

# **Christian Sin and Mimetic Contagion: Repentance in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa***

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In her posthumous letter to Lovelace, Clarissa writes: "I should mistrust my own penitence were I capable of wishing to recompense evil for evil—if, black as your offences have been against me, I could not forgive as I wish to be forgiven." She extends her good wishes for his future spiritual welfare, asserting that they are "wholly indifferent, as undeserved." Her offers of forgiveness alternate with severe reflections on Lovelace's black offences, and while she insists that her forgiveness is sincere, she is careful to point out that nothing in his behaviour merits it. Forgiving Lovelace is an essential step on Clarissa's journey towards spiritual perfection ("I should mistrust my own penitence..."); at the same time, Clarissa sets her own righteousness and piety in sharp contrast to Lovelace's baseness. While her avowed intention is to confirm her penitence and humility by forgiving "as I wish to be forgiven," the overwhelming effect of her letter is to convince the reader of her spiritual superiority over Lovelace.

What exactly is the status of this superior repentance, this proud humility? Is Clarissa's forgiveness sincere? Or does she use a language of Christian ethics for calculated effect? Is this posthumous letter of forgiveness just a sly way of rubbing it in, triumphing over Lovelace with a tremendous display of virtuous generosity?

James H Maddox, in his essay "Lovelace and the World of Ressentiment in *Clarissa*," argues that Richardson's universe is populated with exemplars of Girardian mimetic rivalry. Jealousy, envy, and ressentiment are each character's secret motivation, and Clarissa is no exception. Her posthumous letters, in which she forgives her family and Lovelace, are not innocently virtuous, they are not sincerely generous; instead, they are a final bid for victory and revenge against her rivals.

There are indeed motives of revenge here which have nothing to do with Christian

forgiveness. Or if one sees only Christian forgiveness here, one must wonder: was Nietzsche not correct in his apperception of slave morality within Christian virtue? Clarissa does not escape the world of resentment; her apotheosis is but her ascent to the unstoppable apex of that world, from which she can look down upon all below her." (Maddox 289) On his view, conflicts in *Clarissa* always appear as developments in the latter phases of an escalating mimetic cycle. Clarissa and Lovelace both evince Girard's anxiety of ontological lack; each exhibit a chronic fascination for the rival as both obstacle to, and model for, ontological self-sufficiency. For Lovelace, an initial mimetic identification with James Harlowe precedes the desire to possess Clarissa. Both Lovelace and James, Maddox argues, are morbidly engrossed in an effort to conquer or appropriate the other's pride; Clarissa is, in this sense, an arbitrary prop in a strategic battle of wills. Clarissa's dream thus expresses an important insight into her own role in the conflict: "Methought my brother, my Uncle Antony, and Mr. Solmes, had formed a plot to destroy Mr. Lovelace; who discovering it, and believing I had a hand in it, turned all his rage against me" (342). Rivalry precedes and constitutes desire; at the same time, mimetic violence is intrinsically contagious and escalatory. Clarissa here pictures herself as an arbitrary victim, falsely blamed for a situation of rivalry which preceded her involvement. She is the arbitrary focus for mimetic identification within a complex network of mimetic rivalries; she is the desired object, and as such, she is falsely blamed as the cause of the conflict. Mimetic desire typically misconstrues its own source in precisely this way, rewriting its own chronology so that the desired object is seen to motivate or justify rivalry.

Mimetic desire is triangular in structure: the subject's desires are always mediated by another. The desiring subject experiences a chronic ontological lack which seems to accrue to her alone. The mediator, seen from the outside, appears to have what the subject lacks: s/he appears to be self-sufficient and complete. The subject wishes to acquire this self-sufficiency at all costs. Appropriating the mediator's expressed desires is a strategy aimed at achieving this end. The specific object of any particular desire is arbitrary. What the appropriation of desire reflects is the subject's hunger to assuage the vertiginous inner sensation of ontological lack. In this sense, desire is always desire for the Other's "being."<sup>(1)</sup> The initial admiration for the model quickly turns to hatred and envy. The subject desires exclusive possession of the Other's being. The mediator, at first a model for the subject's desires, becomes an obstacle to their attainment. Thus, the subject's feelings for the mediator are deeply ambivalent; she is the focus for both adoration and dread, worship and envy.

