

Louise Curran, *Samuel Richardson and the Art of Letter-Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp 267. £64.99. ISBN 9781107131514.

Louise Curran's *Samuel Richardson and the Art of Letter-Writing* is a detailed and perceptive examination of Richardson's extensive private correspondence. In this engaging study, such correspondence is invested with its long overdue critical significance; the monograph as a whole can be read as an attempt to reinstate the familiar letter to the 'privileged status' it commanded in the early eighteenth century (8). The book is concerned with examining Richardson's letters 'in their own right' rather than purely supplementary documents to support wider discussions of his fiction (14). In focusing instead on the 'interplay' between Richardson's correspondence and literary works, Curran is able to make a case for their connections. Just as letters create and maintain the figures of Pamela, Clarissa and Grandison, epistolary exchange likewise 'play[s] a leading part in the construction of [Richardson's] own authorship' (16). In each case, letter-writing is essential to individual attempts at 'self-fashioning' (75).

The book opens with a valuable account of the status of an author's correspondence in the early to mid-eighteenth century; a period where 'letter writing [...] emerged as a distinct literary form' (4). Such private, familiar epistles became desirable commodities in the burgeoning 'marketplace for letters' (12). While reference is made to the letters of James Boswell and Laurence Sterne, it is the figure of Alexander Pope who dominates this opening discussion; Pope being, Curran claims, the first writer with a shrewd awareness of the saleability of his letters. By contrast, Richardson emerges as a complex figure who, though cautious of the public taste for private correspondence, is nonetheless enticed by it.

This five-chapter study then traces Richardson's endeavours to construct his authorial identity through his correspondence and literary works. Chapter 1 details Richardson's attempts to find his private, epistolary style while he hones his public, literary style in his early works of fiction, particularly *Apprentice's Vade Mecum*, *Letters Written to and for Particular Friends* and *Pamela*. Both styles, Curran argues, are deliberately plain and unadorned, reflecting Richardson's lifelong preoccupation with, what he later termed, 'the natural and easy beauties of the pen' (107). Chapter 2 focuses on Richardson's newly-acquired role as celebrity correspondent, paying particular attention to his substantial epistolary exchanges with Lady Bradshaigh. This relationship, at once intimate and distant, allowed Richardson to not only express his own 'character' – as both public author and private man – but mould the epistolary characters of others. Curran relates a striking instance where Richardson pleads with Lady Echlin – Bradshaigh's sister and author of the notorious *Alternative Ending to Richardson's Clarissa* – to relate Bradshaigh's 'History' in miniature (78). Such a request reaffirms Richardson's preoccupation with the making of character. It also, more crucially, underlines that such self-creation is bound up with the letter form. Chapter 3 expands upon the concerns of Chapter 2 in its examination of Richardson's correspondence with a coterie of female writers including Frances Sheridan, Hester Mulso and Sarah Fielding, among many others. Though Richardson critics have, in the past, alluded to such letters, Curran's astute and detailed examination of these documents is something altogether new. In particular, the account of Richardson's plans to create a sequel to *Grandison* – using letters penned by his female correspondents – makes for a compelling read.

The final two chapters are primarily concerned with Richardson's attempts to construct a virtuous 'masculine authorial identity' as both a private man and a public author (143). Such attempts find most striking expression in Richardson's letters with other men; letters which form the focus of Chapter 4. These largely critically-neglected letters are

considered alongside *Grandison* and make the case that Richardson's preoccupation with the 'good man' in his final novel was one initially voiced in his private epistles; reiterating that Richardson's correspondence was an integral part of his writing process. The final chapter examines how Richardson organised and edited his correspondence for his posthumous readers; a process Curran aptly refers to as 'archiving the self' (159). Curran's insightful reading illustrates how Richardson's previous endeavours to self-fashion his character as an author and correspondent are intensified at the prospect of his own death.

Astute and persuasive throughout, Curran's book is a striking addition to Richardson scholarship and to studies of 'the great age of letter-writing' more generally (2). By far the most impressive aspect of this work is Curran's ambitious engagement with Richardson's extensive oeuvre. This study relies as much on Richardson's unpublished – even unprinted – works as it does on his published works. Such a focus produces original and nuanced readings of, often critically overlooked, texts. Curran's compelling examination of 'The History of Mrs Beaumont' in Chapter 2, for instance, is particularly worthy of note. Such an uncompromising dedication to these obscure texts has not been seen perhaps in Richardson scholarship since Thomas Keymer's seminal *Richardson's 'Clarissa' and the Eighteenth-Century Reader* (1992); placing Curran's book, quite deservedly, in erudite company.

Rachel Sulich
University of Leeds