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Clarissa Harlowe and Her Times

If a man cuts my Purse, I may have him by the heels or by the neck for it; whereas a man may cut a woman’s purse, and have her for his pains in fetters. How brutish, and much more than brutish, is that Common-wealth, which prefers the Earth before the Fruits of her Womb? . . . We see the Gifts of God, and the Bountys of Heaven in fruitful Familys, thro this wretched custom of marrying for Mony, becom their insupportable grief and poverty. Nor falls this so heavy upon the lower sort, being better able to shift for themselves, as upon the Nobility or Gentry. . . . We are wonderful severe in Laws, that they [our children] shall not marry without our consent; as if it were care and tenderness over them: But is it not, lest we should not have the other thousand Pounds with this Son, or the other hundred Pounds a year more in Jointure with that Daughter?


CLARISSA HARIOWE seems to me one of the greatest of the unread novels. Its greatness derives in part from what it says, by implication, about society and about the relations of individuals with social institutions. But it is a paradoxical book, whose achievement is more profound than the author himself seems to have been aware. It is difficult to come to grips with the moral problems which Richardson presents unless we approach them historically, from the seventeenth century: unless we know something about Puritan attitudes towards society, marriage, and the individual conscience. But our starting point, in considering the structure of the novel, must be economic.

In a recent article, Professor Habakkuk argued that the early eighteenth century saw ‘an increasing subordination of marriage to the increase of landed wealth, at the expense of other motives for

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marriage’. ‘Political power was becoming more dependent on the possession of landed wealth’ than it had been in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when it owed more to royal favour; and so among the upper classes marriage was bent ‘more systematically to the accumulation of landed wealth’.¹ Professor Habakkuk sees this as a cumulative tendency dating from the mid-seventeenth century, the result of technical legal changes by which the father became in effect life tenant of the estate. The eldest son came to occupy a unique position of authority; and the estate, the family property, acquired greater importance than the individual owner.

The new legal devices themselves sprang from ‘profound changes . . . in the attitude to the family and to land’. These changes were related to the necessity of adapting landownership to a society in which standards of expenditure were set by those whose wealth derived from sources other than land, and in which taxation fell heavily on landowners.² They were the consequence of the political compromises of 1660 and 1688, by which the landed class had been left in possession of its property but deprived of power to check the development of capitalism. Professor Habakkuk draws especial attention to the staying power of the greater gentry, to the importance of the concentration of estates for their survival, and to marriage as a means of increasing the size of estates.³ Pamela’s Mr. B. noted that ‘We have so many of our first titled families who have allied themselves to trade (whose inducements were money only) that it ceases to be either a wonder as to the fact, or a disgrace to the honour’.⁴

The relevance of this to Clarissa Harlowe will become clear if we recall its elaborately described point of departure. The Harlowe family, Clarissa told Miss Howe, was ‘no inconsiderable or upstart one, on either side’. Its wealth had already been increased by judicious marriages. But some families ‘having great substance, cannot be satisfied without rank and title’. Among the Harlowes ‘some of us’ held ‘the darling view . . . of raising a family’. The whole family strategy was planned with this end in mind. The uncles, one enriched by the

³ Ibid., pp. 3–5; ‘Marriage Settlements’, pp. 18, 27, 29.