



SAMUEL RICHARDSON
and the Art of
LETTER-WRITING

— Louise Curran —

SAMUEL RICHARDSON AND THE ART OF LETTER-WRITING

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LOUISE CURRAN

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SAMUEL RICHARDSON AND THE ART OF LETTER-WRITING

This fascinating study examines Samuel Richardson's letters as important works of authorial self-fashioning. It analyses the development of his epistolary style, the links between his own letter-writing practice and that of his fictional protagonists, how his correspondence is highly conscious of the spectrum of publicity, and how he constructed his letter collections to form an epistolary archive for posterity. Looking backwards to earlier epistolary traditions, and forwards to the emergence of the lives-in-letters mode of biography, the book places Richardson's correspondence in a historical continuum. It explores how the eighteenth century witnesses a transition, from a period in which an author would rarely preserve personal papers to a society in which the personal lives of writers become privileged as markers of authenticity in the expanded print market. It argues that Richardson's letters are shaped by this shifting relationship between correspondence and publicity in the mid-eighteenth century.

LOUISE CURRAN is a junior research fellow at Trinity College, Oxford. She is co-editor (with George Justice and Devoney Looser) of *Correspondence Primarily on Pamela and Clarissa*, a forthcoming volume in The Cambridge Edition of the Correspondence of Samuel Richardson. As well as articles on Richardson's correspondence, she has written on Pope's *Rape of the Lock* and Milton's reception in eighteenth-century verse miscellanies.

For Joe and Mary Curran

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Prefatory note

Quotations from Samuel Richardson's (SR) early works and *Pamela I* and *II* are taken from the relevant volumes in the new *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Samuel Richardson*, 12 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011–), cited separately in the Abbreviations list. For *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*, not yet available in this edition, I cite the first editions of 1748–1749 and 1753–1754. As for the correspondence, the volumes that are already published in the Cambridge Edition are cited: Volumes 1, 2, 3, and 10 covering SR's letters with Aaron Hill and the Hill family; George Cheyne and Thomas Edwards; Sarah Wescomb, Frances Grainger, and Laetitia Pilkington; and correspondence primarily on *Sir Charles Grandison* (1750–1754).

The remaining letters are cited from manuscripts where they exist or early printed versions where this is the only copy-text available; details of these are given in the footnotes. References to the folios of manuscript letters refer to the place from which the quotation is taken (rather than the first leaf of the letter in question). In my own transcriptions of manuscript letters, square brackets ([]) enclose editorial points unless specified (as SR was fond of using them), pointed brackets (< >) enclose SR's deletions, and interlined letters and words are enclosed within diagonals (/ /). Where a reading is conjectural I have enclosed it within square brackets preceded by a question mark. All year formats have been normalised to a year beginning on 1 January, according to the reformation of the calendar and the introduction of New Style dating in 1750.

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University; the Heinz Archive, the National Portrait Gallery; Houghton Library, Harvard University; Knowsley House, Prescott, Merseyside; McGill University, Montreal; the Morgan Library, New York; the National Art Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum; New York Public Library; Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University; and University College London. For help with access to books, letters, places, and paintings associated with the research of this book, I owe specific thanks to the following individuals: Jacqui Grainger (Chawton House Library); Chris Walne and Brian Barton (Haigh Hall and Country Park); Kirstin Waibel and Emma McCarthy (Knowsley Hall); and Yvonne Webb (Wigan Heritage Service).

Parts of Chapter 2 first appeared as "A Man Obscurely Situated": Samuel Richardson, Autobiography, and "The History of Mrs Beaumont", *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 36:2, 2013, 279–95. Part of Chapter 5 has been published as "Into Whosoever Hands Our Letters Might Fall": Samuel Richardson's Correspondence and "the Public Eye", *Eighteenth-Century Life*, vol. 35, no. 1, Winter 2011, 51–64. In both cases, the writing appears here in a revised form; nevertheless I am grateful for permission to reprint.

There would be no book without the various kinds of support that my parents and family have provided over the years. The dedication registers my debt. Thanks also need to be recorded for 'The Circuit' and 'Fram Thread'. You know who you are.

This book has been on my mind for a long period of time. It attempts to respond to some of the questions about Richardson that I first had on encountering him in print, and have explored with students since. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Fred Parker who introduced me to eighteenth-century literature in the first place and taught me the value of a mode of scepticism that is unflinching curiosity.

My last note of appreciation is for my kindest reader in so many ways: Adam Rounce.

