

## Messenger and Pupils of Death in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*

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### Abstract

This article looks at the didacticism associated with death that Samuel Richardson carefully crafted in *Clarissa* at a time when religion very much had a stronghold on the psyche of the society reading the work, but which still resonates with the contemporary world's religious informed good dying and bestial dying, which the Tom captures in connection with the varying deaths of characters in the epistolary novel. The article demonstrates how the novel uses these characters to pass on the didacticism on good/evil living and attendant dying. Its argument is that the novel encourages people to live well to die well. In this regard, the novel's themes emerges to be timeliness and relevant to the contemporary period.

### Key words:

Didacticism, Good and Bestial Dying, Richardson, 18<sup>th</sup> Century Novel  
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### Introduction

In Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, Thomas Belton and Magdalen Sinclair die in agony, desperately clinging to their bodies as death mercilessly subdues them, their suffering, however, differing in intensity. The more diabolic Sinclair suffers a more macabre, sinister, and bestial death, representative of evil. Both Belton and Sinclair reject to see priests for last minute penance and instead beg doctors to extend their lives in a bid to put their sinful "houses" in order before embracing death. In contrast, Clarissa Harlowe's death is benign and saintly, devoid of any wrestling bouts with death: she does not cling to the body like Belton and Sinclair; the priest comes early, and she is the only one to take the Sacrament before her death. These three deaths exhibit the mind-body duality, in which the body represents material and the mind immaterial things. Clarissa dies peacefully because she is "all mind;" Belton and Sinclair die in torment because they are "all body." Richardson develops the character of John Belford in his dual role as messenger and pupil of death to make Lovelace and, by extension, the reader see the difference between bestial and holy dying.

Richardson prepares Belford for the role of messenger and pupil of death in *Clarissa* by letting him witness the demise of his Watford uncle. When a messenger informs Belford about his uncle's imminent death, he must go and "close his eyes" (Richardson, 1985, p. 560).<sup>1</sup> Though he will be "a considerable gainer by the poor man's death," Belford does not celebrate because he abhors "scenes of Death and the Doctor so near [him]." On second thoughts, Belford rectifies that statement by telling Lovelace: "The *Doctor* and *Death*...for that's the natural order; and generally speaking, the one is but the harbinger to the other" (560). Belford's statement signals the impotency of doctors in saving the mortal body – of willing or unwilling victims – when it is time to die.

The timing and death of Belford's uncle is significant in the development of the novel. It prepares Belford for his role as messenger of death and it signals the events that will preoccupy the readers in the dénouement section of the novel. By witnessing his uncle's "excruciating tortures" (p. 715), Belford sees the vanity of living a reprobate's life. At sixty-seven, his uncle suffers agony for "half the *very vile enormities*" that Belford and Lovelace have "committed in the last seven only" (p. 715). This realization makes Belford consider reform a viable option to a rake's life. As Lovelace admits, "Reformation...is coming fast upon" Belford because his "uncle's slow death, and [his] attendance upon him, through every stage towards it, prepared [him] to it" (p. 1098). This statement foreshadows Belford's pupil-of-death role in subsequent deaths.

His uncle's deathbed also gives Belford an alibi that justifies his absence from the occasion of Clarissa's rape. The uncle who "cannot live many days" (p. 560) hangs on to life until just before Lovelace rapes Clarissa. Even then Belford still has "business" to "hold [him] yet a few days" before quitting his uncle's house (p. 884). As such, Belford owes his complicity in the rape, which Lovelace later accuses him of, to Lovelace's "communicative pen" which exposes him to his "barbarous villainy" (p. 884). Away from the rape scene, Belford can only dissuade Lovelace from his heinous intentions using the same "pen," without betraying his bosom friend's confidence. In his last letter before the rape, Belford warns Lovelace against sexually assaulting Clarissa because "no doubt this affair will end tragically, one way or another," or if she survives the "wasting grief will soon put a period to her days" (p.710). Belford's prophetic words come true after the rape.

I suggest reading Belford as a "ford" or bridge between Lovelace and the death scenes on one hand, and the reader and the text of death on the other. By exposing Lovelace to the minute deathbed scene details attempts to convince him to reform, Belford also addresses readers since they read the letters over his

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from the primary text are taken from Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (London: Penguin Books) 1985

shoulders. In this process Belford is not an impartial participant. Arguably, the triple deaths of Belton, Clarissa, and Sinclair constitute the core of Richardson's didactic deaths. Richardson seems to have meant them to be read as a triad because they come one after another in the last third of the novel within a space of about one hundred and fifty pages. This is remarkably close in a voluminous book whose plot progression is "too slow" (p. 1499). Contrast that with Belton's waiting upon his uncle's deathbed for some four hundred and thirty-eight pages though the latter "cannot live many days!" Richardson arguably designed these death scenes loaded as they are with "circumstantial and minute detail" (p. 1499) for comparison purposes. Belford's narration enables the reader to see the deaths through the same lens without disrupting the novel's epistolary form. This raises the question of why Belford should be the narrator at this stage.

