

*Correspondence**Louise Curran*

Lovelace famously eulogises familiar letter-writing in *Clarissa* as ‘writing from the heart’ because of the etymology of the word ‘*Cor-respondence*’ (the Latin for ‘heart’ being *cor*).¹ His assertion is, like much else in Lovelace’s character, persuasive yet erroneous, based as it is on a false derivation. Richardson added these words to later editions of the novel and they serve to emphasise the duplicitousness of this ‘notoriously brilliant epistolary deceiver’.² Richardson was always on guard against those he termed ‘designing’ letter-writers, yet Lovelace’s opinion that letters record ‘friendship given under hand and seal’ echoes Richardson’s description of the art of correspondence in idealised terms as ‘friendship avowed under hand and seal ... more pure, yet more ardent, and less broken in upon, than personal conversation’ (Richardson to Sarah Wescomb, 27 August 1746).

Samuel Richardson was, even by the standards of a period known as a golden age for letter-writing, an indefatigable correspondent. Today, Richardson’s extant correspondence archive consists of some 1,700 letters, of which 600 or so are by the author.³ Though he professed there to be a powerful connection between epistolary writing and true character – he writes that ‘styles differ ... as much as faces, and are indicative, generally beyond the power of disguise, of the mind of the writer!’ (Richardson to Sarah Wescomb, 27 August 1746) – throughout his letters, Richardson and his correspondents debate the limits of sympathetic response and testify to the way that epistolary writing explores and shapes personal and social identity.

Writing and Receiving Letters

Richardson’s correspondence has long been viewed as narrow in scope compared with that of other letter-writing contemporaries, such as Horace Walpole or Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Recently, however, critics have become increasingly interested both in the particular kind of

correspondence that Richardson's literary celebrity invited and in the way letters supported his role as an important book-trade professional. Some of Richardson's earliest correspondences were with the renowned physician George Cheyne and the playwright, poet, and critic Aaron Hill (as well as Hill's family more generally, particularly his daughter, the writer Urania Johnson); other letters were exchanged with significant people in the literary and artistic milieu of his day, including Thomas Birch, Colley Cibber, Patrick and Mary Delany, Henry and Sarah Fielding, Samuel Johnson, Charlotte Lennox, Thomas and Frances Sheridan, and William Warburton. Richardson's longest correspondence was with Dorothy, Lady Bradshaigh (of Haigh Hall in Wigan), an enthusiastic reader of his novels, as well as a spirited writer, who became a close confidante and adviser. Lady Bradshaigh's sister, Lady Echlin, also became an intimate correspondent of the author's and sent him an alternative ending to *Clarissa* in which the rape does not take place and Lovelace is converted before his death. As well as these correspondences with individuals and groups of friends, he also wrote and received letters on his novels, *Pamela* and *Clarissa* (mostly during the period 1732–49), and *Sir Charles Grandison* (particularly during the years 1750–4).

Like many writers of his time, Richardson generally differentiated between the letters he wrote to women and those he wrote to men. In letters to young women, such as Hester Mulso (later Chapone) and Susanna Highmore (daughter of the painter Joseph), he is their 'Papa'. Whereas the tone of these letters is often an uneasy mixture of encouragement against diffidence and straightforward patronisation, in other letters, as in those to the respected authors Sarah Chapone and Elizabeth Carter, Richardson's esteem of female learning is more apparent. His letters to men, such as the poet Edward Young and the writer and lawyer Thomas Edwards, tend to focus on the question of what constitutes a moral man and artist, and frequently involve debates about authors such as John Milton and Alexander Pope. Rehearsing the merits of a 'good' man, Richardson and Edwards and Young test ideas surrounding writing and ethical practice as well as literary posterity.

Inevitably, letters appear to have been lost along the way, including many from the 1730s, the period before Richardson became famous as an author and began to preserve his correspondence more methodically. Evidence that Richardson sought widely for additional correspondents and was not always gratified with responses gives an indication of his epistolary aspiration. He attempted a correspondence with Louise D'Épinay, the writer and friend of Voltaire and Diderot, though no letters survive

between them. He also lamented that his request for correspondence with the Revd Mark Hildesley was not answered, at least initially: 'A Slight from a good Man', he wrote sadly, 'must be a little (*not* a little) mortifying' (Richardson to Lady Echlin, 17 May 1754). Equally, though he listed a 'D. of P.' in a list he made of thirty-six cherished female correspondents, the duchess of Portland, Lady Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, was never an enthusiastic fan of the writer.⁴ The list seems to have been more an ideal representation of Richardson's networks than a strictly representative one, as the controversial memoirist Laetitia Pilkington was omitted completely, despite their notable exchange of letters.

