# The Private Letters of Samuel Richardson: An Insight into The History of Clarissa

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**Abstract**

This article begins with a look at the culture of epistolarity in Eighteenth-century England, providing first an overview of the growing diffusion of letter writing in the most various contexts. In particular, the private letter – the so-called *familiar letter* – became a favoured means to overcome material and psychological distances, proving to be capable of crossing even social and cultural barriers. The deep meaning and the widespread influence of this written mode of communication are emblematically embodied in the literary life of Samuel Richardson. As a novelist, Richardson expanded the dramatic possibilities of the narrative genre by his innovative use of the letter form. Moreover, he famously conducted an intense correspondence with his readers, establishing an epistolary network which accompanied the long and complex gestation of his masterpiece, *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady*. The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which Richardson's private correspondence configures itself as a critical metadiscourse, which is able to offer a penetrating insight into the history of *Clarissa*.

**Keywords:** Eighteenth-century culture, Familiar letter, Samuel Richardson, Correspondence, Clarissa.

## Introduction: The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century

The growing diffusion of letter writing in Eighteenth-Century England is a phenomenon widely investigated by critics, to the point that the letter has been considered as the symbolic form of the age of Enlightenment: used for every kind of writing, from scientific treatises to manuals of behaviour, from political essays to novels, from periodicals to private correspondence (Altman, 1982). In particular, the private letter, the so-called *familiar letter*, became the favoured means of overcoming the distances of space and time in order to create the effect of presence and intimacy even in the absence of an

interlocutor. Thus, epistolary communication simulates, on the level of writing, the practice and effects of a conversation between family members or between friends; and it spreads to the point of becoming a social practice, capable of crossing even economic and cultural barriers (Anderson, Daghlian, & Ehrenpreis, 1968).

A significant example of this phenomenon is represented by the periodical press, which right from the beginning of the Eighteenth Century promotes the publication of a dense network of private letters, through which single individuals are involved in a sort of collective communication. It is enough to think of the pioneering enterprise carried out by Daniel Defoe in the *Review* with the invention of the *Scandalous Club*, deliberately addressed to "curious readers", which provided a special column dedicated to an epistolary exchange between Mr. Review and his correspondents. Besides, shortly afterwards, the ingenious expedient was to be adopted and perfected by Steele and Addison, first in *The Tatler* and then in *The Spectator* (Downie & Corns, 1993).

Thus, the familiar letter became an object of interest and curiosity to the public in such a way that this form of writing was deliberately conceived and cleverly inserted in a fictional context. "It has become indeed so common a practice among authors to feign a correspondency and give the title of a *private letter* to a piece addressed solely to the public", Shaftesbury remarked in 1711 (Shaftesbury, 1999, p. 347). Moreover, one of Shaftesbury's most influential essays appears in the form of *A Letter to a Friend*, so that the philosopher's reflections assume a dialogical dimension, which is typical of a conversation between friends (Shaftesbury, 1999, pp. 29-69).

In the light of the above, it might be worthwhile to read again some penetrating pages of Gadamer on the primary role of "conversation" and "dialogue" in the process of human understanding, and therefore on the derivation of the epistolary form from the basic structure of question and answer (Gadamer, 2004). In this perspective, the letter can be considered as a written transposition of the dialogical process, which is connoted for its capacity to amplify and fix the distance between two constitutive moments of a relationship, so as to offer the interlocutor a suitable space in which to be received, or rather a predetermined time for reflection. Consequently, then, epistolary writing can be qualified as a sort of in-depth dialogue, meditated and pondered in the prospect of an illuminating distancing, capable of objectifying and unravelling not only the problematic knots of the questions involved, but also the emotional states that are normally associated with them (Earle, 1999).

For all these reasons, as already pointed out, the letter asserts itself as the symbolic form of the British Enlightenment. For its particular flexibility, for its availability to receive every kind of content, for the conversational

freedom it offers, the *familiar letter* occupies the space of an undefined liminality, mediating between the private dimension and the public sphere, between truth and fiction, between domesticity and the market environment (Brant, 2006; McKeon, 2005).

