Getting your letters wrong: Early modern epistolary writing[*]

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Abstract: Letters have played a central role in the development of various forms of literary culture. This article argues that it is through the tropes of miscarriage, deceit, and betrayal that early modern writers and audiences frequently encountered epistolary forms of communication. By looking at various examples from Renaissance and Restoration fiction and literary culture, the article demonstrates that this period was marked by inconsistencies, experimentation, and negotiations. Letters at the time provided writers with an opportunity to showcase the flexibility and malleability of language. The letter, indeed, represented the semantic in-betweenness that links factuality and fiction.

Keywords: Epistolarity, genre, history of the novel, Renaissance fiction, Restoration fiction.

Malos escritos: escritura epistolar en la edad moderna temprana[†]

Resumen: Las cartas han jugado un papel central en el desarrollo de varias formas de cultura literaria. Este artículo argumenta que los escritores y el público de la edad moderna temprana eran introducidos a las formas de comunicación epistolares a través de los tropos del error, el engaño y la traición. Analizando varios ejemplos de ficción y cultura literaria del Renacimiento y la Restauración, este artículo demuestra que este periodo estuvo marcado por inconsistencias, experimentación y negociaciones. En aquel momento las cartas les daban a los escritores una oportunidad de exhibir la flexibilidad y la maleabilidad del lenguaje. Ciertamente, la carta representaba el punto intermedio que une lo fáctico y la ficción.

Erros letrados: a escrita epistolar na proto-modernidade[‡]

Resumo: As cartas têm desempenhado um papel central no desenvolvimento de várias formas de cultura literária. Este artigo argumenta que escritores e públicos da proto-modernidade deparavam frequentemente com formas epistolares de comunicação através dos tropos de erro, engano e traição. Ao considerar vários exemplos da ficção e da cultura literárias do Renascimento e da Restauração, este artigo demonstra que este período foi marcado por inconsistências, experimentação e negociações. As cartas proporcionavam aos escritores da época uma oportunidade de exporem a flexibilidade e maleabilidade da linguagem. A carta, de facto, representava a intermediação semântica que liga a factualidade à ficção.

In *Le Nozze di Figaro*, one of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's late operas, first performed in 1786, the plot circles around amorous intrigues and complex stratagems, all set in a Spanish castle near Sevilla. Late in the second act, Figaro tries to take revenge on the Duke, his master, by sending him on a wild goose chase in the belief that he might catch his wife in an act of infidelity. The instrument that Figaro employs to manipulate the lecherous Duke is a letter; and it is not the only letter in Mozart's opera, whose libretto is based on Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais's comedy by the same name, first performed a few years earlier, in 1784. The opera's gender-bending plot uses letters to remind its audience that meaning and understanding are easily corrupted: letters are written with the intent to trick the reader, by assuming feigned authorship or by miscarriage. In one instance in *Figaro*, a letter that is intended to send a servant into battle, as a punishment for his flirtatious behavior, is rendered inefficient for the simple reason that the revengeful Duke had forgotten to legitimize the letter by imprinting his seal on it. The letter clearly states his intent, but due to a formal flaw it fails to effect that meaning. The absent seal evokes the absent speaker; the letter no longer manages to transport what the author had wanted to achieve. Mozart's late eighteenth-century letters, I will suggest, hark back to an earlier tradition; they remind us that readers used to connect epistolarity with subversive and manipulative forms of communication.

When Mozart wrote his opera in the late eighteenth century, he did so at a point in time when the use of epistolary forms had already been formalized into the kind of writing usually associated with works like Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), Goethe's *Werther* (1774), or Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782). And it is these canonical examples of the epistolary novel that tend to define how we think also about the early modern novel of letters, namely as a work ripe with intimacy, sentimentality, and psychological realism. Letters, according to this tradition, aided proto-Enlightened readers in their pursuit of individuality, supporting them in their struggles against conventional and conservative social models and identities. While this narrative provides much insight into how epistolary writing has engaged its eighteenth-century readers and audiences ever since — recent decades have seen a return

