

Editorial

Why another volume on historical epistolary discourse since increasing scholarly attention has recently been paid to its development in different periods and from different angles (just to mention a few recent contributions: Dossena and Fitzmaurice 2006; Nevalainen and Tanskanen 2007; Dossena and Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008; Palander-Collin 2010, Cottone and Chiavetta 2010; Daybell 2012; Dossena and Del Lungo Camiciotti 2012)? A number of seminal studies have been published focussing on various aspects of letter writing ranging from those related to the familiar letter (Fitzmaurice 2002) to those associated with epistolary communities beyond the domestic or intimate context that used handwritten texts to foster a shared set of values, be it religious, political or of some other nature (Van Houdt *et al.* 2002; Schneider 2005). From official and professional exchanges (Dossena and Fitzmaurice 2006) to the investigation of social connectedness in personal correspondence, letter writing straddles the divide between private and public communication (Brownlees, Del Lungo and Denton 2010).

The present volume focuses on the early modern period, which represents a turning point in the social function of letter writing. The years from the early sixteenth century through to the early seventeenth century, according to the most notable expert on early modern correspondence, James Daybell, were crucial to the development of the genre of the vernacular English letter (Daybell 2012, 19). Indeed they were, but we would add that in the remainder of the early modern period correspondence also underwent significant functional changes, and not just in England. It is during this time that letter writing served a variety of new functions different from the medieval ones, functions that would characterise correspondence in the following centuries: while mercantile correspondence continued the medieval tradition of mixing the personal and public elements well into the modern period (Del Lungo Camiciotti 2012), correspondence between members of gentry families acquired a marked social function, its main purpose being the establishment and maintenance of social ties.

Through the presentation of case studies, the present volume aims at shedding light on the pivotal early modern period when the culture of epistolarity shifted from the public to the more personal sphere and crucial functional changes occurred in both letter writing and reading practices. In the late medieval familiar/mercantile letters such as, for instance, the Paston Letters or the Cely Papers, the transmission of news was the main function. Correspondents belonging to the gentry and mercantile class exchanged information about family affairs but also kept a network of people informed about financial and political events (Del Lungo Camiciotti 2010). In short, the familiar letter was then a semi-public document due also to the fact that literacy was not widespread and third parties were employed in both the drafting and reading of written messages which, in turn, were not infrequently accompanied by oral messages conveyed by bearers. This changed significantly in the early modern period thanks to both

an increasing number of people writing their own letters and the emergence of new modes of disseminating information and establishing social ties. It can be said that in this period the letter permeated every aspect of familiar and social life (Fitzmaurice 2002, 4). Indeed it became the main means of communication in a world of extended contacts – contacts thinned out by distance through business, travel and other forms of separations (Brant 2006, 1), and the kind of document most commonly written by literate adults. Political news was normally transmitted by means of official and diplomatic letters (Brownlees 2012), but personal letters could still have the function of keeping correspondents informed of public events, both domestic and international. Moreover, the increasing literacy of women (Couchman and Crabb 2005) contributed to the development of ‘networking’ letters, a genre which influenced the style of the familiar letter in that it promoted greater confidentiality and led to more intimate and private forms of communication (Daybell 2001, 7).

In order to assess and discuss points of convergence and divergence between writing practices in different contexts in early modern Europe, the present volume brings together scholars from a wide disciplinary spectrum, working on the linguistic, literary, historical and more broadly cultural features of correspondence. It comprises a number of contributions presenting case studies on differences in letter types, on the role played by letters in self-fashioning, social networking, and knowledge distribution. Particular attention is paid to such issues as letters as paratextual material, the physical description of manuscripts and editorial practices in historical letter collections, correspondence as multifunctional interaction between real people, the construction of the epistolary/discursive identities of the addressees of letters, gender differences in conveying information or in attaining persuasive goals, and the role of letters as literary artefacts.

