“How am I pursu’d!”: Beyond Consent in Richardson’s

*Clarissa*

by

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Introduction
Clarissa, Or the History of a Young Lady is a novel of letters published by Samuel Richardson, “comprehending the most important concerns of private life”.¹ Richardson sets an agenda for his text: Clarissa is meant to comprehend, represent, and enforce his interpretation of eighteenth century private life in Britain through a sexual conflict between a bourgeois young lady and a male aristocratic rake. Apparently, to comprehend “private life” requires over fifteen hundred pages of text, several subsequent editions, and extensive contemporary commentary on the text available in Richardson’s correspondence.

Richardson has strict authorial intentions for his text that he asserts and undermines, publishing Clarissa anonymously and as an editor. The two main characters, Clarissa and Lovelace, virtuous maiden and rake-hero, are also the two main authorial voices. They write excessively, to the moment, in the time between Clarissa’s first seduction and her death. They write to each other and to their correspondents of the same sex, Ms. Howe and John Belford, and their descriptions of events become the body of the text. Clarissa and Lovelace’s letters depict private life intimately; as they “write to the moment,” the reader gains access to the character’s interiority. However, their letters also depict coercive social relations in the domestic sphere that jeopardizes intimacy and interiority, particularly for Clarissa. In the text, intimacy is manipulated, interiority is compromised by Richardson’s overbearing intentions, and the domestic sphere is violated by rape. The domestic space Clarissa occupies and Lovelace transgresses comprehends private life in all of it’s intimate coercions.

¹ Samuel Richardson, Clarissa: Or the History of a Young Lady (Penguin, 1985), 34.
How *Clarissa* dramatizes consent and rape is a central topic of scholarship on the novel. It concerns how the text is and should be read in the present, for it has important feminist implications: can *Clarissa* provide a model for feminity in the eighteenth century, within the white, English speaking Atlantic world? Does Richardson actually intend to critique overly authoritative political structures, which are dramatized here by the authoritative role of the patriarch? Does female subjectivity and feminine virtue, which constitutes that subjectivity, form the basis of bourgeois class power in the public sphere? And perhaps more importantly, is this actual power?

In my approach to answering these questions, I begin broadly and move between layers of specificity, centered on the problem of Clarissa’s consent. While I am concerned with how Richardson intends to portray Clarissa’s consent, and with how characters in the novel characterize Clarissa’s consent, I am more interested in how consent is read for outside the novel. I agree with Terry Castle, that the reader becomes the author of the text, remaking the novel each time it is read. Every reader interprets Clarissa’s consent differently, structuring their interpretation into their reading of the event of rape and Clarissa’s desire. In *Clarissa* particularly, the sheer scale of the novel, the unique intensity to detail, and the additional texts written around *Clarissa* by Richardson and his contemporaries defies any single reading of

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2 Terry Castle, *Clarissa’s Ciphers: Meaning and Disruption in Richardson’s “Clarissa”* (Cornell University Press, 1982), 149.
consent. Like the novel form itself, *Clarissa* invites and incorporates incompatible interpretations.\(^3\)

In this sense, Clarissa’s “direct consent” is impossible. Lovelace asks, “Do you think I expect *direct consent* from such a lover of forms as this lady is known to be”?\(^4\) He uses the improbability of Clarissa’s “direct consent” to justify the search for indirect signs of her consent, and what Lovelace reads for, he finds. In my thesis, I reject the search for Clarissa’s direct or indirect consent at all. The so-called presence or absence of Clarissa’s consent does not effect my interpretation of rape. Whether Clarissa was seduced or not, whether she maintained her virtue or not, whether she desired Lovelace or not, Clarissa was raped. However, what I find interesting is how unambiguous rape dramatizes ambiguous consent, and even does away with consent.

My first chapter addresses the problem of allegory and feminine interiority. I am particularly concerned with how the rape plot summons and compromises both readings of the text via Clarissa’s virtue. I consider the text as an allegory for the political authoritarianism of the home and state alongside the intense particularity of its characters. In their particularity, the novel’s characters perfect, exceed, and fail received seduction *topoi* and are instead just capable of signifying complex individual psychologies. However, Clarissa and Lovelace conform too greatly to their seduction models such that they also compromise a reading of the text as a psychological tale. After allegory and psychology, how can we read the novel? In my chapter, I look at

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\(^4\) Richardson, *Clarissa*, 837.
how bourgeois feminine virtue, embodied by Clarissa, troubles both readings and sets an agenda for how to interpret rape.

In my second chapter, I analyze how the strict (and false) binary of consent or resistance defines rape as the structuring event of the novel that determines the trial of bourgeois feminine virtue. I take rape as the event that structures the novel and read against the isolation of the event. I trouble the event of rape by examining the discursive absence of the rape scene and characters’ responses to rape. Rape is created as the structuring event that reframes Clarissa’s rape into two phases, “pursuit” and “response” in order to determine the presence of her consent. I examine the embodied consequences of rape for Clarissa and argue that rather than being an isolatable event, rape is a “state of being” that Clarissa lives with for the rest of the narrative. I argue that as a “state of being,” response to rape cannot be reduced to the simple question of consent or resistance.

In my third chapter, I examine Clarissa’s pursuit from the perspective of her response. I am concerned with how Clarissa’s response(s) to rape reframe the narrative events before the sexual union as pursuit post-rape. I argue that by framing Clarissa’s story within the structure of “pursuit” and “response,” Clarissa’s readers within and without the text retroactively read into Clarissa’s desire in order to determine the presence or absence of her consent. In this search, I argue that the readers within and without the text only find their own desire, mimicking Lovelacian forms of reading that justifies his rape plots. In this chapter, I argue against “reading for” Clarissa’s desire at all.

My study of the problem of desire in my third chapter paves the way to the conclusion of my thesis in which I suggest a different reading of the text that is not based on reading for Clarissa’s desire. I outline instead an approach to reading with Clarissa, that gives authority to her speech while it acknowledges the contradictory nature of her responses. I am particularly concerned with how we can read Clarissa as a victim of rape. I return to the problems of my first chapter: do we read the novel as a seduction allegory, or as a text that dramatizes psychological interiority? I consider how we can maintain the specificity of her case while reading Clarissa as an allegorical victim of seduction and rape. These are the questions I shall attempt to answer as I outline a way of reading that is with Clarissa.
Reading *Clarissa* as:

Political Allegory and Psychological Interiority
Samuel Richardson and his predecessor Eliza Haywood found a central insight that would have importance for Atlantic modernity: that “rape encodes and embodies a political story”. Rape “encodes” a political story by producing standards of behavior within and around that story; to “encode” is “to convert into a coded form, to be responsible for producing (a substance of behavior)”. Rape also “embodies” a political story by expressing ideas, behaviors, and psychological states already generated by that political story; to “embody” is to “be an expression of … an idea, quality, or feeling”. Rape produces and expresses a political story. In eighteenth century British seduction plots, that political story is primarily the problem of consent between king and subject, masculine and feminine desire. In this sense, the seduction plot acts as an allegory for the political authoritarianism of the state and the bourgeois home.

Consent and rape represent political allegory and summon psychological complexity. According to Frances Ferguson, there is a “particular resonance of rape for depicting individual psychology” because rape “dramatizes a problematic about the relationship between the body and the mind”. Ferguson’s article, “Rape and the Rise of the Novel,” demonstrates how the legal language around rape relies upon formal mental states to determine the presence or absence of consent, summoning the possibility of feminine interiority. In Clarissa, Richardson cultivates a desire for

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7 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v., “encode”.
8 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v., “embody”.
9 Doyle, Freedom’s Empire, 118.
10 Ibid., 118.
11 Frances Ferguson illustrates how legal proceeding around rape summons an investigation of individual psychology in her article, “Rape and the Rise of the Novel”. (Frances Ferguson, “Rape and the Rise of the Novel,” (Representations 20, 1987), 98).
access into the interior mind; “the very form of his novel structures our desire … for unveiling, for knowing the intimate inside via our location on the cultural outside, in dissent from the Harlowes”. Richardson’s ideology of writing, “writing to the moment,” takes for granted that such access is possible.

Doyle’s claim that “rape both encodes and embodies a political story” demonstrates the problem with the sexual contract as a narrative paradigm in eighteenth century domestic fiction. How can rape both “encode” and “embody,” produce and express behaviors that arise in political conflict? Can the seduction plot be both an allegory for political conflict and summon individual psychology? Wendy Lee asks, “After allegory, is character possible”? I add on to Lee’s question; after character, is allegory possible?

In this chapter, I examine allegorical and psychology as a way to read Clarissa. I also use this occasion to provide historical background to the text, in order to set up my close readings in my second and third chapter. Here, I argue that Richardson’s seduction plot incorporates incompatible differences like the novel form itself. Clarissa is both an allegory and a story of psychological complexity, and it is neither. Intimately related to these questions of genre is the problem of feminine virtue and particularly, Clarissa’s angelic virtue. I argue that the contradictions of both readings become clear when we examine Clarissa’s “angelic” or “true” virtue.
**Reading Clarissa as Allegory**

Many critics have read *Clarissa* allegorically. Christopher Hill argues that the social background of *Clarissa* is the developing bourgeoisie and its clash with the landed aristocracy. In particular, the bourgeoisie differed from the aristocracy in their sexual behavior.\(^{15}\) In seventeenth century Britain, aristocratic institutions were jeopardized by social revolutions and demographic decline, creating a crisis of succession.\(^{16}\) The rapidly changing conditions of British society in the seventeenth century could no longer be subscribed to God’s wrath as they had been in the past: “the experience of instability and mobility cease[d] to be translated so automatically to the fact of mentality, and [was] increasingly identified and addressed instead as a socio-historical condition of status inconsistency”.\(^{17}\) Aristocratic honor failed to unite the external world and internal moral order satisfactorily, producing and expressing a crisis of truth and a crisis of virtue which asked the question, how can the external material world of the senses represent the truth of the internal spirit?\(^{18}\) This question maps onto a related question that is specifically important for the bourgeois young lady; is the appearance of virtue “true,” or is it a corrupted (and inherently corrupt) representation of virtue?

If we consider the novel as an allegory, than Lovelace is important as his character embodies the general characteristics of the eighteenth century male rake. “Lovelace is an experienced, ruthless, single-minded ravager, a late representative of the cultural figure sometimes called the ‘rake-hero’ and closely associated with

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aristocratic entitlement”\textsuperscript{19} Similarly, Clarissa is important as she embodies the role of the bourgeois young lady. The bourgeois young lady is positively constituted by her virtue; “delicacy” and “notions of filial duty” referred in the eighteenth century to the young lady’s virtue and particularly, to her chastity. In his list of principle characters, Richardson calls Clarissa “a young lady of great delicacy, mistress of all the accomplishments, natural and acquired, that adorn the sex, having the strictest notions of filial duty”\textsuperscript{20} This list summarizes for the reader, before the story is told, Clarissa’s major characteristics and summons how Richardson intends us to read Clarissa’s character.

