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Before I Read *Clarissa* I Was Nobody: Aspirational Reading and Samuel Richardson's Great Novel

When I first came across Richardson's eighteenth-century blockbuster, I was standing in a campus bookstore in Philadelphia in the late 1980s. I had just enrolled in graduate school, chiefly as a dodge. My escape was from a high school classroom in Chesapeake, Virginia, or, to be more accurate, from a hallway lined with classrooms through which I pushed a cart loaded with Bunsen burners and test-tube holders. As an itinerant science teacher, I rattled my tinker's cart of lab supplies into the classrooms of teachers who were standing duty in the lunchroom or dropping cigarette ash on vocabulary quizzes in the faculty lounge. The me that stood in the bookstore in Philadelphia was ecstatic at having managed to swap my lab cart for a book satchel. Farewell to the boy who called me "Miss Tabasco"; adieu to the girl who carved initials into her forearm; good riddance to adolescent *Sturm und Drang*—I had achieved the cool remove of higher learning.

The bookstore was crowded, and I snatched paperbacks with abandon, working my way down the shelf of books earmarked for the seminar in which I had enrolled. *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders*, *The Man of Feeling*—I was grabbing without paying much attention. A month before, I had received a notice from the course instructor who advised students to begin reading in advance, an admonition I took as seriously as a professional weight lifter would heed a warning about the strenuousness of beachball aerobics. Reading was my leisure activity; I had no fear of being left behind.

The last item on the shelf was a book with the size and heft of a two-pound sack of flour, a Penguin Classics edition suffering

from elephantiasis. I dropped my other books and started pawing through the one thousand five hundred thirty-four pages of Angus Ross's magisterial but reasonably priced edition of *Clarissa*. I knelt in the aisle and marveled at the weight of this book. The back cover boiled Richardson's novel down to a one-sentence plot summary, as if to rebuff the casual reader by denying the pleasure of surprise. Gazing into Richardson's novel, I saw myself as a creature deluded by false confidence, and my eyes had trouble focusing on the 10-point print. I reassembled my gathered pyramid of books and proceeded to the checkout line with *Clarissa* serving as the monumental foundation stone. Then, a chastened being, I began my new intellectual career.

The Penguin paperback edition of *Clarissa* represents a grand experiment in book production, a test to see how many pages can be glued to a thin cardboard spine. There are bigger paperback books—the greater Orlando phone book springs to mind—but no other paperback novel has such a commanding shelf presence. On its spine, the Penguin *Clarissa* showcases a smaller version of the front cover art—a miniature version of Joseph Highmore's portrait of Clarissa's family. Unlike most book spine art, which tends to zoom in on the most alluring detail of the full frontal art work in a thumbnail square, the spinal Highmore provides a wider-angle view than the portrait's book front rendition. The Harlowe family cowers before the villainous Lovelace on both front and spine, but in the smaller version Clarissa's dress—which is of the voluminous hip-extending style that makes a woman look like she is transporting a sofa—billows out to its full extent.

But even the estimable Penguin edition does not encompass all of *Clarissa*, just all of the first edition. When I first read *Clarissa* as a graduate student, I went rummaging around in the dustier shelving reaches of a university library in order to find the section of *Clarissa* to which Angus Ross tantalizingly alludes while explaining why he chose to republish the first edition of *Clarissa* instead of the third edition in which Richardson strove to temper the appeal of his villain Lovelace and to enhance the sanctity of Clarissa so that readers would stop moaning about the two not winding up married. If I am to find fault with Angus Ross—and I do this hesitantly and deferentially—it is not because he crammed seven or eight svelte volumes into one corpulent book,

since in so doing he made *Clarissa* available to the masses. No, the only reason I find fault with the Penguin edition is because Ross was too much of a purist: he reproduced the first edition, he said, because it is “appreciably shorter, often livelier” and because “to a large extent the added material seems relatively inert.”

