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Abstract: This article examines **postscripts** both as a feature of **eighteenth-century letters** and as a literary device. Although postscripts could be used for entirely banal purposes such as sending regards or expressing thanks for a gift, their fictional usage was governed by a more specialized set of conventions. The main contention of this article is that the temporal lag between a letter and its postscript allowed novelists such as **Richardson** to explore new ways of manipulating **narrative time**. Henry **Fielding**'s spoof novella *Shamela*, with its numerous postscripts, can be seen as an ironic reflection on that aspect of Richardson's novelistic practice.

'P.S.': The Dangerous Logic of the Postscript in Eighteenth-Century Literature

The cunning of postscripts

Tormented by his wife Margery's amorous fascination with the rake Horner, Mr. Pinchwife, the jealous husband in William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), dictates to her a letter breaking off the affair, with a view to this being dispatched to her defeated lover. The ensuing sequence of events, however, follows the pattern of a familiar stage trick, with Mrs Pinchwife taking advantage of her husband's momentary absence from the room in search of sealing wax to draft an alternative epistle to her 'Dear, Sweet, Mr. *Horner*', entirely reversing the sentiments of Mr. Pinchwife's brusque note. She subscribes it as being from Horner's 'most Humble Friend, and Servant to command 'till death, *Margery Pinchwife*' and folds it ahead of sealing, though not without adding, in Wycherley's suggestive expression, 'a hint at bottom': in other words, a postscript, tailed on to the letter.¹ It matters to the dramaturgy of this scene and the following one that Margery reads out, and so transmits to the audience, the contents of the body of the letter but not the postscript, the content of that being left dangling for a few hundred lines more.

¹ William Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, in *The Plays of William Wycherley*, ed. by Arthur Friedman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 239-355 (IV.2.153-71).

The next scene finds Pinchwife, secure in his misapprehension about the actual letter received by Horner, glorying in his rival's public exposure and dashed sexual ambitions. Horner, for his part, struggles unsuccessfully to reconcile Pinchwife's triumphalist taunts with the letter's actual import. What rescues him from his bafflement, of course, turns out to be Mrs Pinchwife's 'hint at bottom', to which his gaze eventually descends:

Hor. But what should this mean? stay the Postscript.

Be sure you love me whatsoever my husband says to the contrary, and let him not see this, lest he should come home, and pinch me, or kill my Squirrel.
(IV.3.276-79)

It should be noted here that the dramatic effect requires Horner to stumble belatedly upon the postscript, rather than noticing its presence immediately through the visual layout of the letter. Moreover, it falls to him actually to read it out, though of course no real-life reason, as distinct from the logic of stagecraft, compels that Mrs. Pinchwife should voice the main body of the letter but not the postscript, and that the letter's recipient, Horner, should verbalize its postscript but not the rest. In any event, this division of dramaturgical labour allows the audience to encounter the postscript (not altogether unfittingly) as temporally removed from the main body of the letter, whereas the two had in fact been drafted in close succession. The stage function of the postscript is to resolve Horner's immediate

confusion by tipping him off that the letter he has just perused differs from the one Pinchwife believes him to have been reading.²

The whole dramaturgic effect here depends on an interplay between three elements: the letter-text that Pinchwife understands Horner to have received; the actual text that has been surreptitiously interposed by Mrs. Pinchwife; and the letter's postscript, its contents initially withheld from the audience, that eventually allows Horner to make sense of the general confusion. Without the postscript the rest of the subterfuge would very likely have come to grief. The role played by this particular postscript in abetting an adulterous intrigue can be seen as consistent with a more general view, albeit a cynical one, of the general motives behind adding postscripts to letters. Francis Bacon, for example, includes postscripts in his essay 'Of Cunning' amongst other slippery verbal techniques by which we can maximize our advantage across all our different communications with others. The true art of the postscript lies, in his view, in its author's consciously misleading a letter's recipient by putting 'that which was most material in the postscript, as if it had been a by-matter'.³ While this is not exactly what Mrs Pinchwife does, she, as much as Bacon, has evidently grasped the potential of the postscript as a way of managing a communicative act, especially one involving the deception and exploitation of another party.

² There has been little work on the use of letters as stage properties in English drama of the Restoration period. However, for an illustration of this type of approach, see Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008).

³ Francis Bacon, 'Of Cunning', in *Essays*, ed. by Michael J. Hawkins (London: J.M. Dent, 1994), pp. 58-60 (p. 59).

Postscripts in eighteenth-century letters

This essay addresses the use of postscripts in letters by some eighteenth-century authors as well as their incidence in plays and novels in the period. My intention is to try to connect epistolary conventions concerning postscripts with the way in which the device gets exploited for theatrical or novelistic effect, as well as showing in general how correspondents deployed postscripts as a creative resource. My main assertion is that the temporal lag between a letter and its postscript helped eighteenth-century writers conceptualize ways of manipulating narrative time. In the Preface to the first edition of *Clarissa*, Richardson sets down that ‘Letters on both Sides are written while the Hearts of the Writers must be supposed to be wholly engaged in their Subjects [...] So that they abound, not only with critical Situations; but with what may be called *instantaneous* Descriptions and Reflections’.⁴ How best to create within narrative an impression of instantaneous reflection, of an act of writing virtually concurrent with the very event or thought-process that provides its content, posed itself as a significant technical dilemma for eighteenth-century novelists as diverse as Richardson and Sterne. Writing inevitably occupies its own temporal space: the more you write, the more you distance yourself from the event or reflection that provoked you to write in the first place. However, the stop-start effect of inserting a postscript, in either a real or a novelistic letter, allows the correspondent, as it were, to rejoin the present, to recapture the ‘instantaneous’ moment so much prized by Richardson. Postscripts, or even merely the idea of writing in temporal stages, offered then a sort of novelistic solution, but not entirely without a negative element: my treatment of the subject also draws in a loose way

⁴ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady*, 7 vols (1748), I, p. v.

on Derrida's notion of the supplement, seeing a postscript as both aiding a letter (by adding to it) but also displacing it, through superseding it in time.⁵ However, before developing these ideas, I want to begin with the properties of postscripts in general.

