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Clarissa's Suffering: Theorizing Sympathy and Physical Pain in the Eighteenth Century

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Clarissa's Suffering: Theorizing Sympathy and Physical Pain in the
Eighteenth Century

by

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Dedication

To Tam Carlson and Kelly Malone, who together not only inspired my love for literary study but also never gave up on me no matter how many times unmentionables were scattered by ceiling fan blades. This piece of writing and the effort it represents would not exist without your support and love. You have my eternal thanks, and I hope this thesis does you proud.

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Abstract

This thesis examines theories of pain in the eighteenth century, and what it meant to sympathize with the pain of another. I begin briefly with the theories of Descartes and his adherents before focusing on David Hartley and John Locke. Physicians and natural philosophers of the period understood pain as a pure mechanism of the nervous system, confined to the tubelike fibers that run through the body. Naturally everyone feels pain by some means, whether illness or injury, so men ought to be able to sympathize with the afflictions of others. Yet, according to Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, this is not so. He argues for the ultimate inexpressibility of pain; our nerves do not mimic the activity of another's nerves, and our reality cannot completely intersect with the reality of another. Working from the theory that sympathy is a shared suffering, pain then becomes impossible to share. Therefore, physical afflictions cannot receive others' sympathies in the same manner as those of the passions, which pass easily between minds.

While the physicians separated the painful operations of the body from the passions and from mind, newly popular sentimental fiction attempted to reunite all three in their work as their authors strove to replicate realistic

experiences, expressly fictional or otherwise. Bodily pain and emotional suffering lie on either end of a dialectic, and I propose that the fulcrum sits at inventive semantics that rely on a consciously-created mediator. To demonstrate this, I use the example of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa: or, History of a Young Lady*.

Richardson assiduously disallows his characters to express real physical pain directly, but frequently uses every linguistic variation of the word "pain" to emphasize emotional and motivational distress rather than bodily harm. Clarissa in particular refuses to say that she experiences any discomfort even when the situation suggests she ought, emphasizing the unimportance of physical substance to her being. Although Richardson's characters undergo all sorts of pains, physical and cognitive, noun and verb, the only ones directly accessible to the reader are the pains of the mind; all that is known of the body comes mediated several times over by the epistles, semantics, and Richardson himself. This essay suggests how novelists incorporate and accommodate these anatomical theories and their relation to the passions rather than repudiate them for the sake of a fabricated subjectivity.

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Introduction

What was pain in the eighteenth century, and what was it to sympathize with that of another? I will begin briefly with the speculations of Descartes and his adherents, Boerhaave, and other early theorists before focusing on David Hartley and John Locke. Physicians and natural philosophers of the period understood pain as a pure mechanism of the nervous system, confined to the tubelike fibers that run through the body. Naturally everyone feels pain by some means, whether illness, injury, or natural defect, so men ought to be able to sympathize with the afflictions of others. Yet, according to Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, this is not so. He argues for the ultimate inexpressibility of pain; our nerves do not mimic the activity of another's nerves, and our reality cannot completely intersect with the reality of another.

Elaine Scarry examines in depth this particular problem in her monograph, *The Body in Pain*. She claims that: "When one hears about another person's physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person's body may seem to have the remote character of some subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality

because it has not yet manifested on the visible surface of the earth.”¹ Even though the sufferer feels their own pain however intensely, they may sit naturally next to another person, and that other person would never know the sufferer’s pain exists:

...while for the person outside the sufferer’s body, what is “effortless” is *not* grasping it (it is easy to remain wholly unaware of its existence; even with effort, one may remain in doubt about its existence or may retain the astonishing freedom of denying its existence; and finally, if with the best effort of sustained attention one successfully apprehends it, the aversiveness of the “it” one apprehends will only be a shadowy fraction of the actual “it”.)
... Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language.²

Pain may be communicated through inarticulate cries and gestures or by analogy but never directly, and therefore none can understand precisely the discomforting sensations of another. Scarry explains, “...for physical pain—unlike any other state of consciousness—has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other

¹ Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 3.

² *Ibid*, 4.

phenomenon, resists objectification to language.”³ Erin Goss supports this assertion in *Revealing Bodies* when she explains that “the body can only be an allegorical figure... [and] the body exceeds that figure in its insistent materiality, and the body’s experience cannot be contained by the figure by which it achieves its conceptualization.”⁴ Not only can another barely understand another’s pain, but even the body itself cannot fully realize its own experiences. These experiences inevitably spill over into the unknown:

The living body, however, is among other things a body that feels pain, and that pain attests to both the living body’s life and to the incommensurability of its experiences with those of others... Pain removes from the subject the ability to imagine one’s own body as comprehensible and representable, stripping the ability to name bodily experience at the same time that such experience demands expression in order to be verified. Pain removes the capacity for generality required for the body’s representation—even to oneself... [pain] reveals the necessity of metaphor to describe bodily experience. (41)

³ Ibid, 5.

⁴ Goss, Erin M. *Revealing Bodies: Anatomy, Allegory, and the Grounds of Knowledge in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2012. 8.

Working with the idea put forth by Adam Smith that sympathy is a shared suffering, if physical pain is impossible to share, it becomes nearly impossible to sympathize with. Therefore, physical afflictions cannot receive others' sympathies in the same manner as those of the passions, which pass easily between minds. Pain elucidates the eighteenth century understanding of the separation of—or connection between—the mind and the body.

While the physicians separated the painful operations of the body from the passions and from mind, newly popular sentimental fiction attempted to reunite all three in their work as their authors strove to replicate realistic experiences, expressly fictional or otherwise. Bodily pain and emotional suffering lie on either end of a dialectic, and I propose that the fulcrum sits at inventive semantics that rely on a consciously-created mediator. To demonstrate this, I use the example of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa: or, History of a Young Lady*. Richardson assiduously avoids the explicit expression of physical pain from his main characters, but rather uses every linguistic variation of the word "pain" to emphasize emotional and motivational distress rather than bodily harm. "Pain" can function as a noun, denoting a sensation, or a verb, indicating a strenuous effort. For example, Mrs. Harlowe may complain of the pain in her heart from the pains she has taken to marry her daughter Clarissa to Mr. Solmes. Clarissa herself in particular refuses to say that she experiences any discomfort even

when the situation suggests that she ought, emphasizing the peripheral quality of physical form. Although Richardson's primary characters undergo all sorts of pains, physical and cognitive, noun and verb, the only ones directly accessible to the reader are the pains of the mind; all that is known of the body comes mediated several times over by the epistles, semantics, and Richardson himself.

The goal of this thesis is to contribute to the continuing work on the eighteenth century perspectives on neuroscience and the mechanisms of cognition by looking at the bodily experience of pain as a means to understand the accessibility—or inaccessibility—of mind. Furthermore, this thesis suggests how novelists incorporate and accommodate these anatomical theories and their relation to the passions rather than repudiate them for the sake of subjectivity using Richardson's *Clarissa* as a test case.. In an era beginning to look inward, physically and metaphorically, how could a novelist portray introspection without contending with the mechanisms that lie beneath his own skin?

Chapter I: The Confinement of Pain

According to eighteenth century anatomical theory, physical pain is confined—confined to the nerves, confined to the body, confined to inexpressibility and therefore excluded from reality. For centuries, those who have studied the human body agree that when the body receives an injury, the nerves of the body play an exclusive role in conducting pain. Many eighteenth century physicians had their own theories on the precise mechanism of the nerves, but all located that mechanism in the nerve fibers. Other theorists—philosophical and contemporary—have picked up on that isolation and extrapolated further that pain, in its confinement to the nerve fibers, is also confined to the person who experiences it. This section of the essay will explore the eighteenth century theories and the philosophies that arose from or accord with their conclusions.

Theories of the nervous system in the seventeenth and eighteenth century primarily understood the body either as a mechanistic system or an animistic one. Either it was a machine that acts according to its particular protocols, or it was an agent of the consciousness. Herman Boerhaave, a Dutch botanist famous for first observing the esophageal tearing that results from vigorous vomiting,

regarded the body as a “complex hydraulic system regulated by a series of fluid dynamics in the vasculature and nervous systems. Health was due to the correct flow of these fluids; disease by their stoppage or interference.”⁵ Obviously vomit, the improper travel of fluids, indicates sickness. But improper fluid travel within the nerves also resulted in maladies of various kinds, including physical pain. Georg-Ernst Stahl, a German physician, disagreed with this mechanistic view of the anatomy, advocating instead the theory of animism. Animism dictates that the soul is the *principium vitae*, the originator of physiological functions as well as consciousness. Swiss doctor Albrecht von Haller represents the third perspective: he proposed that the nerves possess a certain sensibility that muscles, which simply contract, do not have. As Roy Porter explains, Haller “differentiated organ structures according to their fibre composition, ascribing them to intrinsic sensitivities independent of any transcendental... soul.”⁶ From this perspective, the body is neither reliant upon the soul for direction nor upon precise and rigid rules for operation but on its organic (rather than mechanical) composition. Theories on the production of pain from the nervous system, however, were far more complicated than mechanistic vs. organic vs. animistic.