#### **Narrative subjectivity and good dying**

Despite his relative importance in the final segment of the novel, Belford's narrative role has largely been ignored, side-lined or given superficial treatment by critics. Many critics discuss or mention death because of its centrality in *Clarissa*; they tend to focus on the dominant discourses of Clarissa and Lovelace and marginalise Belford's. Margaret Anne Doody, for one, examines in detail these deathbed scenes and acknowledges how Belford unites the scenes by giving them "the same point of view" through his participation in them (183). Doody, however, focuses on how Richardson draws upon the eighteenth-century devotional literature to develop "the theme of the soul facing death" (153). It is Victor J. Lams, who in his book *Clarissa's Narrators*, recognizes the value of Belford as a main narrator in *Clarissa*. Lams argues that *Clarissa* is a novel of "three [main] narrators" – Clarissa the protagonist, Lovelace the antagonist, and Belford the "neutral narrator" (p. 3). Clarissa and Lovelace's narration are "self-reflective" and Belford's "other-reflective" because Belford lacks "any overriding self-project, any personal purpose which concentrates and directs his conduct" (Lams, 2001, p. 3). Lams (2001) discusses Belford's narrative role as arbiter "dedicated to the judicial intention of discovering the entire truth and opposing it to the fraudulent story that Lovelace has been inventing" (p. 39). In my analysis, I will focus on how Belford's dual role as messenger and pupil of death determines how he informs Lovelace to convert him to his reform plan.

Clarissa names Belford her "historian" or biographer because she recognizes his strategic potential as a reliable narrator. Belford's confidential correspondence with Lovelace can collaborate her story in a bid to restore her reputation among her "friends" and society. Clarissa knows that once Belford publishes Lovelace's letters alongside hers, the resultant composite picture will absolve her of any wilful wrongdoing. Moreover, Belford's ability to maintain ties with both Clarissa

and Lovelace makes him an ideal candidate for the position of Clarissa's biographer. Belford in the final segment of the novel also acts as arbitrator between Clarissa and Lovelace who "beyond that point communicate exclusively through him" (Lams, 2001, p. 47). The indisposed Clarissa is determined not to see the persistent Lovelace till her wish to die has been granted.

Belford becomes Clarissa's advocate when he learns she has unwittingly run into Lovelace's arms of deception. Despite Clarissa's "unequalled perfections and fine qualities," Belford knows Lovelace's trial of her virtue "is not a fair trial," considering the "depths of [Lovelace's] plots and contrivances" (pp. 500, 501). Clarissa is pitied against a cabal of Lovelace's "*specious, well-bred and genteel*" implements ready to lure an inexperienced woman who is cut off from her family's protection into unsolicited sex (p. 501). Belford entreats Lovelace to see the "vanity, conceit, and nonsense in [their] wild schemes" (p. 604), but Lovelace still proceeds and rapes Clarissa.

Indeed, though a rake, Belford's considerate nature helps him gain other characters' confidence. When Belton is thrown out of his house, Belford helps to reinstate him. Similarly, when Clarissa is framed and detained, Belford helps to free her and discourages Lovelace from visiting Clarissa in her declining health. With such positive attributes, Belford needs reform to become an acceptable social being. The deaths he witnesses complete the reformation that his uncle's demise sets in motion. These latter deaths personally affect him because all characters die from sex, or sex related ailments, of which Belford, alongside Lovelace, has been an ardent partaker.

In fact, the names of Belton and Belford, on the one hand, and Clarissa and Sinclair, on the other, as the pun in their names suggests, hint at their fates in the novel. Names, as Ian Watt notes, "in most fiction until the eighteenth century" were used "quite differently from those...in real life; they were 'characteristic,' artificial and conventional designations suited to the half-generalized types that figure in romance and pastoral" (p. 322). Belton and Belford's names fit in this paradigm. The prefix "Bel" means "fair, fine and beautiful" (Oed). These features may refer to man in general. The suffix "ton" means "*The fashion, the vogue; fashionableness, style,*" or "*fashionable people collectively; the fashionable world,*" which like Belton's untimely demise is transient. Belton symbolizes libertinism, which Tiffany Porter (1999) defines as "a philosophical and social system that incorporates more than the simple expansion of the boundaries of sexual behaviour" (p. 5). Libertinism was in "vogue" in England until it petered out in the eighteenth century (Porter, 1999, p. 5). The suffix "ford" means a "shallow place where a river or other stretch of water may be crossed by wading or with a vehicle;" it also means crossing water "by means of a ford" (Oed). On the basis of this interpretation, it is not surprising that one libertine dies and the other is spared to serve as a bridge on which Lovelace, and indeed the reader, can cross to reformation if they so wish.