Clarissa's aura of autonomy and self-identity make her a likely target for mimetic identification. While Lovelace admires her impenetrable virtue as a model for perfect being, she is also a rival, since she stands as an obstacle to his desire for

exclusive self-identity.<sup>(2)</sup> But Lovelace, as Maddox suggests, is subject to multiple mediations. He “can express authentic feeling only through gestures which make an appeal to an observer” (Maddox 288). The presence of the Other is a central focus; he is literally impotent without such an audience. Maddox points out that even the rape is a performance for Lovelace; the presence of Mrs. Sinclair and the whores is essential. The rape is directed towards them as an answer to their mockery (Maddox 285).

“Oh thou cruel implement of my brother’s causeless vengeance” (935), Clarissa exclaims to Lovelace. Nothing is more offensive to the subject than the exposure of her dependence on the rival. Lovelace protests to Belford, “I was speechless!—Well I might!—Her brother’s implement!—James Harlowe’s implement!—Zounds, Jack! what words were these!” (935) Indeed, Clarissa probably has a higher awareness of the mimetic mechanism which underlies her own destruction. Maddox suggests that her superior understanding of mimesis in desire gives her a distinct advantage when it comes to playing the game herself. Unlike Lovelace, she abstains from offering overt gestures of rivalry. Instead, she practices an appearance of indifference to her opponent. For Maddox, Clarissa is an exemplar of Girardian “askesis.” She conceals her desire, and adopts an impenetrable veneer of self-satisfaction. For Girard, “The indifferent person always seems to possess that radiant self-mastery which we all seek. He seems to live in a closed circuit, enjoying his own being, in a state of happiness which none can disturb. He is God” (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel* 107). Clarissa attracts the admiration and envy of others, while betraying none of her own.

Even Clarissa’s piety is a passive aggressive maneuver. By aligning herself with God, she exhibits a cool indifference to her mortal rivals. And by feigning indifference to the outcome of rivalrous conflicts, she effectively *wins* them all. For Girard, “Every startling success in the universe of double mediation results from real or feigned *indifference*” (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel* 167). Indeed, Maddox argues, Clarissa’s final triumph in the novel is the penultimate triumph of ressentiment.

Thus, for Maddox, Clarissa fails to make the spiritual leap beyond the world of ressentiment. She makes it only as far as “the unstoppable apex of that world, from which she can look down upon all below her.” While her gestures of forgiveness and repentance seem to reflect a rejection of mimetic rivalry and a turn towards divine transcendence, they are in fact the winning moves in a rivalry which still occupies her whole attention. Victory in the mimetic game is her single-minded aim; so deeply does she suffer from ressentiment that she is prepared to die for her

revenge: “We may very well look upon her act of wasting away as her final, winning move in her game with Lovelace and the world” (Maddox 275).

Critics often place Clarissa squarely into this field defined by struggle, where she occupies a position of rivalry precisely symmetrical to her opponents, Lovelace or the Harlowes.<sup>(3)</sup> On this view, Clarissa is a player in the mimetic conflict like anyone else, indeed, she is often more shrewdly and selfishly strategic than others.

While the application of Girardian theory offers some important insights into the text, Maddox pulls back from making the most interesting conclusions. His explication of a submerged world of ressentiment that determines the characters’ motives and actions presents a convincing argument for the fruitful application of a theory of mimetic desire. However, his reading remains structurally analogous to the works of Lovelacian critics. He is able to preserve his Lovelacian loyalties, I will argue, only at the expense of a distorted appropriation of Girardian theory.

## **Reading Mimetic Rivalry: Projection and Deception**

Maddox introduces his essay with a brief analysis of an early scene between Clarissa and Arabella. In the scene, Arabella accuses her sister of “artfulness”, of “half-bewitching people by [her] insinuating address.” She castigates Clarissa for her “meek pride”, her “humble significance;” these are only deceptive poses, she suggests, which Clarissa adopts for the purposes of self-advancement. While Arabella intends to bring down her sister’s pride, Maddox suggests that she betrays more of her own weaknesses than she reveals of Clarissa’s. Envy, jealousy, wounded pride: these are Arabella’s motivations; the more vehemently she condemns Clarissa, the more palpably does she reveal her own feelings of inferiority. Meanwhile, Clarissa refuses to sink to her sister’s level; she remains aloof: “Dear Bella,” she exclaims, “proceed!” Her composure ruffles Arabella, who continues to pour out venomous accusations which only serve to demonstrate her own feelings of inferiority. Ultimately, Maddox argues, “Clarissa “wins” because of her ploy of remaining aloof and cool in the face of the other’s hot anger” (Maddox 275). She comes out the victor of this mimetic exchange because her pride remains intact. Arabella, on the other hand, betrays her feelings of inferiority and humiliation; in attempting to crush Clarissa’s pride, she inadvertently humbles her own.

