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A Thousand Years Of Model Letter-Writers

Considerando la scrittura di lettere come parte della retorica, questo articolo si propone di tracciare gli sviluppi dei manuali di corrispondenza in Inghilterra dalle origini ad oggi, partendo dai formulari in latino e in francese. In Inghilterra i primi manuali apparvero nel tredicesimo secolo, ma solo nel sedicesimo secolo iniziarono ad essere redatti in inglese. In seguito, gradualmente, si orientarono sempre più verso le necessità dell'uomo comune piuttosto che quelle dell'uomo di lettere. Esistono due principali tipi di manuali: da una parte quelli destinati ad un uso pratico e, dall'altra, quelli finalizzati all'intrattenimento, sviluppatisi successivamente. In questo articolo verranno analizzate le formule di apertura e di chiusura, nonché altre formule che, in uso da prima del quattordicesimo secolo, sono sopravvissute fino al ventesimo secolo nell'uso meno colto. Al termine un breve sguardo sarà rivolto ai manuali di corrispondenza che continuano tuttora ad essere pubblicati.

1. Introduction

The *ars dictaminis* or the 'art of letter writing' has a long and respectable history. It formed a part of rhetoric and as such can be traced back to Quintilian (c.A.D. 35-100) in the first century A.D. Clearly, people were writing letters before that. Isocrates in the fourth century B.C. wrote a series of letters that are held to have made the genre into an art form. The Apostle Paul wrote copiously to the young Christian churches in Asia Minor in the first century A.D. His writing is highly stylised and formulaic and it is difficult to imagine that he had not had some instruction in the art of letter writing. Manuals for writing letters, however, are known only from about 1,000 A.D.

2. English Letter-writers

2.1. Early letter-writers in England

The earliest formulator of rules for letter writing as far as we know

was Alberic of Monte Cassino c.1075.¹ His treatise was of course in Latin. The British Library has a formulary (the original name for a letter-writing manual) which is tentatively dated c.1207 and was made for the Bishop of Salisbury. Probably the earliest formulary compiled in England was one by Giovanni di Bologna, which was for the use of John Peckham, Bishop of Canterbury, who died in 1292.

Formularies increased in numbers during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, particularly in Italy, Spain and France. Among the most well-known works on the subject of letter writing in England are two treatises by Thomas Sampson, who taught at Oxford in the time of Richard II (d.1400). In the late fifteenth century Erasmus wrote a treatise on letter-writing for his English pupils in Paris: *Libellus de conscribendis epistolis*. This was first printed in England in 1521. Latin formularies continued to be used in schools throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for instruction in how to compose letters. In 1600 the schoolmaster, Charles Hoole, was still recommending Erasmus's work. In that same year Hoole also produced a textbook on letter-writing: *A Century of Epistles English and Latin*, usually given with its Latin title.² This was a landmark in English letter-writing manuals for schools: although the letters it contained were a selection from classical authors, including Cicero and Pliny, they were not only given in Latin but also translated into English.

2.2. Letter-writers in English

So far, only Latin manuals have been mentioned but well before Hoole's *Century of Epistles*, model letter-writers had appeared in English for the general public. One of the first was *The Enimie of Idleness* by the merchant, William Fulwood (d.1593), which was published in 1568. This is a translation of a French work, attributed to Jean de la Moynes (1566) with a few additions. It was more concerned with everyday life and domestic matters than was usual in the Latin

¹ Information about early letter writers is taken from Robertson (1942).

² *Centuria epistolarum Anglo-Latinarum ex tritissimis classicis authoribus, viz. Cicerone, Plinio & Textore, selectorum quibus imitandis ludi-discipuli stylum epistolis familiarem facilius assequantur* (London, 1660); see the database Early English Books Online (EEBO) <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>>.

treatises previously noted. In a preface “To the reasonable Reader”, which Fulwood added later, he set out his aims:

the cunning clarke hath small neede of a teacher. It is the vnskillfull scholer that wanteth instructions. Mine onely intent therefore at this instant is to place downe such precepts, and set forth such instruction, as may (in mine opinion) best serue to edifie the ignorant: and those not vnprofitable, but very nedful. (Fulwood 1582: A6)³

This marks a change of direction from the Latin treatises, which were largely intended as scholarly aids or for instruction in schools.

