

Judith Pascoe

English 545

Anna Howe in absentia:

Richardson's Much-Imagined Nemesis

Judith Wilt, in a note to her suggestive reading of the rape scene in Clarissa, points to the lack of critical attention paid to Sinclair and her coterie. Wilt's essay goes far to correct this analytical dearth for the diabolical female figures of the novel, but another female figure of a far more uncertain though more central role still waits for the full wattage of critical attention to be cast on her, up to now, only partially illuminated role. Anna Howe, in the hands of the critics, has proven to be an endlessly malleable figure; she has been called a feminist, an antifeminist, a contributor to Clarissa's final triumph and an agent in her downfall. Most recently, for Terry Eagleton, she is a deconstructive sceptic, "submitting Clarissa's writing to a 'symptomatic' reading, sardonically detecting in its bland denials and cautious propieties the flickers of unconscious desire"(41). Seemingly, Anna Howe is a character for all critical seasons, but though she is alluded to in almost every study of the novel, the allusions are almost always glancing ones. Each new generation of

critics places this character in a particular (though varying) niche in relation to Clarissa and dispenses with her as it moves on to consider Clarissa herself in relation to Lovelace. Yet Richardson, with his sprinkling of intriguing bits of information about Anna's past and the extraordinary place he grants her in Lovelace's fantasy life, subverts such simple categorizing. It is instructive to consider the combination of vivid verbal presence and physical absence that is Anna Howe in the text and to privilege her relationship with Lovelace over her relationship with Clarissa in order to begin to understand Richardson's employment of this elliptical character. ^{why} _{"elliptical"?}

Anna Howe exists as a disembodied voice in Richardson's text; only Mr. Harlowe, a stock representation of male authority who exists almost entirely as an "angry countenance" (88) and a thundering voice (312), is granted a scantier physical presence. Janet Todd has noted that "[i]n Clarissa, character is often visibly expressed" (30) and certainly this is the case in the many and loving renditions of Clarissa's physical appearance and the excruciatingly graphic tableau of the dying Sinclair. But even characters whose physical presence is less revealing, male and female, are etched in corporality: Arabella Harlowe has "a plump, high-fed face" (60) and Lovelace excoriates Belford on the details of his dress. By contrast, though there are numerous testimonies to Anna Howe's character, any hint of her physical presence is limited to three fairly general comments. Clarissa attributes

to her friend "looks (so animated)" (41). Lovelace writes to Belford, "A sweet auburn beauty is Miss Howe" (864). And Colonel Morden, near the end of the novel writes of Anna Howe, "She is a fine graceful young lady" (1402).

Richardson limits Anna Howe's physical presence in the novel in other ways as well. Though the first half of the novel is structured as a dialogue in correspondence between two friends, what actually exists is a monologue by Clarissa intermittently and relatively infrequently interrupted by the letters of Anna Howe. In the early pages of the novel, Clarissa writes eleven letters within a six day period to Anna Howe's two. Such a one-sided flood of verbiage establishes the pattern for their correspondence. Though the importance of this scriptural repartee is suggested by the tenacity, in the early parts of the novel, with which it is pursued despite parental edict and Lovelace's preventive convolutions, Anna Howe's function is much more that of a reader than a writer, a listener for the hooves of the messenger, rather than an actor.

Richardson exacerbates this state of affairs in the second half of the novel, where Anna Howe is effectively silenced. As Lovelace is passed the baton of primary narrative shaper, Anna Howe neither hears from Clarissa nor is heard from for large expanses of time, perhaps the largest being a three week silencing of Clarissa between

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June 8th and June 28th and the Lovelace-prolonged absence of Anna Howe's letters from May 21st to July 5th. Even when Clarissa escapes the machinations of Lovelace near the end of the novel, the primacy and vitality of her correspondence with Anna Howe is never recovered. Anna Howe is transformed from an empowering friend, a kind of indefatigable Clarissa booster, to a drain on the invalid Clarissa's energies. Anna writes:

I cannot bear to look upon another hand instead of yours. My dear creature, send me a few lines, though ever so few, in your own hand, if possible--for they will revive my heart, especially if they can acquaint me of your amended health.