Where Maddox describes Bella’s obsessive focus on Clarissa as a rival to herself, her sense of enraged inferiority, I think he is quite right. However, he fails to pick up on a what is perhaps a subtler point. Later on in the scene, in a moment of ironic clarity, Bella exclaims: “How natural it is for people, when they set their hearts upon anything, to think everybody must see with their eyes” (197). Of course she is

talking about Clarissa, who, as she suggests, is naive to presume she can negotiate or condition with her family. However, Bella here unconsciously articulates a truth about her own character: she reads Clarissa according to her own motivations, and it is her own most deeply held desires that she condemns in her sister. Thus she says:

How often . . . have I and my brother been talking upon a subject, *and had everybody's attention* till you came in with your bewitching meek pride, and humble significance; and then have we either been stopped by references to Miss Clary's opinion, forsooth; or been forced to stop ourselves, or must have talked *unattended to by everybody* (194) [italics mine]Arabella condemns Clarissa for demanding the attention and admiration of those around her. She behaves in such a way that she attracts admiration and envy; she impresses all her acquaintance with a sense of her own importance. Clarissa, says Bella, is too proud, and wants nothing more than to assert her superiority over her family, her friends, and, indeed, Bella herself. However, it is clear that *Arabella* wishes to command attention in this way. If she could, she would behave so as to be esteemed and envied by all. She is forever calculating relationships of status, with a view to promoting her own. In the scene she describes (quoted above), she is notably uninterested in the actual content of her conversation with James. She values it only to the degree that it draws attention to herself; the ultimate calamity consists in "being unattended to by everybody." Since, from the perspective of her own desire, Bella is robbed of her status in the scene, Bella concludes that this was precisely Clarissa's intention. In other words, she assumes that Clarissa behaved in precisely the same way that she, Bella, would have, had she been in her place. Rather than acknowledging her own desire, she externalizes it, projecting it instead onto her supposed rival.

Maddox fails to acknowledge this aspect of the mimetic mechanism: he fails to observe how desire always reads the Other as a double of the self. For Girard, "it is always his own desire that the subject condemns in the Other without knowing it. . . . Indignant comprehension is therefore an imperfect comprehension" (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* 73). It is always the Other who is blamed for instigating rivalrous conflict, never the self: "for the subject does not recognize in the Other the void gnawing at himself." The vision of the rival is always a projection of the self's own desire: Arabella projects her own motivations onto Clarissa, reading her as a double to her own desires. This gesture of projection is simultaneously a gesture of denial: the projected image of Clarissa as rival becomes increasingly malevolent as Arabella's impulse to externalize her own desire grows more desperate. Desire hides its own tracks, projecting guilt onto the Other, and concealing the mimetic sources for rivalry within the self. In this sense, it is always the Other who is seen as instigating rivalry, never the self. Do we then have reasons to doubt projected images of Clarissa, which attribute motives of rivalry to all her actions? Arabella

blames Clarissa for instigating rivalry. Is Clarissa really implicated in this way, or is her apparent indifference to the mimetic game (which holds so much of Arabella's attention) sincere?

By failing to address the problem of projection, Maddox obscures Clarissa's motives. The persuasive force of his argument, that Clarissa "wins because of her ploy of remaining cool and aloof in the face of the other's hot anger," rests on our understanding of the effect her behavior has on Arabella. Do we have reasons to question the "projected" image of Clarissa as rival?

The issue becomes further complicated when we consider that, for Girard, projection is a strategy always already embedded in a context of rivalry. The subject conceals from herself the mimetic sources for desire, refusing to acknowledge the void gnawing at herself that leads her to emulate the model/rival in the first place. The projected image of the rival is also a form of *attack*: the subject condemns the posited rival for instigating conflict, when in fact, there is no such original causal factor for mimetic rivalry. The subject justifies herself while condemning the Other; it is precisely this mechanism of projection which allows the subject to justify the violence which results from mimetic identification. Thus, "Indignant comprehension is . . . an imperfect comprehension." The projected image of the rival is a strategy of self-deception; it conceals the mimetic sources for violence.

### 3

Maddox's analysis obscures the mechanism through which desire reads its model/rival; this is a symptom of a more serious misapplication of Girardian theory. For Girard, desire reads the Other with direct reference to the chosen mediator. Mimetic identification (in its pathological phases) with a human mediator inevitably gives rise to projected images of rivalry. Choosing Christ as mediator gives rise to a different way of reading the Other, a forgiving reading.