The first manual to include letters that had been made up by the author, as opposed to copies of original letters, was Angel Day’s *English Secreterie* (1586). This is perhaps the best known of the many sixteenth-century letter-writers. It still closely follows Erasmus and the principles of the *ars dictaminis*: the five parts to a letter (*exordium*, *narratio*, or *propositio*, *confirmatio*, *confutatio* and *peroratio*), and also four main types of letters: deliberative, demonstrative, judicial and familiar. In the familiar letters more freedom of expression was allowed and it is on these that this study will now concentrate. Typical is the type headed “From a servant or a factor to his master”. Angel Day’s manual was published until at least 1635. The last letter-writer to be associated with the art of rhetoric was Thomas Blount’s *The Academie of Eloquence* (1653).

2.3. *Development of letter-writers in the seventeenth century*

A new development began with Nicholas Breton’s volume of model letters, *A Poste with a Packet of Madde Letters*, published in 1602. Breton dabbled in various types of ephemeral literature: pamphlets, essays and dialogues, and the letters in *A Poste with a Packet* are more for amusement than for serious copying. One entitled “A Letter to laugh at, after the fashion of loue to a Maide” indicates the type. This genre became very popular throughout the seventeenth century and there were numerous successors to *A Poste with a Packet*. Very often they were illustrated with woodcuts. A title such as *Cupid’s Messenger* (1629) gives an indication of the sort of entertainment to be expected from

³ These words are not in the 1568 edition.

such manuals. Love letters seem to be a feature and they often contained rudimentary narratives. Angel Day's *English Secretorie* had also included a sequence of love letters, although his aim was more serious. These sequences of letters, often only three or four, possibly paved the way for epistolary fiction, which developed in the eighteenth century with writers such as Samuel Richardson.

One of the best known imitations of Breton is W.P.'s *The Wit's Academy* (1677) This contains some of the letters which had already appeared in Breton's *Post with a Packet*. The success of this work was such that W.P. quickly followed it with *A Flying Post* (1678), which mixes serious letters with more comic and fantastic ones.

The first publication to use the actual term "letter-writer" was *A President for Young Pen-men, or the Letter Writer* (1615) by M.R. This publication aimed to combine usefulness with amusement. Breton's influence was felt up to about 1640 although similar volumes of letters appeared to the end of century. In 1640 John Massinger's translation of de la Serre's *Le Secretaire a la Mode* (*The Secretary in Fashion*) set another new direction in letter-writing manuals. Its aim was neither academic, as in the earlier Latin treatises, nor was it intended for amusement or diversion. It set out to instil good manners and teach the art of courtship. The French tradition of politeness is indicated in the title.

Nothing has so far been said about letter-writing for women. Almost all the early treatises and certainly those written for school or academic use were intended for boys and men. However, women were not forgotten, especially in the more domestic type of manual. There were letters for women's use in a section of Fulwood's *The Enemie of Idleness* in the late sixteenth century and most letter-writers thereafter contained a few model letters for women. 1638 probably saw the first whole volume dedicated to women with *The Secretary of Ladies*. This was originally a French publication by Jacques Du Bosque and it was translated by Jerome Hainhofer or I.H. as he appears on the title page.

2.4. *The later seventeenth century and The Young Man's Companion series*

In 1696 the publication of John Hill's *The Young Secretary's Guide* marked another and more lasting stage in letter-writers. It was in two parts: the second was concerned with business and legal matters but the

first part was called: “The true method of writing letters upon any subject; whether business or otherwise: fitted to all capacities”. Jean Robertson in her book *The Art of Letter Writing* calls this compilation “the triumph of the bourgeoisie over the court in the field of letter writing” (1942: 63). There were no love letters in this manual, which was intended solely for instruction and as a “guide” for people wishing to write letters.

