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Chapter 18: Letters

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The relationship between real and fictional letters in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries has been the source of much critical debate. Disagreement particularly surrounds the extent to which the increasingly popular genre of the epistolary novel, which flourished following the publication of Les Lettres portugaises in 1669, drew on the practices and techniques of actual correspondence. On the one hand are those who see epistolary fiction as developing out of real-life letters, with some literary-stylistic additions such as polyphonic point of view. The chief proponents of this argument are the authors of the two classic histories of the epistolary novel, Godfrey Frank Singer and Robert Adams Day,[1] critics of French epistolary fiction and its emergence from letter-writing manuals, such as Bernard Bray and Laurent Versini,[2] and, with some qualifications, writers on women's letters of the period such as Shari Benstock and Linda Kauffman.[3] On the other hand are those who reject this teleological approach in favour of one that emphasizes the functional versatility of the letter in the period, and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of drawing a distinction between its real and fictional incarnations. Adherents to this view include James How, whose discussion of how the establishment of the Post Office in the 1650s opened up new 'epistolary spaces', applies to letters of all kinds,[4] and Thomas O. Beebee, whose conception of the letter 'as a Protean form which crystallized social relationships in a variety of ways' leads him to claim that 'epistolary fiction is a function rather than a thing; it arises when an outside "real" reader takes up the position of the fictional addressee'. As Beebee acknowledges, 'this line of argument tends to blur the boundary between real correspondence and epistolary fiction' (9).[5]

This debate is brought into sharp relief by the case of Samuel Richardson. As many have observed, Richardson's first novel Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded arose, at least in part, from a letter-writing manual he was commissioned to write, which was published in 1741 (after Pamela) as Letters Written To and For Particular Friends, on the most Important Occasions (commonly known as Familiar Letters). As is well known, Letters CXXXVIII ('A Father to a Daughter in Service, on hearing of her Master's attempting her Virtue') and CXXXIX ('The Daughter's Answer') are closely related to the opening of Pamela. Yet the exact nature of this relationship is the crux of the debate between the two positions outlined above. In one view the model letters designed for real-life occasions provided the raw material which Richardson then transformed in his fiction. Singer identifies 'the germ of Pamela' in Familiar Letters,[6] while Day uses evolutionary theory to chart the development of Richardson's epistolary method: 'In progressing from the Familiar Letters to Clarissa and to the less intense but even more complex structure of Grandison, he recapitulated in his own work all the evolutionary developments of his precursors and went beyond them'.[7] In contrast, for those who emphasize the discursive flexibility of the letter in the period, it is harder to draw a line between the letters in Richardson's manual and those in his novels. How, for example, argues that Clarissa is an 'absorption' of Familiar Letters,[8] while Beebee suggests that 'in offering their letters as models to be imitated, manuals and novels both functioned interactively', positing a 'larger feedback-loop between real, model, and fictional letters as they cross-pollinate and mutually condition each other through the centuries'.[9]

The specific stylistic aspects of this 'cross-pollination' have rarely been examined in detail, however. In the remainder of this chapter I will make a first step towards narrowing down just what Richardson's model and fictional letters have in common, and how they might 'mutually condition each other'. Without hazarding a line of direct influence, I argue that stylistic points of connection offer support for a flexible view of the letter in the period. Equally though, I will propose that the novel offered Richardson greater possibilities for the expansion of stylistic techniques that are present only in glimpses in his letter-writing manual. I thus hope to steer a middle ground between those who see fictional letters as a transformational advance on model or real-life examples, and those who see the two as interchangeable, arguing that a precise demonstration of the creative potential of both Richardson's fictional and his non-fictional letters must also allow for the fact that as a genre the novel allowed him a fuller range of expressive possibilities than the manual.