I expect your answer to my letter of the 13th. We all expect it with impatience. (1086)

Clarissa wearily replies, "You oppress me, my dearest Miss Howe, by your flaming, yet steady love" (1087). From here, Clarissa's responses to Anna's letters become less frequent and while Clarissa goes through her attenuated death throes, Anna Howe is placed at a double remove, shuttled off for a holiday at Yarmouth.

In writing of Richardson's relationship with his readers, Eagleton points out the mix of eroticism and sadism that comes to exist as "the author exults in pro-

mce
 longing his readers' suspense, slyly withholding a narrative outcome, manipulating their fears and affections" (27). Richardson's meting out of information to Anna Howe, the reader within the text, is even more parsimonious. As Clarissa dies, Anna Howe continues to expect her friend's next letter, frozen, like Penelope, in a posture of endless anticipation, effectively denied first hand access to Clarissa's greatest moment. Her final stance in relation to Clarissa is an exaggerated enactment of the role she has played all along; she waits, as she has waited throughout the novel, pleading in her last letter to Clarissa, "Let Rogers bring one line, I pray you" (1315).

Richardson undercuts this portrait of passivity, however, in a variety of ways, the most obvious being the freedom of opinion and volubility of expression he permits Clarissa's correspondent, primarily in the first half of the novel. More intriguing, though, are the hints of Anna Howe's past which he buries in the text. Early in the novel, Clarissa tantalizingly touches upon some past possibility of a liaison between her friend and her brother. She writes to Anna Howe:

Once, my dear, it was perhaps in your power to have moulded him [James Harlowe] as you pleased--Could you have been my sister!--Then had I a friend in a sister--But no wonder that

he don't love you now; who could nip in the bud, and that with a disdain, let me say, too much of a kin to his haughtiness, a passion that would not have wanted a fervour worthy of the object . . . (55)

The novel also contains allusions to a less acceptable episode in Anna Howe's past life, an echo of Clarissa's predicament, in which she narrowly avoided running off with a rake. Mrs. Harlowe first raises the ghost of this episode in writing to Mrs. Norton of Clarissa:

Would anybody ever have believed that such a young creature as this, who had by her advice saved even her over-lively friend from marrying a fop and a libertine, would herself have gone off with one of the vilest and most notorious of libertines? A man whose character she knew; and knew to be worse than his she saved her friend from . . . (585)

That the "over-lively friend" was indeed Miss Howe is confirmed soon after when Lovelace writes to Belford, ~~Thou wilt say to thyself by this time:~~ And can this proud and insolent girl be the same Miss Howe who sighed for George Colmar; and who, but for this her beloved friend, would have followed him in all his broken fortunes, when

he was obliged to quit the kingdom?" (635)

With these brush strokes of a past history, Richardson slightly expands Anna Howe's presence and complexity as a character, but it is only in Lovelace's mind that she truly takes on heft and power. After gaining physical control over Clarissa, Lovelace becomes increasingly preoccupied with her relationship with Miss Howe. In his letters to Belford, he moves back and forth between belittlement and aggrandizement of the power of their bond. He writes:

Silly little rogues! to walk out into by-paths on the strength of their own judgements!--when nothing but experience can teach them how to disappoint us, and learn them grandmother-wisdom! When they have it indeed, then may they sit down, like so many Casandras, and preach caution to others; who will as little mind them as they did their instructresses, whenever a fine handsome confident fellow, such a one as thou knowest who, comes cross them. (472)

But preceding and following this belittling comment, are others that point to Lovelace's increasing paranoia over Anna Howe's influence on Clarissa. He writes, "[I]t is owing to Miss Howe, in a great measure, that my beloved is so much upon her guard, and thinks so hardly of

me. And who can tell, as characters here are so tender, and some disguises so flimsy, what consequences might follow this undutiful correspondence?" (554) Of Anna Howe's letters, Lovelace writes, "Cursed, I may well call them-- Such abuses, Such virulence! Oh this little fury Miss Howe" (632) and "Plot, conjuration, sorcery, witchcraft, all going forward!" (633)

Lovelace projects onto Anna Howe all of his own deviousness and increasingly describes her using terms that in the rest of the novel are reserved for himself. He writes, "She has a confounded deal of wit and wants only a subject, to show as much roguery" (448) and ". . . that little devil had put Clarissa out of humour with me" (463).