The utilitarian thrust of letter-writing manuals aimed at the less academically educated is seen particularly in the *Young Man's Companion* series. The first of these manuals, which continued to be published for nearly two hundred years, was William Mather's *Young Man's Companion*, 1681. It was intended for young men of the working or artisan class and contained instruction on a variety of subjects, including practical mathematics, grammar and miscellaneous matters, such as medical cures, bee-keeping, astronomy, a formula for making a Will and so on. It included a section of model letters. In this first of the series, Mather has about thirty model letters. Some titles are:

A Son to his Parents, thanking them for his good Education

A Father to a Son just beginning in the World

A Letter of Thanks

A Letter from a Brother at home to his Sister abroad on a visit, complaining of her not writing.

An Apprentice to his friends

A Gentleman to a Gentlewoman to beg pardon for an Offence.

The letters, as will be seen, are mostly domestic-type letters of the sort that might be written by ordinary working people. They include letters for women: “A Daughter to her Mother in relation to Marriage”, “A Niece to her Aunt” and so on. There are also a few more distinctly business letters, such as “A Letter Requiring payment of Money as an Acquittance”.

This series was continued by George Fisher and others until well into the nineteenth century. Judging by the number of editions Fisher's work went through, it was extremely popular. The Clift family of Bodmin probably possessed a copy. In 1792, one of the brothers, Thomas Clift (1762-1835), a shoemaker working in Bristol, asked his sister to send him the family's copy of *The Young Man's Best Companion* so that he

could write to his younger brother. William (1775-1849), the youngest of the Clift family, had just left home to be apprenticed to the surgeon, John Hunter, in London. There is no evidence that Thomas actually used any of the letters when he finally did write to young William, but the eldest brother John (1759-1819) almost certainly modelled one of his early letters on the type included in Mather: “A Letter from an Elder brother to a Younger exhorting him to good behaviour and seemly Carriage”. Part of John’s letter reads:

be sober and discreet in all you do. be kind & courteous to every one you have to do with & let the remembrance of your God still have the first place in whatever you do, for that is the way to attain the truest wisdom, never absent yourself from your masters house by any means without his leave and always be attentive to his commands. (ed. Austin 1991: 29)

Although this is not an exact copy of Mather’s letter, it smacks very much of the advice to a young man setting out in the world. Exactly which edition of *The Young Man’s Companion* the Clifts owned is not known.

2.5. *Late eighteenth to twentieth centuries*

Model letter-writers continued to be published throughout the eighteenth century and beyond. In 1754, for example, there was Charles Hallifax’s *Familiar Letters on Various Subjects of Business and Amusement ... For the Service of the Younger Part of Both Sexes*. This was intended to encourage letter writing by “conveying Entertainment with moral Instruction”. Hallifax’s manual, dedicated to the Bishop of Worcester, was into its third edition by the following year. It purports to contain genuine letters. Hallifax says in his Preface that:

The Letters for Persons of less happy Education which were found among the original Papers are altered in this Respect; and all those Barbarities of Expression and Uncouthnesses of Manner are softened: this is done tenderly; so that there remains something of Nature, though the faulty Part is taken away. (Hallifax 1754: xvi)

Somewhat later was Thomas Cooke’s *The Universal Letter Writer; or, New art of Polite Correspondence* (?1771). It is directed at “ordinary

readers, whose different employments hinder them either from purchasing or reading a variety of authors” and those who “may have neglected to learn grammar in their youth.” It is mainly serious in intention but includes a few brief narrative sequences. One whole section is devoted to “Courtship and Marriage”. Editions of Cooke’s manual were printed for nearly a hundred years, until at least 1863.

Again there are manuals for ladies, mostly compiled by men but sometimes written by ladies. An early companion-type book is by Hannah Woolley (1622-c.1674): *The Gentlewoman’s Companion; or a Guide to the Female Sex* (1672). The title continues: “Whereunto Is Added: a Guide for Cook-maids, Dairy-maids, Chamber-maids, and all others that go into Service” (1675 edn). Like the *Young Man’s Companion* books it contains some model letters. A very eighteenth-century touch is a letter from “A Lady to her daughter, persuading her from wearing Spots and Black-patches on her face”. Woolley also includes a section on the “Duty and Qualifications of a Governess”. One requirement is the “Need to know Latin.” A few letters seem to be intended for a more working-class reader, such as one from a servant girl to her Mother, asking for advice on a proposal of marriage, but generally the volume seems to be aimed more at gentlewomen than at cook-maids or dairy-maids.