Richardson's correspondence was the site for much discussion of the composition, development, distribution, and influence of his novels. Though there is much truth in the portrait of Richardson as a correspondent who presided over his networks attempting to control and enforce a correct reading of his novels, his correspondence attests, also, to his enjoyment of conflicting interpretations. When he received two letters objecting to *Clarissa's* primness on the one hand and coquetry on the other, he dealt with the situation by sending each correspondent the other's letter (Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, February 1751). Just as Richardson's novels are concerned with the power of letters both to transform and to deceive, his own personal letters demonstrate a deep and abiding interest in the nature of private and public character, as well as the relationship between actual and future readers.

Richardson thought there was 'no amusement equal to an improving and an agreeable correspondence' (Lady Bradshaigh to Richardson, 28 January 1750). Though he enjoyed raillery and in-jokes with his correspondents he could also be combative and relished debate. He admitted as much to one young friend, Frances Grainger, when he promised her that he would 'never flatter' his correspondents but instead would 'always tell them freely of their Faults' and hoped that they would do likewise with him (Richardson to Frances Grainger, 5 December 1749). His correspondence with Hester Mulso about the limits of parental authority in the first instalment of *Clarissa* is a well-known case in point. It was widely circulated at the time of writing (1750–1) and later printed posthumously as *Letters on Filial Obedience and a Matrimonial Creed* (1807); Richardson referred to it uncertainly as both a 'Controversy' and a 'Debate' (to Sarah Wescomb, 1 February 1751). In the absence of much of Richardson's side of the argument (unfortunately lost), we might wonder if the correspondence was much more of a deeply involved dialogic exchange than the printed version suggests.

Richardson proselytised continually about the ethical power of correspondence. When he was a young boy he wrote in the disguise of an older man to a woman known for ‘continually fomenting Quarrels and Disturbances’, quoting ‘Scripture Texts that made against her’ (Richardson to Johannes Stinstra, 2 June 1753) in order to reform her character. He depicts Clarissa as doing likewise when she impersonates ‘an anonymous elderly lady’ in a letter urging Lady Drayton, the mother of a friend, to be less severe with her children (C, II.xiii.74). When Frances Grainger commented approvingly about this moment in *Clarissa* to its author, he encouraged her to take ‘the Hint ... and write to such Mothers’ for ‘You cannot know, till you try, whether your Arguments will *harden*, or *convince* them’ (Richardson to Frances Grainger, 28 February 1750).

Harriet Guest has written that letters are used in *Sir Charles Grandison* as ‘social currency’.⁵ In a similar way, Richardson’s real-life correspondence often mentions the value of the letters in such a manner as to imply a correlation between the length of a letter and its worth. Sarah Wescomb wished that every one of Richardson’s letters would ‘exceed the other in length’ and thus ‘make them more & more Valuable’, a thought that Richardson as recipient of this letter made literal when he annotated it with the note that it contained ‘775 words/62 lines’ (Sarah Wescomb to Richardson, 5 March 1757). In order to deal with the overwhelming length of some of the letters between Lady Bradshaigh and himself, Richardson even suggested they number their paragraphs ‘that we may the better refer to them, and the easier see what each omits answering to’ (to Lady Bradshaigh, 9 July 1754). Lady Bradshaigh refused this invitation, writing that it had ‘the resemblance of slavery’ (to Richardson, 20 July–6 August 1754). Such material obsessiveness reflects the all-consuming nature of the act of writing letters for Richardson, whereby ‘the pen is jealous of company’, engrosses ‘the writer’s whole self’, ‘disdains company; and will have the entire attention’ (Richardson to Sarah Wescomb, 27 August 1746).

Editing and Organising Letters

The life of letters went far beyond their ephemeral moment of composition. As well as sharing some of his exchanges with Hester Mulso, Richardson also showed his correspondence with Lady Bradshaigh (the early portion of it in which she hid her identity) to several of his ‘select friends’ (Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, 20 November 1752). He also frequently recycled parts of his correspondence for authorial purposes.