The style of Familiar Letters has tended to receive only passing attention. In her study of Richardson's work and Defoe's The Complete English Tradesman (1725), which together, she claims, 'laid the essential foundation for transforming collections of epistles into the epistolary novel', Victoria Myers concentrates on each writer's 'moral concerns', arguing that Richardson 'found the familiar letter an attractive locus for negotiating the reformation of the public sphere, and continued that task in the epistolary novel'.[10] She does**,** however, pay welcome attention to the ways in which Familiar Letters differs from previous examples of the genre, such as John Hill's The *Young Secretary's* Guide; or, A Speedy Help to Learning (1687) and G. F. Gent's The *Secretary's Guide* (1705?), noting that 'the key to the difference between Richardson's manual and these others is their use of humour'.[11] Pointing particularly

to Letter XXXIX, which provides a model for 'Ridiculing a romantick Rhapsody in Courtship', Myers suggests that 'Richardson's refinements signal what will also be remarkable in his epistolary novels, the deliberate integration of distinctive voices and situations with deep plumbing of character'.[12] More detailed analysis of stylistic features in the collection, especially those concerned with the representation of speech, will demonstrate just how these 'distinctive voices' and a sense of 'character' are created, and show that techniques for generating humour in the novels are also present, in different forms, in Familiar Letters.

There are several exchanges in Familiar Letters which move beyond the model of a standard letter outlining a problem or request and its reply. One such takes place between Letters CLXI and CLXV, headed 'Advice of an Aunt to a Niece, in relation to her Conduct in the Addresses made her by Two Gentlemen; one a gay, fluttering Military Coxcomb, the other a Man of Sense and Honour' (Early Works, p. 000). After an opening letter from the aunt desiring her niece Lydia's opinion of the two men, the latter gives an account of her 'sensible Lover', Mr Rushford, over two letters. In the first she admits that she finds him 'a very valuable Gentleman' but notes that he is 'over-nice Sometimes as to the Company I see' and that he 'gives himself wonderful grave Airs already' (Early Works, p. 000). The second letter elaborates on these airs, with a lively description of one of his visits:

> He comes last Thursday with great Formality, and calls himself my humble Servant; and I saw he was pleased to be displeased at something, and so look'd as grave as he, only bowing my Head, and following my Work; for I was hemming a Handkerchief. You are very busy, Madam --- Yes, Sir ----

> Perhaps I break in upon you ---- Not much, Sir ---- I am sorry if I do at all, Madam ---- You see I am pursuing my Work, as I was before you came. ---- I do, Madam! --- very gravely, said he, --- But I have known it otherwise, when Somebody else has been here ---- Very likely, Sir! --- But then I did as I pleased --- so I do now --- and who shall controul me? ---- I *beg pardon, Madam; but 'tis my Value for you* ---- That makes you troublesome, said I, interrupting him. ----- I am sorry for it, Madam! ---- Your humble Servant. ---- Yours, Sir. --- So away he went. (Early Works, p. 000)

The way in which this conversation is represented, with Mr Rushford's direct speech in italics and Lydia's in roman font, and the dashes between them, gives a strong sense not only of the lover's grave awkwardness, but also of Lydia's spirited, quick-witted defiance. She even interrupts one of his ponderous utterances to turn his justification for his jealousy against him. The relative lack of speech tags creates a directness and spontaneity which also hints at the humour that Myers has observed in the collection as a whole, especially in the final truncated 'Your humble Servant ---- Yours, Sir --- So away he went'.

Lydia's attitude towards her gravely serious lover can be compared with that of Anna Howe towards Mr Hickman in Clarissa: or, The History of a Young Lady. In Letter XXVII of Volume II, Anna gives a report to Clarissa of one of her awkward suitor's visits, which begins with him stroking his ruffles:

I could most freely have ruffled him for it. – As it was – Sir – saw you not some one of the servants? – Could not one of them have come in before you?

He begg'd pardon: Looked as if he knew not whether he had best keep his ground, or withdraw. – Till, my mamma. Why, Nancy, we are not upon particulars. – Pray, Mr. Hickman, sit down.