Inert? When I first read *Clarissa* as a graduate student, nothing could have seemed less inert than Letter 208. Letter 208, my first favorite letter, is arguably the most lurid letter in the novel since it contains Lovelace’s outrageous flight of malevolent fancy against Clarissa’s best friend Anna Howe. Lovelace plans for his coterie of rakes to carry out a triple rape of Anna Howe, her mother, and their maidservant during a voyage to the Isle of Wight. To his friend Belford, Lovelace writes:

I know it will be hard weather: I *know* it will: And before there can be the least suspicion of the matter, we shall be in sight of Guernsey, Jersey, Dieppe, Cherbourg, or any-whither on the French coast that it shall please us to agree with the winds to blow us: And then, securing the footman, and the women being separated, one of us, according to lots that may be cast, shall overcome, either by persuasion or force, the maid-servant: That will be no hard task; and she is a likely wench [I have seen her often]: One, Mrs. Howe; nor can there be much difficulty there; for she is full of health and life, and has been long a Widow: Another [*That*, says the princely Lion, must be *I!*] the saucy Daughter; who will be too much frightened to make great resistance [*Violent* spirits, in that Sex, are seldom *true* spirits—’Tis but where they *can*—]: And after beating about the coast for three or four days for recreation’s sake, and to make sure work, and till we see our sullen birds begin to eat and sip, we will set them all ashore where it will be most convenient; sell the vessel . . . and pursue our travels, and tarry abroad till all is hushed up.

When I first read this letter, which Richardson wrote for the first edition but then omitted in a half-hearted gesture toward brevity, I was sitting cross-legged on the floor in the library stacks. Someone lurking in the next aisle might have heard a sharp intake of breath quickly followed by a disdainful snorting noise as I got to the part where Lovelace imagines himself going on trial for the crime:

[B]eing a handsome fellow, I shall have a dozen or two of young maidens, all dressed in white, go to Court to beg my life—And what a pretty shew they will make, with their white hoods, white gowns, white petticoats, white scarves, white gloves, kneeling for me, with

their white handkerchiefs at their eyes, in two pretty rows, as Majesty walks thro' them, and nods my pardon for their sakes!

The breeziness of Lovelace's sexual violence and the creepiness of his self-regard were probably enhanced by the experience of reading in a library where the custodial staff announced the approach of closing time by dousing the lights in the stacks. This sudden descent into darkness would be followed by cursing from the vicinity of the open carrels where readers had lost track of time.

Even though I was in danger of stumbling into a book trolley in the pitch-blackness, I had not come looking for this missing excerpt out of solidarity with Clarissa, selecting this passage from all the others due to a shared sense of vulnerability. I singled out this most shocking letter because I liked shocking books, and so had perversely homed in on the scene that is most out of keeping with Richardson's oft-stated moral objective. According to Richardson, "[A]musement should be considered as little more than the vehicle to the more necessary *instruction*." When Richardson titled his novel *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady: Comprehending the Most Important Concerns of Private Life, And Particularly Showing the Distresses That May Attend the Misconduct Both of Parents and Children in Relation to Marriage*, he wasn't anticipating that some misguided graduate student would skim through the moral admonishments and head straight to the triple rape. "[I]f you were to read Richardson for the story," Samuel Johnson famously declared, "your impatience would be so much fretted that you would hang yourself." Johnson went on to insist, "[Y]ou must read him for the sentiment, and consider the story as only giving occasion to the sentiment." Balderdash, I might have said, if I'd been a bold graduate student, unafraid to disagree with the man who defined "balderdash" for eighteenth-century readers. The first time I read *Clarissa*, I read it like I was reading a Stephen King novel, and was only fretted for so long as it took me to come up with a seminar paper topic.

As a vulgar reader of *Clarissa*, a reader who sought out the most salacious missing letter, I was inadvertently participating in a debate among more astute readers of *Clarissa* which had grown heated in the years just before I entered graduate school. Richardson's novel enjoyed something of a critical moment in

the early 1980s, with several of the brightest minds in eighteenth-century studies fixing their high beams on *Clarissa*. The dust jacket of Terry Eagleton's 1982 *The Rape of Clarissa* announced Eagleton's ambition to "reclaim Richardson for our time"; in Eagleton's analysis, Richardson's novel presented the story of the downtrodden oppressed (Clarissa) rising up against the aristocratic oppressor (Lovelace). *Clarissa*, for Eagleton, was a shot fired by the restive middle class against the corrupt and depleted nobility. In Terry Castle's *Clarissa's Ciphers*, also published in 1982, the focus was on Clarissa's suffering at the hands of Lovelace, and on her ingenious efforts to thwart his vile machinations. Both critics positioned themselves on the side of the angels, seeing it as their duty to counter a whole raft of past critics who, when they were not blaming the victim (Richard Cohen: "[A]t a deep and primitive level there is a sense in which Clarissa both asks and deserves to be raped"), were describing the rape of Clarissa with a clinical hauteur. Although I counted Dorothy Van Ghent's "On Clarissa," among the best essays written on the novel, I did not want to pitch my critical tent in the camp of someone who had written:

The central event of the novel, over which the interminable series of letters hovers so cherishingly, is, considered in the abstract, a singularly thin and unrewarding piece of action—the deflowering of a young lady—and one which scarcely seems to deserve the universal uproar it provokes in the book.

There was a take-back-the-night fervor to Eagleton's and Castle's discussions of Clarissa's rape; they were particularly incensed by William Warner's celebration of Lovelace as "the heroic practitioner of a Nietzschean style of subversive interpretation" and by his insistence that the rape of Clarissa had become "something extravagant, overdetermined, pleasurable." My interest in a letter that revolved around an imagined triple rape might seem to bear out Warner's point, but I avoided giving the appearance of fraternizing with the devil by focusing on Anna Howe, who, I argued, had been inexplicably and unjustifiably neglected by critics busy writing about Clarissa's suffering or Lovelace's subversion of language. What's all this about Clarissa and Lovelace, I demanded in my seminar paper. Why isn't anyone paying any attention to Clarissa's best friend, the character who gets the whole novel

going by suggesting that Clarissa “write in so full a manner as may gratify those who know not so much of [her] affairs,” who even requests a copy of the preamble to the Harlowe grandfather’s will so that she can send it to her nosy Aunt Harman who is very desirous to see it? Inspired by the critic Judith Wilt, who had set bow ties spinning by daring to suggest that Lovelace hadn’t been up to the job, that the rape had been carried out by his female accomplices, I used the triple rape scene to accuse Richardson of constructing an insidiously recurring leitmotif of incestuously tinged female relationships. Or at least I think I did. I preserved whatever I had to say about *Clarissa* on a 5-inch floppy disk, now an indecipherable hieroglyph. Everything I really need to know I learned in graduate school—but unfortunately I can no longer open the file.

I tend to romanticize the community of fellow readers I joined in graduate school, but it is fair to say that not all of them shared my commitment to Richardson. Less dedicated members of my eighteenth-century seminar might have been aided and abetted by George Sherburn, a Harvard professor who pared *Clarissa* down to the size of a book one could assign to undergraduates: 517 pages. Sherburn apparently decided his students needed a version of Richardson’s novel that would not cause them to lose heart at first glimpse. This is speculation on my part, and I am attributing to Sherburn’s students a shirking behavior of which I have been guilty myself in past confrontations with super-sized novels. In turning Samuel Richardson’s magnum opus into a biggish book, Sherburn was looking out for the interests of indolent readers like myself, but he was also following the lead of an earlier abridger, the editor of the 1756 *Paths of Virtue Delineated*, known, by subtitle, as *The History in Miniature of the Celebrated Pamela, Clarissa Harlowe and Sir Charles Grandison, Familiarised and Adapted to the Capacities of Youth*. Sherburn’s estimation of the capacities of youth was generous in comparison; this more aggressive abridger turned the nineteen volumes of Richardson’s three novels into a 232-page duodecimo. A writer for the *Critical Review* was glad to find Richardson’s books “now reduced to such a size as may fit them for every hand.”

Whatever approval Sherburn’s edition initially met with, it was ultimately drowned out by the hissing and booping of Margaret Anne Doody and Florian Stuber in the normally tranquil pages of

Modern Language Studies. "Sherburn's abridgment should no longer continue to masquerade as *Clarissa* in the canon of English literature," railed these critics in 1988, bolstered by the recent publication of the Penguin paperback. They went on to accuse the by-then dead Sherburn of sloppy scholarship, slovenliness in proofreading, deception, ruthless and clumsy editing, prudery, censorship, and the hostile trivialization of a great work of Western literature. They said that the flaws they found in Sherburn's edition were "symptomatic of a deep disease not subject to remedy" and that his version of *Clarissa* "should never be taught in any reputable college or university."