Hill and Michael McKeon read the novel as an allegory for bourgeois economic relations. They argue that the seduction plot demonstrates the struggle for economic power between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy by way of the young lady as a figure of exchange. The domestic woman, represented by Clarissa, has a class function, to usurp and assimilate into the aristocracy via the marriage plot. The domestic woman is desirable as a virtuous subject, rather than as an object of display, and in this sense she is meant to “domesticate” aristocratic male desire.\textsuperscript{21} The domestic woman’s desirability has an economic function for the middle class, which had two antithetical desires, to supplant the aristocracy and their system of status stratification, and to be absorbed by them.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} Richardson, \textit{Clarissa}, 37.
\textsuperscript{22} McKeon, \textit{The Origins of the English Novel}, 174.
In *Clarissa*, the struggle is fought between Clarissa’s family and the aristocratic rake-hero, Lovelace. According to Hill, the beginning premise of *Clarissa* is an economic one: the grandfather’s estate is passed to Clarissa, instead of to James Harlowe Jun., thereby disrupting “the [economic] ambitions of the family unit”.\(^{23}\) This sets in motion the main problem of the text, Clarissa’s seduction by Lovelace. In the struggle between Lovelace and James Harlowe, the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, the young bourgeois lady acts as a figure of exchange.\(^{24}\) Clarissa becomes contested property passed between her brother, James Harlowe, and Lovelace: “She is literally pressed between the competitive brother of the commonwealth and the open force of the monarchy”.\(^{25}\)

In contrast to Hill and McKeon, Toni Bowers reads *Clarissa* as an allegory for Tory political resistance against a tyrannical government led by the Whig party. According to Bowers, the authoritarianism of the home is an allegory for the authoritarian Whig government that primarily controlled the British Parliament from The Glorious Revolution into the mid- eighteenth century. In this allegory, the young lady represents supporters of a Tory government. The seduction plot was particularly important to those with Tory sensibility because it dramatized the “problem of imagining virtuous resistance to authority”.\(^{26}\) While meaningful consent and resistance are problematized in these allegories, the young lady produces a new form of “virtuous resistance,” which is “resistance through submission”.\(^{27}\) According to Bowers, eighteenth century Tory seduction plots critique and normalizes structures of

\(^{24}\) Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 15.  
\(^{25}\) Doyle, *Freedom’s Empire*, 136.  
\(^{26}\) Bowers, *Force or Fraud*, 7.  
\(^{27}\) Ibid., 4.
power and dominance, in political society and within the domestic home, by creating complicit virtue.\textsuperscript{28}

While Hill, McKeon, and Bowers read the text as an allegory, they also note that the text exceeds an allegorical interpretation. In my sections, I examine how *Clarissa* fails and exceeds allegory. I first examine how allegory is troubled by Richardson’s attempts to convey realism. I then examine how the specific nature of Clarissa’s virtue challenges an allegorical reading of the text and supports a psychological reading of the text.

**Allegorical Problems: “True” History**

Unlike other genres, the novel was particularly effective at mediating the social crises of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because its structure could incorporate incompatible differences.\textsuperscript{29} Questions of truth and virtue were analogized in the novel form, such that they became the same question framed differently.\textsuperscript{30} Progressive ideologues, such as Samuel Richardson, resolved questions of truth by framing their texts as “true” histories.\textsuperscript{31} Richardson particularly attempts to answer these questions through his ideology of writing, “writing to the moment”. This technique asserts a strict relationship between “experience” and “expression”.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{29} McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel*, 21. Like McKeon, Terry Eagleton claims the novel is meant to “confront, on the level of narrative form and content, both intellectual and social crisis simultaneously”. (Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 22).
\textsuperscript{31} There are two responses to this question: “naïve empiricism,” and “extreme skepticism” Naïve empiricists believed that the spirit was representable, whereas extreme skeptics believed that the material world reflected the corrupted spirit. (1987, 68).
\textsuperscript{32} Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa*, 40.
However, Richardson’s naïve belief in the ability of writing to perfectly demonstrate experience leaves him vulnerable to a conservative skeptic critique.

I argue that *Clarissa* fails allegory particularly as it tries to be a “true” history, or a realist fiction. Terry Eagleton writes, “without realism the allegory is empty, without allegory the realism is blind”. 33 Richardson wanted *Clarissa* to be read as a “true” history in order “to avoid hurting that kind of Historical Faith, which Fiction itself is generally read [with], even tho’ we know it to be Fiction”. 34 Only by framing his text as a “true” history could Richardson claim that *Clarissa* represented not only real material experience, but deeper truths relating to an internal spiritual order.

If *Clarissa* tries to be a “true” history rather than a romance, its claims to truth are undermined precisely by the elements that make it appear real. Richardson tries to maintain the fiction of “true” history in *Clarissa* by “writing to the moment”. The characters write their experiences into the epistolary form as soon as the events described by the letters occur. In the middle of writing, Lovelace gets up, looks out the window, and returns to finish his letter. He narrates these actions; “Here I arose. I shook myself”. 35 Beginning with “here,” Lovelace claims to rise and to write down the action of rising simultaneously. The deictic “here” exists in the unspecified moment of the present, in which Lovelace is always simultaneously rising and writing the action of rising. In this manner, the text of the letter is not only the narration of an event, rising; by sustaining the simultaneity of the action of rising and writing the action of rising, the text itself comes to constitute the event of rising.

33 Ibid., 20.
35 Richardson, *Clarissa*, 658.
According to Terry Castle, “writing to the moment” becomes unbelievable to the reader precisely when the text appears to speak directly to the physicality of the process of writing. Castle claims, “There is something wrong with the letter; it is too insistent, too much with us as we read”. Richardson cannot actually close the gap between “experience” and “expression” as he wants the reader to believe. The novel’s attempt at mimesis demonstrates instead anti-mimesis. Richardson fails to unite “experience” with the “expression” of that experience, and he must fail. “Writing perpetually stands in for a reality it can never encompass” (Eagleton, 45). According to Eagleton, this is made most clear by the discursive absence of the rape. The written expression of rape can never be more than “supplementary” to the material rape (Eagleton, 46).

**Allegorical Problems: Virtue**

Richardson uses the seduction plot in order to dramatize and answer questions of virtue. In the seduction plot, liberal consent discourse is centered on the bourgeois young lady as she attempts to plot a path between the patriarchal tyranny of the home and aristocratic male violence. The young lady’s struggle to make a meaningful choice between these two tyrannical poles demonstrates the inconsistencies of liberal consent discourse, while it gives access to feminine interiority. As such, the young lady’s seduction asks broad questions about how to live and make choices in an authoritarian structure that make this plot useful as allegory, while remaining virtuous.

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36 Terry Castle, *Clarissa’s Ciphers: Meaning and Disruption in Richardson’s “Clarissa”* (Cornell University Press, 1982), 154.
However, as with “writing to the moment,” a purely allegorical reading of the text is jeopardized by the specificity of its characters. Richardson uses narrative specificity to claim historicity within his texts. The seduction plot itself is already a form of narrative specification: in the eighteenth century, micro-histories of family and personal life replaced macro-histories of “status inconsistency” to explain the decline of nobility and rise of the gentry.\(^{37}\) Like “writing to the moment,” micro-histories are meant to lend the tale credibility as a “true” history. While character specificity is supposed to lend historicity to a work of fiction, psychologically complex characters threaten to become too subjective to signify allegorically. Clarissa’s excessive virtue is an example of narrative specificity that becomes problematic for the text.

Richardson’s commitment to naïve empiricism, and the skeptical response it generates, has important implications for Clarissa’s virtue. In the same way that Richardson’s ideology of text fails to unite “expression” and “experience,” Clarissa’s internal virtue fails to signify externally. Richardson has a naïve belief, as does Clarissa herself, that the external representation of Clarissa’s virtue signifies her “true” internal virtuous spirit. However, as Richardson’s ideology of text is made vulnerable to a conservative skeptical response, so too is Clarissa’s virtue. Eagleton calls this “the problem of the woman” (Eagleton, 46). Eagleton asks, “how is she to be at once decorous and spontaneous, translucently candid yet subdued to social pressure”? (Eagleton, 46). While Clarissa demonstrates characteristics of the truly virtuous, her virtue is threatened by the anxiety that she is actually inherently corrupt.

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Clarissa is excessively virtuous in her internal spirit as well as in her external representation. Clarissa’s internal virtue is demonstrated by her ability to distinguish the difference between the appearance of virtue and actual, internal virtue. Clarissa distinguishes between Lovelace’s beneficent actions and his mind: “He was instructed … to do good and beneficent actions; but not from proper motives, I doubt”. While Lovelace is philanthropic, his actions are clearly motivated by the wrong principles. Clarissa’s ability to distinguish truly good actions from the form of good actions demonstrates that she is attuned to “proper motives”. Furthermore, Clarissa says of Lovelace, “his very generosity is more owing to his pride and vanity, than to the philanthropy which distinguishes a beneficent mind”. Here, Clarissa distinguishes between the form of generosity and real generosity, philanthropy. The first is a learned external form, motivated by pride, while the other is an internal attribute of the truly virtuous.

Like her attention to the form and intention, Clarissa’s physical beauty signifies internal virtue. Throughout the text, Lovelace refers to Clarissa as an “angel”. Clarissa is unlike other women Lovelace has seduced; “never… did the angel so much look the angel. All placid, serene, smiling, self-assured: a more lovely flush than usual heightening her natural graces, and adding charms, even to radiance, to her charming complexion”. Clarissa’s angelic beauty astonishes Lovelace, suggesting to him that Clarissa may really be an angel. In this moment, though it is otherwise continuously doubted through the text, Clarissa’s external body seems to signify “true” internal virtue.

38 Richardson, Clarissa, 698.
39 Ibid., 698.
40 Ibid., 693.
What does it mean for Clarissa to have “true” virtue? Christopher Hill notes that “true” virtue is a characteristic of bourgeois virtue generally: “Virtue has its own aristocrats, superior to the aristocracy of birth: that was an old Puritan theme”. What makes Clarissa virtuous is that she has wealth and yet she still “freely” chooses to be virtuous, unlike Lovelace. “The truly virtuous are those of the ‘free’ who ‘permit’ divine grace to operate upon their hearts: and so voluntarily, not of social necessity, take virtue upon them”. Clarissa’s “true” virtue is necessary to bourgeois social power because it destabilizes aristocratic “honor”.

