Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna

DOTTORATO DI RICERCA IN

LINGUE, LETTERATURE E CULTURE MODERNE

Ciclo 34

Settore Concorsuale: 10/L1 - LINGUE, LETTERATURE E CULTURE INGLESE E ANGLO - AMERICANA

Settore Scientifico Disciplinare: L-LIN/10 – LETTERATURE INGLESE

VICTORIAN LETTER WRITING AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN LITERATURE AND PAINTING: THE CASE STUDY OF LOVE LETTERS

Presentata da: Roberta Zanasi

Coordinatore Dottorato

Gabriella Elina Imposti

Supervisore

Prof. Massimo Fusillo

Co-supervisore

Prof. Gino Scatasta

Esame finale anno 2022

ABSTRACT

One of the main features of nineteenth-century fiction is the quasi-total disappearance of the epistolary novel that had had its heydays in the previous century. For this reason, some scholars have declared the "death" of the letter in literature after the transitional romantic period. However, Victorian novels overflow with letters that are embedded, quoted in part or described and commented on by narrators or characters. Even when not revealed to the reader, the letter becomes a *signifier* loaded with meanings, also and particularly so, when it is burnt, torn, hidden, found, buried. The boom of technological innovations in communications of the present age should be a vantage point from which to observe how letter-writing culture developed in an age of relatively similar communication frenzy.

The Postal Reform of 1839-40 that in 14 years brought the numbers of letters sent every year in Britain from 75 to 410 million, as well as the mediatic campaign that supported it drew the attention of the population on the material aspects of this means of communication. In addition to the postages, newspapers became more affordable too, and people of all levels in society could read in them how letters, even those exchanged in the upper classes, were used as evidence in court. Blackmailing was another example of misuse of letters, and letters were used here to perpetrate the crime or, in case of incriminating ones, as instruments to extort money. In the 1870s telegrams became more affordable too, introducing a new disembodied and immaterial means of communication. All these aspects mirrored in the way novelists and artists represented the epistolary themes in their works, which in turn can be fully appreciated only in the light of this diffused epistolary culture.

This is the context within which the specific case study of the love letters is analysed in the present work. After an excursus on the concept of romantic love for Victorians, which focuses on the distinction between emotionology and experienced emotions, some real love correspondences from people belonging to different classes are dealt with to highlight the critical components of the subgenre. When these kinds of letters were disclosed in novels, a closer examination revealed they were not love letters at all and that often writers used them to hint at the modern concept of incommunicability. Painters, on their part, drew inspiration from the Dutch artists of the seventeenth century but loaded those suggestions with the typically Victorian ideals of love, family and the woman.

CONTENTS

SALUTATION 4
CHAPTER 1 - RESEARCH SCOPE 8
Aim and context of this study 8
Methods and theories 16
Key definitions and concepts of this study 16
The theoretical framework 43
The case study: Love Letters 47
Corpora of correspondence 49
Corpus of fictional works 49
Corpus of paintings: 50
CHAPTER 2 - THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT 52
Letter writing and its representation: a brief historical overview 52
When “the letter” became “the post”: the Victorian context 61
CHAPTER 3 - LOVE LETTERS 71
On (Victorian) love 71
Love letters 84
Victorian love letters 86
Valentines 104
Love letters in court 112
Love letters and blackmailing 124
CHAPTER 4 - EPISTOLARY MARRIAGE PROPOSALS 130
Epistolary marriage proposals in novels 130
Epistolary marriage proposals in paintings 170
CHAPTER 5 - FICTIONAL AND PICTORIAL LOVE LETTERS 179
Love letters in novels 179
Pictorial love letters 218
BIBLIOGRAPHY 233
PRIMARY SOURCES 233
SECONDARY SOURCES 236

SALUTATION

"Then letters came in but three times a week: indeed, in some places in Scotland where I have stayed when I was a girl, the post came in but once a month;—but letters were letters then; and we made great prizes of them, and read them and studied them like books. Now the post comes rattling in twice a day, bringing short jerky notes, some without beginning or end, but just a little sharp sentence, which well-bred folks would think too abrupt to be spoken."

Elizabeth Gaskell, My Lady Ludlow, 1858

"The idea of writing a letter to someone is infused with all kinds of reaffirming memories. The love letter, for example. It's comforting to read the letters sent by lovers to each other in wartime. Not just nostalgia drawing you in, but the personal partnership between you and the pen that formed the words. Whoever heard of a touching series of love emails? And I hope we never do."

Michael Enright, CBC The Sunday Magazine, 26th April 2019

Perhaps never before the pandemic that has swept the world in the last two years have people been so powerfully aware of the relevance of communication technology in the lives of most of us, with all its positive and negative implications. Today, people in their forties and fifties who use computers for their work hardly remember what life before the Internet and smartphones was like and when they indulge in their memories (whether they see them as "good old times" or not), they often feel like survivors of a faraway time in which the wired phone served for calling someone, the news was read on newspapers and the letters were made of paper rather than bytes. The ways we read and write literature or enjoy cinema or art keep changing accordingly as well as the boundaries of all these forms of human expression, in what has been defined as our "*liquid modernity*"[1].

This is the context in which the idea of this research was born and the point of observation from which Victorian letter writing has been considered in this study. It is a vantage point as it is distant enough in time to afford a critical and far-reaching view, and at the same time, belongs to a moment in time of relatively comparable revolution in communications, as some critics have

[1] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernita' Liquida*, 22° edizione (Roma; Bari: LATERZA & FIGLI S.P.A., 2011).

suggested[2]. The words of the first epigraph, taken from *My Lady Ludlow*, a novel which presents the conflict between the old traditional world and the modern one with its progress, sound surprisingly similar in their nostalgic tone to the statements of several people of our time who remember "the old ways" with a touch of sadness. However, and quite paradoxically, these expressions of nostalgia on the part of our contemporaries often appear in blogs or social network posts (see the second epigraph published on the website of a radio programme).[3]

In the last century, the historical events which brought about significant social changes have often induced scholars and intellectuals to investigate the origin of those events and to trace their roots in the history and culture of the previous centuries. The second wave of feminism in mid-20th century, for instance, led literary critics to deconstruct the literatures of the previous centuries in order to reconstruct the history of gender bias and literature as a form of agency for women. Feminist historians also lamented how letters, which have been a common form of self-expression for women for centuries, have never been "considered of enough public value to keep or circulate"[4] or being studied.

Similarly, in the context of the contemporary global communication scenario which is dominated by instant messaging, social media and 24/7 connectivity, researchers have shown an increased interest in the study of media communications in order to get to the root of a situation that sometimes seems to get out of our control. A number of studies have investigated the development of mass media and the public forms of communication and in the last 40 years, many critics have been attracted by the origin of "social networks", in the pre-Facebook and pre-Twitter sense of the expression, especially in the early modern time. [5]

As a matter of fact, much has been written on letters in the eighteenth (and a bit less) on the nineteenth centuries, especially by linguists who seem to agree on the fact that in modern times the epistolary language of familiar correspondence was very similar to the spoken language used

[2] In his *The Victorian Internet,* the British Journalist Tom Standage claims that the introduction of the telegraph in late Victorian period is even more remarkable than the introduction of the Internet in the contemporary era. See the following note. Tom Standage,*The Victorian Internet,* (Bloomsbury Pub Plc USA, 2014).

[3] From https://www.cbc.ca/radio/sunday/the-sunday-edition-for-april-28-2019-1.5112097/the-lost-art-of-writing-letters-michael-s-essay-1.5112156

[4] Jolly, Margaretta, 'On Burning, Saving and Stealing Letters', *New Formations* Summer 2009, no. 67 (n.d.): 25–34.

[5] In 2019, for example, an exhibition at the British Library called, *Friendship Before Facebook: Social Networks in a Pre-Digital Age*, promised to show how friends were selected, collected and put on display, before the digital era. The website invited visitors to "*Explore the Library's collection of pocket-sized friendship albums – made between the 16th and 19th centuries – full of celebrity autographs, music, miniature paintings and bawdy lift-the-flap pictures*". See https://www.bl.uk/events/friendship-before-facebook-social-networks-in-a-pre-digital-age

in conversation. Susan Fitzmaurice's work on familiar letters or the studies of the Italian Marina Dossena have certainly been fundamental in this respect.

The exhaustive and ground-breaking research of Clare Brant, on the other hand, with its cultural take, contributed to consecrating letter writing as a proper genre, critical to both public and private spheres, and to enabling relations between them including reconstituting them. As regards the relationship between letters and literature, another key aspect of this research, the formalist work by Janet Gurkin Altman, the comparatist study by Thomas O. Beebee, or the political reading of Mary A. Favret and Nicola Watson, to name just a few, have all contributed to laying the foundations for future studies on the topic.

However, as anticipated, most of these critics have focused on the eighteenth century or on the first decades of the nineteenth at the latest, almost never expanding beyond the coronation of Queen Victoria. The discussion concerning letters in a late modern context has started only in these last decades, probably because, as Dossena suggested, Victorian time was still deemed too close to be studied with the detachment required by a critical approach. Dossena herself, Earle, Barton and Hall, and others have started to delve into the topic of letter writing while its impact on Victorian literature has been treated sporadically, perhaps because of the diffused idea that literary letters had "died" with the romantic period, and mainly on an author by author basis, a choice that might depend on the endurance of the author as a figure, and how that figure subtends publisher lists.

For what concerns the connection between the Victorian letter writing and paintings, although some literary scholars have often referenced the most iconic paintings depicting letters, first among them the tryptic by A.L.Eggs, *Past and Present* (1858, see Chapter 5), to my knowledge, not much has been written so far on this specific theme. The woman reader has certainly been at the centre of attention (see Chapter 5), but rarely the focus was on her reading letters specifically.

It is true that English genre painting with their often idealized depictions of the lives of the peasants and the low classes has been associated by many critics with sentimentality and banal anecdotes, and for this reason, has often been overlooked by them. Nonetheless, I believe that its postmodern way of involving the viewer, who is no more a passive admirer of the work of art but an active interpreter of signs, along with the poststructuralist connection between art and culture

that it presupposes, make it worth being reconsidered and perhaps not only for its documentary value but also for their artistic one.[6]

I believe that Victorian letter-writing and its many cultural implications have still many paths to be explored and with this research, I would like to adventure along some of them.

[6] See the entry "Genre Painting" in Sally Mitchell, ed., *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*, 1st edition (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988).

CHAPTER 1 - RESEARCH SCOPE

The letters are a rhizome, a net, a spider's web.

Deleuze, Guattari, Marie Maclean[1]

Aim and context of this study

In Britain, the middle of the nineteenth century saw the convergence of three circumstances that greatly shaped the culture of the following half-century: the so-called "postal revolution", which greatly affected the idea of letter writing as well as the scale of the phenomenon, a resurgence in the publication of novels after the stagnant decade of the 1830s and finally, the strengthening of the British art sector, and in particular of narrative painting, which was becoming increasingly appreciated not only on a national but also on an international level. Following a red thread that runs through these three aspects of British culture, this study aims at reconsidering the cultural relevance of letter writing and its impact on literature (especially novels) and the visual arts in particular, in the first half of the Victorian Age. The research span covers, more precisely, the period between 1840 and 1870s, two moments that, as the next chapter on the historical context will illustrate, represent two watersheds in the postal history of Britain.

Some scholars[2] have suggested that following the postal reform of 1840, which transformed the postal system into a governmental service, letter writing seemed to lose some of its traditional sentimentality to acquire new political connotations. The fact that under the new system, letters had to pass through many unknown hands in their path to the addressee and were all equal and equally subject to the same authority, the postal one, would have given a more repressive connotation to the new system and caused a levelling of the genre. People started then to see them as potentially dangerous, especially when written by women. As they were often

[1]Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Marie Maclean, 'Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature: The Components of Expression', *New Literary History* 16, no. 3 (1985): 591–608, https://doi.org/10.2307/468842.

[2] See for example Brilli, in M. Costantini, F. Marroni, and A.E. Soccio, *Letter(s): Functions and Forms of Letter-Writing in Victorian Art and Literature*, Scienze Dell'antichità, Filologico-Letterarie e Storico-Artistiche (Aracne, 2009).

repositories of the intimate desires of their correspondents, women's letters were seen in danger when entering the public world of the Post Office and a possible menace to social values and morality.

In addition to that, the postal system was often at the centre of scandal throughout the century. One of them, for instance, concerned espionage activities on the part of the British government against the Italian exile Giuseppe Mazzini (1844), raising the delicate issue of privacy, while another, the so-called "Cleveland Street Affair" (1889) scandal, sparked after the discovery of a male brothel where a number of telegraph boys worked as prostitutes and many aristocrats were involved as clients. A financial scandal on the take-over of the telegraph services by the English government (1870) and the news of the dismissal for drunkenness of almost 1000 postal employees between 1873 and 1888 were other two examples. All these incidents made their way to the press and contributed to damage that image of the postal system and the Post Office as the base of the British progress and civilization that the campaign for the postal reform had created. This, however, did not discourage people from using the post, as the number of letters posted continued to grow throughout the century[3] (a century which also saw the introduction and proliferation of the postcard), but certainly changed the way they approached to letter writing making them more aware of the many aspects of this medium.

Mary Favret in her book on romantic epistolarity, calls the nineteenth century "the post epistolary age" and defines it as:

> an age where one imagines the post where once there were letters, when one reads the movements of the mail coach not the vagaries of epistolary sentiment, and where one begs the postman, not the lover, for correspondence.[4]

This definition, which briefly yet vividly outlines the changes in the perception of letter writing in the nineteenth century, becomes for Favret a necessary premise for her famous declaration of "death" or "literary exhaustion"[5] of the letter in literature.

What I would like to demonstrate is that even if the postal and technical innovations altered the idea of (epistolary) communication and consequently the way it was represented, to stick to the metaphorical image of death, they *did not kill* the letter in literature. Letters were part of

[3] According to the postal historian Daunton, the letters sent in Britain in 1839 were 75,9 millions, while those sent in 1870 were 862,7 millions. See Martin J. Daunton, *Royal Mail: The Post Office Since 1840* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

[4] Favret, *Romantic Correspondence,* 197.

[5] Favret *Romantic Correspondence,* 198.

people's lives more than ever, as some of the cases I came across during this research prove. One of the most striking examples is that of the fallen mothers who wrote to the Foundling Hospital's secretary in London to enquire about the welfare of their children who had been admitted to the institution. The confessional tones of those letters and tales of how the lives of those women continued after giving up to their children demonstrate that the post was still considered by them a reliable way of transmitting narratives of very intimate and private nature, as well as powerful instruments of agency.[6]

Certainly, the heydays of the epistolary novel, which had dominated literature in the previous century, were past and gone. In the ever-multi-faceted society of XIX century Britain, with all its contradictory aspects, the single view the epistolary novel provided the reader with was not deemed sufficient to offer a complete picture of a situation. Walter Scott clearly states this in his *Redgauntlet* (1832), which is included by Beebee among the last novels hunted by the "*ghost of epistolarity*" [7]. This novel starts in epistolary form, with 13 letters, but then the narration shifts into the third person, with the following explanation:

> The advantage of laying before the reader, in the words of the actors themselves, the adventures which we must otherwise have narrated in our own, has given great popularity to the publication of epistolary correspondence, as practised by various great authors, and by ourselves in the preceding chapters. Nevertheless, a genuine correspondence of this kind (and Heaven forbid it should be in any respect sophisticated by interpolations of our own!) can seldom be found to contain all in which it is necessary to instruct the reader for his full comprehension of the story. Also it must often happen that various prolixities and redundancies occur in the course of an interchange of letters, which must hang as a dead weight on the progress of the narrative.[8]

Scott was not the only English writer to be blamed for the demise of the literary novel. In 1797-98 Jane Austen had apparently converted her *Elinor and Marianne* from the epistolary form to the third person narration which has reached us. Some scholars do not exclude that even her

---

[6] This specific case has not been included in this research as the case study chosen deals with romantic love letters. However, I would like to follow this line of research in the future. For an in-depth analysis of this topic, see:

Jessica A. Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women, Unwed Mothers and the London Foundling Hospital*, 2012.

Virginia Grimaldi, "Single, Unwed, and Pregnant in Victorian London: Narratives of Working Class Agency and Negotiation," Madison Historical Review: Vol. 14 , Article 3 (2017). Available at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/mhr/vol14/iss1/3 and

Margaret Snowden, Left on the spindle: correspondence from unwed mothers to the London Foundling Hospital, 1857-1872, A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Art in History, University of Central Oklahoma, Fall 2018.

[7] Thomas O. Beebee, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe 1500-1850*, Illustrated edition (Cambridge, UK ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[8] Walter Scott, *Redgauntlet : A Tale of the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh : Constable ; London : Hurst, Robinson, 1824), http://archive.org/details/redgauntlettale02scot.

'*darling child,' Pride and Prejudice,* might have been subject to the same creative process. Mary Shelley, on her part, in her *Frankenstein* made the letter form "explode" into such a long narrative which caused the readers to forget that they are reading letters at all.[9] After such examples and such a "tombstone inscription" for the epistolarity like the one written by Scott, the life of the letter in literature would really seem at an end, and not only in Britain. Thomas O. Beebee speaks of other European works of fiction, even earlier than Scott's work, which presents the same "*incomplete epistolary form",* such as, for example, the German novella *"The Sandman"* by E.T.A. Hoffmann (1816)[10]. Here, after an epistolary beginning the narrator takes up the narration hinting at the impossibility of the letter to depict reality:

> Dear reader, understand the three letters which my friend Lothar out of the goodness of his heart shared with me as the outline outline of the picture, into which I will try to bring more and more colour through my narration. Perhaps I will be successful in producing some shapes like a good portrait painter, so that you find them a good likeness without knowing the original, indeed, so that it seems to you as though you had seen the person quite often with your own eyes.[11]

Glovinsky,[12] on his part, referring particularly to Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-48) but also extending his ideas to other Victorian writers, speaks for this literary period of "post-epistolarity". This concept would encompass the idea of "intimacy-at-a-distance" that originated from the epistolary exchanges between emigrants and their families in the home country in the imperial context and the shift of point of view taking place in narrative from the first to the third person. Furthermore, in narrative terms, post epistolarity

> names a method of conceptualizing omniscience not only out of the sociable proximity of the country house or the bureaucratic fantasy of a totalizing vision, but also as a form of impersonal access to privileged communications—for example, familiar letters—that serves to anaesthetize narrators against the feared excesses of distant intimates.[13]

When analysing Victorian life, culture and literature in Britain, therefore, one cannot notice that letters are still so powerfully present that the feeling that this alleged death has been overemphasized is almost unavoidable.

---

[9] See Favret *ibid.*

[10] Thomas O. Beebee, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 166-198.

[11] E.T.A.Hoffmann, "Der Sandmann" in Sämtlich Poetische Werke, ed. H.Geiger (Wiesbaden:Tempel, n.d.) 343-344 quoted in as O. Beebee, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850* (Cambridge University Press, 1999),166.

[12] Will Glovinsky, "Unfeeling Omniscience: Empire and Distant Intimacy in Vanity Fair", *ELH* 87, no. 1 (2020): 91–120, https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2020.0003, 93.

[13] Glovinsky, "Unfeeling Omniscence".

Letters were written on paper and in private out of urgent necessity, to update a friend or a relative about one's life abroad, to declare one's love or again to do business and find employment. Those indited by *literati* or men and women of science were sometimes collected in printed volumes, originating the Victorian phenomenon of the "Life and Letters" which offered "an occasion for reflection on the relationship between the words of the biographical subject, which are commentary already, and the biographer's commentary on them".[14] They also appeared in newspapers and pamphlets with the aim of entertaining, educating or campaigning on certain political or social issues; they remained an important presence, either in their epistolary form or in their materiality, in novels and in popular literature; last but not least, they were also admired in paintings, prints or magazines and book illustrations. Furthermore, the campaign for the reform movement of 1840 brought letter writing and postal issues at the centre of attention of the public opinion through a political rhetoric which made great use of narrative techniques. The reform, which made postal exchanges more affordable, had a crucial role in furthering the spreading of literacy and helping social upward mobility. If the eighteenth century has been dubbed the "golden age of the letter", the nineteenth century was the "golden age of the post", with, I will claim, no less implications for Victorian life, culture and art. "The Victorians" writes Christopher Wood introducing the postal theme in paintings, "became prodigious, almost pathological, letter writers"[15].

The great novelists of the time like Dickens, Collins, the Brontë sisters or Gaskell were prolific letter writers themselves and some of them were personally involved in the material aspects of the innovations which were affecting the communications in their age. Anthony Trollope notoriously had a bad start in his career as a postal clerk in London, but when in 1841 he moved to Ireland, where he became Assistant Surveyor in the Post Office and started writing, he allegedly drew inspiration for his works from the "dead letters office"[16]. He was later appointed by Rowland Hill to reorganise the rural posts in southwest England, which resulted in the introduction of the iconic pillar boxes, first in the Channel Islands, then in London and the rest of England. He always took his work so much at heart that he later wrote in his autobiography:

---

[14] Herbert F. Tucker, ed., *A New Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, 1st edition (Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

[15] Christopher Wood, *Victorian Panorama: Paintings of Victorian Life*, First Edition (London: Faber, 1976).

[16] See R. H. Super, *Trollope in the Post Office* (Ann Arbor: Univ of Michigan Pr, 1981).

> […] I was attached to the department, had imbued myself with a thorough love of letters, - I mean the letters which are carried by the post, - and was anxious for their welfare as though they were all my own.[17]

Much less known is the involvement of Charles Dickens, along with his friend Joseph Paxton, in a visionary project aimed at connecting Britain and France with a submarine telegraph cable in 1846. In the end, although they had obtained the necessary authorizations from both the governments and had even started some coastal testing, they did not carry out the scheme. However, the fact that in the same year the indefatigable Dickens worked at this project, launched the *Daily News* (whose strength was the rapidity of collecting the news and presenting them to the public) and started his novel *Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son: Wholesale, Retail and for Exportation* (1846-47), makes Menke conclude that:

> Dickens's period as a would-be telegraph pioneer was brief. But this conjunction of projects in 1846 […] aptly suggests the ties between nineteenth-century fictions and other modes of discourse, both established and emerging. Victorian writing was part of a world of new media, even as those media were just coming into existence.[18]

Decisively less impressive, yet still of interest to this study, were Lewis Carrol's postal efforts. In addition to being a very precise correspondent who kept records of all the letters he sent and received, he used to write "letters to the post office regarding delivery service – in one, for example, he recommends that a postman wear a special cape to protect letters from rain - and ideas about registering letters or parcels".[19] In 1889, he even designed *The Wonderland Postage Stamp Case,* an Alice-themed 12 pocket case for stamps of various values. In the short ironic letter-writing manual, *Eight or Nine Wise Words about Letter-Writing* which he writes to accompany the stationery item, he explains that "what made me invent it was the constantly wanting Stamps of other/ values, for foreign Letters, Parcel Post, &c., / and finding it very bothersome to get at the/ kind I wanted in a hurry*".*[20]

Not only the great names of the Victorian literary canon related to the postal world. Edmund Yates (1831–1894), for example, was an indefatigable journalist and writer who worked

---

[17] Frederick Page and John Johnson, *Anthony Trollope An Autobiography, The Oxford Trollope, Crown Edition*, ed. Michael Sadler (Geoffrey Cumberlege: Oxford University Press, 1950) p.278.

[18] Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (Stanford, Calif. Stanford University Press, 2008), 2-3.

[19] Catherine J. Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 127.

[20] Lewis Carrol, *Eight or Nine Wise Words about Letter Writing*, (Oxford:Emberlin and Son, 1890), 6.

for 25 years at the General Post Office also as head of the missing letters department. Author of sensational novels such as *Land at Last* (1862) or *Black Sheep* (1874), he was a protege of Dickens's and a co-worker of Trollope and Rowland Hill himself.

Painters were involved in the postal frenzy of the period too. The famous artist William Mulready was entrusted with the design of the new prepaid stationery (letter and envelope), which was Hill's solution to the problem of pre-payment along with the stamp. The cost of the printed letter would have included the postage so that no further payment was required. Mulready's work, nonetheless, which depicted a munificent Britannia surrounded by imperialistic and domestic scenes of letter writing and reading, did not have the success Hill had expected. On the contrary, it was considered ridiculous, probably because too artistic for its prosaic function, and was often lampooned, to finally be supplanted by the stamp just one month after its introduction.

The painter John Callcott Horsley (1817 – 1903), whose painting *St. Valentine's Morning* will be dealt with in the last chapter, was commissioned by Henry Cole, one of the main supporters of the Postal Reform, to design the first Christmas Card. The card represented on the two sides two acts of charity (feeding the hungry and clothing the naked) and in the middle a scene of family celebration.

Not all Victorian writers and artists may have taken part in such kind of postal enterprises (and not always had this positive attitude towards the post, as De Quincey's *The Mail Coach* in 1850 demonstrates), but these instances, along with the constant presence of epistolary situations in many of their works, testify to the fascination that letters still held on them as well as on their growing awareness of the many aspects of this medium.

Narrative painters, for example, besides representing figures, especially women, reading and writing letters, dedicated some of their attention to the stages of the postal itinerary of a letter, from the moment it was sealed to the one it was posted and delivered. No wonder one of the most famous paintings representing the variety of Victorian urban society is *The General Post Office - One Minute to Six* by George Elgar Hicks (1860), which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

All things considered, correspondence may no longer constitute the form of entire novels, but letters in the Victorian narrative are much more significant than it has often been assumed. They were not only props included in the plot to achieve a mimetic and realistic reproduction of the characters' ordinary life, nor simple narrative devices. In Lacan's words, the letter was seen

more as a *signifier,* something that had to be interpreted and activated a different *signified* in the different characters.

The French psychoanalyst was so fascinated by letter writing that he used "*The Purloined Letter*" by E.A.Poe as an example for his theory of "the primacy of the signifier". The short story revolves around the theft of a letter of very delicate nature by a French Minister under the eyes of the queen, its addressee. If used against the queen, the letter might result in her ruin, so the prefect of the Paris Police entrusts the famous Detective Dupin to find it. Dupin cunningly retrieves the letter from the Minister's office without much difficulty and in the presence of the Minister's himself. What is remarkable about this story is that all the action happens without the readers and most of the characters knowing anything about the exact content of the letter. It is not the content that is truly important here, suggests Lacan, yet the various meanings that the letter, as a signifier, activates in the various characters. For the queen, it is something that can put at risk her relationship with the king and her position at court, for the Minister an instrument to control his queen, the prefect sees it as a means to achieve honour and wealth while Dupin considers it as a way to take his revenge towards the Minister. The quest for the letter is paralleled then to the process of analysis, where the analyst has to find the hidden and removed meanings behind what is under everybody's eyes.

If Lacan's analysis of Poe's short story had more to do with psychoanalysis than with literature, it certainly highlighted how letters were invested of new and profound meanings in literature some decades before Freud's works were published. By investigating their roles more thoroughly, therefore, and considering them within the postal and social context of their time, we can reach a deeper understanding of Victorian literary production.

All the declinations of the *epistola* we have mentioned, the real and the fictional ones, those published in periodicals and newspapers, those represented in paintings or book illustrations as well as the ones used as evidence in court, influenced one another in a tight net of intertextual and intermodal references, which makes it difficult to fully appreciate the meaning of one without considering all the others. It is on the interconnections among these many facets of the postal phenomenon that I have chiefly focused on in this work.

Methods and theories

Key definitions and concepts of this study

Each of the following three sections will deal with one of the three axes which intersect in this research. They will present not only the definitions of the keywords used here but also the main concepts of the relevant fields of study on which I based my analysis in the thematic chapters.

The section about narrative painting, in particular, will also include an introduction on the context of Victorian visual arts, which I deemed necessary to understand the presence of letters in art and the way letters in painting will be treated in this research.

(Real) Letters

As the historical overview in the second chapter will demonstrate, the category of "letters" has developed over the centuries and through different cultures. Besides, according to the point of view from which the topic is approached, the term may be more or less inclusive. To make an example of how the boundaries of this genre may be elastic today, a recent exhibition on love letters which took place in February 2020 at the National Archives in Richmond, UK, showcased, among the other documents, a will, a diary and some state papers on the ground that,

> …love letters can take different forms. Wills, other state records and letters written to government official can all be read as expression of different types of loves – including love that has been criminalized, unconsummated or cut short."[21]

The implication here is that if we focus mainly on the function or effect of a letter, in this particular case the expression of the sentiment of love, we can be less strict about the form. As a consequence, we can include in the category of love letters, for instance, the will in which Horatio Nelson requested the state to leave, in case of his death at war, to his beloved and mistress Emma "an ample provision to maintain her Rank in Life"[22].

---

[21] February 2020 *[With Love: Letters of Love, Loss and Longing, from the wall text of the exhibition held at the National Archive, see the online version at https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/with-love/exhibition/#section-two]*.

[22] See note 19 above.

Another example I have recently come across concerns a volume about *Jane Eyre* by John Pfordresher. The Georgetown University professor claims that Charlotte Brontë wrote her masterpiece when the Belgian professor she had fallen in love with (unrequitedly) had ceased writing back to her. According to Pfordresher, Charlotte Bronte, who was frustrated by the impossibility to communicate with the man she loved, drew so much from her true story and put so much of her sentiments for him into the novel to turn it into "a long love letter for Constantine Heger".[23]

In these contemporary examples of the use of the term, the function of the document or the intent of the writer when writing it makes the letter more than its form. The first logical deduction might be that in our era, when letters, as opposed to any form of electronic communication, are more relegated to the spheres of memory and imagination (see the Epilogue) rather than that of real everyday life, the term has acquired a certain vagueness.

However, this indefiniteness of meaning might also reflect the permeability of boundaries that has always characterized the epistolary genre itself (see the Historical Overview), as well as its tendency to merge with other forms of written expression. Texts which were conceived as letters about scientific matters, for instance, have often become actual essays, as the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* demonstrates. When the official organ of the Royal Society was founded in the second half of the seventeenth century, it was but a collection of extracts from the correspondence between the Society's secretary, Henry Oldenburg, with the major European men of learning his contemporaries[24]. Political letters often shared the same private-to-public destiny and turned into political treatises. On the other hand, the letter was also chosen as a form for texts which were written in the first place as essays.

In literature, Emily Dickinson might be a striking example of this aspect of epistolarity, as she famously interpolated poems into her letters, making it quite a challenging task for scholars to distinguish her poetical production from her epistolary one. John Keats, before her, had included poems in his letters too, along with comments on some of his poetical concepts like the *negative capability*[25]*,* the creative process and other poets, making his letters an essential reading for any critic who deals with his poetry.

[23] John Pfordresher, *The Secret History of Jane Eyre: How Charlotte Brontë Wrote Her Masterpiece*, (New York: W W Norton & Co Inc; 2017).

[24] See Charles Bazerman, *Letters and the Social Grounding of Differentiated Genres,* in David Barton and Nigel Hall, *Letter Writing As a Social Practice* (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Pub Co, 1999).

[25] John Keats*, Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21-27 December 1817*
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69384/selections-from-keatss-letters last access on 19/02/2021

Jacques Derrida quite provokingly summarised the intrinsic malleability of this medium with his famous statement "mixture is the letter, the epistle, which is not a genre but all genres, literature itself".[26]

For this reason, starting from a literary quote and then expanding on the common definition of the term "letter", I will draw on multidisciplinary perspectives to highlight the aspects of this genre which are more relevant to the purposes of this study.

A Victorian literary source that provides an introductory definition of what is a letter or rather what it is not, is quite unexpectedly the masterpiece of literary nonsense par excellence, *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). Towards the end of the novel, during the trial of the Knave of Hearts who has been accused of stealing jam tarts, the White Rabbit produces a document as an evidence. An interesting debates about whether the document can be considered a letter or not follows:

> "I haven't opened it yet," said the White Rabbit, "but it seems to be a letter, written by the prisoner to— to somebody." "It must have been that," said the King, "unless it was written to nobody, which isn't usual, you know." "Who is it directed to?" said one of the jurymen. "It isn't directed at all," said the White Rabbit; "in fact, there's nothing written on the outside." He unfolded the paper as he spoke, and added "It isn't a letter, after all: it's a set of verses." "Are they in the prisoner's handwriting?" asked another of the jurymen. "No, they're not," said the White Rabbit, "and that's the queerest thing about it." (The jury all looked puzzled.) "He must have imitated somebody else's hand," said the King. (The jury all brightened up again.) "Please your Majesty," said the Knave, "I didn't write it, and they can't prove I did: there's no name signed at the end." "If you didn't sign it," said the King, "that only makes the matter worse. You must have meant some mischief, or else you'd have signed your name like an honest man." There was a general clapping of hands at this: it was the first really clever thing the King had said that day. "That proves his guilt," said the Queen. "It proves nothing of the sort!" said Alice. "Why, you don't even know what they're about!"
> "Read them," said the King.[27]

The verses that the Rabbit reads, as Alice will point out, have no sense at all, but the King tries to interpret them according to the court case at hand, and only when this interpretation seems to accuse the Queen of having fits, the document is dismissed as a pun.

[26] Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, tr. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,1987), 48.

[27] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1866), accessed 24 January 2022, http://archive.org/details/alicesadventur00carr.

Despite the typical nonsensical tone of this excerpt, it introduces some of the definitional features of a letter such as the need for an addressee, the final signature of the sender, the component of handwriting and the message that the reader will interpret.

A more conventional and authoritative definition of the term "letter" comes from *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines it as "A written communication addressed to a person, organization, or other body, esp. one sent by post or a messenger"[28]. After a semicolon, it also adds that the word is a variant of "epistle", which in turn is defined as "A letter, esp. one of a literary, formal, or public nature". This double definition hints at the complexities of the medium I have mentioned above by touching on its personal and official variations as well as its swinging between the private and the public spheres. Interestingly enough, it also focuses on the means of delivery that was such a crucial issue, particularly in Victorian Britain. The postal reform I have mentioned, in fact, made the country a forerunner in the field and a model for the other European countries.

It is quite significant that while both in the Oxford and Cambridge Dictionaries of the English language the definition mentions the messenger or the post (in the first case both of them), not all the dictionaries of other European languages include this reference to the delivery when they deal with the respective term for "letter"[29]. Most of those dictionaries, though, specify that letter writing implies a writer and an addressee.