In the eighteenth century we have *The Lady’s Polite Secretary* (1771) by the writer and poet, Dorothea Du Bois (1728-1774). The author is described on the title page as “A real lady of fashion” and this was a manual mainly for upper classes as the title suggests. Real names are used: the first letter is “From Miss Willis to Miss Sophia Middleton, on the Art of Letter Writing”. There follows a short sequence of letters by ladies discussing how letters should be written. Du Bois has over a hundred letters, including some in verse. They are mainly serious but some seem to be at least partly intended for entertainment.

Moving closer to the present day is a volume of 1871: *The Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Model Letter Writer*. No author is given but it was published by Frederick Warne, as was *The Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Letter-Writer* of 1928. This, in spite of the slightly different title, is probably an update of the earlier book. A similar book, also published by Warne is in my own collection: *The Correct Guide to Letter-Writing*. The author is given simply as: “By A Member of the Aristocracy”.

Another undated manual in my collection, possibly late Victorian or Edwardian, is *Everybody's Letter Writer: The Complete Letter Writer for Ladies and Gentlemen*. This again appears to be perfectly serious with letters intended for copying or for guides as to how to write. Like most letter-writers, it contains letters proposing marriage and others relating to all the contingencies such a step might involve. It seems hard to credit that people might seriously look at model-letters for such matters, let alone copy them.

Letter-writing manuals are still being printed today. One, published in 2004, proclaims in its title: *A 1001 Letters for All Occasions*. Another from the same year is called *Collins Complete Guide to Letter Writing*. Amazingly, sample love letters are still included and *The Complete Letter Writer* (1998) even has a letter of proposal although it suggests that a more direct method of proposing marriage is better. The letter is included in case the couple are separated by distance, or perhaps circumstances dictate that it may be some years before they can meet and the only way to communicate is by writing.

But why not by e-mail nowadays? There are, indeed, manuals coming on the market instructing users in how to write e-mails. The only one I have seen: *Writing Effective E-mail* (2000), has relatively few model e-mails as such and concentrates on organisation, spelling, grammar and similar matters. The injunction (the first of “five rules of using e-mail”) is to “write as though Mum were reading”. What, one wonders, would Cicero have made of that?

3. *How far were letter-writers used?*

Evidence for the use of letter writers is not easy to find but the very proliferation of manuals of this type through the centuries and even into the present day indicates that there was and is a market for them. Just two aspects of the way in which they have been used will be briefly examined here.

Firstly, some letter formulas can be traced back to letter-writers. Some of the formulas used in the early model letters survived until quite recent times. People seek guidance on starting and ending letters in particular. A university professor admitted recently that he used

letter-writers when writing to French correspondents in order to see the polite way to begin a letter in that language. Opening formulas can be long but usually start with some phrase like “I take this opportunity to write you a few lines” or “I take up my pen to write”. Norman Davis (1967) traces these back to French formularies of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, chiefly in connection with the Paston letters, but says they may go back to Latin. My attention has been drawn to letters written during the Roman occupation of Britain in the third and fourth centuries AD, which are mentioned in Bowman’s *Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier* (1994).⁴ Bowman translates the beginning of one as:

I have gladly seized this opportunity, my lord, of greeting you, you who are my lord and the man whom it is my especial wish to be in good health and master of all your hopes. (Bowman 1994: 129)

This brings us to the next part of the formula, which Davis calls the “health” formula. It is used by some of the Clift family and in its full form runs: “hoping that you are in good health as this leaves me at present thanks be to God for it”. Davis (1965) finds evidence of the “health” formula in a letter in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. Later, Nicholas Breton makes fun of it in his *A Poste with a Packet*:

After my harty commendations, trusting in God that you are in good health, as I was at the writing hereof, with my Father, my Mother, my brothers and sisters, and all my good friends, thankes be to God. (1602: f2)

But in spite of its being ridiculed by others as well as Breton, the formula survived well into the eighteenth century among the less literate and traces can still be found until the late twentieth century. One member of my husband’s family, born in 1934, was using a version of the “health” formula up to a few years ago.