The novelty and originality of this volume lies first of all in the socio-historical and spatial perspective adopted. Indeed a wide spectrum of letter types is presented; these belong to different European countries, namely England, Italy and France, and are produced by a number of correspondents ranging from the educated to the less educated, or even illiterate, from family members to professional and business people. The scope of the volume is thus extended to encompass the investigation of a variety of writing styles in different contexts of use. A second aspect which characterises the present collection of essays is the multifariousness of the methodological perspectives adopted by the authors of the articles, from pragmatolinguistic analyses to literary and historical investigations.

Furthermore, the case studies presented in this volume address a wide range of topics, some of them novel in the investigation of early modern epistolary discourse: the contributions range from the more traditional reconstruction of the addressor’s self-image to the less studied discursive identity of the recipient, from the focus on letters as ego documents to their dialogic character. Of course letters are a form of self-presentation in that they may tell us a lot about their writers or encoders (on the term ‘encoder’ see Dossena 2012), but they also

reveal a lot about their addressees and the interpersonal relationships between the correspondents. Another topic dealt with in various articles is the construction of epistolary networks which, in the early modern period, contributed not only to reinforce family or patronage links, but could also be the basis of literary practices as the rise of the epistolary novel proves. Gender differences, which were not marked in the Middle Ages (though see Watt 2004), tend to emerge clearly in the early modern period (Daybell 2001, 2005, 2006, Nevalainen 2002) as female literacy increased and contributed to the development of a specific style characterising epistolary exchanges between women. The various case studies explored in this volume highlight a number of features of epistolary discourse in the early modern period – some traditional such as the mixing together of conveying/asking for information and the practical function of letter writing, others innovative such as the epistolary expression of affection and friendship – each prevailing according to the relationship between the correspondents and the purpose of the message. This is perhaps the most striking change that occurred in this period: the extension of epistolary functions to cover various social and personal communicative needs.

The volume opens with an introductory essay by Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti that surveys the increasing scholarly interest that letters and letter writing have recently aroused. Del Lungo Camiciotti highlights three major areas in which the study of letters and epistolary form plays a pivotal role. First of all, letters are an important source of information for socio-historical investigation, the history of languages and sociolinguistics. Secondly, letters as documents and material objects contribute to the reconstruction of official relationships and exchange of information, thus casting some light on the interaction and discursive practices at different social levels. Thirdly, in the early modern period, the epistolary form gave rise to different fictional genres which provided models that in turn enriched and stimulated actual letter writing.

The essays which appear in the 'Case Studies' sections are devoted to particular issues related to letters and letter writing in early modern Europe: from editorial, material and paratextual issues to the importance of epistolary networks in diplomatic, scientific, social and familial transactions; from the use of letters for political aims to the impact of (fictional) letters on stage. These issues are approached from a variety of perspectives that encompass philological, literary, linguistic and historical studies. On the whole, the articles stimulate a nuanced appreciation of the early modern letter and encourage a dynamic and integrative perspective beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries.

An example of this integrated approach is represented by Carlo Maria Bajetta's article which addresses Elizabeth I's Italian letters, so far partially neglected by critical literature. Careful attention to the physical forms of manuscripts and documents allows Bajetta to reach warranted conclusions about the production of the royal correspondence as a multi-agent collaboration. Letters from, but also

to, Elizabeth I are the object of Giuliana Iannaccaro's and Alessandra Petrina's essay which explores some of the different rhetorical strategies and epistolary modalities used in two corpora of letters, the first containing missives by the Queen, the second comprising petitionary letters which preface works presented to her. The discursive negotiations at work in the letters analysed by Iannaccaro and Petrina respond to the sixteenth-century logic of power and share the contemporary language of patronage and protection. The role of dedicatory, as well as postscript, letters is also investigated by Emmanouil Aretoulakis who focuses on the paratextual material which accompanied More's *Utopia*, edition after edition. Written by More's friends and acquaintances who belonged to continental intellectual circles, these letters not only served to legitimize More's endeavour but they also attempted to confer reality on the Utopian island itself.