**The Familiar Letters of Samuel Richardson**

This characteristic mediation between private and public, between reality and fiction is emblematically embodied in the literary life and career of Samuel Richardson. Typographer, printer, publisher, editor, author of epistolary novels, Richardson covers all the typical roles and stages that make up the process of letter writing (Eaves & Kimpel, 1971). Appreciated as an innovator of language in its grammatical and lexical aspects, he is quoted several times in the famous *Dictionary of the English Language* of Samuel Johnson (1755), who recognized him as a "word-maker" and admired his capacity to express feelings effectively in his writing (Eaves & Kimpel, 1971, p. 338).

The figure of Samuel Richardson should also be understood in the light of his socio-cultural condition. As a printer by profession and a member of the middle class, he did not have a classical education. In his letters, he defines himself as a business man, with all the duties and limits of this condition. Nevertheless, his role as an author brings him into contact with people of the upper class society: thus, when writing to ladies of the aristocracy, he often makes a point of asking for advice on appropriate expressions concerning an upper class environment. In other words, Richardson represents an interesting case of the *outsider*, capable of mediating and transmitting innovative linguistic forms and styles (Montini, 2009, pp. 21-22).

Among the most surprising innovations, we cannot avoid mentioning the extremely vivacious network of communication that he established with the readers of his novels. In other words, Richardson was the creator and promoter of what we would today define as *forum* and opinion groups, involved in discussing and influencing the authorial decisions regarding the development of the plot and the destiny of the characters. But this kind of private/public conversation, for the author of *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, came about in the form of *familiar letters*.

Thus, together with the complex elaboration of his novels – especially the last two, *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison* – Richardson began an intense exchange of letters with a large number of correspondents, all belonging to the intellectual middle and upper class, and among them many young women. On his death in 1761, he had accumulated an incredible quantity of letters concerning, above all, the composition, revision, publication and interpretation of his narrative works. Indeed, of the three novels written by the author, *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady* (1747-48) stands out

as the most important thematic hub of this extraordinary correspondence, both from the quantitative point of view and for the biographical and critical interest of the subjects dealt with (Keymer, 1992). Here is a significant example, which shows the effectiveness with which a *private letter* can transform a personal, or even intimate dimension into a matter of public importance:

> Sir, my nervous infirmities you know – time mends them not – and *Clarissa* has almost killed me. You know how my business engages me. You know by what snatches of time I write, that I may not neglect that, and that I may preserve that independency which is the comfort of my life. I never sought out of myself for patrons. My own industry, and God's providence, have been my whole reliance. The great are not great to me, unless they are good. And it is a glorious privilege, that a middling man enjoys who has preserved his independency, and can occasionally (though not Stoically) tell the world, what he thinks of that world, in hopes to contribute, though but by his mite, to mend it. (Carroll, 1964, pp. 174-175).

These words were written by Samuel Richardson on 21 January 1751 in a letter addressed to the French translator, Jean Baptiste de Freval, to whom, by the way, the imminent publication of the extended third edition of *Clarissa* was announced. This is little more than an extract from one of the richest and most representative collections of letters throughout the Eighteenth Century. The passage quoted above would suffice to testify the importance of the motives which appear in these *familiar letters*, all the more surprising for the conversational style that allows a natural transition from the home environment to the public sphere. Besides, the dignity exhibited by the author in affirming his economic independence, based on tireless working activity (which he defines "business"), calls to mind the famous letter that Samuel Johnson addressed to Lord Chesterfield in February 1755: a letter which the author of the *Dictionary* was shortly to make public and which was to take on the emblematic value of the manifesto of the modern intellectual.

At this point, it seems opportune to offer a brief reconstruction of the complex editorial affair which led to establishing the canon of Richardson's letters. Indeed the first and fundamental collection of the novelist's private correspondence is due to the writer, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, who in 1804 published *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*: the work, in six volumes, contains about 400 letters, a third of which was written by the author of *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. However, no matter how remarkable and praiseworthy Barbauld's achievement was, her work does not seem to be faultless, especially if judged in the light of the modern criteria of philological restitution. Barbauld shortens the texts arbitrarily, omitting dates or transcribing them wrongly; she attributes letters to different correspondents from the original ones, modifies

spelling and punctuation, and summarizes several letters in one without ever pointing out the changes she has made (Montini, 2009, p. 25).