Lovelace alternately accepts and doubts Clarissa’s virtue. I would argue that this is because Clarissa’s “true” virtue destabilizes his own sense of aristocratic “honor” and superiority. “Why was this woman so divinely excellent! – yet how know I that she is? – What have been her trials? Have I had the courage to make a single one upon her person, though fifty upon her temper?”. However, Clarissa’s virtue is also a critique of “true” bourgeois virtue. According to Hill, Clarissa has “true” virtue that is so powerful it is unfit for this world, it can only flourish in heaven. As such, Clarissa offers an unintentional critique of the bourgeois Puritan conception of marriage. Clarissa’s “true” virtue is only capable of existing in heaven. Clarissa’s virtue is unfit for the material world and the material world is unfit for Clarissa’s virtue.

Clarissa’s virtue has been interpreted skeptically by readers and critics of the text, not because it is unfit for the material world, but because it is unreal. “The story

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42 Ibid., 380.
43 Richardson, *Clarissa*, 694.
44 Ibid., 389.
is thoroughly realistic if one can believe in the existence of such a character as the heroine”. While Eaves and Kimpel believe Richardson creates a sense of reality in his text through attention to detail, Clarissa’s character is so incredibly virtuous as to become unbelievable. Like the letter itself, Clarissa’s virtuous protests that she does not love Lovelace are too insistent to be believable. Clarissa is the perfection of the domestic woman such that she exceeds her purpose within the sexual contract and the logic of class relations. The strength of Clarissa’s virtue is so excessive that it fails to operate within class logic at all. Clarissa denies her family’s marriage plot, and fails to marry Lovelace after her rape. Her rejections demonstrate that the exchange is not worthwhile, that feminine virtue is best embodied alone, separate from the male sphere. There is no man capable of being virtuous enough to value her virtue, and to subordinate herself to. There is no equal exchange for her feminine virtue.

While, Clarissa’s virtue is not so much a specific problem for the text as it is the problem with representing “true” virtue in general. Balzac acknowledges that while it is not hard to create an evil character, a character of social corruption, it is difficult to construct the opposite, the character of true virtue who can withstand critique. “True” virtue always appears excessive, it is read as an external manipulation of the internal spirit, a self-validating technique. McKeon adds onto this point, “The spectacle of the individual subject indulgently validating his own virtue so threatens the objectivity of the judgment that the independent reality of that virtue – on whose objective solidity progressive ideology is totally dependent – is thrown into question, and progressive affirmation hovers on the edge of the conservative

45 Eaves and Kimpel, Samuel Richardson, 238.
47 Eaves and Kimpel, Samuel Richardson, 277.
critique of imaginary value”.\textsuperscript{48} Clarissa’s virtue fails to signify in an allegorical reading, because it is both unfit, and unreal. Rather, the strength of her virtue suggests a psychological reading of the text.

**Reading Clarissa as Psychological Interiority**

Rape summons a psychological reading of the novel that fundamentally jeopardizes an allegorical reading. Clarissa’s “angelic” nature threatens to transcend earthly virtue; she exceeds the role of the bourgeois young lady and is just capable of being a “Clarissa”. As such, the text fails to be a critique of the bourgeois domestic sphere and becomes just capable of making claims about Clarissa’s virtue. Clarissa demonstrates that to live as though totally divorced from political and economic concerns is to divorced from the male sphere, celibately. In this manner, *Clarissa* opens itself up to a reading based upon individual psychology. However, the novel troubles psychological reality as much as it summons it. Clarissa’s “true” virtue demonstrates that she cannot live in the world without being compromised by it, because it generates a skeptical reading of her virtue that is Lovelacian.

If rape “encodes and embodies” the subject of the rape story as it does the political story, then rape both produces and expresses psychological realities. Rape plots produce psychological interiority and sexuality based on strict gender divisions that are read as an expression of reality.\textsuperscript{49} In the eighteenth century, sexuality was understood as repressed within the enclosed individual, hidden but discoverable. The notion of hidden interiority further enclosed the individual into strict gendered

\textsuperscript{49} Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 13.
spheres of life, and justified the search for interiority. “The discovery of this repressed sexuality thus provided justification for reading and interpreting sexual behavior wherever one found it, always with the Enlightenment motive of discovering truth and producing freedom, always consequently with the very different result of enclosing sex with an individual’s subjectivity”. The text produces psychological realities that normalize gender scripts created in conduct literature and expressed in seduction narratives.

According to Watt, the “dichotomization of the sexual roles” in the formal division of letters between Clarissa and Ms. Howe, Belford and Lovelace, is what allows access to these character’s interiority (Watt, 209). While Watt sees the gender script created by the novel’s formal division of letters as giving access to interiority, Marcus argues that the seduction plot’s “immutable identities,” make feminine interiority impossible. Gender scripts create women as “objects of violence” and “subjects of fear” (Marcus, 394). The desire for full interior access that the text induces in us hides a more sinister regulating desire: “Richardson’s determination to fathom his character’s interior depths also operates, in a Foucauldian sense, as a surveillance of her”. While Richardson depicts and produces a new type of feminine subjectivity in Clarissa, this subjectivity is based on close attention to gendered forms that denies Clarissa’s actual subjective understanding of her social role.

Rape stories embody female interiority, and they create gendered scripts that reduce individual interiority to an “immutable identity” that plays into the trial of

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50 Ibid., 12.
51 Doyle, Freedom’s Empire, 140.
feminine virtue.\textsuperscript{52} Clarissa’s psychological interiority comes with a price: she is an “object of violence” and “subject of fear”.\textsuperscript{53}

**Conclusion:**

The political story that rape “encodes and embodies” in Clarissa is the intimate coercion of eighteenth century private life. If Clarissa comprehends private life through the marriage and seduction plots, it also comprehends rape as a function of private life. Rape “encodes and embodies” strict standards of behavior and it also generates an ambiguous space in between those standards. The angelic nature of Clarissa’s virtue makes her too specific to be a model for allegory and compromises feminine psychology. Clarissa cannot “encode” or “embod[y]” any political story. However, *Clarissa* has still been read as an allegorical critique of political structures, and as a model for feminine interiority. Do we search for allegory? Do we search for psychological interiority? These questions are important because they determine how to read Clarissa as a rape victim. What authority can Clarissa have straddled between allegory and compromised interiority?

In my second chapter, I will specifically examine rape as the event of the seduction plot, and the event of *Clarissa*. I will examine the implications of how rape produces and expresses a political story as it relates to Clarissa’s body in particular. The Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of “corruption” augments Laura Doyle’s statement that rape “encodes and embodies a political story” by focusing rape as a problem of the individual. The “act” of corruption causes someone to irrevocably

\textsuperscript{52} Marcus, Sharon. *Fighting Words, Fighting Bodies*, 391.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 394.
change their standards of behavior from “moral” to “immoral,” which it takes to be two stable categories. This definition creates a relationship between these two terms; “moral” and “immoral” are constituted by and against the other. They are stable because they exist in an absolute binary. However, I argue that in their relationship to one another, these terms destabilize this binary.
Reading the Event: “Clarissa Lives”
“And now, Belford, I can go no farther. The affair is over. Clarissa lives. And I am

Your humble servant,

R. Lovelace”

“Clarissa lives,” Lovelace states, as though he was apprehensive that she wouldn’t live, as though he can’t conceive of Clarissa as “Clarissa” once “the affair is over,” once the rape has occurred. “Clarissa lives”: the present-tense verb provides a continuous statement across the break in the narrative, the rape, combatting the finality of the affair as “over”. In this letter, written in the place of the discursive absence of the rape scene, Lovelace constructs rape as a singular event or “act” that ends, while he identifies a new relationship generated by it. “Clarissa lives,” a relationship which bridges the period before and after the event of rape. This letter divides and combines the narrative, separating rape as a distinct event that ends while it lives on for Clarissa.

Lovelace’s letters are parts in his individual schemes and overall object: rape. He is not solely motivated by his sexual desire to commit rape. He is motivated to prove that feminine nature is inherently corrupt. The Oxford English Dictionary defines corruption as “the act or effect of making someone change from moral to immoral standards of behavior”. This definition assumes standards of behavior, and creates a subject and an object which corruption acts upon. In the context of Clarissa, rape is supposedly the act that corrupts, causing the young lady to change from moral

54 Richardson, Clarissa, 883.
to immoral standards of behavior. Once the “act” occurs, her standards are supposed to be irrevocably corrupted. The definition suggests a strict movement from moral to immoral standards that occurs across one act.

Throughout the text, Lovelace structures the rape as the object of his schemes, the event that will determine the trial of bourgeois feminine virtue. The rape will be “the very crown of [Clarissa’s] glory … the ultimate trial” of her virtue.\textsuperscript{57} It is the “act” which corrupts. Rape determines whether Clarissa is truly virtuous, or whether she is corrupt and corruptible. While the novel supports a reading of rape as the structuring event of the novel and as the “act” that determines her corruption, I am politically against this reading. To take rape as the structuring event of the novel produces a Lovelacian plot, where the trial of feminine virtue is necessary. Furthermore, it assumes the rake’s formula, “once subdued, always subdued.”\textsuperscript{58}

In this chapter, I will read against rape as the structuring event of the novel. I argue that the novel itself undermines rape as the event. Clarissa does not move from moral to immoral standards of behavior after rape; she refuses to be corrupted. Clarissa maintains virtue despite her rape, upending rape as the event that determines the trial of feminine virtue. That Clarissa goes uncorrupted suggests to me that the “act” of rape itself fails to be an event that ends. The construction “once subdued, always subdued” fails in Clarissa’s case. As such, the novel contains within it the devolution of the “act” that corrupts, undermining the strict movement from “moral” to “immoral”.

\textsuperscript{57} Richardson, \textit{Clarissa}, 879.
\textsuperscript{58} Richardson, \textit{Clarissa}, 675.
Furthermore, the discursive absence of the rape scene troubles rape as an event that occurs. Absent from written representation, rape is indeterminate; did it occur at all? Is it over? In my first section, I examine writing around rape in order to trouble the finality of rape as the event. I will then closely read the fire scene in which Lovelace attempts to rape Clarissa. In this scene, Clarissa’s virtue is already tried and her “response” characterized. Given the trial of the fire scene, I ask, why is the actual (so-called) event of rape necessary to determine the quality of her consent and her virtue? In my last section, I analyze the negative embodied consequences that Clarissa experiences as a rape victim. I argue that rape creates a new “state of being” for Clarissa, in which she is embodied negatively. In the last half of the novel, her body is fragmented and turned into text. Clarissa becomes fully embodied through her death letters, and I argue, through the compilation of the narrative itself.