Unfortunately, it is common practice among his critics and admirers alike to ignore the theological implications of Girard's work.<sup>(4)</sup> Maddox, like many Girard interpreters, lops off Girard's theology as though it were an extraneous and cumbersome fifth limb. Failing to consider Girard's extended critique of Nietzsche, Maddox conflates ressentiment with mediated desire, as though they described different aspects of the same phenomenon. In fact, the fundamental notions of desire at play in each framework are diametrically opposed. For Nietzsche, ressentiment reflects a perversion of the will, or of desire. Desire is not originally mimetic. In the Nietzschean framework, there is such a thing as an authentic desire, a desire which is generated within the self. For Girard, desire is structurally mimetic,

and the notion that there could be a spontaneous or self-originating desire is illusory.[\(5\)](#)

In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard introduces the concept of mediated desire within an explicitly religious framework. Mediated desire is a form of “deviated transcendence,” where authentic transcendence involves embracing Christ as the proper mediator for desire. From the very start, mimetic desire is articulated within a universe of the sacred. “Everything . . . is false, theatrical, and artificial in desire except the immense hunger for the sacred (*Deceit, Desire, and The Novel* 79).’ Desire is always a gesture towards transcendence, though it thwarts itself when mediation replaces the religious impulse.[\(6\)](#) Alternately: “Repudiation of a human mediator and renunciation of deviated transcendency inevitably call for symbols of vertical transcendency” (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* 312).

By lopping off the Girardian universe just below the possibility of divinity, Maddox effectively places a ceiling on transcendence, and mimetic desire spins itself out until the final blow, the final triumph of askesis. If we re-inscribe a religious language into the terminology of mimetic desire, we will come upon a different reading of Clarissa’s acts of forgiveness and repentance. While it is clear that Clarissa is implicated in mimetic conflicts and that she participates in the strategic interplay that is a consequence of mediated desire, her final acts of repentance and forgiveness reflect a renunciation of mimetic desire.

## ***Sin and Mimetic Contagion***

When Clarissa writes, “I should mistrust my own penitence were I capable of wishing to recompense evil for evil,” what is she penitent for? What are Clarissa’s sins? Earlier in the letter, she reflects on her spiritual fate, which, by the time her letter is received, will have been “unalterably fixed”: “I am either a miserable, or a happy being to all eternity. If *happy*, I owe it solely to the Divine mercy: if *miserable*, to your undeserved cruelty” (1425). Here again, as we have seen her do elsewhere in the letter, Clarissa seems to repent and recriminate in the same breath. On the one hand, if she is happy it is because, presumably, God has forgiven her sins. On the other hand, if she is miserable it is Lovelace’s fault. Is she, then, not responsible for her own sins? She acknowledges sin in the context of divine pardon. However, in the instance that she is not granted divine forgiveness, responsibility for sin devolves onto Lovelace. On a Maddoxian reading, Clarissa here demonstrates her skill as a mimetic player, establishing her own virtuous perfection, while she blackens Lovelace’s character. She assumes the pose of a humble Christian, at the same time recriminating Lovelace with all the un-Christian bitterness and hatred she can muster.

This strange construction—where Clarissa is both guilty and innocent, sinner and victim—falls in with a characteristically obscure Clarissean reading of the will, where *intent* and *error* seem to have no necessary ethical connection. In her posthumous letter to her Uncles, she reflects that her fault “was not that of a culpable will (1357)”; still, she is “culpable”, guilty of sin, despite the non-involvement of her conscious will:

Perhaps I was too apt to value myself upon the love and favour of everyone: the merit of the good I delighted to do, and of the inclinations which were given me, and which I could not help having, I was perhaps too ready to attribute to myself; and now, being led to account for the cause of my temporary calamities, find I had a secret pride to be punished for, which I had not fathomed: and it was necessary perhaps that some sore and terrible misfortunes should befall me in order to mortify my pride and my vanity” (1375). This passage describes a strange logic for self-knowledge, where punishment serves to prove sin. Only in being “led to account” for temporary misfortune, does Clarissa stumble upon the possibility of sin. And it was “necessary that some terrible misfortune” should appear in order to unearth a sin of which she had no prior consciousness, and indeed, which she might never have discovered in other circumstances. Her sin is a *secret* pride, hidden from herself, and only revealed through punishment. “Unfathomable”: the image refers to the deep internality of her sin, and also to its secrecy, its exteriority in relation to her own understanding. Thus her sin of pride is at once alien and deeply internal. Clarissa applies this same ambiguous language of both “inside” and “outside” to her virtues. She “could not help having” her virtuous inclinations. They were “given,” not self-generated, and only her pride led her to attribute them to herself.