Postscripts can be defined both in terms of time and space. For the purposes of this essay I will use the term variably to mean either an instalment of a letter evidently written subsequent to the rest of it, or merely to refer to the part of a letter-text placed after the complimentary close and signature, regardless of whether this text was actually penned on a later occasion than the rest. It might be added that I attach no importance here to whether a postscript is indicated by an actual 'P.S.' or not. Postscripts form part of the complex visual and rhetorical grammar of eighteenth-century letters, consisting of the opening salutation, the body of the letter, the complimentary close, the signature, and the 'significant' space inserted between the different component parts. The presence of unused space in a letter, generated for example by the visual drop from the signature to the postscript, could indicate the affluence of the sender or suggest a tone of deference towards the addressee in an epistolary culture in which letters tended to be crowded with writing, given the cost of running to an additional sheet.⁶

The addition of a postscript would have registered itself differently within this epistolary culture than it perhaps does nowadays, mainly because of the strong sense of finality and polite ceremony registered by the traditional complimentary close. Take the ending of one of the century's most famous letters, that from Johnson to Chesterfield on the publication of the *Dictionary* (1755):

⁵ For Derrida's idea of supplementarity, see *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

⁶ See Jonathan Gibson, 'Significant Space in Manuscript Letters', *The Seventeenth Century*, 12 (1997), 1-9.

Having carried on my work thus far with so little obligation to any favourer of Learning, I shall not be disappointed though I should conclude it, if less be possible, with less, for I have been long wakened from that Dream of hope, in which I once boasted myself with so much exultation, My lord, Your Lordship's
Most humble, most obedient Servant,

S.J.⁷

The letter complies with the standard canons of epistolary etiquette in concluding with a complimentary subscription, but the entire sentence, within which the compliment fits, has the effect of canceling it out, as a style of words that might have characterized Johnson's deference to Chesterfield *in the past* – but not any longer. Of more general note, though, is simply that the letter generates a strong sense of closure by virtue of the way that the compliment itself gets swept up syntactically within the rhetorical climax, and had Johnson thought fit to have added a postscript (which luckily he did not) this would necessarily have had to register its presence against that powerful competing note of finality.

The addition of a postscript might answer to any number of particular epistolary requirements, with postscripts being used in eighteenth-century letters for all of the following reasons: to transmit the compliments *of* someone other than the letter's signatory or *to* someone other than the letter's recipient (this is perhaps the most common cause); to prompt the recipient to a timely reply; to apologize for errors or visible hastiness in the letter just completed or for impolite brevity or

⁷ *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. by Bruce Redford, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), I, 96-97 (7 February 1755).

excessive prolixity; to apologize for sending the letter unfranked and so transferring the cost of postage on to the recipient; to respond to some specific point, not considered germane to the whole, in the letter to which the author is replying; to disclose information about the author's state of health or enquire after that of the addressee; to acknowledge some gift received from the addressee; to suggest or arrange a meeting with the addressee; to detail an event, or course of events, occurring after the signing of the letter; to annexe to the letter material penned by a second hand; or, in general, to add any extra remark by way of afterthought.

As a general rule, postscripts were viewed as informal features of letters rather than part of the standard epistolary apparatus consisting of salutation, complimentary close, and so on. They are exemplified only infrequently in letter-writing manuals and tend not to be encouraged. John Hill's *The Young Secretary's Guide* (7th edn, 1696) countenances them only as part of what he calls '*Mixed Letters*', these being idiosyncratic letters, 'suited to the humour of the Writer', and thrown together from 'Incoherent Matter'.⁸ Letters of this kind would naturally be made up of unconnected sections, and within this context of epistolary disjointedness he permits that 'if the different part requires not many Lines, it may be under-written, by way of Postscript, &c'.⁹ Because postscripts were most often used to convey compliments, the most common criticism concerning them was the neglect and impoliteness implied by the author's omitting to include the compliments in the main body of the letter:

⁸ John Hill, *The Young Secretary's Guide; or, A Speedy Help to Learning. In Two Parts*, 7th edn (1696), repr. in *British and American Letter Manuals 1680-1810*, ed. by Eve Tavor Bannet, 4 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008), II, 1-12 (p. 12).

⁹ *Ibid.*

Begin your Letter about two Inches below the Top of your Paper, and leave about an Inch Margin on the Left-Hand, and what Compliments, or Services, you send in the Letter, insert them rather in the Body or Conclusion of it than by Way of Postscript, as is too often done, but is neither so affectionate or polite, for it not only savours of Levity to your Friends, but has the Appearance of your having almost forgot them.¹⁰

These remarks make clear the extent to which the visual layout of letters, including the expensive white space afforded by generous margins, contributed to an overall sense of epistolary politeness and decorum. Postscripts, potentially hinting at inattention in the letter itself, could puncture that crafted impression. It was for this reason that they came to be all the more strongly discouraged when the addressee was of higher social rank than the author. *The Complete Letter Writer; or, Polite English Secretary*, for example, asserts unqualifiedly that ‘When you write to your Superiors, never make a Postscript’. The addition of a postscript, even of a complimentary kind, risked being viewed as disrespectful by people who ‘expect to be treated with Deference’.¹¹

How correspondents actually used postscripts was inevitably impinged on by the larger rhythms of epistolary correspondence, these in their turn being influenced by the commercial and logistical realities of the postal system.¹² All letters that form part of correspondences, as most familiar letters did, could be seen in themselves as being postscripts, as coming after letters previously sent and

¹⁰ Anon., *The Complete Letter Writer; or, Polite English Secretary*, 12th edn (1768), repr. in *British and American Letter Manuals 1680-1810*, I, 8-13 (p. 9).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, I, 10.