The pun on Clarissa and Sinclair's names is one filled with irony. Richardson may have chosen the name "Clarissa," a romance name, because of its saintly attributes (Watt, 1949, 330). Watt (1949) points out that the name has a "remote religious favour, well suited to Richardson's chaste bride of Christ, from Clarisse, an order of nuns founded by Santa Chiara" which still flourished in the eighteenth century (p. 330). "Clarissa" is derived from its Latin root *clarus*, which means "bright," "clear" or "famous,"<sup>2</sup> attributes that Richardson generously endows his heroine with. Ironically, the name "Sinclair" can be traced to the French words "Saint Clair" whose variants include "St Clare," which shares same root *clarus* (Clare) with "Clarissa." The prefix "sin" is a Gaelic abbreviation for the French word "Saint,"<sup>3</sup> but in English it assumes a whole new meaning—wrongdoing. The duality of meaning in Sinclair's name— "Saint Clair" and "Sinful Clarissa"— also reflects her double-faced character, and her role in making the saintly Clarissa appear "sinful" in the eyes of her society. When she is first introduced to Clarissa, Sinclair pretends before her to be "Saint Clair;" she appears so puritanical that Clarissa mistakes her for "a wife of a gentleman" and "everything about her... require[s] not abasement" (p. 529). She maintains two houses, "one, in which all decent appearances were preserved, and guests rarely admitted; [and] the other, the respectable of those who were absolutely engaged, and broken to the vile yoke" (p. 745). These houses are also indicative of Clarissa and Sinclair's final "houses"—heaven and Hades. From Belford's account of their deaths the reader can identify the real "Saint Clair," and her implacable friends can see that she is not "Sinful Clarissa."

Although the names hint at the fates that befall these characters, sex gives them a common identity. Belford and Belton are libertines who strive to control women's bodies for sex. Sinclair profiteers from *selling* bodies for sex. Sinclair, who has masculine features, plays the male role of seducer; Clarissa's body is defiled after Sinclair drugs her. On their deathbeds, the characters, which were obsessed with exploiting bodies for sex, struggle with death to keep their bodies. In fact, it can be argued that the deaths symbolize a role reversal for Clarissa and Sinclair. The terror scenes in Clarissa's rape at the instigation of Sinclair are echoed in Sinclair's death. Clarissa, whose body is defiled without her consent, literally runs into the arms of death to find the satisfaction of the soul. On the other hand, Belton and Sinclair rave and struggle to keep their bodies till death overpowers them; an anti-climax of their sin-ridden materialistic lives.

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<sup>2</sup> See Teresa Norman. *Names Through Ages* (New York: Berkley Books, 1999), pp. 75, 345

<sup>3</sup> Clan Sinclair Association of America, a religious order, has a detailed article "Origins of names St. Clair and Sinclair" at [http://www.clansinclairusa.org/history/miscellaneous/clan\\_na\\_temporary.html](http://www.clansinclairusa.org/history/miscellaneous/clan_na_temporary.html)

The ordering of these deaths also hints at the relationship between them. First comes Belton's death, then Clarissa's and finally Sinclair's "just as in traditional literature" where "the end of the wicked and that of the righteous are set side by side" (Doody, 1974, p. 157). Clarissa dies like Christ, whom she "humbly imitates," between two sinners, one more sinful than the other. Belton, a symbol of male potency in female sexual debasement, dies first. Sinclair, in whose hands Clarissa's fate is sealed, dies after learning about her victim's demise, when her remorse is greater. I will discuss Sinclair and Belton's deathbed scenes first because Clarissa's represents their antithesis.

The more morbid Belford portrays Belton and Sinclair's deaths, the more sanctified Clarissa's demise becomes. It is evident from the nature of details Belford chooses to highlight on these deaths that he has didactic designs on Lovelace whom he wants to convince to reform. Belton's death particularly interests Belford because it mirrors his own and Lovelace's potential deaths.

In Belton, Belford wants Lovelace to see the failure of libertinism as a substitute for traditional marriage. Belton best exemplifies this failure: his cohabitation with Thomasine leaves him dissipated. The concubine Belton loves has been preparing for his death because she has taken "measures to set up a marriage, and keep possession of all [his property] for herself and her sons" (p. 1187). Even Belton's supposed two children turn out to have been fathered by a man passing for Thomasine's cousin. Therefore, Belton who used to boast of "*keeping*" can now in "*sickness and declining spirits*" rue his wasted chances. Thomasine knows she has Belton firmly under her control in the "space of six foot by five" (which Belford translates as the bed) through sex. Thomasine, whose suffix means "pocket" or "bosom" from its Medieval Latin origin, has been pleasuring Thomas with her body to get him firmly in her bosom so that she can get into his pocket. Belford fears without his intervention she could have been "his physician; his will ready made for him—and widow's weeds probably ready provided" (p. 1187). As Belford puts it, "The estate his uncle left him was his ruin: wife, or mistress, whoever was, must have had his fortune to sport with" (p. 1099).

Belford knows that Belton cannot escape because the "malady is within him; and he cannot run away from it" (p.1088). The torments seem to come from within. Belton tells Belford that he is "weaker in my mind... than in my body" (p. 1224), which indicates that his problem is more spiritual than physical. Though earlier in the story, Clarissa mentions that he has a "consumptive cough," Belton on his deathbed talks about "horrible pains in [his] stomach and head" (pp. 543, 1239). While the actual cause of his death is subject to speculation, the failure in sex seems to exacerbate his demise. As Belford notes following Belton's funeral Thomasine appears in a "disguise...out of curiosity" to witness "the last office for the man whose heart she had largely contributed to break" (p.1271).