On the one hand, in fact, letters might be considered as forms of "life writing" or "ego documents" and since ancient times (see Chapter 2) they have often been seen as emblems of their writer's inner self. In the twelfth century, Eloise (see Chapter 2) even asserted that Abelard's letters "have souls".[30] About seven centuries later, Samuel Johnson famously stated in a letter to Mrs Thrale:

> In a man's letters, you know, Madam, his soul lies naked, his letters are only the mirror of his breast; whatever passes within him is shown undisguised in its natural process; nothing is inverted, nothing distorted: you see systems in their elements; you discover actions in their motives.[31]

---

[28] Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), s.v."*letter"* II.4.a.

[29] Le Robert Enligne Dico defines the French word "*lettre*" as "*Écrit que l'on adresse à qqn pour lui communiquer qqch*"; the Duden German dictionary online defines "*brief*" as "*schriftliche, in einem [verschlossenen] Umschlag übersandte Mitteilung*" and the Spanish RAE says that a "*carta*" is "*Papel escrito, y ordinariamente cerrado, que una persona envía a otra para comunicarse con ella*." These are only some examples but there are some which make reference to the post. However I found interesting that both the main English dictionaries do.

[30] Héloïse, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise: To which is prefix'd a Particular Account of their Lives, Amours, and Misfortunes*, Bayle. Trans. John Hughes (London,1760; Project Gutemberg, 27 April 2011), Letter II, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/35977/35977-h/35977-h.htm

[31] Samuel Johnson, *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (New York: Alexander V. Blake, 1840), 519.

In 1868, Emily Dickinson went even further by saying that a letter is "immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend".[32]

On the other hand though, what distinguishes letters from other forms of personal writing like diaries is its addressing to a second person which is, as Janet Altman claims, what makes epistolary language "belongs to the larger linguistic system of 'discourse'"[33]. This I/you relationship is certainly the most distinctive feature of epistolary discourse which "is colored by not one but two persons and by the specific relationship existing between them"[34]. Through a series of textual and paratextual elements which can be either intentional or unintentional on the part of the writer[35], letters certainly reveal much about who wrote them but also about the relationship existing between this person and the reader he/she had in mind while writing. The epistolary discourse is therefore both "a form of self (re)presentation and a dialogic interaction". Samuel Johnson, who had spoken of the letter as a mirror of a man's breast, was well aware of this second aspect of letter writing too, as he wrote also that no man sits down to write without thinking what figure he will make.

The fact that the OED definition refers to the intermediate moment between the writing and reading of the message is noteworthy not only because it recalls the material aspect of the delivery, but also because it introduces another characteristic of the epistolary discourse, which is the intersection of several temporal planes that it entails. Unlike spoken conversation, written correspondence involves a shift in time between the moment of issuing and that of reading the message. The continual and complex tension between the time of narration (the "now" of the writer), the time of the narrated events (past) and the times of the writer's hopes, plans and expectations (future) overlap with the present time of the addressee, (the "now" of the reader) and the future time of the recipient's reply.

Letters are bearers of news and testaments to a certain moment, hence the importance given to a more reliable and fast (as well as affordable) postal system as well as for the telegraph, in the period we are considering. When, in fact, the time lag between the writing and reading is

---

[32] Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson 1845-1886 (2 vols).* Ed. Mabel Loomis Todd (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1906), 313, Letter to T. W. Higginson, June 1869 (L330).

[33]Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ Pr, 1982),117.

[34] Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, 118.

[35] See Susan Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English: A Pragmatic Approach* (Amsterdam ; Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002).

too long, and letters are read, for instance, years later, they often lose their meaning, as Thackeray claims in his *Vanity fair*:

> Take a bundle of your dear friend's of ten years back-your dear friend whom you hate now. Look at a file of your sister's: how you clung to each other till you quarrelled about the twenty pound legacy! Get down the roundhand scrawls of your son who has half broken your heart with selfish undutifulness since; or a parcel of your own, breathing endless ardour and love eternal, which were sent back by your mistress when she married the Nabob-your mistress for whom you now care no more than for Queen Elizabeth. Vows, love, promises, confidences, gratitude, how queerly they read after a while![36]

If the I/you relationship and the coexistence of more temporal plans are the main two aspects of the letter form, another distinguishing feature of letter writing as a genre is, as we have mentioned, its flexibility. Over time letters have proved to be suitable to communicate everything from the philosophical ruminations, scientific discoveries and literary criticism of intellectuals to personal advice to friends, family news and gossip among people from all social classes. In this study I will deal with the latter categories, the *familiar letters*, exchanged (usually, but not exclusively, by post) between two people who knew each other and for any reason were separated and somehow in need to communicate one another information or sentiments.

In the preface to *The Universal Letter Writer*, one of the many letter writing manuals circulating both in Britain and the US in several subsequent editions from the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth, the author highlighted the flexibility of this means of communication:

> "Letters are the life of trade — the fuel of love — the pleasure of friendship — the food of the politician — and the entertainment of the curious. To speak to those we love or esteem, is the greatest satisfaction we are capable of knowing; and the next is, being able to converse with them by letter".[37]

This short extract also testifies to the belief that even conversing with "those we love or esteem" required certain abilities. Of course, the first and most obvious skill one needed to possess was literacy. A significant spread of literacy started gradually at the end of the eighteenth century to continue throughout the nineteenth century and was strictly connected with letter writing and its postal context in Victorian time. In a country affected by the industrial revolution and

[36]William Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, ed. Peter L. Shillingsburg, First edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 191.

[37] Thomas Cook, *The Universal Letter-Writer; Or, New Art of Polite Correspondence: Containing a Course Of ...* (T. Wilson and Son, 1812), http://archive.org/details/universalletter00cookgoog.

urbanization, working-class people often had to leave their family home to find work and they were motivated to learn how to read and write by their need to keep in touch with their relatives. Furthermore, the expanding empire and the consequent increase in the phenomenon of emigration, with many people leaving Britain to start a new, and hopefully better, life in the colonies, made letters an essential means to maintain contact with the homeland and send home tales of “otherness” from those far countries. In the middle of the century, people were furtherly encouraged to write letters by the introduction of low postages, as the promoters of the reform had anticipated.

However, literacy was not the only skill required and probably one that a writing manual book of the XIX century mostly took for granted. In the quoted lines above, “being able to converse by letter” refers particularly to that tension between spontaneity and affectation typical of modern letter writing even among kin and friends. In an era affected by rigid class divisions and obsessed by etiquette, the I/you feature of letter writing created a certain social anxiety. The challenge was being sincere and authentic with one’s friends and relatives and at the same time never overstep the social mark and fall into vulgarity. As Dierks puts it in his study on American letter manuals of the second half of the eighteenth century, “The ideal style was an appearance of spontaneous ease even when tremendous care was taken”.[38]

Another interesting aspect which these manuals highlight is that letter writing was a gendered genre. Some of these guides were, in fact, addressed specifically to ladies or gentlemen, while the more generic ones sometimes included a section dedicated to ladies. Men were associated with a business-like and to-the-point kind of writing, because, as a matter of fact, business letters usually fell to “their lot”, as Mr Darcy points out in an iconic dialogue on women’s accomplishments in *Pride and Prejudice*. Things must not have changed too much with the advancing of the century if, in 1851-53 Mrs Smith could say in *Cranford:*

> My father’s was just a man’s letter; I mean it was very dull, and gave no information beyond that he was well, that they had had a good deal of rain, that trade was very stagnant, and there were many disagreeable rumours afloat.[39]

As for women, since the eighteenth century letter writing had been one of their many household tasks as they were in charge of keeping in touch with the family members who were far

[38] Konstantin Dierks, “The familiar Letter and Social Refinement in America, 1750-1800”, in Barton and Hall, *Letter Writing As a Social Practice,*35.

[39] Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, *Cranford* ed. Anne Thackeray Ritchie (London and New York: Macmillan & Co., 1895), 222, http://archive.org/details/cranford00thomgoog.

from home. Gradually, writing letters came therefore to be seen as a particular women's forte. The spontaneity which was a characteristic of a good letter was thought to come more natural to women who were less educated and therefore affected in their writing style. However, letters were also a way for a woman to disclose her thoughts while "escaping" the domestic environment in which she had to live. Richardson himself, in a letter to Sophia Westcomb, in 1746, had stated that

> the Pen is almost the only Means a very modest and diffident Lady (who in Company will not attempt to glare) has to shew herself, and that she has a Mind. … her Closet her Paradise … there she can distinguish Her Self: By this means she can assert and vindicate her Claim to Sense and Meaning.[40]

This relationship between women and letters became almost a cliché, to such an extent that Jane Austen, in her *Northanger Abbey,* played with this idea when she had Mr Tinley say that "Everybody allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is particularly female". However, he then added, that nonetheless women's writing was characterized by "a general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar".[41]

In *Gossip about Letters and Letter Writers*, a volume that includes two lectures delivered by the Scottish philanthropist George Seton at the Philosophical Institution of Edinburgh in 1867, the section dedicated to the *Characteristics of Male and Female Letter Writers* starts with the statement that "the sex of a letter writer may generally be inferred from the style".[42] Still, in line with the cliché of the beginning of the century, men are described as more successful in the composition of "dry, matter-of-fact, business letters, on legal, commercial or scientific subjects" while women excel in the "friendly epistle" which are "here gay and joyous, there serious and grave, full of the most charming detail without being tedious, genial and good-humoured, if not clever and witty, and overflowing with kindness and affection"[43]. The conclusion of this section perfectly conforms with Victorian gender separation when it specifies that

> In continual contact with the ster reality of life, and the unceasing cares of business, his [man's] time for friendly correspondence is, moreover, generally very limited, and he is too glad to allow his wife or his daughter to wield the pen on his behalf.[44]

---

[40] Samuel Richardson, *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1964), http://archive.org/details/selectedletterso0000rich.

[41] Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (Boston : Little, Brown, & Co., 1903), 23, http://archive.org/details/northangerabbey00austrich.

[42] George Seton, *Gossip about Letters and Letter-Writers* (Edimburgh:Edmonston and Douglas, 1873), 6.

[43] See note 40 above.

[44] See note 40 above.

During the nineteenth century, however, as I mentioned, the relative liberty of expression that women enjoyed when writing letters was sometimes seen with a certain suspicion as the privacy of the closet was seen in contrast with the public nature of the Post Office. Victorians' concern (obsession?) with women's reputation and purity produced an idea of letters as possible menaces to the home stability, as paintings like *Past and Present* by A.L. Egg or *Intercepted Letter* by W. P. Frith demonstrate (see Chapter 5). Even women like Elizabeth Gaskell or Charlotte Bronte who earned their living by their pens, once married, made their husbands read their letters before posting them.

Letter fiction and fictional letters

In his volume about epistolarity in Pre-Richardsonian English literature, Robert Adams Day defined "letter fiction" as

> Any prose narrative, long or short, largely or wholly imaginative, in which letters, partly or entirely fictious, serve as the narrative medium or figure significantly in the conduct of the story.[45]

Day's words referred in particular to English literature in the period between the death of Queen Elizabeth I and 1740 (the year in which Richardson wrote his *Pamela*), when letters were gradually entering the sphere of the novel but still constituted less than half of the narrative. It was a transitional moment which has often been overlooked by scholars but that would eventually lead to the epistolary novel of which Richardson's works were to become the English epitome. I think that the expression "letter fiction", as opposed to "epistolary fiction" which usually indicates the novels entirely (or almost) made up of letters, could be applied also to the Victorian narrative production I will examine. This would also underscore that, if there was a continuity between Richardson and his predecessors, as Day demonstrates in his study, letters continued "to figure significantly in the conduct of the story" even after the demise of the epistolary novel *stricto sensu.*

Letters remained a ubiquitous presence in the novels of this age and works like *Bleak House* or *Middlemarch*, *Cranford* or most of the sensation novels of the 1860s and 1870s, not to mention the detective stories or the gothic revival of the end of the century, would lose so much of their

---

[45] Robert Adams Day, *Told in Letters; Epistolary Fiction before Richardson* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1966), 5, http://archive.org/details/toldinlettersepi00dayr.

essence if we removed the epistolary elements from them. Victorian writers drew inspiration from the preceding epistolary tradition, but they experimented with the genre in order to overcome what they perceived as its disadvantages and exploit all its narrative potential.

In the novels of this age letters usually appear mostly in two forms. First, there are the "embedded letters", which interrupt the narration of the novel and sometimes are marked out as separate documents for example by being printed with a different type and indented or set apart from the rest of the text. To use Day's words, they serve as the "narrative medium"[46] and retain most of the characteristics of their counterparts in the epistolary novels. They colour the narrative with subjectivity and intimacy by revealing, with no intermediary, the personality, thoughts and motives of the characters while giving the readers of the novel a sense of immediacy and authenticity. Nobody, in fact, talks or thinks in place of the characters and nobody seems to interpose between the writer of the letter and the readers of the novel.

All these features, according to Day,

> "tended to the same direction, towards vivifying the static, formal nature of composed, objective, third person narrative in the past tense and bringing it into closer contact with the reader".[47]

However, even in the case of embedded letters, the (usually omniscient) narrator's voice somehow still governs the narration. It is the narrator who decides if and when to give the floor to the characters and reveal the exact words of a letter. In some cases, especially in sensation novels, a letter that has been at the centre of the action for some time is revealed only later in the novel, following the genre's rule "make them laugh, make them cry, make them wait"[48]. In *Man and Wife* by Wilkie Collins, for example, there are over 50 pages between the first mention of the letter that Ann Silvester (the wife of the tile) writes to Geoffrey, the immoral lover who has ruined and disowned her, and the revealing of its exact content (to which Geoffrey has, in the meantime, pencilled a hurried addition). This letter is at the centre of the whole story and will end up being the final legal evidence of the marriage between the two characters according to Scottish law.

In *Hard Cash* by Charles Reade, the message that a dying character (Jane) indites to her brother is not disclosed the moment she writes it, nor when its addressee receives and reads it, which is quite a few pages later, as he has been detained in an asylum. It is at the end of the novel

[46] See note 43 above.

[47] Day, *Told in Letters; Epistolary Fiction before Richardson*, 8.

[48] This quote has been attributed to Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins or Charles Reade alternatively. Despite this uncertain attribution, the writing of these three authors certainly followed this tenet.

that the judge in the trial in which the characters are involved "turned towards the jury and read the letter slowly and solemnly"[49]. Only at this point, do readers learn, with a touch of disappointment after such a long wait, that she (merely) wanted her brother to know that she has never thought he was mad and begged him to convert.

Usually, the criterion on which the novelist bases his/her decision to include a letter may be its relevance within the plot. Charles Reade in his *Hard Cash* interrupts the narration at the beginning of chapter 48 to justify his approach to novel writing and explain that novels, like other "true or fictious" narratives such as epic, dramas, histories or chronicles, "abridge the uninteresting facts as Nature never did, and dwell as Nature never did on the interesting ones"[50]. From this general statement, we can infer that even if a real-life scenario would include a letter, the fictional representation can easily omit it, if the letter is considered inconsequential by the author. At the same time, an author may decide to give pre-eminence to one particular letter among others by quoting it in full, because he considers it more important for the subsequent unfolding of events.

Later in the same novel, in chapter 66, the narrator seems to claim his right to decide whether to disclose some facts himself or let someone else do it for him without having to give too much explanation for his choice: "The very next day the late defender attacked, and in earnest. But for certain reasons I prefer to let another relate it"[51]. A letter by the solicitor John Compton follows.

As we said, embedded letters that show what the characters write maintain among the others, the function of revealing their personality. The insight they offer into the characters' private world completes the depiction the reliable narrator has given of them. Readers are called to judge by themselves whether what they have been told is true. This happens, for example, in *David Copperfield*, where Mr Micawber's exaggeratedly pompous writing style in letters highlights (and confirms) his eccentricity as well as his social aspirations.

A further example of how letters were used in this narrator-character-reader interplay can be found in the already mentioned *Hard Cash.* Here we can read the message which Richard Hardie, a bankrupt banker, sends to Doctor Sampson to invite him to dinner. The doctor has in

---

[49]Charles Reade, *Hard Cash: A Matter-of-fact Romance* (Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1864), http://archive.org/details/hardcashamatter01readgoog. LII, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3067/3067-h/3067-h.htm.

[50] Reade, *Hard Cash,* XLVIII.

[51] Reade, *Hard Cash,* XlVI.

charge Captain Dodd, the father of the girl Hardie's son is in love with, who had a cataleptic shock which left him insane. This is the message Hardie writes to the doctor:

> You will find me a fallen man,[…] to-morrow we resign our house and premises and furniture to the assignees, and go to live at a little furnished cottage not very far from your friends the Dodds. It is called 'Musgrove Cottage.' There, where we have so little to offer besides a welcome, none but true friends will come near us; indeed, there are very few I should venture to ask for such a proof of fidelity to your broken friend, R.H.[52]

Hardie's words are those of a distraught man, humbled by the bankruptcy and forced to leave his large house to move into a little furnished cottage where he dares to invite the doctor only on the ground of their past friendship. Readers, however, know very well that Hardie is, in fact, the villain who has defrauded Captain Dodd of his life earnings causing him the attack and the following insanity and that he invites the doctor only to ascertain that Captain Dodd cannot recover and ruin his reputation. It is very clear by this point what kind of person Richard Hardie is and yet, by letting readers access the letter with no intermediaries, the author allows them to directly experience his duplicity and feel outraged at it.

Hardie's falsity will succeed in fooling the goodhearted doctor with whom readers sympathize and who, in fact, will accept the invitation. On the contrary, readers are not tricked by Hardie as the omniscient narrator has informed them of his previous evil deeds.

These examples introduce the most distinctive feature of fictional letters: their presupposing a "second level epistolarity"[53]. An outside reader (the reader of the novel), who is not the fictional addressee nor another character who happens to have access to the letter, comes into play by reading it and using it to understand the relationship between the correspondents. As Homer O. Brown wrote, "to become a Novel … letters must be read by someone other than the one to whom they are addressed. They must be Purloined."[54]

Victorian novelists enjoyed playing with these multiple levels of reading. Collins, for example, in *Man and Wife,* discloses the mentioned letter by Anne Sylvester to the reader when Mr Bishopriggs, the unscrupulous waiter of the inn where the woman is staying, reads it after stealing it from her room. As readers of the novel, we are unauthorized readers spying on the letter from behind the back of another unauthorized reader, and the words Anne says to Arnold,

---

[52] Reade, *Hard Cash,* XXIV.

[53] Beebee, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850,* 9.

[54] Homer Obed Brown, *Institutions of the English Novel: From Defoe to Scott* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 33.

Geoffrey's friend who delivers the missive to her, resonates with us "My own letter! […] In the hands of another man!"

The second type of letter included in Victorian fiction is the "paraphrased" one. Here the message is not directly accessible to the readers but it is rather "filtered" through a narrator. It is an intermediary then who reports the letter to the readers, be it the omniscient narrator of so much of XIX century fiction, the so-called heterodiegetic narrator, or a first-person narrator involved in the plot, a homodiegetic narrator. This practice has been seen (referring to Jane Austen's use of this method) "as an appropriation of writing by fictional speech, which is, in turn, transcribed into a book that unifies the various linguistic modes—speech, manuscript letter, and print"[55]. It should not be read, therefore, as the abandonment of the letter (Jane Austen, in fact, can be considered the most epistolary of the non-epistolary writers) but as a way to maintain the letter in the novel by adapting the traditional epistolary technique to the third person narrative trend.

Obviously, the voice that speaks determines the reliability of the report. The third omniscient narrator, who by definition, knows everything about the story, is usually trustworthy in early Victorian novels (but less so at the end of the century, as *The turn of the screw* by H. James demonstrates), and tends to give an objective presentation of the letter. When the message is related by a character, on the contrary, it is often interpreted according to his/her knowledge and his/her own perception of the situation.

One of the most interesting examples of this kind can be found in *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens when Mr Jarndyce proposes to Esther Summerson by letter (a case that will be treated more in depth in the chapter on love letters in fiction). Before opening it, Esther sits and looks at the letter while going with her mind over the events of her life which led to that moment. Esther's excursus and her considering her life as a continuous ascent from a disgraced situation to one in which she feels loved, happy and secure, will be the key to her interpretation of the text (even of its omissions) and will lead her to accept the offer. What is central in this chapter is what Fitzmaurice, talking of epistolary discourse, calls "implicit, non-intended meanings, which are not tied to features of the context or linguistic structure that might be considered by the speaker"[56].

Mr Jarndyce's letter is only one of the numerous cases in which the interpreter's (or reader's) meanings prevail over the utterer's (or writer's) ones in nineteenth-century letter fiction.

---

[55] Normandine Shawn, 'Jane Austen's Epistolarity', *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews,* 27, no. 4 (2014): 158–67.

[56] Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English,* 78.

Already in 1815, Jane Austen had played with these two poles in her *Emma,* for instance, when a lengthy letter by Frank Churchill is first read by Emma and then "dissected" by Mr Knightly, who comments it sentence by sentence. After all, as Jacques Derrida and Peter Brooks suggest, letter writing might be compared to psychoanalysis as in both cases, a narrator addresses a listener (or reader in this case) who actively tries to interpret that narrative using the instruments in their possession (their knowledge, experience, etc…).

The two kinds of fictional letters mentioned, the embedded and the paraphrased ones, often intertwine so we find cases, for instance, where only some sentences are quoted from a letter that is otherwise reported by the narrator or a character in their own words or again in which even if the letter is quoted literally, the emphasis is on the way the characters subsequently interpret it. Writers like Elizabeth Gaskell sometimes mixed the two forms by using a sort of "free indirect epistolary discourse". In her *Cranford*, for example, when Miss Matty loses all her savings in a failed bank and has to dispose of her furniture to transform her living room into a tea shop, she receives a letter by the rector which is reported by the first-person narrator, Mary Smith, as follows:

> I just stayed long enough to establish Miss Matty in her new mode of life, and to pack up the library, which the rector had purchased. He had written a very kind letter to Miss Matty, saying, "How glad he should be to take a library, so well selected as he knew that the late Mr Jenkyns's must have been, at any valuation put upon them."[57]

Here Miss Smith maintains control over her tale (there is no interruption in the narration), but the inverted commas indicate that, with the only exception of the pronouns which are shifted to her deictic centre, she is using the exact words of the letter and the epistolary, slightly pompous, rector's style. If readers today had to imagine the audio or film adaptation of this part of the novel, they would probably hear the voice of Miss Smith slightly disguised in order to mimic the cleric's magniloquent one.

Regardless of the way they are disclosed, another aspect worthy of note concerning fictional letters in Victorian novels is that they often end up being used, or rather "misused", in a way that the writers didn't mean or expect. I have already mentioned how their interpretation often strays from their "implicature"[58], but besides this, they are even more often read by the wrong person, used to blackmail somebody or deconstructed into their components (handwriting, ink, paper,

[57] Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, *Cranford,* 263.

[58] Defined by Fitzmaurice as "*the meaning that the utterer intends the interpreter to calculate, given what he has said and the circumstances in which he has spoken*", Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English*, 70.

stamps) in order to identify their anonymous or mysterious writer and find the culprit of a crime. Letters are tampered with, lost and found, torn and grounded, burnt and stolen, originating what Rotunno calls "*postal plots*" which revolve around the content of a letter but also its materiality. Their presence will even arrive to transcend the message they bear, as it seems to happen in *The Purloined letter* by E.A.Poe (1845) and in a lesser degree in its English counterpart, *The Lawyer's story of a Stolen Letter* by Wilkie Collins (1854). They are at the centre of the action as meaningful objects with a narrative function as well as a representational and symbolic one. Not only are they mimetic elements that make the narrative more realistic, but as we will see in the next chapters, with their "deviations" they came to embody the doubt and the slow crumbling of the Victorian certainties during a century that was characterized by contradictions.

Thus far, the main examples of fictional letters included in this section were taken from novels. However, as the two mentioned stories concerning stolen letters suggest, Victorian fiction also included shorter narrative forms. The period between the 1830s, when several collections of short stories were published, and the 1880s, the decade of the so-called "rebirth" of the genre, is often considered by scholars as a sort of interregnum[59] where the novel, in its more massive three-deck form, reigned supreme. Certainly, the short stories which were written in those decades did not meet, or at least not all of them, the criterium of "unity of effect and impression" established by Edgar Allan Poe in 1842[60] and which was later "canonized" as the basic requirement for the "short story proper". In fact, one of the main features of the genre in this period was its lack of a standard form and, consequently, its extreme variety.

Despite having been marginalized by canonical Victorian literary studies, short fiction proliferated in periodical literature even before its revival of the *fin de siecle* and the modernist period. Besides the narrative pieces by famous writers like Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary E. Braddon and Thomas Hardy (which were often collected in volumes at a later time), a number of more ephemeral examples were published, often anonymously, on newspapers and periodicals and included social sketches, cautionary tales, anecdotes with political flavour, horror or adventure stories, children's stories, sometimes even translated in English from foreign languages.

In some cases, the epistolary form which had been long discarded by novelists was deemed suitable for these shorter compositions and therefore resumed, as it happens in Elizabeth Gaskell's

[59] See Plotz, John. "Victorian Short Stories" in *The Cambridge Companion to the English Short Story*, edited by Ann-Marie Einhaus, 87–100. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

[60] Edgar Allan Poe, Review to Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*, http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/POE/hawthorne.html, accessed on 20 July 2020.

Curious if True, subtitled *Extract from a letter from Richard Whittingham, Esq.* (1860)[61]. In this letter to an unnamed friend, the eponymous Richard Whittingham tells about a strange incident that happened to him during his stay in Tours, where he was carrying out genealogical research in order to trace his descent from the sixteenth century reformer John Calvin. Having got lost in a wood at night, Whittingham reached a chateau in which "there were lights in many windows, as if some great entertainment was going on". Here he is mistaken for an expected guest and introduced to all the strange people that are taking part in the reception. From his descriptions of each of the guests the reader, clue after clue, recognizes fairy tales' characters who have got old and somehow grown into Victorian social types. Blue Beard's wife is seen as an abused wife who, after her husband's death, minimizes his guilt, Cinderella is fat and cannot walk for the pain in her feet because in her youth days she used to wear slippers too little for her out of vanity, while Belle and her ugly husband (the Beast of the fairy tale) are represented as the only truly happy couple as their love could go behind appearances. From the questions Whittingham is asked, we understand that he himself is taken for the protagonist of the tale "*Dick Wittinghton and his cat*". At the final entry in the room of Madame Féemarraine (Fairy Godmother) he suddenly wakes up in the wood, where he might have spent the night dreaming, or, the reader wonders, he might have been sent by the fairy who realized he was not a fairy tale character. This story, whose message seems to be that often tales, fictional and imaginary as they can be, often make us understand truths about ourselves and our relationships with others, plays with dreams and reality starting from its very title. In this case, the letter form has been used to make the narrator's tale credible: at the beginning, Whittingham informs the reader that he was in Tours to look for official documents and research some historical facts. The image he gives of himself is, therefore, that of a rational and sensible person who describes what happened to him in minute details as a reliable observer would do. These elements concur to confound even more the readers when they start realizing the weird nature of the incident.

Epistolary-themed stories and anecdotes played a key role also in the campaign in support of the postal reform of the late 30s. Rowland Hill and his supporters made large use of short narratives in their pamphlets, in *The Post Circular* (the official organ for the reformist cause), as well as in other periodicals and newspapers, in order to appeal to the emotional sensitivity that novels, newspapers and painting had contributed to spread and obtain public support. The stories

[61] Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, "Curious if True (Extract from a Letter from Richard Whittingham, Esq.)" in The Cornhill Magazine, vol. 1, issue 2 (1860) Pages 208-219. Among the other examples, see of *Letter of a French Governess to an English Lady* by Louisa H. Sheridan (1832) and *My First Season. Being Extracts from the Private Correspondence of the Lady Gwendolyn Hawthorne*.[61] by M. A. Brackenbury (1890).

presented situations in which the high cost of postages prevented poor people to collect their letters with disastrous, often tragic consequences or cases in which morally impeccable citizens were ruined by the pre-reform postal system. They were sometimes self-standing pieces, like "*Rose Maydew*",[62] that merged the distinctively Victorian themes of letters and fallen women. At the beginning of the story, which was published in several newspapers in 1839 with the subtitle "*A Sketch*" or "*A tale illustrating the effects of high postages"*, the eponymous Rose Maydew leaves her family cottage in the countryside to move to the city and work as a maid in a rich household. She will yield to the temptations of the city and end up suiciding because she never receives a letter of forgiveness from her parents (see Chapter 2).

Some other times these pieces were interpolated in longer political discourses, such as the one concerning the investigations into the theft of a banknote from a letter which is included in Hill's pamphlet about the necessity of the postal reform. The literary value of these pieces might not have been high, but they certainly resonated with their readers, and they continued to appear also many years after the approval of the reform in order to remind people who were disappointed by it how chaotic the postal situation was before 1840.

It is also worth mentioning that in 1838, the writer William Makepeace Thackeray debuted as a writer of fiction in *Fraser's Magazine* with his satirical *The Yellowplush Correspondence*, which as the title suggests, was made up of a series of letters and pages of diary by the eponymous Charles Edward Harrington Fitzroy Yellowplush. The first of the series was a letter to the newspaper in which an independent reviewer discussed the recently published conduct manual *My Book; or The Anatomy of Conduct* (1837). Here Thackeray captured the readers' attention by disseminating the letter with "baits" that made them curious about its writer:

> My dear Y -
> Your dellixy in sending me My Book does you honour ; for the subjick on which it treats cannot, like politix, metafizzix, or other silly sciences, be criticized by the common writin creaturs who do your and other Magazines at so much a yard. I am a chap of a different sort. I have lived with some of the first families in Europe, and I say it, without fear of contradiction, that, since the death of George the IV., and Mr. Simpson of Voxall Gardens, there doesn't, praps, live a more genlmnly man than myself.[63]

---

[62] "Rose Maydew", *Staffordshire Gazette and County Standard,* Saturday 01 June 1839, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/ (accessed on 10 May 2021).

[63] William Makepeace Thackeray, *Flore et Zéphyr ; the Yellowplush Correspondence ; the Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan* (New York : Garland Pub., 1991), 1, http://archive.org/details/floreetzephyryel0000thac.

The reviewer says to be a “genlmnly man”, but his spelling and language reveal his humble origins and even if he mentions the “first families in Europe”, it is only to say that he has lived with them (as a footman, as we will find out in the second letter). To the manuscript of this first instalment, Thackeray enclosed a letter in which he proposed to write more stories by the same author, and Fraser accepted. In the following tales of the almost picaresque adventures of Yellowplush, Thackery continued to use the letter to defer revelations about the character, almost imitating Laurence Sterne in postponing the satisfaction of the readers’ curiosity.

All these examples, scant and sparse as they might be, demonstrate that the experimentations of Victorian writers with fictional letters were based on sound awareness of the communicative features of this medium as well as its literary potential and symbolic value and that their use of it was based on extremely modern considerations. The fact that often the voice of the narrator may still appear in control of the overall narration, which is probably one of the reasons why some scholars have belittled the role of letters in the literature of this century, should therefore not make us doubt their relevance.

Narrative painting and epistolary paintings

The nineteenth century saw a large expansion of the British art world. New institutions for the promotion of the arts were founded not only in London but also in Liverpool, Dublin and Edinburgh. Prettejhon reports[64] that a census of British fine artists held in 1841 listed 4,000 names, while by the year of the Queen’s death (1901), figures had jumped to 14,000. In particular, painting and the visual arts, including prints and book illustrations, acquired new popularity and if the British had always been considered “*a literary, more than a visual, nation*”[65], this idea was overturned throughout the century, to such an extent that Julia Thomas asserts that Victorians were “image obsessed”.[66] However, many of those images and paintings shared with literature a keen and distinctively Victorian interest in narrative.

The hierarchy of pictorial subject matter which Joshua Reynolds had established in the previous century in his *Discourses* was still valid and strongly supported by academicians, however, history- and myth-inspired paintings, which topped that hierarchy, were only a small

[64] Elizabeth Prettejhon, “Art”, in Francis O’Gorman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture*, Cambridge Companions to Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 195-218.

[65] See note 61 above.

[66] Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription Of Values In Word and Image*, 1st edition (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).

part of the production of Victorian artists. Reynolds himself, after all, had a predilection for portraiture and admitted that any subject could be elevated by the hand of a truly talented painter.[67] Moreover, the Royal Academy of which Reynolds was the president, was more recent than other European institutions so its precepts were probably less rooted. Some English painters, therefore, felt that its rules were too strict and imposed from outside, so they rejected them.

Another aspect that differentiated the British artistic context from the continental ones was patronage. The patrons behind British art were not the state or the church like, for example, in France or Italy, but were increasingly more private citizens who belonged to the industrial and commercial middle class. These clients were certainly not interested in large paintings depicting scenes from myths or history to be hung in the galleries of luxurious palaces. On the contrary, they looked for a kind of art which was more suitable for their living rooms, an art that was “moderate in scale, anecdotal in subject matter, meticulous and detailed in execution to suit both close viewing and patron’s demand for value-for-money”[68]. They wanted a kind of art that made their lives and the values on which they were based, such as family, hard work, propriety and respectability, look dignified and worth being admired.

All these factors greatly contributed to the extremely diverse nature of British painting as well as to its divergence from other European national arts. In fact, alongside paintings depicting lofty subjects and heroic gestures - which were never abandoned - a great deal of portraits, landscapes, animal as well as narrative paintings began to flourish. The two opposites, however, were not mutually exclusive as some painters, like William Powell Frith and William Maw Egley, engaged their efforts in both directions.

It is, in particular, narrative painting that mostly falls within the scope of this research, as it often included the theme of letters. The term, which is generally referred to paintings that aim at telling a story, was not common in the XIX century, when other more specific expressions were preferred, such as “scenes from everyday life,” “literary,” “genre,” “historical genre”, “anecdotal”, “domestic”, “subject” or even “poetical painting” in John Ruskin’s words. “Narrative painting” will therefore be used in the present research as an umbrella term that encompasses all those paintings which share a significant storytelling component, regardless of the source of inspiration.

---

[67] *"Whether it is the human figure, an animal, or even inanimate objects, there is nothing, however unpromising in appearance, but may be raised into dignity, convey sentiment and produce emotion, in the hands of a painter of genius. What was said of Virgil, that he threw even filth about the ground with an air of dignity, may be applied to Titian; whatever he touched, however naturally mean and habitually familiar, by a kind of magic he invested with grandeur and importance."”* From Joshua Reynolds, *The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Illustr. by Explanatory Notes & Plates by John Burnet* (London: Carpenter, 1842), 192.

[68] Elizabeth Prettejhon, “Art”, 197.