Richardson's letter of 8 September 1750 to Frances Grainger exists in two manuscript versions today. One is an autograph retained copy and one a heavily edited draft that, as John Dussinger discovered, is the basis for Richardson's only contribution to Samuel Johnson's *Rambler*.⁶ On occasion, the way in which Richardson mined his letters for fictional purposes alarmed those involved. Lady Bradshaigh was mortified when she read aloud a section of *Sir Charles Grandison* to two elderly auditors only to discover that Richardson had taken details from her own letters about one of these women to furnish his novel (Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, 4 January 1754). Additionally, the pamphlets he later produced in response to critiques of his novels, such as his *Answer to the Letter of a Very Reverend Worthy Gentleman, Objecting to the Warmth of a Particular Scene in ... 'Clarissa'* (1749) or his *Copy of a Letter to a Lady, who Was Solicitous for an Additional Volume to ... 'Sir Charles Grandison'* (1754), reprinted actual responses to letters he had received.

The archive of Richardson's correspondence, mostly contained in the Forster Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, but also scattered in libraries across the UK and North America and elsewhere, attests to an abiding interest in organising his letter collections in such a way as both to memorialise friendship and to fashion the self for posterity. Letters were carefully preserved, copied by several different amanuenses, annotated and edited, and arranged in various collections of letter-books. All of Richardson's main characters cautiously contain, shape, and control their epistolary archives, and their author was no different. Richardson thought that his own letters were 'worthy of the public Eye', yet preparing his correspondence for possible public readership raised difficult questions about the uncontrollable nature of such publicity.

Richardson mentioned his intention to revise his letter collections in 1755 by 'looking over, & sorting, & classing ... Correspondencies and other Papers' (to Thomas Edwards, 27 January 1755). It was probably somewhere around this time that he made an index to his correspondence with Edwards, as well as to those collections relating to each of his three novels. There is evidence, too, that Richardson considered publishing his correspondence with Elizabeth Carter in some form: in the letters that were in his possession he changed her name throughout to 'Carteret', and also replaced other names with initials and made some stylistic changes (see, for example, Richardson to Elizabeth Carter, 12 June 1753). When a correspondence with an attorney of Warwick called Eusebius Silvester (who contacted the author after reading *Sir Charles Grandison*) ended in animosity, Richardson set about editing it to such an extent that Tom Keymer has

described it as having 'some claims to be considered as Richardson's last significant literary work'.⁷

In 1757 Richardson was contacted by an acquaintance, Philipp Erasmus Reich, a bookseller in Leipzig, who suggested that the novelist publish a selection of his letters in Germany (Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, 2 January 1758). Richardson discussed the proposal with Lady Bradshaigh and they subsequently set about editing their letters. Copies of letters that had been arranged into 'bound Books' were submitted to Lady Bradshaigh's 'revising Eye' in the hope that a 'Critique' of *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison* would be 'extracted *anonymously*' (Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, 19 November 1757). All along Richardson was vexed about epistolary propriety on the one hand (Reich was understandably confused that Richardson would agree to publish from his collections only if his correspondents formally requested of him that their letters appear in print) and, on the other hand, frustrated by his correspondents' double standards: the same people who displayed 'prudishness' at Reich's suggestion 'would be glad to see a Volume or two of any Body's Letters but their own' (Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, 11 February 1758).

Richardson divided up his correspondence in such a way as to suggest that he had a spectrum of publicity in mind, both at the time of writing his letters and afterwards as he organised them, as he refers to unbound 'private Correspondence', bound correspondence of a 'more Private and intimate Nature', and letters that were more obviously suitable for 'the public Eye' (Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, 28 February 1758). Not all those informed of Reich's proposal greeted it with Lady Bradshaigh's enthusiasm. Sarah Scudamore (formerly Wescomb) was more circumspect, writing to the author, in words that must have alarmed his sense of decorum, that she declined 'the least desire of having them made known, as it might be mistaken for vanity' (to Richardson, 15 April 1758). In the end, the plan for publication during Richardson's lifetime did not come to fruition.

