary Essays*, 191.

in which Clarissa questions her doctor on how her life might be prolonged (7:256). She is both innocent of her rape and her death, in other words, fully implicating Lovelace by breaking out of the confines of the pagan models he wishes to impose upon her. In other cases, and notably in meditation 17 (dated 17 August), Richardson makes explicit contrasts between the penitence of his heroine (which is genuine while also without fault) and the sentimental tragedies of Nicholas Rowe. This occasion in the *Meditations* elicits a mystical contemplation of the meaning of true penitence, issuing finally in a concern for others that recalls the words of Jesus: “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Rowe’s Calista is faulty therefore, because her penitence, in the words of Belford, “is nothing else but rage, insolence, and scorn.” Her penitence is consequently a function of sublimated violent revenge; Belford sees in her the figure for whom tragedy functions under a logic of rewards and punishments (7:122–23). Here again, it seems Richardson blocks any attempt to rationalize poetic justice—even under the guise of neoclassical revenge.

His distinctive project to fashion a (truly providential) Christian tragedy thereby repeatedly frustrates attempts to read the novel in a manner that was amenable to the late preference for poetic justice. *Clarissa* eschews both revenge and comic resolution precisely because Richardson sees in his tragedy a model for social interaction and cultural reformation based on the reclamation of orthodox Christian ideals of charity, grace, and exception. Lovelace’s preference for comedy is thus the natural ideological outgrowth of the heterodox “dispensation”: “I believe, generally speaking, that all the men of our cast are of my mind—They love not any tragedies but those in which they themselves act the parts of tyrants and executioners; and afraid to trust themselves with serious and solemn reflections, run to comedies, to laugh away the distresses they have occasioned, and to find examples of as immoral men as themselves” (4:142). Yet, Lovelace ultimately cannot extricate himself from the tragic plot of *Clarissa* in which he finds himself entangled. His catastrophe is inevitably that of the readers, since we are all subjected to the spectacle of Richardson’s heroine wasting slowly away. What the author finally does is provide a pleasing anguish; he refuses to allow us to look away, which is what makes the religious streak

that runs through his postscript so relevant. If it is, as he argues, that “HEAVEN *only* could reward” Clarissa’s virtue, then the door is opened to a comic ending that makes good on the cultural pressure for reformation and a return to the antiquated models of providence that the 1751 postscript implicitly argues for. Yet, and this seems to be the rub, *Clarissa* can only open the comic possibility if one accepts Richardson’s radically providential religious system—a providence that is, like in the story of Job, devoid of clear reasoning and vehemently opposed to (merely) human notions of justice. The postscript presents the novel as ultimately nothing less than a narrative theodicy.

And does not this, after all, get at the heart of what the postscript’s explication of tragedy does for Richardson? It shifts the onus onto the unbeliever by naming a crisis in knowing with certainty. The problem with tragedy, Richardson ultimately argues, boils down to an epistemic one, a problem tied to discerning the new symbolic social practices of commerce, exchange, and justice in the capitalist dispensation and the life hereafter. Proponents of the poetically just ending had mistakenly attempted to normalize and theorize Clarissa’s virtue so that her death could be reckoned a meaningful exchange. But Richardson’s tragedy troubles this because it short-circuits the calculation necessary to determine the relation of actions and outcomes, forcing his contemporary readers to question if suffering is as it appears and therefore (to recall to the language of the 1751 postscript) how “the dispensations of Providence are justified”—which is to say how moral behaviour is bound to meaning and causality (8:360). In this sense, tragedy for Richardson functions in a manner analogous to the Kantian sublime. His tragic third act formalizes this “momentary suspension of meaning that elevates the subject” through terror, beyond terror.⁶¹ “Providence” becomes a way for him to navigate these discursive limits by displacing choice from the social subject to the divine who, in this moment of dreadful agency, renders human calculation impotent if not absurd. Providence becomes Lacan’s *das Ding*—the terrible, “impenetrable Thing.”⁶²

⁶¹ Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute; or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso, 2000), 158.

⁶² This is Žižek’s phrasing (*The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 124). On the meaning of *Das Ding* in psychoanalytic thought, see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar Of Jacques Lacan: Book VII, The Ethics Of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 43–84.

Perhaps with some irony then, the epistemic crisis formalized generically in *Clarissa* only finds an answer, Richardson maintained, by an act of faith; the novel only made “sense,” in other words, if one extended theological credit to the providential hope of the Christian afterlife. This is where we need to continue to apply critical pressure to the etymological factors that link credit as a form of monetary expression with credit as a form of ideological and religious belief. And while the temptation, of course, is to venture a guess on which set of concepts precedes the other, in *Clarissa* at least, the moral economy and capitalist logics of exchange are mutually constitutive discourses. Together, both discourses tried to manage causality during a period in which, for a variety of individuals, classes, and institutions, new social relations were still being imagined. Not easily separable during the eighteenth century, they arose together as twin modes of imagining and navigating the changing parameters of the social even as they relied on each other for theoretical clarification. *Clarissa*, as an experiment in genre, is an attempt at imagining a counter-discourse set against this new economy and its “society,” a tragedy in which the calculus of moral action embodied in conventional poetic justice was subjected to a radical, sacralized critique of ideology.

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