

# Book Review: Samuel Richardson and the Theory of Tragedy: Clarissa's Caesuras by J. A. Smith

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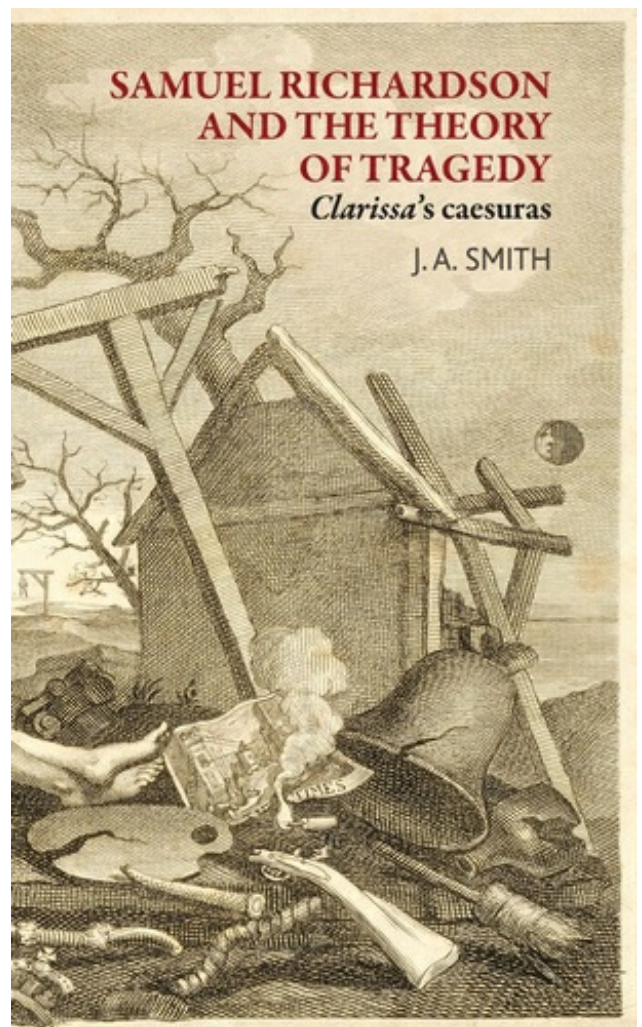
In *Samuel Richardson and the Theory of Tragedy: Clarissa's Caesuras*, J.A. Smith offers a new interpretation of this classic eighteenth-century epistolary novel through an exploration of theories of tragedy, focusing on the pause or caesura between tragedy striking and its consequences. This is a dense, detailed yet accessibly written book that breathes new life into scholarship on Richardson, writes **Danni Glover**.

***Samuel Richardson and the Theory of Tragedy: Clarissa's Caesuras*. J. A. Smith. Manchester University Press. 2016**

Find this book: 

It can be difficult to know where to start with *Clarissa* (1748), an unapproachable behemoth of an epistolary novel about injured pride, absent forgiveness and a virtuous but ultimately tragic heroine. J. A. Smith's *Samuel Richardson and the Theory of Tragedy: Clarissa's Caesuras* starts at the moment of pause, at the caesura between tragedy striking and the resulting consequences. Smith's book breathes new life into scholarship on Richardson by introducing links to theories of tragedy from the philosophical (Friedrich Nietzsche) to the psychoanalytic (Melanie Klein). Although certain theoretical links may be too dense for all but the most diligent of undergraduate students, Smith's clear prose and logical approach to reading *Clarissa* ensures that his own argument remains accessible and easy to follow, even if the works of the individual thinkers are not.