By your le-ave, good madam, to me. – You know his drawl, when his muscles give him the respectful hesitation –

Ay, ay, pray sit down, honest man, if you are weary! – But by my mamma, if you please. I desire my hoop may have its full circumference. All they're good for, that I know, is to clean dirty shoes, and to keep ill-manner'd fellows at a distance.

Strange girl! cry'd my mamma, displeased […] (II.xxvii.159)

Again the way in which Anna represents her own and her suitor's speech here captures her mocking attitude towards him, as well as her lively quick-wittedness. The integration of direct speech in her narrative, often without any attributing clause, creates humour, with the speed of her responses contrasting with the ponderousness drawl of Hickman's speech, who seems as awkward in this exchange as Mr Rushford when visiting Lydia. In this case there is of course a third speaker, Anna's mother, who takes the suitor's side. As previous letters have established him as her favourite, the reader can judge that Anna's behaviour here and her satirical tone is aimed as much against her mother as the unfortunate Hickman (for whom she elsewhere grudgingly acknowledges her esteem).

The representation of speech is also central in creating an impression of character in Letter XXXIII of Familiar Letters: 'A facetious young Lady to her Aunt, ridiculing her serious Lover'. Having thanked her aunt for 'recommending Mr. Leadbeater to me for a Husband', the niece adds 'But I must be so free as to tell you, he is a Man no way suited to my Inclination' (Early Works, p. 000). Her satirical account of the first visit of this 'honest Man' clarifies her feelings:

> […] After he had pretty well rubbed Heat into his Hands, he stood up with his Back to the Fire, and with his Hand behind him, held up his Coat, that he might be warm all over; and looking about him, asked with the Tranquillity of a Man a Twelve-month married, and just come off a Journey, How all Friends did in the Country? I said, I hoped, very well; but would be glad to warm my Fingers. Cry Mercy, Madam! --- And then he shuffled a little further from the Fire, and after two or three Hems, and a long Pause ----
>
> I have heard, said he, a most excellent Sermon just now: Dr. Thomas is a fine Man truly: Did you ever hear him, Madam? […] (Early Works, p. 000)

Again the awkwardness of the prospective lover is indicated by his hesitant style of speech, and the gravity of his topic when he does embark upon it is a further mark in his disfavour. The niece's satirical attitude towards Mr Leadbeater is similar to that of Lydia towards Mr Rushford, and indeed to that of Anna Howe towards Mr Hickman. In this case it is not just the way that his direct speech is represented which conveys her mockery, however. Her suitor's 'ask[ing] with the Tranquillity of a Man a Twelve-month married, and just come off a Journey, How all Friends did in the Country?' starts as indirect speech, from the reporting niece's perspective, before suggesting with

the capitalization of ‘How’ and the question mark after ‘Country’ a flavour of Mr Leadbeater’s actual words and intonation. This is in other words a snippet of free indirect speech, the style which is often said to reach its apotheosis early in the nineteenth century, in the novels of Jane Austen. Its hallmark is the mixture of perspectives (reporter and speaker) which allows for a variety of attitudes to be taken towards the spoken words and the person speaking them. Later in the same letter the style appears briefly again when Mr Leadbeater comes to take his leave:

> […] he press’d my Hand, look’d frightfully kind, and gave me to understand as a Mark of his Favour, that if, upon further Conversation, and Inquiry into my Character, he should happen to like me as well as he did from my Behaviour and Person; why, truly, I need not fear, in time, being blessed with him for my Husband! (Early Works, p. 000)

Here again what starts as indirect speech, with the convoluted clauses following ‘gave me to understand’ indicating the tedious pomposity of the speaker, modulates after the semi-colon into a more direct style, with the expression ‘why, truly’ and the final exclamation mark allowing more of a flavour of Mr Leadbeater’s actual speech. Again this snippet of free indirect speech enables the reporting niece to mix her own perspective with the reported speaker’s voice, and add a mocking slant to her suitor’s words.