of e-pistolary fiction that makes use of email or social network communication[1] — it does not, maybe, tell us all that much about how the early modern age thought of letters. What I would like to suggest, therefore, is that we may have gotten our letters wrong: and quite fittingly, it is precisely through the tropes of miscarriage, deceit, and betrayal that early modern writers and audiences encountered epistolary forms of communication.[2] In other words: during the early modern age, getting your letters wrong was the right way. And when we look at Restoration fiction — or even Restoration literary forms in general — we notice that this period was marked by inconsistencies, experimentation, and negotiations. In fact, studying a particular formal feature such as the novel offers some clues about how Restoration and early modern literary culture worked; or, to cite Stephen Greenblatt: "the study of genre is an exploration of the poetics of culture" (1982, 6). For my particular generic and historical context and its unique willingness to renegotiate such cultural poetics, we can also turn to Sonia Villegas-López, who has put it succinctly in her recent introduction to a special issue of the journal *Restoration*, arguably the top academic platform for this topic: "Restoration fiction evaded uniformity, purity and stability, which are actually features genres adopt to consolidate and compete among themselves" (2022/23, 4). It is in this generic, formal, and historical context that I situate my own research interests. It is, at heart, an attempt to think about genre, form, and mimesis, mutually interdependent aspects that, during most historical moments, rely substantially on stability, yet looking at them through a diachronic prism brings out their discontinuities.

This article will accordingly cover three main aspects: it first offers some brief comments about how epistolarity as a phenomenon of English literary history has been framed, with a dual focus on the early modern age and on some recent scholarship that picks up on this topic. It will then discuss some examples of Renaissance prose fictions that make use of epistolary moments. In its third part, this article will look at how Restoration writers in the late seventeenth century turned to epistolarity, to finally offer some concluding comments on how early modern literary culture treated and drew on epistolarity.

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[1] See, for instance, Löschnigg and Schuh (2018).
[2] This argument builds on but — in terms of historical range and generic specificity — also expands on Loveman (2016).

1. Epistolarity

Epistolarity plays a significant if not yet fully researched role in the history of narrative prose fiction. Like my colleague Leah Orr, whose monograph *Novel Ventures* (2017) offers an original approach to the study of Restoration fiction, I tend to think of the history of a genre in a non-linear and genealogical way that takes cultural materialist ideas into account: books exist at the intersection of writers, readers, and people in the book industries, which in turn are connected and dependent on larger cultural and economic narratives.[3] Leah Orr has demonstrated convincingly that we should think of the early history of the novel through a multi-disciplinary and cross-generic prism. My current research interests try to contribute to these larger questions by looking at one particular medium, the letter, and to see how this medium surfaces in quite different generic contexts. The epistolary novel of the mid eighteenth century unfortunately tends to overshadow our impression of what epistolarity did and how it worked in earlier historical and cultural contexts. While Richardson, Goethe, Laclos and others employed epistolarity through a mix of sentimental, romanticist, and Enlightened attitudes that nurtured a readerly experience through which individuality, moral dilemmas, and psychological interiority were channeled, earlier writers — it seems to me — did not think about the letter in the same terms. What I am suggesting, then, is that we consider a diachronic study of epistolarity. My fundamental claim would be that epistolary forms of writing, like so many other aspects of literary history, frequently undergo rather radical reassessments, leading to a situation where in the early modern age epistolarity largely takes on a contextual significance that sits quite at the opposite end of its subsequent eighteenth-century meaning. Unlike the Enlightened and individualized meaning of the letter at the latter point, the use of epistolarity in the early modern age was instead shaped and even defined quite frequently by its use of deception and betrayal and by a general sense of skepticism vis-à-vis the non-personal form of communication that early-modern modernity in the shape of the printing press, postal services, and the availability of paper permitted.

The history of epistolary forms across Europe has already been masterfully sketched by Thomas Beebee in *Epistolary Fiction in Europe*. He, too, approaches this tradition from a poststructuralist point of view,

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[3] I discuss some of these aspects in my monograph on Restoration paratextual poetics (Bayer 2016).

arguing early in his monograph that "Epistolary fiction is a function rather than a thing" (1999, 8). He points out that because of "the relative unfixedness of its form and essence, the letter made itself available to numerous genres" (Beebee 1999, 14); and he subsequently discusses a wide range of uses that European writers made of epistolary forms. Beebee's work was complemented by Gary Schneider's *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500–1700*, which traces the early modern transition from an oral to a written culture precisely through the use of letters. Schneider views letters and epistolarity as important players in the social sphere, and he also points out that letters are always prone to miscarriage or separation, leading to a breakdown of the non-personal forms of communication that work as a supplement of individual face-to-face interaction. Schneider also carefully traces epistolarity's changing historical functions, ranging from official government letters to familial letters and on to forms of news, as newsletters and other periodical ways of serialized publication. While his is clearly a rich sociological study of epistolary forms and the cultural practices built on it, it does not invest equal time into the history of narrative prose fictions and the role that letters played for their development in the early modern age. It is here that I would say that my own research hopes to suggest a contribution.