The four main sections of the book deal with the different ways that information (about tragedy: in this case, Clarissa's rape at the hands of her suitor, Robert Lovelace) is mediated. First, Smith discusses 'Richardson's representation of the dynamics of the "received notion", the constituting mechanism of public knowledge that he says he wrote the novel to contest'. *Clarissa* is full of suspicious axioms that are used by the heroine's family to allow for her moral imprisonment, most damagingly, 'a reformed rake makes the best husband' and 'once subdued, always subdued'. The excerpting of the novel by the book's own characters (and by subsequent publishers) has been discussed extensively by Leah Price in *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (2000), to which this book is complementary. The echo of rumours and received knowledge in the text contextualises the epistolary form as 'a kind of counter-discourse' (41). Smith notes that 'Richardson's belief that epistolary writing can somehow overcome the manipulations of rumour is supported by the eighteenth-century truism that letters are to be prized for the unmediated access they supposedly give to the hearts of the letter-writers' (41). Richardson shows that the oppressive ubiquity of moral axioms and rumour make it impossible for Clarissa to make free statements about herself without textual baggage before the moment of



caesura.



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The second chapter begins to dissect Clarissa's 'mad papers' composed after the rape, and shows that received information is destabilised by acts of tragedy. Smith takes the act of stopping and starting in fragmentary texts as a caesura in and of itself, noting 'the emergence of an emphasis on locking up speech, stopping short and going no further' (66) at the point at which a tragedy has happened but a narrative has yet to be formed. Mediation – the time and space between an event happening and writing about it – is a key theme in this book. Smith makes the obvious links to *Hamlet's* Ophelia as the ancestor of Clarissa in her fragmentary trauma and poet Sylvia Plath as the descendant, but he also draws on other allusions in the text which may be less obvious to the modern reader, such as Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* and Nicholas Rowe's *The Fair Penitent*.

Richardson suggests that the fragmentation of this section implies not 'an inadvertent self-blame on Clarissa's part analogous to the guilt often felt by rape survivors today but rather a deconstructive refusal to settle on the conventional opposition between pure and impure, chaste and unchaste, virgin and non-virgin' (80). The characterisation of *Clarissa* as a novel that resists eighteenth-century conceptions of virtue is, for me, among the most convincing analyses of the book available. Smith reads the 'mad papers' as 'an ostentatious overloading of significance and reference, both in the aggressive readings of their juxtapositions and misquotations make of their source texts and the multiple significances they seem to have for the dilemmas of the novel itself' (89). This reading gives it a fresh perspective that will be of interest to literary and book historians.

The third and fourth chapters both deal with the moments after caesura: the destabilising effect tragedy has on authoritative quotation and the landscape of survival and forgiveness. After the 'mad papers', the novel renews its 'emphasis on the mediated status of the epistolary novel', which Smith suggests allows for a counter-narrative of 'characters at writing-desks' (96), making this section of the book as much about the mediation of the story as the story itself. Here, Smith draws on the work of Klein and her advocacy for stable identities being contingent on our relationship with the material and immaterial reality that surrounds us.

Though Klein's work is arguably the least familiar of all theorists mentioned in the book to its intended audience, Smith demonstrates a measured and logical approach to applying psychoanalytic theories to a text that resists more basic readings because its very structure is rendered unstable by the actions of its most immoral characters. The

impulse to bring the structure of the novel back to order (as explored in Smith's fourth chapter), to rebuild after a disaster, is complicated by Clarissa's 'refusal to comply any longer or to allow amends to be made and normality returned to' (127). Lovelace's reaction also suggests instability: Smith alludes to the 'baroque tendencies of breaking and remaking meaning' (130) seen in his dream sequences towards the end of the novel. Christian forgiveness is thrown into turmoil by Greek tragedy. By considering the novel through this lens, Smith's theoretical arguments become more universal and accessible in spite of the inherent lack of simplicity and universality in *Clarissa*.

Though *Samuel Richardson and The Theory of Tragedy* is slight, it is dense and detailed, and Smith's forgiving prose style acknowledges the constraints of 'space and readerly patience' (85) that many other first monographs are apparently unfettered by. This book would integrate well into teaching on Richardson or the eighteenth-century novel, and would perhaps even be a good primer for the bewildered on how to apply theory to text.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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