The other main group of formulas comes at the end of a letter, a full version in the Clift letters being:

This being all at Present I must conclude with my prayers to god for

⁴ I am grateful to Tony Fairman for drawing my attention to Bowman’s book.

your health and Prosperity, and shall ever remain, your ever loving and affectionate

Brother

William Clift (ed. Austin 1991: 42)

Often, the phrase “till death” was added. There are also set forms for apologies and requests. Ways of indicating that a new topic is about to be broached can be seen as a form of marking paragraphs, such as “To let you know” (earlier, as in the Paston letters: “to let yow wete”). The Pastons also use the word “Item” to indicate a new subject. In the eighteenth century, the Clift family repeated the direct address to the recipient, as at the beginning of the letter: “Dear Brother”. This brings us to the second way in which letter-writers were, and are, used: the actual method of getting the letter down on the page, including how to address the recipients.

Many of the letter-writers, particularly the later ones, include “rules” or guidelines for setting out a letter. This matter has been the subject of a fair amount of study in recent years.⁵ The early sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuals in English were much concerned with the layout of the letter, particularly the amount of space that should be left between the letter and the subscription. This varied according to the social status of the person being addressed in relation to the writer: the more elevated the addressee, the greater the space. Fulwood (1568) makes a great point of this, as does Angel Day (1586) and later John Massinger in 1654. The rules for layout become more detailed and prescriptive as time goes by. Massinger includes rules for the superscription and subscription and date. He also deals with the business of sealing the letter and the external direction. This is something which worried young William Clift in London some two hundred and fifty years later. He scolded his older sister, Elizabeth, for not addressing her letters correctly:

When you write to me I will be glad if you will write your Direction as I place it underneath because you put the Cart before the Horse and make it look foolish, and endeavour to put each line in its place. (ed. Austin 1991: 135)

⁵ I am indebted to Sue Walker of the University of Reading for some of the following information, which is contained in her article (2003). See also Nevala (2007).

He then draws a box in which he writes the address as he believes it should be, each line centralised, and continues:

You always put Castle Street No 13 instead of 13 Castle Street – Come now dont be afronted for putting you right.

(ed. Austin 1991: 135)

By the 1790s, letters were being conveyed by a postal system, which had greatly improved in 1784 with the introduction of mail coaches with guards. Sending letters was still expensive: a single sheet cost 6d, which represented about a sixth of a London servant girl's weekly wage. Earlier, William had been concerned about the way his sister was folding her letter – envelopes were not used at that time:

When you write, please to fold it as thin as you can and write Single Sheet at the bottom and use thin paper.

(ed. Austin 1991: 77)

Letters were charged by the number of sheets and William had just been wrongly charged for two sheets.

Coming up to the present day, the amount of guidance for setting out letters varies greatly. Collins Complete Guide series: *Letter Writing: How to Get Results* (2001) has extremely detailed rules for the layout of letters and some of the instructions are quite different from those I was taught as a child in the 1940s and 50s: the writer's address should go across the centre of the page at the top and the address of the recipient always be included below on the left, regardless it seems of whether the letter is a matter of business or simply personal. Nearly all letter-writers include modes of address and correct salutations for different occupations and the nobility. These are probably the matters that many people are unsure of: how does one address an archdeacon or a general, for example?

4. Conclusion

There seems to be no record of letter-writing manuals before the eleventh century. Perhaps more could be discovered as it seems clear that some of the formulas appearing later existed at least from the days

of the Roman empire. The early letter-writers, dating from the eleventh century were mainly for the use of scribes and clerics. These were quickly followed by manuals intended as instruction for schools. Model letter-writers in English appear to date from the early sixteenth century and can be divided into two main groups: 1) serious manuals that contained letters for copying or to be used as exemplars – these later became more utilitarian and were aimed at people with less education; 2) those intended for entertainment, such as Breton's *Poste with a Packet*. This type of letter-writer, which often contained rudimentary narrative sequences, was probably the precursor of the epistolary fiction of the eighteenth century. Some letter-writers combined both serious intention and entertainment.

Although this study has concentrated on earlier letter writers, the genre is by no means extinct as evidenced by the model letter-writers, already mentioned, and no doubt others that have been published in this century. These may be superseded in the long run by manuals for composing e-mails. However, it seems at present that the production of letter-writers is set to continue in one form or another.

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