⁵ Rocca, Julius. “William Cullen (1710-1790) and Robert Whytt (1714-1766) on the Nervous System.” *Brain, Mind, and Medicine: Essays in Eighteenth Century Neuroscience*. Ed. Harry Whitaker, C.U.M. Smith, and Stanley Finger. New York: Springer, 2007. 85.

⁶ Porter, Roy. “Medical Science.” *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Medicine*. Ed. Roy Porter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 165.

The Cartesian paradigm on pain, originally articulated by Descartes in his *Treatise on Man* and picked up by his successors—John Hunter, Albrecht von Haller, and Charles Bonnet—held that the nerves extend from every extremity to the spinal column, through which they connect to the brain and thus influence the senses.

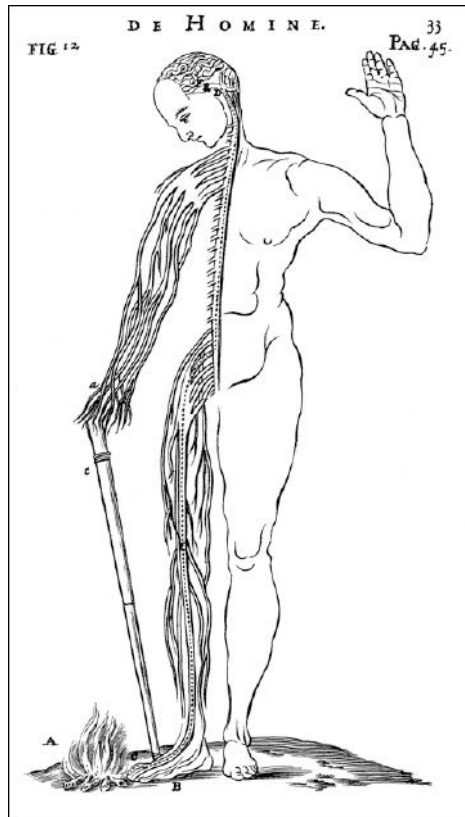


Figure 1.1: A stimulus (fire) upon the nerves of the human body⁷

Their theories differ only on the mode of travel. For Descartes, the animal spirits of the blood break the nerves as they move along, but when this movement

⁷ Descartes, René. *De Homine Figuris et Latintate Donatus a Florentio Schuyjl.* Trans. Florentio Schuyjl. Lyons: Petrum, Leffen, & Franciscum Myardum, 1662, 33.

becomes too vigorous, they break and “cause a movement in the brain which gives occasion for the soul... to have the sensation of pain.”⁸ In the late eighteenth century, Scottish physician John Hunter proposed the same structure for the nervous system (nerves connect to the spine and then to the brain), but rather than suggesting that the nerves break, Hunter’s theory holds that they compress and expand like coils and that nothing of substance travels along the nerves, i.e. no animal spirits. He explains, “Nothing material is conveyed from the brain by the nerves, nor vice versa from the body to the brain; for if that was exactly the case, it would not be necessary for the nerves to be of the same materials as the brain; but as we find...[they are]... it is presumptive proof that they only continue the same action which they receive at either end.” Furthermore, “any sensory stimulation carried to excess could result in pain and when a large nerve is compressed the most acute sensation (pain or numbness) will be at some distance below the compression.”⁹ Therefore, significantly compressing this coil or pulling it to its full length will hurt, but leaving it around its natural tension does not. The alteration to the nerve at one end will be reciprocated precisely in the brain. Swiss philosopher Charles Bonnet suggested a similar non-material transmission of nerve signals when he concluded that

⁸ Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Trans, John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoof, Dugald Murdoch. Vol 1. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 103.

⁹ Hunter, John. *The Works of John Hunter*. Pub posth, Rees Longman: London, 1837, 89, 263.

“pleasure and pain are themselves caused by the ‘vibrations’ of the fibers: the pleasurable or painfulness of sensations depends on the degree of these vibrations and on the relative mobility of the molecules of which the fibers consist.”¹⁰ For example, one nerve might not have adequate room to vibrate in proportion to the sensation that it must transmit, and the amplitude of that vibration combined with the insufficient space to accommodate it translates to the brain as pain. In both Descartes’ and Bonnet’s theories, impinging on the nerve’s territory, either by pressing on the nerve itself or the nerve banging against the sides of its enclosure, causes pain.

In 1786, Haller proposed something very unique for neurology at the time: the nerves are made of a soft pulp rather than a tensile but solid material. Therefore, “the nervous fibers cannot possibly tremulate in an elastic manner.”¹¹ This is to say that the nerves themselves do not deviate and then return to an original shape, snapping back to their neutral state like a rubber band. A pulp-like material does not desire to return to its natural shape after having been altered in some way; it is malleable, impressionable, and infinitely formable. So, rather than the nerves themselves transmitting signals through their oscillations, a fluid within the nerves transmits the signals as it moves from one locale to

¹⁰ Bonnet, Charles. *Essai analytique sur les facultés de l’âme*. Copenhagen: Freres CH. & Ant. Philibert, 118, 120-122.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 220.

another—from a fingertip to the brain, for example—stimulated either by the heart’s pumping or the brain’s detection of stimuli. The nerve itself is simply a conduit rather than a means for sensation. Implicit here is the assumption that the human body is not as fixed in its composition as other physicians would believe but rather is as inconstant in their physiology as in their minds. Haller sharply differentiated between sensibility, the ability to feel, and irritability, the ability to move. Irritability is the province of the nerves while sensibility—sensation in this context—is the province of the soul/mind. Anne Vila sees this inconsistency as a tension between two theoretical concerns of Haller’s: “As a physiologist, Haller sought to elucidate the vital forces that inhered in the body itself. Yet as a natural philosopher with a conservative religious bent, he also sought to preserve some degree of independence for the soul, which he insisted should be seen as an immaterial entity that communicates with the body through the nerves.”¹² Indeed so: Haller allowed for the connection between the mind and the body, but more important in his physiological theories is the inconstancy of the body itself in the proposed malleable and tubular nerve fibers.

Meanwhile, David Hartley devised the most intricate theory of pain and physicality articulated at the time in his *Observations on Man, his Frame, his Duty, and His Expectations* that implies a similar inconstancy as Haller: pain results from

¹² Vila, Anne C. *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. 16.

the vibrations of the *particles housed within* nerve fibers. His doctrine of vibration, as he named it, stipulates that “external objects impressed upon the Senses occasion, first in the Nerves on which they are impressed, and then in the Brain, Vibrations of the small, and, as one may say, infinitesimal medullary Particles.”¹³ Although both suggest that the nerve itself acts as a conduit for something else, be it fluid or particle, for Haller the nerves simply conduct sensations rather than produce them. Meanwhile, Hartley’s vibrations do not result from a simple touch of an object—as Hunter, Bonnet, and Haller suggested. In Hartley’s words, “we are to conceive, that when external Objects are impressed on the sensory Nerves, they excite Vibrations in the Aether residing in the Pores of these Nerves, by means of the mutual Actions interceding between the Objects, Nerves, and Aether.”¹⁴ The aether was a hypothetical medium that pushes downward toward the earth and then is pushed back upward again, allowing for gravity and other movement. Hartley believed that the aether flowed through tiny holes in the nerve fibers to interact with the object pressing upon the nerve, causing the particles inside to vibrate. Since the nerves and the brain are of the same material, the vibrations inside the peripheral nerves will cause the correlating particles in the medullary nerves to vibrate at the same frequency: “the

¹³ Hartley, David. *Observations on Man, his Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*. Vol. 1. New York: Garland Publishing, 1749/1971, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

Vibrations thus excited in the Aether and Particles of the sensory Nerves, will be propagated along the Course of these Nerves up to the Brain.”¹⁵ Again, the sensation impressed upon the nerves cannot register without first passing through the aether. Only then can particle vibrations then complete their motions in the brain, which registers the discomfort. This theory improves upon that of Haller inasmuch as Haller’s nervous liquid requires time, even if only a second, to travel the length of the body to stimulate the brain. Meanwhile Hartley’s aether allows for instantaneous physical and cerebral communication, thus allowing for a connection between (though not the homogeneity of) the body and the mind.

