

ESSAY REVIEWS

REDEEMING INTERPRETATION

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A letter, a novel, and a piece of criticism have this in common: each figures some kind of relationship between the writer of the text and its reader. Each implies and helps engender a social exchange, however fugitive, of a certain shape and tone. Recent literary criticism on that novel in letters named *Clarissa* resembles nothing so much as the struggles for preeminence and control that characterize human transactions within the novel. Both inside and outside the novel we see staged what sociologists call a zero-sum contest: correctness and prestige are presumed to be finite and limited in quantity; every advantage won by one member of the community is registered as disadvantage and loss to someone else; right and wrong appear as absolute ratios which will always be inversely related. Some theoreticians of interpretation seem to watch this situation with complacency. They do not view our critical disputes with the suspicion some outsiders do—as a sign of the spleen of critics, as a cynical means of promoting careers by stirring up business, or as an epistemological flaw at the heart of criticism. For theorists of a Nietzschean bent, critical contention is just an instance of the arbitrary and willful assertion of meaning which lies at the heart of interpretation and is productive of all human culture.

But Terry Castle, in her stimulating new book entitled *Clarissa's Ciphers*, makes us look steadily at the cruel effects of interpretation. The feminist strand of her argument shows how that violent interpretation of the social world called “patriarchy” visits enormous pain on *Clarissa*. It turns her into property to be disposed of in marriage, an object of both a rake’s design and a father’s curse, and a victim of rape, whose only solace can come in dying. But Castle does not develop this analysis so as to impose a new and more powerful interpretation of the world called “feminism.” Instead she reads *Clarissa* as signal and important for the way *Clarissa*’s spiritual trial takes her on a voyage out beyond all violent self-assertive forms of interpretation which have afflicted her. Through her explication of this

exemplary act of renunciation, Castle urges us to reign in our hermeneutic desires, so we may reflect upon the purpose and effects of our own interpretive interventions. In the review essay that follows, I will seek to show how Castle plots this analysis, what reading of *Clarissa* it entails, how the text resists this reading, and how the moral critique of interpretation Terry Castle proposes would transform its working in social life and fiction.

The Story: Clarissa's Voyage Out beyond Interpretation

Much of the urgency, drama, and fatality of Castle's account of *Clarissa's* adventure comes from Castle's understanding of the treachery of interpretation. Although interpretation operates in pervasive fashion throughout the novel, the letter provides a paradigmatic instance of the heroine's vulnerability to what Castle calls "hermeneutic violence." Here is the way Castle describes interpretation:

[Letters] are distressingly ambiguous linguistic artifacts: they symbolize communication, but do not necessarily embody it. Letters open themselves, promiscuously, to distortion by readers, who, out of naivete or unscrupulousness, disregard the intended meaning of the letter writer. . . . [They are] a denatured artifact, cut off from its source in human presence. . . . [Its meaning is] not available in the writing, which is always only a mark of absence. The message one extracts from the letter remains perpetually unverifiable. It cannot be referred back to human presence, to the writer. But when the letter is viewed in this way, our sense of the nature of reading is altered. Interpretation is revealed as an essentially arbitrary activity. . . . Meanings are generated, arbitrarily, by different readers . . . according, only, finally, to the shape of their desire. Meaning is not so much retrieved from the letter . . . as projected onto it. . . . Every reading thus becomes in some sense a misreading, in that it is an imposition on the text, and may or may not coincide with the writer's intended meaning.¹

This description of interpretation will be familiar to any reader of "post-structuralist" theory indebted to Nietzsche and Freud. Here Castle relies on Derrida; she most frequently cites Barthes as her theoretical guide. But Castle's account has added something distinctly new to our image of interpretation. For Castle is by her own account "distressed" by the way letters "promiscuously" open themselves to readers, and angry that some of those readers will be so "unscrupulous" as to disregard the intended meaning of the letter's writer. This moral response to

1. *Clarissa's Ciphers: Meaning & Disruption in Richardson's "Clarissa"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 43-45. Subsequent references are included parenthetically in the text.

the errancy of the letter and the deviance of interpreters is counterbalanced by a grim sense that this is the way of the world, a way that has most "tragic" consequences for the heroine of the novel. Castle's representation of the heroine's experience indicates how. A summary account would go something like this.

For Terry Castle, Clarissa is an exemplary hermeneutic victim. While she naively assumes a lucid connection between sign and nature, the heart's feeling and outer expression, all those around her read with willful abandon. Thus the Harlowes not only use their authority to interrupt and silence Clarissa; they also lay a hermeneutic trap for her, by converting all her words and acts—like her refusal to marry the ugly Solmes—into signs of her "general disobedience to parental will, her pride, and her prepossession for Lovelace" (p. 68). In treatment that foreshadows Lovelace's manipulation of Clarissa, she becomes a "rhetorical event" for her family, inscribed with a "symbolic content" she cannot "in any way control" (p. 71). This causes a fundamental disorientation in the heroine and disrupts her ability to read her world. For a family to act so unkindly, so very unlike kin, disrupts the very idea of natural behavior which guides Clarissa's interpretation. "They reduce her, in effect, to the preverbal condition of the infant—hearing but not comprehending" (p. 73). Clarissa's correspondent and confidant Anna Howe only *seems* to be a refreshing alternative to these predatory interpreters. In fact, Anna "also reads Clarissa herself—just as much, in fact, as any of the Harlowes do" (p. 77). Unfortunately Clarissa proves "pitifully susceptible" to Anna's constructions, for Anna's suggestion that Clarissa harbors a secret attraction for Lovelace has "a curiously mediating influence" and helps to "condition a subtle, but growing emotional engagement with Lovelace" (p. 78).