My secondhand copy of Sherburn's edition bears out their judgment. Unread by me, but purchased from a used book bin for \$2.45 at some indeterminate moment in my distant reader's past, it was first the property of one Fred Warren who engraved his name on the cover in blue ballpoint pen, and what kind of a person, past the age of seven and a half, writes his name on a paperback's front cover instead of inside the front cover or on the half-title page or even on the title page? Despite evidence of this book's seedy provenance, and despite a constitutional aversion to abridgments in general, I do not, however, get exercised by Sherburn's edition. Could the same scholar who wrote *The Early Popularity of Milton's Minor Poems* have become fired with a Machiavellian zeal when, late in his career, he got around to abridging *Clarissa*? If he "slashed out paragraphs without giving any attention to the fabric of meaning," maybe this was because he couldn't make it to the novel's bolt end without losing track of some yardage. Clearly his heart wasn't in it. "*Clarissa* is one of the very greatest novels ever written," he wrote, according to two of Richardson's biographers. He went on to lament, "It cannot be improved by any sort of *abridgment*. I don't believe you can like what I have done. I don't myself."

No one who reads all of *Clarissa* can like what Sherburn did because reading all of *Clarissa*, as opposed to skimming quickly through the first several volumes in which everything that happens could (according to one of Richardson's contemporaries) be condensed into a single page, is a test of intellectual fortitude, a way of separating the chosen people from the churls who go about incising their names into paperback book covers, of distinguishing mature readers from youth with their limited capacities.

As a person who finds few opportunities to feel smugly superior as I wander the halls of academe, or as I scarf goldfish crackers at department parties, I can count on my having read *Clarissa* (five times!) partly to compensate for my not having read *Ulysses* (which I carried across Europe on my honeymoon, and in which an obsolete franc note marks my failure to read past page twenty). When a visiting scholar who claims to be a specialist in the eighteenth century confides that he has never actually read *Clarissa*, I feel like lurching backward into the nonalcoholic punch bowl and shouting, "WHAT!! Never read *Clarissa*?" But instead I smile understandingly and turn my attention to the spinach dip. Whenever I read the latest academic effort to explain the rise of the novel in new terms, that is, to unseat Ian Watt, who wrote *The Rise of the Novel* in 1957, I notice that Richardson's *Pamela* gets thirty-five pages while *Clarissa* gets only the occasional passing reference, and I think, "Here is another person who hasn't read *Clarissa*." Leslie Fiedler wrote about *Clarissa* at length; in fact, *Clarissa* was the most important precursor text for his study *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Fiedler regretted that of Richardson's three novels, only *Pamela* is still read, "the other two now left to gather dust in libraries, though all Europe once wept over *Clarissa*." He went on to castigate "a living authority on the American novel" for wrongly characterizing *Clarissa* as wicked, calling the critic's ignorance of the novel unpardonable. But Leslie Fiedler, just before wagging his finger at his fellow critic's error, ended a summary of the novel's plot by wrongly claiming that Lovelace is killed in a duel by his closest friend. Fiedler let the mistake stand in his book's second edition, either because he had been humbled by his own scholarly error and was determined to let future generations know how the mighty had fallen, or because he was uncowed by the tiny number of people who had read to the end of *Clarissa* and so were likely to notice his mistake.

These days, I read *Clarissa* so that I can teach the novel to undergraduates. I justify teaching a whole class on *Clarissa*, urging students through the novel at the rate of one hundred pages per week, by making grandiose pedagogical claims in my course description. I say I will use the novel as a window onto eighteenth-century culture; I suggest its critical reception will allow me to delineate the major schools of twentieth-century

literary theory. But that's just to impress the curriculum committee. The way I draw undergraduates in is by suggesting they will be initiated into the exclusive coterie of people who have read *Clarissa* in its entirety. You wouldn't think that this kind of bald elitist appeal would play very well at a state university in Iowa. My students are geographically unassuming. When asked to say where they hail from on the first day of classes, they mumble the names of their hometowns, and even when I try to whip up some feeling of civic pride—"Washington? the town with the new outdoor pool? with the giant slide and the tilty buckets?"—they still defer to the kids from the suburbs of Chicago. It can be a humbling experience to be an English major at the University of Iowa, to arrive with your reputation as a high school poet or prize-winning editorialist behind you, lured by the distant twinkle of the Writers' Workshop, only to find yourself taking "Reading Short Stories" in a grim classroom with misspelled signage: "Please do not adjust thermostat. If to hot or cold call maintenance."