Moreover, Belton is alone – abandoned by the “family” he thought he had. The camaraderie that linked him with other rakes has vanished. Mowbray who had “pretended so much love for him; could not bear to be out of his company; would ride a hundred miles an end to enjoy it, and would fight for him...yet now could be so little moved to see him in such misery of body and mind” p.(1225). He finds an excuse to leave the “house of mourning” (p.1231) to be in the house of pleasure with Lovelace in town. And yet, Belton confesses he has less “villainies” answer for than Lovelace, Mowbray, and even Belford. He confesses before Belford that despite his “lingering consumptive illness [he has] laboured under,” he left penance to “the last state” (p.1227). Now he can “neither repent nor pray as [he] ought because [his] heart is hardened” and he can “do nothing but despair” (p.1227). The guilt that he carries with him makes him fail to accept the services of a parson who symbolises things that are pure. Though Lovelace is absent, Belton implores him through Belford to make use of the “opportunity lent him” for which Belton “would give a thousand worlds” to reform (p.1227). Perhaps as an admission of guilt, or simply dread to confront death, Lovelace and Mowbray refuse to attend Belton’s funeral; instead hired men take their place.

### **Symbolism in death and its implications**

Belford’s narration of Belton’s torments emphasizes aspects that relate directly to Lovelace’s life. Belton’s hallucinations about his decadent life, for example, serves to warn Lovelace about his own potential deathbed torments. Belton, for one, tries to hide in bedclothes, “staring wildly,” then turning his head this way and that, before crying out, “did you not see him?” with “horror in his countenance” (p. 1230). Belton believes he has seen Tom Metcalfe who “had drawn him out of bed by the throat, upbraiding him with the injuries he had done his sister, and then him in the duel to which he owed that fever which cost him his life” (p.1231). Metcalfe is a ghost from the past; Lovelace and Belford have their own ghosts lurking in their consciences: “Mercy on us if in these terrible moments all the evils we do rise to our affrighted imaginations!” (p.1231). Belford, the narrator, and Lovelace, the addressee, are as much on deathbed trial as Belton.

Belton clings desperately to the body because it is the last hope he has. He needs the body to atone for his sins: “I cannot die; I cannot *think* of dying. I am very desirous of living a little longer... Can you give me nothing to make me pass one week, but *one* week, in tolerable ease, that I may die like a man? – if I must die!” (p.1239). In death, he realizes how illusory his belief in his manliness is. As in his love bout with Thomasine, Belton is impotent in the face of death. Belton seeks refuge in his youth since he is “*yet* a young man: in the prime of my years” and “youth is a good subject” for the doctor “to work on” (p.1240). But the doctor insists that “nothing in physic” can help him (p.1240). This reference to youth

directly implicates Lovelace and Belford who are Belton's peers. The emphasis placed on the doctor doing "nothing *at all*" for Belton emphasizes the danger of procrastination in mending one's ways.

In a pattern that will be repeated in Sinclair's case, Belton also refuses the services of a parson because he cannot "bear the thought of one; for that he should certainly die in an hour or two after" (p.1241). Instead, Belton still hopes for a miraculous recovery to allow him to reform and repent. This, however, is wishful thinking because Belton dies a profligate but repentant man. Evidently, Belton's death deeply affects Belford and he wants Lovelace to feel the same:

He is now at the last grasp—rattles in the throat: has a new convulsion every minute almost. What horrors he in! His eyes look like breath-stained glass! They roll ghastly no more; are quite set: his face distorted and drawn out by his sinking jaws and erected staring eyebrows, with his lengthened furrowed forehead, to double its usual length as it seems. It is not, it cannot be, the face of Belton, thy Belton, and my Belton, whom we have beheld with so much delight over the social bottle, comparing notes that one day may be brought against us, and make *us* groan, as they very lately did *him*—that is to say, while he had strength to groan; for now his voice is not to be heard; all inward, lost; not so much speaking by his eyes: yet, strange! (p. 1242)

Belford's description emphasizes the misery inherent in the death of an irreligious man. The distorted features stress the utmost agony Belton endures in death. Belford contrasts this ghastly image with the socialite Belton they once knew; he makes certain Lovelace understands the implication of Belton's life on their own lives:

But we must leave poor Belton to that mercy which we have all so much need of; and, for my own part (do you, Lovelace, and the rest of the fraternity, as ye will), I am resolved I will endeavour to begin to repent of my follies while my health is sound, my intellects untouched, and while it is in my power to make some atonement, as near to restitution as is possible, to those I have wronged or misled. (p. 1243)

Belford, who becomes the model for the reader, hopes Belton's deathbed scene will move Lovelace "more effectually than by any other because it is such a one as thou thyself must one day be a principal actor in" (p.1224). Seeing the "shocking scenes his illness and agonies exhibit," Belford sends a chilling message to Lovelace: "Let this truth, this undoubted truth, be engraven on thy memory" like a tombstone "in all thy gaieties, that the life we are fond of, is hardly life; a mere breathing-space only; and that at the end of its longest date... THOU MUST DIE, AS WELL AS BELTON" (pp. 1223-4). Clarissa also hopes Lovelace will learn from Belton's death: "Since you [Belford] are so humanely affected with the solemn circumstance, that you could have written an account of it in the style and manner you are a master of, to your gay friend [Lovelace]. Who



knows, as it would have come *from* an associate and *of* an associate, how it might have affected him?" (p.1248). Clarissa connects Lovelace, Belton and Belford in a shared destiny if they shun reform.

