



THE DEATH OF CLARISSA

Richardson's Clarissa and the Critics

by

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SUMMARY

As a work which has long been a subject of critical controversies, Richardson's Clarissa would appear to raise peculiar problems both of interpretation and of evaluation. While this is the case with many literary works, Clarissa is extraordinary, perhaps unique among novels, in coming to us with such detailed instructions on how it is to be read: Richardson was constantly stating his intentions, which were in essence to produce a great work of Christian apologetics to promote the spread of 'virtue and religion'. To critics who see the significance of Clarissa rather in its supposed revelation of its author's perversities, however, or in buried themes of class conflict, psychology, or semiotics, naturally the novelist's didactic aims appear tedious, effete, and irrelevant to his real achievement. Despite the efforts of some recent commentators to direct attention back towards a concern with authorial intentions and what one might call 'historical sympathy', the persistence of others in wanting to do away with such things remains remarkable. In the face of this phenomenon, the purpose of this thesis is twofold: to trace the chequered critical history of Clarissa, from the eighteenth century to the present day; and, in doing so, to suggest that one should seek to understand the novel not through yet another radical re-reading, but rather by attending to the work itself, its author, and the times in which he lived.

The thesis is structured as follows. In Chapter 1, Richardson's intentions in writing Clarissa are discussed, and it is argued that these were rather more interesting than is often acknowledged. Chapters 2 and 3 chart the course of Richardson's reputation, looking at early critical responses to Clarissa; Richardson's early fame and the causes of its decline; and the significance here of attitudes to Richardson the man. Subsequent chapters offer a critique of modern 'anti-intentionalist' readings of Clarissa. Chapter 4 concerns Richardson's psychoanalytic critics; Chapter 5 his 'sociological' and 'myth' critics; and Chapter 6 the deconstructionists. In a final chapter, the persistence and prevalence of these critical methods is considered, and the thesis concludes with some general reflections on present tendencies in literary criticism.