

## **“She goes out as I enter”: the symbolism and verisimilitude of space and place in Richardson's *Clarissa***

Grace Egan

Room after room  
 I hunt the house through,  
 We inhabit together.  
 Heart, fear nothing, for, heart, thou shalt find her -  
 Next time, herself! - not the trouble behind her  
 [...]  
 I [...] Range the wide house from the wing to the centre.  
 Still the same chance! She goes out as I enter.<sup>1</sup>

*Clarissa* is a novel of locked rooms, secret compartments in flesh and wood, closets and keyholes. Both the cognitive behaviour and the wellbeing of the correspondents in *Clarissa* are shaped by the architectural and corporeal limits which define their reality. What is so distinctive about descriptions of space in *Clarissa* is the way in which the epistolary form allows the characters' differing, subjective senses of the same spaces to be conveyed. Over time, the emotional events which transpire within the novel's buildings make the characters who occupy them imbue each room, stairway and passage with symbolic meaning, a meaning which differs according to their individual viewpoints. The materials with which the protagonists create their own symbolic maps are provided by Richardson, and in that sense the parallel symbolisms of the characters all originate from a single source. And yet, the absence of an omniscient narrator means that an objective view of the novel's settings does not exist. Richardson's desire to develop his characters in certain opposing directions dictates which materials he chooses to give them. The fate the author has planned for a character gives rise to his or her spatial context: character and setting develop simultaneously. The differing stances (physical and moral) of Clarissa, Lovelace, Anna Howe and Belford produce a collage of subjective, highly psychological accounts of the same buildings, so that on the page, character and space give rise to one another. This is something that has not always been recognised in readings of *Clarissa*.

Richardson's spatiality differs from that of his contemporaries in prose fiction. For example, Fielding's novels comprise wide open spaces, which allow room for overarching analogies between the progress of the story, and the journeying of the characters to new places. In *Joseph Andrews* (1742), for example, Fielding sets up a running metaphor for the progress of Andrews and Parson Adams from ignorance of their situation, to resolved understanding, by having them wander through the countryside until they both literally and spiritually reach their goals. In *Clarissa* and *Pamela*, by contrast, Richardson uses only the finest touches of the metaphor of the spiritual journey as it is found in (for instance) *Don Quixote*, or *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Crucially this metaphor hardly ever relates to the physical movement of the characters. Richardson creates symbols tailored to the individual voices and experiences of his characters, and because his characters occupy stagnant domestic spaces for the majority of their time, the closed space, and its most paradigmatic manifestation – the house – is the dominant spatial metaphor. It presides over the plot of *Clarissa*, and even dictates the choices of the protean Lovelace.

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1 Browning, “Love in a Life”, *Collected Poems* (vol. 1), ed. John Pettigrew (London, 1996), pp. 603-4 .

Richardson was not alone in structuring his novels according to domestic space. The narrative form of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) is a transliteration of a building's dimensions, and characters' movements within it. Chapters begin with the opening of a door into a new room, or a curtain being drawn. Richardson employs a similar technique to end some letters, but in a far less ostentatious way; for example, *Clarissa* coincides the end of a letter with an account of the unceremonious end of a conversation: "Thus she run [sic] on, as she went down-stairs" (202,L44).<sup>2</sup> For Sterne, the house is a grand prop which is used to stretch out time unnaturally, a symptom of the unpredictable narrative. Tristram complains that it is "a shame to make two chapters of what passed in going down one pair of stairs ... and for aught I know ... there may be as many chapters as steps."<sup>3</sup> The difference between Sterne and Richardson's imaginings of the domestic is that Sterne's rendering of space is prominent and comically virtuoso; the dominance of Tristram the narrator does not allow the incremental influence of character stance to seep into the author's descriptions of space in the same way that Richardson's epistolary form does.

What is so evocative in Richardson's use of space is the way in which he accurately mimics the human tendency to magnify the quotidian. As Samuel Johnson said of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, "new things are made familiar, and familiar things are made new."<sup>4</sup> Richardson's is technique functions like an inward-looking version of Swift's earlier work, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Swift uses the travel narrative to allow him to comment upon his own society, by grossly distorting and highlighting its faults. In this way he is able to use the Brobdingnag kitchen to show how strange national conventions look when viewed from another place or perspective: "...if I should describe the kitchen-grate, the prodigious pots and kettles, the joints of meat turning on the spits, with many other particulars, perhaps I should be hardly believed..."<sup>5</sup> While Richardson acknowledges the "importance of elsewhere"<sup>6</sup> in *Clarissa*, the "elsewhere" is seen only as a vague and undesirable alternative: *Clarissa*'s plan to go to the American colonies, for example, is not something that is imagined as desirable for its own sake. Both Richardson and Swift subtly undermine the self-knowledge of their central characters; like *Clarissa*, it may be said of Gulliver that for him there is always something preferable to the truth.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to Swift, however, Richardson conveys realistic peculiarities of thought and behaviour by having the same domestic spaces re-imagined by different characters.