Anna Howe becomes Lovelace's chief combatant in a mentally rehearsed siege against Clarissa. He takes to addressing and taunting her in his thoughts, and his struggle with Clarissa is paralleled by an imaginary duel with Anna Howe, of which the following exclamations are typical: "I think, Miss Howe--I think, said I to myself, every now and then as we walked, that thy wicked devices are superseded" (675). "Miss Howe, I defy thee, my dear--Mrs. Townsend!--who the devil are you?! (677)

Anna Howe's letters, for Lovelace, take on supreme importance; they become talismans which he handles and reads over and over, using them to fuel the fire of his wrath and propel him forward. In letters to Belford,

Lovelace repeatedly recalls the contents of the letters. He writes, "But I have once more steeled my heart. My vengeance is uppermost; for I have been re-perusing some of Miss Howe's virulence. The contempt they have both held me in, I cannot bear . . ." (694) Frequently debilitated by his actual encounters with Clarissa, he returns again and again to the paper presence of her friend. Anna Howe's efforts to sustain her friend become Lovelace's only reliable means of empowerment; they become armor in his anticipated confrontations with Clarissa. Janet Todd suggests that Anna rivals Lovelace for Clarissa, that she longs to take the place "not only of cruel father and mother but of lover as well" (48), but such a rivalry is much more evident in the neurotic rantings of Lovelace than in Anna's fairly consistent admonitions that Clarissa marry Lovelace. He uses her letters not only to fuel his anger but also to break down his resistance to marriage itself, writing, "[T]hen will I re-peruse Miss Howe's letters, and the transcripts from others of them; and give way to my aversion to the life of shackles: and then shall she be mine in my own way" (735). He grows frenzied in his obsessive preoccupation with Anna Howe's writing. "O Jack!" he writes, "I am sick to death, I pine, I die, for Miss Howe's next letter! I would bind, gag, strip, rob, and do anything but murder, to intercept

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it" (851).

Anna Howe becomes, at least in Lovelace's mind, the one factor he cannot control, so it is not surprising that he starts weaving elaborate fantasies of domination. The most harmless and humorous of these are his attempts to convince himself that Anna Howe is in love with him and thus under his spell. He writes:

And, truly, I must needs say they [Mrs. Moore and Miss Rawlins] have almost persuaded even me myself, that Miss Howe is actually in love with me. I have often been willing to hope this. And who knows but she may? . . . For am I not a smart fellow, and a rake? And do not your sprightly ladies love your smart fellows, and your rakes? And where is the wonder that the man who could engage the affections of Miss Harlowe should engage those of a lady . . . who would be honoured in being deemed her second?" (801)

Again, it is the suggestion of an assignation between Clarissa and Anna Howe that compels Lovelace to attack their friendship from both sides. Upon Anna Howe's promise to abandon her "better prospects" and "share fortunes" with Clarissa (860), Lovelace writes, "Charming romancer!--I must set about this girl, Jack. I have always

had hopes of a woman whose passions carry her into such attitudes!--Had I attacked Miss Howe first, her passions (inflamed and guided as I could have managed them) would have brought her into my lure in a fortnight" (863).