The concept that an image can tell a story and that "a picture is worth a thousand words" may seem almost obvious nowadays (as also in epochs well before the one we are considering), but one of the most popular books in Victorian time, with many editions and reprints throughout the century, was Gotthold Lessing's *Laocoon* (1776), which established the neat opposition of literature and Art. According to the German philosopher, the two forms of expression belong to two completely different domains as the former represents movements and changes and unfolds in time while the latter, in which stationary figures coexist in a certain space, belongs to the spatial sphere. For this reason, he had concluded that the two "sister" arts could never be made to overlap.

William Hogarth, on the other hand, one of the most popular painters of the previous century, had demonstrated that it was possible to successfully represent a certain succession of moments in art. In his serial paintings *The Harlot Progress* (1731), *The Rake progress* (1732–1734), *Marriage A-la-Mode* (1743-45) and *Four Stages of Cruelty* (1850), he had used details to allow the viewer to understand the story behind the pictures and to fill the blank spaces between one painting and the other. His contribution to visual storytelling was so important that some critics like Thierry Smolderen identify in his "readable images" the origin itself of the modern comics[69].

The narrative artists of the nineteenth century drew inspiration from Hogarth's painting to represent a duration and include in one static scene more phases of action. However, they discarded the bitingly satirical nature of his style to embrace a more moral and sentimental (even if sometimes slightly ironic) intent which was more suitable to Victorian viewers. Hogarth is therefore considered as "the real ancestor of modern life painting"[70] and "the father" of the English narrative school, which was continued in the new century by literary and historical painters such as Edward Matthew Ward (1816 -1879) and Charles Robert Leslie (1794-1859). Their scenes from *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and *The Vicar of Wakefield* "first taught the Victorian public to equate painting with literature; taught them that a picture was something to be read, a novel in a rectangle."[71]

This kind of narrative painting became very popular throughout the century to such an extent that one critic stated in an article on *Leader Magazine* in 1856 that a painting "rises in the scale of art in proportion as it is a story"[72]. In the same years, John Ruskin, one of the main

---

[69] See Thierry Smolderen, *The Origins of Comics: From William Hogarth to Winsor McCay*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, Illustrated edition (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014).

[70] Christopher Wood, *Victorian Panorama: Paintings of Victorian Life* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 10.

[71] See note 67 above.

[72] Quoted in Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians,* 3.

Victorian art critics, theorized the hierarchy of what he called "poetical painting" which reversed the academic one as it was based on the amount of invention it involved. At the lowest level there were the historical paintings that represented events which had actually happened; then there were those inspired by literary sources like the cases of Ward and Leslie we have mentioned; and finally, in the highest position, there were paintings which told a story that was fruit of the painter's imagination as here the painters became themselves poets.

The most famous example of this latter kind was *Awakening conscience* by the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Hunt (see Figure 1). The painting represents a woman rising from a man's lap while staring at an undefined point within an elegant flat. Through a series of props and written inscriptions however, as well as the title of the painting, we can reconstruct the whole story. This is the "reading" of this painting given by Terry Riggs for the Tate Modern website:

> A gentleman has installed his mistress (known to be such because of her absence of a wedding ring) in a house for their meetings. As they play and sing to Thomas Moore's 'Oft in the Stilly Night', she has a sudden spiritual revelation. Rising from her lover's lap, she gazes into the sunlit garden beyond, which is reflected in the mirror behind her. The mirror image represents the woman's lost innocence, but redemption, indicated by the ray of light in the foreground, is still possible. Intended to be 'read', the painting is full of such symbolic elements. The cat toying with the broken-winged bird under the table symbolises the woman's plight. A man's discarded glove warns that the likely fate of a cast-off mistress was prostitution. A tangled skein of yarn on the floor symbolises the web in which the girl is entrapped. […] The frame, designed by Hunt, also contains various symbolic emblems; the bells and marigolds stand for warning and sorrow, the star is a sign of spiritual revelation.[73]

From this example we can deduce that, in order to create the illusion of duration in the static scene of the paintings and overcome the space-time dichotomy that Lessing had highlighted, these painters based on:

- the attitude, expressions and physiognomy of the characters;
- the relation between the figures;
- the props and emblems suggestive of the past and future of those characters;
- inscriptions or captions and sometimes even written words included in the paintings which had the function to give the viewer the key for the interpretation or to reiterate the general message.

In brief, every single detail was significant for the reconstruction of the "novel in the rectangle".

[73] The Awakening Conscience, Tate Gallery Website https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hunt-the-awakening-conscience-t02075 Accessed 20 August 2021.

Perhaps the Pre-Raphaelites often used symbols that may not have been easily recognizable by everyone, especially those based on Biblical or literary references (*Awakening conscience*, for instance, alluded to a verse from the Book of Proverbs), but, on the whole, narrative painting "was marketed as a democratic genre"[74] which could be read by everyone, regardless of their level of education.

Genre painting, in particular, represented scenes from the daily lives of people, usually from the "lower orders". Rather than evoking classical or biblical referents, it recalled familiar experiences and aimed at eliciting an emotional rather than an intellectual response in the beholder. Often, those homely scenes aimed at promoting the values of the middle class such as family, domesticity and hard work among the lower classes and for this reason, according to Thomas, "it is not surprising that the working classes, in particular, were encouraged to view such images, with employers organizing trips for their workers to exhibitions like the one in Manchester in 1857".[75]

A sort of official international presentation of this kind of painting took place in Paris, at the International Exhibition of 1855, in which 231 British paintings and 143 watercolours were displayed alongside the works from 26 other countries. The general impression of the visitors who could compare and contrast examples of so many different national arts was that narrative painting, particularly the one which offered a glimpse of the English home life, was specifically British. As the Redgrave brothers, who had organized the English section of the French exhibition, wrote, these were pictures to be hung "on the walls of that home in which the Englishman spends more of his time than do the men of other nations". This kind of painting was consequently seen overseas as a mirror of Englishness and many French articles and essays declared it as such. English critics embraced and confirmed that view so that some critics believe that not only genre painting did suit the English taste, but it also contributed to define that taste and to strengthen in England this specific idea of Englishness, "so that the ideal of domesticity comes to seem natural, obvious, self-constituting—an essential characteristic of Victorian life"[76].

Despite this association with English national character, genre painting had its roots in the Dutch and Flemish painting of the seventeenth century represented by Gabriel Metsu, Gerard ter Borch, Pieter de Hooch and Joannes Vermeer, to name just a few. In actual fact, many English

---

[74] Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians*, 117.

[75] See note 71 above. The exhibition Art Treasures of Great Britain held in Manchester in 1857 and mentioned by Thomas was the greatest painting exhibition ever held in Britain where for the first time paintings by Hogarth were displayed along with Victorian narrative paintings. This reinforced the idea of a national narrative school.

[76] Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians,* 113.

artists, and the members of the Royal Academy after its foundation, considered the Dutch style of painting as inferior to other European models, as it was guilty of too much attention to detail and pervaded by “low humor”. Nevertheless, Dutch art had always de facto permeated through the English boundaries pervading the English collections, especially after the French Revolution which had caused several palaces of the aristocracy to be dismantled and their collections sold. Even the future king George IV had started a private collection of Dutch art at the end of the eighteenth century, setting the fashion among the English aristocracy.[77] All in all, the Protestant Republic of the Netherlands of the seventeenth century shared a few similarities with Victorian Britain: it was a wide-ranging trading empire with a growing population and wealth, relatively high rate of literacy and a developing postal system.

The Dutch origin of English genre painting is of great importance for this research, because it was thanks to painters like Vermeer or Metsu that for the first time in any culture the theme of letters acquired a central role in images of everyday life.[78] The power of letters of giving pleasure or sorrow or other kinds of emotions, creating an intimate atmosphere and at the same time representing “ritualistic social interactions”[79] became the subject of painting. As Peter Sutton points out, speaking of

> their memorable images of people reading, writing, receiving and dispatching letters […] would establish the forms that letter themes took for the next three centuries in art, in England, France, Spain, the United States and elsewhere throughout the western World.[80]

Some of the “epistolary paintings” by Vermeer may have become quite iconic (see Figure 2), but the exhibition “*Love Letters: Dutch Genre Painting In The Age Of Vermeer*” held at the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin in 2003 displayed 44 masterworks, revealing that most Dutch painters of the seventeenth century engaged in pictures concerning letters, with also some serial examples[81]. Vermeer himself dedicated to the theme six of his works, that is almost one fifth of his entire production.

---

[77] For the reception of Dutch XVII art in Britain I referred to *The Reception of Dutch Genre Painting in England, 1695-1829*, Harry Thomas Mount, Corpus Christi College, Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge, July 1991.

[78] Peter S. Sutton, *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer* (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2003), 15.

[79] See note 75 above.

[80] See note 75 above.

[81] The catalogue of the exhibition by Peter Sutton (see the previous notes) has been of great inspiration for my work as it included several essays on several aspects of the representation of letters in Dutch art that allowed me to draw parallels with English painting.

As I mentioned, despite the cold reception on the part of some artists, Dutch art insinuated the English art market between the seventeenth and eighteenth century with some painters who even moved to England to work. Ever Collier, for example, a famous still life artist who lived in London at the end of the seventeenth century and even assumed an English name to sign the painting he made there (Edwards Collier, see Figure 3), was particularly renowned for his "letter racks". These were *trompe l'oeil* paintings representing letter racks including items belonging to the materiality of letter writing, like pens, paper, penknives, along with other simple everyday objects like newspapers and watches or combs, which testifies to the interest of these artists for the details of everyday objects, and in particular for letters.

Hogarth himself drew inspiration from the art of the Dutch golden age, and after him, and also somehow through him, the Victorian narrative got inspired by that same painting. In particular, they borrowed the letter theme from those artists who had so much exploited it and used it, like the novelists their contemporaries, to support their storytelling.

On the one side, letters contributed to the realistic feel of the pictures. The postal reform of 1840 had led to a democratization of letter writing which became a more and more common activity amongst the people of all the classes or at least, the classes that somehow could access art, also through the ever more popular prints of paintings and illustrations which circulated at the time. It was very likely then that the viewers were familiar with letters and their emotional implications, such as the waiting for a lover's letter, the difficulty in penning one's thoughts, the happiness of receiving good news from relatives or friends or the sorrow after reading a letter which bore bad tidings.

An episode concerning a painting that includes letters and that is often quoted by critics as a demonstration of how genre paintings were commonly considered almost representations of real events is related by the novelist Henry James. Talking of his visit to the Royal Academy Exhibition in 1877, he reported the comment of a woman in front of Marcus Stone's painting "Sacrifice",

> I remember a remark made as I stood looking at a very prettily painted scene by Mr. Marcus Stone, representing a young lady in a pink satin dress, solemnly burning up a letter, while an old woman sits weeping in the background. Two ladies stood near me, entranced; for a long time they were silent. At last—"Her mother was a widow!" one of them gently breathed. Then they looked a while longer and departed. The most appreciable thing to them was the old woman's wearing a widow's cap; and the

> speaker's putting her verb in the past tense struck me as proof of their accepting the picture above all things as history.[82]

The novelist did not appreciate the narrative genre, which he found "irritating" as he specifies in the previous lines, but his remarks about the woman's comments are quite revealing. The fact that the scene is treated as it had really happened and that the only remark about the picture was referred to the older woman's hat may indicate that the viewer took the rest of the picture as quite ordinary.[83]

On the other side, letters became clues like rings or flowers that, combined with gestures and expressions of the depicted figures, helped the viewer/reader decipher the scene, although their hidden message made them more powerful and enigmatic than any other props clearly in view. In the case of reading scenes, for example, we can only deduce the content of the letter from the reaction of the internal reader in the picture. As in some literary cases mentioned above, as viewers, we are somehow spying on the intimacy of the private conversation between two friends, relatives or lovers. We are "visual eavesdroppers" who reconstruct the message through what we see rather than what we hear.

In Figure 4, for instance, we do not certainly need to read the letter to understand what has just happened. A woman, the mother of a young child, is crying because she has just received the news of the death of her husband. The title of the painting suggests that the man was fighting in the siege of Sebastopol, one of the most decisive moments in the Crimean war, which saw heavy casualties on the British part but then led to the Russian defeat. He was probably a high ranking officer as both the woman and the child wear silk and laced clothes, and we can spot the corner of an elaborate painting frame in the background. The message from the title is reinforced by the three layers of documents on the table, which may also stand for the long duration of the siege (it lasted almost one year) and therefore of the anxious wait of this woman for her husband. First, the map entitled "Siege of Sabastopols" shows that the wife wanted to know exactly where her husband was fighting, then a newspaper, revealing that she was worried for him and monitored the press in order to know how the siege was going on and finally the letter which causes her desperate cry. The little girl who is trying to dry her mum's tears symbolizes the future of that woman, who will have to find the strength to overcome the loss for her daughter's sake.

---

[82] Henry James, The Painter's Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts, ed. John L. Sweeney (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956), 150, quoted in Julia Thomas, *Picotrial* Victorians, 118.

[83] See Chapter 5.

I have chosen this painting as an example to demonstrate how English narrative painters borrowed the Dutch themes and reinterpreted them in "Victorian" fashion. The painting *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* by Vermeer in Fig.2 also depicted a woman and future mother as her shape suggests, who reads a letter which is probably by her husband. Her reaction to the reading is not so clear as the one of the wife in Cope's painting, and we may presume that the message is not as tragic, but as Weelock suggests, "the bend of the woman's neck, the parted lips, and the drawn-up arms infuse her with a sense of expectancy"[84]. Also in this case a map, which here represents Holland and is placed behind the woman, hints at the fact that the husband may be far away. However, Vermeer's painting is more enigmatic, starting from the title itself, and his figure more reflective. Cope, who was also a painter of history subjects, depicted a more historically situated scene, even if private and sentimental, and wanted to make sure that the viewers understood the exact circumstances of that woman's tragic situation.

Even in English paintings, the message is not always so obvious, though. Sometimes the beholders are puzzled by the scene which they can only try to interpret with not much help on the part of the painter. In Figure 5, for example, we do not have any clue on what Katie's letter will be about, we only infer from her clothes that she is a peasant who writes from the cosy interior of her cottage. Is she addressing a friend? A lover? Or rather to a brother who has left the countryside to move and work in an industrial city? King let his viewer make their suppositions. What is certain is that she is deeply absorbed in the act of writing, her face is lit, and both the door and the window behind her back are open. She is probably opening her heart to someone and certainly, her letter will find a way to leave the walls of her cottage and adventure into the world outside. Much has been written on the importance of doors and windows in genre paintings as *liminal* places which separate and at the same time unite two domains, the house and the world and therefore the private and the public sphere. Nevertheless, I believe that when associated with letters, and particularly letters written by women, these architectural elements are often an allusion to the possibility of these women to leave the house where they are somehow relegated through their letters, and to enjoy some liberty.

---

84 From Arthur K. Wheelock Jr and Ben Broos, Johannes Vermeer, F First Edition (Zwolle: Yale University Press, 1995), *Critical Assessments:* Woman in Blue Reading a Letter, *http://www.essentialvermeer.com/cat_about/blue.html*

In the painting *Trust me* by J.E. Millais (Appendix to Chapter 5, Figure 11), a man (a husband? A father? We are not allowed to know) asks a woman to see the letter she is hiding behind her back. The words of the title may be pronounced either by him or by her, but the shut door and the fact that the way to the door is blocked by a table make the scene almost claustrophobic. There is no way out from that situation, and that letter that may have just arrived or on the point of being posted will probably have to be subject to patriarchal scrutiny.

In all these examples, letters were excellent means for expanding the time of the stationary painted moment. The intrinsic nature of this specific media in which past, present and future are intertwined (see 1.2.1) conferred the paintings a sort of "temporal depth", making them overcome the temporal limitations that first Lessing and then Reynolds had seen in art. The content of the letter in King's painting may be unknown to us, but we can infer that Katie is probably writing to someone she has known for a while, maybe even in reply to a letter she had received herself from that person, in a moment of break from her domestic work (as the sewing basket on the table seems to suggest) which she will resume afterwards. The daughter in Millais'painting is probably hiding her father her liaison with a man as she knows he would not approve and the viewer fears what might happen after the moment caught by the painter.

The epistolary theme was also a good means to exalt the reformed postal system whose perfect functioning was seen by many as a mirror of the Empire itself. The campaigners who had supported the Postal Reform had been presented by the propaganda supporting the Reform as a way to improve civilization and moralize the nation. It is not surprising, therefore, that they made such a relevant appearance in a genre that was seen in terms of a national school. Some paintings mirrored the enthusiasm concerning the new Post Office like Witherington's *The Village Post Office* (1853) or the *General Post Office at One Minutes to Six* (1860) by George Elgar Hicks, while some others focused on the figure of the postman (Appendix to Chapter 5, Figure 23), who, thanks to the prepaid post, was no longer feared but instead waited with expectancy. The various stages of the journey of a letter, from its sealing to its posting and opening, became the subject matter for painting.

Finally, the fact that most of the epistolary paintings I will include in this work represent women is not a chance (see Chapter 5). Of the corpus of over 200 Victorian paintings I have collected which include letters, an overwhelming majority depict women. As I mentioned in the section on letters, women's letters were considered more intriguing (and potentially dangerous), and even if a love exchange would have necessarily involved a man, too, it was usually the

feminine part to be represented in painting. Significantly enough, the only representation of a male figure writing a love letter among the paintings I have researched, *The Valentine* by the watercolourist William Henry Hunt, is, in fact, that of a young boy and is slightly ironic.

The theoretical framework

A study on epistolary culture, which is in itself an extremely varied subject, and on how it impacted literature and the art necessarily requires an interdisciplinary approach. Studies by literary critics, historians, linguists, sociologists, sociolinguists, theorists of communications, art historians and other academic scholars have been of inspiration for this work.

However, the primary documents that forms the basis for this research, i.e. letters exchanged between ordinary people mostly from the "lower orders in life", are all but academic. Certainly, when in 1899 Mrs Green was writing from her self-exile in Italy to the father of her child who, being married, had abandoned her some decades earlier could not imagine that her letter would become the object of the interest of scholars one day. The same can be said for the young servant who sent a note to give an appointment to the housemaid he was infatuated with or for the fallen woman that enquired about her child's health at the Foundling Hospital. Nevertheless, the scholars who approach them today should get over the reticence towards violating such private and intimate documents and, with an act of tenderness and sympathy, make those voices heard again. The stories that those letters have to tell and which will be reconstructed by scholars in this way will be a key to the interpretation of their age and allow a perspective that has often been overlooked. If, as the historian Asa Briggs suggests, the material objects from the past are "*emissaries*" of the culture of their age, how much more do letters represent their time? After all, they are objects which tell a great deal about their correspondents through their material components such as ink, paper, and handwriting, and at the same time also means of communication which still conserve what is most similar to the conversation we have been left with.

The perspective is that of "history from below" and the culture of the Victorian age is seen as the result of the interwoven relationships between different media and different forms of human expressions, at all levels. Cultural Studies are an excellent theoretical base with their lack

of well-defined boundaries and the stress on multi-disciplinarity or even "post-disciplinarity"[85], their wide perspective on the idea of culture, the interest for expressive forms often considered derogatorily "popular" and "minor" as well as the focus on class, gender and ethnicity[86].

"Culture is ordinary", claimed Raymond Williams in 1958, in an essay that contested T.S Eliot's concept of elitist culture. This maxim seems to me a good starting point for a study that aims to connect a widespread and popular phenomenon as letter writing with more "illustrious" cultural expressions like literature and the visual arts.

Despite a certain affinity with the perspective of the Cultural Studies, however, I endorse Clare Brant when, in her volume on epistolary culture in eighteenth century Britain, claims that "diverse materials invite different perspectives", so similarly, I will try to "draw on a spectrum of methodologies" and reject any fixed "-isms", in order to "illuminate shades of meaning and demonstrate the importance of nuance"[87].

For my claim that letters in the Victorian narrative are worth much more attention than they get even when they are not present in their form, I was also inspired by the theories of Marshall McLuhan. Letters - either real or fictional - are, after all, first and foremost means of communication. The Canadian scholar, in particular, brought the focus back to the medium rather than to the message, arguing that "The medium is the message". In his seminal work on media, he explained that the "'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs".[88] Moreover, what McLuhan says about the railway, that is that "it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure" independently "of the freight or content of the railway medium" might be referred, in a broad sense, to the new postal system too, which, as mentioned before, introduced such great changes into human affairs.

Furthermore, transferring what McLuhan said about the real world to the fictional world of the novel, the concern about the drastic reduction of the epistolary form in novels may have, in McLuhan's words, blinded us "to the character *of the medium*" itself and to what it meant for the literary characters, the authors and the reading public. The thematic approach which, after

[85] Chris Barker and Emma A. Jane, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, 5 edizione (Los Angeles: Sage Pubns Ltd, 2016).

[86] N. Vallorani, *Introduzione ai cultural studies. UK, USA e paesi anglofoni* (Carocci, 2016).

[87] Brant, C. (2006) *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture,* AIAA, p.2.

[88] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Reprint edizione (Cambridge, Mass: Mit Pr, 1994), 8.

alternating fortune among critics, has been reaccredited in the last decades, would find in this case further support in the intrinsic nature of the specific theme at hand.

David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their *Remediation,*[89] took McLuhan's theories to a further step. They presented the history of media not as a series of displacements where new and more technologically advanced media replaced the old ones (for example the TV replaced the radio), but as a continuum in which all these means of communication reform and improve one another and therefore "new media refashion prior media forms". Far from supplanting the letter writing culture, therefore, the introduction of the telegraph and later of the telephone in the second half of the century, only affected the way letters were conceived. Some scholars like Menke[90] argues that it was not by chance that the introduction of the telegraph, that of shorter forms of epistolary communication like the postcards, and the demise of triple-decker novels in favour of shorter kinds of fiction, all happened in the same decades.

As for drawing thematic parallels between novels and paintings in this study, I am aware of treading on a particularly delicate ground as in the past this method was at the centre of animated debates among scholars. Some critics objected that treating the two on the same level could lead to flatten the differences in the aims and procedures of the two media. David Summers, for instance, used the expression "linguistic imperialism" to refer to the attempts at "reading" paintings as if they were texts and somehow imposing the theories of language to art[91]. Julia Thomas, on the other hand, argues that Summers' mistake is to think that saying that an image is a signifier means that it is a word. To support her view, she refers to the father of modern linguistics himself, Ferdinand de Saussure:

> Saussure asserts that, even though linguistics is the "master-pattern," language is only one example of a semiological system. Signifiers include, but are not restricted to, words. They can also be visual: a set of traffic lights, or the symbols that distinguish male and female lavatories. In a fundamental way Saussure's theory actually discounts the idea that word and image are the same, because at its core is the notion of difference between signs.[92]

I will embrace Thomas's view of a plurality of semiological systems and her claim that, specifically for Victorian Britain, words and images intersected in the creation of those same meanings that in turn they aimed at representing.

[89] J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: Mit Pr, 1998).

[90] Menke, *Telegraphic Realism Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems*.

[91] David Summers, "*Real Metaphor: Towards a Redefinition of the 'Conceptual Image*," in Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey, eds., *Visual Theory*, 1st edition (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1991),231-259.

[92] Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription Of Values In Word and Image*, 1st edition (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 7.

Although the contamination between these two forms of human expression has ancient roots (the genre of the *ekphrasis* in Greek epic was one of its first examples), this topic was particularly controversial also Victorian times. The diffusion of the mentioned *Laocoon* (1776) by Gotthold Lessing's, which established the irreconcilability of art and literature, and the popularity of narrative paintings coexisted in a period characterized by many other internal contradictions.

Nineteenth-century Britain was characterized by a constant dialogue between these two arts. As narrative paintings were sometimes accompanied by long descriptions and included written words in the frame or within the painting itself, volume editions of the novels of the most popular writers of the time like Dickens, Thackeray and Gaskell, started to be enriched by elaborate illustrations. These were based on plates executed by famous painters like John Everett Millais, Arthur Hughes or Frederick Leighton who were trying to supplement their income, or by illustrators who were soon to become as popular as the writers of the novels they illustrated, such as Phiz, Cruickshank or Seymour. Sometimes the novel/illustration order and hierarchy were overturned. It was the case of *The Pickwick Papers,* which was commissioned to Charles Dickens as a set of descriptions that were to accompany Robert Seymour's plates in order to create a sort of graphic novel. However, the success of the serialized story by Dickens was such that the novel ended up being at the centre of popular attention while the illustrations acquired only secondary importance.

Further proof of the hybridity between the work of the pen and that of the pencil or the brush was the narrative form called "*sketch*". These short descriptive and informal narratives flourished especially in the first decades of the century, but they influenced the production of Victorian writers greatly. Dickens's first published work was the collection *Sketches by Boz (*1833-1836) and, during his stay in Paris, Thackeray wrote his *Paris Sketch Book*, (1840); the nostalgic tableaux which constitute Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851-53) are certainly indebted to one of the most famous examples of the genre, *Our Village* (1820-1830) by Mary Mitford. With their realistic pretensions as "a mode that seeks to avoid strong rhetorical claims, and which situates itself as a non-judgemental first impression"[93] the sketches, as the name itself suggested, were for a writer what a rough pencil drawing that recorded the first impression of a place or a person was for a painter.

A certain connection between realism in novels and a certain kind of painting is evident also in George Eliot. In her *Adam Bede* (1859) the writer admits being attracted by Dutch genre

[93] Tim Dr Killick, *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century: The Rise of the Tale*, 1st edition (Ashgate, 2013), 21.

painting of the seventeenth century, for their "*rare, precious quality of truthfulness*" (incidentally, the same painters which so much influenced the narrative paintings of her age.) She found

> a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions.[94]

Words entered the visual arts while visual art entered the sphere of literature. Paintings influenced writers' styles in the same way as novels affected how painters represented reality. In this age both forms can be described as "*narrative and pictorial*"[95] and, as Thomas claims, it was from "*the interaction between the textual and the visual, the point at which they coincide and conflic*t" that meanings were generated.

It is for the hybridity of the two forms that I think that this period lends itself particularly well to a transmedial thematic study like this one which focus on how letters were represented in art and literature and on how art and literature impacted the culture of letter writing.

Murray Ronston, in his volume on Victorian context, declares to believe in

> the predominance in each generation of a central complex of inherited assumptions, of emergent ideas, of urgent contemporary concerns, to which each creative artist needs to respond individually. Poet, novelist, and painter may each choose to adopt those assumptions and priorities, they may question them, they may even vigorously deny them, but only at their peril may they ignore them. And even when the writer or artist resists them most forcefully, those impulses will, as matters of immediate pressure, continue to affect, often without conscious awareness on their part, aspects of their own art.[96]

At the base of this research there is the assumption that letters and letter writing were part of those *emergent ideas* which most artists and writers sooner or later ended up dealing with.

The case study: Love Letters

If the first two chapters of this work deal with letter writing and its representation in fiction and painting in general terms, from Chapters 3 to 5, the focus will be on a specific case study, that of the love letter. Initially, this project included many more case studies, such as letters and death, letters and illness (physical and mental), letters and crime. However, as often happens with study

---

[94] George Eliot. *Adam Bede*, Project Gutemberg Edition, (posizioni nel Kindle 2734-2736).

[95]Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription Of Values In Word and Image*, 1st edition (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004)

[96] Murray Roston, *Victorian Contexts: Literature and the Visual Arts*, 1st ed. 1996 edition (New York; Secaucus: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 3.

projects, in the course of the research, I had to reduce the scope of this work to make it more realistically feasible. Letter writing was so rooted in the culture of the time that, in addition to the archive search to find samples of actual letters and library search for fictional and pictorial ones, each of these case studies would not have been complete without an introductory in-depth analysis of its relevant context (respectively the idea of death, illness and crime in Victorian Britain). All this would have required much longer than the three years I had at my disposal for this PhD course, but the investigation of these other fields might be an interesting development of this study.

Love has always been a great inspiration, possibly the greatest, for all forms of art, even though, as Chapter 3 will demonstrate by referring to the history of emotions theory, the way it was perceived and experienced changed over the centuries. Therefore, how letter writing intersected with the Victorian concept of love will be at the centre of the second half of this work.

First, some real love correspondences will be considered, which have been selected according to the criterium of variety (they belonged to different social and education backgrounds) and practical considerations of availability in London, where most of the field research for this thesis was conducted. The chapter will highlight the main aspects of these epistolary exchanges in order to identify the key features of the sub-genre. Valentines will also deserve a sub-section, as they find themselves at the meeting point between social conventions, epistolary customs, visual and material culture and sometimes, skilled craftsmanship, and therefore represent an excellent link between all the aspects discussed in this work. This first chapter will also deal with what has been called here the “secondary function” of love letters, that is, their use (or misuse) in contexts that are not those of the love relationship. The examples considered are love letters presented as evidence in court (usually against the writers) or employed for blackmailing.

Secondly, the treatment of love letters in Victorian fiction will be analyzed. The first examples are written proposals of marriage that are often embedded when they appear in novels. The four cases found in the corpus considered are examined to emphasize how novelists used letters with much more in mind than a simple change of narrative perspective. Then, love letters, that are not disclosed but become different signifiers for different characters and are used, abused

and often transformed into litter (see the pun in K. Johnsons's article, "When Letter becomes Litter")[97] are taken into consideration.

How all these aspects will be translated in painting will be the object of the second sections of Chapters 4 and 5 dedicated to the case study of love.

Corpora of correspondence

- The Foundling Hospital Archive at London Metropolitan Archives
- The Fienga correspondence (private collection)
- Emily Bronte *Selected Letters*
- The Brownings correspondence
- The correspondence between Sullivan and the Scott Russells
- Valentines from the Victorian and Albert Museum in London
- Letters and postal items from the Postal Museum Archives (London)
- Letters between Jack Hughes and Beatrice Mercer
- Private letters conserved at the National Records of Scotland

Corpus of fictional works

The fictional works on which I have based my analysis is made up of novels, and some short stories

(1836) Charles Dickens *The Pickwick Papers*

(1848) William M. Thackeray *Vanity Fair*

(1849/50) Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

(1851/53) Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*

(1852/53) Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

(1859) Wilkie Collins, *The woman in white*

(1860) Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife*

(1862) Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*

(1863) Charles Reade, *Hard Cash*

(1864-65) Anthony Trollope, *Can You Forgive Her?*

---

[97] Kirstin Johnson, 'When "Letter" Becomes "Litter" : The (de)Construction of the Message from Ann Radcliffe to Wilkie Collins', *Caliban* 15, no. 1 (2004): 153–62, https://doi.org/10.3406/calib.2004.1513.

(1864-66) Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*

(1867) Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, *No Thoroughfare*

(1870) Anthony Trollope, *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite*

(1872-73) George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

(1874) Thomas Hardy, *Far From The Madding Crowd*

(1878) Wilkie Collins, *The Haunted Hotel*

(1886) R.L. Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

(1891) Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

(1898) Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*

(Popular) short narrative :

(1832) Frederick Boyle, *A Clandestine Correspondence*

(1845) E.A.Poe *The Purloined Letter*

(1847) Mary Leman Gillies, *Kate of Kildare: A wife's trial and triump*

(1854) Wilkie Collins *The Lawyer's story of a stolen letter*

(1860) Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell*, Curious if True (Extract from a Letter from Richard Whittingham, Esq.)*

Corpus of paintings:

The following study is not meant as an art history treatise, and yet it will often refer to paintings that include letters. As Ludmilla Jordanova claims, "as in the present, so in the past, the sense of sight shapes experience"[98], and considering paintings but also occasionally other lower forms of visual arts like prints and illustrations in connection to the general culture of letter writing is essential for what she calls an "integrative approach"[99] to a theme.

About 200 images of Victorian paintings depicting letters have been collected during this research by browsing books, old catalogues but also the web pages of art galleries, auction houses and museums. However, the number would be much higher if we counted those which do not include the words "letter" and "letters" in their titles and that can be found, for instance, in the catalogues of the summer exhibitions of the Royal Academy. Unfortunately, until 1888 the

[98] Ludmilla Jordanova, *The Look of the Past: Visual And Material Evidence In Historical Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

[99] Jordanova, *The Look of the Past,*4

catalogues were not illustrated, and when the paintings have been lost or become part of private collections, their title and, sometimes, a short description is often all that we have left with today.

Not all the paintings portraying letters contained the word “letter” in the name, but also behind titles including the word “news” or other allusions to the content of the message rather than to the medium itself, there might be a hidden letter. Although titles can be useful for statistical purposes to highlight the popularity of the theme in painting, when not accompanied by the illustration, they often do not reveal much of how the theme was treated. For this reason, I only considered paintings I could find the image of, or of which I found detailed descriptions in newspapers or books or even sketched studies.

Another premise that may be necessary about how I have dealt with paintings in this work is that for this corpus, I had to be less selective as for their dates than I have been for novels. If the period under exam spans from about 1840 to the whole 1870s, for many paintings, especially those not included in art catalogues, it is not easy to establish the exact date of production, and the only certain dates are those of birth and death of the painters.

CHAPTER 2 - THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"It is a great invention, and some day men will call it writing. At present it is only pictures, and, as we have seen today, pictures are not always properly understood. But a time will come, O Babe of Tegumai, when we shall make letters—all twenty-six of 'em,—and when we shall be able to read as well as to write, and then we shall always say exactly what we mean without any mistakes."

Rudyard Kipling, "*How the First Letter Was Written*" in *Just So Stories* (1902)

Letter writing and its representation: a brief historical overview

In the hilarious children's short story from which the lines in the epigraph have been taken[1], Rudyard Kipling imagines the moment in which writing was invented and significantly entitles the tale *How the first letter was written*. The tale is set in the Neolithic period when little Taffy goes out fishing with her father. When they reach the chosen spot and are already far from home, the spear her father is using to fish carps breaks, so Taffy, disregarding his order to sit while he is trying to mend it, decides to write a message and send it home to her mum through a passing stranger who does not speak her language. In that archaic form of a letter, written on a birch-bark using a shark's tooth as a writing tool, the girl draws a series of pictures to tell her mother what happened and what she wants her to do (send the spear through the stranger). However, the message is misinterpreted by the man and also by the mother, who believes that father and daughter are in danger because of the stranger and sends an armed tribe there. That first letter causes much trouble, but after the final explanation by Taffy, the tribe chief agrees that she has just done a great thing: she has invented writing.