Interpretive violence is practiced on Clarissa by the Harlowes because of their determination to compel her obedience; by Anna Howe because she uses Clarissa's ordeal as the locus of her own fantasies. But when Clarissa falls into the hands of Robert Lovelace, the same hermeneutic violence is embedded as a settled practice in character. Castle shows how Lovelace turns what she calls his "obsession with textual mediacy" and his "pervasive . . . anti-mimesis" into a program to wage "metaphoric aggression" against Clarissa and her relation to the natural (pp. 85, 86, 89). Clarissa is "hypnotized" by his unrestrained "professions" and disoriented by the lies and stratagems he uses

to confuse people, places, and signs. The rape of Clarissa by Lovelace becomes the book's climactic figure for hermeneutic violence. It precipitates Clarissa's response, an "escape" from the world of reading. Her dying becomes "a methodical self-expulsion from the realm of signification" (p. 109). This first appears in the poignant half-coherence of the "torn papers" written after the rape, becomes more explicit when she gives away her clothes so as to remove herself "from the realm of sartorial meanings," and is staged most dramatically when she covers her coffin with ambiguous symbols which invite a proliferation of divergent interpretations to which the heroine is now invulnerable. Clarissa's coffin becomes an ironic parody of communication; the author is dead and all we have is text. But in the epilogue, Castle draws a moral from the career of Clarissa's victimization: the story of Clarissa's hermeneutic violation might draw readers to reflect on the desires and ideologies which ground their own acts of interpretation, and thereby leave "the real reader free to envision a critical discourse not founded on the death of the other" (p. 186).

Reviving Correspondence

I value Terry Castle's book for its crisp and intelligent writing, for its theoretical rigor, and for the conceptually unified reading of *Clarissa* it offers. She gets a vast part of the book to contribute to her account of Clarissa's movement beyond interpretation. This often involves a subtle interpretation of elements of the text—like Clarissa's coffin—never before read so well. Castle's engagement in all the details of Clarissa's victimization is also heartfelt and compelling. But if this reader of *Clarissa* tried to assume this interpretation as his own, in the interest of the hermeneutic peace Castle seems to advocate, he would become a victim of a certain hermeneutic intimidation. For Castle's way of seeing and experiencing *Clarissa* seems, in several fundamental ways, wildly out of phase with what I see happening in this text. I would like to point out a series of ways it seems to me Castle has misrepresented *Clarissa*. Of course I can have no idea of how my reader adjudicates these matters; each must, and will, decide for him/herself.

Castle always chooses to skew her image of Clarissa toward that of a weak and helpless victim, who is naive both in her "benevolism" and her belief in the one-to-one correspondence of

sign to thing (p. 21). The word "child" is frequently used to describe Clarissa. Thus in her contention with Lovelace, she is a "child-woman" engaged in a conflict where she is "inevitably the loser" (p. 22). Nowhere does Castle give proper weight to the sheer strength of Richardson's heroine; it is a strength based on the sense of inner virtue she carries as the touchstone to a constantly expanding sense of self. Although she is subjected to enormous psychic stresses, Clarissa does not seem to me immobilized in the face of her family's persecutions; rather she is resourceful and brave. I find Clarissa's narrative analysis of her family witty, powerful, and effective; some of her commentary on James, Bella, and Solmes seems devastating, in the best satiric tradition. Her exchanges with Anna have the effect of drawing her into a more comprehensive analysis of her situation; I do not see her ever becoming the dupe of Anna's perspectives or desires. Even in the case of Lovelace she eventually proves his equal and superior in both will and wit. Clarissa's difficulties at Harlowe Place, and in the early phases of her struggle with Lovelace, come from her relative inexperience, a tendency to overconfidence, and the intrinsic power of the forces ranged against her.

If Castle's treatment of character gives emphasis to the innocent vulnerability of Clarissa and the malevolence of nearly everyone else, then Castle's description of the action is shaped to disentangle Clarissa from every compromising connection. In this respect, Castle's analysis seems to move in exactly the opposite direction of the text. While the text shows Clarissa everywhere entangled and implicated in relationships, correspondences, and financial arrangements she cannot control, Castle seeks to create a sublime isolation for Clarissa. Thus commentators within the book, seeking to interpret Clarissa's fall—and Clarissa herself is among them—put great emphasis on Clarissa's disobedience to her father in refusing to give up her correspondence with Lovelace. But Castle separates her from this act, and makes it situational and abstract, by attributing it to her "desperate desire for discourse itself" (p. 81). Correlatively, Castle begs the question of why Clarissa would ever agree to go off with Lovelace, or whether she loves him, by saying the text is "indeterminate" on these questions (p. 89). This also explains the reason Castle gives so little emphasis to the Christian typological resonances of her fall and the meditations within which Clarissa thinks about this: if Clarissa is sinful, it is a way of saying she is complicit—

through her pride, or her unconscious love—with Lovelace in ways she does not at first understand. Finally, Castle exonerates Clarissa, in the space of an eloquently silent victim, by obscuring Clarissa's active part in arranging to have a book edited to tell her story. Clarissa makes these arrangements through her agreements with Anna Howe and Belford, well before her death. It is a legacy that insures her ongoing engagement with the social sphere.²

Having committed Clarissa, by the trajectory of her own argument, to silence and passivity, Terry Castle cannot help but find it very problematic and embarrassing when Clarissa interprets as actively as others do. Thus Clarissa assesses Lovelace's character, censures his "extravagant volubility," and then explains her distrust of words as a guide to reading character when compared to simple gestures. Castle also condemns Lovelace for his penchant for citations that fragment the text they quote and that habitually "mediate between him and other people" (p. 85). However, Clarissa ends her analysis by citing Shakespeare—on "the rattling tongue of saucy and audacious eloquence"—with as much zest as a Lovelace. Castle notes this irony and attributes it to the "hermeneutic confusion" Lovelace has worked on the heroine so she becomes so "pathetically tangled up in the linguistic circuit" that "she falls, schizophrenically, into citation" (pp. 91-92). But I do not see that Clarissa's citation of Shakespeare implicates her in a contaminating activity. Clarissa and Lovelace, and Castle and her reader, and this writer too, are all tangled in a linguistic circuit of interpretations. Why does Castle wish to circumvent that fact? I suspect that Castle's efforts to draw Clarissa out of that web of language are part of an effort to do what Richardson sometimes thought he had done: to use rhetoric to make Clarissa a sentimental heroine who has transcended the rhetorical.

