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Clarissa: An Abridged Version (Review)

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SAMUEL RICHARDSON. *Clarissa. Or, the History of a Young Lady (An Abridged Edition)*, ed. John Richetti and Toni Bowers. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2011. Pp. 807. \$24.95.

We have long needed a new edition of *Clarissa* for undergraduates. In the introduction to his 1962 Riverside edition, George Sherburn warns readers that the heroine is “too good for human use” and that Richardson does not succeed as well as Shakespeare in portraying “convincing human traits in connection with spotless near-perfection.” Insisting that “Lovelace steals the show,” he prejudices readers against Richardson’s protagonist before they have even read her first letter. Sherburn concludes that *Clarissa* was “from the first calculated for readers of leisure; for busy people, unconcerned with the life of ideals, it has to remain, what it has always been, ‘a large still book,’” an observation unlikely to lure multitasking twenty-first-century students. His abridgment conveys the basic plot, but not the richness of the characters. Not surprisingly, I cannot recall my own emotional response to reading *Clarissa* for the first time in the Riverside edition. My inability to remember the novel’s initial effect on me stands in contrast to my subsequent experience reading Angus Ross’s unabridged *Clarissa*. Housebound for ten days in a tiny apartment during a January of record-breaking

snowfalls, I finally “experienced” *Clarissa*. My experience was so intense, however, that I have been reluctant to assign Sherburn’s abridgment to my undergraduates; I often teach *Pamela* instead.

Before opening Mr. Richetti and Ms. Bowers’s new abridgment of *Clarissa*, therefore, I was already wondering whether I would want to assign it. Picking up the Broadview paperback, I felt the heft of it and calculated how many weeks of a semester it would take my overworked commuter students to read through the 722 pages of text, plus another eighty or so pages of useful and engaging Appendices (with selections from Richardson’s correspondence and an assortment of eighteenth-century responses to the novel). It is difficult for my students to keep pace with more than about 250 pages per week; I would need to allow one fifth of a fifteen-week semester. If the abridgment would lure them into *Clarissa* and give them something of the experience of the novel’s tug of war between desire and hesitation, between collusion and resistance, I knew I would be tempted to assign it. So, I opened the book. Unlike Sherburn’s off-putting introductory observations, Mr. Richetti and Ms. Bowers immediately inform their readers that this is a “minutely detailed, complicated, and protracted unfolding of a simple, tragic plot.” Moreover, it “embodies immense psychological depths and socio-historical resonances” and is considered “the greatest work of eighteenth-century prose fiction in English.” They make clear, with compelling honesty, that Richardson “would have been unlikely to approve of this abridged edition.” Nevertheless, they explain the necessity of what they are doing and they assure their readers that the University of Pennsylvania has guaranteed a permanent link to the full-text of the third edition from which they

abridged this text. By contrast to Sherburn, who did little to help students appreciate Richardson’s protagonist, Mr. Richetti and Ms. Bowers emphasize Clarissa’s power to captivate her readers even through the protracted pages of her “long slide to death after her rape and its aftermath.” They ask us: “What are we to make of a nineteen-year old girl who dies of no apparent physiological cause, who purchases and admires her own coffin, which she has carefully designed with symbolic engravings?” Rather than suggesting that Lovelace steals the show, our editors point to the scene of Lovelace’s death when he “at last acknowledges something greater than himself.”

Mr. Richetti and Ms. Bowers explain that their aim is to retain the novel’s “rich and complex characterizations and its subtle depictions of relations among characters.” They must, of course, also include enough of the essential letters to allow readers to follow the plot. The result, if we compare their edition to Sherburn’s, is that we find many of the same letters, but more of each letter is included. We thus get more of the afterthoughts, the repetitions, the polite but insistent protests, the exclamations, and the epistolary codas that really give a sense of each character. When we reach Clarissa’s scribbled ramblings after her rape, all ten papers are included, among them the disturbing Paper X, with its type askew, which Sherburn excises. Letters to and from minor characters are often omitted in order to convey the richness of the relationships between the major characters, and this decision helps keep the abridgment faithful to the central emotional conflicts of the original novel. Readers will note certain letters that they would have included (I would have retained the full text of Clarissa’s last will and testament). However, it was easy (even for this untech-

savvy reader) to find the paragraphs I sought through the full-text link, and I will be able to direct my students to them. All letters are identified by number and volume, unlike in Sherburn's edition, and so we always know if we are proceeding to the next letter or whether we have skipped several letters that we might want to locate online.

For undergraduates, it will probably not make too much difference whether their *Clarissa* is based upon the first edition (the only option Ross had for an unabridged paperback), the third edition, or a conflation of the two (which Sherburn used), but for graduate students, the choice of abridging the third edition will introduce them to the edition that, as the editors inform them, is now usually preferred by critics (in any case, Ross's first edition is still readily available, as a Penguin classic, for those who will want to compare them). Most importantly, Mr. Richetti and Ms. Bowers's edition will enable its readers to begin to have the full experience of *Clarissa*. And, yes, reader, I will order it for next semester.

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