Kipling notoriously wrote this story in 1902 as a bedtime tale for his daughter Josephine, so he did not certainly mean it to be taken too seriously. However, his suggestion that *writing* was created *in ancient times* with the purpose of *sending a message,* by a *girl* who wanted to *tell a*

[1] Kipling, R. (1902). *How the First Letter Was Written*. *Just So Stories* (Lit2Go Edition) *https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/79/just-so-stories/1302/how-the-first-letter-was-written/ (*accessed 10/09/2021)

story and *have something done* while somehow *disobeying her father*, as well as the connection between *the written word and the image* and the focus on *interpretation* might, in fact, be rather revealing of some aspects of the letter-writing discourse and culture which dominated the XIX century.

The assumption that the letter was invented as a substitute for an oral message to be delivered at a distance has an ancient and mythical origin in the Sumerian epic *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta,* one of the first representations of the letter in a literary context. In this twenty-first century BC account, the kings of two conflicting cities send each other a messenger with wrathsome challenges and riddles, which became from time to time ever more complex, long and difficult for him to report verbally. To overcome this problem, one of the two kings inscribes his message on a clay tablet using a set of cuneiform signs that his opponent will interpret with some difficulty.

Despite what this legend seems to suggest, though, the first letters found by archaeologists in the Sumeric area dates back to eight hundred years after the invention of cuneiform writing, which at the beginning was used, apparently, mainly for economic and administrative purposes.

The Greeks also used letters extensively, writing them on clay tablets or lead. They were used both for public communication (for example, between the *poleis*) and for the private one, and in this case, their delivery was entrusted to occasional messengers like soldiers or merchants. However, in the Greek tradition, the communicative function of writing went hand in hand with its commemorative purposes, as the first findings of epigraphic fragments (mainly dedications and funerary inscriptions) seem to suggest.

This notion of the alphabet as a means to preserve memories did not have only a positive connotation, though, and it threw a shade of suspicion over the writing itself. If in several myths, writing was a gift to humans from the gods, Plato, in his *Faedro,* tells a different story. Here, the Egyptian inventor of the alphabet is scolded by the god Thamus because instead of helping men remember things, his invention will discourage the use of their own memory and make them forgetful for lack of practice. The passage from the oral to the written tradition was sanctioned.

In Greek literature, letters were represented as enigmatic objects, whose secrecy often had negative implications. In the *Iliad,* for example, the only written text mentioned is in the episode of Bellerophon, where the hero is sent to king Iobates with a letter that orders his own murder. This will be the first in a long line of literary “Bellerophonic letters”, defined as letters that

somehow harm their deliverers unaware of their content and that have in the Shakespearian episode of Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern one of its most famous early modern examples.

Remarkably, one of the most ancient written commentaries on letter writing is Greek. The treatise *Peri Hermeneias* (in latin *De Elocutione,* in English *On Style)* has been attributed to the rhetorician Demetrius, and despite being written approximately in 270 BC, its chapter dedicated to letters mentions three ideological underpinnings of letter writing[2] that will be central to the theoretically oriented discussion of the following centuries:

- *philophronesis* ("the friendly disposition that undergirds the letter exchange") ,[3]
- *homilia* (the letter as part of a dialogue between two friends who are separated by distance) and
- *parousia* (the idea that the presence of the other person is felt at the moment of writing and reading a letter).[4]

Demetrius stresses here the similarity between letters and dialogue, besides introducing one of the most famous commonplaces concerning the genre, i.e. that "a person writes a letter almost drawing an image of his own soul",[5] which, as we mentioned in Chapter 1, Samuel Johnson would reaffirm in eighteenth-century England. Quite paradoxically, however, the Greek rhetorician also warns that, while dialogue is usually based on improvisation, letters have to be considered as gifts to the addressees and, for this reason, require a certain elaboration. This foreshadows the tension between spontaneity and elaboration that will be another aspect of the European epistolary discourse in the modern period.

About two centuries later, Cicero (106 BC – 43 BC) in one of his meta-epistolary compositions, claimed that there are "many types of letters, but one thing is certain, that the thing itself was invented so that we could inform those absent of anything that it might be important for them to know either concerning ourselves or themselves"[6]. He also embraced a pragmatic approach and introduced the distinctions between letters whose only function is to inform, that have to be severe and serious (*severum et grave*) and those which aim at entertaining friends, which can be intimate and humourous (*familiare et iocosum*); or between letters written for

[2] See Paola Ceccarelli, *Ancient Greek Letter Writing: A Cultural History (600 BC- 150 BC)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199675593.001.0001.

[3]Hans-Josef Klauck e Daniel P. Bailey, *Ancient Letters And the New Testament: A Guide to Context And Exegesis* (Waco, Tex: Baylor Univ Pr, 2006), 189.

[4] For this excursus on ancient letters I refferred mainly to Ceccarelli, *Ancient Greek Letter Writing,* see note 2 above.

[5] Demetrius *De Elocutione, 227*, quoted in Ceccarelli, *Ancient Greek Letter Writing*, 4.

[6] Cicero, *Epistulae ad Familiares* 2. 4. 1 (to Curio) quoted in Ceccarelli, Paola, *Ancient Greek Letter Writing*, 2. . Compare Cic. Q. fr. 1. 1. 37

private use and letters written for a wider public. Not surprisingly, considering his "genre awareness", it is the generation of Cicero (and Caesar) that has been credited by scholars as the one which introduced the practice to collect and publish personal letters, laying the foundation of a new literary genre. Ebbeler, in her essay on Roman letters, claims that "By the middle of the first century CE letter-writing had emerged as a favourite aristocratic pastime; and the letter collection had become an established literary genre"[7].

One of the Latin literary works that would have a significant impact on the painting and poetry of the period considered in this study (both in terms of epistolarity and of the ideal of femininity it implied) was undoubtedly the *Heroides* by Ovid (43 BC – 17/18 AD), which the author himself considered as a new literary genre[8]. In this collection of fictional epistolary poems, some heroines from the Greek and Roman tradition, such as Penelope, Briseis and Dido, address their former lovers, from whom they have been mistreated or abandoned, to give vent to their passions and feelings. This work, which was an example of *contaminatio* between different poetic genres, has been acknowledged as a milestone in the process of "fictionalization" of the epistolary genre in a world where letters circulated among a relatively ever-wider public.

Notably, it was in the Roman context that the oldest surviving handwritten letters in Britain were composed between the I and the II century AD. The so-called "Vindolanda tables" were written in Latin by members of the Roman troops stationed in the *castrum* of Vindolanda (in present-day Northumberland) and their families. Written in ink on wooden tablets of the size of a postcard, the messages are various, including an invitation written by the wife of a commander, Claudia Severa, to Sulpicia Lepidina, inviting her to a birthday party.

Letters also had the fundamental function of keeping the early Christian church members united, giving them a sense of fellowship. Moreover, with the gradual development of the organization of the church, episcopal, pastoral, and papal letters were used to inform the congregation about decisions and regulations concerning spiritual as well as temporal matters. The Epistles of the New Testament and the epistolary writings of the Fathers of the Church gave the form a strong religious connotation which in Christian iconography was translated in the fact

---

[7] Ebbeler, (2010) "Letters", *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*, *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 5, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199211524.001.0001.

[8] See Rizzardi Perutelli B., *The Influence of Ovid's "Heroides" on Victorian love poetry,* in M. Costantini, F. Marroni, e A.E. Soccio, *Letter(s): Functions and Forms of Letter-writing in Victorian Art and Literature*, Scienze dell'antichità, filologico-letterarie e storico-artistiche (Rome, Aracne, 2009), https://books.google.it/books?id=DNkqAQAAIAAJ.

that Saints, Evangelists and Doctors of the Church were often represented holding a pen, in the act of writing.

It was in the religious context that, in the Middle Ages, the *ars dictaminis* was developed, a branch of rhetoric that focused on the composition of letters and put special attention to the respect of the hierarchical relations between senders and recipients. Slowly, it became the basis for the expanding commercial and governmental correspondence[9] with its main centre of activity in Bologna. The *dictamen* writers created an “approved format” of the letter composed of 5 parts based on Cicero’s parts of speech: *salutation*, *captatio benevolentiae*, *narratio*, *petitio,* and *conclusio* (salutation, introduction, narration, petition and conclusion)[10]. Bologna was then the centre of *ars notaria* which dealt with the law and the form of legal documents, which caused the two *artes* to overlap, and, in the second half of the thirteenth century, the second to replace the first. Many medieval documents were, in fact, in the epistolary forms and, as Bazerman points out, even a document of the relevance of the *Magna Charta* followed somehow the epistolary model.

This connection between the letter and the law[11] will be an essential component of the epistolary culture in late modern times when letters will be used as evidence in courts. As Jolly points out, the legal power of the letter, connected with its embodying its writer and signatory, is still evident today when in the age of electronic text, documents handwritten and signed on paper are still required by the law as a legal guarantee.[12]

As the case study considered for this research is the love letter, it is close to home, while hinting at the Middle ages, to mention that it was at this historical moment that one of the most famous love correspondences of all times took place. The love letters between the French nun and scholar Eloise and her teacher Peter Abelard inspired poets and writers of all ages and contained profound meta-epistolary remarks, like, for example, the idea of the letter as a substitute image of the lover and a means of communicating love and desire that emerge from the following words:

> I have your Picture in my Room, I never pass by it without stopping to look at it; and yet when you were present with me, I scarce ever cast my Eyes upon it; If a Picture, which is but a mute Representation of an Object, can give such Pleasure, what cannot Letters inspire? They have Souls, they can speak, they have in them all that Force which expresses the Transports of the Heart; they have all the Fire

[9] See Charles Bazerman,”Letters and the Social Grounding of Differentiated Genres”, in David Barton e Nigel Hall, *Letter Writing As a Social Practice* (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Pub Co, 1999) 20.

[10] James Jerome Murphy, *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts* (University of California Press, 1985), XVI.

[11] “The letter and the law”, incidentally, will be also the title of a chapter in Wilkie Collins’s *Man and Wife*, one of the novels that will be dealt with in chapter 5 and whose plot is based on the legal use of a letter.

[12] Margaretta Jolly,” On Burning, Saving and Stealing Letters”, in *New Formations,* Iss. 67, (Summer 2009): 25-II.

> of our Passions, they can raise them as much as if the Persons themselves were present; they have all the Softness and Delicacy of Speech, and sometimes a Boldness of Expression even beyond it.[13]

As for medieval visual representations of love letters, the world's most famous piece of medieval art, the Bayeaux tapestry (eleventh century), which depicts the events that culminated with the Norman conquest of England and the Battle of Hastings, shows several scenes concerning messengers sent between the two armies. On the other hand, as the middle ages drew to a close, the last illuminated manuscripts of the works of Boccaccio or editions of The *Heroids* by Ovid included miniatures of women writing their love letters.

In the early modern period, as Bazerman claims, the ever-growing European economies added new financial connotations to the letter, which was now involved in bank operations like, for example, giro banking and was, according to Bazerman, at the origin of the banknote itself.

In general, however, the structure that *dictamen* writers had given to the letter remained almost unaltered in the epistolary exchanges of ideas and controversies of Reinassance scholars, up to the end of the sixteenth century when, with the rediscovery of the familiar letter, a real (first) revolution in letter-writing took place. Thanks to an increasing number of publications in vernacular languages, these had started to acquire more dignity, replacing Latin as the language of letter exchanges. If Latin encouraged an eloquent and formal writing style, the vernacular, more associated with lower contexts, facilitated an intimate and spontaneous tone. As Almási points out, however, the semi-public nature of learned correspondence that often was published made it impossible for the letter to be truly "familiar" and spontaneous:

> The humanist letter was thus very often a "publicly private "literary enterprise, which was, at the time, less of a contradiction than it appears to us. This is most evident in the case of published argumentative letters, letter treatises or dedicatory letters, in which the addressee (usually a man of prestige or fame) would often be used for airing opinions on controversial issues. On the other hand, when correspondence came to be published for its own sake, which was not at all unusual, it was meant to be read as pure literature, which offered examples of virtue and erudition, and served as a set of models for good epistolary style. At the same time letters were "ego-documents", in which, as Demetrius had put it, "everybody reveals his own soul". Yet, published correspondence was to a certain degree fiction, not only because letters have always tended towards fictionality, and did even more so during

[13] Héloïse, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise: To which is prefix'd a Particular Account of their Lives, Amours, and Misfortunes*, Bayle. Trans. John Hughes (London,1760; Project Gutemberg, 27 April 2011), Letter II, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/35977/35977-h/35977-h.htm

> the Renaissance, but also as a result of editorial intervention, from writing wholly factitious letters to tailoring authentic letters to editorial goals.[14]

The tension between spontaneity and elaboration that Demetrius had already identified in familiar letters in 270 BC, along with a stress on the contrast between public and private characterized, therefore, the letters in the Reinassance period.

Letters appeared ever more often in the portraits of humanist scholars like Erasmus of Rotterdam, but only as Leymarie points out, as "symbols or accessories, without any real connection with the mood or the psychology of the sitter"[15]. Erasmus incidentally had written himself a guide to epistolary practices entitled *De Conscribendis Epistolis* (1522), that would contain a staple definition of the letter taught in most grammar schools in the seventeenth century:

> 'A letter, as the comic poet Turp skillfully put it, is a mutual conversation between absent friends, which should be neither unpolished, rough, or artificial, nor confined to a single topic, nor tediously long.[16]

However, it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that letter-writing culture had its golden age. The expression "The Republic of Letters" was used in Europe and America for the network that intellectuals formed in these centuries, which overcame national boundaries and distances and included doctors, learned men, scholars and literary men. "Letters" stood for all the fields of knowledge to which these men dedicated their studies, but letters were also their favourite means of expression, and as postages were still quite expensive, they often took advantage of travelling scholars or students to have their epistolary contributions delivered. The previous chapter already mentioned how this international ferment led to the founding of the Royal Society in England and how it was just on the epistolary exchanges among this intellectual community that its official journal *Philosophical Transactions,* was formed.

In England, a crucial development took place in that century that would radically change the British postal system. In 1635, the Royal Mail, which had been created by Henry the VIII to deal with the royal and court post, was opened by Charles I to the general public.

---

[14] Gábor lmási, "Humanistic Letter-Writing" in *European History Online (EGO),* published by the Institute of European History (IEG), (Mainz, 3 December 2010) URL: http://www.ieg-ego.eu/almasig-2010-en URN: urn:nbn:de:0159-20101011147 [accessed 20-01-2020].

[15] Jean Leymarie, *The Spirit of the Letter in Painting*, Presumed First Edition (Hallmark Cards, 1961), Introduction.

[16] Quoted in Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199532445.001.0001.

The seventeenth century was also when Dutch artists such as Dirke Hals, Gerard ter Borch, Gabriel Metsu and Johannes Vermeer made the letter a central theme in the images of everyday lives that they depicted (see also Chapter 1). Peter Sutton argues that

> Dutch genre painting document for the first time in any culture the full range and power of letters, not merely as an expression of ritualistic social interaction but as a highly personal form of communication delivering pleasure, pain, and a full spectrum of emotion.[17]

The other European artists would embrace the epistolary theme only from the following century but certainly, they always had those examples in mind. A browse to the corpus of Victorian paintings collected for this research is enough to reveal the debt these paintings owe to their Dutch predecessors. Incidentally, there are some points in common between the cultures of the two countries in the two ages: both of them were centres of a trading empire and had an increasing population as well as growing literacy rates, all factors which certainly affected their epistolary culture.

In the eighteenth century, letter writing became a central aspect of everyday life. Brant points out how free franking for MPs made letter symbols of free speech, but they were also at the basis of trade, industry, and the management of the Empire[18]. The improvements in transport and the local road and canal networks favoured communications, an essential precondition to the development of the postal system. Furthermore, in the second half of the century, the introduction of Palmer's mail coaches increased the reliability and speed of the delivery and advanced the concept that the postal system should have been a service for the public rather than a means for profit for the government.[19]

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the greater mobility caused by industrialisation and colonial expansion made a certain "epistolary literacy" a necessity also among the lower classes. Recent historiography (like the study by Susan Whyman *The Pen and the People)* interested in history "from below" has started to consider this popular aspect of epistolarity, reconsidering the traditional ideas about literacy in this century. Brant argues that even the tension between public and private discussed above, in this century acquired new connotations, as letters were often indited and read in the company. High postages made it often impossible for one person far from

---

[17] Peter S. Sutton, *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer* (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2003),15.

[18] Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-century Letters And British Culture*, (Basingstoke England ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1.

[19] See Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800,* 58.

home to write a single letter to each of the members of his family, and similarly, a family could not afford to send separate letters to a faraway relative or friend.

Letters were also a form of sociability for the polite upper classes and they became the subject of a myriad of writing manuals containing language tips as well as model letters, which along with published collections of personal letters constituted a great part of the volumes in the bookshelves of the middle and upper-class homes.

Letters were then promoted as a form of sincere self-expression: Addison and Steel claimed that "nothing discovers the true Temper of a Person so much as his Letters"[20], and we have already quoted Johnson's idea of the letter as a mirror on one's soul. However, at the same time, it was used by literati, like Alexander Pope, to support their image and celebrity.

This was also the century when letters colonized the novel and the visual arts. If the first English epistolary novel is usually considered Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters Between a Noble-Man and his Sister (1684–87),* it is in the eighteenth century that the genre reached its peak popularity with the novels *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–48) by Samuel Richardson's and Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778). Following the sentimental tendencies of the literature of this age, but conferring his characters more authenticity than the usual sentimental types, Richardson managed to involve the readers with his characters by letting them access details from their private lives and consciousness in an unselective way.[21] The novelty of Richardson's works was to give the novel a more intimate and inward direction than the traditional one based on external action, merging romance with realism and paving the way for the nineteenth-century novel. As Bray argues[22], the representation of consciousness in epistolary novels was not as unmediated as it has often been believed and closer to the representation of human psychology in the subsequent literature.

European paintings started to include letters no longer as mere marginal objects part of the background to the main subject figure, but as relevant elements with which the human figure related, and a key to understanding the scenes that were acquiring an ever more narrative character. Writing paraphernalia, tools and desks were part of the painted scenes as well as the methods of despatch, testifying to a greater awareness of the ever more central role that letter writing, and its material aspects were playing in people's lives.

[20] *The Spectator,* N. 284, Friday, January 25, 1711-1712, online (accessed on 15/04/2021)

[21] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (University of California Press, 2001), .

[22] Joe Bray, *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness*, 1° edizione (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003).

The so-called "age of revolutions" was followed by great delusion for the failed ideals that underpinned it and fear of new political upheavals. Letters started to be seen suspiciously as potentially dangerous means of communication between spies. The French painting, *The death of Marat,* represents for Favret[23] this new image of the letter connected to betrayal and death. In literature, on the other hand, and as mentioned in Chapter 1, the letter form, for the single point of view it provided, was no longer considered suitable to represent the new complex reality. Nevertheless, letters would still have a new, relevant role in fiction.

With no intent to be exhaustive, the approximate historical outline above aimed to identify critical points concerning letters and their representations in history, which will reemerge, along with new ones, in the age of the "Victorian Postal Revolution". The main issues which men and women have tried to address over the time were basically the tension between public and private and the intrinsic contrast in the nature itself of the letter that is a form of spontaneous self-expression, but also of social exchange, and as such it is based on conventions and intended to convey a certain image of the writer. Furthermore, material considerations were also fundamental in shaping the public image of letter writings. On their part, the visual arts and literature have mirrored the ways these issues were perceived within the cultural and material context of each age.

When "the letter" became "the post": the Victorian context

On the 20th of September 1879, *The Punch* published a poem in memory of the just deceased Sir Rowland Hill that the reformer's daughter called "my father's fittest epitaph", as "no more eloquent or appreciative obituary notice could have been penned"[24]. The *Punch's* famously desecratory attitude seemed to have been, on that occasion, abandoned for the eulogy to Hill:

No question this of worthy's right to lie
With England's worthiest, by the side of him
Whose brooding brain brought under mastery
The wasted strength of the Steam giant grim.

Like labours—his who tamed by sea and land

---

[23] Mary A. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence : Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[24] Eleanor C. Smith, *Sir Rowland Hill: the Story of a Great Reform*, (London:1907, T.Fisher Unwin), 303.

Power, Space, and Time, to needs of human kind,
That bodies might be stronger, nearer hand,
And his who multiplied mind's links with mind.

Breaking the barriers that, of different height
For rich and poor, were barriers still for all;
Till "out of mind" was one with "out of sight,"
And parted souls oft parted past recall;

Freeing from tax unwise the interchange
Of distant mind with mind and mart with mart;
Releasing thought from bars that clipped its range;
Lightening a load felt most i' the weakest part.[25]

This man, who was deemed to be worth lying with the greatest of England (and accordingly, was buried in St. Paul's Chapel in Westminster Abbey), was the main supporter of the Postal Reform of 1840 that had "broken the barrier" between people by "freeing from tax unwise the interchange/of distant mind with mind". This poem reveals how during the political campaign that preceded it, but also after its introduction, the Reform and its leader were the subjects of a political narrative that used the same literary "*topoi*" that filled novels and the narrative production of the time. The consequence was that the reform was seen as a democratic revolution, and its main supporter, a national hero. As we will see, all this exaltation and sentimentalization of the post affected how letters came to be represented in literature and the visual arts.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, what was, *stricto sensu*, a political reform, brought about so many cultural and social changes that several nineteenth-century intellectuals, as well as contemporary scholars, have equated it with a major *revolution*. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose love letters to Robert Browning will be dealt with further in this work, wrote about it in a letter to her American friend Cornelius Matthews in tones that were hardly less celebratory than those used by *The Punch* and equated it to the "glorious three days of Paris".[26] On his part, the

[25] See note 23 above.

[26] "Why will you not as a nation, embrace our great Penny Post scheme & hold our envelopes in all acceptation? You do not know—cannot guess what a wonderful liberty our Rowland Hill has given to British spirits,—& how we "flash a thought" instead of 'wafting' it from our extreme south to our extreme north, paying "a penny for our thought" & for the electricity included– I recommend you our Penny Postage as the most successful revolution since the "glorious three days" of Paris ---"
Elizabet Barret Browning, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Cornelius Mathews*, *28 April 1843*, Armstrong Browning Library - The Browning Letters, online collection: https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/28-april-1843.-browning-elizabeth-barrett-to-mathews-cornelius./339502 (accessed 22/01/2021)

postal historian William Lewins, in 1864, stressed the aspects of *égalité* and *fraternité* which the reform implied.[27]

As for our contemporary scholars, Catherine Golden's volume on the topic, published in 2010, confirms this view, bearing the meaningful title of *Posting it: the Victorian <u>Revolution</u> of letter writing*[28]. Kate Thomas, who focuses on the queer potential of the new postal system, notices that on the Penny Post, the cornerstone of the reform, "*the Queen was still separated from her head*", [29] connecting the image on the stamp to the bloody revolutionary events of the previous centuries. The association between the stamp bearing the image of the head of the queen and the royal heads severed by revolutionaries was not lost on Victorians either, if in 1864, on the occasion of Hill's retirement, *The Punch* published a cartoon showing Rowland Hill crowned by Britannia and bearing the caption:

> Should Rowland Hill have a statue? Certainly, if Oliver Cromwell should. For one is celebrated for cutting off the head of a bad Queen, and the other for sticking on the head of a good Queen.[30]

Among the innovations brought about by the reform, the most significant was the introduction of a unified postal rate of the value of one penny for the whole country (Uniform Penny Postage). This meant that sending a letter that weighed up to half an ounce (14-15 g) from any point to any other in the kingdom would cost only one penny. Considering that in the first half of the 19th century, because of the heavy taxes imposed during the Napoleonic Wars, the postages in Britain had reached their highest cost ever, this was a remarkable change. In the pre-reform period, for instance, sending a letter from London to Scotland would cost about 13.5 pence, which approximately corresponded to the daily salary of an average worker. The Parliamentary Selected Committee itself, when speaking of the Post Office in Parliament in 1838, declared that the postal system, as it was, *"was an establishment too expensive to be made use of"*.[31]

It has to be noted that the new postage, low as it was, was not yet within everyone's means, as one penny was the cost of a loaf of stale bread, which was a staple for working-class families

---

[27] Quoted in Kate Thomas, *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters*, 1° edizione (Oxford University Press, 2011).

[28] Golden, *Posting It*.

[29]Thomas, *Postal Pleasures,* 19*.*

[30] See note 28 above.

[31] Quoted in L. Rotunno, *Postal Plots in British Fiction, 1840-1898: Readdressing Correspondence in Victorian Culture*, Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137323804.

and therefore parents who had to choose between sending a letter and feeding their children would have obviously gone for the second option. However, this lower rate was affordable for a far larger segment of the population, including part of the working class, as the soar in the number of letters sent after the reform demonstrated. If in 1839 the letters posted in the UK were 75.9 million, by 1845 they had increased to 271.4 million, to almost double up by 1853.[32] It is important, however, to specify that these numbers refer to the letters sent through the Royal Mail, and not to the letters actually written. In fact, when the postages were so expensive, people endeavoured to find ways to send their messages for free or at lower rates by making use of travellers to make their messages reach their destinations or sending codified messages on the cover of the letter so that the recipient could understand the message without having to pay for it.

This latter trick was based on another practice of the old postal system which was to be changed by the reform. Until 1840 it was generally the recipient who, on receiving the letter, had to pay the relevant postages as usually they were not covered by the sender (the letters bore a "paid" or "unpaid" stamp). The cost was calculated by a clerk of the Post Office who considered the number of sheets as well as the distance it had to travel to reach the recipient. Daunton gives an idea of the general pre-reform pricing system:

> The lowest rate for a letter of a single sheet was fourpence for up to 15 miles, rising to one shilling for a distance up to 300 miles. Beyond that, one penny was charged for each additional 100 miles. A double letter of two sheets paid twice these rates, and a treble letter three times; 'heavy' letters were charged by the quarter ounce.[33]

With the reform of 1840, conversely, the cost of one penny (except for heavier letters) was paid by the sender who stuck a "piece of paper" bearing the image of the queen herself on the letter (and later on the envelope) to attest that the payment had been effected. This piece of paper was the Penny Black, (later Penny Red), the first stamp in history.

Fixing one penny as the postage for letters addressed within all the country certainly gave the reform nationalistic tinges, as it enabled British citizens to feel closer to each other despite the distance, as well as democratic ones since more people from the lower classes were now able to access the postal services exactly like the most well off. But it was the cancellation of the "right of franking", the provision that was considered the most egalitarian of the reform, although it was introduced for strictly financial reasons. Since the eighteenth century, royals, members of

---

[32] Nigel Hall, *The materiality of letter writing: a Nineteenth Century Perspective*, in Marina|Del Lungo Camiciotti Dossena, *Letter Writing in Late Modern Europe*, *Pbns.218* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2012), https://benjamins.com/catalog/pbns.218.

[33] Martin J. Daunton, *Royal Mail: The Post Office Since 1840* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 6.

aristocracy and Members of Parliament could "frank" their letters, that is, put their signature on the back of them to have them travel for free. However, this practice promoted abuses, as the privilege was often passed to family members and friends (who had their letters signed by the holder of the right) or even exchanged with favours or used to repay one's debts,[34] causing significant loss to the revenue.

Even Queen Victoria, after the reform, renounced her franking privilege and put a stamp representing her effigy on the letters she sent, which proved to be a shrewd political decision:

> This was a remarkable move: an act, on a certain level, of abdication. By stripping her signature of the power to circulate her correspondence freely in her own dominion, she relinquished her royal privilege and symbolically joined the "poorer and more numerous classes". From this point on, cheap communication was to be the right of a nation of citizens, not of a royal household. Victoria's renunciation of the frank was an inspired piece of PR; her signature disappeared from its place on the back of the royal envelope but was replaced by her head and shoulders on the postage stamp on the front of each and every envelope that passed through the postal system. Her mail thus traveled alongside all of her subjects, and she traveled with each and every one of their letters, her head forming an imprimatur of their importance, and a guarantee of equality.[35]

Furthermore, the queen was also reported as often walking personally to the post office close to Balmoral Castle in the summer to chat with the postmaster, buy stamps and send her own letters, an activity that made her feel closer to her people.[36]

All this had an evident impact on the representation of the reform in the public imagination, as paintings like *The General Post Office at One Minute to Six* by George Elgar Hicks (1824-1914) demonstrate (see Chapter 5). By showing a crowd of members of different classes in the background of the Post Office of St Martin Le Grand at closing time, the scene mirrors the egalitarian connotations that the new Postal System came to acquire.

Another factor that contributed to shaping how the reform was seen in the public imagination was its political campaign, which was, as mentioned, centred on the figure of Rowland Hill. An ambitious radical that had already dealt with education and poverty issues by running an experimental business school with his family and publishing a pamphlet, *Home Colonies* (1832), in which he promoted the creation of agricultural communities for the poor, he became known in 1837 with a pamphlet called *Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability.* Here he expounded the economic reasons underpinning the proposed reform to the Postal System. As the

[34] See Chapter 4, where this custom is mentioned in an excerpt from *Cranford* by Elizabeth Gaskell.
[35] Thomas, *Postal Pleasures*, 14.
[36] Christopher Browne, *Getting the Message: The Story of the British Post Office* (Alan Sutton, 1993),94.

government income exceeded the expenses in those years, some taxes were to be lowered, so he proposed the reduction of postages as the most advisable. It would have been a great benefit for the people with a minimum impact on the revenue, which would have grown. By lowering postages, more people would have afforded to send letters and chosen the Royal Mail to send their messages rather than entrusting them to travellers or making use of ruses not to pay the shipping costs. On the other hand, this move would have impacted the literacy rates as people were motivated to learn how to write and read in addition to strengthening the family bonds in a country where family and home were considered sacred. In short, the pamphlet and, more in general, the campaign it supported presented letter writing and the reform that would incentivize it as a means to enhance Britain's civilization.

In order to better convey this message among the population, the propaganda for the reform made use of a series of anecdotes that appeared in Hill's pamphlet itself but also in the official organ for the reformers, the *Post Circular* edited by Henry Cole, one of Hill's main collaborators, as well as in many newspapers. These tales were mainly of two different types. The first group presented episodes from Hill's life, which formed a sort of *bildungsroman* of the hero of the reform and explained the reasons behind his "calling" to it. In one of them, for example, as an 8-year-old, weak and sick child, he was sent by his mother to the pawnbroker to pawn some old family trinkets (or clothes in another version) because the postman had delivered her a letter she could not afford to withdraw. In another story included in his pamphlet, a friend of his (who later he admitted being himself) was in Scotland and wanted to contact home. However, he could not afford to pay for the postages so he forged the signature of Members of Parliament on newspapers to send them to his family. From the date on the newspaper and the postal stamp they knew where he was on that date, and from the member of Parliament chosen, how he was, according to a code they had agreed.

The second group of anecdotes, which Catherine Golden calls "pre-reform" tales,[37] presented situations in which the high costs of postages had disastrous effects on the lives of the poor. The most famous and more popular in newspapers was the tale of *Rose Maydews,* subtitled in the *Post Circular*, "a tale illustrating the effects of the high postage" (see also Chapter 1). Here, a young woman leaves her cottage in the countryside to work as a maid in the city. At the moment of her departure, she is recommended by her mother: "mind Rose, and write when any trouble presses thee, for thou wilt find none in the world who will counsel and guide thee like thy

[37] Golden, *Posting It,* 46.

parents”.[38] The idea behind those words was that the letter allowed families to keep in contact and therefore was a way to help young people who left the nest hold the values transmitted to them by their families and keep their virtue intact (something that Richardson’s *Pamela* ha already established a century earlier). After the first months in the city in which the girl is excited about the “splendour of London and of her fellow-servants” (as she repeatedly writes home), she “tasted of that cup whose inheritance is shame and sorrow”. With the Victorian reticence in revealing the details of fallen women’s sins, the narrator refers to what happened with the exclamation, “How soon does guilt usurp the place of innocence!”. After her fall, the girl repents bitterly and writes a letter home confessing her guilt in the hope to receive forgiveness and good advice from her parents. In the meantime, her family are facing some serious financial difficulties so when the letter reaches home they cannot afford to pay the nine pence postage. The letter has then to be rejected painfully by her mother who cannot imagine its content nor reply to it. This epistolary silence will convince Rose that her sin is unforgivable, and will lead her to kill herself. The last letter the family will receive is from a police officer announcing that Rose’s body has been found in the river. The dramatic and sentimental tone of the story is abruptly put to an end by the final political moral:

> And this poor girl was thus driven to despair and death by her parents’ inability to receive and answer her letter. Say, reader, ought not postages to be reduced? *Haste to petition the legislature for a penny postage.* (The Italics is in the original).[39]

Another tale concerned an impoverished mother who offered the post office clerk a silver spoon in pawn in exchange for a letter from her husband in prison until she could collect the necessary money. In some versions, the postmaster accepted, while in others, he rejected it.

The pre-reform procedure of “candelling” was at the centre of yet another tale. Hill’s pamphlet reported the story of a post office clerk, who, on examing a letter against the candle to establish how many sheets it was composed of, spotted a banknote inside it and could not resist the urge to steal it. An investigation follows that, with its evidence analysis, questioning of the personnel, a character acting in disguise and a police identification, recalls the contemporary detective stories.

All these anecdotes, which blurred the boundary between reality and fiction, highlighted the benefits of the reform and the reformed postal system (some of them continued to be

---

[38] All the quotations are from *Rose Maydew*, The Staffordshire Gazette and the County Standard, 1 June, 1839, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/ (accessed on 30/07/2019)

[39] See note 37 above.

published after the reform had been applied) by presenting tales of hardships of the previous years. For this purpose, they exploited some of the narrative paradigms that were making novels a thriving genre. Sentimentalism, pathos, mystery and *topoi* like the fallen woman, the poor mother humiliated in front of the postman or the post office clerk, or the sick child who is sent to the pawnbroker, appealed to the fictional taste of readers that had read *Oliver Twist*, and some years after the reform, would read *The Purloined Letter* by Poe. It is probably not for a chance that a decade after the reform, the so-called "postal plots," centred on letters, their paths and content started to flourish. At the same time, the reform (and with that, letter writing) acquired those sentimental tinges that painting so much celebrated.

Reformers did not limit themselves to short stories and sketches. The character of Queen Victoria declared herself in favour of the reform in the skit *A Report of an Imaginary Scene at Windsor Castle Respecting the Uniform Penny Postage* written by Henry Cole and published with the thirteenth instalment of *Nicholas Nickleby* by Charles Dickens (April 1839). If the title specified that the scene was "imaginary", often the words pronounced by the existing politicians who appear in it were taken from their speeches in Parliament, further blending facts and fiction. Some scholars even go as far as to suggest that the skit might have weighed on the queen's decision to approve the reform.