Discursively absent from the narrative, rape is continuously present in the characters’ letters as they attempt to define the moment itself. Rape is not a singular and therefore definable event, it occurs and reoccurs as it is retold and reinterpreted. Rape is a singular event that begins and ends, and not one that bleeds into all of the letters of the novel. Rape is a state of being, rather than an event, that the characters manipulate after the fact “for a whole age of repentance”. Talked about, talked around, talked through, the rape continues to occur in its aftermath because its significance to the story develops each time it is invoked. Lovelace claims “The affair is over,” structuring the rape as an event that was over after “one guilty hour”. However, “Clarissa lives” and carries an embodied reminder of the rape. 

Writing Around Rape

Letter 257 begins, “And now, Belford, I can go no farther” signaling that in the space between when letter 256 and 257 were written, the rape has taken place.\(^6^0\) However, the rape is absent from the discourse. I argue that the discursive absence of the rape scene suggests that Lovelace fails to represent the rape because it fails his ability to incorporate it into his rake’s logic. In this section, I will do a close reading of Lovelace’s letters written around rape in order to question why the rape is discursively absent.

According to Toni Bowers, there is a chilling undercurrent of the certainty of rape in *Clarissa*. “It is there in virtually every letter, every interview, every relationship”.\(^6^1\) Similarly, Terry Eagleton claims that all of the letters in *Clarissa* are about Lovelace and Clarissa’s sexual union.\(^6^2\) For Eagleton, the rape structures the meaning of Clarissa and Lovelace’s letter writing while Clarissa is still at Harlowe Place, always containing within it the specter of sexual violence. The letters Clarissa exchanges with Lovelace come to foreshadow her rape –“Lovelace begins by exploiting Clarissa’s passion for scribbling rather than sexual affections, but the two impulses are intimately allied”.\(^6^3\) In this sense, the letter is a site of conflict for Clarissa and a place of power for Lovelace.

With his “scribbling” pen, Lovelace has interpretative power over Clarissa. For Lovelace, to incorporate is to interpret. Lovelace is continuously reinterpreting his actions and those of others, incorporating them into his rake’s logic. This is best

\(^6^0\) Ibid., 883.
\(^6^1\) Bowers, *Force or Fraud*, 266.
\(^6^2\) Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa*, 44.
\(^6^3\) Ibid., 47
demonstrated in a letter Lovelace wrote soon after the rape. Several days after rape, Lovelace acknowledges that Clarissa did not submit willingly to rape. He regrets that “[he] ever attempted her; since not one power either of body of soul could be moved in [his] favor”. While this should trouble the rake’s formula (was Clarissa subdued?) Lovelace goes on to incorporate his failure back into the rake’s logic: “But people’s extravagant notions of things alter not facts … and, when all’s done, Miss Clarissa Harlowe has but run the fate of a thousand others of her sex – only that they did not set such a romantic value upon what they call their honour; that’s all”.

Lovelace has hermeneutic power in the realm of letter writing. His interpretative power, demonstrated in his control over the form of letter writing, has significance outside of the text in the physical world of his plots. Lovelace incorporating changes or unexpected reactions into his ever developing plots to rape Clarissa. In the hours before rape, Clarissa’s resistance threatens to jeopardize Lovelace’s plans. Lovelace responds to her exclamation, “Do you know, do you see, my dearest life, what an appearance your causeless apprehensions have given you”?

Here, Lovelace asserts power over Clarissa’s perception, over what she can “know” and “see,” how appearances signify. He adds, “– Do you know it is past eleven o’clock”? Appearing as an after thought, this additional statement has incredible power over Clarissa’s perception. It makes an implicit claim that her actions are out of place, excessive for the hour. Lovelace’s question implies that Clarissa is behaving inappropriately, throwing her into a confusion that he incorporates into his schemes.

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64 Richardson, Clarissa, 885.
65 Ibid., 885.
66 Ibid., 882.
67 Ibid., 882.
Lovelace loves to write, and he loves to write about his successful schemes. Figured as his trial of feminine virtue, Clarissa’s rape should be the event that signifies Lovelace’s greatest success. Nothing short of rape will prove her inherent corruption and his own absolute possession. “Why was this woman so divinely excellent! – yet how know I that she is? – What have been her trials? Have I had the courage to make a single one upon her person, though fifty upon her temper”\(^{68}\)

Lovelace’s previous schemes are inadequate trials; they only try her “temper,” not her “person”. Lovelace’s attempts upon her “temper” and their exchange of letters is only a “great flurry of signifying presence… merely foregrounds a material lack: letters can be no more than ‘supplementary’ sexual intercourse”.\(^{69}\) Hermeneutic power is not enough for Lovelace; his plots can only be successful after sexual intercourse.

But Lovelace does not incorporate the rape into his interpretative framework. He does not interpret it, and he does not incorporate it into his rake’s logic. Bowers reads this omission as the climax that has already occurred. Richardson denies “discursive presence” to the rape, because “by the time of Clarissa’s rape, its processes have already been over-represented”.\(^{70}\) The meaning conveyed by the rape is distributed throughout the narrative, emptying this specific moment of its supposed “exceptionalism”. Made “ubiquitous,” the rape is “so inevitable that it defies representation”.\(^{71}\)

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\(^{68}\) Ibid., 694.

\(^{69}\) Eagleton, pp. 45

\(^{70}\) Bowers, *Force or Fraud*, 282.

\(^{71}\) Bowers analysis points to the instability of rape as a singular act within the text. While I do not necessarily agree that the actual rape scene fails to be a narrative climax – Clarissa experiences physical violence of a different kind here than in the rest of the narrative–Bowers illuminates how rape is embedded within the narrative as a foreshadowing. (2011, 282).
In contrast to Bowers, I read the discursive absence of the rape as Lovelace’s failure within the text. Lovelace’s typically excessive language is upset in letter 257; Letter 257 does not read like Lovelace’s writing. The statements are not Lovelace’s typical fragments of excessive emotion: “oh Jack, the rage of love, the rage of revenge is upon me! By turns they tear me! – The progress already made! – the women’s instigations!”72 Here Lovelace writes fragments in fits of excitement, characterized by quick dashes of his pen, hyperbole, and repetition. Lovelace writes for pleasure or he writes for pain. He writes excessively as he feels excessively between these two poles. Lovelace’s account of the rape, one short line punctuated by short and non-descriptive statements, is contrary to the way Lovelace usually describes his schemes. “I can go no farther” is not the kind of triumph that the reader expects Lovelace to show after he has “successfully” committed rape.

Furthermore, a close reading of letter 257 suggests that the rape is not an event that occurs and ends at all. There are three complete sentences and one incomplete statement in letter 257. If we think of the three complete sentences as dividing into four parts, by sectioning the first sentence into two after Lovelace mentions Belford, then the line follows the syllabic pattern 4-6-6-4. The two statements next to each other, each six syllables, “I can go no farther” and “The affair is over,” amplify the other. “Farther” and “over” nearly rhyme. “I can go no farther” suggests that Lovelace has reached the outward bound of his plots, and “The affair is over” rings as a final ending (nothing more can happen, no more can be said). As indeterminate signifiers these words fail to create the ending to the affair that they

72 Richardson, Clarissa, 882.
describe. “Farther” is a spatial descriptor and “over” is a temporal one. Both suggest an indefinite outer limit: what is the place that is farther than “farther,” what exists of a moment once it is “over”? However, we could turn these questions around, to consider how a place can be bounded only by that which is “farther”, and a moment bounded only by that which is “over”. The place and the moment lose stability, they lack circumscribed identities.

Lovelace ends letter 257 with “Clarissa lives,” unbounded spatially and temporally. Clarissa lives on as Clarissa, not as “Mrs. Lovelace,” not as a fallen woman, not as a corpse. She is still “Clarissa,” across the break of the rape, separate from Lovelace’s direct construction of her.

**Resisting Irresistible Virtue**

There are two rape scenes in the text, a failed attempt that I call the fire scene, and the rape itself, which is not represented. However, despite being a failure, the fire scene is positively represented in the text, while the rape itself is the “negative” representation of rape. It is “positive” in the sense that it occurred and is represented in the story, “negative” in the sense that it cannot be said to occur in the story.

The fire scene is the (successful) trial of Clarissa’s virtue. Duncan Eaves and Ben Kimpel believe the fire scene is necessary to Richardson’s plot, because it convincingly demonstrates Clarissa’s virtue before the event of rape. Rape cannot harm the quality of Clarissa’s virtue because it has already been determined here.

However, Eaves and Kimpel do not question the necessity of rape. If Clarissa’s virtue

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73Eaves and Kimpel offer a short description of the plot, around the two rape scenes: “Lovelace tricks her into his power, tries to seduce her, and after her resistance has been convincingly shown, rapes her while she is drugged to sleep”(1971, 236).
has already been tested and shown to be uncorrupted, then the question stands why
the actual rape is necessary, or inevitable, to the plot. Clarissa’s rape is foreshadowed
throughout the first half of the narrative, but the fire scene represents rape. It is a trial
of Clarissa’s “temper” as well as of her “person,” a Lovelacian justification for rape.74
This leaves the reader to question why Lovelace goes forward with his schemes after
this scene. Why is the fire scene not enough to be a trial of Clarissa’s virtue?

The fire scene takes place during the middle of Clarissa’s imprisonment at
Mrs. Sinclair’s brothel. A fire begins in a maid’s room, causing uproar throughout the
house that ends in Clarissa’s bedroom. Lovelace runs to reassure Clarissa and ends
trying to restrain her. He is excited by “the joy of encircling the almost disrobed body
of the loveliest of her sex”.75 What follows is a description of Lovelace’s attempts to
seduce Clarissa, verbally and physically. He tries to manipulate her, reassuring her
that their sexual union will be consecrated by marriage the next morning. However,
Clarissa refuses Lovelace so vehemently that she convinces him not to go through
with the rape.

Lovelace is thwarted by the strength of Clarissa’s virtue, demonstrated by her
eloquent verbal resistance. Clarissa falls to her knees at Lovelace’s feet:

“And there, in the anguish of her soul, her streaming eyes lifted up to my face
with supplicating softness … her grief gave way to her speech, in words
pronounced with that emphatical propriety which distinguishes this admirable

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74 Richardson, Clarissa, 694
75 Ibid., 724.
creature in her elocution from all the women I ever heard speak; did she implore my compassion, and my honour.

Consider me, dear Lovelace … on my knees I beg you to consider me, as a poor creature who has no protector but you; who has no defence but your honour: by that honour! by your humanity! by all you have vowed! I conjure you not to make me abhor myself! Not to make me vile in my own eyes!”.

