

‘A SUBJECT SO SHOCKING’:
THE FEMALE SEX OFFENDER IN RICHARDSON’S *CLARISSA*

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ABSTRACT

Richardson’s *Clarissa* is notable for the shocking rape of its title character, but what is often critically overlooked about the plot is the presence of female accomplices during the crime. Clarissa’s recollection of the event is confused, but she notes with horror the participation of women during her rape. In my thesis, I examine the significance of Richardson’s use of women in this role through historical and literary analysis. My thesis utilizes court records from the Old Bailey Proceedings Online to explore the existence of historical rape cases involving female accomplices to shed light on Richardson’s use of the women in the novel. I also discuss the roles erotic literature and prostitution play in creating these characters.

I contend that the novel is ultimately about gender in relationship to power. Throughout the thesis, I examine authorship and the law’s roles in creating each character’s understanding of gender and how these perceptions affect the rape of Clarissa.