The most significant aspect of Hartley’s theory is the intercession of the aether on the nervous fibers. According to his theory, humans cannot even experience their own sensations without an intermediary. Since the particles must pass through the aether before reaching the nerve to cause any sensation whatever, direct physical contact between man and the world around him is then logically prohibited; the aether is always in the way. Therefore, man is physically isolated, and his pain cannot extend beyond his own frame. Even man’s passions—his “intellectual pain,” e.g. grief or heartache, extend from sensory pain: “Now it will be sufficient proof, that in all the intellectual pleasures and pains are

¹⁵ Ibid, 21-22

deducible ultimately from the sensible ones...for thus none of the intellectual pleasures and pains can be original.”¹⁶ If something so basic requires mediation, is it possible to experience complex emotions without it? For eighteenth century people with any medical familiarity, the answer is no. Humans are mediated and mediating creatures.

John Locke most clearly connects the operations of the mind to the sensations of the body when he, too, places pain and pleasure along the same spectrum in his *An Essay on Human Understanding*. “By Pleasure and Pain,” he says, “I must be understood to mean of Body and Mind, as they are commonly distinguished; though in truth, they be only different Constitutions in the Mind, sometimes occasioned by disorder in the Body, sometimes by Thoughts in the Mind.” First, he observes that both the mind and the body are involved in this process—pain may exist in the mind, though this pain is different in kind (mental as opposed to physical) rather than degree. The pain of the mind corresponds to Hartley’s intellectual pain, sometimes called emotional or psychological pain since it does not involve the nerves but the mind and soul. Second, he concedes that physical pain can only be known by the experience of the senses, not the imagination or reason: “These like other simple Ideas cannot be described, nor their Names defined; the way of knowing them is, as of the simple Ideas of the

¹⁶ Hartley, 430.

Senses, only by Experience.”¹⁷ Thomas Hobbes suggested this very idea, although in less detail, forty years earlier in his *Leviathan*. He explains, “The Original [Object] of them all, is that which we call Sense,” and from the senses arise our “endeavors” toward or away from an object. In his words, “That which men Desire, they are also sayd to Love: and to Hate those things, for which they have Aversion,” with one of these aversions being to the sensation of pain.¹⁸ Physical pain can only exist through sensations, i.e. the experience of the body, and cannot be moralized or rationalized without extending it beyond its status as a simple idea into a complex idea—simple ideas combined or related by the mind. At this point pain would no longer be pain but rather a reflection upon pain. Representations of pain encounter this problem as well: once pain escapes the realm of experience into that of expression, the representation becomes a one of the effects of pain rather than one of pain itself.

However, more complex ideas may be imprinted upon the mind from an external source, thus allowing for reflections upon anything from sadness to sympathy. As a simple idea is “only to be got by those impressions Objects themselves make on our Minds, by the proper Inlets appointed to each sort,” complex ideas “[consist] of several simple ones.” We experience complex ideas by “the power of Words, standing for the several Ideas, that make that

¹⁷ Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, 229.

¹⁸ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 13, 38.

Composition.”¹⁹ Yet, not every single idea may be conveyed to us through language; we need to have been exposed to each simple idea that makes up the complex one before the complex idea or the word that represents it can make sense. Locke explains:

In such Collections of Ideas, passing under one name, Definitions, or the teaching the signification of the word, by several others, has place, and may make us understand the Names of Things, which never came within reach of our Senses; and frame Ideas suitable to those in other Men’s Minds, when they use those Names: provided that none of the terms of the Definition stand for any such simple Ideas, which he to whom the Explication is made has never yet had in his Thoughts.²⁰

Locke provides the example of a blind man to explain how this works: a blind man can get the idea of a statue, as he himself has the idea of a figure/body, but he cannot understand the idea of a picture, never having been exposed to colors. In the same way, a deaf woman could understand rhythm through the idea of vibration, which she can feel, but not that of a symphony, never having been exposed to the sound of a violin or a trombone. Simply, “We can have

¹⁹ Locke, 424-25.

²⁰ Ibid, 426-26.

Knowledge no farther than we have Ideas.”²¹ Our knowledge is confined to our own experience of the world in the Lockean perspective, and the knowledge (although not the mechanisms) of pain remains an innately personal and sensual experience; it never matches reality. Our reflections upon our ideas, then, must be mediated both through that specific experience of them and through the language used to describe them. This is done by what Locke describes as juxtaposition or an immediate comparison, i.e. analogy.

According to Locke, reflections can be expressed through analogy while sensations cannot, and physical pain can only be a sensation; it cannot be shared. Any analogy employed must necessarily correspond to a contemplation of the experience rather than the experience itself in his view.²² Theories of sensation and consequently pain were central to the epistemological and anatomical sciences; physicians needed to explain how our minds could register the motions and encounters of the body. While their neurological principles connected us to the world through constantly mobile particles—or in some cases, fluids or spirits—that travel back and forth from the brain as a result of external impetus, those principles also came to mark our alienation from that world. The mind can only

²¹ Ibid, 538.

²² Scarry appears to disagree with this point when she employs analogies to describe pain, but such moments she uses to expose pain’s resistance to language and the necessity of metaphor when speaking of it. However, it should be noted that both Locke and Scarry are referring to the instant when pain is registered in the brain and not the subsequent moments—the reflection, the residual emotions, the consequences, and another nuances that complicate the experience. A discussion of such nuances expands beyond the scope and capacity of this thesis.

reflect on the experiences of the body, as Locke insists, because it is of a different substance and thus has different capabilities. The mind can make a choice to act, which in turn affects the body, certainly. However, the mind largely remains a distinct entity in this period. As Jonathan Kramnick explains in his *Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson*, “the distinguishing feature of minds is the causal role they do or do not play in physical movement... at the heart of the problem of mental causation is the distinction, if there is one, between mind and matter.”²³ The mind influences matter only as an agent, not as a compeer: “the emphasis fell on causation as the means by which mental states or properties have at once a real existence and are looped into other things.”²⁴ Kramnick explores the tension between the Cartesian distinction between mind and matter and the externalist perspective, where mental actions depend upon the external world. He also recognizes a slipperiness in Locke, where Locke occasionally elides consciousness with the body as though it is something the body possesses, a characteristic: “For some writers, including Locke on occasion, consciousness was something that bodies have and do. It was not a separate substance put into them.” Yet, this perspective is problematic: “But how can a physical system be the locus of experience? Matter seems by definition to be without experience, yet

²³ Kramnick, Jonathan. *Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. 2-3, 8.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 7.

put together in certain ways, it gives rise to sentience, awareness, pleasure, pain, appetites, and the like.”²⁵ Thus, the most common and most easily understood perspective of the time dictated that the mind/consciousness and the body be separate though co-existing entities with the mind having a definite yet limited influence on matter. As far as most eighteenth century physicians were concerned, the only access the mind has to the body it inhabits and the world it observes is its capacity to imagine, conceive, and re-conceive sensory input.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid, 10.

²⁶ The theory of functionalism describes this perspective on the mind-body connection. According to Jaegwon Kim in *Mind in a Physical World; An Essay on the Mind-Body Problem and Mental Causation*, “functionalism suggests that “mental kinds and properties are functional kinds at a higher level of abstraction than physiochemical or biological kinds... its central doctrine seemed to postulate a distinctive domain of mental/cognitive properties that could be scientifically investigated independently of their physical/biological implementations.” (3) This is not to say that functionalism severs the connection but rather creates a hierarchy where “the mental ‘supervenes’ on the physical” (9). This is not too far off from what Descartes imagined in what Kim dubs “Cartesian substance dualism,” where “the world [consists] of two different domains, the mental and the material, each with its own distinctive defining properties... There are causal interactions across the domains, but entities in each domain, being ‘substances,’ are ontologically independent of those of the other, and its metaphysically possible for one domain to exist in the total absence of the other” (15). Functionalism, however, side-steps the strict severance between the mental and the physical that Cartesian substance dualism relies upon, allowing for a less dichotomized perspective.