Clarissa’s “elocution” restrains Lovelace. The depth of her anguish is in her “soul,” not represented in her body but in her speech: “her grief gave way to speech”. The power of her speech, not the signs of her body, convinces him of her earnestness. Yet Clarissa’s body is desirable to Lovelace despite her anguish. Clarissa’s virtue restrains Lovelace’s actions, but it does not restrain his sexual desire, which is activated in this scene: “her streaming eyes lifted up to my face with supplicating softness”. Lovelace reads into Clarissa a “supplicating softness,” which suggests a “yielding in resistance” that her words refute with “emphatical propriety”. She continues:

“Kill me! kill me! – if I am odious enough in your eyes, to deserve this treatment; and I will thank you! – Too long, much too long, has my life been a burden to me! – or, wildly looking all around her, give me but the means, and I will instantly convince you that my honour is dearer to me than my life!”

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76 Ibid., 725.
77 Ibid., 725.
If her body is made desirable to Lovelace, it is made odious to Clarissa, a “burden”. In this quote she identifies her body as the site of her troubles, the barrier rather than the bearer of her honor. She says, “my honour is dearer to me than my life;” suggesting that her honor will outlive her body, that it already supersedes the boundaries of her body. That Clarissa so easily forsakes her body through death, and not rape, demonstrates the otherworldly strength of her virtue. “What a triumph has her sex obtained in my thoughts by this trial, and this resistance!” he writes at the end of his letter.\(^7\) At the end of this trial, Clarissa is more an angel than before in Lovelace’s eyes; “By my soul, thought I, thou art upon full proof an angel and no woman”!\(^7\) Clarissa’s virtue is proven, and it exceeds what is necessary to the trial.\(^8\)

Lovelace claims, “I never before encountered a resistance so much in earnest: a resistance, in short, so irresistible”.\(^8\) Clarissa’s resistance is made into a desirable quality that encourages, rather than prevents, rape. Lovelace co-opts Clarissa’s resistance, making it “irresistible” as an object of his desire. Furthermore, Lovelace co-opts Clarissa’s resistance and transforms it into one stage in his seduction plot, that furthers the continuation of that plot. Lovelace cheekily claims that his plots are justified in order to lend credibility to the stories of the rake told by “the mothers, the aunts, the grandmothers, the governesses” to “pretty innocents” as part of their education into young bourgeois women.\(^8\) The “sweet girl … drawn aside by him” is

\(^7\) Ibid., 726.
\(^8\) Ibid., 726.
\(^8\) According to Bowers, Richardson depicts Clarissa as so incredibly virtuous throughout the text to combat the strict binary of consent or resistance to seduction or rape. He “worked to imagine subordinated (sexual) agencies that, when presented with ‘force or fraud’ responded in excess of resistance or consent”(2011, 4).
\(^8\) Richardson, Clarissa, 727.
\(^8\) Ibid., 847.
a negative example necessary to the identity of all young bourgeois ladies, a warning against falling into the rake’s trap.\textsuperscript{83} Clarissa, whom Lovelace refers to as “my charmer,” is the ultimate negative example because she is the ultimate positive example of the young lady. If all other young ladies are unequal to Clarissa’s irresistible resistance, then any other is also inadequate as a warning.

However, the fire scene demonstrates that this relationship becomes a problem for Lovelace, too. While demonstrating Clarissa’s powerlessness to choose, it also increasingly diminishes Lovelace’s significance.\textsuperscript{84} Lovelace’s continued power over Clarissa proves to be disappointing for him, because Clarissa’s responses are “in excess” of consent or resistance. Clarissa forsakes her body, which has become the site of Lovelace’s sexual desires. She would rather die than be corrupted by him.

\textbf{“Clarissa Lives,” Embodied Catastrophically}

Letter 257 maintains the fiction of presence. “And now … Clarissa lives.”\textsuperscript{85} Clarissa is no longer simply described by Lovelace; she “lives” both within and beyond his letters. After the rape, Clarissa’s presence exceeds Lovelace’s texts. Rape has failed to define “Clarissa” in a Lovelacian manner. Clarissa refuses to be corruptible, destabilizing rape as the act of corruption. Rape fails to be an event at all, because the trial is not over for Lovelace.\textsuperscript{86} “Clarissa lives” on in the present increasingly freed from Lovelace’s constructions of her. Clarissa becomes present in

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 847.
\textsuperscript{84} Bowers, \textit{Force or Fraud}, 279.
\textsuperscript{85} Richardson, \textit{Clarissa}, 883.
\textsuperscript{86} The trial is not complete for Lovelace, shown by his statement, “But now are we come to the test, whether she cannot be brought to make the best of an irreparable evil?... if she now forgive; then will all be over” (Richardson, \textit{Clarissa}, 886).
the rest of the novel embodied catastrophically, through the metaphysical power of her words.

Both Lovelace and Clarissa invoke “now” in their letters preceding rape. It is particularly sustained in “Clarissa’s Papers”: “How art thou now humbled in the dust, though proud Clarissa Harlowe!”; “But forgive now the vain triumphs of my heart”; “What now is become of the prospects of a happy life, which once I thought opening before me? – Who now shall assist in the solemn preparations?” Lovelace makes several references to the “present”. He writes to Belford, “so much grief has stupefied her, that she is at present as destitute of will, as she always seemed of desire”. Her body becomes present to Lovelace and the reader “stupefied” and “destitute of will”. Clarissa behaves “stupidly,” by which Lovelace means she acts without reason. The rape has fragmented her metaphysically and materially; Clarissa’s mind and body are metaphorically split by rape. “Clarissa lives” in the “present,” but her presence is negative, divided. In this sense, she is embodied catastrophically.

Initially, Clarissa can make neither her body nor her words signify. Rape fragments Clarissa. Her first letters to Lovelace, called “Clarissa’s Papers,” demonstrate her fragmented reason. They are half-finished, sometimes incoherent, and distinct from her usual writing style. Her sentences are fragmented, punctuated by commas and dashes that show Clarissa’s difficulty to produce meaning; “I don’t presume to think you should receive me – no, indeed – my name is – I don’t know what my name is –”.

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87 Richardson, *Clarissa*, 891-892.
88 Ibid., 887.
89 Ibid., 886.
90 Ibid., 890.
ground, each a renewed response to rape. Written beneath the titles of “Paper I” and “Paper II” someone has written “torn in two pieces” and “Scratched through, and thrown under the table”.\textsuperscript{91} “Clarissa’s Papers” are a metaphor for her torn body and mind. As Clarissa writes, she “gets up, wrings her hands, weeps, and shifts her seat all around the table”.\textsuperscript{92} Her movements are fragmented like her papers. Lovelace claims, “what she [Clarissa] writes she tears”.\textsuperscript{93} As she writes, she tears; these actions become metonymically related. Her attempts to form reason in the written letter tear her body.

As in her fragmented papers, Clarissa comes into the present at death. Here, her presence is also negatively defined. She becomes present as she rejects her body. She exclaims, “Now! – Now! – (I bless God for his mercies to his poor creature) will all soon be over… – and I shall be happy”\textsuperscript{94} Here, like after rape, Clarissa’s presence is negative. She is embodied in the “now” because she rejects the body she views as corrupt. At the end of her life, Clarissa reinterprets rape as a necessary trial that corrupts her body while it constitutes her virtue. Rape demonstrates for Clarissa that her nature is not inherently corrupt, though her body is. Quoting scripture, she claims, “It is good for me that I was afflicted”.\textsuperscript{95} She accepts rape as the necessary event and, through death, rejects her material body for the uncorrupted metaphysical realm, heaven. In place of her body, which has become abhorrent to her, Clarissa leaves text.

The notes beneath “Paper I” and “Paper II” are meant to indicate the material reality of the page. Rather than indicating the “truth” of the letter, Eagleton argues

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 890. 
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 889. 
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 889. 
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 1361. 
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 1362.
that references to the physical page dispel Richardson’s fiction of “writing to the moment”. There is a disjunction between the letter’s so-called materiality and the text that the reader reads: “Paper I” claims that it is “torn in two pieces,” but the reader reads off of a standard, untorn page. According to Eagleton, these references demonstrate that “experience” and the “expression” of that experience cannot be united. In this sense, Clarissa can never have presence in the moment of letter-writing, because she has no actual presence in Richardson’s world, the world which writes the letter. However, this is not a problem for the type of presence Clarissa comes to have in the text.

Clarissa becomes liberated from the fiction of material presence by rejecting her body. Clarissa becomes present; “the soul of the real is fleshed into full presence only by the withdrawal of the trivially physical”. The “soul” that is redeemed is the “soul” of the real that writing attempts to replicate. The written “expression” becomes more real than the “experience” itself. Liberated from her body, Clarissa can have “true,” uncorrupted virtue that is not assaulted by a skeptical critique. Clarissa does not have to signify externally; she becomes only her internal spirit. Her metaphysical words replaces her material body, and become a form of power in their own right.

In the last one hundred pages, “Clarissa lives” in the death letters she has prepared for her family. As in the fragments of “Clarissa’s Papers,” here Clarissa invokes the present. Clarissa writes to her brother: “Now, at reading this, will you pity your late unhappy sister! NOW will you forgive her faults, both supposed and real. And NOW will you afford her memory that kind concern which you refused to her

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96 Eagleton, The Rape of Clarissa, 40.
97 Ibid., 44.
98 Armstrong, Desire and Domestic Fiction, 95.
before”.99 To her sister she writes, “Now may you, my dear Arabella, unrestrained by the severity of your virtue, let fall a pitying tear on the past faults and sufferings of your late unhappy sister”.100 Clarissa’s continued invocation of “Now,” gives life and presence to her words. She is dead when the letters are received, but her presence at the moment of writing the letter is imbued within the text by continued reference to “now”.

Clarissa’s letters to her parents demonstrate how her embodied presence becomes constituted through her words alone. Clarissa begins a letter to her father, “With exulting confidence now does your emboldened daughter come into your awful presence by these lines”.101 Though dead, Clarissa is brought into her father’s “presence” through her words, as she could not have been while alive. She replaces material life with metaphysical presence accessible in her texts. Similarly, Clarissa writes to her mother: “I now, by these lines, approach you with more assurance”.102 Though she has no material life, Clarissa can still “approach” her mother through her words. In this sense, “Clarissa lives” after death in and as text.

Though “Clarissa lives” is Lovelace’s phrase, it creates an interpretative framework for the text that exceeds Lovelace’s meaning. The rape creates a metaphysical “state of being” for Clarissa that is perfected in the moment of her death. As “Clarissa lives” on after death in her post-humus letters, she lives in the letters that constitute the narrative. Her body dies, but her interior mind is preserved in her death letters, and more significantly, in the form of the novel itself. In this

99 Richardson, Clarissa, 1373.
100 Ibid., 1374.
101 Ibid., 1371.
102 Ibid., 1371.
sense, whether rape is an event that can end for Clarissa or not, it is not one which ends in the narrative itself, or for the reader. As a post-humus compilation of letters, *Clarissa* is predicated on Clarissa’s death. Rape is a state of being that forms the basis for Clarissa’s presence within the text as such. In this sense, Clarissa’s body is always negatively defined, embodied catastrophically. She is present only because of her rape and death.

