On the Shattered Vision and the Ruins of the Mirror (Hymen) in *Clarissa*¹)

Jaesik Chung

I.

*Clarissa* is one of the most fascinating masterpieces to explore the intriguing links between the eye (and gaze) and the hymen in the history of English literature. It impressively aestheticizes a hymen of a beautiful virgin (*Clarissa*) and elevates it to an enigmatic cypher²) through the artistic but perverted eye of a...

¹) An earlier draft of this article, entitled “On the Scream of the Virgin: The Art of Hymen and the Phallic Gaze in *Clarissa*,” was presented at the annual conference of The American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Las Vegas, April, 2005.

²) When Clarissa deplores her extremely painful situation in which she is just a passive and tempting object of Lovelace’s obscene eye, she describes herself as “a cipher,” a hermeneutical object, as follows: “[...] I am but a cypher, to give him significance, and myself pain?” (II 264). All volume and page references from Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* will be taken from *Clarissa or, The History of a Young Lady*, ed. John Butt. London: Everyman’s Library, 1965. All subsequent quotations from this volume are indicated with the following format for volume and page number. For example, (II 264)
philosophical libertine (Lovelace). Lovelace’s distorted and obscene vision persistently seeks to frame Clarissa’s hymen as his alluring object through his incessant attempts to penetrate the surface of the hymen, which is a reservoir of many layers of meanings. Clarissa’s hymen is, thus, not simply a sexualized physical organ but also the hermeneutical object on which the sacred and the obscene are perversely and deliriously intertwined in aesthetic, political and religious contexts.

Clarissa’s hymen in this novel can be likened to be a piece of white and pure paper on which many-folded meanings are inscribed by the delirious movements of Lovelace’s self-conscious and sexual pen. Furthermore, the transparent surface of the hymen works as an enigmatic mirror, which reflects, deflects, and distorts Lovelace’s wickedly fascinating visions. The hymen as a mirror is the linchpin of Lovelace’s visual writings, evoking the interiorized gaze of the self-portrait and its hallucinatory effects that throw the reader into an illusionistic space. Being engulfed in the uncanny space as constructed by Lovelace’s perverted vision is, indeed, essential to experience the heart of Clarissa, where the sacred and the obscene are vertiginously intertwined.

Here, it is interesting to note that the hallucinatory aura of Clarissa evokes the self-reflexive vision and the mirror effect of Velázquez’s Las Meninas (Maids of Honor).

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indicates volume 2 and page 264.