Chapter II: The Possibilities of Sympathy

Sympathy as theorized by Adam Smith is something that *can* be shared; with regard to emotions, sympathy is the psychological congruity between the one who feels and the one who observes because the one who feels can express precisely what he feels. Since pain cannot be expressed precisely and its mechanisms cannot extend beyond the body to which it is confined, another can only sympathize by means of reflection and analogy and thus logically cannot measure up to the congruity required of sympathy. However, sympathy previously referred to the correlation between organ disorders within a single body. This section will examine the various types of sympathy as they might be known in eighteenth century Britain, first as it was a medical concept and next as it developed into a primarily psychological and thus subjective phenomenon as articulated by Adam Smith in his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. More importantly, this section explains sympathy's role in the moral status of pain: sympathy cannot penetrate the physical body and therefore pain cannot be its object.

Like pain, sympathy has a vexed history in the eighteenth century; it operates under two definitions that offer conflicting stories, especially as applied

to pain. The first definition, far more useful to the physicians of the time, notes sympathy as “a relation between two bodily organs or parts such that disorder, or any condition, of the one induces a corresponding condition in the other.”²⁷ In this construction, sympathy immutably ties together two bodily objects. For example, in Nicolas Culpepper’s translation of Thomas Bartholin’s *Bartholinus Anatomy* (1668) he explains the problem of anatomical sympathy: “The Sympathy between the Kidneys and the Stomach, as when persons diseased in their Kidneys, are troubled with Stomach-sickness and vomiting.”²⁸ Such a connection is indubitable and irreversible, giving those who are ill an especially difficult time. Sympathy did not begin as psychological congruity between two people; it was not sharing in the suffering or happiness of other. Instead, sympathy meant the congruity between organ functions.

Hunter and other physicians, however, were slowly repudiating the medical principle of sympathy—rejecting the seemingly magical relationship between body parts—and replacing it with more complex theories of how the nerves relay pain from one site to another and how the brain interprets those signals. For example, in 1751 Robert Whytt, a Scottish physician of the eighteenth century, fully accepted the principle of sympathy when he suggested that nerves only communicate at the brain/spinal cord and “that possibly this

²⁷ OED, “Sympathy” 1b.

²⁸ Bartholin, OED, 1b.

communication accounted for the sympathy between the various parts of the body”²⁹ and “hypothesized nerve-mediated links between uterus, stomach, and brain.” He arrived at this conclusion through testing reflexes, concluding that the spine was absolutely critical in stimulating reflex actions. If the spinal nerves were destroyed, nerve communication traveled no further than the site of severance. Consequently sympathy, like pain, has multiple meanings that shift between physiological and psychological, with the pain favoring the former and sympathy favoring the latter. Hunter, for example, did not believe in medical sympathy as Whytt described it, stating that: “I believe it is a delusion in the mind... a delusion in the mind is an object appearing to be where it is not.”³⁰ According to Hunter, a stomach ulcer cannot directly cause a throbbing toe or anything of the sort; a throbbing sensation likely indicated a problem with the toe than the stomach. He suggested instead a theory of referred pain where “the brain splits part of the action of sensation in the brain,”³¹ thus deflecting part of the pain to another location, splitting the impulse from the nerves as they arrive. Since two different nerves A and B may communicate with each other, the pain of nerve A may be communicated to nerve B, but the brain “is aware of it” and so is

²⁹ Neuberger, M. *The historical development of experimental brain and spinal cord physiology before flourens*. Trans. and Edited: Edwin Clarke. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1981, 157.

³⁰ Hunter, 332.

³¹ Stone, 76.

involved. Hunter explains, "It is very remarkable that none of the sympathies can or ever are reversed, therefore they do not arise from communication of the nerves but [more likely] from the effect of the brain upon the nerves."³² Namely, the brain itself transfers a pain from one location to the other rather than the afflicted part enacting the transference, as Whytt believed, and this transference is ubiquitously unidirectional and thus not truly "sympathetic." The theory of medical sympathy slowly lost its relevance as Hunter and other physicians began refuting it, delegated to dusty library shelves instead of eighteenth century medical practice.

Contemporaneously, another definition of sympathy began to dominate the linguistic landscape of the eighteenth century, one which did not refer to direct affinities between tangible objects like kidneys and livers but rather to affinities between emotions. As John Brewer explains, "Sentiment and sensibility were technical terms employed in medicine, philosophy, and psychology, but from the mid-eighteenth century they were widely and loosely used to describe the expression of heightened, intense human feelings, a new sort of refinement."³³ Sympathy became a thing of the mind rather than the body, and, according to Adam Smith, the basis of morality and social conduct. This sort of

³² Hunter, 275.

³³ Brewer, John. *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. London: Harper Collins, 1997, 113-4.

sympathy is a psychological congruity, “the quality or state of being affected by the condition of another with a feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other; the fact or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings of another or others; fellow-feeling. Also, a feeling or frame of mind evoked by and responsive to some external influence.”³⁴ Again, “sympathy” speaks of an affinity or transfer, but not one that can be traced through the nerves or exact correspondences.³⁵ The relevant emotion does not transfer directly, like a letter carried from one person to another, but rather like that letter translated from one language to another. The translation may be extremely close, but it can never quite carry the same nuances as the original language: “The person... neither feels for someone else... nor deliberately engineers sympathetic feeling, but rather converts the idea of another’s feeling into the present and immediate impression of that idea... the exchange cannot be perfectly symmetrical.”³⁶ The eighteenth century philosophers and authors who theorized sympathy also thought of it in these terms. Importantly, sympathy was not limited to suffering; it extended to joy, hope, anger, sorrow, fear, and any of the other passions,

³⁴ OED, “Sympathy” 3b.

³⁵ Maureen Harkin reiterates this sentiment well when she explains, “Sympathy, rather than transmitting an exact copy of the sentiments of another is more or less faulty means by which we solve the problem of our ignorance of these sentiments, by representing in our imagination copies of what we would feel in that person’s place.”

³⁶ Ibid, 23, 31. Michael Frazer echoes this idea when he explains, “the identification with the objects of their sympathy but necessarily be incomplete” because the imaginative transference of emotion “reduces the strength of the reaction concerned. (101)

through it could not pass between individuals with the same vivacity. It carried an “epistemological uncertainty” with it, the insurmountable gap between minds.³⁷

Adam Smith constructs sympathy as the imaginative response within ourselves to the tangible passions in another, and propriety consists of the parallel between what one expresses and the extent to which the other can sympathize. In order to sympathize with another’s passion, however, we must be able to put ourselves in the other’s shoes, as it were: “we can form no idea in the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation... [our senses] never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations.”³⁸ Sympathy does not require an exact parallel between the passions felt by both parties but simply a correlation.³⁹

³⁷ Pinch, Adela. *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, 31. Pinch here speaks of Hume’s formulation of sympathy, a formulation whose epistemological basis marries perfectly with Smith’s, although he focuses more on pride and humility within the self rather than the knowledge of the other.

³⁸ Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Lexington: Empire Books, 2011, 1. Inline citations henceforth. As Bacon remarks in *The New Organon*, men are misled in their knowledge by three types of “idols,” one being the idol of the cave. This dictates that each man’s “cave” (re Plato’s Cave) distorts reality in its own particular manner such that no one sees either the reality of nature or the reality of another. He concludes, “Heraclitus well said that men seek knowledge in lesser, private worlds, not in the great or common world.” (41).

³⁹ Harkin, Maureen. “Smith’s The Theory of Moral Sentiments: Sympathy, Women, and Emulation.” *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*. 24 (1995): 175-190, 177. Harkin reiterates this sentiment well when she explains, “Sympathy, rather than transmitting an exact copy of the sentiments of another is more or less faulty means by which we solve the problem of our ignorance of these sentiments, by representing in our imagination copies of what we would feel in that person’s place.”

However, Smith admits that “there are some passions of which the expressions excite no sort of sympathy, but before we are acquainted with what gave occasion to them, serve rather to disgust and provoke us against them.” Therefore, our imaginations require “the situation which excites” the passion order to replicate it. Yet, as Smith points out frequently, “our sympathy... is always extremely imperfect.” Imagination and reality are not the same; the sufferer’s passion and the observer’s sympathy are not the same: “Every man feels his own pleasures and his own pains more sensibly than those of other people. The former are the original sensations; the latter the reflected or sympathetic images of those sensations. The former may be said to be the substance; the latter the shadow” (Smith 3-4). Sympathy relies on the presence of a spectator, someone who observes the suffering in question and thus can reflect those sufferings. The sufferer must match his visible lamentation to the level of sympathy that an observer can muster out of courtesy, and this forms the basis of the Smith’s moral theory.