**Conclusion: Can Rape Be Redemptive?**

That the rape is not represented is the contradiction of the text: it both constitutes the text and threatens its dissolution. It threatens its dissolution because it creates a problem which cannot be solved, which is that for the novel *Clarissa* the rape is both a necessary event of and an event which does not (and, Eagleton even argues, cannot) occur. However, it constitutes the text in the sense that the discursive absence of the rape gives form to the novel. Rape is discursively absent from the narrative, but it is “embedded” throughout.103 Rape is present in the first half, foreshadowed by Lovelace and Miss Howe. It is present in the second half in each letter that attempts to define Clarissa as corrupted and therefore more corruptible, or inherently corrupt. Furthermore, rape is embedded in the narrative as the trace of Clarissa’s metaphysical body. In this sense, rape is not the structuring event that ends as it determines the trial of feminine virtue. It creates a “state of being” for Clarissa that permeates the entire narrative, becoming the basis for the novel’s form. As a

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103 Laura Doyle claims Richardson that the rape is embedded within smaller moments throughout the rest of the text. “Richardson omits the scene and instead embeds its effects in many smaller moments, articulating the problem in psychological, endlessly ramified terms – which … entangle Clarissa in her own undoing” (2008, 143).
“state of being,” rape disrupts the two phases of seduction, “pursuit” and “response,” implicitly challenging the nature of consent, which is based on this strict binary.

In my next chapter, I will examine how Clarissa’s consent is searched for in response to rape. As in this chapter, I am concerned with how the novel works within and outside of the binary of consent or resistance, and how reader’s of the text have interpreted Clarissa’s desire.
Reading for Clarissa’s (hidden) Desire:
Paper III

“A LADY took a great fancy to a young lion, or a bear, I forget which – but a bear, or a tiger, I believe it was. It was made her a present of when a whelp. She fed it with her own hand: she nursed up the wicked cub with great tenderness; and would play with it, without fear or apprehension of danger: and it was obedient to all her commands: and its tameness, as she used to boast, increased with it’s growth; so that, like a lap-dog, it would follow her all over the house. But mind what followed. At last, somehow, neglecting to satisfy its hungry maw, or having otherwise disoblige it on some occasion, it resumed its nature; and on a sudden fell upon her, and tore her in pieces – And who was most to blame, I pray? The brute, or the lady? The lady, surely! For what she did, was out of nature, out of character at least: what it did, was in its nature.”

In this fragmented letter, labeled “Paper III,” Clarissa uses the allegory of a lady and a young bear – or lion, or tiger – to represent her seduction. This allegory is infused with the language of motherhood; the “wicked cub” was “made her a present of when a whelp”; she “nursed” the young cub “with great tenderness”; “it was obedient to all her commands”. Here, the lady is a mother-like figure, the rake is the corrupted form of a child. The relationship between mother and child is analogized as that between master and “lap-dog”; the child’s “tameness” is more severe than that expected of a child, and the mother boasts her success in a perverse way, more attributable to a satisfied dog trainer than a mother. Yet if the cub is corrupted to

104 Richardson, Clarissa, 891.
begin with, the lady, not the cub, corrupts the mother-child relationship. The text asserts, “She fed it with her own hand: she nursed up the wicked cub”. The lady is the active subject of the text, while the cub is the object of her actions. The relationship is unnatural not because the cub’s nature is already wicked, but because the lady acts “out of nature”. However, the text asserts she is more culpable for the result (“[it] tore her in pieces”) because, “neglecting to satisfy its hungry maw, or having otherwise disoblige[d] it on some occasion,” she failed to fulfill the corrupted role of mother she set out to occupy. The cub turns on the lady for her inability to perfectly embody the mother figure; she acted “out of character”.

“Paper III” is an allegory for reading Clarissa’s seduction—and perhaps for reading generally. It is one of Clarissa’s “readings” of her seduction after the rape. In the place of reflection, it gives allegory. Nonetheless, “Paper III” has been read as though it gives access to Clarissa’s hidden interiority, and in particular, Clarissa’s desire. Like the novel itself, “Paper III” combines interpretative problems for readers within and without the text: how, what, and for whom does the reader read? I will take my cue from Terry Castle, who claims that the problem of the text is the problem of reading.

In my chapter, examine reading practices within and without Clarissa.105 I am particularly concerned with the reading for Clarissa’s desire. The frame of “pursuit” and “response” encourages a reading that searches for the presence or absence of Clarissa’s desire in order to determine the quality of her consent. This is how reader’s

105 Castle distinguishes between the two types of reading that are always going on: the reading within (the characters) and the reading without (the reader). The act of reading within the text may be called “history” or “story” and the act of reading without may be called “discourse” (Castle, Clarissa’s Ciphers, 43).
read the text. Implicitly, the search for Clarissa’s desire, what the reader reads for, strictly binds Clarissa to consent or absolute resistance. Each reader reads for and into Clarissa’s desires differently, prompted by a search for her hidden desire. Readings typically follow one of two paths: Lovelacian or Clarissian.

Here, I will argue against reading for Clarissa’s desire. The real problem of the text is not whether Clarissa has desire, but the preoccupation with her desire as the determinant of the crime. The claim that Clarissa unconsciously desires Lovelace makes an implicit claim to the quality of her consent. Any indication of guilt or underlying desire is an admission of complicity within the gendered dynamics of the eighteenth-century seduction plot. Either she was raped and absolutely resisted any interpretation otherwise, or she was seduced and consented. Consent, resistance, guilt, complicity: these terms rest on the presence or absence of female desire. To read Clarissa in order to definitively make a claim about any of these categories is to read for Clarissa’s desire. The opposite is true: to read for Clarissa’s desire is to make a claim about the quality of her consent.

In my chapter, I argue that reading for Clarissa’s desire always reflects a Lovelacian reading of her desire. In the search for Clarissa’s desire, she moves from an object of rape to a subject of her own misfortune. This movement is reflected in “Paper III” itself: while the brute turns on the lady; “[he] on a sudden fell upon her, and tore her in pieces,” the lady is to blame. The lady’s fault is not that she consented to the brute’s act, but that she did not properly prevent against it. The lady’s fault is that she acted against social norms that made her vulnerable to an external act of

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106 Bowers, Force or Fraud, 35.
violence. There is no reciprocity in the brute’s act: the “act” of corruption is external to the lady.

**Lovelace, the “Lover of Forms”**

Wendy Lee argues that the question of *Clarissa* for readers has become, “Is she in love”? Readers of *Clarissa* have historically been caught between reading Clarissa’s desires as a sign of her “credibility” or her “legitimacy”. Either Clarissa does not acknowledge her real feelings, or she is a monster not to have any. Her aggressive non-consent ceases to represent non-consent, instead generating a skeptic response in which “protesting at all was protesting too much”. Her protests are interpreted as attention to social form, to excessive politeness, virtue, and piety, which some critics read as a “façade” that masks her true desire. Lovelace notes this in the text, calling Clarissa a “lover of forms”. As a lover of forms, Clarissa loves social forms and formalities, tact, indirectness, and politeness.

As a “lover of forms,” Clarissa is incapable of giving “direct consent,” but that does not preclude “indirect” consent. This is evident in Lovelace’s statement, “But yet, imaginest thou that I expect direct consent from such a lover of forms as this lady is known to be”? “Indirect consent” follows the Lovelacian formula,

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109 Briggitte Glaser believes that Clarissa’s body acts differently from her words; Clarissa’s desires are represented in the text “often in the form of denial,” and “as behavior which is diametrically opposed to her professed intentions” (Briggitte Glaser, *The Body in Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa*, (Hiedelberg: Universitatsverlag C. Winter, 1994), 129.
110 Richardson, *Clarissa*, 837.
111 Ibid., 837.
“there may be consent in struggle; there may be yielding in resistance”. Resistance can always be reinterpreted for signs of “yielding” consent and hidden desire. Anna Howe reflects this. Howe reads against Clarissa’s assertion that she could never love Lovelace: “But you know best – Yet you don’t neither … Depend upon it, whether you know it or not, you are in for’t”. Clarissa’s words can always be re-interpreted as indicative of her hidden desire, overwriting her authority to “know” her own emotions.

Literary critics Aaron Hill, Briggitte Glaser, and Watt read into Clarissa’s first seduction at the garden door for signs of her hidden desire and consent. In their analyses, the form of seduction becomes demonstrative of Clarissa’s hidden desire. That Clarissa left with Lovelace signifies greater than either character’s accounts of it. Unlike with the actual rape, Clarissa is conscious when she meets Lovelace at the garden door; complicity appears to operate here. Clarissa “go[es] away with” or “goes off with” and even “followed” Lovelace, despite her intention not to. Each of these critical accounts place the burden of consent or resistance on Clarissa’s actions. Like in “Paper III,” the lady is the subject of her misfortunes. She acted “out of character,” while the brute acted according to his own nature.

Like Anna Howe, Hill, Glaser and Watt read against Clarissa’s explicit statements, and find desire in her so-called consent to leave. Clarissa’s consent is based on her decision to go to the garden door, an action that works within the seduction form. I argue that rather than demonstrating Clarissa’s consent or non-

112 Ibdi., 557.
113 Richardson, Clarissa, 70.
consent, the scene at the garden door demonstrates the false dichotomy between consent or resistance. Clarissa is forced by fright, physical manipulation, and the threat of murder (Lovelace says: “Fly, my dearest life! – if you would not see two or three murders committed at your feet, fly”) to leave her father’s house. Clarissa’s seduction cannot represent both implied consent and active force. Glaser says “she opened the gate and stepped outside,” ignoring that Clarissa left amidst extreme confusion and fright, as she claims, “frighted beyond the power of controlling”.

Ironically, Clarissa goes to the garden door as a “lover of form” – a lover of the form of written correspondence -- rather than for her sexual desire. When Clarissa goes to the garden door, she is aware that her actions fit within the form of seduction. She acknowledges Ms. Howe’s warnings, that define the form of seduction: “here your words *that all punctilio is at an end the moment I am out of my father’s house …* determined me once more against taking that rash step [leaving with Lovelace].” Ms. Howe’s words can be seen as the novel’s definition for seduction as a form; seduction is framed as an irrevocable “act” that corrupts the young lady’s standards of behavior. The lady’s standards move automatically from “all punctilio” to assumed immorality. While Clarissa understands the threat of seduction, Lovelace compels her.