These efforts become particularly forced and implausible when Castle describes Clarissa's movement beyond interpretation in the chapter called "The Voyage Out." After the rape, Clarissa is said to experience a "hermeneutic malaise" which is part of the movement by which she "escapes the world of reading" (pp. 124,

2. The novel's first title begins, "The Lady's Legacy" and ends with this sentence: "Published in compliance with the Lady's order on her death-bed, as a warning to unguarded, vain, or credulous innocence." This makes Clarissa directly responsible for the final publication of a book edited by others. But by a year before publication of the first edition, Richardson has changed things, as he explains to Aaron Hill, so as to make "Sollicitude for the Publication to be rather Miss Howe's than Clarissa's" (*Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. John Carroll [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964], p. 77).

109). Demonstrating this thesis is so difficult that Terry Castle ends up devoting a good part of the chapter to handling evidence that contradicts it. Thus Castle notes that “ironically, Clarissa is writing much during her last days”; and “paradoxically . . . she appears to those around her as a more powerful speaker and writer than ever” (pp. 126, 121). As an example of this rhetorical power, Castle describes the “abrupt magnificence” of Clarissa’s rhetoric in the “pen-knife” scene, where Lovelace and the women are silenced and “overwhelmed at last by [an] articulated ‘construction’ of the events” which gives Clarissa “a kind of ecstatic testimony” (pp. 121-123). For further evidence of Clarissa’s interpretive expertise I would add her cool investigative letters, written after her final escape from Sinclair’s, to get evidence of Lovelace’s deceptions by questioning her uncle’s servant and Lovelace’s aunt (3:331-335); the “book of memoranda” she resumes within a week after the rape, in view of giving a full “account” to Miss Howe later (3:256); and the “plain white dress” she wears after she gives all her other clothes away. Castle sees this last gesture as an effort to “remove herself” from “sartorial meanings,” but must immediately add complex qualifiers about the efficacy of this gesture (pp. 124-125). Isn’t it more straightforward to see giving away one’s clothes as part of a saintly gesture of renunciation, and wearing white as a signification of one’s purity? Finally, Castle finds some of Clarissa’s final interpretive gestures most disturbing. Thus, “given the unconstrained cutting and excerpting . . . going on elsewhere in *Clarissa*,” her frequent use of Scripture to embody her situation “is a troubling one” (p. 131). And when Clarissa writes the letter telling Lovelace she is going to her “Father’s House,” Castle cannot bring herself to admire what she calls this “Lovelacean exploitation of semantic variability.” She calls this rhetorical triumph “an equivocal and disturbing one for the reader,” and finds satisfaction in the physical breakdown Clarissa suffers after describing her ruse to Anna (pp. 133-135).

Of course there is a very simple way to overcome the problems that Castle’s interpretation has made seem knotty indeed: by seeing Clarissa, from the start of the fiction to its end, from its second letter (where Clarissa begins narrative at Anna’s behest) to the institution of a book that all can read, as an active, resourceful, unabashed practitioner of the art of interpretation. And after the rape, Clarissa writes and interprets to good effect. She penetrates a whole range of Lovelace’s lies and stratagems;

she wins Belford to her cause; she brings Morden to her bedside, making it possible for him to be the final avenger of her outrage; and through these agents, and the publication of her story, she is able to triumph over the Harlowe family in death.

Probing Psychic Life with Familiar Correspondence

Castle's ethical assault on the interpretive activity in *Clarissa* has far-reaching consequences for our conception of Richardson's art. What do we value in this fiction, and why does it occupy such an important place in the development of English fiction? Richardson's novel offered a more patient and probing exploration of the turns of motive and shades of feeling which compose the texture of personal experience than any earlier fiction. Of course much of his work consists of narrative and dramatic language familiar from fiction and theater; he also borrowed from the conduct literature of his day to meditate upon the best way to live one's life. But Richardson was also able to mix into his narratives a kind of writing previously most commonly associated with religious forms of confession and meditation: a detailed analysis of inner feeling and motive, which take full account of the ruses and subtlety of a heart intent on hiding its own sin from itself.³ The psychological analysis, for which Richardson's fiction has long been justly celebrated, helped to make the novel the privileged literary form for exploring personal relationships. After Richardson, the novel became a bridge between the analysis of the heart carried through in religious discourses and that carried through in this century in the therapeutic space invented by psychoanalysis.⁴

How was Richardson able to advance this shift in fiction? In *Clarissa* a probing analysis of the heart depends upon his most important compositional decision: the construction of the fiction around two parallel correspondences (Clarissa and Anna Howe, Lovelace and Belford). And while each character uses this correspondence in very different ways, all four are young, enthusiastic, and vow an unguarded openness with one another. Richardson praises this form of "familiar correspondence" as the

3. Cynthia Wolff has a valuable discussion of the way Protestant religions sought out the "secret sin" of the heart in her *Samuel Richardson and the Eighteenth-Century Puritan Character* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1972), pp. 14-58.

4. For the way the Catholic confessional anticipates the structure of the analytic session, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978).

most truthful, natural, and pleasurable form of writing.⁵ In this writing between friends there can be a radical honesty and non-rhetorical directness because you have confidence and trust that your friend will receive your meaning with sympathetic understanding. The assumption here is that understanding depends on sympathy, and no real understanding is possible without it. Now this kind of sympathy is certainly related to the empathic identification with the victim staged by sentimental fiction, but it is also different because these bold young letter writers are not just intent on confirming each other's illusions and fictions. They also open a critical-analytic space for a free discussion of human relationships in general and their particular entanglements with a beloved. Here the correspondents vow *to see honestly together* and to be freely critical of each other as part of that end. It is against this backdrop that Terry Castle's harsh critique of the Clarissa-Anna Howe correspondence must be interrogated.