While there is a growing body of research on Restoration epistolarity,[4] earlier literary uses of epistolary forms are still in need of further research. This article attempts an early survey that will hopefully inspire further suggestions and ideas for additional Renaissance texts that make substantial or significant use of epistolary moments. And I should add that I do not restrict my corpus to epistolary novels per se, that is to say, to novels where letters make up all or even the majority of the written material. I am indeed even more interested in how epistolarity appears in narrative prose fiction, be it ever so briefly. It is the letter in the novel rather than the epistolary novel that forms the basis of my own academic curiosity.

This curiosity is shared by various colleagues in the field, even though each project follows its own trajectory. Rachel Scarborough King's monograph *Writing to the World: Letters and the Origins of Modern Print Genres* (2018) looks at the long eighteenth century and argues that the letter forms what she calls a bridge genre, by which she means a cultural

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[4] Some of my own contributions are listed in the bibliography (Bayer 2009, Bayer 2022, Bayer 2024), with the most recent entry coming from a special issue on Restoration epistolarity that I coedited with Jaroslaw Jasenowski.

practice that both accompanied aesthetic and formal changes and at the same time contributed to them. For King, the letter is such a medium, in particular during the early modern moment: "For the educated elite, the letter was culturally available: it was an obvious form of personal and professional interaction, and epistolary circles formed the foundation of many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literary and scientific communities" (2018, 5). During what she calls the "postal era" (6), letters appeared at almost all levels of print culture.[5] While I would agree with her assessment of the omnipresence of epistolarity in early modern literary culture, I also notice that her interest in letters is largely outside of literary and novelistic forms of writing. While her book forcefully demonstrates that the writing of letters accompanied changes in literary genres, her book mostly concentrates on mid- to late eighteenth-century literary examples. The crucial gestation period of the novel in the late seventeenth century is only briefly mentioned, and even crucial texts like Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters* (1684) or Eliza Haywood's *Love in Excess* (1719) are absent from her analyses.

A maybe too exclusive preference for the more canonical works of the eighteenth century marks Eve Tavor Bannet's recent *The Letters in the Story* (2021), which begins with the, to me, significant observation that "in addition to the epistolary novel and the first- or third-person narrative 'history,' there was from the first a vibrant tradition of narrative-epistolary fiction that mixed the two forms" (2021, vii). Her monograph starts off with Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood, arguing that both writers "warn readers against taking letters at face value as honest brokers of their authors' thoughts and feelings" (Bannet 2021, 37). Yet like so much eighteenth-century scholarship,[6] her monograph sees in the late seventeenth century merely an overture and, as a consequence, Renaissance and Restoration fiction receives less attention outside the canonical works by Behn and Haywood that form her starting point.

2. Renaissance letters

Let us therefore turn to a few textual examples of Renaissance letters, or maybe one should say narrative-epistolary fiction. The social reality of letter writing during the Renaissance is still rather modest: the

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[5] On the non-literary private letter at this time, see, for instance, O'Neill (2015), whose title, *The Opened Letter*, also evokes the form's permanent potential for purloining.

[6] A similarly non-genealogical view marks the otherwise fascinating monograph by Patricia Meyer Spacks (2006).

overwhelming majority of people even of fairly well-to-do backgrounds will not resort to letter writing as a frequent means of communication. There is no substantial public infrastructure for the reliable delivery of mail. Indeed, the postal services were only in their very early stages. It was under Henry VIII that a government official was appointed in 1517 to the role of Governor of the King's Post. There was, however, a clear sense that it was a royal prerogative to transport mail; and one assumes that apart from concerns about the safe delivery of habitually confidential official matters, an element of spying and controlling played a significant role then.[7] Wealthy people could, of course, resort to private messengers who would carry letters directly to their social partners. And we know from coterie culture in general that a lively exchange of materials existed amongst the noble and privileged classes; one could point here, for instance, to the circulation of Sidney's *Old Arcadia* in the late 1500s.

The writing of letters clearly picks up in the second half of the century: as early as 1568, William Fulwood published a letter writing manual called *The Enemy of Idleness* which provided help for the writing of letters to superiors, equals, and what he calls "inferiors, as to seruant, laborers, &c" (1568, 2). The snobbish or at least classist tone of that social description already makes clear that the target audience of Fulwood's book was well-to-do people. In his dedication to "the Maister, Wardens, and Company of the *Marchant Tayllors* of London" (Fulwood 1568, A2ʳ), the author explains why the writing of letters often becomes necessary, namely:

> Where urgent matters of our owne,
> or frends to write vs moue.
> As for example when our frende
> in any forren land
> Farre distant is, and we desire
> to let him vnderstand
> Of this or that, of warres, of peace,
> of strangie newes or else
> Of other things that nede requires (A2v)

His clearly is a how-to guidebook, where he explains "How to begin, how to procede, / and how the finall ende / Must ordered be in each affaire" (A2v). Letters, he claims, are much more reliable than sending