Magnanimity, then, is the exact agreement between the passion expressed by one and the sympathy felt by the other. The magnanimous man, Smith’s equivalent of Aristotle’s virtuous man, is he who allows for “the most perfect correspondence between his sentiments and ours, and on that account the most perfect propriety in his behavior” (38-39). However, there is not always an

observer against which to measure our sentiments, and Smith proposes the idea of the internal impartial spectator as a solution. First, he asserts that “our first moral criticisms are exercised upon the characters and conduct of other people; and we are all very forward to observe how each of these affects us...we begin, upon this account, to examine our passions and conduct, and to consider how these must appear to [others], by considering how they would appear to us if in their situation.” He is both the examiner and the judge. For Smith, virtue is not good in itself but good because “it excites those sentiments in other men” (95-96). Thus we ought to aspire to become the magnanimous man by means of the impartial spectator formulated in our heads. Yet, certain sentiments are easier for another to sympathize with than others.

According to Smith, physical pain is one such difficult sentiment; another person cannot sympathize with our wounds, illnesses, or dying convulsions. He claims, “Pain never calls forth any very lively sympathy unless it is accompanied with danger. We sympathize with the fear, though not with the agony of the sufferer.” The only sympathy we can muster when observing someone else’s physical pain is a sympathy with the fear they might feel for the inflicter of the pain. We can replicate the fear of the sword but not the sensation of its cut. Why is this the case? Smith asserts that “nothing is so soon forgot as pain. The moment it is gone the whole agony of it is over, and the thought of it can no

longer give us any sort of disturbance. We ourselves cannot then enter into the anxiety and anguish which we had before conceived" (21). Smith also suggests that "our imaginations can more readily mould themselves upon his imagination, than our bodies can mould themselves upon his body," so part of the problem is that our body cannot imitate a broken pelvis or the gout in another in the same way that our mind can mimic despair. Furthermore, for the one in pain, he is not truly feeling the suffering in that instant, according to Smith: "When we are under the greatest bodily pain... we shall always find, if we attend to it, that it is not the suffering of the present instant which chiefly torments us, but either the agonizing remembrance of the past, or the yet more horrible dread of the future. The pain of each instant, considered by itself, and cut off from all that goes before and all that comes after it, is a trifle, not worth regarding" (261). Consequently, the sufferer ought not express his pain lest he foolishly attempt the impossible. Rather, he ought to recognize the insurmountable gap between minds and accept the mediation allotted him.

Chapter III: *Clarissa*: Pain and Sympathy Mediated

Both Clarissa Harlowe and her creator, Samuel Richardson, knew well the agony of pain and dying. Both suffered from, as Raymond Stephanson suggests, a “nervous sensibility, or that intimate relationship of mind and body (the nexus is the nerves) in which one’s mental state can have a direct effect on one’s bodily health (or vice versa).”⁴⁰ Dr. George Cheyne, a close friend of Richardson’s for years, diagnoses his symptoms as “merely nervous,” informing him that “If you would honestly have my Opinions about the Cause and Origin of your Disorder I take it you were born originally of weak *Nerves*... then the Nerves have been wasted and relaxed by your sedentary Life and thinking attentively.”⁴¹ He and Clarissa suffer from remarkably similar illnesses, illnesses originating in the very anatomical structures that dictate sensation and pain. For Richardson, he was incredibly depressed and paranoid for the final years of his life and suffered from tremors and insomnia, the melancholy and weak nerves that Cheyne warned

⁴⁰ Stephanson, Raymond. “Richardson’s “Nerves”: The Physiology of Sensibility in *Clarissa*.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 49:2 (1988): 267-285, 268.

⁴¹ Cheyne, George. *The Letters of Doctor George Cheyne to Samuel Richardson (1733-1743)*. Ed. Charles F. Mullett. Columbia: University of Missouri, 1943, I.23.

him about.⁴² He would complain of an “increased Malady in the Nervous Way.”⁴³ When he describes his illness as “nervous,” he does not mean an ailment of anxiety but rather one of the nerves themselves, though he cannot specify exactly what feels wrong. As his biography explains, “for many years before his death, his hand shook, he had frequent vertigoes, and he would sometimes have fallen had he not supported himself by his cane under his coat. His nerves... were affected to such a degree, for a considerable time before his death... This disorder at last terminated in an apoplexy.” The debilitation of his body preceded the debilitation of his mind. As one went, so did the other. Richardson finally died of a stroke, “the outcome of his old paralytic disorder, which attacked him on Sunday, 28 June 1761.”⁴⁴ Pain dominated a great part of Richardson’s later years.

In *Clarissa*, Richardson makes a particular effort to avoid using the word “pain” in a bodily sense; nearly ten percent of all instances of the word “pain” actually refer to a physical injury.⁴⁵ Scarry notices this phenomenon in almost all artists when she comments, “even the artist—whose lifework and everyday habit are to refine and extend the reflexes of speech—ordinarily falls silent before

⁴² ODNB, “Richardson, Samuel.”

⁴³ Eaves, T.C. Duncan, and Ben D. Kimpel. *Samuel Richardson: A Biography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, 84, 323.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 513, 517.

⁴⁵ This statistic was compiled using Serge Heiden's Textometrie.

pain.”⁴⁶ Rarely do his characters truly hurt themselves; usually they complain of gout or headaches, both indeed painful experiences but neither particularly unusual complaints and requiring elucidation.⁴⁷ Clarissa notes that her father “had the gout upon him”⁴⁸, and Lord M complains to Mr. Belford of his “gouty humours” (607). Mr. Lovelace explains to Goody Moore that he has a “dreadful pain in [his] jaws; an ague in them,” (738) but that was a lie to keep her from investigating his intended recapture of Clarissa. Generally characters must speak vaguely of their afflictions, for “gout” and “ague” are essentially metaphors for an unspecified type of pain assumed to be the same in everyone. “Ague” simply meant a fever, but Lovelace uses it to refer to his jaws. Lord M has the gout in his right hand, while Mr. Harlowe has it in his stomach. Pain in this novel slips from moniker to moniker, never specific in its mechanism but rather mediated by indistinct terms and circumlocution. Richardson adopts an Augustinian perspective on semiotics where words are simply signs, but they do refer to reality rather than to an abstract idea.

⁴⁶ Scarry, 10.

⁴⁷ The anomalies to this proposition, primarily Mrs. Sinclair, provide the moral counterexample. While Clarissa behaves as the zenith of virtue and paragon of propriety, Mrs. Sinclair behaves exactly the opposite in helping to further Lovelace’s iniquitous plans. Clarissa is Richardson’s primary example of true virtue manifesting in the mind and true reward bestowed in the afterlife (rather than a perfectly chaste maiden who eventually marries providing the model for his readers.) Mrs. Sinclair represents the ethical horror that results from an inappropriate focus on the body.

⁴⁸ Richardson, Samuel. *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady*. New York: Penguin Group, 1985, 52. Inline citation henceforth.

In order for this form of mediation to have any significance, words themselves must point to a reality; the signified must exist. If access to another's pain must always be mediated by terminology, preconceptions, assumptions, and so forth, it needs a physical presence, or else it's turtles all the way down.⁴⁹ This is not to say that Derrida's *rein hors de texte* and similar theories are invalid; they simply have no bearing on semiotics as Richardson uses it. Rather, one must assume an Augustinian perspective. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Saint Augustine outlines his theory of language, one that posits a dual structure. There are signs and there are things; the sign is the word, and the thing is the object or idea to which the sign refers:

All instructions are about things or signs: but things are learnt by means of signs. Now I use the word "thing" in a strict sense, to signify that which is never employed as a sign of anything else... There are signs of another kind, those which are never employed except as signs: for example, words. No one uses words except as signs of something else; and hence may be understood what I call

⁴⁹ The phrase "turtles all the way down" indicates the infinite regress of the *primum movens*, the first cause, the question of whether a chicken or an egg came first. The Hindu, Chinese and Native Americans each have a myth that the world rests on the back of a giant turtle (or, in some cases, an elephant or a serpent depending upon translation.) A snarky challenge to this myth asks what supports the turtle while the turtle supports the world—assuming the turtle does not "swim" in the void by his lonesome, of course. The snarky response to the challenge claims that the turtle stands upon another turtle, who stands upon another... and it's turtles all the way down. Iterations on this phrase have been circulated since at least the eighteenth century if not earlier.

signs: those things, which are used to indicate something else.