Castle is deeply disturbed by the insidious mediating influence Anna's interpretations have on Clarissa. Castle says that the correspondence "seems" at first like "an avenue of escape, an outlet for free speech, . . . a gesture toward the truth—toward a more normal and human experience—and we read it, at least at first, with a sense of relief." But Castle distrusts the "innocent mythology of friendship with which Anna and Clarissa surround their correspondence" because Anna has the infidelity to be an active interpreter: "Anna reads Clarissa's letters, of course; but she also reads Clarissa herself—just as much, in fact, as any of the Harlowes do." Of course Clarissa does not seem to mind this; in fact, she invites it: Castle quotes Clarissa, "I am almost *afraid* to beg of you, and yet I repeatedly do, to give way to that charming spirit, whenever it rises to your pen, which smiles yet goes to the quick of my fault. What patient shall be afraid of a probe in so delicate a hand?" (2:155). Castle is most disturbed by the implications of this passage: "(The imagistic conflation of interpretation with physical aggression—probing, prodding, entering—will become even more insistent later, in relation to Lovelace.) But Clarissa's passivity is dangerous. In the all-important matter of her feelings about Lovelace, for example, Anna's reading of the situation is utterly compromising." Here

5. For a fuller discussion, see my *Reading Clarissa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 96-102.

Castle confers upon Anna's interpretations the power to engender the reality Clarissa will then live. Clarissa is "pitifully susceptible to Anna's rhetoric. . . . Language itself dictates to the heart, rather than the other way around. Her friend's irresponsible suggestions have a curiously mediating influence on Clarissa's own feelings. . . . They condition a subtle, but growing emotional entanglement with Lovelace. The 'construction' does not reflect reality, but creates it; the linguistic act becomes prophetic, rather than mimetic. Clarissa begins to act out her friend's fantasy—by writing letters to Lovelace secretly, by admitting him clandestinely to her presence, by behaving, in short, in exactly the conventional manner of the enamored and flirtatious young woman. . . . Before, Clarissa has not experienced a 'prepossession' for Lovelace, but as soon as the potential for desire is articulated by another, desire becomes a possibility—in her own heart. . . . and as the Harlowes' oppressions increase, Clarissa becomes more than willing to let her friend 'write the script' for her" (pp. 77-80). This passage of Castle's analysis performs an astounding reduction of Clarissa's power of reasoned self-control, forethought, and good-sense. It not only separates Clarissa from any responsibility for her relationship with Lovelace. The final turn of Castle's argument makes Clarissa into little more than an impressionable teenager, who is fully capable of being misled by the enthusiasms of her closest friend, despite the fact that they run clean counter to her own feelings and hold enormous peril for herself.

Castle's analysis of the Clarissa-Anna Howe correspondence falls prey to the fallacy of the excluded middle. She assumes that Anna's response to Clarissa's accounts of her situation must be *either* self-willed, arbitrary "constructions" (active interpretation), *or* a faithful and abject acceptance of the writing friend's intended meaning (and thus no interpretation). In the first case Anna ends dancing Clarissa on the strings of her own interpretive fantasies; in the second case she can only be a good friend by being a mute and unmeddling witness. I would like to suggest, however, that this correspondence avoids both alternatives by constructing a complex middle space, a social space for the exchange of letters, where letters sent and received can enlarge the understanding of the participants. It is true that these letters can never be free of the willful self-assertion which is part of every interpretation; nor do they offer a knowledge that is absolute. But Anna and Clarissa assume they can win more insight into the

complex entanglements of human relationships through sympathetic critical dialogue than through solitary meditation or one subject's confessional effusion. Sometimes this dialogue can be painful. Thus, when Clarissa likens Anna's probing mind to the hand of a surgeon (and disturbs Terry Castle so much in the process), Clarissa is soliciting the *topos* of the "good physician" who must sometimes hurt to heal.⁶ One way Anna does so is by refusing to receive the "intended meaning" of a letter as its only permissible meaning. In fact, the discrepancy between intended meaning and some other suppressed or repressed meaning is often the very focus of the familiar correspondent's probing—as when Anna accuses Clarissa of feeling more love for Lovelace than she dares acknowledge to others or herself. In the course of their correspondence, there is a similar criticism of Lovelace by Belford and Belford by Lovelace. What distinguishes Clarissa, and helps make her the proper heroine of this fiction, is her superior ability to hear adverse criticism and incorporate it into her own interpretation of her life.

This perspective on Clarissa's correspondence brings us to an idea that Terry Castle does not seem to have considered. The original letter and enunciation was never a passive innocent reading; it was always already an active interpretation which carried the likelihood of obfuscation, repression, and thus its own species of hermeneutic violence. In other words, interpretative violence is often done by the self and to the self. One can break out of the cocoon of one's own self-interpretation only by subjecting oneself to the sympathetic critical response of a friend. Of course the one who responds critically is never exempt from a counter-critique which can put in question the authority of the initial response. Thus this correspondence, like nearly every human interpretive exchange, becomes a dizzying imbroglio of knowledge, pleasure, and illusion. Here Anna and Clarissa interpret the Harlowes, each other, the rush of events, and that most resistant interpretive object of all: love. It is the fundamental intelligence of this dialogue in letters which allows Clarissa to achieve a surer and surer grasp of her situation. Anna's critiques, and the meditations they trigger in Clarissa, expand the grasp of Clarissa's consciousness. The circuit of communication enlarges the modes of knowing.⁷ It makes her aware enough to

6. See the first chapter of Stanley Fish's *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

7. For an interesting hypothesis about the way the growth of a faculty of intra-subjective consciousness depends upon a social network of inter-subjective consciousnesses, see Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, No. 354.