In general, this passage evokes a profound sense of the mystery of sin and error: Clarissa’s acknowledgment of sin, at least in part, comes as an effort to grapple with the apparent senselessness of her own punishment. The discovery of previously unknown faults helps to make meaning out of her suffering. After the rape, her sense of the injustice of her suffering emerges in the complaining spirit vehemently expressed in her early Meditations. Taking her cue from Job, she appropriates his resentments and his manner of expressing them. Her curses, like his, issue from the apparent asymmetry between sins committed and punishment suffered.

Job’s sin is also a form of spiritual pride. By questioning the justice of God’s punishment, he lays claim to a self-knowledge which precludes the possibility of sin. Alternately, submitting to God’s punishment, despite its apparent unreasonableness, means acknowledging the radical interiority of sin. It means acknowledging the deep embeddedness of a sin which is not defined according to conscious intention, and for which the self cannot reasonably be held responsible.

Clarissa's growing consciousness of sin gains expression through images of contagion, corruption, invasion, disease. Such images appear after the rape, and recur throughout the *Meditations*. "I have said to corruption, Thou art my father: To the worm, Thou art my mother and my sister (Job xvii)...Take thy plague away from me!-I am ever consumed by the means of thy heavy hand! (Ps xxxix)" (*Meditations* 4) In spite of personal will, sin intrudes, contaminates, secretly enters. For Girard, there is an intimate connection between these notions of secrecy, pride, and contagion. They signal the openness of the self to mimetic influence.

For Girard, pride invokes a sense of the fall; it triggers a descent into double mediation. Pride is at the heart of mimetic rivalry. Ironically, the rival's mimetic identification with the mediator is always motivated by an impulse towards self-individuation. The subject covets the model's apparent self-sufficiency. In an ironic bid to appropriate autonomy, she adopts the model's desires. Mediated desire, then, preserves the lie of metaphysical autonomy, by positing the rival as an obstacle to its accomplishment.<sup>(7)</sup> Victory over the subject's sense of ontological lack exists just beyond the image of the model/rival. The illusory expectation for ontological self-sufficiency sees itself as always delayed, deferred, but an ever-present possibility nonetheless. Pride, then, asserts its claim for metaphysical autonomy, while this gesture always remains inscribed in a relationship with the rival. Metaphysical autonomy is a false promise; the more the subject struggles to assert ontological supremacy, the more enslaved she becomes to the specter of the mediator.

4

Compulsively Other-directed, pride is radically exterior to the self<sup>(8)</sup>; at the same time, it penetrates the self, effecting: ". . . an invasion of the vital centers of the individual by triangular desire, a desecration which gradually infects the most intimate parts of being. This desire is a corrosive disease that first attacks the periphery and then spreads towards the center" (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* 43). Pride is like door within the self, forever opening out in a gesture towards the Other, at the same time admitting mimetic contagion into the depths of the self. The disease of mimetic desire spreads like a plague, and no one is impervious to its influence.

As Clarissa describes her early impressions of Lovelace, she reflects: "And then has the secret pleasure intruded itself, to be able to reclaim such a man to the paths of virtue and honour: to be a *secondary* means, if I were to be his, of saving him, and preventing the mischiefs so enterprising a creature might otherwise be guilty of, if he be such a one" (183). In her posthumous letter to Lovelace, this "secret pleasure"—whose intrusion she recalls with the pleasant consciousness of

seduction-becomes a source of shame. She “blushes to own” her early preference for Lovelace, which defied her better judgement. “For I was weak enough, and presumptuous enough, to hope to be a means in the hand of Providence to reclaim a man whom I thought not unworthy of the attempt” (1427). Lovelace’s influence intrudes and becomes Clarissa’s sin; her repentance must answer for the mimetic intrusion of this secret pleasure and secret pride.