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[7] On the political aspect of epistolary spying, see Beebee (2024).

somebody to deliver information since "When messenger by word of mouth / might hap forget his note, / And either tell somewhat to much, / or else leaue some vntold" (A3v). The book starts, in true Renaissance fashion, by deferring to classical sources, and Fulwood points to Lucanus, the first-century Roman poet and historian, who in turn dates the invention of letter writing to the Egyption city of Memphis. This Renaissance handbook takes great pains in observing proper social etiquette in how authors address other people: formalities need to be observed, and it seems that in epistolary communication the performative nature of social distinction was closely observed. However, Fulwood also notes that there is already a tradition of private letters that allows for a more intimate and less conventionalized form of language: "But if we write to our frend, we may make our Epistle or letter, long or short, as we shall thinck best, and as it shall be most delectable" (Fulwood 1568, 6). The stylistic and rhetorical guidance in Fulwood's book soon gives way to example letters on all sorts of occasions, public and private. Most delectable, if you would allow me to pick one, is the advice on "How to visit our Frend with Letters, not hauing any great matter to write" (73), where potential wafflers are provided with this sample letter:

> ALthough I haue no mater to write vnto you (my deare friend) for that I knowe not of any newes hereabouts chaunced, yet neuerthelesse the greate loue equall betwixt vs, will not suffer me to lette passe any messanger that I know goeth towards you, without sending you Letters by him, for I beleue verily that you haue as great ioy to rede my Letters, as I haue to reade yours. (Fulwood 1568, 73)

The letter, then, already has a phatic function at this early modern moment: it provides writers with an occasion to stay in touch, to cultivate a relationship, or — and here I am intentionally alluding to twenty-first century practices — to pamper their social networks. Such letters must have been read *cum grano salis*, with the recipient knowing full well that such a no-content missive should not be read as a meaningful engagement with factual reality. The mimetic force of such letters indeed frequently tends towards zero. The Renaissance letter, then, also had the potential to be a mere gesture, and a gesture, one could add, that has irony and subterfuge attached to it. Or maybe I need to tone this down a little bit: Fulwood's letter writing manual mostly takes a very pragmatic approach to epistolary communication, one that is based on

the assumption that this form of long-distance writing does have the potential to share information and to effect change. Yet it also admits, if rather implicitly, that letters also serve an emotional function and in this do not rely necessarily on a purely factual engagement with reality.

Turning to an example of Elizabethan prose fictions, epistolarity mostly plays a similarly marginal role, one that mirrors the exclusive status of letter writing at this historical moment. When we read George Gascoigne's *The Adventures of Master F.J.* (1573), we find a full immersion in epistolary forms. The book's plot draws frequently and intensively on letters, and these letters are mostly intimate and personal: they relate to close friendships and to amorous intrigues. They offer insight into the inner lives of various characters; they indeed are at the core of the book's main love plot. Given that the writing of letters is such a highly formalized and frequently taught tool of communication, it maybe comes as no surprise that the lovers in the tale are at times in doubt about the precise status of the love letters they receive. Indeed, their first wooing oscillates between face-to-face communication, the performative theatrics of ritualized courtly dances, and the exchanges of short notes. Elinor tells Ferdinando that "I understand not [...] t'intent of your letters" (207); and then submits to him a letter in a riddle for him to decode. Upon completion he is left in further doubt, in his case not about the missive's content but about its authorship: and "imediatly uppon receit hereof, he grew in ielosy, that the same was not her owne devise" (208). He assumes that her letter does not speak her mind since he suspects an allographic authorship: "For as by the stile this letter of hirs bewrayeth that it was not penned by a womans capacitie, so the sequell of hir doings may discipher, that she had mo redy clearkes then trustie servants in store" (Gascoigne 1573, 208). Both Ferdinando and the reader thus view her act of epistolary communication through the tradition of letter writing manuals, of secretaries and of other forms of distraction and manipulation. Their budding affair, the text suggests, is built on a medium that, in its own right, hardly warrants trust. The very notion of the secretary, through its etymology, ties to secrecy, evokes clandestine communications that were indeed often of a morally transgressive nature: secretaries were frequently involved in the planning and cover-up of their masters' (or mistresses') extramarital affairs.[8]

A few exchanges of letters later, this situation is partly remedied. Here is the comment provided in Gascoigne's narrative: "This letter I haue

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[8] On the perilous legal situation of female servants in households of sexually abusive masters, see Burnett (1997), in particular chapter 4.

seene, of hir own hand writing: and as therin the Reader may finde great difference of Style, from hir former letter, so may you nowe understand the cause. Shee had in the same house a friend, a seruaunt, a Secretary: what should I name him?" (Gascoigne 1573, 215). It is in the absence of "This manling, this minion, this slaue, this secretary" (216) that Elinor finally writes her own letters, revealing — maybe unintentionally — her true feelings and indeed desires.