Further collections which followed in the Twentieth Century are doubtlessly less rich than the preceding one; but the edition that constituted an unavoidable reference in Richardson's bibliography is the one edited by John Carroll (1964), which presents 128 letters in a chronological order, all signed by the author, scrupulously edited on the basis of manuscript sources. This choice coincides only in part with Barbauld's letters, favouring, in the immense amount of material available, the documents mainly dealing with literary matters. But in particular, *Clarissa*, the lengthy epistolary novel that Barbauld had already recognized as Richardson's undisputed masterpiece, is also the central point around which the most significant part of the author's correspondence revolves (Ross, 1985). The letters in question, then, cover a period of time from 1744 to 1757: that is, from the testimony of the first missives concerning the writing of the novel – the first two volumes came out in December 1747 – to the entire following decade.

**Letters concerning *Clarissa***

Indeed, it is the complex gestation of *Clarissa* that induces Richardson to start an intense network of epistolary exchanges with various correspondents, among which are not only friends, men of letters, critics, and translators, but also, and above all, ladies and affectionate female readers. With his intense work of writing in full flow, the author submits to this numerous and composite group of interlocutors the parts of the novel as he writes them. In his letters, he asks for suggestions and corrections; he anticipates and discusses his narrative solutions and enters into the merits of the motivations animating his characters. But above all, Richardson is concerned about the proportions that his work is taking on, as revealed by the insistent request to some of his correspondents in order to make the necessary cuts. Here is what the author says in a letter of 1744:

And I have run into such a length! – And am such a sorry pruner, though greatly luxuriant, that I am apt to add three pages for one I take away! Altogether I am frequently out of conceit with it. Then I have nobody that I can presume to advise with on such a subject. – But last week, indeed, I took the liberty to send the beginning of it to my indulgent friend, Mr. Hill, whose sincerity I cannot doubt; but whose favour to me makes him so partial, that, if he approve, I shall not be without my diffidences. But if he prunes it, as I have requested he will, without mercy, then perhaps shall I have the courage to proceed with more alacrity. (Carroll, 1964, p. 61).

In actual fact, the length of the work, evident from the initial phases of its elaboration, is not extrinsic to the nature of *Clarissa*, nor is it simply ascribable to the author's temperament, that is, to the detailed way of

proceeding which characterizes his writing. On the contrary, as underlined by Angus Ross (1985), the material extension of the novel is an integral part of its complex capacity of meaning and of its expressive force. However, what is important to emphasize above all, in this context, is the fact that Richardson became more aware of what he was creating – of the innovative originality of his narrative technique – precisely through the laborious process of metawriting that is carried out in the pages of his private correspondence. Scanning his letters in their chronological order, it is possible to grasp, in the varied repetition of recurring themes, the progressive configuration of a plan which is also the development of the author's consciousness (Bray, 2003). In particular, the author appears more capable of using a specific kind of writing, being fully aware of its intrinsic complexity. Indeed, the most evident difficulty, arising from the modality of "writing to the moment", as the author of *Clarissa* acknowledges, consists of indulging in a certain prolixity of style. This is what Richardson declares in a letter of 13 August 1756, replying to the criticisms of Smollett and inviting his rival novelist to undertake this type of epistolary narrative (Carroll, 1964, p. 328).

With this in mind, it is worth rereading the wide and articulate reconstruction of Richardson's life "with remarks on his writings", which Anna Barbauld feels the need to put forward, before presenting her collection of letters of 1804 (Barbauld, 1804, p. vii). In truth, much more than a biographical essay is contained in this *Life of Samuel Richardson* where the female scholar, with profound critical intuition, collates the main narrative modalities that characterized the origins of the *novel* (Barbauld, 1804, pp. vii-ccxii). Thus she compares Richardson's epistolary writing with the homodiegetic narrator of Smollett's *Roderick Random* and, on the other hand, with the epic form theorized by Fielding and the omniscient narrator of *Tom Jones*. The conclusion that Barbauld draws is that the method of "epistolary correspondence", as she calls it, can truly represent a valid mediation for the development of the realistic novel, inasmuch as it includes within itself the positive aspects of the two alternative forms. Moreover, noteworthy is the fact of having focused attention on the comparison between Richardson and Fielding, the crux of the critical debate on the novel until today (McKeon, 1987). Besides, it is no coincidence that Barbauld devotes particular attention to the fundamental question of narrative time – a question which emerges with much concerned insistence from Richardson's letters. If Fielding's narrator can allow himself to be either concise or lengthy, according to the needs of the story being developed, the epistolary form, on the other hand, is not compatible with the speed of the style (Barbauld, 1804, p. xxvi). Moreover, the accurate control of the connection between chronological time and narrative time, as every novelist knows, is of essential importance in achieving the effect of reality. All the more, then, the author of *Clarissa* must question himself on the material time allowed for the

epistolary interaction between his characters, in order to make their intense letter exchange credible. Writing to his friend, Hill, in a letter of 20 January 1745, Richardson puts it in these terms:

> Length is my principal disgust, at present. Yet I have shorten'd much more than I have lengthen'd; altho' it will not appear so by this first parcel; having taken in a month in time. The fixing of dates has been a task to me. I am afraid I make the writers do too much in the time. If lazy ladies, that is to say, ladies who love not writing, were to be judges, they would think so: especially if not early risers. (Carroll, 1964, p. 63).

It is also interesting to observe how, starting with the fact that the work is excessively lengthy, the author comes to affirm the character of innovative originality of his writing, albeit keeping to the usual modesty topos. Objecting to the proposals of Aaron Hill regarding certain cuts to the text, Richardson appeals to the laudatory comments of some friends, who had identified in those same passages the emergence of what they defined as "a new species of writing" (Carroll, 1964, pp. 75, 78). The expression recalls, at least for the reader of these pages, a famous statement of *Tom Jones*: in the introductory chapter of the second book, the narrator declares that he is the "founder of a new province of writing" (Fielding, 1985, p. 60).

The perspective adopted by Richardson is evidently different: thanks to the technique of "writing to the moment". The author moulds his epistolary style in order to embody the character's personality, achieving in *Clarissa* a singular dramatic intensity. Furthermore, the innovative intention is also confirmed on the level of moral content, and precisely in relation to the characterization of the two main characters. Thus in the above quoted letter, wanting to show Lovelace as a totally despicable character, Richardson declares with resolute determination:

> I intend in him a new character, not confined to usual rules: and something indeed new in each, or I should not have presum'd to scribble. If absurd or unnatural, they ought not to appear at all: but this I must say, that I had not in my aim to write, after any thing I ever read, or heard talk'd of. (Carroll, 1964, p. 77).

On looking more closely, however, the most innovative element of the work consists precisely of its complex dialogical and dramatic modality, which not only gives life to the characters, making them express themselves from within, but also develops the entire matter in such a way that every event is filtered through the prism of multiple points of view and of different interpretations. It is exactly this dynamism that leads to the creation of round characters, of totally credible personalities, even beyond the intentions declared by the author. This is highlighted by Masolino D'Amico in his *Introduction* to the novel, where he emphasizes how Clarissa is "infinitely

enriched by a fundamental ambiguity", whereas the character of Lovelace, together with a feeling of repugnance, ends up provoking in the reader an irrepressible impulse of attraction (D'Amico, 1996, pp. xvi-xvii).

This constitutive duplicity of the characters, which makes *Clarissa* an absolute masterpiece, is also to be found widely mirrored in several pages of Richardson's letters, where the author discusses on the contrasting opinions manifested by his readers, and in particular by some passionate female readers. Thus he writes to the daughters of Aaron Hill in a letter of 14 December 1748:

> What pride you give me in your approbation of my Clarissa! – And how charmingly just is your correction of Miss Howe! Would you not wonder, were you to hear, that such there are as prefer that lively girl to her? And still more, were you to be assured, that there are numbers of your sex, who pity the Lovelace you are affrighted at, and call Clarissa perverse, over-delicate, and hard-hearted; and contend, that she ought to have married him? (Carroll, 1964, p.102).

However, the acme of the emotional and ethical tension, in these letters on *Clarissa*, coincides inevitably with the most controversial and unexpected narrative solution, which concludes the history of Clarissa with her saintly death. The final dénouement of the story, or rather of *The History of a Young Lady* (Richardson, 1985), represents a choice both humanly suffered and contrasted by male and female readers, and at the same time passionately defended by the author (Budd, 2007). Richardson's private correspondence obviously bears ample traces of the lively debate conducted on such a crucial point: a point which inevitably called into question, for both the author and the readers, the meaning of the work as a whole. An exemplary testimony of this metaliterary drama is a letter of 15 December 1748: an extraordinary long letter addressed to Lady Bradshaigh, *ideal reader* par excellence and a leading voice in the pages of Richardson's correspondence. In a central passage, where he discusses the ending of *Clarissa* with vibrant yet affable tone, the author confutes the arguments put forward by his most affectionate correspondent:

> But let us suppose the story to end, as you, Madam, would have it; what of extraordinary would there be in it? After infinite trials, difficulties, distresses, and even disgraces (her delicacy and situation considered), see her married. See her an excellent wife, an excellent mistress, and even an excellent mother, struggling thro' very delicate and very painful circumstances; what though common, not the less painful and delicate for being common. See her foolish and obstinate relations reconciled to her: see Mr. Lovelace in his behaviour to her all that can be expected – from a tender a fond husband – What is there unusual in all this? Except in the latter case an example as dangerous as rare! (Carroll, 1964, pp. 106-107).

As in a sort of palimpsest, the author's letters reveal the unending process of writing and rewriting of the novel – writing which has materialized on the page, even if only temporarily, or that which has remained at the planning stage of ideas: the possible or improbable solutions, the proposals considered, the hypotheses discussed, and above all the continual oscillation between the opposing reasons of the mind and of the heart. The intrinsically dramatic quality of Richardson's masterpiece, symbolically represented by the image of the duel, which opens and closes the novel, is reflected in all levels of the textual structure and in the entire process of composition of the work (Budd, 2007). Significantly, also the critical metadiscourse on *Clarissa*, which unwinds through the pages of Richardson's private letters, configures itself as a skirmish, where the author defends his own narrative solutions. Or better, he fights to defend the reasons which led him to write the history of *Clarissa*, as he himself points out in another passage of the same letter to Lady Bradshaigh. Perhaps it is not without significance that, at the culminating moment of the novel's publication, when announcing to his friend, Hill, the imminent publication of the last volumes, Richardson keeps his distance from the categories of the *novel* and of the *romance* in order to assert the tragic character of his *Clarissa*: "These volumes will shew you, Sir, that I intend more than a novel or romance by this piece; and that it is of the tragic kind" (Carroll, 1964, p. 100).

**Conclusion**

After the publication of his third novel, *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-54), Richardson turns his hand to the revision of his private correspondence, with the intention of reorganizing an enormous amount of material in view of a possible edition. Writing to Lady Bradshaigh on 19 November 1757, the author consults his most affectionate interlocutor on this matter: according to the judgment of some trusted friends, the correspondence between them would represent, in its entirety, "the best commentary that could be written on *The History of Clarissa*" (Carroll, 1964, p. 335).

Indeed, the fundamental instance emerging from Richardson's private correspondence, as we have seen, is the structuring of a truly critical discourse on *Clarissa*, which moreover conveys an eloquent testimony of a *work in progress* in continuous transformation. The form of the familiar letter, then, is at the origin of the hermeneutic dynamism which underlay the writing of the work from the very beginning of its elaboration. Within and without this epochal novel, the letter constitutes the generative kernel of the dialogical process from which the complex stratification of *The History of Clarissa* is interwoven. Based on a terrain of confrontation (and of clashes) between the exploration of interiority and so-called public opinion, Richardson's epistolary writing affirms itself as a tool of elaboration for a new model of cultural

communication (Keymer, 1992). The exchange of letters between several correspondents transposes, in the narrative structure of the *novel*, the flexible and interlocutory character of a cognitive process which conforms to the rhythm of conversation and dialogue. As Margaret Doody has intelligently remarked: "The structure of the book is itself a mode of knowledge" (Doody, 1998, p. 107). Even more so, one could say that the exchange of private letters, in its progressive development, reveals the immanent epistemological principle underlying the composition of the novel: that is, the dialectical movement of distancing from the work in order to objectify the process of composition, followed by the subsequent act of continuous re-approaching the text. It is precisely this conscious effort of alternating roles, this participating detachment of the novelist from *his* heroine, that seals the story of *The history of Clarissa*:

> One word more, only, as to my Clarissa. – I think of going thro' my present reading of the piece, being got into the 4th century of letters (monstrous number!); and then shall let the poor Unhappy sleep! – If you will be pleased to favour me so far as you have gone, and intend to favour me with going (and are your observations irrecoverably lost?) I shall take the benefit of it; tho' with the licence that I hope you will not be greatly displeased with me for taking. And, when the books are returned, I shall by comparison be better able to judge of all. (Carroll, 1964, p. 84).

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