Images of contagion abound in the rape scenes, most notably in the fire scene. Rape here figures as an allegory for the penetration of the Christian soul by sin and the ever-present openness of the self to the contagious influence of mimetic desire. Fire becomes a powerful image for the mechanism of mimetic contagion. Desire exceeds the boundaries of the self: it is *catching*, it spreads like fire. And the effort to separate fire, to delimit the “fire” of desire according to the strict boundaries of the self is a gesture that lays claim to a false metaphysical autonomy. This gesture always thwarts itself, and inevitably leads to the fallen world of mimetic rivalry. The fire of mimetic desire flames out against itself; the wrath it expresses is directed only towards its own perpetuation.

Rosemary Bechler, in her essay *Reading the Fire Scene in Clarissa*, argues that images of fire in the novel evoke a Christian spiritual dialectic, between “the light and the fire, the love and the wrath of God” (Bechler 141). Appealing to Christian mystics William Law and Jacob Boehme, Bechler analyzes the fire imagery in the fire scene according to a theology that posits spiritual contrarieties—good, evil, the “yes” and the “no”—in a perpetual state of struggle.[\(9\)](#) The different forms of fire reflect dialectical opposites, though each is ultimately composed of the same spiritual substance.

On Bechler’s view, Lovelace’s trick fire in the fire scene is a “fallen” fire, a fire which is separate from its divine origins. Lovelace uses fire for his own ends, negating the essential spiritual unity of all fire: “Convinced that his trick fire is real . . . he thinks that he controls it for his own ends, as he creates his own identity out of the power of his own will” (Bechler 154). Clarissa is fragmented under the influence of Lovelace’s fire; however, it does not destroy her, as Lovelace presumes it does.[\(10\)](#) Baptized in fire, she is transformed into a saint. Fragmented, penetrated by his desire (his fire), Clarissa’s own fire attains its “spiritual destiny” (Bechler 152). Repudiating the trick fires that claim spiritual autonomy, Clarissa opens herself to the penetration of divine fire.

The sources for desire are not traceable, the initial spark of sin is always situated in the space which describes a continuum between self and other. The fire of desire is essentially catching, contaminating. Acknowledging the impulse of fire (desire) towards the sacred entails a renunciation of fire that seeks to kindle itself, that

seeks to deny the presence of the mediator. Ethically speaking, this means a renunciation of pride: a renunciation of the idea that you can descend into the fallen fire of mimetic rivalry and emerge unscathed.

Clarissa's sin is indeed both inside and outside, hers and Lovelace's. Sin communicates itself through a process of mimetic contagion; *no one* instigates mimetic rivalry, though *all* are implicated. Transcending the human mediator calls for a repudiation of the notion that violence is traceable, measurable, atonable: a rejection of what Girard terms the "sacrificial economy," an ethical economy based on the false belief that violence can be priced and recompensed in form. No one is initially responsible for triggering mimetic violence, though all are penetrated by its contaminating effects. Thus forgiveness and repentance are essentially linked; they are different facets of an identical gesture of renunciation.

People imagine that to escape from violence it is sufficient to give up any kind of violent initiative, but since no one in fact thinks of himself as taking this initiative—since all violence has a mimetic character, and derives or can be thought to derive from a first violence that is always perceived as originating with the opponent—this act of renunciation is no more than a sham, and cannot bring about any kind of change at all. Violence is always perceived as being a legitimate reprisal or even self-defense. Since the violence is mimetic; and no one ever feels responsible for triggering it initially, only by an unconditional renunciation can we arrive at the desired result. (*Things Hidden* 198) Mimetic projection, as we have seen, *calculates* and *assigns* guilt; a repudiation of mimetic conflict evokes a consciousness of the *incalculability* of sin. Clarissa's offers of forgiveness are indeed undeserved; they do not gain currency from a strict economy of attack and counter-attack, offense and defense. There is no *justice* to them at all. Forgiveness turns the eye inward, discovering the traces of a contagion which implicate the self in mimetic violence; alternately, repentance casts a forgiving eye upon the rival, who cannot be held responsible for instigating a cycle of mimetic contamination.

### **Following Example**

In a footnote to Clarissa's posthumous letter to Lovelace, Richardson reminds us that she wrote the letter some time before her death. "High as her Christian spirit soars in this letter, the reader has seen, in letter 467 and in other places, that that exalted spirit carried her to still more divine elevations as she drew nearer to her end" (1425). The last bulk of Clarissa's writings are the *Meditations*, half of which never appear in the text of the novel. While Clarissa's first-person narrative falls out of the novel during her long preparation for death, the *Meditations* chronicle her redemptive journey through the complaining and recrimination of her early transcriptions, through repentance and forgiveness, and finally, to thanksgiving and

praise.