The narrative at this point quickly shifts from the courtly and amorous to the physical and even erotic: during the "absence of hir chiefe Chauncellor" Ferdinando "thought good now to smyte while the yron was hotte, and to lend his Mistresse such a penne in hir Secretaries absence, as he should never be able at his returne to amend the well writing thereof" (Gascoigne 1573, 216). The phallic force of their epistolary encounters — anticipating a central element of Laclos' *Liaisons* — should not trick readers into forgetting that what the scene indeed reveals is that, at other points in the epistolary encounters between the book's two protagonists, it was two men who were crossing their swordish pens. The nature and quality of epistolary writing thus remains essentially at play. Gascoigne's narrative fiction already employs a Baroque pleasure in playfully undermining generic and readerly conventions, also with respect to the formal status of epistolarity.

Turning to one of the most successful publications in the genre of Renaissance prose fiction, readers will quickly note that John Lyly's *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578) falls into two parts: while the majority of the action avoids any epistolary moments, the book's final sections rely substantially on the exchange of letters. Here, too, the letters anticipate the kind of intimacy later readers also find in Goethe's *Werther* in that readers are permitted to listen in to the private exchanges between two close male friends who discuss private and amatory affairs in their letters. Yet the letters here also largely serve to present the now older Euphues as a general source of wisdom, having reformed from his youthful days. As Paul Salzman has pointed out in *English Prose Fiction*, Lyly's book picks up its core stylistic device when it turns antithesis into the defining plot element for the development of the book's protagonist (1985, 36). Just like the euphuistic style provides antithetical rhetorical elements, so the book contrasts the two Euphueses to flaunt its underlying didactic purpose.

It is here that letters start to appear, having earlier in the book only played a minor role. Towards the end of the *Anatomy*, however, Lyly turns into a writer of self-help fiction, with frequently unconnected

letters that pick up on general themes of education and social formation, reminiscent of Renaissance letter writing manuals. The wittiness and stylistic exaggeration of these letters invites readers to encounter them with some level of skepticism. And how could one not inwardly smile at a letter with such a title: "Euphues to a young gentleman in Athens named Alcius, who leauing his studie followed all lyghtnes and lyued both shamefully and sinfully to the griefe of his friends and discredite of the Vniuersitie" (1578, 83). The very principle of wit here signals towards a self-effacing reading, implicating epistolary in this subversive gesture: "Ah Alcius I cannot tell whether I should most lament in thee thy want of learning, or they wanton lyuinge, in the one thou arte inferiour to all men, in the other superiour to all beasts" (83). The letter becomes the main platform through which to comment on the artificiality of such elegant conversation, and it makes perfect sense that, although the second volume, *Euphues and His England*, still has plenty of love plot elements, it does resort much more frequently to epistolary moments. Lyly increasingly turns to the form of the letter to situate the artificiality of both his euphuistic style and his courtly etiquette in a context that readers would have associated with such performative qualities. The letter, for Lyly, thus stands as a formal reminder of how epistolary communication falls short of direct, honest, and individual forms of exchange.

In Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), the body of the text does very nicely without resorting to moments of letter writing. The same can be said about Robert Greene's *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time* (1588). For both works I should add that they include examples of the epistle dedicatory: clearly in tune with the Renaissance practice of seeking patronage, the books use the form of the letter to create a network of reception that includes author and dedicatee but somehow also draws in each book's actual readers, who share in the not-so-private dedicatory letter to some "Right Honourable" Earl this or Duke that. These paratextual letters frame the actual text and, when contrasted with the absence of epistolary exchanges within the actual narratives, underline the fact that epistolarity only slowly begins to play a role outside lofty social circles.

In Thomas Deloney's *Jack of Newberie* ([1597] 1966), epistolarity plays a somewhat different role: while this book also features an epistle dedicatory, its dedicatee differs in terms of social rank. Almost anticipating the shift that will take place roughly one hundred years later, Deloney dedicates his work "To All Famous Cloth Workers in England," bringing