Richardson uses the perceived independence of Miss Howe as a goad to Lovelace's sense of inadequacy, causing him to conjure up fantasies of submission that grow increasingly vindictive and diabolical. Lovelace writes of Anna Howe

What pleasure should I have in breaking such a spirit! I should wish for her but for one month, in all I think. She would be too tame and spiritless for me after that. How sweetly pretty to see the two lovely friends, when humbled and tame, both sitting in the darkest corner of a room, arm in arm weeping and sobbing for each other!--And I their emperor, their then acknowledged emperor, reclined on a sophee, in the same room, Grand Signor-like, uncertain to which I should first throw out my handkerchief? (637)

Lovelace's most outrageous flight of malevolent fancy against Anna Howe, however, occurs in a letter which is omitted from the first edition (upon which the edition used in writing this essay was based), but added

to the third edition of the novel. (A copy of the complete letter is appended to this essay.) In this letter, Lovelace, devoid of the casuistic reasoning he uses to justify Clarissa's rape, plans the triple rape of Anna Howe, her mother, and their maid-servant by himself and his fellow rakes during a voyage to the Isle of Wight. He writes:

[O]ne 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 . . . we will set them all ashore where it will be most convenient . . ." (AMS edition 237)

In an extravagantly elaborate rendering, Lovelace carries this scenario to its conclusion in a London courthouse through which he and his cohorts stride like military heros^e and where, though they are convicted of the crime,

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a throng of women step forward in their defense. He writes:

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 show 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 his Majesty walks through them and nods my pardon for their sakes!" (AMS edition 242)

One has to wonder where Lovelace's maker stands in relation to this bizarre tableau of virgins begging for a rapist's life. Unlike many of the additions Richardson made to his novel to correct for over-fond readings of Lovelace, this letter was omitted from the first edition and so was originally part of the integral weave of Richardson's text (Ross 17). Any attempt to see this scene as a straightforward illustration of Lovelace's corruption must ignore an insidiously recurring leitmotif of incestuously tinged female relationships. Richardson repeatedly inserts into his novel vignettes of female alliances tested by male sexual designs and found unstable. The imagined corps of rapist-defending maidens prefigures the rape-supporting (or even enacting, according to Wilt)

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Reminds me of the
wife of Bath's Tale

Sinclair and her female cronies. In addition, the sexual conquest of the, according to Lovelace, willing mother and easily overcome daughter is echoed strangely in the actual (though again Lovelace[^]narrated) episode of the French marquise and her prudish sister-in-law. Lovelace describes having taken sexual advantage of the marquise while professing his love for her sister-in-law who was locked in a closet nearby and listening. Both women are portrayed as being content with the outcome of this debacle. "'My ingenuity obtained my pardon,'"[^] Lovelace writes, "the lady being unable to forbear laughing through the whole affair, to find both so uncommonly tricked; her gaoleress her prisoner, safe locked up, and as much pleased as either of us"[^] (675).

Richardson also uses Mrs. Howe in his series of abominations of sororal alliance. Richardson portrays the relationship between Anna Howe and her mother as having more in common with that found between sisters than mother and daughter and he taints this supposed sisterly relationship with sexual competition. Just as Mrs. Howe is portrayed as sexually avid in Lovelace's imagined scenario, she is portrayed in the "actual" realm of her daughter's letters as being more attracted to her daughter's suitor than Anna herself. Anna writes of her mother and Hickman, "My mamma's hand was kindly put into his, with a simpering altogether bridal" (274) and "in contemplation of my

sauciness, and what they both bear from it, they sigh away!-- and seem so mightily to compassionate each other that if pity be but one remove from love, I am in no danger, while they both are in a great deal and don't know it" (70).

The incestuous reverberations set stirring in encounters like those mentioned above reach their crescendo, finally, in a dream which Lovelace recounts. In the dream, Clarissa's bed partner, Mother H, is metamorphosed into Lovelace and a series of "scenes perpetually shifting" (922) similar to the actual rape of Clarissa result in a "smiling boy amply, even in her [Clarissa's] own opinion, rewarding the suffering mother" (922). But strangest of all, Lovelace continues:

Then the grandfather's estate yielded up, possession taken of it . . . Miss Howe her visitor; and (admirable! thrice admirable!) enabled to compare notes with her; a charming girl by the same father, to her friend's charming boy; who, as they grow up, in order to consolidate their mammas' friendships (for neither have dreams regard to consanguinity), intermarry; change names by Act of Parliament, to enjoy my estate-- and I know not what of the like incongruous stuff. (922)