Publishing Letters: Reception and Legacy

When Richardson's correspondence finally came to be published in any kind of comprehensive form for the first time in Anna Laetitia Barbauld's six-volume *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson* (1804), its reception was lacklustre. Not all commentators were as forceful in their assessments as Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review*, yet his final judgment was influential: 'they consist almost entirely of compliments and minute criticisms on his novels ... and some tedious prattling disputations with his female

correspondents'.⁸ The next edition of the correspondence fared little better. John Carroll's 1964 selection contains only 128 letters and solely ones that Richardson wrote, none that he received. Under such circumstances it was little wonder that Robert Halsband opined that they offered primarily a 'critical commentary' or 'an authorial gloss' with little 'personal history' and even less 'social, political, or literary history'.⁹

Not all critics read Richardson's letters in this limited way. Rachel Trickett thought Carroll's edition undersold the letters' significance, for they revealed, in her opinion, 'the intense conviction, the deep absorption in his own imaginings' that produced 'the finest tragic novel in English'.¹⁰ In the same year as Carroll's edition was published, Claude Rawson suggested a more complex legacy for Richardson's correspondence when he compared the verbal play on the word 'sentimental' in Austen's *Northanger Abbey* with a letter from Lady Bradshaigh to Richardson about the fashionable use of the term.¹¹

Recent academic studies on eighteenth-century epistolary culture in general and Richardson's letter-writing practice in particular afford a new opportunity to reassess the links between Richardson's letters and his fiction, as well as understand the author more fully as a major networker in the print marketplace of his day.¹² Richardson's arrangement of his letters by correspondents and novels, and the indexes that survive, suggest that he envisaged that the letters would be read thematically rather than chronologically, just as Alexander Pope had arranged his *Letters* (1737) by correspondent in order to reflect the importance of classical ideas of friendship. In following Richardson's original organisation by particular persons and works, the editors of *The Cambridge Edition of the Correspondence of Samuel Richardson* (2013–) accentuate the way in which the writer's archive is not just a repository of biographical facts but also a record of his own acts of self-fashioning.

To date, much writing about Richardson's correspondence has tended to extrapolate broad interpretations from Barbauld's highly edited, if not always bowdlerised, corpus. Critics are now beginning to appreciate hitherto neglected areas of the author's epistolary collections: the varied tone of Richardson's letter-writing style both within the same letter and in letters to different friends, as well as the importance of the material aspect of his correspondence. So, for example, a facet of these letters rarely explored is the way in which they often function as part of wider manuscript exchange. Carefully preserved among Richardson's papers in the Forster Collection is a bound volume of manuscript poems, with signs of detailed arrangement and pagination, most of which were originally sent

enclosed in letters. The Richardson–Edwards letters gave rise to an extensive exchange of poems, often experiments in sonnet form, by poets such as Martha Ferrar, Hester Mulso, and Susanna Highmore.

Lady Bradshaigh gave Martha Richardson her letters from Martha's recently deceased father in 1762 because the family had 'a right to them' and because she was assured that they would be used only 'for private amusement according to his order'. The manuscript of this note was later endorsed (in an unknown hand) with the words: 'This is a Letter of great consequence' (Lady Bradshaigh to Martha Richardson, 29 April 1762). Now that Richardson's correspondence is finally being systematically edited, scholars are beginning to work out the implication of these words for his entire epistolary archive.

Notes

- 1 Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*, 3rd edn, 8 vols. (London, 1751), iv.xi.77.
- 2 Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters* (Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 87.
- 3 A much larger number of letters must have been lost, including all of the correspondence from Richardson's earlier years; the first extant letter is from 1732.
- 4 Eaves and Kimpel, *Biography*, p. 186.
- 5 Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750–1810* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 109.
- 6 John A. Dussinger, 'Samuel Richardson's Manuscript Draft of *The Rambler* No. 97 (19 February 1751)', *Notes and Queries*, 57.1 (2010), 93–9.
- 7 Keymer, *Richardson's 'Clarissa'*, p. 34.
- 8 Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 5 (October 1804), 23–44 (pp. 33–4).
- 9 Robert Halsband, 'A World of His Own', *New York Times Book Review* (4 April 1965), 18.
- 10 Rachel Trickett, 'Review of Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson', *Review of English Studies*, 17 (1966), 323–6 (p. 326).
- 11 Claude Rawson, '"Nice" and "Sentimental": A Parallel between *Northanger Abbey* and Richardson's *Correspondence*', *Notes and Queries*, 209 (1964), 108.
- 12 See for example Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Betty A. Schellenberg, 'Introduction', in Betty A. Schellenberg (ed.), *Correspondence Primarily on 'Sir Charles Grandison'*, in *CECSR*, Vol. x, pp. xxxv–xlvi; and Louise Curran, *Samuel Richardson and the Art of Letter-Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