in not only non-noble individuals but potentially even mere working people. The narrative itself avoids epistolary moments with one exception: in chapter vi, Jack starts what the twenty-first century would call a crowd-funding initiative to support cloth workers who fell on bad times as a result of trade embargoes at times of war. Trying to raise money and ultimately to petition the king for support, Jack "sent Letters to all the chiefe cloathing townes in *England*" ([1597] 1966, 50). The book provides its readers with a reproduction of the full text, headed "The Letter." The text falls back on the somewhat stilted rhetoric of official letters, for instance in its starting phrase: "having a taste of the general griefe, and feeling (in some measure) the extremitie of these times, I fell into consideration by what meanes we might best expell these sorrowes, and recover out former commodity" (50). The commentary differs markedly in terms of its chosen register: "Copies of this Letter being sealed, they were sent to all the cloathing Townes in *England*, and the Weavers both of linnen and woollen gladly received them" (51). While much of Deloney's short novel might be read as an attempt to negotiate a more participatory role for non-noble (albeit wealthy) citizens, the discrepancies in language that mark the work's shift into an epistolary moment at the same time underline the essential distance between these two social groups. The letter here merely serves to mark this distance.

What these examples of Renaissance epistolary prose fictions show is that epistolarity moved simultaneously in different registers: the official letter evoked administrative traditions of government; letter writing manuals brought in more private interests; and novelistic uses of epistolarity demonstrated how diverse the range of letter writing practices indeed were. In almost all these contexts, letters were not reduced to essentially reliable and trustworthy forms of mimetic representation. Instead, they frequently signaled towards the unreliability of epistolary discourse. The potential for manipulation and deception was an omnipresent flavor of all forms of communication by letters. As a consequence, Renaissance readers must have been clearly aware of the deceptive nature of letter writing, and it is therefore hardly surprising to note that writers would allude to this non-factual and non-reliable feature of epistolarity quite openly.

3. Restoration letters

Following the tumultuous middle decades of the seventeenth century, when regicide, interregnum, and the Puritan reign put political, religious, stately, and social concerns high up on the public agenda, the Restoration finally provided for a cultural environment where experimentation flourished. It was not just the newly opened theaters in London and the growing importance of periodical publications and coffee house discussions that provided a nurturing ground for up-and-coming writers:[9] prose fiction itself started to look for a formal expression of what must have felt like a radically new experience of post-war living. The situation bears some resemblance to what Roland Barthes, in *Writing Degree Zero*, points out about the early twentieth century and artists' ambition to find relevancy in their output. When he states that "Modernism begins with the search for a Literature which is no longer possible" (1967, 38), Barthes might as well have been commenting on literary culture during Restoration England. Public and private letters played a crucial role in this bubbly environment: the Royal Society relied largely on contributions sent in by letters; John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury* invented the format of the agony aunt; and even a periodical such as Peter Motteux's *The Gentleman's Journal* resorted to the framework of being a letter sent to readers living in the country. In the latter periodical, Motteux regularly included short pieces of narrative prose fiction, elegantly discussed by Maria José Coperías-Aguilar in a recent issue of the journal *SEDERI* 32 (2022).

Yet it is precisely at this moment that letters in prose fictions increasingly take on a quality of deception and betrayal. Epistolarity, it seems, accompanies the radical growth in print publications with a counter story, one that reminds readers and consumers about the actual distance between life and letters. Epistolary Restoration literature famously begins with the publication of a translated text with a direct link to the Spanish-Portuguese yearbook *SEDERI*, the aptly named Portuguese Letters, which appeared in 1669, translated from a French source that came out in the same year and is frequently referred to as the first French epistolary fiction. These letters by a nun to her absent lover were located precisely at the threshold between fact and fiction, allowing their readers to decide for themselves whether they want to buy into the truth-claims of these texts or simply enjoy the passionate and intimate

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[9] On how coffeehouse culture, periodical publication, and the agony-aunt format employed epistolarity as a means to question (scientific) factuality, see Jasenowski (2024).
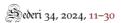
love letters. The publication nevertheless marks a turning point in the
history of English literature as well, suggesting, as it does, that plot and
passion can rely on letters alone.

It does not take long for Aphra Behn to pick up on this suggestion
and publish her *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* in three
installments between 1684 and 1687. Behn started her first volume en-
tirely in the form of an epistolary novel, emulating the *Portuguese Letters
by a Nun*. Both titles already allude to moral and sexual scandal in
their titles, and Restoration epistolary writing frequently teeters on
the borderline between the respectable and the immoral. In the first
volume to the *Love-Letters*, it is primarily letters by the illicit lovers that
take up the majority of space; and Behn does not provide her book with
a commenting narrator. There is a brief paratextual frame entitled "The
Argument," where Behn introduces her two lovers in the language and
tone of Renaissance romances, emphasizing their beauty and social
status. The narrative point of view is third-person with the exception of
a few asides where the voice draws in the readers through the use of a
first-person plural precisely at the moment where the text explains that
the names used are not real names: the text introduces "a Lady, whom
we will call *Mertilla*" and "young *Philander* (so we call our amorous
Hero)" ([1684–87] 1996, 9).[10] The anonymous narratorial voice and
the text's readers are united in their make-belief: they realize that what
they read is not precisely what transpired in reality, starting with use
of names and, possibly, also extending to further aspects. It is in the
light of such potential readerly skepticism that I would suggest we read
the closing statements of Behn's authorial paratext, where she states
about the letters that "they are as exactly as possible plac'd in the or-
der they were sent" and then claims — or maybe admits — that the
letters are "those supposed to be written towards the latter end of their
Amours" ([1684–87] 1996, 10). Both statements invite skepticism; both
signal towards the roman à clef quality of her book but both also signal
towards the somewhat questionable status of epistolary writing in its
own right.