be a full vessel for, and vivid witness to, her experience. At the same time, Clarissa's being everywhere entangled—with Lovelace, her family, and even with Anna's correspondence, in some of the ways Castle has suggested—all these leave Clarissa struggling with feelings, and bewildered by a situation, she cannot control.⁸ In all of this she is the progenitor of the arduous and intelligent heroines in Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Henry James. When Dorothea Brooke and Isabel Archer hold their vigils through the night and take stock of their life and love, they are the daughters of Clarissa. So too are the thoughtful woman narrators of Virginia Woolf. Mrs. Dalloway's first name seems no coincidence. If one exaggerates Clarissa's weakness during her trial and her susceptibility to Anna and Lovelace, or separates her from the interpretive practice with which she grapples with her world, as I have argued Castle does, then Clarissa cannot become the heroic center of consciousness her trials make her. Instead, she merely becomes the object of the empathic emotions Castle feels and attributes to the reader.⁹

Clarissa as a Heroine of Hermeneutic Renunciation

There is something daring and radical about advocating a movement by anyone anywhere beyond interpretation. After all, Terry Castle can't avoid the fact that this position is advanced about a heroine whose letters are rife with interpretation, in a critical book that proffers its own interpretation of both *Clarissa* and interpretation.¹⁰ But hermeneutic violence is all too real; we

8. In his preface to the New York edition of *The Princess Cassimassima*, Henry James discusses the importance of having a protagonist who has enough, but not too much, conscious grasp of his/her life.

9. Not all readers are as sanguine about, or interested in, the knowledge value of familiar correspondence as is Richardson. Thus Samuel Johnson suggests that a "friendly Letter is a calm and deliberate performance" which offers "temptations of fallacy and sophistication" because "surely no man sits down to depreciate by design his own character." By contrast, in "the eagerness of conversation, the first emotions of the mind often burst out, before they are considered; in the tumult of business, interest and passion have their genuine effect" ("Pope," in *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 9 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1825], 8:314). If Johnson is a public man suspicious of the implicit psychology of Richardson's fiction, French writers such as Rousseau and Laclot used the letter form to demarcate the space of the personal and intimate, so as to accent the romantic and erotic potentials active in Richardson's fiction. This suggests an idea that cannot be fully explored in this essay: the knowledge and pleasure that are the results of looking intently into the heart, or letter, of another are not separable alternatives but concomitants of the same act. Our tradition will always try to idealize knowledge by separating it from pleasure, but in reading fiction, as with religious confession or psychoanalysis, every act of looking engages the desire to know and every search for knowledge is empowered by the pleasure peculiar to seeing.

10. There is a vivid image of this contradiction in the text. Castle takes Lovelace to task for the violence of his interpretive interventions in Clarissa's life and letters, and she sees a figure for this in the little pointing figures he puts in the margin of the letter of Anna Howe's he intercepts. Each fingered idea calls for revenge against Anna Howe. But of course Castle cannot stop her own interpretation of Lovelace's practice from repeating the gesture of fragmentary citation, pointing, and violent appropriation she anathematizes in Lovelace (p. 113).

see its work, and its cruel effects, in every day's paper. Anyone who has been victimized by arbitrary acts of hermeneutic violence—where the fundamental meaning of one's position, whether in personal or public life, has been distorted unfairly beyond recognition—cannot be indifferent to Castle's project. The argument in *Clarissa's Ciphers* is structured to overcome the danger that it will lapse into just another willful, violent act of interpretation. Castle's book would draw us out of the fruitless cycle of interpretation and counter-interpretation, where each tries to prevail over the other by invoking the authority of the most powerful theoretical paradigm of the moment. In this, Castle's book belongs to the kind of project of moral revision that Judith Fetterly ascribes to feminism: "Feminist criticism is a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read."¹¹ Let's look carefully at how Castle tries to take us beyond interpretation, what this might involve, and why she does not succeed.

Terry Castle does not develop a single concept of interpretation and then subject it to critique. Instead she offers two models of interpretation that produce a contradiction at the center of this book which cannot be wished away, nor is it accidental; this contradiction structures the book. On one hand we have the kind of interpretation practiced by Clarissa. It is in touch with primordial natural feelings; it is faithful to intended meanings; it is an adjunct of her struggle to "make meaning itself out of her experience, . . . [a way] to *understand* the horrific and bizarre dislocations she is being made to endure" (p. 23). Arrayed against Clarissa and her efforts at interpretation is a much more powerful and pervasive force: the violent hermeneutics by which every other character in the book imposes "constructions" upon Clarissa so as to gratify their own desire. Not only do the Harlowes and Anna and Lovelace practice this hermeneutics; Castle offers careful theoretical narrative to indicate that this is the only kind of interpretation that is practiced in the world we know. And Castle describes no critical commentary on *Clarissa* which has avoided doing hermeneutic violence to Clarissa. Little wonder that Castle narrates Clarissa's victimization as inevitable. Lovelace's violent act merely figures a hermeneutic rape which is universal. Or so it seems.

11. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. vii.