Comparatively, the deaths of Belton and Sinclair are portrayed as escalating drama. Beforehand, Belford prepares Lovelace for intensified horrific imagery: "And we got there by ten: where a scene so shocking presented itself to me, that the death of poor desponding Belton is not, I think to be compared with" (p. 1387). Belford is drawing Lovelace's attention to the disparity between Belton's dying and Sinclair's death. Belford explains how he finds Sinclair "raving, crying, cursing, and even howling, more like a wolf than a human creature" (p. 1387). Though both Sinclair and Belton cry and rave, Sinclair's bestial dying is despicable, more pronounced and more hideous. Indeed, Belford spares no sympathy for Sinclair.

Belford portrays Sinclair as a devil dying amidst a *sick* institution of whoredom. Certainly, he emphasizes the imagery of "the diseased and decaying harlots" (Doody, 1974, p.165) that he and Lovelace associate within their pursuit for sex. When he enters the room Belford does not see beauties adorning Sinclair's deathbed but "cursed daughters... all shocking dishabille and without stays" (p. 1387). The exceptions are Sally, Carter, and Polly, who "not daring to leave [Sinclair], had not been in bed all night" (p. 1387). The others...seemed to have been but just up, risen perhaps from their customers in the fore-house, and their nocturnal orgies, with faces, three or four of them, that had run, the paint lying in streaky seams not half blowzed off, discovering course wrinkled skins: the hair of some of divers colours;... They were all slipshod; stockpiles some; only under-petticoated all; their gowns, made to cover straddling hoops, hanging trollopy, and tangling about heels; but hastily wrapped round them as soon as I came upstairs...And half of them (unpadded, shoulder-bent, pallied-lipped, feeble-jointed wretches) appearing from a blooming nineteen or twenty perhaps overnight, haggard well-worn strumpets of thirty-eight or forty (pp. 1387-8).

Belford is "more particular in describing" this scene to Lovelace because he believes Lovelace has never seen "any of them, much less a group of them, thus unprepared for being seen" (p.1388). Otherwise, Lovelace would "hate a profligate woman...since the persons of such in their retirements are as filthy as their minds." Belford argues, "a neat and clean woman must be an angel of a creature, so a sluttish one is the impurest animal in nature" (p. 1388). Though Belford does not mention Clarissa, his reference to adoring "a truly virtuous and elegant woman," makes the contrast clear. Belford seems to use the physical description of the harlots to infer their spiritual emptiness, which makes them impure as objects of adoration. In fact, Lovelace's deception of Clarissa parallels the deceptive appearance of the whores.

The drama that ends with Sinclair's death starts with the way she hurts herself. Perhaps to drown her sins, Sinclair gets "heartily intoxicated with her beloved liquor," and breaks her leg in the process (p. 1378). Doctors recommend that the leg be amputated, which symbolically may refer to her castration. When Belford suggests sending for a clergyman, Sinclair, like Belton, blatantly refuses. She fears sending for a parson would mean acknowledging her imminent death, for which she is not ready: "I cannot, cannot die! – Never tell me of it! – What! Die! – What! Cut off in the midst of my sins!" (p. 1392). Ironically, it is the only chance she has to redeem herself, as Belford observes:

Will it rather shorten the life you are so desirous to have lengthened, and deprive you of the only opportunity you can ever have to settle your affairs for both worlds? This is but the common lot: and if it will be *yours* soon, looking at *her*, it will be also *yours*, and *yours*, and *yours*, speaking with a raised voice, and turning to every trembling devil around her (for they all shook at my forcible application); and *mine* also. (p. 1392)

Belford refers to every reprobate in the room, including himself. In the epistolary form "yours" may apply both the addressee and the reader. By rejecting the services of a parson, Sinclair severs her last link to any hope of salvation (not that she deserves it). Though she feigns ignorance of "*what* [she] may be, and *where*" (p. 1392), she will end up in her debased house—in hell. Her pleas to "God of Heaven and earth" to grant her just one more chance to begin "a new course of life" and renounce her "demons" and "live a life of penitence" and later leave her wealth generated through honest means to "charitable uses" (p. 1392) fall on deaf ears. Providence cannot grant the self-proclaimed "poor creature" an opportunity to live "every hour of [her] life in penitence and atonement." It is too late; even a rich madam like Sinclair cannot bribe God. All Sinclair can do, as Belford writes, is reflect "upon her past profligate life, throughout which it has been her constant delight and business, devil-like, to make others as wicked as herself" (p.1394). She eventually dies "in such agonies," terrifying "all the wretches about her" into penitence (p. 1394). The bestiality evoked in the imagery of Sinclair's death is comparable only to the sadism and baseness of her life:

Her misfortune has not at all sunk but rather, as I thought, increased her fresh; rage and violence perhaps swelling her muscley features. Behold her then, spreading the whole tumbled bed with her huge quaggy carcass: her mill-post arms held up, her broad arms clenched with violence; her big eyes goggling and flaming-red as we may suppose those of a salamander; her matted grizzly hair made irreverend by her wickedness (her clouded head-dress being half off) spread about her fat ears and brawny neck; her livid lips parched, and working violently; her broad chin in convulsive motion; her wide mouth by reason of the contraction of her forehead (which seemed to be half-lost in its frightful furrows) splitting he face, as it were into two parts; and her huge

tongue hideously rolling in it; heaving, puffing as if for breath, her bellows-shaped and variously coloured breasts ascending by turns to her chin and descending out of sight with the violence of her gasping (p. 1388).