It is usually too cold when I start teaching *Clarissa*. It is January in the Middle West and people are sliding across the iced campus walkways, their faces freezing into death grimaces whenever a stiff wind gusts off the river. Inside the classroom, it takes several weeks of cheerleading to convince students that Richardson is worth reading, and I am not above trying to impress them with his mechanical achievement, that he wrote a sixteen hundred-page closely typed novel in the days before typewriter, fountain pen, or rollerball. I do not make them trim their own goose quills and dip them in ink, but I dwell on Richardson's manual fortitude whenever possible. "Our author had a most ready pen," wrote Anna Barbauld, who edited Richardson's letters. "Indeed, it was seldom out of his hand, and this readiness, with the early habit of writing letters, made him take pleasure in an extensive correspondence, with which he filled the interstices of a busy day." My students fill the interstices of a busy day by watching "The Simpsons," donating plasma for cash, and drinking excessively at local bars. I ask them to write about the exact circumstances in which they read *Clarissa*, wanting to make a point about the difficulty of reading *Clarissa* at this particular moment in time, when one could, instead, be playing video games or shopping on-line. In this way I bear witness to the

student who reads *Clarissa* at a truck stop diner with an attached Harley-Davidson dealership. This student works out the power hierarchy in the Harlowe family while eating gravy biscuits amidst long haulers, then tucks his copy of *Clarissa* under his arm so he can peruse the Harley belt buckles next door. Another student writes of reading *Clarissa* in the Arby's at the Old Capitol Mall: "It's quiet but not too quiet. Plus they have really good milkshakes. Many times I've enjoyed *Clarissa* and a Jamocha shake." Still another student reads *Clarissa* in the commons area of the student union, with her "very distracting & talkative boyfriend & the music & TV blaring." Richardson's first novel, *Pamela*, inspired a cult of readers who used the book to signal each other at pleasure gardens, flashing its cover suggestively as they passed each other in the lamplit walkways. "All that read were his readers," wrote Anna Barbauld. "Even at Ranelagh . . . it was usual for ladies to hold up the volumes of *Pamela* to one another, to shew they had got the book that everyone was talking of." Although I ask students to write about where they read *Clarissa* in order to highlight the difficulties faced by the serious student of Richardson, their descriptions allow me to imagine them as a secret society bound together by the black and yellow cover of the Penguin *Clarissa*. At semester's end, one student writes, "I became so engrossed with this book that after reading what I had to for the week, I went out to the bars, but came back to read more before I went to bed." There is the occasional naysayer—"I loathe *Clarissa*. I never want to see it again"—but the secret society of *Clarissa* readers are not put off by even the most fervent expressions of disdain. Over the course of the semester, many of them can be found in the smoking section of the Country Kitchen because, by one account, that is where the most interesting people sit. "If I needed a break," wrote one Country Kitchen *Clarissa* reader, "I would eavesdrop on the conversations of people with piercings."

My students read for the plot not the sentiment, and when one of them, inevitably, bothers to read the back book cover and finds out that some book designer at Penguin has killed the surprise, he becomes seriously sullen, sulking at the periphery of the classroom, next to the nonadjustable heater which is chugging along like Mike Mulligan's steam shovel even though crocuses are blooming outside (to hot! to hot!). There's always one student in the room who knows that *Clarissa* gets raped and who

also knows what happens next (I won't ruin it for the non-*Clarissa* readers—if you buy the Penguin edition, be prepared to clap a book jacket on the cover). But this knowing student is kind enough not to spoil it for his classmates who, in any event, sail right past the rape without realizing it has happened. In the most famous letter in the novel, on the 883rd page of the Penguin edition, Richardson communicates the rape of Clarissa by having Lovelace write:

And now, Belford, I can go no farther. The affair is over. Clarissa lives.
And I am