The first volume nevertheless sticks to the epistolary format, including
intrigue, confusion, cross-dressing, and betrayal mostly on the level of
plot. And yet one wonders whether it is not precisely the nexus between
the book's central themes and the chosen generic format that speaks
most forcefully: letters, or so Behn seems to suggest, lend themselves

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[10] Here (and generally) italics and recte fonts have been reversed for readability: the passage appears
all in italics in Behn's paratext, with only the names of the protagonists in a non-italic font.

precisely to the kind of plot that relies on subterfuge and subversion. As readers move into the second and third volume of Behn's *Love-Letters*, they find themselves increasingly in the narratorial good hands of an actual narrative voice, receiving more direct information and guidance through this narrator, as Ros Ballaster (2004, 144) has suggested. We can only speculate why Behn might have decided to abandon her original form: Was it because she no longer had the "real" letters (or rather, the relevant court documents where such letters were included) or was she unhappy with the restrictions that this format placed on her own plans for further plot developments? My hunch would be that Behn wanted to move outside the epistolary format precisely because she — and by her assumptions probably also her readers — were perfectly aware of the shortcomings of epistolary forms of communication. Since letters are so easily feigned and so readily abused, the *Love-Letters* needed to move outside of the epistolary space and into actual real-life action.

This shift in perspective then brought with it a change in narratorial point of view: in the third volume, we have the kind of omniscient and authorial third-person voice that also marks so much of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction. In other words, Behn needed to move outside of the confines of epistolary writing to approach the kind of social realism that critics like Ian Watt have identified as the foundation for the birth and rise of the novel. In the third part, readers will find plenty of dialogue that creates a three-dimensional impression of the main characters, but Behn also made use of interior monologue and other forms of the representation of interiority that anticipates, in some moments, the kind of post-Freudian stream-of-consciousness to which writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf would turn early in the twentieth century. The three volumes of Behn's *Love-Letters* thus not only stand as a milestone in the history of the novel: the work also comments quite powerfully on the advantages and otherwise of epistolary writing at the late seventeenth-century moment when Behn composed her volumes.

That epistolary forms were viewed with skepticism or even with a sense of ironic detachment also becomes quite obvious in a powerful moment towards the end of George Farquhar's *Adventures of Covent Garden* (1699), in a scene that I would probably consider to be one of the prime examples of Restoration deceptive epistolary writing. Mostly known as a playwright, Farquhar probably wrote this short narrative prose fiction during his college days, one could assume as an exercise or showpiece for future commissions for the much more lucrative ca-

reer as a stage writer. That Farquhar takes a somewhat twisted look at the conventions of epistolary writing already becomes obvious in his dedication: avoiding the earlier tradition of using the epistle dedicatory to enlist the support of a noble patron, the *Adventures* are prefaced by a very short and somewhat cryptic text that, in its entirety, reads:

> The dedication.
> To all my Ingenious Acquaintance at Will's Coffee-House.
> Gentlemen,
> //
> I am.
> Your most Devoted, most Obedient, and most Faithful humble Servant. (A3^r–A3^v)

I have inserted a double slash to indicate what in the original is a page break: in other words, this epistle dedicatory not just undermines the social conventions of the dedication by replacing a courtly patron with coffee-house buddies, it furthermore makes visible, by the use of a largely blank page, the hollow emptiness often found at the core of this epistolary tradition. Letters, this suggests, are frequently not what they appear to be.