It is significant that her posthumous letter to Lovelace is written relatively early on in her redemptive journey. It undoubtedly retains a residue of the complaining spirit of resentment; soon after she completes this letter, however, she leaves off letter-writing altogether, absorbing herself instead in *Meditations on divine example*.

5

Tom Keymer argues that the *Meditations* embody Clarissa's ultimate strategy for self-justification. Like Maddox, Keymer doubts the sincerity of Clarissa's pious pose. The *Meditations*, he argues, "offer an elaborate contrived proclamation of the writer's own apotheosis" (Keymer 107). On this view, Clarissa withdraws from the epistolary context (a context of potential mimetic contamination) in order to construct a meaningful and impenetrable image of self. By appropriating the text of *Job* and absorbing it into her own experience of suffering, she creates for herself a divine image. What Keymer describes is a typical ascetic maneuver: Clarissa suppresses or denies her focus on the rival, instead constructing a complete and autonomous self, at one with her own meaning. This construction is, however contrived and false; it simply presents a veil for her continued fascination with victory over her rivals.

Keymer's argument rests on the notion that Clarissa's imitation of *Job* is *appropriative*; I would suggest that precisely the opposite is the case. Clarissa's conscious appeal to a divine mediator is literalized in her meditations; they dramatize a renunciation of pride, and an acknowledgment of the radical interiority of sin. By following the example laid out in divine scripture, Clarissa mimics *Job's* spiritual acknowledgment of the ontological dependency of the self. Her renunciation of deviated transcendence, in the form of mimetic rivalry, does not purge her from mediated desire *tout court*. She renounces one form of mediation in favour of another.

Through a renunciation of pride, the Christian elides the trap of mimetic rivalry. The lie of metaphysical autonomy no longer holds any allure, and the central role of the mediator in desire can be freely acknowledged. At the same time, the turn to a divine mediator coincides with a deep acknowledgment of the interiority of sin. The mediator is no longer a rival, a repository for projections of sin and guilt. The divine mediator presents a model for emulative imitation.

Tho' I were righteous, yet would I not answer; but I would make supplication to my judge. Tho' I were perfect, yet would I not know my soul: I would despise my life (Job ix). . . Cause me to know the way wherein I shall walk; for I lift up my soul unto thee (Ps cxliii) (*Meditations* 10) Clarissa's conscious appeal to the divine mediator

itself occurs as a following of example. Her acknowledgment of the ontological dependency of the self is spoken through another's words, mediated by the exemplary figure of Job. Clarissa's repentance does not establish her as a "perfect Christian," "at one with her own meaning." Clarissa's repentance is exemplary in that she follows example.

Lovelace's dying moment stands out in sharp relief to Clarissa's exemplary repentance. "LET THIS EXPIATE" (1488) he cries, and in his death displays a final, masochistic hubris. While Clarissa's repentance and forgiveness consciously refer to the ontological supremacy of a divine mediator, Lovelace claims status even in his repentance. Enslaved as ever to an image of himself as powerful, autonomous, and self-generating, Lovelace here lays exclusive claim to both sin and salvation. His self-sacrifice is a gesture of atonement which, ironically, asserts his ultimate power over the world of mimetic rivalry. Girard notes that such acts of self-sacrifice frequently conceal a desire "to sacralize oneself and make oneself godlike—which quite clearly harks back to the illusion traditionally produced by sacrifice" (*Things Hidden* 237). Indeed, Lovelace's dying exclamation has meaning only within a sacrificial economy, where violence can be seen to compensate for violence.

Clarissa's death is neither triumph nor sacrifice, but a final acquiescence to divine mediation. Her double gesture of repentance and forgiveness does not issue from ressentiment; it marks a step beyond projected images of rivalry. "I should mistrust my own penitence were I capable of wishing to recompense evil for evil": it is always the rival's pride which leads him/her to feel justified in recompensing evil for evil. When Clarissa renounces her secret pride, the mechanism for mimetic projection becomes inverted; sin no longer accrues solely to the Other. At the same time, the futility of all efforts towards recrimination or revenge is exposed. Repentance occurs simultaneously with a gesture of forgiveness. Both self and other retain the traces of mimetic influence. Clarissa transcends the world of ressentiment, then, by acknowledging its inevitable influence on her own desires.