Abbreviations

- Barbauld *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson, Author of Pamela, Clarissa and Sir Charles Grandison; selected from the Original Manuscripts bequeathed to his Family. To which are prefixed, a Biographical Account of that Author, and Observations on his Writings*, ed. Anna Lætitia Barbauld, 6 vols. (London: Richard Phillips, 1804)
- Clarissa Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa. Or, The History of a Young Lady*, 7 vols. (London: Printed for S. Richardson: 1747–8)
- CECSR *The Cambridge Edition of the Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, 12 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013—)
- Dictionary Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (London: W. Strahan, 1755)
- Eaves and Kimpel T. C. Duncan Eaves and Ben D. Kimpel, *Samuel Richardson: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971)
- EW Samuel Richardson, *Early Works*, ed. Alexander Pettit (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)
- FM Victoria and Albert Museum, London, National Art Library, Forster Collection, MSS. XI±XVI (48E5–48E10) [Samuel Richardson's correspondence]
- OED *Oxford English Dictionary*
- ODNB *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

- Pamela* I Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* [1740], ed. Albert J. Rivero (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)
- Pamela* II Samuel Richardson, *Pamela in her Exalted Condition* [1741], ed. Albert J. Rivero (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)
- Grandison* Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, 7 vols. (London: Printed for S. Richardson, 1753–4)
- SR Samuel Richardson

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Introduction

Undesigning scribbler

On 28 March 1754, Samuel Richardson received a letter. It was written, as he observed, 'in a neat pretty Female Hand'.¹ He had just finished the arduous task of completing and publishing what would be his final novel, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, and it was this event that had provoked the anonymous letter writer to address him. The missive read:

Sir,

My first wish is, that you had never commenc'd Author, my next that you will let Sir Charles Grandison's History be the last of the kind you trouble the Public with; and I do assure you, whatever some of your friends may tell you to the contrary, these are the Wishes of Numbers, besides

K. L.²

As this epistolary encounter suggests, the interaction between author and correspondent was not always felicitous. Yet despite the fact that one of Richardson's friends dismissed this letter as a 'Sawcy Billet', and its writer 'a flirting forward girl', Richardson himself professed to 'Delight' in showing it to his friends and transcribing it for their perusal, and claimed to wish it in his 'Power to thank the Lady for her Advice; and to assure her, that I will follow it, as far as I can'.³

Sent directly to the author (it was addressed 'To Mr. Samuel Richardson, in Salisbury Court, in the Strand'), rather than through his bookseller,⁴ the note demonstrates how novelists in the eighteenth-century literary marketplace had a sometimes uncomfortable relationship with their largely anonymous readership. The letter is important to Richardson both as a material artefact (a sample of female penmanship) and for the way in which it proffers literary advice and provokes debate in the kind of manner about which he enthused. It also attests to the way that letters survive, for the fact that it still exists today is because Richardson copied it out and sent it to his friend, Lady Bradshaigh. Sceptical readers might even wonder if the letter was written by a woman at all, which

prompts further questions about the opportunity for letter writers to disguise themselves and project different selves.

This anecdote concerns the writing, sending, receiving, and preserving of correspondence and raises many aspects of the letter which will be examined in this book: the relation between correspondence and publicity in the eighteenth century; the place of women in Richardson's letter-writing network (his eye for a 'neat pretty Female Hand'); the use of letters by Richardson and his correspondence network as sites of literary critical debate, promoting and sustaining discussions about his fiction and other literary output; and the way in which Richardson carefully disseminated and preserved for posterity the letters he received.

As a novelist, Richardson's reputation rests on three epistolary fictions: *Pamela* (in two parts, 1740 and 1741), *Clarissa* (1747–8), and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–4). These novels-in-letters enabled their readers, as Francis Jeffrey, in a review of the first edition of Richardson's letters, put it in 1804, to 'slip invisible, into the domestic privacy of [their] characters, and hear and see everything that is said and done'.⁵ Richardson's novels, as the seminal 'rise of the novel' theories proposed, made psychological realism a core part of this genre.⁶ The 'major advantage' of the epistolary style in Ian Watt's reading was that letters 'are the most direct material evidence for the inner life of their writers that exist'.⁷ On the title pages of each of his novels, Richardson identified himself as the 'Editor' of his works not the author; thus his protagonists write his or her own stories, inviting their readers to enter into the privacy of their closets and the immediacy of their thoughts.