¹² See Howard Robinson, *The British Post Office: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948).

received and as accordingly mediating, or setting in an ever so slightly altered perspective, all the foregoing letters in a series. After the innovations made to the postal system by Ralph Allen in the 1720s and 30s, vastly expanding the reach and efficiency of the network, postal deliveries became more frequent. Yet, as Sarah Haggarty has pointed out, a role still existed for foot-posts and private carriers to convey mail away from the main postal routes, and for a host of personal arrangements to be put in place for letters to be carried from the post office to the addressee's own door.¹³ In a postscript of early 1742, for example, William Shenstone tells his correspondent Mrs Knight how pleased he would be to receive his next letter from her at the very moment of his setting off for London the following week, the letter being put into his hand precisely (as he imagines) 'as I put my Foot into the Stirup'.¹⁴

This unpredictability of deliveries made it very common for the drafting of a letter to be broken in upon either by the arrival of another letter from the same addressee, or by other correspondence occasioning some revision or updating of the letter in hand. Postscripts were of course especially useful in the face of epistolary exigencies of this kind. Also influencing the prevalence of postscripts was the pricing of letters by the sheet. Where the protocols of deference could be set aside, letter-writers became very adept at cramming the maximum wordage on to the page. The need to fill the single sheet, but not to spill over on to an additional one, inevitably placed an artificial check on epistolary flow, requiring a major sustaining – or conscious renewal – of momentum for the author to go beyond it. We can see this,

¹³ Sarah Haggarty, "'The ceremonial of Letter for Letter': William Cowper and the Tempo of Epistolary Exchange", *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 35 (2011), 149-67, (pp. 152-56).

¹⁴ *The Letters of William Shenstone*, ed. by Marjorie Williams (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939), p. 50 (Letter XXVII).

for example, with another of Shenstone's postscripts, this time to Lady Luxborough, penned on June 6th 1749, tagged on to a letter begun three days earlier:

I did think to have sent y^e former sheet this morning; which having neglected to do, I will endeavour to make some Amends for my Delay by adding another; as an Author now & then throws you in a dull appendix *gratis* in order to atone for his dilatory Publication of a duller Piece.¹⁵

Shenstone had presumably penned and signed the letter the previous day, coming to a natural halt when he had filled up the sheet. Neglecting to send off the letter the following morning, however, he embarks on a long postscript, which once more reaches its entirely artificial point of conclusion at the foot of the second sheet: 'Thus has my Pen run on 'till It has cover'd another Sheet'.¹⁶

Letters written by eighteenth-century authors, as other literary works of the period, straddle the divide between text as artefact and text as process. Shenstone's letters, for example, seem to want to realize themselves as a process unfolding in time, with the postscript representing not just an afterthought so much as an afterthought specifically about the foregoing letter. His postscripts therefore depict him as not just a writer, but also a reader of his own correspondence: 'Upon revisal I am asham'd to send this stupid Letter'; 'I think on a revisal I am too censorious'.¹⁷ Many of his letters are composed in instalments, with the stages of composition nakedly in evidence or formally divulged either in the body of the letter or very often in the postscript: 'Tis now Oct. 18th —but this Letter was wrote, in order to

¹⁵ *The Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 198 (Letter LXXXVIII).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 221, 254.

have been sent last Week'.¹⁸ His postscripts seem particularly of a piece with the self-reflexive and quixotic spirit of his correspondence: 'This is a random Letter, and ought to be written over again, but [...] I love Letters written at different Periods.'¹⁹

Postscripts were also inevitably bound up with an author's self-consciousness about concluding or failing to conclude, and, in this way, can be seen as momentary enactments of the anxieties attendant on all forms of human leave-taking and ending.²⁰ As Johnson notes in his penultimate *Idler* essay: 'There are few things not purely evil, of which we can say, without some emotion of uneasiness, "this is the last."²¹ Postscripts can have the effect of tapering an ending, softening it, or dissipating its sense of climax. This interplay between competing impulses to end or to continue past the end is evident in a letter from Thomas Gray (who styles himself in a postscript elsewhere as 'by trade a Finisher of Letters') to Horace Walpole on 12 June 1750:

I have been here at Stoke a few days (where I shall continue good part of the summer); and having put an end to a thing, whose beginning you have seen long ago, I immediately send it you. You will, I hope, look upon it in the light of a *thing with an end to it*; a merit that most of my writings have wanted, and are like to want, but which this epistle I am determined shall not want,

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 291 (Letter CXXI).

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 281 (Letter CXVII).

²⁰ On the nature of literary endings in general, see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); and Pat Rogers, 'The Parthian Dart: Endings and Epilogues in Fiction', *Essays in Criticism*, 42 (1992), 85-106.

²¹ *The Idler and the Adventurer*, ed. by W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell, repr. in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 16 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958-), II (1963), 314 (*Idler*, 103, 5 April 1760).

when it tells you that I am ever

Yours,

T. GRAY.

Not that I have done yet; but who could avoid the temptation of finishing so roundly and so cleverly in the manner of good queen Anne's days.²²

The postscript runs on for another few sentences, with the whole passage being wryly alive to the problematics of closure. Gray, a naturally slow and diffident composer, has enclosed with the letter a copy of the 'Elegy written in a Country Churchyard', stressing it to be a '*thing with an end to it*', presumably so as to discourage any suggestions for further revisions. He dramatizes the poem's now finished and perfected state by summarily moving to the closure of his own letter, a closure he immediately unravels by appending a postscript. However, the tension between the ended and the *infinito* lodges itself also in the complimentary close ('ever Yours'), as well as expressing itself in Gray's decision lower down to add a formal close to the postscript (albeit without a signature), a decision sensitive to the general epistolary dilemma not just of how to finish a letter but equally of how actually to conclude a postscript.