The newspapers' extensive coverage of the postal issue end its significant impact on public opinion underscores that another sector was thriving hand in hand with the postal one: the press industry. Technological developments in printing, such as the Applegath cylinder machine, which was on show at the Great Exhibition in 1851 and could print up to 5000 copies per hour, along with the general reduction of the taxes on print until their complete removal in 1855, are some of the key factors underpinning the boom that press experienced in those decades. In 1815 the Stamp Act had increased the tax on each copy to 4d, and the newspaper would consequently cost between 6 or 7d so their circulation was chiefly restricted to people with fairly high incomes. After the abolition of the stamp duty in 1855, *The Daily Telegraph*, became the first penny national. The Manchester Guardian, The Scotsman and Liverpool Post became daily, and the same year, 17 regional "evenings" were founded. The first logical consequence of all this was the emergence of the first mass reading public.

The Postal Reform brought about a significant increase in the number of letters sent, but it did not give the expected financial results that Hill had foreseen. The revenue started to

experience a significant growth from the post only in 1852 to the delight of Hill's adversaries who had always considered him an amateur who dealt with issues he did not really understand as he had not worked in the postal department before drawing what he called "his plan".

However, the "Great Reform" of 1840 had only paved the way for many more innovations that continued for the whole century. For example, in 1861, the Post Office Saving Bank was opened, a bank service for ordinary people that encouraged them to save money that the government would secure. Four years later, the Post Office started to sell life insurances and in 1881, postal orders were introduced. In 1884 an official and affordable Parcel Postal Service was also implemented for the first time.

However, another watershed date in British postal history, which marks the start of the last decade considered in this study, is 1870. The first innovation of that year was the acquisition by the Postal System of the telegraph, which made it more affordable for the common people and not only for businesses, railroads and newspapers, that were the primary users of the services before that date. The electric telegraph was seen as a form that "annihilated space and time",[40] and its new kind of textuality, abstract, disembodied and transmitted immaterially, would impact, according to Menke, the realistic novel itself, that at the end of the century abandoned the three-decker format to shorten into leaner volumes.

The second innovation of 1870 was the introduction of postcards that the Post Office made available for the first time on the 1st of October of that year, following the Austr-Hungarian model. They were not charged, and to send them only cost half a penny. Christmas cards and Valentines were already popular (see Chapter 3), but in 1871, the average number of postcards sent in one year reached the number of 75,000,000.[41]

The campaign for the reform had contributed to putting letter writing at the centre of the public attention, and all these innovations encouraged an ever greater awareness concerning the material aspects of the post and, more in general, of communications. Clearly, in the following years, people were disappointed because not all the reformer's promises had been maintained (families were still divided, not all the people were literate), and the requests for further improvements were continuously put forward. On the 25th of December 1898 for

[40] Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems*, 1st edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2007), 268.

[41]Rotunno, *Postal Plots in British Fiction, 1840-1898,* 30.

example, after a long campaign, the Imperial Penny Postage which extended the postage of one penny to all the colonies and promised to unite the Empire was implemented.

CHAPTER 3 - LOVE LETTERS

Love Letters written in sincerity and faith need but little guidance except from the heart of the writer. The true lover will find the words he seeks flow easily from his pen, and probably the eyes resting next upon them will not criticise very severely.

"The wide world letter writer", Milner & Company, Londra, 1890 ca

Heav'n first taught letters for some wretch's aid,
Some banish'd lover, or some captive maid;
They live, they speak, they breathe what love inspires,
Warm from the soul, and faithful to its fires […]

Alexander Pope, *Eloisa to Abelard*, 1717

On (Victorian) love

The first chapter defined what it is meant for "letter" in the current study and touched on the complexities of the genre, while the second attempted at historicising letter writing and outlined, in particular, the material and postal context of the period this work focuses on. Before analysing Victorian love letters, however, it may be appropriate to briefly mention that letters were not the only things to change (materially and conceptually) over the centuries and across different cultures, but love itself did.

According to the traditional *affect theory* introduced by the psychologist Silvan Tomkins in the 1960s, emotions are innate and natural in humans, and for this reason, they are somehow "universal". Rob Boddice summarises this position by saying that for the advocates of this theory, "Love is love, fear is fear, anger is anger, and so on, and we only need to take note of the changing contexts of expression with regard to these human biological universals".[1] Nevertheless, "those who study emotions in the classical world", Boddice continues, "are under no illusions that they are dealing not only with different 'emotion words', but with entirely different affective experiences".[2] This is true to such an extent that Frevert demonstrates that some emotions like

[1] Rob Boddice "The History of Emotions: Past, Present, Future", *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, 62, (October 2017), accessed 24 March 2021, 9, https://revistas.uniandes.edu.co/doi/10.7440/res62.2017.02.
[2] See note 1 above.

honour, have been lost in late modern time, while others, like empathy and sympathy, emerged in the eighteenth century when they started to be seen as pillars of civil societies and to affect people's mutual relations.[3] Therefore, the German historian coined the expression "historical economy of emotions" to present emotional states in history "as dynamic and mobile, both enacting and reacting to cultural, social, economic and political challenges".[4]

A scholar who applies these ideas to romantic love, that is the emotion on which the letters considered in this section will revolve around, is William E. Reddy. The opening of his volume on the rise and development of romantic love[5] asserts that the Western way of feeling, which originated in the courtly love sung by *trobairitz* and *trobadours* in the Southern France of the XII century, is characteristically based on a dualism, with two differing forces that are in constant tension:

> In a common Western way of feeling, romantic love is paired with sexual desire. The lover feels both at once, yet the two feelings are in tension with each other. Desire is an appetite, self-regarding, pleasure seeking. Love is otherdirected and entails placing the good of the beloved above one's own. True love motivates the lover to master selfregarding desire. Loving self-restraint, because it subordinates desire to concern for the other's well-being, in turn renders desire potentially innocent. When the beloved returns one's love, and when neither of the two lovers' well-being is threatened by sexual embrace, then love and desire may both be fulfilled without harm.[6]

Reddy argues that the conflict between these two aspects cannot be found in ancient Greek or Roman cultures and literature nor in Nordic Sagas or Old English epics and not even in the oriental contexts he investigates in his study (see note 4). The idea of a "fulfilled love" where romantic love and sexual desire are happily paired, with the first subliming the second, started from the *"fin'amors*" of the *trobadours* and remained circumscribed as an object of a sort of "earthly religion"[7] in the Western context.

---

[3] Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History: Lost and Found* (New York: Central European University Press, 2011), available online at https://books.openedition.org/ceup/1504.

[4] See note 2 above.

[5] William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love : Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900-1200 CE*, Chicago Studies in Practices of Meaning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), http://ezproxy.unibo.it/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=470474&site=ehost-live&scope=site. Reddy compares the Western conception of love as it rose in XII century Europe with that of some regions of Bengal and Orissa between the ninth and twelfth centuries CE, and that of the imperial aristocracy of Heian Japan in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE.. His conclusion is that the where and when of an emotion change completely the quality of the emotion itself and not only of its expression.

[6] Reddy,*The Making of Romantic Love*, 1

[7] Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim quoted in Stearns andd Sterns.

Scholars belonging to the fast-growing field of history of emotions,[8] on the other hand, have challenged this "universal temptation",[9] demonstrating that if the context of emotional expressions changes, the quality itself of the emotion changes too. One of the most widely cited examples of this principle concerns the translation into contemporary languages of "emotion terms" from ancient Greek.

Another study about the history of emotions that proves particularly useful in interpreting the complex and contradictory Victorian attitude towards love (and not only)[10] is the seminal article that Peter and Carol Sterns published in 1985.[11] Here the two scholars introduced the new term "*Emotionology*", which indicates,

> the attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression; ways that institutions reflect and encourage these attitudes in human conduct, e.g., courtship practices as expressing the valuation of affect in marriage, or personnel workshops as reflecting the valuation of anger in job relationships.[12]

Emotionology, therefore, referring to the "collective emotional standards of a society" differs from emotions which, on the contrary, are

> a complex set of interactions among subjective and objective factors, mediated through neural and/or hormonal systems, which gives rise to feelings (affective experiences as of pleasure or displeasure) and also general cognitive processes toward appraising the experience; emotions in this sense lead to physiological adjustments to the conditions that aroused response, and often to expressive and adaptive behavior.[13]

The distinction between emotionology, that is the collectively accepted and institutionally-promoted standard of approaching a particular primary emotion, and the emotional experience of individuals and groups is of primary importance for this study. It explains why scholars, when talking of romantic love in Victorian time, should not, as some have done, limit themselves to analysing conduct manuals. These latter only give one side of the coin, the emotionological

[8] See for example the studies of Peter and Carol Stearns or Ute Frevert.

[9] Boddice, "The History of Emotions", 11

[10] I believe that these considerations can be of extreme relevance not only to the purposes of this research, as they place a renewed interest in letters and provide us with a key to interpret some Victorian attitudes like the one towards marriage or fallen women, but also, more generally, to a reconsideration of the so-called "Victorian compromise".

[11] Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, 'Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards', *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 4 (1985): 813–36, https://doi.org/10.2307/1858841.

[12] Stearns and Stearns, 'Emotionology",813.

[13] Paul R. Kleinginna, Jr., and Anne M. Kleinginna, "A Categorized List of Emotion Definitions, with Suggestions for a Consensual Definition," *Motivation and Emotion*, 5 (1981): 345-79, esp. 354-59, quoted in Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns.

context, which in some cases may be more accessible to us than individual experiences, yet it is insufficient on its own. Diaries and letters, but also newspaper articles reporting divorce or breach of promise trials or news of love stories with disastrous or even tragic endings can be, on the other hand, good sources to investigate the other half of the coin, the experiential one. According to Stearns and Stearns, a third aspect that the historian of emotions must consider is how people reconciled the prevailing emotional standard with their experience, and again letters and diaries offer a precious insight into this. Art and literature could also be of interest in this last step as many writers and artists, and among them, Dickens himself, sometimes supported in their works the prevailing Victorian values and yet betrayed (in their production as well as in their lives) personal views which were discordant with them.

This introduction aimed at demonstrating that romantic love, like other kinds of emotions, changes over time under the influence of the dynamics of its age and not only in terms of the way it is expressed in the different historical contexts but also in the way it is conceived and perceived by the lovers.

Although this study focuses on the medium more than on the sentiment it expresses, the two spheres are so intertwined that, in line with the research strategy proposed by Stearns and Stearns[14], it will now proceed with a short outline of the "prevailing standard" of the idea of love (and marriage) that emerges from the conduct literature and writing manuals of the period (emotionology). Then, after defining what a love letter is, the chapter will focus on examples from different social classes, investigating how this feeling found expression in writing and the key elements in Victorian love correspondence. Finally, some "secondary uses" of love letters will be investigated, which affected the concept of letter-writing itself and the ways it was represented.

The American scholar J.A. Boone summarises the evolution that love underwent from the eighteenth century to the Victorian times as follows:

> In stark contrast to the eighteenth-century delight in sexual pursuit, the ethereal affinity celebrated by Romantic soul-mates, or the Continental predilection for the extramarital affair, the ideal of love cultivated in Victorian England and America was foremost a glorification of married love and a vision of hearthside harmony. By conceiving of marriage as the natural goal of love's progress and the home as the center of life's most permanent values, the Victorian ethos sought to transform the otherwise potentially disruptive energy of passion into a stabilizing convention of bourgeois society.[15]

---

[14] As hinted above, Stearns and Stearns propose a three-step analysis: first emotionology, then emotional expressions, and finally the ways people mediated between the two.

[15] Joseph Allen Boone, "Wedlock as Deadlock and Beyond: Closure and the Victorian Marriage Ideal" in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* , Winter 1984, Vol. 17, No. 1, "FOR BETTER OR WORSE": Attitudes Toward Marriage in Literature (Part I) (Winter 1984), 65-81, University of Manitoba.

Simplistic as this outline might seem, it clearly endorses the history of emotions theories mentioned earlier while introducing the marriage-centred middle-class conception of love.

The association between romantic love and marriage, which is almost taken for granted in western society today, was actually introduced in modern times. In the patriarchal families of the pre-modern era, marriages were mostly regarded as a sort of investment. Parents choose the partners for their children in order to strike up economic and political alliances as well as to secure themselves care in old age in exchange for inheritance. Unions based exclusively on love and disrespectful of family alliances or rivalries, on the other hand, were considered dangerous, and literature has often destined them to tragic endings (think of *Romeo and Juliet).*[16]

However, in the middle of the eighteenth century, in the novel *Clarissa* (1748), Samuel Richardson showed the disastrous consequences of a marriage forced on a daughter by parents only to heighten their social position and irrespective of their child's feelings. The character of Clarissa Harlowe epitomised the growing aspiration of young people to choose their own partners for life and challenge their parents' control over these matters. Similarly, some decades later, Hogarth satirized the upper-class habit to arrange marriages based only on material considerations in his *Marriage a la Mode* (1774).

As industrialisation advanced, young people of the lower classes, who started to earn their money and became more independent from their parents, also acquired more power of choice in their lives. New factors were taken into consideration when choosing a partner besides the financial position: once that the basic needs in life were satisfied, aspects like character, educational background and appearance became more important. Clearly, the extent of this freedom depended on the class and the status one belonged to and what was at stake. Aristocratic but also middle- and upper-middle-class families gave their young people the idea of being free to choose their partners but were very careful to limit their acquaintances to a select group of eligible candidates.[17]

Economic considerations may no longer have been central in choosing a partner, but they often were the driving force behind the decision to get married. Middle-class women married to find protection and economic stability, as in the middle of the century it became less respectable

---

[16] See Paul Puschmann, "Love, Sex, and Sexuality: Balancing Economic Considerations, Sociocultural Expectations, and Personal Desires." In *A Cultural History of Marriage in the Age of Empires*. Ed. Paul Puschmann. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 117–138.

[17] This is only a general introductory outline of the development of the institution of marriage; for further and more in depht analysis see, for example, Lawrence Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*, 1st Edition (London: Littlehampton Book Services Ltd, 1977).

for them to work out of the home, and the same could be said for working-class men, who by getting married to a working woman could secure against the problem of the seasonality of their jobs and obtain free labour for their households.

The Victorian ideal of marital union was nevertheless that of a "companionate marriage" based on mutual love, loyalty, duty and protection. This concept had already been promoted in the previous century when the "cash economics" was still in its infancy and women were considered important skilled workers in the house and could help their husbands informally also in business matters, for example by listening to their problems and offering advice. Nonetheless, as Coortz points out, slowly cash money came to acquire more and more importance and, as it was obtained by working out of the home,

> "the division between a husband wage-earning activities and a wife's household activities grew, so too did the sense that men and women lived in different spheres, with the man's sphere divorced from domesticity and the woman's divorced form "economy".[18]

Because of this new separation, according to Coontz, the idea that wife and husband were workmates was replaced by their being soul mates, and that work that women provided was no longer seen as a contribution to family economics, but as a sign of her love for her family.

On the one hand, as "angels in the house", to use Patmore's words, women had to make their home a fortress where to raise their children and where their husbands could retire in the evening to escape the immoral and corrupting outside world of business and trade. The series of Sarah Stickney Ellis's manuals, *The Women of England* (1843)*, The Wives of England* (1843)*, The Daughters of England* (1843) and *The Mothers of England* (1844), as well as the triptych *Woman's Mission* by George Elgar Hick (*Guide of Childhood, Companion to Manhood* and *Comfort to Old Age)*, illustrate this view while giving women's role what Phegley calls a "religiously inflected nationalistic fervour".[19]

On their part, men gave up the masculine activities in which they were engaged in the eighteenth century, like meeting at pubs, coffee houses and clubs to smoke, drink, discuss politics and write letters, favouring more domestic moments spent talking with their wives and children. John Ruskin, in a lecture delivered in Manchester in 1864, summarised this idealisation of the idea of home and familiar love with the following words:

---

[18] Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, Annotated edition (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006), 155.

[19]Jennifer Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England*, Illustrated edition (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2011).

> This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods . . . so far as it is this, and roof and fire are types only of a nobler shade and light,—shade as of the rock in a weary land, and light as of the Pharos in the stormy sea;—so far it vindicates the name, and fulfils the praise, of Home.[20]

The identification of the home as a "sacred place" and a "vestal temple" and that of the woman as an angel, an"interpreter between the gods and men",[21] a herald of morality on whom, according to the nonconformist writer Edwin Hood, "depends mainly the righting of wrongs, the correcting of sins, and the success of all missions",[22] demonstrate how Victorian idea of love was deeply connected with the sphere of religion. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this association was not new, as it had been introduced into the western culture by the chivalric poetry of the French troubadours. However, as Houghton argues,[23] in nineteenth-century Britain, it merged with the inheritance of Romanticism and the Evangelical revival to give origin to phenomena like the "woman worship" of the sixties and the ethic of purity which in turn brought about the infamous Victorian prudery and condemnation of "levity". Women thus became powerful carriers of ideology while being deprived of real word agency.

This view was also tinged with nationalistic undertones. As mentioned in the first chapter about the new ideal of domesticity and its representation in painting, when Redgrave described the genre paintings which were sent to the French Exhibition of 1855, he stressed that that kind of art was meant for the homes where the English men spent so much of their time. This "domestic obsession", as some critics have called it,[24] was certainly inherited from the previous century, as the poetry of William Cowper or the paintings by George Morland, Henry Robert Morland, and later by David Wilkie demonstrate. However, according to Chase and Loweson, the rise of the

---

[20].John Ruskin et al., *Of Queens' Gardens* ([London : G. Allen, 1902), 22, http://archive.org/details/ofqueensgardens00ruskrich.

[21] Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Princess : A Medley* (New York : Macmillan Company, 1917), 134, Part VII, lines 301-312http://archive.org/details/princessmalf00tenn.

[22] Edwin Hood, *The Age and Its Architects* quoted in Walter E. Houghton, 'Love', in *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 1830-1870 (Yale University Press, 1985), 341–93.

[23] Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (Yale University Press, 2014).

[24] For example,Chase and Levenson, see note 24 below.

public sphere that took place in the last half of the eighteenth century intensified the growing need to circumscribe and defend its opposite, a private domain, home.[25]

Domesticity was considered then a traditional, national trait, as the very titles of Sarah Stickney Ellis's manuals stressed: they were not addressed to general women, wives and daughters, but specifically to the women, wives and daughters of England:

> There is an honest pride which every true heart has a right to feel, and England's pride should be in the inviolable sanctity of her household hearths. When these are deserted, the sentence of her degradation will be sealed.[26]

On the other hand, French literature and culture were considered dangerous influences as writers like Balzac, Sue and Sand were considered too indulgent towards sexual sins. Hannah More, in 1818, writes that she is aware of cases where "the reading of French fiction has led to the breach of solemn vows, and she thinks highly probable, therefore, that it contributed to the alarming increase of divorce".[27] It is no chance that in the first painting of the triptych *Past and Present* (1859) by Augustus Leopold Egg which depicts the dramatic scene where a wife's illicit relationship has been discovered by her husband who has intercepted a letter between the lovers, the couple's two daughters in the background are playing cards on a green book written by Balzac. The "evil" French example had entered the temple of a middle-class English home with tragic consequences.[28]

The positive national model for the blissful and sacred domestic union was obviously the royal couple, Victoria and Albert. Although it might be objected that the usual man/wife roles were reversed in this particular case, as the queen held the power and prince Albert managed the household (she even called him "my Angel"), Phegley argues that Victoria "made a great effort to play up her domesticity",[29] and generally the couple successfully concealed this confusion of roles, giving the public the image of a marriage of equals.

---

[25] Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy* (Princeton University Press, 2000),7.

[26] Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Young Ladies' Reader. With Observations on Reading Aloud and Remarks Prefixed to the Divisions of the Work*, (London:Grant and Griffith, 1845), 17.

[27] Quoted in Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870*, 360.

[28] This is the most common reading of the reference to Balzac, however, it is not the only possible. Annabel Rutherford for example, says that the book might not represent a novel but the essay *Physiologie du mariage* (1821) in which the French author, anonymously, satirized the institution of marriage. This might suggest that the message of the painting is not a cautionary one, but rather a critique of the bourgeois marriage as it was, as it often led to unhappiness. See: Annabel Rutherford, *A Dramatic Reading of Augustus Leopold Egg's Untitled Triptych*, Tate Papers n.7, Spring 2007, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/07/a-dramatic-reading-of-augustus-leopold-egg-untitled-triptych (accessed 17/07/2021)

[29] Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England, 3*.

It goes without saying, however, that for ordinary people, this ideal of companionate marriage based on equality of souls crashed, especially in the earlier Victorian period, with a reality of strictly separate gender roles and disparity of power in the couple. The Utilitarian philosopher and supporter of women's rights John Stuart Mill, in fact, claimed that marriage could become a happy institution only when wives and husbands shared the same rights. Meanwhile, the same books that contributed to spreading this idealised view of middle-class married life also prepared their readers for potential disappointment. Ellis, for example, wrote that women should be ready to find faults in their men, caused by the "peculiar mode of education by which men are trained for the world." She continued explaining that,

> From their early childhood, girls are accustomed to fill an inferior place, to give up, to fall back, and to be as nothing in comparison with their brothers; while boys, on the other hand, have to suffer all the disadvantages in after life, of having had their precocious selfishness encouraged, from the time when they first began to feel the dignity of superior power, and the triumph of occupying a superior place.[30]

However, Ellis encouraged women to allow for these men's faults and continue their mission despite everything.

To borrow from Coontz, love had conquered marriage, but somehow, in the public imaginary, it got caught into it. As Houghton argues, "passion was very much tempered by reverence and confined to the home—that is, to potential or actual marriage" and its object became "scarcely mortal". Furthermore, the love which did not conform with this standard "was not love but lust." This was also the message endorsed by conduct literature writers. The *Webster's Ready Made Love Letters,*[31] for example, pointed out that "All love letter writing aims at matrimony, or at keeping bright the little golden circlet that is at once its token and its pledge…". Love aimed at marriage and love letter writing, as its powerful instrument, was but a means to reach that goal, one rite of the more complex ritual of courtship.

Here is where the study of emotionology and emotions underscores an essential difference between the accepted standards and the experience actually lived by individuals. Many a letter, as we will see, was written in illicit and non-marriage contexts, exchanged between lovers whose unions had not been approved by their families, lovers involved in adulterous liaisons or lovers of the same sex. After all, as Brant argues, traditionally the typical image of the lover was connected to madness, and the lover "experienced love as a passion at odds with reason which called into

---

[30] Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Wives of England : Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, & Social Obligations* (London : Fisher, 1843), quoted in Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England*, 4.

[31] *Webster's Ready Made Love Letters*, (New York: R. M. De Witt, 1874).

question the truth of the world as it was to one in love and how that differed from the perceptions of people who were not in love".[32]

One of the many contradictions of the period, on the other hand, is that in the same years in which Patmore was "fighting fire with fire"[33] opposing, in his *The Angel of the House* (1855) the fire of passion and hell to that of pure love and the hearth and saying that only the latter could elevate the former, doctor G. R. Drysdale, in his treatise*, The Elements of Social Science: Physical, Sexual, and Natural Religion* (1854) wrote that "if a man and a woman conceive a passion for each other, they should be morally entitled to indulge it, without binding themselves together for life"[34]. The philosophy of "free love" that Goldwin and Wollstonecraft had advocated and on which George Eliot and G. Lewes were basing their household was also spreading, despite the condemnation of moralists.

Popular as the idea of marrying for love had become, however, conduct literature and advice columns in newspapers urged their readers to use not only their heart but also their head when choosing a partner, and to consider the character of their beloved too:

> Do not marry a man who has only his love for you to recommend him! - The London Reader warns its female readership - That is very fascinating but it does not make the man. If he is not otherwise what he should be, you will never be happy. The most perfect man that did not love you should never be your husband; but though marriage without love is terrible, love only will not do it![35]

Young men were similarly advised not to be guided in their choice only by women's appearance nor merely by their fortune and follow, instead, the old proverb "Like blood, like good, and like ages, make the happiest marriages", as the following excerpt taken from an anonymous article confirms:

> Some young men marry dimples, some ears; one I know married a beauty spot made of court-plaister, while a second cousin of my wife's married an expression,—I believe an amiable expression. It is difficult in the absence of any accurate statistics on the subject, to say, decidedly, which feature is most frequently sought in marriage. The rosiest, however, certainly lies between the eyes and the hair. The mouth, too, is occasionally married; the chin not so often. […] Only the other day, a very sensible young fellow of my acquaintance fell over head and ears in love with a braid […] What do young men marry? Why they marry all these, and many other bits and scraps of a wife, instead of the true thing. Some, more sagacious than the ordinary run, are not content with an eye, or a lip, but marry a set of teeth, a head of

[32] Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture,* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 94.
[33] Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870*, 379.
[34]Quoted in Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870*, 363.
[35] Quoted in Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England,* p.13

> hair, and a neat foot and ankle, all at once. Some marry a fortune, and as Providence sends a female with it, they wed her too. Some marry a silk dress, and others a pretty bonnet, and yet others a pair of gloves […] So young men marry, and so they settle; and such as the marriage is, such is the after-life; and then, after wedding such features, or possessions, or attributes, or what not of females, they are surprised to find that, though married, they have no wives. He that would have a wife must marry a woman. If he can meet with one of equal social position, like education, similar disposition, kindred sympathies, and habits congenial to his own, let him marry. But let him beware of wedding an instep, of marrying a bust, however fair, or a neck, however swan-like, or a voice, however melodious.[36]

Switching from conduct to fictional literature, this article recalls to mind the love story between David and his first wife, Dora Spenlow, in *David Copperfield* (1849-50) by Charles Dickens. David's infatuation for Dora starts in the very moment of their first meeting as his older voice informs us when relating it: "All was over in a moment. I had fulfilled my destiny. I was a captive and a slave. I loved Dora Spenlow to distraction!". However, that love is based purely on Dora's lovely appearance, her "bright eyes" and "bright curls" (the *bits and scraps* mentioned in the article above) and it is only after marrying her that David realises how little they have in common. The sentence pronounced by Mrs Strong, "There can be no disparity in marriage like unsuitability of mind and purpose", resonates with him and makes him growingly aware that his marriage (like the one Annie had avoided by marrying Dr Strong instead of Jack Maldon) was the result of "the first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart". On the other hand, Agnes, who has always been his best friend, a faithful life companion as well as a perfect angel in the house, will be his final and mature choice.

However, it was probably Anthony Trollope the Victorian writer that more than any others explored the many facets of matrimony in his works, to such an extent that he has been called "one of literature's most assiduous and complacent manufacturer of marriage plots"[37]. In his *Can You forgive her?* (1864-65) for example, the three main female characters are engaged in decisions concerning marriage, and all struggle between prudence and passion, the Byronian lover or the sensible one, in short, their heart or their head. Nevertheless, the question "what should a woman do with her life?" which resonates in the three plots throughout the novel, also delicately introduced the doubt about whether a woman's life really had to depend only on her marriage. The Matrimonial Causes Act which had been passed some years earlier (1857) and was bringing so

[36] The article appeared in many newspapers, but this version is taken from *Eliza Cook's Journal*, "What do young men marry?" Sat. 7 October 1854 – online version https://books.google.it/books?id=-jIFAAAAQAAJ&redir_esc=y, last visit 10/04/2021

[37] Sharon Marcus, 'Contracting Female Marriage in Anthony Trollope's Can You Forgive Her?', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 60, no. 3 (1 December 2005): 291–325, https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2005.60.3.291.

many cases of unhappy marriages to the public attention was starting to question the conventional ideas of love and marriage.

Starting from the 1860s with subtle allusions like the one quoted, the "courtship plots"[38] in which a couple had to overcome social, geographical or psychological obstacles before reaching the (happy or tragic) final closure, gradually were replaced by "*domestic plots*" where the marriage was no longer the climatical end of the lover's struggle to be together but the start of new, often dramatic, developments. In 1847-48, Thackeray had already satirized the praxis of Victorian fiction to consider the marriage as the end of the story in his *Vanity Fair*:

> As his hero and heroine pass the matrimonial barrier, the novelist generally drops the curtain, as if the drama were over then: the doubts and struggles of life ended: as if, once landed in the marriage country, all were green and pleasant there: and wife and husband had nothing to do but to link each other's arms together, and wander gently downwards towards old age in happy and perfect fruition.[39]

The Woman in White (1859) for example, as well as *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) all include a plotline focusing on the post-marriage life, presenting problematic domestic situations in which tyranny, falsehood, madness and lies dominate and that are quite far from the early Victorian ideal of blissful union. At the end of the century, George Gissing's character Rhoda Nunn in *The Odd Women* (1893) said that authors of romantic novels should be "strangled and thrown into the sea" for distorting reality and hindering women's reformation with their sentimentality: "In real life, how many men and women fall in love? …Not one pair in ten thousand have felt for each other as two or three couples do in every novel".[40]

All these examples, anyway, confirm that the novel was a preferential genre for the representation of marriage with all its facets and tensions. The sentiment of love in itself, however, was considered quite a complicated matter, to such an extent that even the many conduct manuals which aimed at setting its rituals avoided a clear definition of it. Nevertheless, from the romantic love of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* by Elizabeth Barret Browning to the disappointed one which calls for vengeance of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, from the

---

[38] See Joseph Allen Boone, "Wedlock as Deadlock and Beyond: Closure and the Victorian Marriage Ideal." In *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 17, no. 1 (1984): 65–81. Boone claims that the British tradition of marriage plots has essentially three possible orientations: the courtship one, where a couple had to face obstacles of different nature before the final union (*Pride and Prejudice, Pamela*) or, in its tragic version, separation (see the original ending of *Great Expectations,* for example). The seduction one, where a sexual element is introduced and social propriety removed and that often ends in tragedy (*Clarissa*); and finally the domestic one which focus on problematic marriages, with two possible ending, the comedic or tragic one.

[39] Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*.

[40] Quoted in Joseph Allen Boone, "Wedlock as Deadlock and Beyond".

sacred domestic love exalted by Coventry Patmore in *The Angel in the House* to the fierce passion that unites Heathcliff and Cathryne in Charlotte Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Victorian novelists and poets as a whole seemed particularly aware of the varied and contrasting aspects of love and marriage as well as engaged in exploring them.

Furthermore, although these writers often supported the predominant and idealistic views, sometimes the love stories they told had some darker undertones. The example of *Great Expectations* may be obvious, but also *David Copperfield* can be seen from a different perspective. Agnes is the angel in the house who has taken care of her father all her life and has always secretly loved David, but, at the same time, since she can achieve the object of her desire only after Dora's death, she can also be seen, as Hilary M. Schor underscores, as a cannibal "feeding on the corpse of others".[41]

Schor summarises the complex Victorian view of love in literature as follows:

> Love remains a (passionate) site of negotiation, because marriage is not a tableau of people fixed motionless around a fire but a constant whirling thing. If the Victorians seem torn between prudishness and prurience; between repression and explosion; between the cozy warmth of the hearth and the erotics of the street, lost lovers forever wailing on some wuthering heath, it is because the ghosts are not so much angry as confused, contorted, contracted, trying to do too much, to say too much, when they say "I love." [42]

With the waning of the century, however, what was already a "whirling thing" became ever more confusing. The movement for women's rights, the campaigns for the reform of the family like the one in support of the Children Custody act or the Matrimonial Causes Act, which made divorce a matter for civil proceedings, as well as the numerous family and divorce scandals that newspapers reported every day, questioned the foundations of that idealised view of family and home. The private and sacred family life was dragged into the spotlight through Parliament debates, court trials and newspaper articles, originating what Chase and Lewenson defined as "the spectacle of intimacy".[43] The next sections will outline how all these factors affected love letter writing and the ways it was represented.

---

[41] Hilary M. Schor, 'Love', Victorian Literatur*e and Culture* 46, no. 3–4 (ed 2018): 752–56, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150318000748.

[42] See note 40 above.

[43] Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy*.

Love letters

Before proceeding to examine the use of letters in the Victorian love context, it may be necessary to pinpoint what exactly makes a letter a "love letter". In *A Lover's Discourse - Fragments*, Roland Barthes, exploring love and its language, devotes one entry to this topic. Here, the French critic highlights "the special dialectic of the love letter, both blank (encoded) and expressive (charged with longing to signify desire)."[44] On the one hand, then, love letters aim at expressing a sentiment of love and desire, but on the other, they are blank because, as he claims in another point, expressivity is but an illusion:

> as a writer, or assuming myself to be one, I continue to fool myself as the effect of the language: I do not know that the word "suffering" expresses no suffering and that, consequently, to use it is not only to communicate nothing but even, and immediately, to annoy, to irritate (not to mention the absurdity).[45]

Similarly, then, the words of love do not really communicate love. Moreover, adds Barthes, when using them, "I can be understood by everyone (love comes from books, its dialect is a common one), but I can be heard (received "prophetically") only by subjects who have exactly and right now the same language I have."[46]

The "sweet nothings" that fill lovers' correspondence are then characterised by paradoxes. Clare Brant further confirms this paradoxical nature of love letters by pointing out that while they aspire to originality by expressing sentiments that are described as unmatched and unique, they are at the same time conventional, in that they use the language which so many other lovers use and have used for the same purpose.[47] Conduct manuals that established the rituals of courtship, as well as writing manuals which helped with the composition of letters, that were so popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, were material confirmations of this internal contradiction.

In his entry on love letters, Barthes discussed three more key aspects of the sub-genre. First of all, he explains what lies behind the idea of "I'm thinking of you", which emerges again and again in love letters like a varied "musical theme". For a lover, to think of the absent beloved means to awaken continuously from the forgetfulness that life itself imposes on them and to start thinking of him/her again. Writing is just a way to bring back this thought: "*I have nothing to tell*

[44] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Translation edition (London: Penguin Group, 1990), 157.

[45] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,*98.

[46] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,* 212.