The exchange of letters among members of intellectual and family circles is the main object of a group of five essays which are contained in the second section of the 'Case Studies'. Here, the construction of epistolary networks is investigated from the points of view of sociopragmatics, discourse analysis and stylistics. For example, by exploring the diplomatic correspondence of Sir Thomas Bodley, Gabriella Mazzon highlights the interplay between directness and indirectness in a particular text-type, the diplomatic letter, which partly differs from both the business and the personal letter. In the case of Henry Oldenburg's letters, Maurizio Gotti shows how epistolary exchange within a scientific community functioned not only as an instrument for sharing views and validating one's observations and findings but, more crucially, how it facilitated the creation of the specialist community itself.

In the early modern period, corresponding with friends and relatives became a quite common social activity: it reinforced family and patronage ties. As shown by Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti and Eleonora Chiavetta, women played an important part in the construction of epistolary networks. Whereas the exploration of Mary Delany's letters allows Chiavetta to highlight how the author mirrors and shapes through discourse different versions of self and different aspects of her interpersonal relationships, the examination of Lady Corwallis Bacon's correspondence by Del Lungo Camiciotti brings into focus a partly overlooked aspect of women's letters. It concerns, namely, the way in which the recipients' identity is constructed and negotiated through epistolary interaction within the group.

Letters also provide a rich field for investigating stylistic features of epistolarity within exchanges between members of a particular circle. In the light of the social network theory, Donatella Montini sheds light on how Samuel Richardson's 'dramatic style' impinged upon the style of members of his epistolary network.

Letters can also be important documents to afford access, though filtered, to subjects who, because of their social condition and level of education, could hardly make their voices heard. It is the case of the Lyon weavers whose petitions to Louis XV and Monseigneur Poulletier are analysed by Carmelina Imbroscio.

Her reading of these important historical documents reveals how the workers were fully aware of their violated rights and the exploitation they had to face. If letters can be used to express political and social concerns, they can also be a source of information to reconstruct the life and activity of personalities, as is the case with Michelangelo's *Carteggio*. In his essay devoted to the artist's correspondence, Adelin Charles Fiorato highlights and explores three main aspects of Michelangelo's letters, the first and second concerning two different kinds of relationships, those with relatives and those with collaborators and patrons. The third aspect touches a more intimate dimension, encompassing the artist's reflection on sickness and death. Thus, Michelangelo's letters offer an illuminating, though mediated, glimpse of the latent aspects of his projects and personal traits.

Alongside 'real' letters, used by 'real' people, to convey all kinds of information, both social and personal, during the early modern period, the fictional uses of the epistolary form flourished. Letters appeared on stage and in prose narratives in forms that imitated the conventions of ordinary correspondence. In Kerry Gilbert-Cooke's article, Shakespeare's stage letters are considered in the light of contemporary epistolary theory. In particular, Gilbert-Cooke argues that the accurate observance, even in drama, of the precept according to which the language of a letter should adapt itself to its recipient, witnesses a more pervasive influence of epistolary theory than previously thought.

Along much the same lines as the previous issues of *JEMS*, this volume features an Appendix, edited by Paola Pugliatti, which includes a wide spectrum of letters and letter types belonging to different cultural contexts in different periods; its aim is to illustrate the manifold uses to which the letter might be put.

As the present collection of essays shows, the social and creative dimensions of the letter form are very variable and, no doubt, its plural manifestations, striking pervasiveness and nuanced complexities in early modern culture deserve deeper investigation and further scrutiny.

Letters from the past are fascinating documents; they appeal to curious and perhaps 'indiscreet' minds, which read, actually re-read, in the present and in a different context, what originally was not intended for them. In this sense, letters offer us a fleeting illusion of a privileged access to alterity.

Our special thanks go as ever to Arianna Antonielli, our indefatigably patient and kind journal manager, and to the dedicated editorial team who made once again the publication of *JEMS* possible. We are particularly grateful to John Denton, always generous with his knowledge and time. We also wish to thank the friends and colleagues who, by responding to our call for papers, have given life to this volume. The many letters we exchanged throughout the process are a testimony of our collegial endeavour and mutual cooperation.

Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti and Donatella Pallotti

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