Postscripts in literary works

²² *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, ed. by Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley, three vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), I, 326-27 (Letter 153). The reference to 'queen Anne's days' indicates nostalgia for a more elegantly formal style of complimentary close associated with the turn of the century. For Gray's styling himself a 'Finisher of Letters', see his postscript to a letter of 14 May 1740 from Horace Walpole to Thomas Ashton (Letter 85), in *ibid*, I, 152-55 (p.154).

The use of postscripts in everyday correspondence was not merely unexceptional in itself, but also allowed for the inclusion of material, such as expressing compliments to a third party or acknowledging a gift, often considered too banal or formulaic for inclusion in the main body of the letter. When we turn to letters written specifically by authors, however, these often show a heightened sensitivity to the literary possibilities or dramatic effect of postscripts. Shenstone, for example, ends a gossipy letter to his friend Richard Jago with a plangent one-line postscript: 'Write soon. It is this moment reported that Pope is dead.'²³ The effect generated is complex, partly produced by the sudden insertion of immediacy ('It is this moment') combined with the jolt the reader gets from receiving such momentous tidings through a postscript.²⁴ The reader is left in no doubt that Shenstone has deployed the postscript to produce a particular epistolary effect.

Postscripts featuring in novels or plays can be seen as observing conventions that relate to letters in general but also more specialized ones specific to the realm of literature. They tend to flourish most in amorous correspondence, as especially facilitating secret affairs or elopements, and as belonging to an epistolary territory over which women were the acknowledged rulers. In *The Life, Travels and Adventures of Christopher Wagstaff* (1762), for example, postscripts are listed as part of the more general paraphernalia of love letters, here advertised as articles for sale:

All plain, common, prose *love-letters*, with a reasonable quantity of

²³ *The Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 89 (Letter XLVI, 30 May 1744).

²⁴ Shenstone is one of relatively few eighteenth-century writers to have his correspondence published during his own century. *Letters to Particular Friends* came out in 1770, seven years after his death.

protestations, tears, sighs, and groans, &c. fit for country-gentlemen, or reputable tradesmen, (and their answers) shall be furnished at three-pence a line; —and *postscripts*, not exceeding two lines, shall be allowed the purchaser.²⁵

Postscripts nestle alongside ‘tears’, ‘sighs’, and ‘groans’ as a related symptom of amorous distraction. That the lover’s postscript tends to be more intense, or more emotionally abandoned, than the main body of their accompanying letter is evident from Eliza Haywood’s amatory fiction. In her *History of Jemmy and Jenny Jessamy* (1753), for example, Jenny is on the receiving end of just such a heart-wrenching postscript in which his lover declares herself languishing and ‘distracted’ until she has opportunity of telling him all that her ‘soul is full of’.²⁶ Such emotionally volatile postscripts, however, were not the exclusive preserve of female lovers. In Haywood’s later novel *The Fruitless Enquiry* (1767), it is Bellazara’s ‘devoted slave’, Antonius, whose heart spills over in his desperate postscript:

Oh! If your gentle heart as yet has ever guessed what it is to love and to despair, believe my labours in the pangs of both, and in compassion to my woes, afford an answer to these distracted lines.²⁷

The postscript here marks the boundary between reason and unreason, between self-control and emotional abandonment. The heart spills out from its confines at

²⁵ Anon., *The Life, Travels, and Adventures of Christopher Wagstaff*, 2 vols (1762), II, 58.

²⁶ Eliza Haywood, *The History of Jemmy and Jenny Jessamy*, 3 vols (1753), II, 268.

²⁷ Eliza Haywood, *The Fruitless Enquiry*, 2nd edn (1767), p. 118

the same time as the letter spills out beyond its formal close.

Whereas in such instances the postscript records the mutation of love into distraction, on other occasions it captures the movement from romance into intrigue. Many stage or fictional postscripts serve the lovers in the planning of trysts or even elopements, with the 'P.S.' acting as a sort of sanitary cordon between the romantic and the purely logistical elements of the communication. In Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677), Florinda uses the cover of a masque to convey to her lover Belvile what he describes to his cavalier comrades as 'the softest letter'. Yet though he lets his friends peruse this letter, its exact content remains withheld from the audience, though Belvile paraphrases its purpose as a gentle invitation for him to assist in Florinda's flight from the controlling authority of her brother. Belvile then hands the letter to Willmore for him to relay to the group, as well as to the overhearing audience, the exact words of the postscript: 'At ten at night – at the garden gate – of which, if I cannot get the key, I will contrive a way over the wall – come attended with a friend or two'.²⁸ What Belville cherishes as the 'softness' and 'kindliness' of the main body of the billet seem entirely absent from the postscript, with its bossy, hard-headed plotting, even to the point of Florinda's asking that Belvile enlist his friends to add numbers to the enterprise.

Postscripts need to do something different from the main letter, or to adopt a different tone or register, to merit being postscripts at all. One way of comprehending the relation between the two elements is that postscripts can be seen as forms of reaction against the preceding letter's status as text or discourse. The postscript exudes a greater worldliness than the main text, joining the

²⁸ Aphra Behn, *The Rover*, repr. in *Oroonoko, The Rover and Other Works*, ed. by Janet Todd (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 155-248 (pp. 171-72).

sentiments of the letter to the imperatives and constraints of real world situations. The letter enters and touches the world through the funnel of its postscript. In Haywood's *Betsy Thoughtless*, Betsy's friend Miss Forward receives a passionate letter from her distracted lover, who dedicates himself as her 'most grateful adorer, And everlasting slave, R. WILDLY'. The sentimental flourish of the close, however, dissolves into sober practicality in the ensuing postscript in which, as Miss Forward reports, 'he told me, that he would be in the church-porch in the afternoon, hoping to receive my answer'.²⁹ It is as if the romantic ardour expressed in the letter can only achieve agency in the world through the practical offices afforded by the postscript. This sense of a bathetic drop of tone from the nobly sentimental in the main letter to the officiously pragmatic in the postscript figures in a number of fictive postscripts in post-Restoration literature. It also notably exists in real letters written by Laurence Sterne to his friend and probable lover Catherine (Kitty) Fourmantel. In April 1760 he writes to her a touching letter from London, where she was currently staying. 'You are a most engaging Creature; and I never spend an Evening with you, but I leave a fresh part of my heart behind me', he confides to her, before descending in the postscript to the logistics of their next liaison: 'I will be with You soon after two o'Clock—if not at two—so get y^r Dinner over by then'.³⁰

Although in the letters just quoted postscripts feature as textual auxiliaries to be called upon by both male and female lovers, their usage became viewed in some quarters as particularly characteristic of female letter-writers. Such an association may have been rooted in the fact that female correspondents of elevated social rank

²⁹ Eliza Haywood, *The History of Betsy Thoughtless*, 4 vols (1751), I, 152.