The dismissive attitudes of the female characters discussed so far towards their lovers are nothing however to that of Richardson’s most ‘facetious’ letter-writer: Charlotte Grandison. As the newly-married Lady Grandison, Charlotte writes a succession of

letters to Harriet Byron in Volume IV of The History of Sir Charles Grandison, detailing with her characteristically lively wit the travails of married life with Lord G. In Letter XXXVII, for example, she reports that 'we live very whimsically, in the main: Not above four quarrels, however, and as many more chidings, in a day' (IV.xxxvii.256), before revealing that 'we have had a serious falling-out, and it still subsists' (IV.xxxvii.257). The cause is a dispute over the fact that 'we have not made our appearance at court'; she being 'fervent against it' partly due to her brother's absence abroad. Lord G.'s argument is given in a mixture of her and his words: 'I was the only woman of condition, in England, who would be against it' (IV.xxxvii.257). This looks like direct speech, especially with the presence of quotation marks, yet the person and tense have been shifted from what Lord G. would actually have said: 'You are the only woman of condition […]'. This is in other words another example of free indirect speech, with the combination of reporter's and speaker's voices again allowing Lady G. to add her own angle to her husband's words.

After the night has passed off 'with prayings, hopings, and a little mutteration' their dispute resumes:

> The entreaty was renewed in the morning; but no! – 'I was ashamed of him,' he said. I asked him, If he really thought so? – 'He should think so, if I refused him.' Heaven forbid, my Lord, that I, who contend for the liberty of acting, should hinder you from the liberty of thinking! Only one piece of advice, honest friend, said I: Don't imagine the worst against yourself […] (IV.xxxvii.258)

Here free indirect speech emerges more fully in Charlotte's representation of her husband's words, with '"I was ashamed of him"' and '"He should think so if I refused him"' each exhibiting the switches of person and tense noted above (compare 'You are ashamed of me' and 'I shall think so if you refuse me'). The style again captures Charlotte's satirical perspective, presenting Lord G. as under the sway of his domineering wife, even in the way his speech is represented. Her words, in contrast, are given here in forceful direct speech.

In each of his novels, especially Grandison, Richardson develops stylistic techniques which demonstrate and expand the expressive possibilities of the letter and its capacity for creating voices, attitudes and character. His skills as an epistolary stylist are perhaps sometimes lost in appreciation of other aspects of his handling of the letter form. One way of recuperating them would be to go back to the model letters which he was composing at the time of writing Pamela, which display glimpses, albeit sometimes brief and tantalizing, of the innovative playfulness and experimentation with style which were to characterize his greatest achievements.

Notes

[1] Godfrey Frank Singer, The Epistolary Novel: Its Origin, Development, Decline, and Residuary Influence (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1933); Robert Adams Day, Told in Letters: Epistolary Fiction Before Richardson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966).

[2] Bernard Bray, *L'Art* de la letter amoureuse: Des manuels aux romans 1550-1700 (The Hague: Mouton, 1967); Laurent Versini, Laclos et la tradition: essai sur les sources et la technique des Liaisons dangereuses (Paris, Klincksieck).

[3] Shari Benstock, 'From letters to literature: La carte postale in the Epistolary Genre', Genre 18 (1985), 257-295; Linda S. Kauffman, Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

[4] James How, Epistolary Spaces: English Letter Writing from the Foundation of the *Post Office to Richardson's* Clarissa (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003).

[5] Thomas O. Beebee, Epistolary Fiction in Europe 1500-1850 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 3, 8, 9.

[6] Singer, pp. 37-8.

[7] Day, p. 210.

[8] How, p. 17.

[9] Beebee, pp. 18, 21.

[10] Victoria Myers, 'Model Letters, Moral Living: Letter-Writing Manuals by Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson', The Huntington Library Quarterly 66.3/4 (2003), 373, 381, 382.

[11] Myers, 386.

[12] Myers, 386.