It is difficult to articulate the precision with which Richardson shows the mutual influence of places and mindsets, and the way in which he represents the evolution of domestic metaphors (both individual and collective), by comparing him with other novelists. The most prominent critical analysis of Richardson's symbolic space is Margaret Doody's essay "A Fine and Private Place".<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, Doody does not analyse the houses in *Clarissa* in terms of the particular characters who write about them. Instead, she often takes the semantically loaded objects and spaces in the novel to be of uniform metaphorical weight. For example, she compares the mirror in the officer's garret prison, described by Belford as "breaking out into a thousand points" (1065,L334) with a completely unrelated mirror: "when *Clarissa* is living in a false world, the glass sometimes shows the truth, as when *Clarissa* surprises Lovelace's ugly expression in the pier-glass. Now, when the world appears as it really is, the mirror

2 All references are to Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*, ed. Angus Ross (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1985), unless otherwise stated. Quotations are referenced by page and letter numbers in parentheses in the text.

3 Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, Vol IV, Chapter X (Michigan, 1980), p.203.

4 Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets* (Oxford, 1905), vol.III, p.338.

5 Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Falkirk, 1787), p.132.

6 Philip Larkin, "The Importance of Elsewhere", *The Whitsun Weddings* (London,1964),p.34

7 Samuel Johnson, *Johnsonian Miscellanies* ed. George Norman (London, 1966), vol.I, p.297.

8 Margaret Doody, *A Natural Passion* (Oxford, 1974), pp.118-125.

represents the false, and is destroyed.”<sup>9</sup> This interpretation homogenises the mirrors in the novel, which are in fact significant only insofar as they are meaningful for the characters describing them. Belford longs for redemption, and sees his own self-hatred reflected in the damage that has been done to the prison mirror. The mirror which gives Clarissa a brief insight into Lovelace's dual nature belongs to an entirely different cosmology of symbols, which is peculiar to her, a pursued character moving swiftly from room to room. Far from reinforcing received, abstract ideas, *Clarissa's* actual mirrors illuminate differing angles of the personalities of those who view them.

As Doody's broad-brush analysis does not take into account the specific social practices of Clarissa's age, Amanda Vickery's recently published book *Behind Closed Doors*<sup>10</sup> will contribute towards a more accurate understanding of Richardson's eighteenth-century domestic world, giving greater definition to the nuances of particular spatial metaphors. In order to progress with a new analysis of space in *Clarissa*, it is necessary to demonstrate Doody's technique, and the ability of Vickery's research to counteract it. A representative example is Doody's treatment of the letter in which Clarissa is compelled to speak with the hated Mr. Solmes, her family obstinately leaving her to fend for herself:

There are two doors to *my* parlour ... As I entered at one, my friends hurried out at the other. I saw just the gown of my Sister, the last who slid away ... And they all remained in the next parlour, a wainscot partition only parting the two.

...

Not knowing what I did ... I flew to the door, and would have opened it ... I pressing against it ... fell flat on my face into the other parlour ... But everybody was gone. (303, L78)

This scene is an example of a symbolically-loaded behavioural pattern which occurs repeatedly in *Clarissa*, that of withdrawal and pursuit. Architectural space frequently serves as the physical confirmation of emotional barriers between people (later in the same letter Clarissa “throws” herself into the “contrary window” to avoid her uncle). Doody recognises this pattern and its spatial implications: “Clarissa is caught, like a bird in a cage, just as she is later at Sinclair's”.<sup>11</sup> However, while the gesture of withdrawal, and the compulsion to pursue are common acts in *Clarissa*, it is the particularities which give meaning to each iteration. Here, for example, the “wainscot partition *only* parting the two” hints at the theatrical, rather superficial cruelty of Clarissa's family; the heroine's farcical entrance “flat on my face” is both pathetic and humorous, and serves as a reminder of Clarissa's youth, vulnerability, and the innocence of her pride. These nuances are not part of Doody's appraisal of patterned behaviour involving space:

The use of the house imagery is not exactly pictorial ... Physical objects are seen in relation to the motion, physical or mental, of a character. We know where rooms stand in relation to each other in the various dwellings and how the characters move to and fro in each of the houses described ... even though we hardly know what the rooms actually look like.<sup>12</sup>

By minimising the description of interiors, Richardson is demonstrating a degree of psychological realism in his ventriloquism of the observations of someone in Clarissa's position. There would be no reason for her to remark on the furnishings of a room with which she was already familiar. As Amanda Vickery points out, “[i]nteriors do not easily offer up

9 Doody, *ibid.* p.207.

10 Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors* (New Haven, 2009).