³⁰ *The Letters*, ed. by Melvyn New and Peter de Voogd, vols 7-8 of the *Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), VII, 142 (Letter 54).

were more likely than men to have had their letters scribed by secretaries, and so to have added holograph postscripts as a personalizing touch.³¹ The particular office performed by women's postscripts is discussed in Richard Steele's *Spectator*, 79 (31 May 1711), which, through the moral dissection of 'a Billet or two which came from Ladies', aimed to show women's particular weakness and self-deception in the face of amorous temptation. Steele cites the following letter and afterword as evidence of his case:

Mr. SPECTATOR,

I AM Young, and very much inclined to follow the Paths of Innocence; but at the same time, as I have a plentiful Fortune, and am of Quality, I am unwilling to resign the Pleasures of Distinction, some little Satisfaction in being Admired in general, and much greater in being beloved by a Gentleman, whom I design to make my Husband. But I have a mind to put off entering into Matrimony 'till another Winter is over my Head, which (whatever, musty Sir, you may think of the Matter) I design to pass away in hearing Musick, going to Plays, Visiting, and all other Satisfactions which Fortune and Youth, protected by Innocence and Virtue, can procure for,

SIR,

Your most humble Servant,

M.T.

³¹ See James Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 109. This convention is an interesting example of postscripts being used partly to add secondary content to the letter but also to provide authentication along with the signature itself. There is in fact a case for associating postscripts with the domain of the signature rather than the letter-text.

‘My Lover does not know I like him, therefore having no Engagement upon me, I think to stay, and know whether I may not like any one else better.’³²

By their postscripts may you know them; or, as Steele observes, quoting his fictitious friend Will. Honeycomb, ‘[a] Woman seldom writes her Mind but in her *Postscript*’. The deplorable M. T., as the Spectator views her, uses the body of her letter to set out the merits of the sort of gadding life of pleasure that might be pursued, within the bounds of innocence, by an unattached, monied, and attractive young woman. What she confides within the deeper confessional of the postscript, though, is her giddiness and amorous promiscuity, leading the Spectator to comment that ‘[t]here is no end of Affection taken in at the Eyes only’.³³

There are various elements of gender stereotyping on display here. Postscripts are adduced as a female epistolary device partly because they provide a vehicle for intrigues, in the arts of which women were seen as being especially adept. Furthermore, they seemed to epitomize the inveterate contrariness of the female mind, such that the portion of a letter that ought to contain the most incidental matter instead gets used to convey its most important business. That this was a feature of women’s epistolary technique is a regular source of comment in fictional works of the period. The eponymous heroine of Elizabeth Griffith’s *The Story of Lady Juliana Harley* (1776), for example, observes to her friend Maria that ‘the men say that the purport of a lady’s letter is always contained in the postscript’.³⁴ Such a perception may have arisen in part from the related

³² Repr. in *The Spectator*, ed. by Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), I, 338-39.

³³ *Ibid.*, I, 339.

³⁴ Elizabeth Griffith, *The Story of Lady Juliana Harley*, 2 vols (1776), II, 59.

observation, as reported for example in *An Apology for the Life of George Anne Bellamy* (1785) that 'a woman's postscript is generally longer than the letter itself', a phenomenon associated in its turn with women's supposed predilection for adding postscripts to postscripts.³⁵ In *The History of Lady Bettesworth and Captain Hastings* (1780), when her eponymous Ladyship reaches the concluding postscript of a letter from a female correspondent, she can't help exclaiming: 'What, another Postscript! Right woman's letter.'³⁶

Postscripts and novelistic immediacy

Postscripts were recognized as belonging mainly to so-called 'familiar' letters, informal letters exchanged between friends or loved ones, and their use accordingly has a general relevance to debates about the proper composition of letters of this kind.³⁷ The very concept of epistolary 'familiarity' lent itself to what nowadays might seem bewildering extremities of idealization. James Howell, for example, in a poem 'To the *knowing* READER, touching Familiar or Letters-*missive*' stationed at the front of his regularly reprinted *Epistolae Ho-Eliaanae* (1645), celebrates such letters as the 'life of Love, the Loadstones that by rare / Attraction, make souls meet, and melt, and mix'. Elsewhere, he claims that '*Letters* Ideas are, / Of the informing

³⁵ George Anne Bellamy, *An Apology for the Life of George Anne Bellamy*, 6 vols (1785), VI, 120.

³⁶ E. M., *The History of Lady Bettesworth and Captain Hastings*, 2 vols (1780), I, 10.

³⁷ On familiar correspondence, see Howard Anderson and Irvin Ehrenpreis, 'The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century: Some Generalizations', in *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Howard Anderson, Philip B. Daghljan, and Irvin Ehrenpreis (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), pp. 269-82; Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986); and, more generally, Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

soul, they can declare, / And shew the inward Man'.³⁸ This idealized claim that familiar letters allow for a pure converse between souls, making the contents of the soul readily available and legible to the letter's recipient, exercises a significant influence on those seeking to legislate on the proper conduct of familiar correspondences. In a famous pronouncement Thomas Sprat stated it to be characteristic of such letters that in them 'the Souls of Men should appear undress'd'.³⁹ Sprat's remark epitomizes a paradoxical strain in the theorization of the familiar letter in which the materiality of the letter, its status as a physical medium between sender and addressee, tends to get discounted. What replaces it, in the minds of such commentators, is the ideal of a pure non-mediated transfer of interiority between author and recipient.