   In the body of the book, readers follow the amorous career of a male protagonist who has fallen on financially difficult times and therefore hopes to court a woman he assumes was recently and wealthily widowed. He is not exactly playing fairly since he also continues to woo another love interest, but his inconsistency or dishonesty is easily matched by the various fires stroked by the supposed widow, who seems particularly interested in the advances by one Lord C–. Throughout this entertaining book, readers are restricted to the point of view of the protagonist, only learning slowly about the deception and manipulation that his love interest fabricates. Yet at the end of the tale, a plot twist has Emilia enlist Peregrine as her amatory ghost epistolarist:

> *I am sensible you have an Excellent Talent in Epistolary Stile, (which I must still remember since first your Charming Letters conquered me;) you must therefore write an Ingenious Letter for me, which I will Transcribe, and send to his Lordship, which will Infallibly reclaim him. But suppose Madam (*said Peregrine) *that my Lord discovers the difference of Stile if you Write to him again? No, no (*said she) *you shall Answer all my Lords Letters for me.* Peregrine *immediately conceiving, that by this means he should see my Lord C–'s Letters, and thereby discover if the Intreague went any*

> further then he would have it, undertook the Task, and wrote a Letter which wrought the desired effect. (51)

The way Farquhar construes this epistolary encounter is quite ingenious, in particular when read against the novel's actual plot: readers by now realize that Emilia does not honestly love Peregrine, so the supposed effect his letters had on her never took place. They also learn that Lord C– will be manipulated through letters that are not written by Emilia, yet they believe, with Peregrine, that the Lord's letters will at least provide Peregrine with some truthful insights about the state of the other love affair. This, however, is also soon undermined, since Emilia has of course anticipated this risk:

> But *Emilia* had forewarned my Lord of making the least mention of any her Favours, lest the Letter might Miscarry, and fall into Hands that might Publish her shame. By which Artifice secur'd, she continued her ingenious Correspondence with my Lord, which more and more engaged his Affections, without giving *Peregrine* any resonable grounds of Jealosy. (55–56)

The word that stands out here is "Artifice": etymologically, the word simply means "the making of art," yet it here implies lying, deception, and betrayal.[11] The letters Peregrine assumes allow him to understand the true state of Emilia's romance with the Lord are telling him only half of reality and thus not even part of the truth. It is indeed an "ingenious Correspondence," in the sense that it is highly artificial, fabricated, and manipulative. The text here clearly plays with the assumption that epistolary communication by default provides readers with truthful, intimate, and reliable information.

It is by coincidence that Peregrine finally learns the truth about Emilia's affair with the Lord, and tellingly it is in the context of a court trial: the discourse shifts from one of romance — in the sense both of the amorous emotions and of the genre tradition — to one of legal speech. At court, language is brought back into close proximity to reality, and testimony verifies the correspondence between words and actions. Emilia's betrayal of Peregrine's affections is made all too obvious. His reaction plays out also in the field of romance, and again in both semantic contexts: he hopes to free himself of his romantic ties to Emilia

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[11] On lying in early modern culture, see Hadfield (2014).

and at the same time educate readers about the falsehood of letters and
how they are conventionally employed in romance fiction:

> Now fully Convicted of the Treachery of his Mistress by her own Oath,
> [Peregrine] has once more put on firm Resolutions of ever forsaking
> her; and that he may draw my Lord C– out of the same Errour, he has
> given a Copy of all my Lords Letter's and their Answers to a Friend
> of his, who immediately designs to publish a Collection of Letters,
> where his Lordship may read his own Wit, and the Falshood of *Emilia*.
> (57–58)

The novel thus ends with Peregrine disillusioned about his former lover
but also with a rather witty gesture aimed at the readers: while the
Lord may learn from the published letters that he in fact corresponded
not with his lover but her other suitor, making of this correspondence
a rather homoerotic love triangle, his trust in epistolary romance is
probably diminished. But the majority of readers of these letters in pub-
lished form would not read them from such an enlightened position:
they would only encounter love letters between a noble man and his
beloved, assuming them to be genuine and truthful. What Farquhar's
gesture at the publication of such correspondence in fact suggests is
that readers normally do not know what the actual circumstances are,
for instance in this case that her letters were not even written by herself
and that his letters were significantly self-censored. In other words,
the supposed volume with love letters would always be mis-read and
its content mis-construed. And it is precisely in this gesture aimed at
the actual quality of epistolary communication that I see Farquhar's
most powerful comment on the state of epistolary writing during the
Restoration moment.

   As the examples pulled from Gascoigne, Lyly, Behn, and Farquhar and
others have shown, early modern epistolarity frequently approached let-
ters from an angle that presents them in a light that clearly differs from
the supposedly timely meaning of epistolarity. For these writers (and,
one assumes, their readers), letters were habitually associated with a
breakdown of communication and with the potential to undermine
reliability and factfulness. Whether epistolarity served as a metonymi-
cal critique of the growing importance of writing and printing at the
historical moment when oral culture gave way to print may be difficult
to argue. The textual evidence suggests that writers and readers almost
delighted in getting their letters wrong.

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