[47] Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture,* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 95.

you, save that it is to you that I tell this nothing"[48]. In the second fragment, Barthes points out the difference between ordinary correspondence and love correspondence. He says:

> "As you see," writes the Marquise de Merteuil, "when you write someone, it is for that person and not for yourself, so you must be sure not to say what you think, but rather what will please that person." The Marquise is not in love; what she postulates is a correspondence. i.e., a tactical enterprise to defend positions, make conquests; this enterprise must reconnoiter the positions (the subgroups) of the adverse group, i.e., must articulate the other's image in various points which the letter will try to touch (in this sense, "correspondence" is precisely the word to use, in its mathematical sense). But for the lover the letter has no tactical value: it is purely expressive – at most, flattering (but here flattery is not a matter of self interest, merely the language of devotion); what I engage in with the other is a relation, not a correspondence: the relation brings together two images. You are everywhere, your image is total, Werther writes to Charlotte, in various ways. [49]

Therefore, love letters differ from other kinds of letters in that they have no strategic purposes and result from the writer's "longing to signify desire". Moreover, they evoke images and even more bring into relation the images of the two lovers.

The last point in Barthes's entry deals with the necessity for a love letter, even more than for other kinds of messages, to be followed by a reply. Quoting a letter that Freud wrote to his fiancé, Barthes claims that when love letters are not replied to, a distance between the lovers is created which makes the silent one become "other", a stranger whose image changes in the eye of the writing lover.

The few pages that Barthes dedicated to this subject seem to touch on many of the key concepts behind love letter writing, such as absence, desire, expressions of love and encoded language, the image of the lover, the difference from the ordinary letter and the need for a reply. Although both love and letters are subjected to changes over time, one would say that all these aspects are quite permanent features of the genre as leafing through collections of examples from different ages may easily demonstrate.[50]

[48] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,*157.

[49] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,*158.

[50] See for example Clarke, Andrea (ed.), *Love Letters: Intimante Correspondence between Famous Lovers* (London: British Library Publishing, 2011).

Victorian love letters

In a book where he reviewed some of the most significant Victorian narrative paintings, the British writer and publisher John Hadfield, included among the others, *The Love Letter* by Margareth Sarah Carpenter (1840, Figure 1). The painting, which was executed at the beginning of the period we are considering, represents a young woman who has retired to a secluded corner of her garden, arguably in search of some privacy as she is holding a letter from her beloved. The dreamy look in her eyes will be discussed more in-depth in the following subchapters, but Hadfield's comment on this painting may serve as a good introduction to this section:

> "How one wishes one could read more than a few words of the letter, or could supply an appropriate text for it from some contemporary source!" and then he adds "I have tried to find such a source but all I have come upon is a passage from a letter written some twenty years earlier".[51]

A letter from the poet John Keats to Fanny Brawne follows.

The fact that Hadfield could not think of an example of a letter suitable to accompany Carpenter's painting which was its contemporary, should not come as a surprise, given the little attention that has generally been dedicated to Victorian letters (see Chapter 1). After all, words like, "Love is my religion — I could die for that — I could die for you. My reed is Love and you are its only tenet" (Letter to Fanny Brawne, October 1819) make the immediate association between a nineteenth-century love letter and Keats quite understandable. As for fictional letters, one of the most iconic examples in XIX century literature is perhaps the letter in which Captain Wentworth declares his unchanged love to Anne Eliot, eight years after she had rejected his marriage proposal in Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1817). Both these examples relate to the romantic idea of overwhelming love whose strength is associated with death and agony ("You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope", says Captain Wentworth) and both of them predate the Victorian age of about 20 years.

The main objective of this section will be, therefore, to challenge the assumption that love letters did not survive the romantic period and demonstrate that, quite on the contrary, fostered

[51] John Hadfield, *Every Picture Tells a Story: Images of Victorian Life* (London: Herbert Press Ltd, 1985).

by the postal reform, they still played an important role in the lives of an ever-growing number of people, which was mirrored in novels and paintings. That complex tangle that was the Victorian idea of love and which, as mentioned above, was shaded with religious undertones, utilitaristic ideas, nationalistic nuances and a certain sense of guilt when one's emotion did not tally with the morally accepted standard, has often found but a squashed place in the emotionology studies. Furthermore, the bias that has accompanied the study of the Victorian period since the modernists of the beginning of the twentieth century as a time of repression, prudery and hypocrisy and which the revisionist studies of the 70s tried to correct,[52] might have contributed to this belittling attitude towards Victorian love letters.

People did write love letters in the middle and the end of the XIX century, as much as their parents and grandparents had done before them, but these letters represented different values and were seen in a different light. In fact, the category of love letters continued to be an extremely diverse one, including messages written in the most various situations, where secrecy was more or less a requirement and where writing the letter was prompted by a prolonged absence of the beloved, the simple need to keep thinking of them when not in their presence (see Barthes's quote above), or even the fact that the writer preferred writing something rather than saying it in person, as it sometimes happens with the marriage proposals. Obviously, a love correspondence does not only consist of passionate manifestations of love, but it may also reveal cracks in the couple's relationship or grief and desperation on the part of the writer in cases of unrequited love.

The social class and consequently the kind of education the lovers received are other key factors that determine not only the style, the register and the language used but also the content. Letters by learned writers tended to include literary and philosophical references and digressions (see the Barret-Browning correspondence), while when considering letters exchanged between people involved in more practical businesses, we find that they are often full of references to everyday issues and practicalities. Professor Katherine Hughes, who studied the love letters exchanged between Isabella Mayson (the future Mrs Beeton, author of the famous book about house management which sold 60,000 copies) and her fiancé Samuel Beeton, comments thus on this correspondence (which is not accessible to the public):

[52] See, for example, Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (Basic Books, 1966).

> love always comes alloyed with everyday concerns, jumbled up with worries about bills and what to have for supper. Even Isabella, a very young woman with no business or house to run, is unable to give her letters over totally to love. In between the extravagant sending of "1,000,000 kisses" and the slightly saucier fantasy of shutting herself up in a big cupboard with Sam, there are bulletins about the health of her 20 younger siblings, worries about skipping piano practice, and delicious dreams about new clothes. Sam, meanwhile, tries valiantly to stay focussed on love in his letters, but frequently finds his attention veering off to the much more pressing subject of business.[53]

Another example of love letters in which the practicalities of everyday life supplant the tender words of the love discourse comes from the Archive of the Postal Museum in London. Robert Abbott from Darlington, near Durham, was the eldest son of the poet Thomas Eastoe Abbott (1786–1854) and presumably a well educated and refined young man, listed among the partners of a Banking Company as "a gentleman".

The Postal Museum conserves four letters that Robert sent to his fiancèe Mary. The first is dated 1st January 1845 and is a sonnet full of erudite religious references to their future together, while the remaining three, which were written in the months preceding their wedding in 1847, deal more with the everyday visits Robert receives and pays and the practical details of the organization of their marriage than with sentimental considerations. Hints at the more spiritual aspect of their union are not altogether absent, as the following lines demonstrate:

> And now, my beloved, all things, under the divine blessing of the Lord, appear to be approaching to a happy issue. I on my part, my beloved, seem to have little to wish for, except the increase of love and wisdom and felicity. And this I am persuaded, in all humility, will be our united portion, if we devote our hearts and loves to those pure and heavenly things which are before us in the faithful records of the New Jerusalem.[54]

Nonetheless, generally, he prefers talking about his daily life. He tells Mary where he is going to buy the new clothes he needs (in York because where he lives there are no good tailors) and to spend the month before the wedding (at her fiancèe's family home). He also informs her of the arrangements taken for their wedding and the time they have to catch the train to be in church in time. On other occasions, he refers to his deceased sister and enquires about the work in progress of a new mansion, probably on Mary's estate.

---

[53] Prof. Hughes bought the bundle of letters at an auction and based on them and on her research about them her volume Kathryn Hughes, *The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs Beeton*, Harper Perennial, 2006. The words quoted here are from a review she wrote for the Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/feb/11/featuresreviews.guardianreview1

[54] Robert Abbott, *Robert to Mary*, 7 August 1847. From The Postal Museum.

Paradoxically, it is in the opening and closing formulas of the letters that Robert inserts some more affectionate words of address. He calls Mary, "My beloved Mary", and when he takes leave, he always stresses the constancy of his love:

> Be assured, my beloved Mary of the constant love and remembrance of yours alone, Robert Abbott.[55]
>
> Believe me to be, my beloved Mary, ever yours in faithful love, Robert Abbott.[56]
>
> The word adieu, believe me, was never written with such mingled indescribable feelings as it now flows from the pen of your in unaltered love, Robert Abbott.[57]

If Roberts seems otherwise quite reticent in displaying emotions too openly, he might have turned to the "language of flowers" in order to strengthen his message. Indeed, three of his four letters to Mary are decorated with flowers, which acquired important social and symbolic meanings in Victorian times*.*

The concept of communicating through flowers (and other small natural objects) seems to have originated in the middle east harems and was brought to Europe by Lady Montague's Turkish letters:

> There is no colour, no flower, no weed, no fruit, herb, pebble, or feather that has not a verse belonging to it; and you may quarrel, reproach, or send letters of passion, friendship or civility, or even of news, without ever inking your fingers.[58]

However, it became truly popular first in France, then in the rest of Europe, after 1818 when the *Le Language des Fleurs* by Madame Charlotte de la Tour (Louise Cortambert) was published. The book was such a success that it was soon translated and imitated, and it spawned many flower language dictionaries as well as personal ones, which often differed in their interpretations. A review of the book *The language of flowers* (1840), describes the volume as

> a practical guide to the knowledge of Floral Emblems, and will be found most useful to those who are desirous of adopting the beautiful Eastern custom of corresponding by means of Flowers.[59]

[55] Robert Abbott, *Robert to Mary*, 26 April 1847. From The Postal Museum.

[56] Robert Abbott, *Robert to Mary*, 3 August 1847. From The Postal Museum.

[57] Robert Abbott, *Robert to Mary*, 7 August 1847. From The Postal Museum

[58] Mary Wortley Montagu et al., *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (London : Henry G. Bohn, 1861), http://archive.org/details/lettersworksofla01inmont (accessed on 20/12/2021), 350.

[59] "The Language of Flowers", The Atlas - Saturday 18 July 1840 https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk (accessed on 02/12/2021)

Tennyson, Ruskin and Barrett Browning all made use of flower symbology in their poems, and as we will see later, Elizabeth Barrett herself sent flowers to her beloved Robert Browning in the envelopes with her letters. According to Janette Eve, Elizabeth Gaskell, a lover of flowers and a gardener herself, used a language of flowers of her own in her novels, different from the mainstream one.[60]

Robert Abbott's letter paper is decorated with roses, which quite unanimously was deemed to represent love, and red rosebuds, symbols of purity and loveliness. More specifically, when an open rose is accompanied by buds, as in the sonnet letter, it could indicate secrecy.[61] Is it possible that Robert was suggesting that Mary should keep that poem for herself only? Finally, the forget-me-not, the flower that appears in the third letter, was a symbol of true love and an invitation to be constant in the affection for one's lover, which seems quite a suitable message in a letter that Robert wrote as he was leaving Darlington to go to York. Another letter he wrote to Mary, dated 22 August 1846 and now conserved at the archive of the Birmingham University, with its many references to gardens and some poetic allusions to the "fairies of the floral kingdom", reveals his interest in gardening and flowers.[62] In the same letter, the fact that he also sends his fiancèe a common acquaintance's thanks for the flower seeds she has given her testifies that Mary shares the same passion:

> Mr Giliard says she ought to write you a letter of thanks for the seeds; but desires me to say everything sweet on her behalf. Another season, I hope, she will have the pleasing reminescence of High Field [Note: Mary's house] and its fair Nymph in cluster of beautiful parterres round about her dwelling.[63]

Clearly, we cannot know for sure which precise symbology Robert referred to with the flowers he painted in his letters, but indeed, he must have based his choice on some kinds of cultural considerations or mutually agreed code.

On the other hand, the idea of using a "code" to communicate secret messages to one's beloved, avoiding the inspections of inquisitive parents, would later originate another form of "language" connected with postal items: the "stamp language". A series of end-of-the-century postcards promoted a secret code based on the rotation of the stamps on the postcards to convey

[60] See Jeanette Eve, 'The Floral and Horticultural in Elizabeth Gaskell's Novels', *The Gaskell Society Journal* 7 (1993): 1–15.

[61] Kate Greenaway, *Language of Flowers* (London : George Routledge and Sons, 1884), http://archive.org/details/languageflowers00gree.

[62] In the same letter he also sends his fiancèe a Mrs Gilliard's thanks for the seeds she has given her, hoping that she will soon *have the pleasing reminiscence of High Field (note: Mary's house) and its fair nymph in clusters of beautiful parterres round about her dwelling.*

[63] Robert Abbott, *Robert to Mary*, 22 August 1846. From the University of Birmingham Archive.

secret messages. For example, a rotation to the right of 45 degrees meant "I love you" while a similar rotation to the left meant "Forget me not". Even though some examples of franked postcards of the time present oddly placed stamps, we cannot know for certain whether this was only a coincidence or if they really followed a code. Certainly, it may have also been a commercial move by the Post Office to incentivize the use of postcards among those people who did not want to entrust their private messages to a postcard where they were not protected by an envelope.

Anyway, the stress on covert codes to express one's emotions or deliver confidential messages highlights the secrecy component of love correspondence, especially in middle-class contexts, that emerges so clearly in paintings and novels. Less concerned with secrecy, on the other hand, seemed to be the lower classes, as the following cases will demonstrate.

Moving down the social ladder, more examples of love letters come from an unexpected source, namely the petitions that the unwed mothers of the working class presented to the Foundling Hospital to have their illegitimate children admitted to the prestigious institution. Here, these fatherless children who would otherwise be destined to street life or even to death received a primary education and, at the age of 14 or 15, were apprenticed to housekeepers.[64] As the process of selection was quite strict, the mothers had to demonstrate their "good character" and that their children had not been the fruit of prostitution or of a dissolute life. Therefore, in the petitions they often enclosed letters exchanged between themselves and the fathers of the children which served as proof that they had been in a serious and stable relationship before what the committee called the "criminal conversation". In particular, if there had been a promise of marriage, the chances that their children were accepted were considerably higher. The lovers in these cases belonged to the working class (servants, housemaids and apprentices), and thanks to the crucial function served by their messages, these letters are among the few of this kind that have been preserved to the present day.

Rather than being dedicated only to the expression of the lover's devotion, these letters often concerned appointments which were arranged, postponed or broken and the reasons thereof like the following one written by Charles Y., a 30-year-old locksmith, to his beloved Eliza, a 23-year-old chambermaid:

My dear Eliza,

[64] For a more extensive study on this topic, see Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women, Unwed Mothers and the London Foundling Hospital*.

> I now drop you a line I am sorry to say that I was not able to come a Round to you this evening as I have been out at Brixton at work all day i have only just come home now at 9 o'clock. […][65]

Or this one in which a grocer's clerk informs his beloved of his whereabouts:

> I will be in Lambeth Road on Sunday evening about past 6 and after that time, I will be at the "Bird in Hand", so that you will know where to find me, if you should happen to be out.[66]

All these messages also testify how courtship was less codified for working-class people. Even if their lives were circumscribed by long working hours, when off-duty, they were free to go wherever they wanted and with whom they wanted, with no chaperons or even the approval of their parents.

The letters included anecdotes from daily lives, jokes, tales of illnesses, and references to love tokens, petty jealousies and quarrels. Expressions of love and desire were not excluded from these correspondences though, as these lines from a gardener to his loved Harriet demonstrate:

> Dearest Harriet,
> I spend one Sunday with Pleasure and the other with the Blues but hop some day to spend them all with Pleasure when I have got the one I love Fast well good night Daerest …[67]

As Ducrocq points out, these messages offer a unique insight into the life of urban working-class people, which was neither only as gloomy as novelists and historians have often depicted it, being also made of little everyday leisure moments and pleasures, nor as light-hearted as the popular songs presented it.

However, there is another aspect of these documents that matters even more to this inquiry. All these letters enclosed in the petitions to the Foundling Hospital told stories which followed the same pattern: the love between two people, a "criminal conversation" which was followed by the birth of a child, a father who abandoned the mother and child and the mother forced to give away her baby in order to maintain her respectability and be able to keep on working. We may reasonably infer, though, that these letters were only a small fraction of the vast amount of love correspondence exchanged between people of this class, the tip of the iceberg to which we still have access only because these women turned to the Foundling Hospital after the

---

[65] Francoise Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria: Sexuality and Desire Among Working-Class Men and Women in 19th Century London*, trans. John Howe, Reprint edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 115.

[66] Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria,* 114.

[67] Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria,*118.

sad ending of their love story. Letters, therefore, were exchanged among the members of the working class much more than it has often been thought.

Love letter writing, however, remained a more extensive activity in the middle and upper classes, primarily because in those *social milieux* lovers could hardly ever meet alone. Unlike what happened in working-class contexts, here a man and a woman could hardly see each other in private as they often had to be chaperoned. Letters were then an essential part of the courtship in that they represented one of the very few means two lovers had to get to know one another more intimately without supervision. As it was mentioned above, however, even this aspect was subject to rules, which were dictated by a plethora of manuals. It is here that the paradox of familiar letters, which was pointed out first in the first chapter and more specifically for the love context in the previous subchapter, emerges: spontaneity and sincerity vs obedience to the rules and conventions, the wish to express the uniqueness of one's sentiments through the use of expressions and words shared with all the other lovers.

Apparently, to avoid potential *faux pas* in this delicate moment of the courtship, some lovers tended to stick too much to the models provided by these books. Since the eighteenth century, manual writers had often felt the need to warn their readers against copying *verbatim* a letter without adapting it to their specific situations. However, not all kinds of love correspondence were envisaged by writing manuals, as varied and comprehensive was the range of "occasions" they presented. Clandestine love affairs were carried out in secrecy, with the complicity of friends or housemaids and maintain still today all the narrative power of well written fictional tales, to such an extent that some of these correspondences have been published, with or without narrative interpolations by editors.[68]

The writers of marriage plots did not have to look very far for inspiration, as these situations must have been quite common in their circles, especially in those contexts where a "good marriage" was imperative to raise in society or to save a family from economic and social ruin.

One of the most famous examples of clandestine engagements based chiefly on correspondence is undoubtedly the one between Robert Browning and his future wife, Elizabeth Barrett. On the 10th of January 1845, Elizabeth Barrett, who had already attained international

[68] See Julia Markus, *Dared and Done: The Marriage of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning* (New York: Alfred a Knopf Inc, 1995). For the correspondence between Arthur Sullivan and the Scott Russells see George S. Emmerson, *Arthur Darling: The Romance of Arthur Sullivan and Rachel Scott Russell* (London, Ont: Galt House, 1980). For lesbian relationships, see Michael Field, *The Fowl and the Pussycat: Love Letters of Michael Field, 1876-1909* (University of Virginia Press, 2008). For correspondence among ordinary people, Beatrice Catherine Mercer, *Dearest Beatie, My Darling Jack: A Victorian Couple's Love Letters*, 1st Edition (London: Willow Books, 1983).

fame as a poet and had recently published her volume *Poems,* received a letter from Robert Browning, six years younger than her, who told her that after reading her work, he could not refrain from sharing with her the effect they had had on him. The letter started with the words, "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett", then praised "the fresh strange music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos and true new brave thought" of Barret's poetry and towards its closing said, "I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart— and I love you too."[69]

If Browning had already expressed his gratitude to other poetesses for their verses in similarly ardent terms (for example to Fanny Haworth in 1836),[70] the shift from the love for the poems to the love for the person who wrote them made this letter quite daring even for him. He also mentioned an occasion in which he had tried to visit Barrett thanks to the common friend Mr Kenyon (a cousin of her father's), but as she was not well, they had not been received. The following day Barrett replied to that letter saying how she was glad of receiving such compliments from a fellow poet and one she admired so much. She asked him to be sincere with her about the faults of her poetry (even if she did not promise she would follow his advice) and told him they would see each other in the spring, when usually her health was better, so that "what I lost by one chance I may recover by some future one."[71]

Barrett's health issue, which emerges twice in these two letters, a chronic disease that scholars are still debating, is one of the reasons why at the time of these exchanges, she was living a secluded life in her house at 50 Wimpole Street, London. Her family had owned sugar plantations in Jamaica since it had been an English colony and had incurred considerable losses after the abolition of slavery. For this reason, her father had to sell their mansion in Herefordshire to repay his debts and finally moved the family to the Wimpole Street address.

Mr Barret was described by Elizabeth as having a certain "peculiarity" which led him to impose on all his 12 children the promise not to marry. The reason for this stance is still unclear but might have depended on his religious views that made him equate original sin with procreation.

[69] Robert Browning*, Robert to Elizabeth*, 10 January 1845. From Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 1845-1846 (New York : Harper & brothers, 1898).

[70] Margaret Forster, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning : A Biography* (New York : Doubleday, 1989), http://archive.org/details/elizabethbarrett0000fors_e9w4., 143.

[71] Elizabeth Barrett*, Elizabeth to Robert*, 11 January 1845. From *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.*

However, day by day Elizabeth and Robert Browning grew ever closer and started a relationship which developed through 575 letters and ended with a secret marriage and an escape to Italy, where they spent the rest of their lives.

Their correspondence was very scholarly, full of allusions to classics from Homer to Tasso, from Shakespeare to Pope, and included quotes in Latin and ancient Greek as well as philosophical ruminations on poetry and writing. However, it also mirrored the development of the sentiment between the two lovers, showing all the typical components of any romantic relationship. The impatience to see the lover again, for example, often emerges from the letters, like in this one by Browning:

> What do you think frightened me in your letter for a second or two? You write 'Let us talk on Thursday ... Monday I forgot'— which I read,—' no, not on Thursday— I had forgotten! It is to be Monday when we meet next'!— whereat as a goose in death contracts his talons close, as Hudibras sings— I clutched the letter convulsively— till relief came.[72]

A couple of times Elizabeth included flowers in her letters while Robert marked his lover's envelopes with a number, the date of his last visit and its duaration.

Their *rendezvous* were limited though (generally once a week for half an hour), and it was the mounting impatience to receive the letters from the lover that is often described, as reading the lover's messages and writing to him was, according to Barrett, "a way of meeting, ... the meeting in letters, ... and next to receiving a letter from you, I like to write one to you"[73]. The couple is familiar with the times the post leaves and arrives:

> When shall I tell you more ... on Monday or Tuesday? That I must know […] can you let me hear by our early post to-morrow as to-morrow— as on Monday I am to be with Moxon early, you know— and no letters arrive before 11-1/ 2 or 12.[74]

The postman is also mentioned as the welcome bearer of the precious messages who sometimes seems to enjoy torturing the lovers by prolonging their painful wait:

> Your letter which should have reached me in the morning of yesterday, I did not receive until nearly midnight— partly through the eccentricity of our new postman

[72] Robert Browning*, Robert to Elizabeth*, 18 March 1846. From *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.*

[73] Elizabeth Barrett*, Elizabeth to Robert*, 25 March 1846. From *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.*

[74] Robert Browning*, Robert to Elizabeth*, 21 March 1846. From *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.*

> whose good pleasure it is to make use of the letter-box without knocking; and partly from the confusion in the house […][75]

> Your letter came just after the hope of one had past— the latest Saturday post had gone, they said, and I was beginning to be as vexed as possible, looking into the long letterless Sunday. Then, suddenly came the knock— the postman redivivus— just when it seemed so beyond hoping for— it was half past eight, observe, and there had been a post at nearly eight— suddenly came the knock, and your letter with it. Was I not glad, do you think?[76]

However, it was after one year of correspondence that Robert Browning started to become truly impatient and restless. Elizabeth had promised him that by the summer, they would have done "something" to put an end to that situation and would finally be together in another country. However, her fear of disappointing her father and of his reaction to the news she was in love at her age as well as of what the world would have said of such a union stopped her. So, in a sequence of letters, Robert keeps pressing her while she tries to divagate by focusing on their lives abroad rather than on how she thought to make that dream of theirs come true.

At this point, for Robert, letter writing is no longer a pleasant activity that makes the lovers feel close to each other as it was for Elizabeth at the beginning of their correspondence. Quite on the contrary, it is an unsatisfactory substitute for a physical presence: "I do hate having to write and not kiss my answer on your mouth"[77], he writes, and then "Love, shall I have very, very long to be hating to write, yet write?". Elizabeth, on her part, still saw their relationship as a fairy tale (simile that made him even more nervous), with the knock of the postman like the touch of a fairy wand.

Thanks to the warm summer of 1846, that year Elizabeth started feeling better and stronger and the letters became more focused on the practicalities of their escape that seemed ever more feasible. However, it was in that summer that the couple quarrelled for the first time, even though, before that time, they had always rejoiced at the fact that as they shared views on so many matters, they could have never argued. Actually, for a couple who was about to elope, family and money were not such extraordinary battlegrounds, but it is remarkable that Browning blamed letters for the argument.

---

[75] Elizabeth Barrett*, Elizabeth to Robert*, 16 October 1845. From *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.*

[76] Elizabeth Barrett*, Elizabeth to Robert*, 19 January 1846. From *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.*

[77] Robert Browning*, Robert to Elizabeth*, 25 March 1846. From *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.*

In his letters bearing the postmark of 31 July 1846, he writes:

> Dearest Ba,
> the love was as you admit, beneath all the foolish words—I will lay your pardon to my heart with the other blessings. All this missing of instant understanding — (for it does not amount to misunderstanding)—comes of letters, and our being divided. In my anxiety about a point, I go too much on the other side from mere earnestness,—as if the written words had need to make up in force what they want in sound and promptness […] (the emphasis in the text is mine).[78]

In a crescendo of impatience on the part of Browning, letters are no more a way for the couple to stay in touch but are seen negatively as a barrier between them, something which impedes their "instant understanding". In these few lines, Browning seems to point out the limits themselves of letter writing.

Earlier in this chapter, it was hinted at a certain component of secrecy in love affairs and letters, especially in middle-class contexts, even when the relationship was sanctioned by the parents' families. It will not be surprising then, that this component became even more critical in case of illicit love affairs.

As far as the couple Barrett-Browning are concerned, for example, the lovers usually met when Mr Barrett was not at home and the letters they exchanged were probably justified in his eyes as communications between fellow poets concerning literature. Even their common friend Mr Kenyon, who had served as their cupid, introducing the lovers to each other, was at a certain point excluded from their secret. Elizabeth remembered very well the family drama caused by her sister Henrietta asking her father for his consent to some outing involving a young man ("I hear how her knees were made to ring upon the floor, now!—she was carried out of the room in strong hysterics")[79], and she certainly did not want to be the protagonist of a similar scene.

Another example of illicit love affairs that led to a clandestine correspondence was that between the famous composer Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900) and Rachel Scott Russell. Famously Sullivan spent his life between his work and the "temptations" of London, as he called them in his letters, that is, gambling, alcohol, and mistresses, and he never got married. However, he had some serious love affairs, one of which with Rachel Scott Russell, the daughter of a Scottish engineer who had made his fortune in London and participated in the organisation of the Great Exhibition of 1851.

---

[78] Robert Browning, *Robert to Elizabeth*, 31 July 1846. From *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.*

[79] Elizabeth Barrett, *Elizabeth to Robert*, 17 January 1846. From *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

In the early 1860s, as a promising artist at the start of his career, Sullivan was often invited to the houses of prosperous families of the upper-middle class as he had a charming personality and was considered pleasant company. At Westwood Lodge, in Sydenham (South London), he met the three Scott Russel sisters and soon later started a relationship with the middle one, Rachel. She was an excellent pianist and a great music lover who appreciated his work and encouraged him to overcome his natural indolence, becoming a great inspiration for him between 1866 and 1867. In those years, they met and corresponded frequently, but only the letters that Rachel wrote to him are left to us. She burnt his after the end of their relationship, before she married William Holmes, a member of the Indian Civil Service, and moved to India.

Rachel's words to Sullivan reveal a deep love for him and for his music, but also a serious concern for the bohemian life he kept conducting in London and particularly for his flirtations with other women:

> I cannot think how you can go on living the life you do – going to miserable sickly London parties, smoking half the night through – and then getting up seedy and limp and unfit for any good honest work. [80]

> ...how fortunate it is that I trust you quite implicitly, otherwise, I should be inclined to think you have deceived me, for you were seen in Bond Street on Saturday in a Hansom with Lady Kathrine.
> I try to think it was an accident because I cannot believe you would not have told me. Anyway I don't like it... [81]

> I don't trust you enough, birdie, to let you go to see Mrs Lehmann – so you must give that up, my own sweet one – You told me you could not trust yourself when you got naughty – and darling I never couls love you again if I thought <u>any</u> other woman had <u>any</u> power over you… [82]

Their relationship was very unlike the one between Elizabeth Burdett and Robert Browning, and so were their letters. From Rachel's words, we can reconstruct their love affair as a continuous oscillation between moments of great intimacy (even physical) and bitter epistolary quarrels with her often shedding tears over his little constancy. Sullivan may have truly loved the

---

[80] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan*, 16th May 1868. From John Wolfson et al., *Sullivan and the Scott Russells*, First Edition (Chichester: Packard Publishing Ltd, 1984), 22.

[81] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan*, 22nd October 1867. From John Wolfson et al., *Sullivan and the Scott Russells*, 22.

[82] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan*. From Emmerson, *Arthur Darling*.

woman who kept urging him to higher achievements,[83] but she was probably too demanding and asked him, materially and sentimentally, what he would not be able to give to any woman in his life. Some of his letters, though, must have shown great affection for his "Passion Flower", as Rachel herself suggests in some of her replies: "I have shown yours to Lady [a nickname for her sister] and we both cried so bitterly that we could not speak. Darling <u>come</u> and see me."

However, the letters in which Rachel rejoices for Sullivan's words are outnumbered by those in which she complains about his not writing to her, writing her cruel words, or seeing other women.

When in Paris with her family, for example, she asked him to visit her, even only for a day, but he did not, and she learnt that he had spent a whole Sunday with Mrs Lehmann instead. The immediate reaction to that news was a letter full of jealousy and contempt:

> Dear little bird,
>
> I am so dreadfully hurt at your not coming down to see me that I can hardly write to you. I cried myself to sleep last night and today I feel very sad. […]
> By the by, you better rush down at once to see Mrs Lehmann so as to have someone to console you when we are gone[84]. […]
> When you are quite at leisure, I want to have a long earnest talk with you about things which will concern your future and mine, and till I have settled those things I cannot settle down.
> Perhaps you could come here on Sunday, as I daresay you can arrange to do for me what you did for your own pleasure last Sunday. […]
> This overture of yours[85] is the only piece you ever wrote that I don't care a straw about. They may hiss it for all I care... [86]

If the general reproaching tone of those words must have annoyed Sullivan, the very last lines must have made him furious, as they touched his work, in which he was putting so much effort. His reply, like his others, has been lost, but it must have been a bitter one, as the following letter by Rachel is a lengthy and quite submissive apology, to which he does not seem to have replied. Here is the beginning and end of Rachel's letter:

> I have been punished for that wicked wicked letter I wrote you – punished so bitterly – be kind as you are powerful and do not punish me anymore. […]

---

[83] "*I want you to write an opera – such an opera- and I feel it must be doene this winter. A grand vigorous gret work.[…] I want you to write something for which alle the World <u>must</u> acknowledge your talent."* Letter of 15th November 1867, Emmerson, *Arthur Darling,* 43.

[84] Her family was considering the idea to move to Paris at the time.

[85] She is referring to *Marmion.*

[86] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan*, 20 May 1867. From John Wolfson et al., *Sullivan and the Scott Russells, 36*.

> Oh Arthur, forgive me and you shall do what you like with me. I will go to you, will be your wife. Anything, anything, only to be with you and hear that you are mine as I am yours.
>
> Your passionately loving little
> Bird. [87]

Rachel's letters are often full of passion, especially after she had given herself to him, and challenge, to the eye of the modern reader, the stereotype of Victorian prudery mentioned in the previous section:

> Oh! My own sweet love – if I could only sit alone with you for days and weeks and do nothing else but pour out my love upon you, all the time, I would not show you how tenderly and passionately I love you. My own love, when shall I see you and get a kiss from your dear lips and see the love that I live for welling up out of the depths of your eyes? [88]
>
> I would see by what Freddie said that he thinks I have no physical passion in me – and please don't ever undeceive him – it is a thing you created and called out and between you and me let it rest a secret. [89]
>
> Will you come down and fetch me tomorrow? And take me up to London? - Oh God bless you my own own own darling love – my sweetest my dearest – my priceless darling – Hold me in your arms darling – gather me to your heart & love me in the old way – with your lips on mine & your eyes looking into mine – my darling my darling.[90]

Undoubtedly, the impetuous expressions of passional and physical attachment of these quotes, especially the last one with its emphatic repetitions and informal punctuation, were a far cry from the sensible models proposed by Victorian writing manuals. Nevertheless, Rachel, who belonged to the family of a self-made man that had arrived in London poor and had managed to raise in society, was exactly one of the target readers that those manuals addressed. This discrepancy furtherly confirms the relevance of considering emotionology and the emotions of individuals as two separate, if intertwining, spheres.

Sometimes Rachel wonders whether having laid with her lover might have contributed to the change she notices in him:

> My sweet one,

[87] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan*, 20 May 1867. From John Wolfson et al., *Sullivan and the Scott Russells, 37*.

[88] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan*, Spring 1867. From John Wolfson et al., *Sullivan and the Scott Russells, 31*.

[89] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan*, 12 August 1867. From John Wolfson et al., *Sullivan and the Scott Russells, 29*.

[90] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan,* 13th June. From Emmerson, *Arthur Darling*, 25.

> Your letter made me a little sad, for it showed me that your love could not stand the test of absence and that only physical contact could recreate it into what it was. - Ah me! When I think of those days when cooing and purring was enough for us – till we tried the utmost – and that is why I fancy marriage spoils love. When you can drink brandy water tastes sickly afterwards – and so I feel that mere petting and cooing will have no charm for us anymore and that when we satisfy our passion then all those little endearments will cease to have any charm. […] I do so fear I have given myself to you too completely. […][91]

In the beginning, the affair between Sullivan and Rachel was kept quiet to Rachel's parents (but not to her sisters with whom Sullivan corresponded and even flirted, too) as she preferred to wait until Sullivan had set aside the money they needed to get married before speaking to them. However, in 1867, tired of keeping that secret, Rachel decided to disclose it to her mother, who reacted furiously and said that she would sooner die than let her marry Sullivan. The Scott Russells were going through severe financial difficulties, and her father would soon have to move abroad to find work. Therefore, it was crucial for Mrs Scott Russell to find wealthy husbands for the three daughters, and Sullivan, a penniless composer of low origins, did not certainly represent an eligible match for Rachel. He was immediately banned from the house, and Rachel was forbidden from seeing him again.