Much of the discussion surrounding familiar letters in the eighteenth century can be reduced to a division between those wanting, on the one hand, to acknowledge, or, on the other, to deny, the letter's mediating role as a textual genre and material entity within such correspondences.⁴⁰ One highly-developed view insisted that familiar letters be seen as essentially proxies for conversation between the parties, with the skill of epistolary composition being judged in terms of its ability to reproduce the immediacy and informality of good conversation. In the Preface to his *Letters and Poems, Amorous and Gallant* (1692), one of the most important early collections of authorial correspondence, William Walsh proposed

³⁸ James Howell, 'To the *Knowing Reader*', in *Epistolae Ho-Eliauae* (1645), sigs. A-A2^v.

³⁹ See Sprat's 'Account of the Life and Writings of Mr. Abraham Cowley', in *The Works of Abraham Cowley* (1668), sig. C.

⁴⁰ I am indebted to the discussion of this and related issues in the section on 'Reading Epistolary Fiction', in Tom Keymer, *Richardson's Clarissa and the Eighteenth-Century Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 1-15.

that '[t]he Stile of Letters ought to be free, easy and natural; as near approaching to familiar Conversation as possible'.⁴¹ The term that was most often used to capture this epistolary technique was 'undress' (as employed by Sprat earlier) which conveyed a sense both of the nakedness and transparency of such correspondence and also its informality and artless negligence, as when Pope assures his addressee John Caryll that 'my letters are scribbled with all the carelessness and inattention imaginable' so that 'my style, like my soul, appears in its natural undress before my friend'.⁴²

While Pope is endorsing relatively common precepts about the composition of familiar letters, it would be wrong to assume these necessarily enjoyed universal approbation. Another school of thought was inclined to cast doubt on the extent to which letters ought to model themselves on conversation: as John Dennis puts it, the purpose of familiar letters was rather 'to supply Conversation, and not to imitate it'.⁴³ Dennis in fact was one of a number of commentators to doubt that familiar letters could be reduced to a single epistolary style, arguing instead that the style of a letter should rise and fall with the contours of the individual subjects under discussion, its being proper, as Dr. Johnson was later to point out, 'to depart from familiarity of language upon occasions not familiar'.⁴⁴ Moreover, the idea that stylistic negligence should be singled out as a particular virtue of familiar letters

⁴¹ William Walsh, Preface to *Letters and Poems, Amorous and Gallant* (1692), sig. A2^v.

⁴² *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. by George Sherburn, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), I, 155 (Letter to John Caryll, 19 November 1712).

⁴³ See the 'Advertisement' to *Letters upon Several Occasions* (1696), in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. by Edward Niles Hooker, 2 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1939-43), II, 382.

⁴⁴ See *The Rambler*, ed. by W. J. Bate and Albrecht Strauss, 3 vols (1969), repr. in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, V, 46 (*Rambler*, 152, 31 August 1751).

clashed with more exalted notions of epistolary craft. For Johnson, in letters as much as any other form of literary production, '[t]he pebble must be polished with care, which hopes to be valued as a diamond'.⁴⁵

These debates about the properties of familiar letters matter to my task-in-hand only in so far as they provide some context for thinking about postscripts as a distinctive property of letters of this kind. The occurrence of postscripts in familiar letters both validates and contests certain views about the aesthetic of epistolary familiarity. If letter-writers were being encouraged towards an unbuttoned, negligent style, the casual addition of a postscript could seem in keeping with this. Yet, at the same time, the impression apparently sought by such letters of being immediate, sincere effusions from the heart could be jeopardized if the postscripts attached to them appeared to qualify the sincerity of the preceding text, or to flourish their own credentials as instalments even more immediate to the reader than the letters to which they were appended. Whatever else, postscripts could hardly but remind readers of the textual machinery of the epistolary form, in contrast to the view that the familiar letter, in its most idealistic construction as an authentic discourse of the heart, transcended such material mediation. When Alexander Pope, one of the more avid proponents of familiar letters as unmediated 'Emanations of the Heart', oversaw the publication of his own correspondence, the postscripts were in many instances silently removed, partly no doubt as a tidying-up exercise but also perhaps in recognition of the way that they compromised the sense of artless sincerity that the published letters were intended to convey.⁴⁶

The complex relation of postscripts to epistolary 'undress' can be explored in

⁴⁵ Ibid., V, 47.

⁴⁶ The phrase appears in the preface to the quarto edition of Pope's *Letters* (1737) and is reproduced in *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, I, p. xxxvi.

a postscript attached by Sterne to a letter to the Rev Francis Blackburne in November 1750, mainly concerning an arrangement for substitute preaching. The postscript runs as follows:

PS

Our Dean arrives here on Saturday

My Wife sends her Resp^{ts} to You & Y^r Lady.

I have broke open this Letter, to tell You, That as I was Going with it to the Post, I encounterd Hilyard, who desired me in the most pressing Manner, not to let this Affair Transpire—& that You might by no means be acquainted with it—I therefore beg, you will never let him feel the Effects of it, or even Let him know, You know ought about it—for I half promised him,—tho' as the Letter was wrote, I could but send it for your own Use—So beg it may not hurt him, by any Ill Impression, as he has Convinced <all> It proceeded only from Lack of Judgm^t.⁴⁷

The purpose of the postscript was to bind Blackburne to keep secret his knowledge of the disclosures contained in Sterne's letter to him, this being necessitated by Sterne's chance encounter with another party involved in the affair as he was *en route* to post the letter. It is not unprecedented among his letters either that the postscript mainly helps Sterne cover his tracks, or that its addition involves the letter actually being broken open and then resealed.⁴⁸ Whereas, following the

⁴⁷ *The Letters*, I, 16-17 (Letter 6).