11 Doody, *A Natural Passion*, p.193.

12 Doody, *ibid.* p.188.

their secrets. The backdrop of a life is rarely the fodder of diaries and letters, just as routines are less interesting to record than events. They were taken as read at the time, and so remain elusive in surviving written records today.”<sup>13</sup>

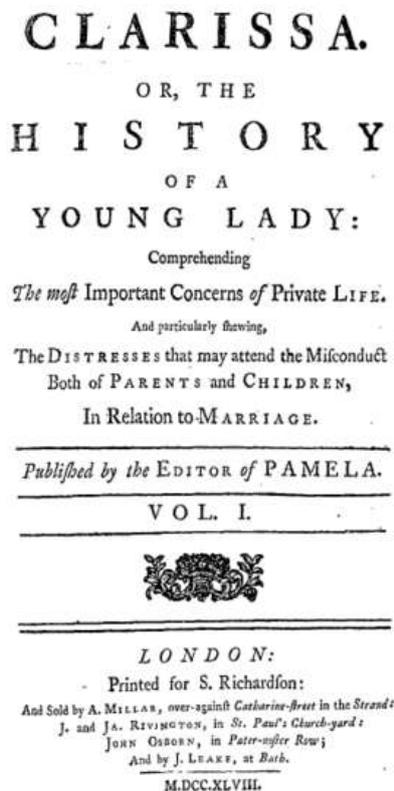


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Richardson was loath to include anything in his novels that was inconsistent with human nature, and part of the natural state of writing was that “styles differ ... as much as faces, and are indicative, generally beyond the power of disguise, of the mind of the writer!”<sup>14</sup> Further to this, Richardson described the absolutely individual identity he proposed to give to Lovelace: “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 ...”<sup>15</sup> As Tom Keymer notes, Richardson was so successful in representing realistically a “proliferation ... of contending points of view” that “[r]eaders failed to converge on a single definitive understanding of the text”.<sup>16</sup> The fact that, as Henry Fielding reported, “there is scarcely a Contradiction in Character, which I have not heard assigned from different Reasons to this Poor Girl”,<sup>17</sup> meant that the diversity of voices in Richardson's text was successful in bringing out the diversity of its readers' viewpoints. In *Clarissa*, total immersion in characters' free individual styles results in symbols of space which reflect the diversity of human nature.

Each character's way of looking at a domestic object is silently coloured by his or her personality and experience, just as facial expressions shift according to situation. There are points where an intersection occurs between different characters' understandings of space: these intersections are governed by shared social norms, and understood through shared metaphors which arise out of these norms.

Vickery's historical approach may help to unravel particularly confusing knots of meaning to do with the home. On occasion, it is possible that Richardson, and his sympathetic critics, aim to cover plot holes with the cloak of the symbolic, but it is also possible that *Behind Closed Doors* will vindicate him. After her flight from Harlowe Place, Clarissa writes to her family requesting that they send her some clothes, “together with fifty guineas, which you'll find in my escritoire [of which I inclose the key]...” (411, L102). Lady Bradshaigh, ever the purveyor of astute comments on etiquette and probability (for probability is an etiquette within the conceit of the novel's letters as “found documents”), wrote an annotation in her copy of *Clarissa*, with the objection that “I thought the key of her escritoire had been left in the hands of her Relations.” Richardson replied “If so, omit [of which I enclose the key].”<sup>18</sup>

13 Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, p.3.

14 To Sophia Westcomb, [1746?]. *Samuel Richardson: Selected Letters*, ed. John Carroll (Oxford, 1964), p.64.

15 *Selected Letters*, ed. Carroll, p.76.