Accordingly, every sign is also a thing; for what is not a thing is nothing at all.⁵⁰

A sign must refer to some thing, and the thing must exist outside the mind, or else God has created only an illusion for us and thus lies to us. For a devoted Christian such as Augustine, this conclusion is inconceivable, given the ultimate beneficence of his Creator. This assumes that language does not intend to present an idea to another but rather to ourselves. Contemporary critic Fr. William Ralston explains it in this manner: “The primary function of language is not to communicate, but to articulate.”⁵¹ Communicative language (ideally) requires a clear transference of an idea from one person to another. Language that articulates, on the other hand, takes a nebulous sense of something—anything—and gives it form through sound. The intangible becomes tangible. Therefore, whenever Richardson refers to physical pain, this pain is a thing with a material existence for his characters—specifically one rooted in the nervous system of the character experiencing it—but this existence can only be accessed through medication.

⁵⁰ Augustine, I.2.

⁵¹ Ralston, William. “The Language of the Liturgy.” *That Old Serpent: Essays by William H. Ralston Jr.* Savannah: St. John’s Church, 1999. 155.

More often Richardson uses “pain” as a noun to indicate someone’s emotional distress—like Clarissa’s determination to adhere to her moral compass—or their strenuous efforts to accomplish something, usually to control Clarissa’s behavior. Just as “sympathy” transformed from a physical concurrence to a mental mirroring, so Richardson uses an originally physical reference, “pain,” to describe an emotional distress. Scarry notes that “*psychological suffering, though often difficult for any one person to express, does have referential content, is susceptible to verbal objectification, and is so habitually depicted in art that... there is virtually no piece of literature that is not about suffering, no piece of literature that does not stand by ready to assist us.*”⁵² *Clarissa* is a novel rife with suffering and psychological pains, and Richardson uses “pain” in that way quite frequently. For example, Clarissa’s brother commands that she travel “up or down the back stairs, that the sight of so perverse a young creature may not add to the pain you have given every body” (121). Clarissa’s father threatens her with “pain of displeasure” (57) should she refuse to marry Solmes. Pain, instead of being a physical attack on the nerves as the physicians theorize, is an attack on the mind, either dished out by some wretch or endured by the wretched. This type of psychological pain serves as both suffering and punishment, a whip lashed upon the emotions rather than the skin.

⁵² Scarry, 11.

Furthermore, “pain” could be used to indicate the effort someone takes to manifest their will in the world. For example, Clarissa explains the extent to which Lovelace has gone to mold her thoughts of him: “And though black seems to be his natural color, yet he has taken great pains to make me think him nothing but white” (461). He tries to possess Clarissa, but he also tries to slough off the blame onto others so that no one might be pained (offended or hurt) by his actions. Nearly all of Richardson’s characters take “pains” to control the situation and then experience emotional pain when said situation does not transpire as they will it. Pain, semantically, does not need to indicate an external condition under these circumstances because the emotions and the will remain sequestered in the mind. As Smith proposed, we can sympathize with the passions of another because we too can imagine and feel them, but we cannot sympathize with physical states because some mediator, be it our neurological constitution, linguistic imprecision, or failure to re-conceive past pains, prevents the mental correspondence required of it. Richardson constructs the world of *Clarissa* according to this principle, where the characters meant for admiration do not ask another to attempt to sympathize with physical pain.

Clarissa alone appears unaffected by the “pain(s),” both of the body and the will, because she, more so than any other character, is the subject of the most mediation: three and sometimes four layers worth. Richardson mediates for

Clarissa, Clarissa's sensations are mediated by the mechanisms of reality and the signs allotted to describe it, and then she mediates herself semantically and performatively in her letters. Often, Lovelace, Belford, or Anna Howe serve as another layer between Clarissa and her pains. When she experiences physical pain as Lovelace poisons her in order to rape her after she has passed out, Clarissa instead attributes the affliction to another emotion: "Ill before, I found myself still more and more disordered in my head; a heavy torpid pain increasing fast upon me. But I imputed it to my terror." (1009). Even at the moment of her death, she expresses happiness rather than discomfort: "Oh! Mr. Belford, said she in broken periods; and with a faint inward voice, but very distinct nonetheless—Now!—Now!—(I bless God for His mercies to his poor creature) will all soon be over—A few—a very few moments—will end this strife—and I shall be happy!" (1361). The broken and faint quality of her voice implies that Clarissa suffers from some physical malady, but she reveals nothing of it. Instead, as Smith suggests, Clarissa focuses on the terror rather than the pain; we have no access to her body.

Belford and Lovelace frequently provide their own interpretation of Clarissa's pains and of their own, though Richardson never suggests that they truly understand them. Haller's experimental work on the body allowed for "the development of the sensible body or subject as an increasingly encoded and

decodable set of signs,"⁵³ but these signs are frequently misinterpreted or at least unduly imposed upon Clarissa's body. As Frances Ferguson suggests, "...if it then appears that *Clarissa* bespeaks the primacy of forms—a primacy designed to ensure the legibility of mental states by deriving them from forms—that very legibility itself carries within it the constant possibility of internal contradiction."⁵⁴ In this case, the external form—the body—is meant to provide the means to interpret that form's interiority, but interpretation is and will always be imprecise. The body may act in ways contrary to the mind's design, so Belford, Lovelace, and even the reader can never be certain how Clarissa feels from her form alone. Furthermore, Lovelace himself can barely distinguish his own mind from the yearnings of his body. As Ferguson says, "[Lovelace] has continually dispersed and recreated himself to acknowledge the absurdity of the connection between any particular form and any particular significance."⁵⁵ For instance, in the weeks preceding Clarissa's rape, Lovelace turns more and more violent as his frustration rises, and he forbids her from any personal freedoms, including letter-writing, strolls, or any other activity important to her. He became so infatuated with her that he cannot permit anything but that she be under his complete control. Yet, rake that he is, Lovelace cannot bear the thought of being

⁵³ Goss, 36.

⁵⁴ Ferguson, Frances. "Rape and the Rise of the Novel." *Representations* 20 (1987): 88–112, 100.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 101.

so consumed with one woman. In a monologue to his own conscience, Lovelace attempts to quell its altruistic passion using the language of violence and pain. He exclaims, "Take that, for a rising blow!— And now will thy pain, and my pain for thee, soon be over... Had I not given thee death's wound, thou wouldst have robbed me of all my joys... Gasp on!—That thy last gasp, surely!— How hard diest thou!" (848) If he can subjugate his conscience, he can subjugate Clarissa's moral principles without guilt. Pain here functions as the metaphorical conduit for further pain; a mental beating—Lovelace's violent chastisement—produces the necessary apathy for a physical beating—Clarissa's rape. Prior to the assault, Lovelace can only understand his world in terms of pain and pleasure, Locke's simple sensations upon which all more complex ones spring. Pleasure for Lovelace is sex with Clarissa, proving not only that he is such a stupendous rake that any woman will concede to his charms but also that every woman will eventually give in to her natural desire for sex. Pain for him is failure, indicating the falsity of his reputation and the torment of desiring a woman he can never have. This dichotomy he explains to Belford many times over after his kidnapping of Clarissa. Lovelace conflates violence with inner torment because he has never yet had to entertain more complex emotions in his dealings with the opposite sex.

Clarissa, on the other hand, does not associate another's violence with her pain because she believes the horrors that surround her stem from her own error, nor can she associate that pain with herself. Prior to her abduction, Clarissa has a frightening dream of her own violent death and careless burial. Yet, she describes it from an eerie third-person perspective:

“Methought my brother, my uncle Anthony, and Mr Solmes had formed a plot to destroy Mr. Lovelace; who discovering it turned all his rage against me, believing I had a hand in it. I thought he made them all fly into foreign parts upon it; and afterwards seizing upon me, carried me into a churchyard; and there, stabbed me to the heart, and then tumbled me into a deep grave ready dug, among two or three half-dissolved carcasses; throwing in the dirt and earth upon me with his hands, and trampling it down with his feet. (342-43).