⁴⁸ See the 'Postscript' to *A Political Romance*, in *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy by Mr. Yorick to Which are Added the Journal to Eliza and a*

encounter with Hildyard, Sterne might have thought better of sending the letter at all, or put himself to the trouble of redrafting it, his decision instead to attach a postscript allows him to get away with minimum disruption of his plans.

When Sarah Fielding, in the Preface to her *Familiar Letters Between the Principal Characters in David Simple* (1747), tries to define the meaning of the stock expressions 'familiar easy Style' or 'concise epistolary Style', she decides that what they amount to is nothing other than 'short, abrupt, unconnected Periods', of the sort that 'any Man may write'.⁴⁹ Sterne's postscript above, in its breathless, abrupt and staccato sentences, conforms closely to this definition. It is not just written after the main letter but written in a different style, one consciously drawing attention to its own urgency as well as its higher level of immediacy. The sheer vigour of its 'nowness' makes the rest of the letter already seem dated, even historical. Whereas the main body of the letter depends on a relatively leisurely relation to a larger situation, the postscript represents an up-to-the-moment reaction to unfolding events.

All these factors, as well as the general urgency of its rendered experience, make Sterne's postscript reminiscent of the way the same device figures in Samuel Richardson's novels as part of the narrative technique that the novelist himself termed 'writing to the moment'.⁵⁰ In the very first letter of Richardson's earliest fiction, Pamela relates to her devout parents the recent death of her 'Lady' and the

Political Romance, ed. by Ian Jack (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 210.

⁴⁹ Sarah Fielding, *Familiar Letters Between the Principal Characters in David Simple*, 2 vols (1747), I, p. vii.

⁵⁰ For Richardson's self-consciousness about his 'new Manner of Writing—to the Moment', see his letter to Lady Bradshaigh (9 October 1756), in *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. by John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 329.

gift of four guineas in mourning money bestowed on her by her new master. She has enclosed these in a pill-box, 'wrapt close in Paper', to be delivered by the letter-carrier. The main body of the letter closes as follows:

I know, dear Father and Mother, I must give you both Grief and Pleasure; and so I will only say, Pray for your *Pamela*; who will ever be,

Your most dutiful Daughter.

I have been scared out of my Senses; for just now, as I was folding this Letter, in my late Lady's Dressing-room, in comes my young Master! Good sirs! How was I frightned! I went to hide the Letter in my Bosom, and he seeing me frightened, said, smiling, Who have you been writing to, *Pamela*?— I said, in my Fright, Pray your Honour forgive me!—Only to my Father and Mother. He said, Well then, Let me see how you are come on in your Writing! O how I was sham'd!—He, in my Fright, took it, without saying more, and read it quite thro', and then gave it me again; —and I said, Pray your Honour forgive me;—yet I know not for what. For he was always dutiful to his Parents; and why should he be angry, that I was so to mine! And indeed he was not angry; for he took me by the Hand, and said, You are a good Girl, *Pamela*, to be kind to your aged Father and Mother.⁵¹

The postscript runs on for a few more sentences, with Pamela winding up on a note of embarrassment at 'making another long Letter'. Oddly, the one signature follows

⁵¹ Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, ed. by Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 12.

the postscript, not the main body of the letter, though Pamela admits to having been interrupted by her master in the actual process of 'folding this Letter', at which point the signature would normally already have been applied.

Pamela's remark about 'another long Letter' is deceptive in as much as the text subsequent to her first close does not read like that of a letter. Its breathless sentence formation, flurried punctuation marked in particular (like Sterne's letter above) by a liberal use of dashes, and general tone of self-dramatization make it very different from the preceding letter or from Pamela's customary epistolary style elsewhere in the novel. What conditions the style of the postscript are two relations in which it stands to chronology: it gets drafted after the preceding portion of the letter, but also it differs from the remainder of the letter through being composed in a much more proximate temporal relation to the events it actually describes. Its status as a *post-text* (that is, postdating the main body of the letter) vies with its aspiration to be nearly contemporary with the events that form its own subject-matter.

Pamela's embarrassment at having her letter scrutinized by Mr. B, and at having her general pretensions to letter-writing uncovered, does not stop her immediately recording the incident in the dashed-off postscript. The writing and sending of the postscript place Mr. B immediately at a disadvantage in as much as Pamela, her parents, and the novel's readers are privy to both portions of the letter whereas Mr. B (unbeknown to him) gets only to see the first part. The postscript, as the device often does, introduces a division of knowledge between the participants. The movement from the body of Pamela's letter to her postscript says much about the range of possible fluctuations in Richardson's narrative technique in general. Whereas the memoir novel can range steeply across the past perfect and past

pluperfect tenses, Richardson's fictions unfold in only a shallow past, where small gradations of temporal removal attract great significance. The idea of the postscript, as a sort of textual phantasm of scripted instantaneousness, marking a temporal moment occurring, in Pamela's words, only 'just now', is integral to the formal technique of his novels.

Postscripts occur commonly in *Pamela*: of the heroine's first twenty letters, eight contain some post-scripted material placed after the initial close. In accordance with the meta-textual role of many postscripts, in terms of their commenting on the foregoing letter or the conduct of the larger correspondence, both Pamela and Mr. Williams use postscripts to manage the clandestine release of the former's letters, with Williams promising to 'come once every Morning, and once every Evening, after School-time, to look for your Letters'.⁵² The postscript here allows such narrowly logistical details to be kept separate from the more general exchange of sentiments, but it also reflects the common understanding of postscripts as a textual space in which to stow the more secretive elements of a correspondence, even where the letter and postscript will inevitably be received and read together. Mr. B himself uses an early postscript to notify Pamela's parents of his discovery of his own servant John's role in smuggling out an earlier batch of letters: 'P.S. I find my Man *John* has been the Manager of the Correspondence, in which such Liberties have been taken with me'.⁵³ Again, it is assumed that the postscript provides the most fitting place for issues to do with the general management of correspondences.