Doody (1974) sums up Sinclair's "death [as] a picture of hell" (165). Wilt finds Sinclair's refusal "to die with dignity appropriate to the mortal" distasteful because she "simply continues page after page raving and howling that she will not, cannot, die" (p. 29). Notably, this is Belford's account for Lovelace who needs to get a full picture of the death of the beast in whose hands he had entrusted the divine Clarissa. Moreover, the bestial features are merely symbolic embodiments of the torments of the soul of a hardcore sinner. The emphasis on her bestial features in her death also serves to emphasize the ugliness of the material things that Sinclair and Lovelace desperately cling to. The bestial features also serve to remind Lovelace of the evil that he has been so fondly been caressing.

The concentration on the debased bodies of Belton and, particularly, Sinclair sharply contrasts with Clarissa's "holy dying." Instead of "devils" surrounding her deathbed in the case of Sinclair or desolation in Belton's case, Clarissa has "good people" (p. 1076), and Belford, a newly reform candidate. Critics like Dorothy van Ghent (1953) object to such a crowd "pressing around a dying woman to obtain her blessing" because one is given to "understand that nothing could be of greater good than Clarissa's death" (p. 60). But as other critics have correctly observed it is the public nature of Clarissa's death that makes her slow death edifying and saintly (Eagleton, 1982, p. 74; Damrosch, 1985, pp. 224-5).

### **Problematical Dying of Saintly Clarissa**

Some critics question whether as a professed Christian and a paragon of virtue Clarissa should commit suicide. As Damrosch (1985) suggests, Christian tragedy is supposed to "combine... inexorable fate with ethical responsibility" (p. 254). *Clarissa* can qualify to be such because there is no conclusive evidence to confirm she, indeed, commits suicide because if she does, she would be in trouble with salvation in Christian epistemology. Clarissa's fault seems to lie in her appearing to be starving herself to death, thus the suspicion that she willingly flirts with and courts death. For example, Sally reminds Clarissa: "This is wrong, *Miss Harlowe!* Very wrong!—Your religion, I think should teach you that starving is self-murder" (p. 1054). Though Clarissa does not answer her, she later explains in a letter to her confidant Miss Howe:

As I am of opinion, that it would have manifested more of revenge and despair, than of principle, had I committed violence upon myself when the villainy was *perpetrated*; so I should think it equally criminal, were I now *wilfully* to neglect myself; were I purposely to run into the arms of death (as

that man [Lovelace] supposes I shall do) when I might avoid it... I do assure you... that I will do everything I can to prolong my life, till God in mercy to me shall be pleased to call for it... **When appetite serves, I will eat and drink what is sufficient to support nature...In short I will do everything I can do to convince all my friends, who hereafter may think it worth their while to inquire after my last behaviour, that I possessed my soul with tolerable patience;** and endeavoured to bear with a lot of my own drawing: for thus, in humble imitation of the sublimest exemplar, I often say: Lord, it is thy will; and it shall be mine (pp. 1117-8; emphasis in bold added).

Much as Clarissa prefers death to her suffering, she rejects committing suicide; she also affirms sustaining her life until God grants her death wish. From her statement she says she will eat when "appetite serves" as well as "eat and drink" what is sufficient to sustain life. Clarissa infers that there is a difference between wishing to die and committing suicide. The fact that Clarissa survives for as long as she does after her reported anorexic tendencies is indicative of the fact that she does not deliberately starve herself to death. In a space of three hundred and eight pages, starting from when Sally announces that she is committing "self-murder" to the day she dies, Clarissa is in control of her faculties and conducts her own businesses, including attending church prayers.

Circumstances including psychological torture that Clarissa endures after the rape seem to erode her will to live. The confinement, prosecution for a concocted debt, ostracism from her "friends," her father's curse, Lovelace's relentless pursuit and the rape stigma would make someone's appetite disappear. Moreover, she is only being offered unattractive propositions on this earth, including exile and compromising her principles by marrying her rapist, Lovelace. However, Clarissa insists she "cannot [simply] consent to *sanctify*...Mr. Lovelace's **repeated** breaches of all moral sanctions, and hazard [her] *future* happiness by a union with a man, through whose **premeditated** injuries, in a **long train of the basest** contrivances, [she has] forfeited [her] *temporal* hopes" (1141; emphasis in bold added). In fact, the rape marks the end of her will for "temporal" hopes and marks the start of her will to die because to attain spirituality. The rape complicates Clarissa's life on earth: she cannot claim her chastity in body even if her will remains inviolate. Paradoxically, Lovelace still seeks her consent in further rape when there can never be *consent* in any rape in this world. Thus, when the apothecary, Goddard, tells Clarissa that she is her "own doctress" because her case requires "little of the [doctor's] assistance," it is evident that "wasting grief" will eventually kill her, hence making Belford's prophetic words come true. Nevertheless, the fact that Clarissa seems ready to embrace death only when God grants her wish to die should not be ignored.