Whether or not Clarissa is successful in her bid for transcendence, is not, ultimately, a question that holds any interest. The gesture towards a divine mediator for desire remains a gesture, and spiritual perfection only consists in an admission of perpetual openness to contagion or sin. The orientation of the Christian self towards the ontological vanishing point of the divine([11](#)) reflects a repudiation of mimetic conflict with a simultaneous acknowledgment of the mimetic sources for desire within the self. The purification of desire from its mimetic sources is an impossibility; the idea of perfecting desire in this way simply delivers the subject back into the lie of spontaneous desire. Clarissa's transcendence over the world of ressentiment does not launch her into a realm above, or beyond, mediated desire. But by acknowledging the deeply mimetic structure of desire, and choosing to

follow a divine mediator, she renounces mimetic rivalry.

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## Notes

1. "Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is

subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires being, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being" (*Violence and The Sacred* 146).

[\(back\)](#)

2. "For Lovelace's intense possessiveness is the erotic equivalent of existential envy: he desires not only to crush Clarissa's will but to be her, by making her a part, an adjunct of himself" (Maddox 278). [\(back\)](#)

3. Maddox explicitly aligns his reading with William Beatty Warner's. Warner writes: "By building a book, and putting her friends and adversaries in her book, she tries to establish a Godlike authority and dominion over them" (Warner 75). Clarissa's effort to secure a unitary meaning on the text, for Maddox, is a typical ascetic ploy. She attempts to rise above the essentially fluid and reflexive relationships of ressentiment, preserving for herself a pose of autonomy and imperviousness to mimetic influence. [\(back\)](#)

4. Paisley Livingston's book-length study of Girard does away with the question of religion in two sentences: "Explanations of such matters [i.e., religious phenomena] should be sought exclusively at the sociological and psychological levels of description. . . My assumption is that many of Girard's original insights into human interaction and motivation are logically separate from [his] theological claims" (Livingston 18). Such efforts to elide Girard's views on Christianity are the more ironic in light of Girard's extended critique of misrecognition in contemporary philosophy and criticism. [\(back\)](#)

5. Girard writes: "The Nietzschean mystique is both a mask for the mimetic disease and a sophisticated justification for the type of behavior it demands ("Nietzsche, Wagner, and Dostoevski" 74)." Maddox's inconsistent use of Girard's theory of mimetic desire dissolves into confusion on numerous counts. He remarks on the St Alban's proposal scene as follows: "The moment of the proposal is so interesting because Lovelace himself is shocked by it; he has been startled into uncontrived behavior. . . Shocked out of his guardedness, Lovelace for a moment expresses straightforward desire" (Maddox 283). Maddox fails to articulate the relation between "straightforward" desire and mimetic desire; this retreat into a Nietzschean framework reflects a denial of the deeper implications of Girard's theory. [\(back\)](#)

6. "Denial of God does not eliminate transcendency but diverts it from the *au-delà* to the *en-deçà* The imitation of Christ becomes the imitation of one's neighbour. The surge of pride breaks against the humanity of the mediator, and the result of

this conflict is hatred" (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* 59}. [\(back\)](#)

7. "Pride can survive only with the help of the lie, and the lie is sustained by triangular desire, The hero turns passionately toward the Other, who seems to enjoy the divine inheritance. So great is the disciples' faith that he perpetually thinks he is about to steal this marvelous secret from the mediator. . . Nothing separates him from divinity, nothing but the mediator himself" (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel* 58). [\(back\)](#)

8. "The impulse of the soul towards God is inseparable from a retreat into the self. Inversely the turning in on itself of pride is inseparable from a movement of panic towards the Other. Pride is more exterior to us than the external world" (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* 58). [\(back\)](#)

9. The points of contact between Girardian theory and William Law's reflections on desire are striking. Law writes, "If you ask what fire is in its own spiritual nature, it is merely a desire and has no other nature than that of a working desire which is constantly its own kindler. For every desire is nothing else but its own striking up or its own kindling itself into some kind and degree of fire. . . And it is to be observed that fire could have no existence or operation in material things, but because all the matter of this world has in it more or less of spiritual and heavenly properties compacted in it, which continually desire to be delivered from their material imprisonment" (Law 53). [\(back\)](#)

10. "Lovelace believes that it is his fire which tests Clarissa, as he believes that it is this which destroys her. . . The fire which indeed fragments her, which opens bodies, is also the alchemist's agent of transmutation. Lovelace's seduction is the work of the devil, but God turns defeat into victory" (Bechler 152). [\(back\)](#)

11. "Christianity directs existence toward a vanishing point, either toward God or toward the Other. Choice always involves choosing a model, and true freedom lies in the basic choice between a human or a divine model" (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* 58). [\(back\)](#)