16 Tom Keymer, *Richardson's Clarissa and the Eighteenth-Century Reader* (Cambridge, 1992), p.57.

17 Keymer, *ibid.* p.57.

18 Barchas, *The Annotations in Lady Bradshaigh's Copy of Clarissa* (Victoria, 1998), p.59.

Janine Barchas - editor of Bradshaigh's annotated *Clarissa* - defends Richardson's original text, as the author did not amend the section in the third edition. She explains Bradshaigh's confusion as an inability to grasp the symbolic meaning of an earlier passage, where Clarissa writes "[t]his moment the keys of everything are taken from me" (P116, L21):

Perhaps, while Lady Bradshaigh recalled that passage as the moment when Clarissa is stripped of all keys, Richardson intended it to mark the removal, not of Clarissa's private escritoire key, but of her many domestic keys, and – by extension – the termination of her privileged position in the Harlowe household.<sup>19</sup>

Barchas defends what seems to be a mistake on Richardson's part by saying that Clarissa's use of the word "everything" was symbolic. However, there could be a more practical root to the problem. Clarissa's behaviour was typical of eighteenth-century divisions of storage (and the keys which granted access to divided space), as Vickery explains: "the passing of household power was ... ritualised in ceremonial renunciation, as when a Lancashire merchant's wife ... handed to her inheriting son in 1778 'the keys of the Buroe where he wo'd find all the keys.'"<sup>20</sup> This is like the opening ceremonials in *Pamela*, where Mr. B announces to all the servants that Pamela will look after the linen. The wife of the Lancashire merchant views her bureau's key as the key of all keys. Because of the special status afforded to secret storage, it is possible that a person of Clarissa's domestic precision would have held the house keys and her private set of keys to be so different semantically, that she would have thought the escritoire key too private to be included in the phrase "the keys of everything". In other words, there is a practical explanation for Clarissa's oversight: the different symbolic categories of key correspond with their functions in the real world.

Kant said "space ... is a pure intuition," "the subjective condition of sensibility",<sup>21</sup> but in Richardson's novels, intuition is as much imprinted by space, as space is subject to the biases of sensibility. Plot and setting, character and space develop in parallel, and are mutually influential: all plaited together in the Gordian knot of Richardson's faithful transcriptions of human nature.

The novel opens at Harlowe Place, which is large enough to accommodate both the grand frontispieces of human nature, as well as its shabbier back-stairs. Awkward social "conversation pieces"<sup>22</sup> such as the staged tea ceremony in which Mr. Solmes reveals himself to Clarissa's repulsed gaze, and disorganised rushing and whispering combine.

The most powerful colonization of space in Harlowe Place for Clarissa, without doubt, is her closet. As Vickery points out, the closet was a place where women especially could fulfil their secular "closet duties" and have religious privacy. Richardson thought the "modest Lady, happy in herself" would find "her Closet her Paradise".<sup>23</sup> Clarissa is in charge of who enters her closet while she occupies it; it locks on the inside. Locks, and her ability to control them, are Clarissa's first priority when examining her new quarters at Sinclair's, and in the officer's prison. When she uses her closet, Clarissa is most able to be herself; indeed, all the closets she adopts in the novel occupy the same semantic space in that they are all at least perceived as safe retreats by the heroine.

19 Barchas, *ibid.*, p.59.n.

20 Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, p.44.

21 Joseph Kestner, *The Spatiality of the Novel* (Cambridge, 1992), p.16.

22 cf. Lynn Shepherd, *Clarissa's Painter* (Oxford, 2009) for general discussion of this genre of portraiture.

23 *Selected Letters*, ed. Carroll, p.68.

For *Clarissa*, the dairy and the summer-house, like the closet, are places for cultivated self-expression, free from the social politics occurring in the main house. Katharine Esdaile calls the summer-house “the finest flower in the first Gothic revival”, an amenity without which no eighteenth-century garden was considered complete.<sup>24</sup> It was one of a number of fashionable accoutrements which romanticised outdoor spaces (another being the hermitage), and allowed gardens to fit more easily into the literary process for Richardson and his contemporaries. Whereas Lovelace, hiding out in the coppice adjoining the Harlowes' paddock, is reduced to “[k]neeling on the hoar moss with one knee, writing with the other ... My feet, by the time I had done, seeming to have taken root” (718,L223), the summer-house facilitated a more civilised meeting between the writer and their outdoor environment. Summer-houses appealed to Richardson personally, as he wrote to Sophia Westcomb:

I sit with you, I talk with you, I read to you, I stop to hear your sentiments, in the summer-house: your smiling obligingness, your polite and easy expression, even your undue diffidence, are all in my eye ...<sup>25</sup>

William Sale asserts that the summer-house at Richardson's country residence at North End was special to the author, as he had built it and written most of *Clarissa* there.<sup>26</sup> Catherine Talbot, upon visiting Parson's Green, noted that his “Villa is fitted up in the same Style as his Books are writ ... Every Minute detail ... useful or pleasing.”<sup>27</sup> If *Clarissa* first came to life in Richardson's summer-house, it is appropriate that she should feel most at ease in her own at Harlowe Place. Keymer insists that the yew hedge and “Dutch-taste garden” have connotations of overbearing authority,<sup>28</sup> but it is Lovelace who sneers at the outmoded style; for *Clarissa*, the straight lines of the Dutch-taste might well signify the straight and narrow path, from which her “swerving feet” (650,L201) took her towards Lovelace, and her fall from grace. Both Pamela and *Clarissa* find a peaceful solitude at their respective summer-houses, until they are forced to meet with an aggressive male presence there.