Grammatically speaking, Clarissa forces herself to be the object of the violence rather than the subject-victim. Rather than saying, “I was tumbled into...,” she says, “[they] tumbled me.” Even here she mediates herself through the shift from subject to object. She describes it as though she were witnessing it and interpreting rather than experiencing this nightmare and suffering. In her own accounts of Lovelace’s violences preceding her rape, she only describes herself as

“unworthy,” “humbled,” and a “proud wretch” (890-892). In most cases, Clarissa steps outside herself and judges rather than sitting with her own mind and acknowledging her emotions and sensations. Yet, Belford sees exactly the opposite; for him, Clarissa's misery dissipates under the ultimate goodness of her soul. From his perspective, she simply dismisses wretched thoughts and feelings, for that is what moral paragons ought to do. When Clarissa begins to die after escaping Lovelace and his abuses, Belford observes, “She was stooping with pain... She then turned from me towards the window, with a dignity suitable to her words; and she showed her to be more of soul than of body at that instant. What magnanimity!” (1103). Without direct access to her interior, Belford must simply assume how she feels; from her posture, he assumes pain, and from her dignity, he assumes magnanimity. Stooping might well suggest muscle weakness without pain, but Belford wants to believe that Clarissa can overcome anything in her goodness, so he assumes the worst and praises her for failing to perform his assumption. As Goss explains, “Whether we turn to the body as an object that requires our attention, or as a sign of the subjects that we are, we turn to a substitutive figure that replaces particularity with the generality that allows us to name it. Such substitution replaces an absence of knowledge, an inability to know and name, with certainty.”⁵⁶ Belford cannot know; he can only guess.

⁵⁶ Goss, 45.

Similarly, however much the reader can imagine her passions and sympathize with her distresses, her physical form is simply a sensible shell for those emotions, a shell the reader cannot access.

This utter impenetrability of Clarissa's physical form reveals its irrelevance. Granted, this is not to say that Clarissa's body has no role in the novel; first Lovelace and Mr. Solmes compete to see who ought to have legal possession of it through marriage, then Lovelace does everything in his power to force Clarissa to yield it up to him without marriage, and finally this body dies. However, the characters with the greatest interest in her body—Lovelace for its taunting virginity and Clarissa's own family for her legal right to her grandfather's lands—only consider it a vehicle for some other purpose or virtue. Goss theorizes that when excessive attention is paid to the body, it ceases to be a subject and becomes instead an object when she discusses William Hogarth's *The Reward of Cruelty*: "... though in this final "Stage" his body will be the object rather than the subjective agent of a dismembering torture that exposes the body as merely a collection of parts..."⁵⁷ and thus Clarissa exists. She has become the object of scrutiny, and thus her body is not her own. It is instead the object of the torturous intentions of her family and of Lovelace. The Harlowes simply hope to control their own reputation through Clarissa first through a terrible marriage

⁵⁷ Ibid, 32.

match to the vile Mr. Solmes and then by disowning her once Lovelace's clever kidnapping threatens Clarissa's chastity. Should Clarissa marry Mr. Solmes, he has agreed to assist her brother James in becoming "Lord Harlowe," a title and nobility the family lusts after. Clarissa's grandfather bequeathed to her all of his property, and Solmes, once her husband, could do with it as he pleased, including speeding the path to aristocracy for James Harlowe. Her body is simply a means to titular fame. Clarissa herself remarks upon the "envy, ambition, high and selfish resentment and all the violent passions" (234) of her family in an early letter to Anna Howe, and Anna responds with her typical sharp insight:

One thing you must consider, that, if you leave your parents, your duty and love to them will not suffer you to appeal against them to justify yourself for so doing; and so you'll have the world against you. And should Lovelace continue his wild life, and behave ungratefully to you, how will that justify their conduct to you (which nothing else can), as well as their resentments against him? (239)

Anna recognizes the incredible virtue that Clarissa possesses, the virtue her family endeavors to command through Clarissa's own moral sensibility, as well as the dangers inherent in Lovelace. Clarissa exists between the proverbial rock

and hard place for the first few hundred pages of the novel, her regard for her virtue and duty at war with her family's desire for fame and power.

Lovelace, meanwhile, has a purely incidental interest in her body; he focuses, rather, on the possibility for its corruption and therefore the corruption of Clarissa herself. Granted, he is indeed a rake with a well-established reputation for seducing women and sleeping with them. However, Clarissa does not represent another vagina to penetrate to Lovelace; she represents the ultimate conquest. If he manages to sleep with her, Lovelace proves that even the most virtuous of women will yield to their own natural lusts. If she resists him perpetually, then Lovelace will have found a woman worthy of his reformation. He too exists between that proverbial rock and hard place, for he desperately wants to claim her virtue and prove it false but desperately wants it intact as well so that he will feel righteous in marrying her. Sandra Macpherson, in arguing that Lovelace holds a sort of limited liability in Clarissa's eventual death in *Harm's Way*, asserts that "[Clarissa] is less a subject than a cause—because she accepts responsibility for a tragic plot that much as we might want to believe exceeds and is distinct from character, in fact, embodies it."⁵⁸ This tragic plot is Lovelace's justification for his actions: a trial. He tells Belford that he is simply testing her as well as undertaking to rescue her humanity from her own

⁵⁸ Macpherson, Sandra. *Harm's Way*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. 14.

excessive and consequently false virtue: "What must virtue be which will not stand a trial? ... Well then a trial seems necessary for the further establishment of the honor of so excellent a creature... if she overcome, that will redound to her honor... Am I not justified in my resolutions of trying her virtue, who is resolved, as I may say, to try mine?" (430-1). He further reveals his intentions many letters later:

And should not my beloved, for her own sake, descend by degrees from goddesshood into humanity? If it be pride that restrains her, ought not that pride to be punished? If, as in the Eastern emperors, it be an art as well as pride, art is what she of all women need not use. If shame, what a shame to be ashamed to communicate to her adorer's sight the most admirable of her personal graces? Let me perish, Belford, if I would not forgo the brightest diadem in the world for the pleasure of seeing a twin Lovelace at each charming breast, drawing from it his first sustenance; the pious task continued for one month, and no more! (706)

If he can prove her virtue, he can obtain it for himself (through the metaphorical suckling at her breasts) and increase hers. If he can break her virtue down, he maintains his reputation as a rake and proves that all women shall fall if the best will. Belford, however, disbelieves Lovelace's justification for not marrying his

captive just yet, and Belford is right: "If trial only was they end, as once was thy pretense, enough surely hast thou tried this paragon of virtue and vigilance. But I knew thee too well to expect, at the time, that thou wouldst stop there. Men of our cast, whenever they form a design upon any of the sex, put no other bound to the views than what want of power gives them" (714). Lovelace, he thinks, does not truly wish to prove Clarissa's virtue and thus secure his own. He simply wants to overpower a paragon and thus reinforce his rakish prowess. The pleasures of her body have very little to do with his motivations; her body is the means by which he will enforce his power and desirability.

Yet, many critics have theorized how and why Clarissa's body dies with a satisfactory answer hardly to be found because her body has proven itself both inaccessible and uninterpretable. Richardson himself declared that Clarissa ought to die "for the sake of the example given by it,"⁵⁹ though precisely what example Richardson intended remains open for argument. He simply refused to satisfy his readers with a happy ending to a plot that he believed could never go any way but tragically. Adam Budd argues that "Richardson's representation of Clarissa's death, whose organic causes he deliberately obscured, and thus whose inevitable basis he denied, indicated his eagerness to confront contemporary notions of literary sensibility by making it clear that the exemplary elements of Clarissa's

⁵⁹ *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, ed. Anna Laetitia Barbauld, 6 vols. London: R. Phillips, 1804. 4:188, 212-213.

character (rather than the character itself) ought to be emulated and not mourned.”⁶⁰ By killing off Clarissa, Richardson negates the suggestion that some young girl might follow her path, for Clarissa’s path leads to rape and death. However, the circumstances of her death—her exemplary religious convictions and, more importantly, Belford’s subsequent reformation—elevate her as a moral paragon to be imitated. Clarissa, Budd remarks, is a “sentimental heroine who lives to depict her own saintliness,” and naturally one must be dead to be considered for sainthood.⁶¹ Budd considers Clarissa’s death to be Richardson’s version of poetic justice: only if Clarissa died could Belford undergo a transformation, Lovelace be suitably punished for his presumptions, and Clarissa be released from her suffering. Kathryn Steele, meanwhile, focuses on Clarissa’s silence, citing a spiritual surrender as an explanation for her death:

As we have already seen, Clarissa makes decisions in accordance with a prior surrender. Initially that surrender is to patriarchal authority: in her passive obedience to her father, she is willingly circumscribed by the tenets of filial obedience. Later, the surrender is to God; like silence, this act is difficult to perceive and describe in material terms... Clarissa attempts to transcend immediate

⁶⁰ Budd, Adam. “Why Clarissa Must Die: Richardson’s Tragedy and Editorial Heroism.” *Eighteenth Century Life* 31:3, 2007. 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 5.

understanding by earthly readers, and... she moves their judgment out of the realm of the material world.⁶²

Namely, Clarissa uses her quiet passivity to exemplify the proper relationship between man and God: one of silent surrender. Raymond Stephenson suggests that “Clarissa dies because of her nervous sensibility,” denying any ulterior message to her death; she simply dies of a bodily weakness.⁶³ Each of these explanations—and many more left un-cited—focus on Clarissa as a character with a body that can either speak, be silent, represent, or exemplify. These theorists assume a weaker distinction between the body and mind, a point of contention that pervaded eighteenth century neuroscience and natural philosophy.