Clarissa's preparation for her impending death is littered with symbolism, which can be misinterpreted when given a literal interpretation. She is merely "settling

the affairs of this world" in a symbolic way to prepare for the next. The actions she takes are symbolic embodiments of spiritual readiness to transcend material things. It is through these symbolic actions that witnesses like Belford can watch and marvel at how "a woman, of so weak and tender a frame" should succeed where men such as Belford's uncle and Belton have failed (1305). Clarissa wants to be independent of material things that tend to constrain other mortals: "By planning every detail of her death and funeral, she assumes total control over her life—however paradoxical this may sound" (Damrosch, 1985, p. 256).

Clarissa also refuses to be obliged to anyone because she is "above all human dependence." She purchases her own coffin and designates how her "wretched remains" should be disposed of (p. 1092). She even engraves her coffin by writing her will on it; in the will she describes how to dispose of her body when she is no longer attached to it, when her mind is free. Belford marvels at the way she gives orders about the coffin and explains details relating to it "with so little concern" (p. 1305). The fact that her actions win her admirers is significant in understanding the difference between Sinclair and Clarissa. Read symbolically, these are preparations that human beings ought to make during their lifetime, for the coffin is certainly the "house" for the body. And preparations for eternity must be made well in advance. The snake symbol (a visible sign) on her coffin indicates the life of eternity (which is abstract) that awaits a virtuous person, which is granted only by the grace of God. But for her "friends," and from an artistic point of view, the symbol indicates the eternal life for a soul of a virtuous person. The authority for actions is contained in the biblical quotations she includes on her coffin for the world to read.

Belford seems aware of the symbolic nature of Clarissa's death. He sees Clarissa as an angel in human form. As Belford notes, Clarissa "is more than pure vestal; for vestals have been warmed by their own fires. No age, from the first to the present, ever produced, nor will the future to the end of the world, I dare aver, a young lady tried as she has been tried, who has stood all trials as she has done...you never saw, never knew, never heard of, such a lady as Miss Harlowe" (1096). Though portrayed as a woman, she stands for virtue that has triumphed over evil. One can substitute Clarissa and read virtue in her place for virtue has stood the test of time. Belford's steadfast articulation of Clarissa's saintly attributes seems to indicate how he would like the reader to see her. Thus when the crowd clamours for blessings at her deathbed, they seem to align themselves with the virtue that Clarissa epitomizes. Virtue can save them from the fates of Belton and Sinclair. This is evident in Clarissa's final caution to Belford: "Make sensible of all your errors—You see, in me, how all ends—may *you* be—" (p. 1362). Though she does not complete this blessing, her warning is clear: Belford must reform.

When Clarissa finally dies, death becomes a fruition of her dreams. Clarissa dies, crying out, "Come—Oh—come—blessed Lord—JESUS" (p. 1362). She ironically gets the utmost pleasure in death when her wish to relinquish the body (things material) to embrace Jesus (in things immaterial) is granted. Clarissa dies dressed as a bride for Jesus, the chaste bride that Lovelace can never have because of his preference for sinfulness. Thus, Clarissa gets the perfect marriage in heaven, which Lovelace has denied her on earth. While others resist the advances of death, Clarissa with glee embraces death when it courts her because death leads her to the heavenly gloom that gives her the climax she desires. Death can only deprive Clarissa of her body, not her spirituality represented by her mind.

While the body of Belton and, more so, that of Sinclair become deformed in death, Clarissa's body retains its perfect form. The crowd watches her incomparable beauty, listens to her "sweet voice" as it witnesses "how happily [she] die[s]" (p. 1362). The difference lies in Clarissa's death being "all mind," preoccupied with the spiritual rather than the material things. The loss of the body becomes gain in afterlife. Even when the mind separates from her body, Clarissa's form remains a spectacle to watch. As Belford notes, "We could not help taking a view of the lovely corpse, and admiring the charming serenity of her noble aspect. The women declared they never saw death so lovely before; and that she looked as if in an easy slumber, the colour having not quite left her cheeks and lips" (p. 1367). The body is in perfect shape; she is healthy, a befitting bride for a heavenly king. The serenity in Clarissa's death signals the perfect harmony that exists between the body (material things) and the soul (the non-material) when the mind is at peace.