The importance of the closet, not just to *Clarissa*, but to her family, may be seen in the highly ritualised way with which they dispose of her paraphernalia once she has left Harlowe Place. Her things are treated like those of a disgraced and deceased person. She has died in the affections of her family, and consequently all traces of her prestigious presence are thrown into her closet, which has become a kind of tomb, or anti-shrine:

Your drawings and your pieces are all taken down; as is also your own whole-length picture in the Vandyke taste, from your *late* parlour: they are all taken down and thrown into your closet, which will be *nailed up* as if it were not a part of the house; there to *perish* together... (509, L147, my emphases)

The Harlowes' is a psychologically plausible reaction to *Clarissa*'s absence: they want their surroundings to reflect the rift that has occurred between them and the “flower” of their family. *Clarissa*'s marginalisation begins with the change in her status from participant in family life, to spectator. Lynn Shepherd discusses Joseph Highmore's portrait of the Harlowe family (c.1745-7) as a visual transliteration of this shift, where *Clarissa*'s “symbolically empty chair” is used to divide the figures in the “claustrophobic picture space”.<sup>29</sup> *Clarissa* is pushed

24 Katherine Esdaile, “The Small House and its Amenities in the Architectural Handbooks of 1749-1827”, *The Library* (March 1918), pp.115-132.

25 *Selected Letters*, ed. Caroll, p.65.

26 William Sale, *Samuel Richardson: Master Printer* (New York, 1950), p.13.

27 Keymer, *The Eighteenth-Century Reader*, p.108.n.

28 Keymer, *ibid.* pp.109-110.

29 Shepherd, *Clarissa's Painter*, pp.121-2.

back to the far left of the portrait, an area usually reserved for servants. Eventually, she is pushed out of the house altogether, to the moral squalor of Mrs. Sinclair's brothel, to the officer's garret prison, to the Smiths', and finally to the confines of her coffin.

The final space of *Clarissa's* to be discussed is the page, and the formal subdivisions of printed and grammatical space thereon. Richardson takes great care throughout to suggest a link between the original documents which comprise the correspondence of which he is the "editor", and their printed setting. From Lovelace's frostbitten jottings in the coppice, to the smudged, disordered writing of Clarissa in her illness, there is often a third dimension to the letters' expression of the state of their writers, and a sense in which *where* they were written defines the content, and its layout on paper.

In the first edition of *Clarissa* (1747-8), Richardson gave each of the three principal writers their own set of asterisks with which to divide their letters into discrete sections. He saw his printer's devices as defining features of his press, and was confident that "the Want of the same Ornaments" would expose pirated editions.<sup>30</sup> Clarissa's asterisks have a greater "female fancy" than the other two (she shares the device with Anna Howe, indicating that it is a gendered symbol), a circular femininity which suggests the daisy, and hence the Marguerite tradition. Lovelace's are elaborately phallic, suggesting his vanity. Belford's are horizontal and equivocal: either a lozenge between two circles, or leaves pointing left and right, which indicate his intermediary position between Lovelace and Clarissa. He shares his asterisks with Colonel Morden, which is appropriate given the accord between the two men, and their unity of purpose. The joining of a typographical device to Clarissa, Lovelace and Belford respectively suggests that the individuality of the printed characters of each asterisk relates to the *character* of each correspondent, and consequently to how they occupy space, both in life and letters. The different typographical boundaries are a visual assertion of the inextricable link between character and setting: after all, the tools with which the characters assert their sense of textual (and thereby temporal) parameters are given to them by Richardson the printer, just as the fictional settings they occupy are provided by Richardson the author. The resemblance of the asterisks to architectural decorations makes an aesthetic link between the filling of space on the square of the page, and the building designs which appealed to Augustan taste. Richardson's bibliographical playfulness allows the characters to approach the reader and occupy *real* space, by drawing attention to the relevance of the spatiality of the text itself.



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30 Sale, *Master Printer*, pp.251-2.