The antithesis between “good” and “bad” interpretation which Castle stages is a sign that this text is fundamentally moral in its goal. But the encounter of these two species of interpretation does not offer us a simple moral choice; nor can we ride a dialectical progression to a secure third type of interpretation where we as readers could come to rest. Instead this antithesis—between one term which is clearly preferred, but impossible to reach, and a second term which leads to pernicious violence, but everywhere holds sway—leads Castle, and her reader, to a strange moment of negative knowledge. It is the irony and melancholy not of a confirmed skeptic but of one who has glimpsed a better truth and would like to believe but needs to take all of humanity toward the virtuous pole of her strenuous moral opposition. Thus the epilogue where Castle glimpses this truth becomes a space where the reader is given something of a moral test. Can we embrace the insight made available to us by Clarissa’s heroic act of renunciation, refusing “the implicit violence against the other that the act of ‘construction’ entails”? (p. 81)

Terry Castle makes Clarissa exemplary and ideal for the way she resists practicing hermeneutic violence on others. This gesture moves Castle’s book toward Samuel Richardson’s explicit moral project, the one he tried to enforce in the later editions of the book, and is best expressed by Samuel Johnson: to hold Clarissa up as an example of “the most perfect idea of virtue; of virtue not angelical, nor above probability, . . . but the highest and purest that humanity can reach.”¹² To do this Castle must make interpretive moves which cut against the grain of the text as I read it. First, in a simple but decisive gesture she makes Clarissa the book’s only legitimate focus of sympathy and interpretive solicitude. In doing so she elides the perspectival quality of this text, the way it gets us to see and imagine every important position on a given issue in conflict. But Castle, in a gesture familiar from other feminist texts, clearly feels that making Clarissa the locus of value in this text is justified by the devaluation that she has suffered at the hands of others. Thus Castle’s title comes from the line Clarissa speaks about Lovelace during her suffering at Sinclair’s: “I am but a *cypher* to give *him* significance, and *myself* pain” (p. 15). But *Clarissa* constantly reminds us that values are not virtual but relational and

12. See *Rambler* No. 4, in *Samuel Johnson: Essays from the Rambler, Adventurer, and Idler*, ed. W. J. Bate (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 14-15. This passage is discussed more fully in *Reading Clarissa*, p. 134.

reciprocally determined. Thus Castle does not note the irony that Clarissa's line is an echo of an early complaint of Bella about the way Clarissa has affected Bella's value in the family. Clarissa paraphrases Bella's words in a letter to Anna: "That I half-bewitched people by my insinuating address: That nobody could be valued or respected, but must stand like cyphers wherever I came" (1:316). Through the strange turns of the textual network, Bella's words name the purpose of Castle's book: to make every character and critic stand like ciphers, or place markers, behind Clarissa, so as to increase her value.

Castle's final placement of Clarissa, standing pure above and apart from contaminating forms of social struggle, so she can be an example to us all, is justified by Castle's interpretation of interpretation. Since, as we have seen, Castle envisions no middle space for interpretive transactions which are reciprocally shaped, Clarissa must choose between practicing either brutal, arbitrary "constructions" upon others or passing out of the world of reading in silence. Since language and interpretation are the very medium of social exchange, Castle's pervasive critique of interpretation has the ironic effect of abolishing the space where any human exchange can happen. Clarissa's only humane choice is to die. Thus for Castle, Clarissa's victimization and death is inevitable. But Castle can only make this case by suppressing what all eighteenth-century readings acknowledge, and most modern readers accept, as at least *part* of this text: a love story between Clarissa and Lovelace. This is an explicit possibility from the earliest unfolding of the fiction because of the New Comedy formulas which govern aspects of the first two installments and give Lovelace the position of the "desirable suitor" opposed by an arbitrary and overbearing father. In addition, Lovelace and Clarissa dwarf those around them; and though the heroine's sentiments about the hero are delicately veiled, her jealousy on hearing of Rosebud, the electricity given off by their brief encounter at the wood-house, and her alarm at Lovelace's apparently dangerous illness, all invite the reader to complete a very romantic tableau. Of course, Richardson was right to insist that an alert reader should see that other, more complex factors are in play.

Though the love between Clarissa and Lovelace is finally aborted, at moments in the first edition there are three genuine proposal scenes where the right words (and interpretations) at the right instant could have turned the story of Clarissa and Lovelace

from tragedy and death to love and comedy.¹³ While Castle sees the turn toward tragedy as a fateful by-product of hermeneutic violence, I see this turn of the action as the result of a willful, arbitrary, and therefore *non-necessary* chain of interpretations: Lovelace's interpretation of Clarissa as a woman of prideful virtue whom he must attempt to humble as part of his own career of seduction; Clarissa's interpretation of herself as a paragon of virtue with the strength and independence of will to reform a rake of corrupt principles; and, at the level of authorial determinations, Richardson's interpretation of Clarissa and Lovelace as characters that will allow him to stage a tragic moral victory of a middle class woman of the highest principles over an aristocratic rake with all the advantages of worldly power and attraction. But because none of these three interpretations is the only one possible by these interpreters about the characters they interpret, because the text circulates other possible interpretations at every point in its trajectory, many of the readers of the first and second installments were able to weave radically different stories than the one Richardson was intent on telling.

What results is a fundamental indeterminacy about this text. Little wonder that struggles of interpretation open between Richardson and his readers in the months before the third and final installment is published. His most detailed and subtle debate is carried on with Lady Bradsheigh, who used the pseudonym of "Belfour." Two factors stand out in her advocacy of a happy ending: first, her reading of *Clarissa* is thoughtful and compelling, and second, their debate outside the text involves a gender reversal of those within the novel. Thus Belfour urges many of the positions advanced by Lovelace; Richardson becomes an explicit partisan of Clarissa's cause. The persistence of these "errant" readings, even after the publication of the final installment of the first edition, encouraged Richardson to add footnotes and a table of contents summary of the action for the second edition. In the third edition Richardson goes much further: he makes "restorations" of new letters to the text. Now, although Terry Castle objects to these addenda on aesthetic grounds, she allows her readings to be conditioned by them. Thus she does not treat second or third edition material as

13. This fact is partly concealed by Richardson's addition in the third edition of a proposal scene, inserted before the others, where Lovelace is obviously manipulative and insincere in his elliptical references to marriage. Richardson included this scene to condition his reader to discount the radical contingency and concomitant possibilities opened up by the later, genuine proposal scenes. I discuss these crucial scenes in some detail in *Reading Clarissa*, pp. 81-87, 201-209.