The difference in the way Clarissa, Belton and Sinclair die strengthens Belford's resolve to reform:

When I reflect upon the ends (some untimely) of those of our companions who we have formerly lost; upon Belton's miserable exit; upon the howls and screams of Sinclair, which are still in my ears; and now upon your miserable Tomlinson; and compare their ends with the happy and desirable end of the inimitable Miss Harlowe: I have reason to think *my footing morally secure*... I know *my weak side, I will endeavour to fortify myself in that quarter by marriage*, as soon as I can make myself worthy of the confidence and esteem of some virtuous woman; and by this means becomes a subject of your envy, rather than your scoffs. (p. 1435; emphasis added)

Compared to Belton, Sinclair and Tomlinson, Clarissa is a saint, though she admits to pride as her major sin: "I have been a very wicked creature—a vain, proud, poor creature—full of secret pride—which I carried off under an humble guise, and deceived everybody...and now I am punished" (895). Even the consequence of the rape she ought to suffer is a result of "an *accidental*, not *premeditated*, error" (p. 987), ironically occasioned by her family's lust for

property. Though Clarissa takes a false step that makes her fall into Lovelace's promiscuous world, the original sin remains the estate her grandfather bequeathed her, as Clarissa informs Miss Howe: "The enviable estate which has been the original cause of all my misfortune" (p. 754). It is no surprise that she writes on her coffin "April 10" as her date of death because "that was the fatal day of leaving her father's house" (p. 1306). Thus by calling her an "inimitable Miss Harlowe," Belford knows that she is beyond comparison. In fact, her family name "Harlowe," as Watt points out, is the closest one can get to "harlot," implying that it is her family that prostitutes with property; Clarissa is above material things as she proves in the way she dies. Belford knows he cannot be like Clarissa (nobody can); he can only learn from her and even "read some of the admirable lady's papers" whenever he falters (p. 1434).

Unlike Belford, Lovelace does not learn from the deaths of Belton, Sinclair and Clarissa. In rejecting the path of reform Clarissa wills for him, Lovelace embraces the path of death that she does not will for him. Lovelace's death when it occurs happens outside Belford's narration. Incidentally, in one of the briefest letters in the book, Belford warns him: "I have only to say at present – Thou wilt do well to take a tour to Paris; or wherever else thy destiny shall lead thee!!! –" (p. 1359). With this statement, Belford seems to free himself from the role of peacemaker between Lovelace and Colonel Morden Clarissa has assigned him in her will. By encouraging Lovelace to go abroad, Belford gives Lovelace a chance to reform to fulfil Clarissa's will. Clarissa wants Lovelace's "conscience... to avenge" her so that he can have "a chance of repentance" (p. 1445). It is evident that after Clarissa's death Lovelace's life will never be the same. Like Clarissa after the rape, Lovelace suffers from a temporary bout of dementia (p. 1382). Even public opinion turns against him. He tells Belford: "I have had very bad usage...to have such plaguy ill name given me, pointed at, screamed out upon, ran away from, as a mad dog would be; all my friends ready to renounce me!" (p. 1437). With such a negative attitude towards Lovelace going abroad seems an amenable choice. However when abroad, Lovelace learns about Morden's "will of [Lovelace]" (p. 1476) through his own contrivances. Lovelace talks about Morden's will (not Clarissa's). In a sudden twist of fate, the same Joseph who helps Lovelace lure Clarissa to her ruin also gives Lovelace the intelligence that results in his death.

### **Conclusion**

Lovelace dies the way Belton dies; the only difference is that a disinterested party is telling his story. The narration of his story by a person outside the main story indicates that this is not the end that Clarissa wills for Lovelace. The brevity of the narration can be attributed to a disinterested narrator, or the assumption, on the part of Richardson, that by this stage the reader has had learned enough about

bestial and holy dying. Like Belton and Sinclair, Lovelace is “very unwilling to die” and “suffer[s] much” (p. 1487). Lovelace also hallucinates on his unnamed victim, though one can infer that it is Clarissa for he shouts several times: “Take her away! Take her away!” (p. 1487). What happens to Lovelace after his death is subject to speculation. On one hand, his dream suggests Lovelace goes to hell since he sees a “bright form” welcome Clarissa to heaven as he drops “into a hole more frightful than that of Eden” (p. 1218). On the other hand, he calls on Clarissa, as de la Tour the narrator rightly guesses, the “Sweet Excellence! Divine Creature! Fair Sufferer” to “Look down, blessed Spirit, look down” upon him (p. 1487). As his salvation depends on his repentance, whether Lovelace is forgiven or not, it is hard to tell from the available information since de la Tour says Lovelace “spoke inwardly so as not to be understood, before announcing, “LET THIS EXPIATE” (p. 1488). It is a paradoxical ending that will occupy the minds of readers. What is evident, though, is that Lovelace regrets having put Clarissa, or virtue, or trial. Lovelace’s death is also symbolic of his having lost the control that he has at the beginning when he subdues James, Clarissa’s brother, in a duel. It is also a symbolic indicator of the defeat of evil.

Throughout the narration, Belford has vainly been trying to entice Lovelace into reform. In the end, it is Belford who provides a bridge for himself after completing his lessons as a pupil of death. Belford has learned enough not to wait till the doctor is at his deathbed to reform. Given a choice between “Sinful Clarissa” (epitomized by Sinclair) and “Saint Clarissa,” Belford chooses the latter. By choosing virtue, Belford chooses life, a choice Richardson may have hoped for his readers. Though Belford fails to convert Lovelace in his role as messenger of death, Richardson may have hoped his readers will follow Belford’s example rather than Lovelace’s. If they did, then Belford also served as a bridge for himself and others.

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