Your humble servant,
R. Lovelace

My students generally come to class after reading this passage with no idea that something momentous has occurred. They are initially resentful that, after having dutifully read 883 pages, they have been given so slight an account of the novel's central event. It is almost as if Orson Welles, instead of lingering over the sled at the end of *Citizen Kane*, had opted instead, to put an advertisement for Rosebud sleds on a distant billboard in the corner of the screen. We talk about the contrast between this elliptical little letter and all the wordy letters that precede it, about why an author whose characters write at so great a length—a stickler for verisimilitude once proved that these characters could not have written so much and still have had time to live the events they describe—would be so reticent. My students come around to the view that Richardson's refusal to describe the rape of Clarissa, or at least his refusal of detail directly after the event has transpired, is a stroke of brilliance, that the rape is all the more shocking for its not being immediately described. Sometimes someone brings up Hitchcock's method of increasing suspense by letting the viewer's imagination fill in what the director refrains from depicting in gory detail. OK, sometimes I bring up Hitchcock since everyone has seen *Psycho*. No matter—we are suddenly a community of readers with strongly held opinions about the rape of Clarissa. Before the semester is over, a few of my students become evangelical in their enthusiasm for the novel and try to bring others into Richardson's fold. One of them hails me at the Handimart fuel pump in order to report that her sister has tried to read *Clarissa*. "How far did she get?" I ask, trying not to let gasoline drip on my shoes.

My students are part of the wired generation that is leaving librarians with no one to shush, and *Clarissa* might seem immune to the kind of digital innovations that are making it possible to get a college degree without checking out a book from the library. Yet Richardson's behemoth has been well served by the technological advance guard. The good people at Literature Online stand poised to transmit a machine-readable transcript of either the 1748 *Clarissa* (all 5,914 kilobytes of it) or the 1751 third edition (with its 935 extra kilobytes). You, with the laptop computer and the internet link—you could be downloading *Clarissa* at this very minute. You, there, checking out the Rookwood auction on eBay—why aren't you reading one of the greatest European literary works of all time, the high-water mark of the English novel? Inspired by the success of Oprah reading groups, several municipalities have called on their citizenry to join together in a communal reading effort. A year or two ago, Chicagoans were urged to read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*; Boiseans were coaxed to take up Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*. In Chicago, lapel pins were issued so that *Mockingbird* readers could identify each other in supermarket lines or across crowded buses and feel licensed to express their views of Boo Radley to complete strangers. There is a general unassailable consensus that reading is a good thing, that people who read together will exhibit a heightened civility, an increased brotherly love, an enhanced vocabulary.

When I see city officials focus their reading initiatives on a book like Harper Lee's, a good book, but let's face it, not much of a challenge even for the junior high schoolers to whom it is regularly assigned, I see a missed opportunity for bold governmental action. If everyone agrees it is a good thing to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* en masse, how much greater a thing would it be to tackle the longest book in the English language on a city-wide basis? Reading *Clarissa* requires stiffened resolve, increased fortitude, heightened stick-to-itiveness—all qualities that would strengthen and improve a city's populace. Commuting distances would seem to shrink if car-poolers were consulting Angus Ross's glossary for the meaning of "pad-nag" or "padusoy." Cocktail parties would sizzle if martini-drinkers ventured strong opinions about epistolarity. Mine is an immodest, but by no means facetious, proposal. If Oprah favors books that feature sympathetic

heroines who learn one of Life's Important Lessons, why is Oprah not leading her viewers to the book recommended by the 1762 *Treatise on the Religious Education of Daughters*, whose author found *Clarissa* "admirably calculated to instruct and entertain"? Richardson, could he come back from the dead, would be a delightful talk show guest, eager to oblige Oprah with a walking tour of his writing grotto. Witness the testimony of a Mr. Reich of Leipsic who once set out for England "purely with a view of cultivating a personal acquaintance with so great a man as Mr. Samuel Richardson," and who was subsequently served chocolate and encouraged to partake of the fruits of Richardson's garden, and who, when he came to rest in Richardson's grotto, kissed the esteemed author's inkhorn. Richardson was not the most camera-ready author, being by his own description, short and rather plump, with one hand generally in his bosom, and the other holding a cane which he leaned upon under the skirts of his coat as a stay against frequent tremors. But Richardson more than compensated for any physical deficits by his willingness to court female readers, and by his tirelessness in discussing his own work. As Barbauld tactfully reports, "In the circle of his admirers, his own works occupied, naturally, a large share of conversation; and he had not the will, nor perhaps the variety of knowledge necessary to turn it on other topics."