Like Clarissa, Lovelace is also a “lover of forms” – a lover of other’s forms. Lovelace’s successful manipulations demonstrate that he is a master of social forms,

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115 Bowers writes, “Even though Lovelace short-circuited her choice, manipulated her apprehensions, and physically ‘lifted’ her into the coach while she was screaming “no, no, no,” Clarissa remains accountable” (Bowers, *Force or Fraud*, 273).
116 Ibid., 380.
118 Richardson, *Clarissa*, 374.
119 Richardson, *Clarissa*, 365.
as well as a master of appearances. In his letters to his helper, Joseph Leman, Lovelace acknowledges that the appearance of consent signifies greater than Clarissa’s actual consent: “They [the Harlowe’s] should conclude she is gone off by her own consent, that they may not pursue us”. Lovelace must know the form perfectly in order to manipulate the appearance of the form to his advantage.

Lovelace manipulates Clarissa’s naïve love of forms to convince her to meet him at the garden door at all. Castle claims that the Harlowes “purposefully confuse those codes of communication she [Clarissa] is accustomed to use – both to signify her own experience and to interpret the behavior of others”. Like her family, Lovelace manipulates Clarissa’s attention to social forms when he compels her to go with him through the garden door. By refusing to acknowledge the rejection letter Clarissa wrote him, Lovelace acts contrary to the swift response and reply that usually characterizes their correspondence. He sets a trap specifically designed to ensnare Clarissa by transgressing the form of letter writing developed between the two of them. This compels Clarissa to communicate her decision to remain at Harlowe Place in person, despite knowing that she will be vulnerable.

Seduction and rape are Lovelacian forms; Lovelace is a “lover of forms” because he does not have to behave according to them. Lovelace uses Clarissa’s attention to social forms and manipulates them to his advantage, as he manipulates the signs of her body to his advantage. “She answered me not, but with tears and sighs: fond of believing what I hoped, I imputed her silence to the modesty of her sex … But looking in her averted face … I plainly perceived that it was resentment, and

120 Ibid., 384.
121 Castle, Clarissa’s Ciphers, 59.
122 Castle, Clarissa’s Ciphers, 81.
not bashfulness, that was struggling in her bosom”. Lovelace acknowledges his subjective reading, transforming Clarissa’s angered silence into “the modesty of her sex”. While he ultimately rejects that reading (“I plainly perceived that it was resentment … struggling in her bosom”), he acknowledges “the absurdity of the connection between any particular form and any particular significance”.

While Lovelace does not have to strictly follow Clarissa’s social codes, he does live strictly by his own. For Lovelace, form and mental state do not necessarily signify as they do for Clarissa. He asks, “if blushing be a sign of grace or modesty, have not the sex as great a command over their blushes, as they are said to have over their tears?”

While Lovelace’s deep misogynistic suspicion of the feminine body motivates this phrase, it also demonstrates Lovelace’s commitment to form. The “command” that a woman has over her blush changes it from an involuntary expression of emotion to an artful manipulation. In his interpretation, every involuntary blush becomes a “command” that hides hidden desire. Lovelace reads signs of sexual desire into Clarissa’s blushes, inverting the formula “blush = modesty” to “blush = eros”.

While it appears as though Lovelace willfully interprets and misinterprets, Lovelace is committed to the formula, “blush = eros,” lack of desire is hidden desire.

Furthermore, Lovelace is ultimately concerned with Clarissa’s consent. He is necessarily a “lover of forms,” at least a lover of the form of seduction. For Lovelace, nothing has to mean anything except that the form of seduction will come to signify

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123 Ibid., 934.
125 Ibid., 692.
126 Castle, Clarissa’s Ciphers, 89.
the presence of female desire and indirect consent. Later in the narrative, Lovelace justifies his continued trials of Clarissa by pointing to the fact that Clarissa made herself vulnerable at the garden door. The effect of seduction is meaning: that Clarissa was seduced signifies her consent to seduction. He believes that “the forms of actions – however fictitious – carry mental states like intention and consent with them”.\textsuperscript{127} It is clear from his behavior after the rape, especially his desire for Clarissa to be pregnant, that Lovelace believes that Clarissa’s participation in the rape, however limited, signifies her implicit consent.

As readers of the text, we do not need to read with Lovelace for Clarissa’s desire. Rather than signifying consent, the scene at the garden door demonstrates how the form of seduction is implicated in critical readings of the text. In this sense, every reader of Clarissa’s desire is also a “lover of forms”. Intention will inevitably be found when the effect signifies meaning, when the form of seduction implies original intention and desire. By reading the form of seduction as demonstrative of Clarissa’s desire for Lovelace, readers distort Clarissa’s actual desires and fall into a Lovelacian interpretation of the scene.

What the form of seduction actually indicates is that we are never reading Clarissa’s desire; we are reading the form that is supposed to signify that desire in a Lovelacian reading. Clarissa’s desire and consent cannot be said to operate at the garden door. Rather, Clarissa is an object of seduction interpreted and made into the subject of her misfortune.

\textsuperscript{127} Ferguson, “Rape and the Rise of the Novel,” 101-102.
Responding to Rape: Clarissa

Clarissa responds to rape by reading into her actions during Lovelace’s pursuit. In this section, I examine two of Clarissa’s responses, “Paper III” and another moment which I call “Clarissa’s Premise”. Clarissa’s responses to rape fall within the two-stage framework of “pursuit” and “response” identified by Toni Bowers. “Response” defines rape as rape or seduction by determining the presence or absence of female consent to rape.\(^\text{128}\) Clarissa’s responses to rape have been used to interpret Clarissa’s mental state after the rape, to understand her new life as a rape victim, and to question her complicity.

Taken together, the ten papers that constitute “Clarissa’s Papers,” demonstrate Clarissa’s first semi-conscious response to rape separate from Lovelace’s account. Ian Watt reads Clarissa’s self-condemnation as indicative of her suppressed erotic desires. The fragmentation and delusions of her Papers are caused by the “frightening reality of the unconscious life which lies hidden in the most virtuous heart,” that is, her love for Lovelace.\(^\text{129}\) While Clarissa is only concerned with her complicity here, Watt reformulates this passage to be about Clarissa’s desire. The lady is to blame because “what she did, was out of nature”. Desire is notably absent here, however, Watt uses Clarissa’s guilt to make claims about the quality of her desire.

However, “Paper III” offers itself to divergent and mutually contradictory interpretations. Terry Eagleton reads it in light of the irrational guilt that rape victims sometimes ascribe to themselves after their trauma. For Eagleton, “Paper III” is not a truthful allegory of Clarissa’s story; it is the “construction” of a trauma victim. Rather

\(^{128}\) Bowers, *Force or Fraud*, 4.

than indicating hidden sexual desire for Lovelace, this passage creates a “self-lacerating mystification”.\textsuperscript{130} Clarissa’s intention and desire are alienated from the text, mystified rather than exposed by “Paper III”.

Like Terry Eagleton, I read Clarissa’s response to rape in “Paper III” as a “self-lacerating mystification”.\textsuperscript{131} “Clarissa’s Papers” follow an unclear and contradictory trajectory that reflects Clarissa’s fragmented body. In “Paper I,” Clarissa writes, “I can write nothing at all – only that, whatever they have done to me, I cannot tell”.\textsuperscript{132} Clarissa’s mind is fragmented by rape, compromising any coherent response to rape. Her “response” to rape, supposedly so evident in “Paper III,” is confused. Throughout her papers, Clarissa moves between the subject and the object of her misfortunes. In “Paper III,” and “Paper V,” the lady is the subject of blame: “I thought I could acquit my intention of any such vanity. / I was too secure in the knowledge I thought I had of my own heart. / My supposed advantages became a snare to me”.\textsuperscript{133} However, in “Paper I,” Clarissa is the object; “whatever they [Lovelace and Mrs. Sinclair] have done to me, I cannot tell”.\textsuperscript{134} In “Paper X,” Clarissa’s reference to Lovelace’s pursuit is overt: “By swift misfortunes / How am I pursu’d!”.\textsuperscript{135} What this demonstrates is that Clarissa’s initial “response” to rape is actually multiple, contradictory responses.

While Eagleton means that “Paper III” is Clarissa’s own mystification, it is also a mystification for the reader. Reading “Paper III” for signs of Clarissa’s desire

\textsuperscript{130} Eagleton, \textit{The Rape of Clarissa}, 69-70.
\textsuperscript{131} Terry Eagleton, pp. 69-70.
\textsuperscript{132} Richardson, \textit{Clarissa}, 890.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 890.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 890.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 890.
doubly inhibits the reader’s access to her desire; readers read Clarissa’s self-conscious reading of her rape. “Paper III” dispenses with the fiction of interiority and presents only allegory. Furthermore, “Clarissa’s Papers” are already compromised by their compilation. There is no indication in the text that Clarissa ordered the fragments herself. The reader is left to assume that Lovelace ordered her papers, generating a mini-narrative in the process. In this manner, Lovelace mediates the reader’s access to Clarissa’s interiority, mystifying a reading of the text.

Clarissa responds to rape again at the end of her life in her premise for the compilation of the novel. Clarissa reads into her actions before rape, interpreting them according to the necessities of her radically changed circumstances.

“May my story be a warning to all, how they prefer a libertine to a man of true honour; and how they permit themselves to be misled (where they mean the best) by the specious yet foolish hope of subduing riveted habits, and as I may say of altering natures”!

Notably, Clarissa’s premise only directly refers to the pursuit, and to the bourgeois young ladies’ role in their own seduction. “They,” the bourgeois young ladies, “prefer a libertine to a man of true honour,” “they permit themselves to be misled,” “they” have the “foolish hope of … altering natures”. Clarissa’s premise skews the burden of seduction on the actions of the victims. Like the lady in “Paper III,” the seduced young lady is the subject of her misfortunes. However, here, the

136 Richardson, *Clarissa*, 1319.
young lady does not “act \textit{out of nature},” she tries to alter the rake’s nature. As the structuring premise that creates the form of the narrative, Clarissa’s premise directs the reader and the critic’s attentions to the female’s motives in the period of pursuit. In her premise, Clarissa is otherwise little concerned with the sexual union itself or in it’s aftermath. The motive that Clarissa is primarily concerned with is the desire to “\textit{subdue} riveted habits,” not to fulfill sexual desire.

Clarissa’s premise demonstrates that reading for Clarissa’s desire according to Clarissa’s responses is still a compromised reading. In a novel in which rape is the structuring event, Clarissa’s desire is always framed in \textit{response} to rape or to the inevitable event of rape. Even if we think of female sexuality as a process, in which the singular “response” becomes “responses,” female consent and desire are still interrogated as the determinants of rape, abstracted from the crime itself.\textsuperscript{137} Furthermore, as a “lover of forms,” Clarissa is committed to the form of rape. Rape is supposed to signify implicit consent, or at least to signify that Clarissa behaved out of form before rape.