separate strata of the text, or show how her interpretation is affected by Richardson's extensive revisions to the text (pp. 82, 176). This is most likely because she is in fundamental sympathy with the ends Richardson pursued in making these "restorations": blackening Lovelace, making Clarissa's rape and death seem inevitable, and turning Clarissa and the text that bears her name into a pure, seamless, natural and thus *non-interpretive* object. But how, in a critical study that shows such a sure self-awareness about the ubiquity of shaping interpretations, can Castle end wishing to efface the material traces of the author's interpretive struggles with actual readers? I suspect that this happens because the moral project which drives Castle's reading, at every crucial juncture, demands that the text occupy an illusionistic space where there is a fundamental correspondence between the career of the heroine and the emotional responses of the reader. If Clarissa's victimization by interpretation is to trigger a salutary reflection about hermeneutic violence in every reader, then Castle must assume this text effects moral mimesis uncontaminated by contingent acts of interpretation. This assumption will allow Terry Castle to end her book in an exultant and hopeful tone, with an epilogue that offers the reader a "life" that has learned from, and gone beyond, the grim alternatives offered us by the deaths of Clarissa and Lovelace. In the lyric close of this epilogue, Castle concedes her own interpretive acts, but points the reader to a place beyond, an ideal, ahistorical space articulated as a place for "moral action" beyond all interpretive violence. This is the proper, that is, ideal, ending for this book. But the world being what it is, Castle adds a short but important p.s., a Bibliographic Postscript. There the interpretive struggles that Castle had convinced us she had gone beyond, return with a vengeance.

The Return of Interpretation; Or, The Voyage Back

Castle organizes her discussion of other criticism of *Clarissa* so as to prevent her disagreements with critics from giving her treatment of the text too contentious a tone. In a book which advocates an end to violent wars of interpretation, she does not want her reading to get too mired in polemics. Thus, in her introduction Castle offers a short, mild four-paragraph description of the course of *Clarissa* criticism. She aligns her own study with two recent books that make the letter and the act of reading

focal in their interpretation: John Preston's *The Created Self: The Reader's Role in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* and William B. Warner's *Reading Clarissa: The Struggles of Interpretation*. Then she adds in a footnote: "Warner's study (which came to my attention as I finished the first draft of this manuscript) shares certain methodological assumptions with my own. We reach, however, very different conclusions regarding the internal drama of reading in *Clarissa*. For an extended discussion of Warner's book, see the Bibliographic Postscript" (p. viii).

This footnote effects a discrete displacement of her disagreements with me from the beginning to the end, from the head to the foot, from the gateway of the book to something written after—its postscript. But this very effort to marginalize interpretive disputes in a postscript is also a symptom of the compulsion to begin again with interpretation, to make oneself clear, to get in the last word which is so evident in *Clarissa*'s final letters and will, in Richardson's revisions in the second and third editions, and in this very review essay of Terry Castle's book. It does not turn out to be so easy to end interpretation, peacefully.

The postscript to Castle's book shows us something very different about interpretation than Castle intends. For in the second half of the postscript, where Castle subjects *Reading Clarissa* to critique, she cannot avoid the very kind of "hermeneutic violence" from which she has labored to wean critics. Thus her summary analysis of my argument carries through a selective citation and embedding of my text in her text that fundamentally distorts the content of my reading. To give one example, Castle writes, "Women readers in particular may be surprised to hear that Lovelace's 'way of operating,' which culminates ('logically,' Warner suggests) in sexual violence, 'engenders something shared and mutual' (RC, p. 38)" (pp. 194-195). In *Reading Clarissa* I never assert something so absurd as this passage seems to maintain: that Lovelace's rape of *Clarissa* engenders something shared and mutual. What Castle is doing here is described quite vividly in her own book: "New readings of a given work typically affirm their claim on truth by destroying previous readings, often through that kind of fragmentation represented by incriminating, 'Lovelacean' citation" (p. 184).

Castle's heated discussion of *Reading Clarissa* does not simply distort some ideas in *Reading Clarissa* while it fairly represents others. It also distorts by what it neglects to do. Castle does not touch upon two of the fundamental differences that mark our

readings of *Clarissa* and which I have made the focus of attention in the second and third sections of this essay: her representation of Clarissa as a weak, susceptible, passive victim of hermeneutic violence; and the problematic theoretical and moral gesture by which Castle tries to take Clarissa beyond interpretation, a move which would deprive the novel of its power of psychological analysis. She also makes no attempt to deal with my way of seeing the genuine "proposal scenes," and the struggles of interpretation inside and outside the novel they trigger, as everywhere crucial to our consideration of *Clarissa*. This omission is connected with the most fundamental lapse of comprehension in her reading of my book, a lapse which enables most of her misreading of me and calls for some detailed consideration.

While Terry Castle's reading of *Clarissa* emphasizes the way Clarissa as a character must be read as representing a real human victim, for me a character is *not equal* to a person. Thus in writing *Reading Clarissa*, I labored to sustain the double perspective of conceiving characters as both people *and* tropes of the novelist's art. Of course in both ways characters often become something that exceeds the author's inaugural intention. So in my reading of the text, Clarissa and Lovelace began as vivid representations of people. But almost immediately they evolved for me into two reciprocally dependent terms of a much more abstract nature: "Clarissa and Lovelace" became by turns, the will to faithful mimetic representation, and the will to ironic, parodic, fictive subversion; they figure the seriousness of the moral and the laughter of the nonmoral; in expressing the desire for a centered sense of self versus the pleasures of the polymorphous adventure, they are avatars of Hestia and Hermes, Penelope and Odysseus; their transactions reenact the tension between the will to mastery through systematic interpretation and the will to mastery through a marginal displacement of that system; their career in the text enacts the symbiotic and parasitic exchange between logocentricism and "deconstruction." In this extended, multivalent, allegorical reading, the important point is the impossibility of simply dispensing with one term of the opposition. This seemed the fundamental flaw of much traditional criticism of *Clarissa*. Critics had usually succumbed to the profoundly antithetical quality of this text by simply *siding* with Clarissa or Lovelace. And though critics were occasionally unfair to Clarissa, they usually understood her position. Lovelace was

often enjoyed for his wit and style, but never understood for the way he incarnates a subversive stratum of Western thought which is always unsettling to entrenched ideologies. This helped to guide me toward a particular writing strategy.