From that moment, their relationship became even more secret and mostly an epistolary one, and the words they exchanged had to become even more private:

> Mama vows she will never let us marry – well so be it. True I will be – but I said I would write to you and now listen Arthur – Never, never, as long as you live show any one – any living soul one line or one word of my letters or tell them of anything I say to you – I will never write or speak to you if again you do – remember I leave my honour in your hands – you must burn all my letters as soon as you read them – or else I must write to you perfectly friendly letters which all the world may see. Tell me honestly and openly if you have showed any of my letters or parts of them to any one. And also darling you must not speak of me to people – remember from this time this love of ours is our deep inner life – but it must not keep bubbling up to the surface. […][92]

Quite interestingly, however, Wolfson points out that since their meetings became ever more furtive and rare (she went to Switzerland to accompany her father who had found a job there) and his letters shorter, Rachel began to form an ideal image of her lover, and to write,

> as if she were communicating with a fantasy Sullivan that she had created in her mind - a Sullivan who loved her exclusively and was devoted to her slightest whim.

---

[91] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan*, Winter 1868. From John Wolfson et al., *Sullivan and the Scott Russells, 67*.

[92] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan*, 2nd August 1867, from Emmerson, *Arthur* Darling, 32.

> […] The Sullivan who had so often ignored her or made her jealous, had been barred from her house and, for the most part, from her thoughts as well.[93]

When Rachel was about to leave for Switzerland, Sullivan did not oppose her departure (as she had hoped) nor wrote to her for a while. She then sent him a few lines:

> If you don't write to me I shall consider you are tired of it all and wish to give it up. God help me. If there was one thing I trust in, it was your undying love – and now a few weeks – and all is gone. I feel simply heartbroken. Triumph in the thought of that if you like – and the way in which you have wrecked my beautiful bright young life. Is it Good-bye forever? [94]

Although those words may suggest a certain awareness that their affair was not to last, on the contrary, his epistolary negligence (with shorter letters or no letters at all), along with the physical distance, contributed to the strengthening of the image Rachel had created of him. This seems perfectly in line with Barthes's assertion, mentioned in the previous section, that love letters require to be followed by a reply, more than other letters. As the French critic explains,

> perpetual monologues apropos of a loved being, which are neither corrected nor nourished by that being, lead to erroneous notions concerning mutual relations and make us strangers to each other when we meet again, so that we find things different from what, without realising it, we imagined. It […][95].

Thanks to the distance and the lack of replies to her letters, the fantasy Sullivan who existed only in Rachel's mind, grew stronger than the real one. That real Sullivan, while she was in Switzerland, was flirting and exchanging love letters with her sister Louise and soon later would have put an end to their affair for good. Some more letters followed, and in one of them, Rachel proposed to meet him to make sure he would burn her letters. They did meet, but he convinced her not to destroy them, while some time later, before getting married, she burnt his.[96]

An interesting aspect of love letters in general, and which emerges in particular from the correspondences analysed in this research, is the use of nicknames and terms of endearments. Lovers often do not call each other simply by their proper names but need to use appellations that are different from those all the other people use for their beloved. In their letters, they create a world whose language is understood, as Barthes argues, only by themselves and in which they

---

[93] John Wolfson et al., *Sullivan and the Scott Russells,* 51.

[94] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan*, August 1868. From John Wolfson et al., *Sullivan and the Scott Russells, 80.*

[95] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,* 158.

[96] Rachel Scott Russell's letters to Arthur Sullivan are conserved at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, in the Sullivan collection.

exist in relation to each other, so they give each other names of their choice, not the ones others have imposed on them. It is at the same time a way to detach from the outer world and claim one's possession of or reaffirm one's belonging to the beloved.

A search in the *Historical Thesaurus* of the *OED* reveals that some of the most common terms of affection in the nineteenth century were: love, angel, baby, beloved, darling, dear, dearest, honey, heart, sweetheart, and treasure. Of course, these terms of endearments were shared by many other lovers (the paradox of love letter emerges again here!), but perhaps the possibility to choose which to use was what made them "special". In some other cases, the names used to address the beloved were based on shared experiences or memories of the lovers and therefore were more personalized.

Robert Browning often calls his beloved *Ba*, the short form for "baby", the name her brothers and sisters called Elizabeth, which denoted familiarity and intimacy. However, he also used "dearest", "love", and "Beloved", while Elizabeth more occasionally called him "angel" and "dearest". Perhaps, being older than him and than the average Victorian bride-to-be as well as an invalid, she felt less confident and perhaps more embarrassed to use them.

In the Sullivan - Rachel Scott Russell case, the nicknames often fall within the semantic area of birds. This may depend both on the traditional association between love and birds since when Chaucer wrote his *Parlement of Foules* (1382 ?)[97] but especially on the fact that Sullivan was inspired by Rachel for the song *O Fair Dove, O Fond Dove* based on the poem by the Victorian poet Jean Ingelow. If at the beginning of their affair she signed her letters as "Your passionate flower" (with an erotic reference to their passionate relationship) later she became his "Fond Dove" or "F.D." and Sullivan was addressed to as "birdie", an appellation she also used for herself, for example when signing herself "Your passionately loving little Bird".[98] As Wolfson points out, the bird imagery was not only used for names but also as imagery for metaphors:

> My feathers are all up the wrong way and it will want a great deal of petting, billing and cooing to bring them down again.[99]
>
> I will speak to my mama and tell her frankly that […] you do not any more wish to take your little bird home to your nest…[100]

[97] See also the many Valentine cards illustrated with doves.

[98] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan*, 18 February 1868. From John Wolfson et al., *Sullivan and the Scott Russells,* 38

[99] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan*, 12 August 1866. From John Wolfson et al., *Sullivan and the Scott Russells,* 56.

[100] Rachel Scott Russell, *Rachel to Arthur Sullivan*, 29 January 1868. From John Wolfson et al., *Sullivan and the Scott Russells,* 72.

Valentines

With regards to written communication of love through the post in the Victorian period considered, Valentine cards certainly deserve a particular mention. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the significant advances made by the paper and printing industries along with a more affordable postal system contributed to boosting the market of cards and the custom of sending them. In the 1840s, Christmas cards were sent for the first time, and by the 70s, sending them had become a firmly established fashion. Furthermore, in 1870, the same year the Post Office took over the telegraph service from private companies, another form of short postal communication was introduced, the postcard. In this context, Valentines, which were more or less elaborated romantic cards accompanied with verses and some love words from the writer and sent on the 14th of February, reached their greatest popularity to then gradually fade towards the end of the century.

This custom was not indeed a novelty in Victorian Britain. The origin of the festival of St. Valentines itself[101] has to be sought in the *Lupercalia*, a Spring festival introduced in the country by the Romans that included fertility rites and took place in mid-February when the mating season for birds started. When, later, the early Christian missionaries attempted to obliterate the old pagan superstitions by replacing the pagan celebrations with Christian ones, they dedicated the 14th of February to St Valentine, a bishop who had been martyrised on that day in 270 AD. Even though until that moment, the saint had been venerated as the patron of the sufferers of epilepsy (from which the bishop himself possibly suffered)[102], the overlapping of his day with the Lupercalia sanctioned his definite connection with lovers.

As Leigh Eric Schmidt argues, over the following centuries, “the traditions of St. Valentine’s Day were carried forward […] on three distinct but interrelated paths - one religious or ecclesiastical, another popular or folkloristic, and a third aristocratic or courtly”.[103]

On the one side, despite giving little relevance to the devotion of saints, the Church of England still considered the first martyrs, and Valentine among them, as essential models for Christians to follow. In his *A tale of a tub* (1633), Ben Johnson mentions bishop Valentine

---

[101] The standard reference book for the history of Valentines is Frank Staff, *The Valentine & Its Origins* (Frederick A. Praeger, 1969).

[102] For example when in *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton lists the patron saints that some believe should be prayed to in case of illnesses, he mentions St Valentine as the saint of the “falling sickness”, which was epilepsy. See Burton, R. (1920), *The anatomy of melancholy*. London: G. Bell

[103] Leigh Eric Schmidt, ‘The Fashioning of a Modern Holiday: St. Valentine’s Day, 1840-1870’, *Winterthur Portfolio* 28, no. 4 (1 December 1993): 209–45, https://doi.org/10.1086/496627.

specifying that “works of piety he did practise, And bade us imitate; not look for lovers, Or handsome images to please our senses”.[104]

On the other hand, many regional and local traditions were perpetuated in connection with this festival on the popular level. Among them was that of young men drawing by lot from a box the name of what would become their lover, sweetheart or special friend for the following year. This woman would receive a present, often accompanied by a motto, from the person who had drawn their names. This ritual was seen as a good omen for the possible future marriage of the two people. At the same time, therefore, St Valentine’s day customs “served as both a type of nuptial divination and a frolicsome form of youthful entertainment”[105].

Nevertheless, it is in what Schmidt mentions as the third line of development of the festival, its aristocratic variant, that the nineteenth-century celebration of the day was chiefly rooted. The circulation of love poems, greetings and tokens but also of doggerel verses, which characterised the way the upper classes had celebrated the day since the time of the Duke d’Orleans (1394 - 1465), gave origin to the custom of exchanging love cards. The Duke is traditionally considered the author of the first Valentine known[106], as he supposedly sent Valentine verses to his wife while he was a prisoner in the Tower of London after the battle of Agincourt. Although this fact is historically improbable, it is true that the French aristocrat was a refined poet and often mentioned St Valentine’s day in his verses. In particular, in one poem, he declares himself too old and tired to take part in the St Valentine lot where he would be assigned a Valentine for the year, which proves that the folk tradition of the lot had a courtly version.

Since the Elizabethan time, the uses of the courts and the aristocracy were emulated by the emergent middle class composed of merchants and professionals and gradually, “in the lurching and drawn out movement from courtly to mass consumption, St. Valentine’s Day was transformed”.[107]

The courtly element still emerges in the accounts of St Valentine’s day offered by Samuel Pepys in his diaries[108], which include notes on how he and his wife spent that particular day. From Pepys’s narrations, we learn that married people could also take part in the lot, as well as children

[104] The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson, ed. G. A. Wilkes, 4 vols. (Oxford, Eng.: Clarendon Press, 1981), 1:21.

[105] Schmidt "The Fashioning of a Modern Holiday: St. Valentine's Day, 1840-1870".

[106] See the blog of The British Library about the Duke d’Orleans’ Valentine: https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2021/02/charles-dorl%C3%A9ans.html

[107] Leigh Eric Schmidt, ‘The Fashioning of a Modern Holiday: St. Valentine’s Day, 1840-1870’, *Winterthur Portfolio* 28, no. 4 (1993): 209–45.

[108] I have checked in particular the diaries of the years 1660-1669, https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/, accessed 20 June 2021.

and servants. In the following lines, for example, he describes the scene in which a child, probably the small son of his wife's maid, enters his bedroom on Valentine's morning 1666 while he is still dressing, to present Mrs Pepys with a card:

> This morning come up to my wife's bedside, I being up dressing myself, little Will Mercer to be her Valentine; and brought her name writ upon blue paper in gold letters, done by himself, very pretty; and we were both well pleased with it. But I am also this year my wife's Valentine, and it will cost me 5l.; but that I must have laid out if we had not been Valentines.[109]

This reference to blue paper with gold lettering may be one of the first known mentions of a written Valentine handmade card. Pepys also refers to another custom which consisted in considering one's Valentine the first unmarried person one encountered in the morning of the 14th of February. The description of his wife trying to avoid the painters who are working in the house not to become their Valentine is quite hilarious:

> This morning, in comes W. Bowyer, who was my wife's Valentine, she having (at which I made good sport to myself) held her hands all the morning that she might not see the paynters that were at work in gilding my chimney-piece and pictures in my dining room.[110]

The tales of Pepys's St Valentine's days do not fail to include the downside of this tradition, that is the costs that all these tokens involved and which are often reported in detail. Even if he was not as extravagant as some aristocrats such as the Duke of York, who gave his Valentine Lady Arabella Stuart a jewel of the value of £800, he is often concerned about the money he has to spend on this occasion:

> 14 February 1668
> Up, being called by Mercer (Mrs Pepys' maid), who come to be my Valentine, and I did give her a guinney in gold for her Valentine's gift, There comes Roger Pepys betimes, and comes to my wife, for her to be his Valentine, whose Valentine I was also, by agreement to be to her so every year; and this year I find it likely to cost £4 in a ring for her which she desires.[111]

This was also the reason why the tradition of exchanging tokens was less honoured among the lower classes. Sending cards too was quite prohibitive for many people before 1840 because

---

[109] Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, Thursday 14 February 1666/67. From https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1667/02/14/ accessed 20 June 2021.

[110] Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, Friday 14 February 1661/62. From https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1667/02/14/ accessed 20 June 2021.

[111] Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 14th February 1668. From https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1667/02/14/ accessed 20 June 2021.

even if the Penny Post had been introduced in London in 1680, in the rest of the country, as the previous chapter extensively explained, the postages were very costly. In rural country villages, therefore, often the cards were left at the door of the beloved by their sender, who sometimes remained anonymous.

These customs endured throughout the 18th century, especially in the upper classes and if the oldest printed Valentines date probably to the last decades of the century, the earlier versions were handmade, using techniques such as pin pricking, drawing, painting and following patterns like the "true love knot"[112] (very popular in Scotland and the United States) or the puzzle. Contemporary to the first printed cards was also the publication of little manuals called *Valentine Writers*, like *The complete British Valentine Writer, or the High Road to Love for both sexes* (1794), which offered the lovers verses to be copied on their cards or letters and, in February, of poems and articles concerning Valentine's day on magazines.

However, with the turn of the nineteenth century, the fashion for elegant and elaborate writing papers, already used by traders for commercial communications and bills, further expanded, and printers and publishers envisaged for Valentines a new profitable side market. Skilful engravers like the Italian Francesco Bartolozzi (1727 -1815) and specialised firms like Dobbs dedicated their efforts to realising elaborate cards enriched with paper lacing, embossed patterns and colourful images.

The production of the Regency period included charming floral lithographies and love scenes that, to the modern eye, may appear "nauseatingly sentimental in style"[113], but it also encompassed the so-called "vinegar valentines". Not all Valentines, in fact, were pleasant to be received. A fashion for sending caricatural, rude and even vulgar cards to people one hated, were they neighbours, members of the local community or unwanted partners, started to spread, especially in the lower classes. These satyrical portraits accompanied by caustic texts highlighted particular flaws of the receivers, such as their poor manners, the lack of hygiene, arrogance or alcoholism. Staff stresses[114] that these cards were an expression of the same British penchant for social satire that had made the fortune of satirical prints in the eighteenth century and emerged in

---

[112] The "true love knot" is a message that was written on a band arranged as a maze. The text could be read starting from different points or following different paths and rotating the card but it still made sense, resulting in a clever form of entertainment.

[113] Frank Staff, *The Valentine & Its Origins*, 1st ed. edition (Frederick A. Praeger, 1969).

[114] Staff, *The Valentine & Its Origins*, 63.

Hogarth paintings too. On the other hand, Pollen[115] suggests their connection with the Backtinian idea of carnivalesque, which may derive from the pagan celebration of Lupercalia that underpinned the origin of St.Valentine day.

Until 1840, receiving these offensive valentines was even more annoying as, basically, recipients had to pay for something that insulted them. Naturally, this caused many complaints to the local post offices where people asked for a refund of the postages they had paid. However, the fashion to send what today we would call "hate mail" did not go out even after the postal reform of 1840 established that the sender had to pay for the postages (and, in this case, the insults). On the contrary, the boom of the phenomenon was between 1840-1880, as the one penny postage was relatively affordable for middle-class users and mock valentines themselves were far less expensive than their elaborate romantic counterparts.

The introduction of the Uniform Penny Post, in fact, marked the start of the "golden era" of the Valentines[116] in which "*Valentine makers were producing some of their most beautiful works*".[117] A popular poem attributed to James Beaton, which circulated in 1840, humorously predicted the enormous impact that the reform would have on the custom of sending Valentines, hinting at their commercial (the increase of the demand for paper and ink are mentioned) and postal success:

> And lots of paper will be used by every scribbling elf,
> That each should be a paper manufacturer himself.
> To serve all with ink enough they must have different plans;
> They must start an "Ink walk" just like milk, and serve it round in cans.
> The letters in St Valentine so vastly will amount,
> Postmen may judge them by the lot, they won't have time to count;
> They must bring round spades and measures, to poor love-sick souls
> Deliver them by bushels, the same as they do coals.

Fourteen years later, *The Punch* (1852) published a vignette (see Figure 2) that seemed to illustrate these same verses, confirming, again humorously, the correctness of Beaton's prediction. In the picture, two delivery men are shown while they are pouring letters in the hole leading to a coal vault of a house while their helpers hold heart-shaped spades.

Turning to the data, according to the Victorian and Albert Museum, if the Valentines sent in Britain in 1836 were 60,000, in 1865, 25 years after the postal reform, the figure raised to 542,000

---

[115] Annebella Pollen, '"The Valentine has fallen upon evil days": Mocking Victorian valentines and the ambivalent laughter of the carnivalesque', *Early Popular Visual Culture, special issue: Social Control and Early Visual Culture,* Vol 12, Iss, 2, 2014, pp. 127-173.

[116] Staff, *The Valentine & Its Origins*,58.

[117] Staff, *The Valentine & Its Origins*,62.

only in London. Towards the end of the century, the phenomenon reached such proportions that in 1886 a Post Office Notice had to be issued to ask the public to send their cards early on the 13th of February "in view of the large numbers of Valentines which are sent by post"[118]. St. Valentine was, according to the Graphic, "the terror and annoyance of postmen, as well as of the men of business, whose letters are seriously delayed about the middle of February".[119]

Victorian romantic Valentines were fundamentally of 3 kinds. The most artistic and expensive ones featured laced borders, lithographed pictures and embossings, and were adorned with hearts, cupids, flowers and birds (swans or doves). Some of them also included little mirrors accompanied by verses dedicated to the person whose image was reflected in them. Towards the end of the century, perfumed sachets impregnated with essences were also added, and one of the most famous companies for this kind of product was Rimmel in the Strand, today a leading cosmetics company. These cards, which were bulky and fragile, were more likely to be delivered by hand as they might get damaged in the transport and within the crammed postmen's bags.

In addition to these sophisticated specimens, cheaper versions could also be found, which featured romantic or floral scenes and verses, to which the sender added some words or more verses possibly taken from one of the many Valentine Writers published every year.

Over the century, a third type made its appearance, the so-called "novelty cards", which were usually more humorous and playful and tried to surprise the receiver with jokes or witticisms rather than with their precious craftmanship or romanticism. Some examples of this kind were the *Love Banknote* cards, the *Map of Love*, and in 1871, after the introduction of the telegraph, the ones written in the form of the *Love Office Telegraph* (see Figure 4). After all, also Valentine's writers' manuals allowed for some irony in the cards. *The Lover's Poetic Companion and Valentine Writer* (1877), for instance, argued that "A little harmless pleasantry is by no means incompatible with feelings of esteem or even affection; A jocose letter, especially on Valentine's Day, is an irresistible temptation to some persons". For this reason, therefore, after a section on original romantic verses and another with poems taken from old classics (Hovid, Catullus, etc.), the volume included a section on satyrical verses.

Valentines became a popular subject for newspaper articles and illustrations in February. In 1850 Dickens collaborated with W.H. Wills on the article *The General post office on Valentine's day*

---

118 See http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O753348/ephemera-unknown/?carousel-image=1

119 "St. Valentine Day", *Graphic* - Saturday 12 February 1870, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/ (accessed on 10/08/2021).

on *Household Words* to reveal what happened behind the scene on that frantic day, and every year similar reports appeared that referred to one or another post office in the country, sometimes giving the exact numbers of cards sent that year along with the relevant income for the revenue.[120] Graphic periodicals like the *Graphic* or the *Illustrated London News* published etchings that often represented a postman surrounded by young ladies eager to receive Valentines from their sweethearts (see Figure 5, but also "Oh, Here's the Postman" in *The Illustrated London News* of 10 February 1872, or "St. Valentine's Day" in the Graphic, 12 February 1870, Figure 3).

Articles on the history of St Valentine's day were also similarly frequent in the British press, as well as commentaries on the moral implications of its customs. Offensive valentines were generally condemned (even if the same periodicals also published the advertisements of their producers) and many saw them with a certain anxiety as a form of moral decadence:

> We cannot see why gross and offensive Valentines should not be seized and destroyed, without any reference to the custom. In fact, there are dirty, dingy shops in the poorer parts of London, where the spurious and vicious St. Valentine is continually represented, and obscene daubs and witless caricatures may be seen, fly-spotted and yellow with age, all the year round. Weekly contemporary has evidently, therefore, thrown away a great deal of virtuous indignation, or vented a considerable quantity of moral bile, on the subject of Valentines at large.[121]

However, as Crossley suggests, also sentimental Valentines met with some criticism:

> The playful language and visual opulence of the Valentine, however, could also conceal a lack of authentic emotion. As such missives by this period were likely to be commercially produced rather than handmade, critics of the Valentine were concerned that cards with pre-printed messages represented cheap reproductions of sham sentiment.[122]

The *Collection of New and Original Valentines (*1858), in fact, while presenting model verses to be added to one's Valentine, pointed out that "nothing can be so pungent as an immediate emanation from your own heart". These words reiterate the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' eternal tension between spontaneity and propriety in familiar letter writing, which this chapter's epigraph from the *Webster's Manual of Letter Writing* also highlighted.

---

120 "St. Valentine's day at the Post Office", *Morning Advertiser* - Saturday 16 February 1856, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/ (accessed on 30/07/2021)

121 "St. Valentine's Day and Valentines", *Morning Advertiser* - Monday 13 February 1871 https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/ (accessed on 30/07/2021)

122 'Victorian Valentines: From Sentiment to Satire – Journal of Victorian Culture Online', accessed 26 May 2021, https://jvc.oup.com/2013/02/11/victorian-valentines-from-sentiment-to-satire/.

Some lovers, nevertheless, added some more personal messages to their cards. A Valentine of this period conserved at the Postal Museum in London, and which is part of the documents analysed for this study (see Figure 7), contains no less than a proposal of marriage:

> Carnmoney, 14th February /65
>
> Dear Mary
> Pardon the liberty I have taken in embracing the opportunity this day affords to acquaint you with my sincere passion. I have long admired your gentle and assuming manners, your charming face, and elegant form, and find my heart quite subdued. My destiny is totally in your power either to be most happy or most miserable.Do not keep me in suspense, but promptly say if you can love me in return; and if you love me in return; and if you favo(u)r [Note: the writer corrected his spelling here] me with an interview, as I imagine you will guess the handwriting , we may perhaps appoint the day that shall unite us in love and happiness.
>
> From your faithful Valentine.[123]

This example highlights that even in such an important case as in a proposal that could change the lives of the people involved, the tradition of anonymity connected to Valentine is respected. We may presume that if the sender took for granted that his Mary would have recognized his handwriting, the two were already correspondents, but the playful aspect of the Valentine remains essential for the card.

With regards to marriage proposals, “leap year” valentines are also worth mentioning. In line with the old tradition of women being allowed to propose to their suitors on the 29th of February of leap years, these cards feature proposals of marriage, usually with an ironic touch. Figure 6, for example, represents a laced card where a frog is ready to jump into a garland with the motto “Leap here”. The text inside the garland says: “An opportunity not to be lost. I ask you with all love sincere, If this Leap-year you'll have me Dear?"

In conclusion, with their patterns and illustrations, their verses, and the personal messages they included, Valentines can be considered a fascinating meeting point of all the threads (material, cultural, artistic and epistolary) followed in this study, yet still today they are collected and studied more for their material significance than for the place they occupied in epistolary fashion and in a wider cultural context.

---

[123] Postal Museum Archive, London, OB1995.414.

Love letters in court

The letters enclosed in the petitions to the Foundling Hospital discussed above, in addition to being precious documents of socio-historical, linguistic and epistolary relevance, also demonstrate how love letters could deviate from their original purpose and be used to fulfil other functions. Those words which had been written to express love and desire and were usually meant for the sole and private reading of one's beloved could become an instrument in the hands of the abandoned women to demonstrate that they were not the only ones to be blamed for the birth of the children, as in a certain way, the Eighteenth Recommendation of the Poor Law Amendment Bill (1835) seemed to imply. The document specifies, in fact, that the woman who has a child out of wedlock has"voluntarily become a mother without procuring for herself and her child the assistance of a father and a husband."[124] The Twenty-first recommendation, then, repealed the Elizabethan law, which "PUNISH OR CHARGE THE PUTATIVE FATHER OF A BASTARD"[125] (in capital letters in the original document), on the ground that it gave vicious women the possibility to accuse (and extort money from) "innocent men".

Letters were therefore used, in this context, as evidence of the fact that the fathers of their children had somehow deceived them by making them believe that they would marry them, which was the reason why they had yielded to their sexual advances. The committee tended to be more lenient to a woman who had been thus deluded and tended to be more willing to accept their petitions (which had to meet, however, many more requirements). After the evaluation of each case, whether the petitions were accepted or rejected, these documents, along with their enclosures, were conserved at the Hospital but treated with the utmost discretion. Secrecy was of the essence, if one of the aims of the institution, besides giving a better future to destitute children, was "replacing the mothers in the course of virtue"[126] and helping them regain respectability. Sheetz Nguyen points out that "everyone associated with the admission process swore a promise to maintain absolute secrecy in all cases".[127]

However, not all these kinds of secondary uses of the letters were as discreet as that.

---

[124] Commons, Eighteenth Recommendation of the Poor Law Amendment Bill, vol.8, p.196, quoted in Jessica A. Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women, Unwed Mothers and the London Foundling Hospital*, 2012, p.22.

[125] See note 122 above.

[126] Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women, Unwed Mothers and the London Foundling Hospital*, Foundling Hospital Petition Form in Appendix, 192.

[127] Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women, Unwed Mothers and the London Foundling Hospital*, 74.

Queen Victoria had yet to come to the throne, when on the 22nd of June 1836, what came to be known as the "trial of the nineteenth century" started at Westminster Hall. The case was Norton vs Melbourne, and it involved no lesser person than the Prime Minister, William Lamb, second Viscount Melbourne, who was soon to become the right-hand man of the 18-year-old Queen Victoria. Melbourne was accused by the Honourable George Norton of criminal conversation with his wife, Lady Caroline Norton and asked to pay damages for £10.000. He denied the charges and an 11-hour trial followed which "excited an extraordinary degree of interest" (as the *Sussex Advertiser* put it).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the news industry witnessed an unprecedented boom and the courtrooms had become an excellent source of news for reporters since the 1790s when they were permitted to publish verbatim what was said in court. Charles Dickens himself was at Westminster Hall on that 22nd of June to shorthand record the trial for the *Morning Press,* and as we will see, something of what he saw and heard would re-emerge some months later in his first novel.

Leaving aside all the political implications of the trial, which was seen by many as but an attempt by the politically frustrated Tory George Norton, to ruin the career of the successful Whig Lord Melbourne or the role that it played in Mrs Norton's fight for the approval of the Custody of Infant Act (1839), this case dragged the privacy of a family before what Wilkie Collins called the "unknown public".

The witnesses were chiefly servants who worked or had worked in Mr Norton's house. They claimed that Lord Melbourne's visits when Mr Norton was away were very frequent, that he used to enter by a back door and not by the main entrance at which visitors were usually received, and that Mrs Norton had disposed that whenever Lord Melbourne was with her, her children had to be kept elsewhere and the servants could not enter the room where they were sitting if not called. The pages of the newspapers brimmed with allusive tales concerning Mrs Norton's hair (which was always carefully arranged before Lord Melbourne's visits and dishevelled when he went away), or saucy reports of Mrs Norton found by a servant who had incautiously opened her door, "lying on the floor, her clothes in a position to expose her person"[128] in the presence of Lord Melbourne. Moreover, her clothes bore "the marks from the consequences of the intercourse between the two parties" (words that, as *The Sun* duly reports, caused murmuring amongst the

[128] "Crim. Con. Norton v. Lord Melbourne", *The Sun,* 22 June, 1836, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk (accessed 01/07/2021)

audience). In fact, all these details that novelists would have omitted for decorum in fictional works, here became accessible, on the ground of their veracity, to anyone who could spare some pence to buy a newspaper or could borrow one. However, what is of particular interest for this research is that, along with the tales of the servants, private letters exchanged between the parties involved had a central role in the proceeding and were brought to court and read in public.

First, the plaintiff's counsel, Sir William Follett, introduced the theme of the correspondence between the two alleged lovers:

> It is notorious that there was a constant interchange of letters and messages between Mr. Norton's house and Lord Melbourne's. We have proofs that notes were frequently carried from Mrs. Norton to Lord Melbourne, and brought from Lord Melbourne to Mrs. Norton. Where are all these notes ? And I am glad of the opportunity of alluding to the correspondence which has taken place, because it is impossible for any one not to have heard of the idle rumour and gossip that attached to that correspondence, whether the letters exist or not—whether they are letters of a description to satisfy you, Gentlemen, of the guilt of the parties or not— I cannot tell. [129]

Of the correspondence between Lord Melbourne and Mrs Norton that her brother had managed to retrieve from the house by taking advantage of the absence of Mr Norton and pretending to the servants to act in the name of Mr Norton himself, only three short messages were left and produced to the court. However, the barrister considered them sufficient evidence of an intimate relationship between the two. This is how the newspapers reported the three messages and the reaction they caused in the audience:

> These notes were found since, they relate only to the hours of meeting, and are of a trivial character […] but there is something in the style of the notes that seems to me to lead to something like a suspicion of what was going on. The first note merely said—"I will call about half-past four.—Yours."
> This letter has no beginning; it has no commencement. It does not commence as letters usually do, which are written by gentlemen to ladies. The next letter was in these words "How are you ?—(A laugh.) I shall not be able to call to-day, but I probably shall to-morrow.—Yours."
> This is not the note of a mere acquaintance. The next letter runs thus :
> "There is no House to-day. I will call after the levee, about half-past four, or, if you wish it, later. Let me know what you intend, about going to Vauxhall.—(A laugh.)-- - Yours."
> These are the only notes that have been found—if there are others I cannot produce them. It is of importance to notice the manner in which these notes were written; there is nothing of the style of a mere love letter, they are most cautiously and guardedly worded—they are not written as a mere acquaintance or friend would

[129] See note 126 above.

> write. All the other letters of Lord Melbourne were removed by Mrs. Norton's brother. [130]

The correspondence is "cautiously and guardedly" written, gossiped about, retrieved with a trick, made to disappear and searched for. Moreover, what is left, because considered insignificant by the parties, is analysed in detail. The messages are not signed, but the counsel points out that they are "in the handwriting of Lord Melbourne", and the truly incriminating aspect is their style, too informal for a proper correspondence between a gentleman and a gentlewoman. Rather than for their content, the letters are judged then for what is actually missing in them, the polite formulae of addressing to which writing manuals often dedicated a specific section. In short, they had to be from a lover because they did not sound like a lover's words. This must have given the audience and the readers of the newspapers, supposedly letter-writers themselves, the idea that letter writing was a serious matter, one with important legal implications.

Letters from Mrs Norton to her husband were also read to demonstrate that she had always been kind and affectionate to him during his absence. She told him anecdotes concerning the life in the house and often begged him to come back home: "Come back, come back, dear George, I am longing for you."

Typically, however, these messages were not considered by the plaintiff's counsel as proofs of her innocence but as a sign that her husband had always been "kind and indulgent" to her (which he was not as we know of episodes of violent behaviour against her, which did not emerge in court). Thanks to these letters, which mentioned Lord Melbourne nonchalantly as any other acquaintance of the couple's, Mr Norton was justified for never having suspected the illicit love affair that supposedly would have taken place under his nose and could not be accused of having been careless.

The trial terminated at midnight of the same day it had started. Lord Melbourne won the case, so his political career was not destroyed as he had feared when the scandal had broken and he had suddenly detached from Caroline. However, if the letters between Melbourne and Mrs Norton that her brother had recovered would have reached the court, the case might have taken a different turn. Diane Atkinson writes that,

> The flurry of letters between her and Lord Melbourne reveal an intimacy between them which suggests a love affair was in the making, if not already made. […] While Caroline's letters to Lord Melbourne do not mention any physical relationship – in an age of insecure post and prying messengers it is unlikely they would have made this

[130] See note 126 above.

> mistake – the intensity of the only letters to survive and her very personal tone would not have been appreciated by George Norton.[131]

In addition to the newspaper coverage, a "*FULL REPORT of the TRIAL of NORTON v. MELBOURNE*" was on sale for 4 pence, and the advertisement in *The Sun* specified that it included "the whole of the letters". On the 24th of June, that is two days after the trial, this report had already reached its third edition.

Lord Melbourne was not new to these kinds of scandals. Some years before, he had paid off the offended husband of an Irish lady in order not to be sued and drawn into the scandal. Nevertheless, even more relevant to this study is the fact that in the 1810s, he had suffered public embarrassment when his wife, Lady Caroline Lamb, had formed an obsession with George Byron. After a short affair with the woman in 1812, the poet, probably tired of her manic behaviour (she had sent him a note enclosing some pubic hair and had forged his writing in a letter to his publisher to obtain a miniature of his), left her with a very cold and cruel letter which bore the seal of his new lover. The original letter is not extant, but she wrote to her closest friend, Lady Morgan Sydney Owenson:

> We had got to Dublin, on our way home, where my mother brought me a letter. There was a coronet on the seal. The initials under the coronet were Lady Oxford's. It was that cruel letter I have published in Glenarvon: it destroyed me: I lost my brain.[132]

After that letter, Caroline Lamb suffered a mental collapse and fell into depression. In the following years, to take her revenge, she gave a fictional account of her love story with Byron in her *roman a clef, Glenarvon* (1816), in which the vampiric character of Ruthven represented the poet who had sucked the life out of her. The letter to which Caroline Lamb refers and that was reported in full in the novel is the following:

> I am no longer your lover: and since you oblige me to confess it, by this truly unfeminine persecution – learn that I am attached to another; […] I offer you this advice, correct your vanity, which is ridiculous; exert your absurd caprices upon others; and leave me in peace.[133]

The novel created a sensation and was a remarkable success (it was reprinted a dozen times) but rather than for its literary merits, for the fact that the readers were well-aware of its

---

[131] Diane Atkinson, *The Criminal Conversation of Mrs Norton* (London: Preface Publishing, 2012), 80.