Lovelace's dream presents in capsule form a number of tensions that permeate the novel. Lovelace's meta-

morphosis in the dream from Clarissa's female sleeping companion might well represent Lovelace's desire to supplant Anna Howe in Clarissa's affections, to be part of a pairing that tantalizes and disturbs him. In the dream, as in life, Lovelace resorts to brute sexuality and perceives Clarissa and Anna Howe as willing, or easily coerced, sexual partners. The two sides of the dream, Lovelace as woman and Lovelace as male conqueror parallel Richardson's schizophrenic use of Anna Howe in his novel. She is granted a verbal autonomy and closeness to Clarissa that Lovelace clearly envies, but in Richardson's narrative, like all the women in Lovelace's accounts and fantasies, she is barely an active force.

Morris Golden, in his synopsis of Anna Howe in Richardson's Characters, writes, "When she enters the action, she inevitably, with the best intentions, affects matters against Clarissa's interests" (53), blaming Anna for the role her kidnapped letters play in keeping Lovelace's courage up. More recently, Terry Castle, in her far more sophisticated analysis of the novel, claims that "Anna's implicit doomsaying is in fact conditioning Clarissa's doom" (79) and that her words instill in Clarissa "a subtle, but growing emotional entanglement with Lovelace" (78). Both critics overstate the amount of power Richardson allots to Anna on a grand scale; her actual range of activity is severely curtailed. Though Castle's

interpretation of Anna as exegete grants ^{Clarissa's correspondent} a subtle, unconscious power, this unconscious power is gainsaid by the fact that Anna's conscious attempts to shape her friend's behavior consistently go unheeded. Clarissa only fleetingly decides she will marry Lovelace, despite Anna's repeated insistence that this is her only option. And Anna's various plans for Clarissa's escape or offers of money are tentative enough that they are again and again squelched by Clarissa's mild refusals to involve her friend in trouble. Even in her final letter to Clarissa, when she is fully aware of Clarissa's immanent demise and tells her, "I will set out this moment, little as the encouragement is that you give me to do so!" (1348), Anna Howe still waits for a messenger to bring back a reply before she departs and so is denied a physical role in Clarissa's final hours. By contrast, and ironically, Belford, the parallel receptor of the novel, becomes an actor for Clarissa just before and following her death.

In his creation of Anna Howe, Richardson gives with one hand while taking away with the other. Though he does grant her a voice with which to comment on the inequities of relationships between the sexes, he effectively silences this voice before the novel is half over and even before ^{this point,} (it is silenced,) ^{her} allows this voice to have very little impact on the actions of ^{the} his heroine. Katherine Rogers, in her celebration of Richardson's feminist incli-

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nations, writes of Anna Howe, "She is not castigated for insubordination to her narrow-minded mother, her reluctance to marry Hickman, her declaration that she will not blindly obey him after marriage, or her unspoken hostility to men" (133). Finally, though, Anna Howe is relegated for the greatest part of the novel to being a pawn in the imaginative life of a rapist, granted little real power to effect any kind of change, and reduced to asking Belford for marital advice. Though Anna Howe is ostensibly Richardson's most openly feminist creation by virtue of her espousals, his handling of this character makes any claims for Clarissa as a feminist novel highly problematic. Though the novel ends with the birth of a new Clarissa, this hopeful occurrence is compromised by the fact that the new Mrs. Hickman is last seen in permanent, zombie-like homage to the old Clarissa, whom Richardson would not allow Anna Howe to outlive.

Course grade =
A

A- Judith, This is a superb essay, as far as it goes. It is beautifully written - full of verve and subtlety - and it produces extremely interesting evidence toward an analysis of Anna Howe. Finally, however, the conclusion seems a bit disappointing or undeveloped.

I'd have liked to see more extended treatment of the ways in which Anna's ^{power} is compromised. Actually, I think the ^{power} of your conclusion is linked over

to the fact that
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relations you tried female
and what you call R's "schizophrenic
along with its relation to the icon
and legitmotif. This is powerful
long way in illuminating it, but I

think you need to go further.
I also think that what you have
done is sufficiently compelling to
warrant that you do try to
push us away further and
perhaps, a try to outlet it.

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