The eighteenth century has been identified as the great age of letter-writing, in terms of the number of letters that were written and printed, and the perceived mastery of proponents of the familiar style. In an age defined by its emphasis on sociability, it was the pre-eminent written art of converse: 'we shall receive no letters in the grave' as Johnson once intriguingly remarked.⁸ The creation of a marketplace for letters posed many new predicaments for authors in the eighteenth century, changing the traditional way in which letters had explored and presented authorial identity. Before the eighteenth century, the publication of letters by an author in their lifetime had limited precedent. Cicero, Pliny the Younger, Petrarch, Erasmus, Spenser, and Milton all published from their correspondence in their lifetime. Spenser's letters with Gabriel Harvey, published in two parts in 1580, were, as Judith Rice Henderson has summarised, 'essentially designed to draw attention to the London

literary life in which Spenser was then involved and to publish Harvey's poetic and academic compositions [...] they are consciously self-promoting'.⁹ Milton's publication of personal correspondence (rather than his *Letters of State*, which remained in manuscript form only) during the years of restored monarchy, as *Epistolae Familiares* (1674), demonstrated one way of using letters to address the subject of posthumous reputation.¹⁰

The eighteenth century witnessed a shift whereby letters were increasingly used to construct authorial identity in an author's lifetime, as well as after his or her death. This development was influenced by many cultural factors. During the century, the letter underwent a technological revolution with the establishment of the Post Office at the same time as there were formal shifts in fashion, from the courtly, 'precious' style associated with the seventeenth-century French authors, Vincent Voiture and Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac, to a more simple, 'easy' style, derived from the humanist tradition and characterised (after Seneca's expression) as 'talking on paper'.¹¹ Authors in this period increasingly read, wrote, dictated, transcribed (or had copied by an amanuensis), organised, and published letters (in manuscript and print) and considered this form from many different and intersecting viewpoints, including the ethical, literary, legal, and social.

Despite many eulogies to the letter in this period, the dubious nature of this kind of self-authorship did not go unnoticed. Samuel Johnson in his 'Life of Pope' famously argued that there is 'no transaction which offers stronger temptations to fallacy and sophistication than epistolary intercourse', for 'surely no man sits down to depreciate by design his own character'.¹² Alexander Pope was one of the first English writers to publish his correspondence in his lifetime to a 'substantial degree', and remains, in Howard Erskine-Hill's assessment, 'among the greatest, as well as among the earliest, of literary letter writers in English'.¹³ Arguments about the publication of his letters in the early eighteenth century led to the consideration of the legal property of letters (and by implication their literary merit) in the case of *Pope vs Curll* in 1741, the first and still most influential test case regarding letters and copyright, following the enactment of the world's first copyright law in Britain, the Statute of Anne (1710). These legal debates had an important influence on writers of the following generation, including Richardson, and are worth considering in further detail in order to provide a background against which to situate many of the concerns of this book.

Epistolary fame: letters, commercial value, and literary merit

Pope's choice to include his familiar letters in the authorised edition of his *Works* in prose after 1737 indicate that letter-writing had emerged as a distinct literary form. As Wendy L. Jones has pointed out, 'The same sensitivity to the subtle nuances of feeling, taste and opinion which contributed to make him the foremost poet of the early eighteenth century is no less significant in Pope's choice of the familiar letter as a vehicle of expression.'¹⁴ Pope associated his correspondence with the classical and humanist tradition of letter-writing: an art form that eschewed the restrictions of scholasticism and reflected easiness and *sprezzatura*. Despite the studious effortlessness of his letters – they 'should only be a Memorandum at Seasonable Intervals, between Friend & Friend' he wrote¹⁵ – Pope's letters were not destined to remain in manuscript. In 1730 Jonathan Swift wrote to his friend and fellow Scriblerian on the subject of the intent behind writing letters:

I find that you have been a writer of Letters almost from your infancy, and by your own confession had Schemes even then of Epistolary fame. Montaigne says that if he could have excelled in any kind of writing, it would have been in Letters; but I doubt they would not have been natural, for it is plain that all Pliny's Letters were written with a view of publishing, and I accuse Voiture himself of the same crime, although he be an author I am fond of.¹⁶

Just as Pope had presented himself in verse as having 'lisp'd in numbers',¹⁷ so Swift sees in his friend a precocious talent for the genre of letter-writing. Yet he also teasingly disavowed Pope's association of letters with familiarity by suggesting that the greatest letter writers of the classical and more recent French tradition wrote for publication and epistolary fame first, and employed the discourse of familiar 'talking on paper' as a way of obscuring their commercial aim.

The narrative of Pope's publication of his letters is an intricate one, and in certain respects remains obscure to this day. In recent years scholarly research has elucidated the complex events surrounding the publication of Pope's letters from the appearance in print in 1726 of Pope's youthful letters to the translator and poet Henry Cromwell in two volumes at the hands of the piratical publisher Edmund Curll, to the authorised edition of correspondence in 1737, and finally the *Letters of Pope and Swift* in 1741.¹⁸ Pope's letters highlighted the growing commercial market for letters of famous men and women, the interplay of printed material with the distribution of manuscripts in coterie groups, and debates about what