Clarissa accepts a Lovelacian reading of her desires in order to reconstitute her virtue, and as such, any reading of Clarissa’s desires that relies upon her “response” to rape follows a Lovelacian reading. She accepts the Lovelacian theory of consent, that “there is yielding in resistance”.\textsuperscript{138} However, she also transforms it in her premise, reformulating consent as, “how they permit themselves to be misled”. Clarissa is still a “lover of forms”. Clarissa acted contrary to her nature when she

\textsuperscript{137} Marcus defines female sexuality “not as a discrete object whose violation will always be painfully and instantly apparent, but as an intelligible process whose individual instances can be reinterpreted and renamed over time”(Marcus, “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words,” 400).

\textsuperscript{138} Richardson, \textit{Clarissa}, 557.
went to meet Lovelace at the garden door. The young lady “permits” her own seduction, propelled by her “foolish hopes” of transforming the rake’s social identity. Clarissa’s intentions, not her actions, cause her to be complicit; her intention to transform Lovelace is the initial misstep that brought her to the garden door at all.

Clarissa’s “reading” in “Paper III” and in her premise do not necessarily demonstrate something essential about the nature of her desire for Lovelace, or the quality of her consent. In “Paper III,” the brute turns on the lady; “[he] on a sudden fell upon her, and tore her in pieces”. The lady’s fault is not that she consented to the brute’s act, but that she did not properly prevent against it. The lady’s fault is that she acted against social norms that made her vulnerable to an external act of violence. There is no reciprocity in the brute’s act: the “act” of corruption is external to the lady. Her hidden interiority is notably absent.

Clarissa’s “self-lacerating mystification(s)” demonstrate the problem with reading for desire and consent across time. Why must Clarissa’s “response” to rape be demonstrative of her desires before rape? Clarissa’s different desires and intentions across the time of the narrative are reinterpreted according to her changing circumstances. Her desires change; the significance she attaches to her desires also changes.

**Reading for Desire, Against Authority and Self-Representation**

After we have examined how Clarissa is read within and without the text, it is hard to know how to read Clarissa at all. Scrutinized for signs of desire and consent, Clarissa’s limited authority is based on her ability to convince others of the strict

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139 Richardson, *Clarissa*, 891.
relationship between her external actions and her internal moral order. How we read
Clarissa’s desire determines how we read her authority over herself. If we do not read
Clarissa authoritatively, then we deny her credibility and reenact Lovelacian
hermeneutic violence. If we read her as a self-authority, then we accept what she
comes to believe; that she is complicit in her rape and that her rape is a necessary trial
that constitutes her virtue. Without subjecting her to greater hermeneutic violence,
without undermining her authoritative voice, how do we read Clarissa, a frustratingly
virtuous, contradictory, and sometimes tragic character? And in particular, how
should we read Clarissa as a character in a narrative about her rape?

Wendy Lee reads Clarissa as a “transparent” character. Where there is no
hidden interiority, no depth-model of subjectivity, there is no desire to be violently
searched for and no pleasure in doing so. Clarissa “disables any incentives for
psychological discovery”. 140 Terry Castle interprets Clarissa in a slightly different
manner, as a “naïve” character who “reads the world as though it were an ‘open-
book’—a transparent source of meaning”. 141 As a “naïve” reader, Clarissa reads
desire as though it were self-evident. Both Castle and Lee define how Clarissa reads,
in order to argue how she should be read.

I would argue against Lee’s reading of Clarissa as a “transparent” character. It
is not a sustainable reading practice, nor is “transparency” possible in an epistolary
narrative. How we can read at all when there is nothing hidden, when there is “no
pleasure”? What type of model for reading does this create? As David Kurnick
demonstrates, it is impossible not to read for pleasure. It is particularly difficult in

140 Lee, _A Case for Hard-heartedness_, 42.
141 Castle, _Clarissa’s Ciphers_, 57.
Clarissa, when Clarissa’s desire is the major question asked by readers of the novel. Whether or not Clarissa has actual desire, and I question what actual desire is and how it can be shown, she is read for desire. If we do not read as though Clarissa has desire, then we are incapable of supplementing Clarissa’s limited authority with our own.

Furthermore, the reader’s access to Clarissa’s desire, demonstrated through her words and bodily actions, is often mediated by Lovelace’s letters. In some cases, Clarissa’s letters are accessible to the reader because Lovelace has physical control over them, such as with “Paper III”. In other cases, Clarissa’s reactions to Lovelace are only narrated by Lovelace, and therefore written (read) through Lovelace’s desire. In this sense, a “transparent” reading of Clarissa’s desires is impossible. Furthermore, a “transparent” reading is impossible within the epistolary novel at all. The reader’s access is always mediated through character’s “constructions”.142 Clarissa’s actions are not “transparent” but actively mediated by different narrators and her own “constructions”. Like Lovelace and readers of the text, Clarissa “reads” for and into her desire across the time of the narrative. Desire is important to Clarissa: first, in her right not to have desire for Lovelace, and second, in her admission of corrupted desire, which reconstitutes her as a subject.

As with a transparent reading, I read against Clarissa as a “naïve” character. Castle distinguishes between the “naïve” reader of nature that Clarissa is initially and the “nuanced” reader of nature she becomes after rape. All of Clarissa’s actions are subsumed between these two categories, preventing Clarissa from reading differently.

142 Eagleton would call this the “problem of writing,” which mirrors “problem of the woman” (1982, 46).
Furthermore, this division is mapped onto the timeline of the narrative, following a similar division of “pursuit” and “response”. All of Clarissa’s acts of resistance before the rape become read as “naïve” attempts to gain control over her surroundings, and all of her constructions after her letter, “To my father’s house” become “nuanced”. In this letter, Clarissa tricks Lovelace into thinking that she is returning to Harlowe place, when in fact she is referencing heaven. According to Castle’s analysis, here Clarissa is a “nuanced” reader because she has learned how to interpret Lovelace’s reactions, and knows how Lovelace will interpret this letter.\textsuperscript{143} Clarissa becomes a “nuanced” reader in “response” to her rape, and once Clarissa demonstrates a “nuanced” reading, she stops reading “naïvely”. This binary causes Castle to attribute Clarissa’s failed attempts to escape too much on her “naïve” reading, rather than to the strength of Lovelace’s (de)vices. Furthermore, if we read Clarissa as “nuanced” after her rape, than her statements in “response” are justified and attributed greater power than they necessarily deserve.\textsuperscript{144}

Castle and Lee’s interpretation of Clarissa’s “reading” returns us to the problem of Clarissa’s authority. As a nuanced reader, Clarissa gains authority over her body that she did not have as a naïve reader. If to be a nuanced reader is greater than a naïve one, than the naïve/nuanced binary redeems rape: Clarissa gains self-governance where before she had none.\textsuperscript{145} However, I am wary of the manner in which the novel offers redemption, which I see as exchanging rape for virtue, lack of authority for the limited authority to die. The novel’s so-called redemption troubles

\textsuperscript{143} Castle, \textit{Clarissa’s Ciphers}, 59.
\textsuperscript{144} Clarissa’s premise is an example where Clarissa is a “nuanced” reader, and yet unjustly re-interprets her desires before the rape.
\textsuperscript{145} Doyle claims that \textit{Clarissa} is a story of failed liberty that tries to make that failure redemptive. (2008, 135).
even the meaning of Clarissa’s authority. Soon after rape, Clarissa declares to Lovelace, “‘Let me go’, said she. ‘I am but a woman – but my life is in my own power, though my person is not – I will not be thus constrained’”!146 Her authority is limited to power over death, rather than power over life; she is only capable of having negative liberty.

Examining Clarissa’s use of juridical language, and freedom as an English subject, Doyle demonstrates how the text notes the contradiction of her freedom, usurped by first her tyrannical father and brother, and then by her rapist, Lovelace. While Richardson’s demonstrates the contradictions of consent in a patriarchal society, he also works within it, justifying a native discourse that works within the apparatuses of the state. He does this by dramatizing feminine seduction and subjection, in turn reworking feminine subjection into a necessary composition of the English character.147

Conclusion

Reading, like writing as a form of “reading” Nature, is a compromised activity in Clarissa, particularly for the heroine whose lack of political authority and naïve interpretation leaves her vulnerable to Lovelace’s tricks. How can we read separately from Clarissa and still allow her to have authority over her self-representation? Given her negative liberty, how can we imagine a model of reading that incorporates Clarissa’s authority at all, when the novel so resolutely denies Clarissa any real political authority? In particular, the question for me is how we read desire in a novel

146 Richardson, Clarissa, 939.
147 Doyle, Freedom’s Empire, 136.
that “[aspires] to be a national allegory by way of a woman’s violation story”.\textsuperscript{148} This question brings us back to the concerns of the first chapter. Do we read \textit{Clarissa} as an allegory for seduction and as an allegory for seduction, an allegory for liberty? Do we read it as the first psychological novel? Do we read it according to genre, as a realist novel, a sentimental novel, as domestic fiction, as a tragedy? These questions are isolated and made politically important after we have examined the problems of reading Clarissa’s desire within and without the text.

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 137.
Conclusion:

Reading *with* Clarissa
In my close reading of the novel, I have attempted to demonstrate a form of reading *with* rather than *for* Clarissa’s desire. To read *with* Clarissa is not to interpret as she interprets, but rather to read next to her as she interprets. “Reading with,” means to read the novel as Clarissa moves through it and to take this occasion to read social relations as they appear allegorical and specifically within the text. To read with means to read the novel allegorically, as rape and not seduction, because solidarity with Clarissa as a rape survivor is politically important. Furthermore, it means to recognize the characters as psychologically complex characters who, in their specificity, support, break down, and have no relation to an allegorical reading of the text at different moments across the narrative. Clarissa is an allegorical character and she is specific. However, her specificity does not mean the end to the allegory; these terms are not mutually exclusive.

To read *with* Clarissa also means to read against rape as the structuring event of the novel. As I have shown in my second chapter, the “act” of rape is not an isolatable event it is a “state of being” that creates a new relationship between the victim of rape and her body. By destabilizing rape as a concrete “event,” I destabilize the strict movement of corruption between moral and immoral standards of behavior. Clarissa is an angel who falls and maintains her angelic virtue. Furthermore, as a state of being, the catastrophic embodied consequences of rape become clear. In this sense, to read *with* Clarissa is to focus on the consequences of rape as the main subject of the novel.

While the seduction plot considers consent or resistant to be unambiguous, the state of being generated by rape throws consent into ambiguity. In the “state of being”
produced by rape, a space is opened in which the victim of rape can have desire, no
desire, and complicit desire simultaneously. The problem with the structure of the
feminine “response” to rape is that it reads across time, and rejects contradiction. To
“read with” Clarissa is to read against a strict binary of consent or resistance, desire
or never desire. Reading with lets one moment signify in that moment only, not
across the time of the narrative.
Bibliography


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