Postscripts occur less regularly in *Clarissa*, though normally retaining the

⁵² Richardson, *Pamela*, p. 129.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

same connotation as in *Pamela* of a level of discourse more emotionally spontaneous and more strenuously seeking coincidence with the present moment than that confined to the main body of the letter.⁵⁴ Clarissa's letter to Miss Howe (Letter 57), for example, consists of an initial instalment of the letter, at the end of which Clarissa lays down her pen, 'having tired myself and I dare say you'; a second section added sometime later, albeit not marked as a postscript, concluded with a complimentary close after a sentence indicating Clarissa's intention to put the letter in the post directly ('I will deposit thus far'); and then a final instalment scribbled in pencil on the outside of the letter, after Clarissa has discovered a second letter from Anna waiting for her downstairs.⁵⁵ The drafting of the letter in discrete stages allows for the process of its composition to itself become dramatic and for variation in Clarissa's mood and epistolary style. In addition, the longer the letter, the greater the extent to which it must inevitably postdate its own narrative starting point, so the use of instalments or postscripts allows the letter to constantly update itself against the clock, to haul itself back into contemporaneity with the narrative moment.

Particularly in *Pamela*, the frequency of postscripts seems much in excess of what one would expect in conventional correspondence. In Richardson's own exemplary volume of *Familiar Letters on Important Occasions* (1741) from which the idea of *Pamela* first arose, they occur very sparingly, and with no hint of the

⁵⁴ Though an obvious element of Richardson's epistolary (and narrative) technique, his letter postscripts have received less attention than might have been expected. The only systematic analysis seems to have been by Donald L. Ball in his *Samuel Richardson: The Theory of Fiction* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 116-21, 295.

⁵⁵ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa; or, the History of a Young Lady*, ed. Angus Ross (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 244.

resource that they provide elsewhere for Richardson in his capacity as a novelist.⁵⁶ Of course, the extent to which it is germane to remark on this, and indeed to scrutinize Richardson's fictional letters as specimens of real letters, evincing real epistolary properties, has been subject to some debate. Janet Altman, for example, insists that the letters merely exist to deliver the narrated world, and that Richardson shows little interest in actively exploiting conventions of letter writing.⁵⁷ Such an opinion is broadly in keeping with a longstanding critical view that Richardson chose the epistolary method simply as a device to render the inner processes of the mind in the most complete and intimate manner, with the letters themselves just acting, in Ian Watt's expression, as a 'short-cut, as it were, to the heart'.⁵⁸ A corollary of this general issue is the extent to which we should view Richardson's epistolary heroines as, indeed, letter-writers, or as characterized in a significant way by the avidity with which they compose letters or by their distinctive epistolary characteristics. Would it be any more true to view Pamela, for example, as an obsessive letter-writer than to view Hamlet as a compulsive orator? It would follow that if the novel were not asking us to attend to Pamela's letter-writing, neither would it be asking us to take note of her more the unusually assiduous use of postscripts or to think about those issues of epistolary etiquette or divided selfhood that might be indicated by the regular usage of such a device.

It is probably best that Pamela's postscripts should remain invisible to

⁵⁶ For Richardson's attitude towards familiar letters, see John's Carroll's introduction to *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, pp. 31-35; and Elizabeth Bergen Brophy, *Samuel Richardson: The Triumph of Craft* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974), pp. 38-49.

⁵⁷ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State Press, 1982).

⁵⁸ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), p. 195.

critical attention, in the specific sense that it would be wrong to read them as indexing her particular proclivities as a correspondent. However, for Richardson the novelist, it hardly goes too far to suggest that the postscript might be seen as the very grail of his fictive method. That tiny interval of lapsed time separating the body-text from its postscript is the space that Richardson's fictions crave to occupy. It is the space in which the mind can return on itself, and in which the postscript's ability to trump the foregoing text with its claim to a higher level of immediacy hints erotically at dizzying vistas of confession and unbosoming. Perhaps, most of all, Richardson's aspiration to the full flow of dramatic immediacy, his 'writing to the moment', could most perfectly be realized by composing, not text, but post-text. It is on its very post-dating of the previous moment of writing that the postscript bases its claim for currency with the narrative instant. Perhaps only two letters exist in the English language plausibly purporting to capture the absolute coincidence of experiential and epistolary time: 'P.S.'

The most high-profile opponent of the Richardsonian technique, and especially of the laboured artificiality of his attempt at writing to the moment, is of course Henry Fielding. What has received less comment is the extent to which Fielding seems to have associated Richardson's novelistic trademark with the regularity of his use of letter postscripts. In Fielding's *Shamela* (1741), the eponymous heroine, the bawd Mrs Jervis, and Parson Tickletext all hang postscripts on the end of their letters. Having described to her mother her departure from Squire Booby's house, Shamela herself adds the following postscript:

P.S. Just as I was going to send this away a Letter is come from my Master, desiring me to return, with a large Number of Promises. – I have him now as

sure as a Gun, as you will perceive by the Letter itself, which, I have inclosed to you.⁵⁹

The art of Fielding's spoof was to insist on noticing aspects of Richardson's text that a more neutral reading would have silently passed over, amongst which is the egregious epistolary technique of regular use of postscripts. The passage above, with the manipulative Shamela glorying in her proximity to her grand prize, sends up the clumsiness of the '[j]ust as' moment, so precious to the novelistic technique of *Pamela*. Fielding appreciated just how germane the postscript was to unlocking and discrediting the fictional method of the man who was to be his main professional adversary over the next decade, a point underlined by the way that his own novella ends, or perhaps more accurately, stops: that is, with a postscript.⁶⁰

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⁵⁹ Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews and Shamela*, ed. by Douglas Brooks-Davies, rev. by Thomas Keymer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 334.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 344 (Letter from Parson Tickletext to Parson Oliver).