In order to restage the spare intensity of the Clarissa/Lovelace encounter, I shaped my reading so these allegorical resonances of the text would emerge only gradually and indirectly. Because the conceptual categories of novel criticism—like character, plot, and theme—constituted a built-in bias toward Clarissa's way of reading the world; and because contemporary humanism also privileged her valorization of selfhood, sincerity, and the "natural"; I began my reading with a strategic reversal of accustomed hierarchies. While I subjected Clarissa's position and narrative to a sharp critique designed to lay bear its artifice, I celebrated Lovelace as the heroic practitioner of a Nietzschean style of subversive interpretation. Though plotting my reading of the text in this way risked unfairness to Clarissa and an uncritical affirmation of Lovelace, it seemed the best way to loosen the weight and authority of the tradition of *Clarissa* criticism, so I could resee and reactivate the full scope and energies of the struggle between Clarissa and Lovelace, and the positions they represent. In the second part of my book I recast the opposition "Clarissa/Lovelace" into the struggle of interpretation between Richardson and Belfour. Finally in the "tail-piece" to my text I incorporated both these levels of interpretation, plus my own act of interpretation, into an allegory about the lady and the serpent, and their struggle—quite inevitable but forever failed—for the crown of interpretive victory. Throughout this critical narrative, my appreciation of the aesthetic ingenuity of interpretation, my restaging of the proposal scenes, and my narrative of the sedimentation of the striated text of *Clarissa* are all of a piece: they seek to foreground what is arbitrary, contingent, and artificial about this text and the interpretations which produce it. Here, at least, Art *does not equal* Life. This is why Clarissa and Lovelace only seem to be—by the recuperative moral arguments proffered by Richardson as editor and a succession of critics, including Terry Castle—but finally are not, alternatives one could choose to choose between.

There is a strong irony about the differences that separate *Reading Clarissa* and *Clarissa's Ciphers*. If these two books have much of a career in future criticism, they will undoubtedly be

seen as sibling texts because, whatever their many differences, both read *Clarissa* as an allegory of reading, and both are heavily influenced by post-structuralist theory. But the misreadings and inadequate readings of *Reading Clarissa* are probably a necessary and constituent part of the design of *Clarissa's Ciphers*. The narrator of *Reading Clarissa* occupies the same position that Lovelace does in Castle's reading: one who embraces an interpretive voluntarism and a concomitant misogyny which justifies his expulsion from the space for humane articulation, outside the walls of Terry's Castle, the ideal theoretical space of the book where a moral alternative for criticism is proffered. The irony subsists, however, that one's antagonist inevitably enters and affects the shape of one's thinking. Though we may think we are playing a zero-sum game, where one's person being right means that the other is wrong, in fact there may be much more collaboration and reciprocal transaction going on than first appears. Certainly the rhetorical style of *Reading Clarissa*, with its glorification of interpretive struggle, and its pleasure in saying the outrageous thing, encouraged the impression that interpretive combats must be mortal. They do not need to be. In fact criticism would seem now ready to benefit from a decompression of the calculated hyperbole of critical terminology that has been so much the fashion of late and that marks both *Reading Clarissa* and *Clarissa's Ciphers*. But the alternative to interpretive war is not the kind of empathic identification with the interpreters' interpretation of themselves that Clarissa sometimes appeals for, and that Castle repeats as a gesture in her own book at the end of her introduction when she writes: "regarding the interpretative choices I have made, I can only hope, with Clarissa, that the reader will put the best and not the worst construction on what it is I do" (p. 31). By echoing Clarissa's own words to her family about her proposals, and thereby identifying her discourse with Clarissa-as-hermeneutic-victim, Castle does not end urging us toward a critical relationship to the texts we read but into a chain of sympathies that would extend from Clarissa to Castle to you. But, as we have seen, such a statement of fellow-feeling does not succeed in purifying the interpretative practice in *Clarissa's Ciphers*. There may be no redeeming interpretation. But interpretation subsists as an impure transmitting medium, the very form and force of our every communication. So what I advocate in this review essay is not a proleptic sympathy for the

other's position but criticism as a sequence of transactions and dialogues; not a zero-sum game but the very medium of community, a critical community where differences that are real and important are not suppressed but explored, as I have tried to do here.

THREE VIEWS OF LANDSCAPE

Patricia Crown

The major British achievement in the visual arts is in landscape painting with its climax appearing in the years between 1750 and 1830. During this period it became the favored subject of artists of major ambition not only in England but in Europe as well. The astonishing quantity of paintings and variety of approaches present art historians (and historians of literature, geography, philosophy, and culture) with a bewildering richness of material to explain, manipulate, and order. The quantity of these pictures is matched by their importance as subject matter: it was the mode in which painters freed themselves of dependency on the literary texts which governed history painting and moved toward a subjective art of pure representation. These critical and historical issues have inspired a multitude of recent studies, many interdisciplinary, as innovative and multiform as the paintings themselves. The three books here discussed exemplify some of these methods of interpretation.

Sean Shesgreen's *Hogarth and the Times-of-the-Day Tradition* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982) addresses a group of five of Hogarth's works (*Morning, Noon, Evening, Night, and Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn, 1736-1738*), which seem at first glance to have little to do with landscape, and reveals their sources in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Netherlandish landscape painting. He successfully employs the procedures of iconological investigation to show that Hogarth was familiar with the emblematic tradition of depicting human activities appropriate to Morning, Noon, Evening, and Night in landscape settings presided over by classical deities with their symbolic accompaniments. Suites of prints by De Passe, Berchem,