Richardson was an insecure author, in constant need of bolstering, and he tolerated his readers' editorializing in exchange for their abundant praise. He worried constantly over his novel's excessive length, writing to his friend Edward Young, "[I] am such a sorry pruner, tho' greatly luxuriant, that I am apt to add three pages for one I take away!" Sarah Fielding's 1749 *Remarks on Clarissa* provided a gratifying response to the author's concern. "As to the length of the story," Fielding wrote in the guise of a *Clarissa* reader named Bellario, "I fancy that Complaint arises from the great Earnestness the characters inspire the Reader with to know the Event; and on a second Reading may vanish."

To read *Clarissa* once may be considered a duty, but to read *Clarissa* twice might be considered, especially in our day, a solipsistic retreat from the actual world. Leigh Hunt, walled around with all the comfort and protection his library could provide, wrote, "I entrench myself in my books equally against sorrow and the weather." If one wants to build a fortress with

books, the Penguin *Clarissa* makes a handy brick, but Richardson's previous readers saw the book as a buttress rather than a retreat. Mary Shelley read *Clarissa* in 1816, then read the Italian translation three years later. In between readings, she lived through the suicide of her half-sister Fanny, the birth and death of her daughter Clara, and the death of her three-year-old son. In the journal entry that directly precedes Shelley's mention of reading *Clarissa* in Italian, she notes her husband's birthday, going on to write, "We have now lived five years together and if all the events of the five years were blotted out I might be happy—but to have won & then cruelly have lost the associations of five years is not an accident to which the human mind can bend without much suffering." For Mary Shelley, Richardson's novel served as sustenance rather than diversion. No novel allowed her an escape from the loss of two children, but *Clarissa*'s suffering may have helped Shelley endure her own enormous grief. Richardson's refusal to grant his readers a happy ending was, for Mary Shelley, a companionable acknowledgment of human anguish.

I do not turn to *Clarissa* in times of duress, but then I am an unregenerate reader, too enthralled by Lovelace's legerdemain to linger over Richardson's edifying sentiments. Richardson wrote of his attempt to reach readers like myself, of "pursuing to their *closets* those who fly from the *pulpit*; and there, under the gay air, and captivating semblance of a *Novel*, tempting them to the perusal of many a persuasive sermon." He gathered *A Collection of the Moral and Instructive Sentiments, Maxims, Cautions, and Reflexions, Contained in the Histories of Pamela, Clarissa, and Sir Charles Grandison*, cross-listing the sentiments with citations for volume and page "both in Octavo and Twelves" so that readers could go directly to the most edifying excerpts. The purpose of gathering sustaining quotes from the novel, according to the Preface to this compilation, was to "animate man to act up to his genuine greatness," and I hope, when I next turn the pages of *Clarissa*, to be the kind of reader who does not pass lightly over this passage which Richardson culls from volume two:

To *know* we are happy, and not to leave it to after-reflection to look back upon that preferable Past with a heavy and self-accusing heart, is the highest of human felicities.

Volume two is arguably the most tedious volume in *Clarissa*; I am accustomed to reading through it at great speed.

I would like to be a better reader of *Clarissa*, but the day may never come when I will not anticipate with greatest pleasure those moments in the novel when Lovelace prances about in a diabolical passion like Cyril Richard playing Captain Hook. I may persist in loving Lovelace like Percy Shelley loved Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, against the author's intentions and counter to the work's noble aims. I may continue to love *Clarissa* partly for the same petty reason that I like *The Princess Casamassima*—because I've read it and not everyone has. In moments of honest personal inventory, I realize that I may never distinguish myself among readers of *Clarissa*, but, still, here we all are: Samuel Johnson, William Hazlitt, Mary Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Babington Macaulay, Henry James, Virginia Woolf—along with Dan from Council Bluffs, Jessica from Cedar Rapids, and me.

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