The explanation that accords most closely with theories of pain and anatomy comes from Ferguson, who acknowledges the inaccessibility of Clarissa’s body: “Clarissa makes her body, the body that Lovelace had hoped to convert into a form of consent, into a slowly wasting sign of the inability of a form to carry mental states in anything but excessively capacious (that is, ambiguous) or potentially self-contradictory stipulated forms.” She separates the mind and the body as distinctively as the eighteenth century physicians do, for any hints the body could provide for subjectivity are completely unreliable.

⁶² Steele, Kathryn L. “Clarissa’s Silence.” *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 23:1, 2010. 1-34.

⁶³ Stephanson, Raymond. 268.

Ferguson continues, "...from the moment after the rape, when Clarissa begins dying and Lovelace begins longing for her consent, the novel is literally haunted by the specter of psychology, in which mental states do not so much appear as register the improbability of their appearing."⁶⁴ The body carries within it the mind/soul, but it remains the messenger for mentality rather than the manifestation of it. Terry Castle supports the perspective of the body as an unreliable means of communication. Her dying, she says, becomes "a methodical self-expulsion from the realm of signification."⁶⁵ In this version, Clarissa refuses to be an object of interpretation for everyone else's subjective approaches, as they often get it wrong. One's own body can at most mediate but not display in their entirety the expressions of the mind though gesture and language.

Richardson mimics the nature of sympathy when he denies us direct access to Clarissa's mind but rather casts Anna as the medium through which the reader encounters Clarissa's heart, Lovelace the medium for her abuse, and Belford the medium for her death. For instance, Belford is our translator, our aether, keeping the reader two steps removed from Clarissa's experience: first through his subjective experience of her, and second through the reader's of him. He can interpret her language, gestures, and convulsions, but he too is not

⁶⁴ Ferguson, 106.

⁶⁵ Castle, Terry. *Clarissa's Ciphers: Meaning and Disruption in Richardson's Clarissa*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982. 109.

entirely accessible, being of a separate entity than the reader and thus whose reality cannot intersect with ours. Ultimately, the novel itself has same epistemic problems as sympathy itself: both operate on the imagination alone. The eighteenth century turn toward sentimental novels parallels the neurological and sentimental theories exemplified by Hartley and Smith, as sympathetic pain lies in the passions, not the body, and thus can only be understood through imaginative recreation. Authors like Richardson turned their focus inward as physicians deemed the unmediated gaze outward categorically impossible. The etymology of sympathy, *συμπάθεια*, translates literally to "suffering with," and eighteenth century science and philosophy dictates that one cannot suffer another's physical pain. Therefore, *Clarissa* represents the sympathetic epistemology where the characters' passions inspire passions but their pain remains their own.

Conclusion

Both neuroscience and natural philosophy have progressed greatly since the eighteenth century, discovering impressive connections between the operations of the consciousness and the operations of the body that Hunter, Haller, Hartley, and the rest never imagined. However, their natures remain distinct in contemporary theory and science, as Kim explains thoroughly in *Mind in a Physical World: An Essay on the Mind-Body Problem and Mental Causation* and Kramnick suggests in *Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson*, both of which I referenced earlier. They certainly may affect one another, superimpose upon the other, and so forth, but the consciousness is in itself a different type of thing than the physical form. Whether this separation solidified from developments in neuroscience in the eighteenth century or at another time is not a matter of immediate concern, but the theories outlined by Hunter, von Haller, Bonnet, Hartley, and so forth outline mechanistic rather than metaphysical operations. Where once Descartes' theories relied upon animal spirits to convey sensations from the body to the brain, his successors described mechanisms such as compressions, fluids, and moving particles. Subsequently, the brain must interpret the signals arriving from the source of the stimuli and then send a

message back, whether instinctive or deliberative, i.e. with the intervention of the consciousness. Yet, if one's own mind and body interpret each other, separate bodies and separate minds have an even larger separation requiring greater inference.

Physical pain remains the most revealing human experience that exhibits the distinction between minds and bodies most thoroughly. Pain belongs only to the person who experiences it, and pain requires a form in order to be experienced. The mind can only reflect on the terrible throbbing of a headache, and the sufferer's companion must take the sufferer's word that his head hurts (as the companion can hardly share the headache with the afflicted.) Thus, pain is endlessly mediated, first through the form, then through consciousness, then figurative language, then to another form, and finally to another consciousness, and such is the simplest path for knowledge of another's pain to travel. At minimum, the knowledge of pain is mediated five times and as such requires interpretation. As Scarry explains, the crux of the problem lies in the figurative language required to communicate pain, as pain itself resists objectification in language and must instead rely on metaphor and circumlocution. Emotions such as joy or sadness, though differing often in cause, do not differ in manifestation. Therefore, should Clarissa claim herself to be sad, Anna would understand and sympathize with Clarissa's feeling of sadness. However, should Clarissa claim a

headache, Anna could ask, "Is it sharp, dull, throbbing, stabbing, aching, crushing, shooting, burning, or pressing?" If Clarissa were to reply with "throbbing," not only would "throbbing" need to be the most accurate metaphor to describe the type of pain in her head, but also Anna would have to understand both what "throbbing" implies with regards to pain but also to have experienced a "throbbing" headache herself. Even if this were the case, Anna still must make a comparison that by nature can only approximate Clarissa's experience, never mirror it. According to Smith, sympathy requires a mirroring of one person's circumstance within the mind or memory of another. Note that sympathy need only mirror in type, though not necessarily in intensity. Anna and Belford may sympathize with each other's grief over Clarissa's misfortune and death even if one grieves slightly more than the other. Yet, no one can sympathize with the wretched Mrs. Sinclair's broken femur because no one has felt the pain of a femur snapped in exactly the same manner as she snapped hers under the same circumstances, nor can she express that sensation adequately enough for another to learn.

Richardson understood well the inaccessibility of another's pain, suffering greatly himself near the end of his life, as well as the distressing passions that drive people's efforts to control others, and he emphasized both in *Clarissa*. Richardson assiduously disallows his characters to express real physical pain

directly, assisted by the epistolary form of the novel. All pains are recounted in reflection and in consciously chosen language rather than instinctual and non-linguistic outbursts. However, Richardson frequently uses every linguistic variation of the word "pain" to emphasize emotional and motivational distress rather than bodily harm. Often someone takes great pains to accomplish something, or another has caused great pain to that person's heart. Rarely does anyone expressly complain of a physical malady.

Clarissa in particular refuses to say that she experiences any discomfort even when the situation suggests she ought, emphasizing the unimportance of physical substance to her being. Although Richardson's characters undergo all sorts of pains, physical and cognitive, noun and verb, the only ones directly accessible to the reader are the pains of the mind; all that is known of the body comes mediated several times over by the epistles, semantics, and Richardson himself. Clarissa's body functions as a means to others' goals: a secure estate and title for the Harlowes, reputation for Solmes, proof of women's sexuality and lack of steadfast virtue for Lovelace, and proof of ultimate virtue for most everyone else. Her body is simply an object of interpretation, a means to understand her mental and spiritual condition, and not a reliable one. If Clarissa's body told the unadulterated truth, the reader would know its pains and the cause of its death. Instead, her pains are inaccessible and her death a

mystery. Sympathy with her physical condition is impossible; her body is irrelevant in its inaccessibility.

Clarissa instructs its readers in the ultimate reality of subjectivity. Though novels of the period were transitioning from descriptions of a character's actions and adventures to their subjective interpretations of the events that befall them, Richardson's *Clarissa* presents subjectivity as an outsider experiences it. The epistolary form demands mediation in every instance because letters are written in reflection rather than in the moment. Thus Richardson creates unstable sympathies in his characters and readers, as the endless mediation makes an accurate representation of pain nearly impossible. The separation between the mind and body as theorized by his contemporaries and the nature of sympathy as articulated by Smith dictate the subjectivity Richardson could depict in his penultimate novel.

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