[132] *Lady Morgan's Memoirs: Autobiography, Diaries and Correspondence*, 2 vols. (London: W. H. Allen, 1862), 2:201 quoted in Clara Tuite, "'Tainted Love and Romantic "Literary Celebrity'", *ELH* 74, no. 1 (2007): 59–88.

[133] Quoted in Tuite, "Tainted Love and Romantic "Literary Celebrity".

real-life inspiration. Some of them even took notes in the endpapers of their volumes about the "keys", trying to guess which real member of Lamb's circle hid behind each of the characters. On their part, those real people who had inspired the characters felt offended by the way Lamb had portrayed them and, in addition to sending her angry messages, expelled her from their social world.

Her fatal mistake was in making what was private public. As Clara Tuite claims,

> The scandal of Glenarvon is also partly a scandal of genre: the scandal of the reproduction of Byron's letter in and as a novel. As John Cam Hobhouse wrote to Byron, the day after the novel's appearance, "There is not the least merit in the book in any way except in a letter beginning 'I love you no more' which I suspect to be yours." It seems that the scandal here is that the letter is not sufficiently novelised or transformed, that it is too raw and unmediated. But even this makes sense within Lamb's counter-intuitive strategy of publicising her humiliation: making public that which is most private and ought to remain hidden or secret. Within this logic, Lamb's novel can be read as an attempt to shame Byron by publicising the affair beyond his coterie circle.[134]

The events concerning the Lamb-Byron relationship were included in a novel behind the façade of fiction rather than being revealed to an even larger public by newspaper articles. However, at the time, journalists and readers already shared a certain taste for the scandals concerning the upper classes, as the "Queen Caroline's affair" demonstrated in 1820. It was only after the middle of the century, though, that with the repeal of the taxes on advertisements, newspapers and paper, newspapers became more affordable and these sensational titles reached the lowest ranks of society. As Chase and Levenson argue, "the conditions of mid-nineteenth century English life" with its "sheer extent of the home fetish, the maturing apparatus of information (newspapers, journals, telegraph), the campaign for legal reform of the family (infant custody, divorce, married women's property), the self-consciousness of modernity",[135] fostered the spectacularization of the private family issues as it had never happened before. And all this happened with the inadvertent complicity of (love) correspondence.

The sacrality of home, marriage and family, as they were idealised in the works by Ellis, Dickens and Patmore, was questioned in these cases where "under the pressure of spectacle, the familiar becomes uncanny", and which certainly influenced the taste for sensational literature of the 60s and 70s.

---

[134] Tuite, 'Tainted Love and Romantic "Literary Celebrity".

[135] Karen Chase, Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton University Press, 1798), 133.

As Norton vs Melbourne involved people of high rank and political position, this may be one of the most notorious trials of this type, but it was only the first of a long series of cases that sensationalised family issues through the exposition of private love correspondence in Victorian time. Within this context, the public reading of letters was always listened to with great attention by the jury and the audience. They had been written before the trial, when no one suspected they would have been used in court and for this reason, they were considered even more authentic than the oral testimonies of the parties. Talking of the general public interest in eminent people's letters, the rhetorician Hugh Blair had written:

> We expect in them to discover somewhat of their real character. It is childish indeed to expect, that in letters we are to find the whole heart of the author unveiled. Concealment and disguise take place, more or less, in all human intercourse. But still, as letters from one friend to another make the nearest approach to conversation, we may expect to see more of a character displayed in these than in other productions, which are studied for public view. We please ourselves with beholding the writer in a situation which allows him to be at his ease, and to give vent occasionally to the overflowings of his heart.[136]

The same could be said for the letters of the non-eminent people who were involved in these trials. These documents gave the public the possibility to pry into other people's hearts and private affairs and satisfy those voyeuristic impulses that one century earlier were appeased by epistolary fiction.

Another kind of trial that was quite common in the nineteenth century and that often involved reading love letters in court was the sue for breach of promise of marriage. The proposal of marriage was considered a contract, therefore going back on one's promise could have legal consequences. Obviously, the court could not force two people to get married, but it could make the person who failed to fulfil their obligation pay damages to the aggrieved party. The actions of this kind increased throughout the century and often included letters among their evidence. Frost specifies that even after 1869, when the plaintiff herself could take the stand and speak in person to the court, "*letters figured in 173 cases".*[137.] As the typical pattern was that where a man refused to marry a woman after proposing to her, this situation was not so different from the one of the mothers of the Foundling Hospital who had to demonstrate that they had been deceived by the men they loved. Paradoxically, all these women who decided to stop being victims and take action

---

[136] Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres by Hugh Blair, D.D. F.R.S.E. ..* (Baynes and son, Paternoster Row, 1823), 403.

[137] Ginger S. Frost, *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England*, University of Virginia Press, 2015, p.30.

(by turning to the Foundling Hospital or suing their former fiancées) used letters to demonstrate they were actually victims, and often spoke their truths by using the rhetoric of sentimental and melodramatic fiction of seduction and abandonment.[138]

Not only were these cases read in newspapers, but they also attracted wide audiences into the courtroom, as the following excerpts from the reports of Miss Mary Elizabeth Smith v. Washington, Earl Ferrers specifies:

> Very great anxiety was manifested to hear this case, and at an early hour of the day the court was completely crammed. Had it not been for the vigilance of the ushers, it would have been impossible for those having business in the court to have obtained the slightest accommodation.[139]

> This case was again resumed this morning. On the doors being opened, the rush very much resembled the crush at the Opera-house. The interest is immense.[140]

The reference to the Opera House should not seem out of place, as Ginger Frost argues that the presence of such a public along with the performing nature of the proceedings gave these trials a sort of theatrical dimension[141]. All the parties (plaintiffs, defendants and barristers) had to play a part, the plaintiffs and defendants wore costumes (as both were advised by their counsels on how to dress to impress the court and give a certain image of themselves), the jury and the audience sometimes laughed or uttered exclamations of surprise on hearing the witnesses' declarations and finally judges and barristers themselves often used words from the theatre in their speeches like "acting" or "play a part" and even quoted Dickens, Shakespeare or Gilbert and Sullivan. Unsurprisingly the melodrama, which had its heyday at the beginning of the XIX century, often included a trial (sometimes off-stage) that solved the situation, and in the 30s, the breach of promise itself became the subject of a farcical piece.

Some stories reconstructed in court and reported on the papers really resembled melodrama scripts or novel plots, with cliff-hangers at the end of each session and even final twists. The most striking example was the trial (quoted above) of Mary Elizabeth Smith (plaintiff) vs Washington, Earl Ferrers (defendant), which took place in 1846. In the beginning, the case seemed to be that of an Earl who had proposed to a young woman of a lower social class, Miss

---

[138] Grimaldi, Virginia L. (2017) "Single, Unwed, and Pregnant in Victorian London: Narratives of Working Class Agency and Negotiation," *Madison Historical Review*: Vol. 14 , Article 3.

[139] "BREACH OF PROMISE OF MARRIAGE - MISS Mary Elizabeth Smith v. Washington, Earl Ferrers," *Leeds Times*, February 21, 1846, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk (accessed 1st July 2021).

[140] "Court of Queen's Bench, Westminster Feb.17, SMITH V. EARL FERRERS " *Evening Mail* - 18 February 1846 (accessed 01/07/2021)

[141] See Frost, *Promises Broken*.

Smith, but then had married a lady of high rank. The defendant's twelve letters presented by Miss Smith clearly revealed the writer's intention to marry her, with sentences like*,*

> Won't the old hall be bright and happy when its future mistress takes possession of it? Pray take every care of yourself, dearest forget not you are the only hope of one to whom palace would be a desert, and England no home without you far dearer to me than each earthly blessing, without which no one, or any, would be of value.
>
> With several other gentlemen, I often go to hear the speeches in the house. Really, 'tis a great treat, and what you would like, and your father too, much, I fancy. When we stay in London, after our marriage, he must come; then he will have the pleasure of hearing his friend Sir Robert speak.
>
> Will it not be a surprise to all the people round, the sudden bridal, my own and only love? How dearly prize thee, and how much think of thee. [142]

In other letters, Ferrers had invited Miss Smith to go and buy clothes and jewellery as presents from him for which he would have paid at his return to the area. Witnesses were heard who could testify to the fact that the writing and the signatures of those messages belonged to the defendant. However, Ferrers never paid the shops where Miss Smith had bought her "presents", so her father had to borrow money to do that, and later the family learnt from newspapers that he had married Augusta Chichester.

When "the second act of the trial" started, the defendant's lawyer quite histrionically presented a totally different story. Ferrers had never known Miss Smith, and she had hatched a plot to frame him with the complicity of her mother. All the information and references that the letters allegedly written by Ferrars contained were proved false, from the dates mentioned to the name of his horse, from the fact that he would have lost money at cards while, actually, he never played, to the people mentioned, who did not exist. Other and more trustworthy witnesses were heard who said that Ferrers could have by no means written those letters. Those messages, the lawyer concluded, had been written by someone who had not known the Earl, that is by Miss Smith, who, obsessed with a childish love for him, had forged his writing to force him to marry her and was caught up in her spiral of lies.

On the third day of the trial, what papers called the "third volume of the mystery",[143] highlighting the similarities between this story and a triple-decker, new letters were presented from the defendant, this time. They were anonymous letters he had been receiving for years

[142] "BREACH OF PROMISE OF MARRIAGE - MISS Mary Elizabeth Smith v. Washington, Earl Ferrers," *Leeds Times*, February 21, 1846, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk (accessed 1st July 2021).

[143] "Action against Earl Ferrars" *Westmorland Gazette* - Saturday 21 February 1846, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk (accessed 1st July 2021)

(many of them he had burnt) from a lady who told him she admired him greatly and tried to persuade him to take part in a ball where she would have been present. These letters were written in Miss Smith's hand (after the trial she admitted to having written them herself) and attested to her obsession for Ferrers. Following that new evidence, the trial arrived at an abrupt conclusion: the principal counsel of the plaintiff withdrew from the case because he could not continue to conduct it, and Miss Smith was nonsuited.

Frost stresses that many elements of the case were left unexplained and that the only explanation was that both the parties had not been completely sincere. However, leaving aside the legal aspect of the trial, what is noteworthy for the purposes of this analysis, is the fact that those letters whose reading had been listened to and that had been read by so many people interested in the case had turned out to be a forgery. The public, as the court, had been fooled for a while by a young woman. Unsurprisingly, as Frost claims, "cases as such as this justified middle-class disdain for the action; they equated any breach of promise actions with Smith's*".*

The suits for breach of promise, however, increased over the century with more and more private correspondence dragged into the public eye: in Armitage Vs. Chaplin (1859), for example, 375 letters were presented by the plaintiff, of which only six were read in court,[144] while in Bray vs Carter (1870), 200 were presented, but very few were read as they were "too prosy".[145] The most clamorous case, in terms of the number of letters produced, however, was Way vs Prowse, in Bristol (1888), where the defendant had broken and renewed his promise of marriage five times in six years, and the plaintiff brought to the court 1000 letters as evidence.[146]

Valentines made their appearance in court too, even if more sporadically than longer written messages. For instance, in the case of breach of promise of marriage Lindsay vs Steel that appeared in Paisley Sheriff Court (Scotland) in 1880, Mary Ann Lindsay produced to the court a Christmas card and a Valentine sent to her by her lover to show that William Steel, the father of her child, had promised her to marry. The Valentine from William contained the following message:

Dear Mary Ann,

---

[144] "Extracts of 375 letters in court!", *Surrey Comet* - Saturday 17 December 1859, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk (accessed 4 st July 2021)

[145] "Two hundred love letters in court" *Dundee Courier* - Monday 22 August 1870, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk (accessed 30/06/2021)

[146] "A thousand love letters" *The Globe* – Saturday, 7 July 1888, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk (accessed 03/07/2021)

> In complying with custom, allow me, (at this time of the year,) to send you a small token of my apreciation of you. I also greet you with the customary rhyme,
> The roses red, the Violets blue;
> The honey's sweet, and so are you;
> And when we meet we'll have akiss
> And when we part we have another,
> That is the way we love each other?[…][147]
> As for the rest I have got to say, you will find a suitable inscription on "The Valentine" I have sent. Hoping that you will ever be happy, and that you will enjoy all the attributes pertaining thereto,
>
> I remain yours affectionately
> William Steel Jr.

The sheriff found against William and although he appealed to the court, he had to pay damages and was named the child's father in the public register.

Divorce cases had also made use of letters since the previous century. However, letters were used in this context even more after the Matrimonial Cause Act of 1857 which stated that a husband had to prove his wife's adultery to divorce her while a wife had to prove her husband's adultery and that he had treated her with cruelty, deserted her, or had committed incest or bigamy. Letters were often presented as evidence of illicit affairs, like in the case of the application for a divorce of the Rev. Edward Queensby Ashby. Here the Reverend produced a letter written by his wife to her lover (which he had found in her notebook), in which the woman said that she was fed up with her husband (whom she calls "that brute") and concluded

> Henry, love of loves, best and most precious of treasures, I could have murdered him last night and this morning and as it is, I do not believe, own precious love, I can bear his present horrid taunting way.[148]

As the next chapter will point out, the fictional accounts of these cases in literature, especially the breach of promise ones, can be divided between those which treated the topic humorously and those which stressed their more dramatic aspects. However, with the waning of the century, the attitude of newspapers towards this excessive use of love letters in court and the overinterpretations that were often given to those "*sweet nothings*" was ever more of mockery and scorn. In 1845 the *Bell's New Weekly Messenger* published an article on love letters which lamented the poor quality of the genre due to the facts that parents did not have their children instructed in the art and that young people tended to be careless "*when writing to those in whose*

[147]The Valentine card is conserved at the National Records of Scotland, reference SC58/22/630, https://webarchive.nrscotland.gov.uk/20170106024416/http://www.nas.gov.uk/about/120208.asp (accessed 10/08/2021)

[148] "An extraordinary love letter" *Westmeath Independent* - Saturday 30 March 1850, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk (accessed 03/07/2021)

eyes everything they do is sure to appear graceful". However, the article suggests that when writing a love letter, both ladies and gentlemen should always ask themselves, "What would a lawyer say of this, should it happen to be produced in court?". In fact,

> lawyers are very severe critics of love letters. Indeed there is no satisfying them; as we constantly see in actions for 'breach of promise'. If the pen of the fair or gallant writer has run riot a little, lawyers make joke of emotions with which they do not (at the moment) sympathise. If a lady writes a plain unaffected letter to her admirer, thanking him for piece of music, or retailing the little household gossip in unexaggerated phrase, lawyers cry out, This woman writes common sense, and cannot have been in love![149]

Ironically, the article concludes that probably the fear that the letter might end in the hands of these hypercritical "ultimate judges of love letters" could be a good incentive for the improvement of the genre.

Other similar pieces encouraged lovers to have their letters re-read by a grammar expert in case one day they should be read in court. Even if humorous, all these examples make us wonder whether, over the century, this publicisation, deconstruction and overinterpretation of letters may have really influenced somehow the way people wrote them, as the journalist of the *Bell's New Weekly Messenger* had anticipated.

This might be true at least in the case of people working in law, as two literary examples from *Bleak House* seem to suggest. Mr Bucket is said not to be a "great scribe" as (among other reasons) "he often sees damaging letters produced in evidence, and has occasion to reflect that it was a green thing to write them", while Mr Guppy tells Lady Dedlock that "Being in the law, I have learnt the habit of not committing myself in writing". These characters preferred not to write letters, but we may reasonably assume that, in case they really could not avoid it, they were very careful in inditing them. A further example comes form Wilkie Collins's tale, "*The Fourth Poor Traveller*", which was published in the 1854's Christmas edition of *Household Words*. Here one character, a lawyer, could well say: "My experience in the law, Mr. Frank, has convinced me that if everybody burnt everybody else's letters, half the Courts of Justice in this country might shut up shop".[150]

---

[149] "Love Letters"*Bell's New Weekly Messenger* - Sunday 30 March 1845 https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/ (accessed 03/07/2021)

[150] Wilkie Collins, `The Fourth Poor Traveller' in *Household Words*, Volume X, Magazine 1854 Christmas, 25 December 1854, Pages: 591-598, https://www.djo.org.uk/indexes/articles/the-fourth-poor-traveller.html, accessed on 21/09/2021.

Love letters and blackmailing

The public display of letters in court was not the only instance of what we called the "secondary use" of love correspondence, that is, of how love messages could be made to divert from their original purpose. For example, love letters in the hand of the wrong person or the right person (the addressee), but in the "wrong" situation, could become evidence of some impropriety and be used to threaten someone's reputation (typically the writer's) in order to obtain something.

What today we would call "blackmailing", that is the act "to extort money from (a person etc.) by threatening to reveal a damaging or incriminating secret",[151] became a very common theme in the novels of the second half of the century. From *Bleak House* to *Middlemarch,* from *The Woman in White* to other sensationalist novels of the 1860s and 1870s, first among them Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Victorian fiction teems with characters that "trade" on the reputation of others, arming themselves with a secret story often (but not always) documented by a letter or another written script. The term "blackmailing" itself, however, is not connected in any way with the modern meaning of "mail" as "post", as a sort of reverse etymology has led to think. Instead, the expression has a Scottish origin, and in its earliest use (sixteenth century), it indicated "A tribute levied on farmers in Scotland and the border counties of England by freebooting Scottish chiefs in return for protection or immunity from plunder",[152] "mail" coming from the Middle English *male* "rent, tribute" and "black" referring to the "evil of the practice".[153]

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the term was used with a wider meaning, yet Victorian writers, despite including blackmailing in their plots, never called it that name. At the time, it was not even pronounced in court because only at the end of the century, this act was recognised as a proper punishable crime. As Welsh points out, punishing a person because they had made public false information about someone was considered understandable, and indeed libel and slander were old crimes. However, the criminalisation of the threat to reveal truths was a more controversial matter and was not established until 1895 when the Libel Act was passed. Before that date, the "punishable" aspect of blackmailing was the extortion of money, and for this

[151] OED
[152] OED
[153] Online Ethimology Dictionary, https://www.etymonline.com/word/blackmail#etymonline_v_41377, accessed 05/12/2021

reason, the few times that a case of this kind reached the court (for their nature, not many did, as it would have meant to reveal the hidden secret) it was treated as a robbery. [154]

It should not surprise that a society so obsessed with propriety and at the same time so flooded with new sources of information and means of communication was so anxious about the risk of blackmailing, which, by exposing past sins, could ruin a person's reputation forever. Paradoxically, if often old letters (not only those of sentimental nature) were the weapons in the hands of the blackmailers, it was again through letters that these blackmailers disclosed their knowledge of the secret to their victims. As Golden argues, "typically a blackmailer sent a letter to a targeted victim to extort money in exchange for guarding a guilty secret".[155]

After all, Penny Post encouraged a wide range of other scams and frauds, from those of people who wrote to wealthy benefactors to ask them for money on false pretences to the so-called "confidence tricks", where a newspaper ad asked for seventeen stamps to be sent as a "token of confidence" to a certain person who would have sent them back along with a present.[156]

Nonetheless, what made blackmailing more suitable to be included in novels was its complexity and ambiguity. It is ambiguous because, even if the victim is guilty of some past offence, their sin is overshadowed by the mean action of the blackmailer, who becomes the new offender. In this regard, Welsh, speaking of the film *Blackmail* by Alfred Hitchcock, says that "the guilt is transferred from the heroine to the blackmailer". On the other hand, from a narrative perspective, its complexity originates from the connection it establishes between the present (the act of the blackmailer or his investigation to learn a secret), the past (the secret not to be revealed) and the future (the possible social implication of the disclosure on the future reputation of the victim). What could embody all these time layers better than a letter?

Furthermore, according to Welsh, blackmailing represented the Victorian anxiety that a person could "get away with murder and then […] be found out much later".[157] As a consequence, a status of social, familiar and personal tranquillity could be destroyed by the emergence of past immoral actions, which cast shadows on the idea of social mobility itself. In *Middlemarch*, this feeling is defined as "the full-grown fang of a discovered lie", or "the sudden sense of exposure after the re-established sense of safety came". These words convey all the horror of the "spectre" of revelation.

---

[154] Alexander Welsh, *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Harvard University Press, 1985), 5.

[155]Catherine J. Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 179.

[156] Golden, *Posting It,* 178.

[157] Welsh, *George Eliot and Blackmail,* 19.

The popularity of this theme in the novels of the period we are considering would lead to thinking that cases of blackmailing were commonplace at that time. However, as Welsh highlights and some research on the newspapers of the period of our interest (1840-1880) confirms, these cases were not so common, or at least, were not much publicised, which, speaking of the public opinion and imagery, is equally relevant.

The anxiety surrounding the possible disclosure of past and shameful secrets that emerges from the fiction of those years seems only to anticipate what would become a problem later in the century. Novelists perceived all the potential danger of the spread of information in a society where respectability was so precarious:

> There is every indication that the novelists anticipated, rather than reacted to, the widespread practice of reputational blackmail. […]
> The late emergence of the word's present-day meaning supports a conclusion that the blackmail plot in the novel actually looks forward in time. [158]

Certainly, some court cases concerning this practice reached the press and the public. In 1861, for example, to mention a case involving love-letters, the trial of the Italian artist Vincent Colucci received wide coverage on newspapers. Colucci was charged with defrauding a Miss Frederica Johnston of £1900 under the promise (not kept) to return her the love letters she had sent him in the three years they had known each other. The artist got to know the lady while painting her portait in his studio and by telling her sad stories about his dying mother in Italy and his debts in England manged to persuade her to lend him money on more than one occasion. The couple even went as far as to speak about marriage, but when Miss Frederica withdrew and resolved to break off with him, he started to assume a "dictatorial style with her". When she asked him to have her letter back, in fact, he replied with the following letter, which was duly translated from Italian during the trial and reported on newspapers:

> June 10.
> No, no, no, not a month more of such a life, not even week. It is infernal to me. It is the vengeance of God. Yes, you have ruined me physically and morally. You have destroyed everything in me—my talent, my peace, my heart. Come, Miss, you have only one of three things to choose. You will either marry me, or insure me enough to live upon, or I shall leave England. You have three days to think it over.
> V. C.

[158] Alexander Welsh, *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Harvard University Press, 1985), 4-5.

In the following letter, with more aggressive and violent tones, Colucci threatened Miss Frederica to show her letters to a magistrate (presumably to sue her for breach of promise of marriage), making public their affair and correspondence. She accepted to pay £2000 to have her letters back so they met at the Pantheon where she gave him the money and he handed her a parcel. However, when she later opened it, she found it contained old, folded newspapers covered by one of her letters that he had put on the top in case she would tear the wrapping paper to verify the content. Miss Frederica's brother wrote to Colucci and ordered him to give those letters back, but as his requests did not produce any effect, the man "put the matter in the hand of a solicitor" and a warrant was issued.

Not all the voluminous correspondence was published, but some articles included a description:

> The correspondence between them was always kind, friendly, and affectionate. The letters she wrote were generatly in answer to those of the Prisoner. She could not say how many she wrote but there were more than 63 […].[159]

In short, it was not so different from the correspondence of so many other lovers. During the hearing, Colucci's solicitor even made fun of the name she gave herself in her letters, which, as we discussed earlier, was a common feature of love discourse:

> MR KEANE: Your name is Frederica?
> WITNNESS: Yes.
> MR KEANE: You called yourself his Colomba?
> WITNNESS: Yes.
> MR KEANE: That means a dove?
> WITNNESS: Sometimes it means a pigeon. (Laughter)
> MR KEANE: You said, did you not, that a dove sat in a jessamine bower?
> WITNNESS: He said so and I admitted it.

In this exchange, Colucci's solicitor implied that "dove" was a term that lovers used, as one of the symbols of love so often present in its depiction on valentines and sentimental paintings. The fact that she called herself so meant, according to the sollicitor, that she had been in love with the prisoner, encouraged him and then rejected him after accepting his offer of marriage. On the contrary, Miss Johnston tried to minimize the sentimental implication of that nickname, by translating the Italian "colomba" with the less romantic "pigeon". The laughters that accompanied

[159] "The Extraordinary love letter case. The trial of Vincent Colucci", Glasgow Herald - Friday 25 October 1861, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/

those remarks again confirm the teatrality of these kinds of trials as we already mentioned, as well as the deconstruction of the love discourse that often took place on these occasions.

Despite the clamour caused by this case, blackmailing someone for their past love affairs or their sexual behaviour would become a more widespread practice at the end of the century. The threat to publicly accuse someone of sodomy, for example, that was already common throughout the eighteenth century,[160] and that, as mentioned, was equated at the time with robbery, continued to be frequent as homosexuality was punishable by death until 1836, and even after that date, it involved from ten years to life imprisonment.

Kate Thomas for example, tells the story of a Rebecca Hamilton who, in the middle of the century,

> blackmailed businessmen via letters that instructed them: “on receipt of this you are to enclose a sovereign in a letter.” If they didn't they would “at once be denounced as a sodomite yourself and Partner.” Her scheme purposely sought to reframe business relationships as sexual ones, as she threatened to “accuse you of an unnatural crime with your assistant” and to whisper “throughout all the City you are a sodomite vagabond.” Hamilton understood that the postal system was a powerful engine of circulation, but she failed to understand that what goes around comes around: she was traced via the return postal address with which she had supplied her would-be victims.[161]

However, cases like this came to the centre of public attention especially after the 1885’s Criminal Law Amendment Act, a piece of legislation that was, in fact, so ambiguous in its description of what constituted a homosexual act, that it came to be known as ‘The Blackmailer’s Charter’.

Often the blackmailers were maids or valets that learnt valuable information on the lives of their masters. In “The Picture of Dorian Gray”, Dorian, afraid that someone might learn his secret, starts being paranoid about his servants:

> It was a horrible thing to have a spy in one’s house. He had heard of rich men who had been blackmailed all their lives by some servant who had read a letter, or overheard a conversation, or picked up a card with an address, or found beneath a pillow a withered flower or a shred of crumpled lace.[162]

After all, Oscar Wilde himself was often involved in these cases of blackmailing, and what brought about his fall was his public reaction to one of these accusations scribbled on a card.

---

[160] See Trumbach, Randolph. “Blackmail for Sodomy in Eighteenth-Century London.” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 33, no. 1 (2007): 23–39. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41299398.

[161] Kate Thomas, *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters*, 1° edizione (Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

[162]Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London, New York, Ward, Lock, 1891), 184, http://archive.org/details/pictureofdoriang00wildrich.

The two examples of secondary uses of love letters, the use in court and for blackmailing, highlight how, also thanks to the press, this century was characterized by a greater awareness of the critical aspects of letter writing and a stronger focus on its reading and interpretation. The next chapter will investigate how fiction and the visual arts rendered these contrasting aspects of letter writing, the secret and intimate one and the public and often ridiculed one.

CHAPTER 4 - EPISTOLARY MARRIAGE PROPOSALS

> *But, oh, Alice! […] I think you love me. Your woman's pride towards me has been great and good and womanly; but it has had its way; and, if you love me, might now be taught to succumb. Dear Alice, will you be my wife?*
>
> *Yours, in any event, most affectionately,*
>
> *George Vavasor.*
>
> Anthony Trollope, *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864-1865)[1]

Epistolary marriage proposals in novels

In the previous section, Captain Wentworth's letter to Anne Eliot in Chapter 23 of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* is mentioned as one of the most exemplary fictional love letters in XIX century English literature. The urgency that underlies the writing of the letter itself[2], the overwhelming attachment described that has only increased despite the 9-year long separation[3], the climax of the proposal[4] as well as the final request for a physical and sensual answer[5], all contribute to make this text "the pinnacle of all love letters".[6]

According to Austen's nephew, it was only after completing the novel that the writer found the ending "tame and flat" and therefore rewrote the two final chapters to incorporate, among the other changes, this new and more epistolary solution for the love story between the two main characters.

This decision can be an intriguing starting point for this chapter. After all, Jane Austen has been counted among the writers who brought the epistolary novel to an end, particularly on the grounds of her rewriting the epistolary *Elinore and Marianne* in the third person. Nevertheless,

---

[1] The page numbers for the quotes from *Can You Forgive her?* are from Anthony Trollope and Stephen Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1975).

[2] *"I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach"*, Ch.23.

[3] *"You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope",* Ch.23.

[4] *"I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own than when you almost broke it, eight years and a half ago",* Ch.23.

[5] *"A word, a look, will be enough",* Ch.23.

[6] Mary Butler, 'Letters Within Jane Austen's Novels: A Bridge Towards Romantic Communication', *Undergraduate Review* 2, no. 1 (1 January 2006): 103–8.

that same Austen decided, on second thought, to leave to a letter the climactic task of solving the main love plot in her last and most mature complete work.

As a matter of fact, the original ending did not include a similar declaration of love in the dialogue between Wentworth and Anne nor in any other narrative form. In her works, Austen generally prefers keeping the successful proposals of marriage that involve her primary heroes or heroines off-stage. Ferguson suggests that the reason for this choice is that the strict "formula of courtship", which was based on the three pillars of status, virtue and money, did not suit the spontaneity of the sentiment the main characters were granted.[7] On the other hand, the verbal proposals reported word by word and which slavishly conform to the conventions set out by manuals (for example, Mr Collins's and Mr Elton's) are ridiculed and rejected. In *Persuasion,* conversely, the authenticity of Captain Wentworth's declaration makes it worth being revealed and accepted, but again not through direct dialogue: the author goes for the letter form.

Austen seems to anticipate Jacques Lacan when he claimed that one cannot speak about love but can write about it[8], because if speaking of love is necessarily "imbecilic or abject",[9] writing, especially in letter form, is, on the contrary, a powerful activity. "The best thing in this curious surge that is called love," writes Lacan, "is the letter, it is the letter that can take on strange shapes".[10] In fact, even after Mr Darcy's first disastrous declaration of love and marriage proposal, in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), it is to a letter that the author had resorted to pave the way for the new development of the relationship between Darcy and Elizabeth. The reading of the letter of explanation by Mr Darcy takes one entire chapter (36), which ends with the sentence "she could think only of her letter", suggesting that, although Darcy specifies it is not a love letter, it has on Elizabeth the effect of one.

In the Victorian context, among the wealth of love letters mentioned or quoted in fiction, novelists were particularly explicit about those containing a proposal of marriage. This does not mean that there are many of them in the corpus considered (4). Nevertheless, when a proposal involving a significant character is made in writing, it often occupies a central position in the plot

[7] Robert A. Ferguson, 'Proposals and Performative Utterance in the Nineteenth-Century Novel' in Martha C. Nussbaum and Alison L. LaCroix, eds., *Subversion and Sympathy: Gender, Law, and the British Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199812042.001.0001.

[8] Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XIX, The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst*, 3rd February, 1972, online https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-XIXa_le_savoir_du_P.pdf accessed 20 April 2020.

[9] Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XIX, The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst*, 3rd February, 1972 online https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-XIXa_le_savoir_du_P.pdf accessed 20 April 2020.

[10] Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XIX, The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst*, 3rd February, 1972 online https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-XIXa_le_savoir_du_P.pdf accessed 20 April 2020.

and in three out of four cases, it is embedded in the text. In the fourth case, it is however reported and commented sentence by sentence by its reader.

Of course, there are mentions of such letters in many more novels but as they are not relevant to the main plot, the writer chose not to linger on them. In the second chapter of *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848), for instance, the young Reverend Crisp sends a "proposal note" to Becky Sharp, which, however, is intercepted and causes the immediate removal of the infatuated curate from his post in Chiswick by his mother. The function of this episode is to show how Becky could mesmerise and lead naif people astray already at her young age, foreshadowing what will come later in the novel.

Proposing by letter was, nonetheless, a practice that some manuals like *The Webster Ready Made Love Letter* admitted only on exceptional cases:

> A declaration in writing should certainly be avoided where the lover can by any possibility get at the lady's ear. But there are cases where this is so difficult that an impatient lover cannot be restrained from adopting the agency of a billet-doux in declaring his passion.[11]

However, an article in *The Frazer Magazine* (1839) informs us that some men preferred writing to delivering the question in person:

> The courage required for a regular declaration of love and proposal of marriage, is evidently more rare than the courage required in the field or on the ocean. This is clear from circumstances, that few gentlemen venture to make verbal declarations, but content themselves with firing at a distance, - writing letters which, as all the world know, never can bear inspection; and wrathful, indeed, are the writers at the bare hint of the tender epistles having been exhibited.[12]

Among the "factual" love letters examined for this research, only the Valentine from the Postal Museum contains a proposal, and two letters in the Barret-Browning correspondence (25th and 27th September 1845) include a suggestion to it, yet they also mention a visit where supposedly the matter was further discussed verbally. The spectacularization of correspondence examined in the previous chapter, as hinted, may have made lovers more self-aware and fearful lest eyes other than those of their beloved might peruse their writings. The quoted article itself alludes to the ideas of inspection and exhibition as unpleasant situations.

[11] *Webster's Ready Made Love Letters*, (New York: R. M. De Witt, 1873) accessed 18 November 2020, https://loc.gov/item/11002925/

[12] *Fraser's Magazine*, vol 19. 1839, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/mb (accessed on 20/09/2021).

As Fitzmaurice points out,[13] linguistically speaking, the (verbal or written) proposal is what J.L. Austin called an "illocutionary act, that is a speech act whose desired effect is to win acceptance from the addressee regarding a future set of circumstances". However, only its acceptance transforms it into a performative act, where the "issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something". [14] They are words that make things happen, to such an extent that, as we have mentioned, the promise of marriage was in itself considered a sort of contract whose breach could result in a proper court trial.

According to Coontz, Victorians were "the first people in history to try to make marriage the pivotal experience in people's lives and married love the principal focus of their emotions, obligations, and satisfactions".[15] The marriage proposal was a crucial turning point in their lives, then, especially for women, whose entire life depended on the decision they made on that occasion.

In novels, the severe nature of that decision is demonstrated by the fact that even when a female character is attracted by a suitor and will marry him in the end, she often accepts him only the second time he proposes. *Can You Forgive Her?, Far From the Madding Crowd, Jane Eyre, North and South,* and *Doctor Thorne* all include examples of these double proposals. The first time she is asked, the heroine turns down the offer, but then the events that follow will make her and the proposer more mature and more suitable to each other so that when he asks for her hand the second time, she will accept.

The sense of decorum that accompanied the ideal of marriage and generated a particular delicacy towards this critical moment in life is, according to Ferguson, the reason why the marriage proposal was sometimes treated with a certain awkwardness by Victorian writers[16]. Even though nineteenth-century novels are often centred on marriage, in fact, one can hardly find "full blown, articulated, successful marriage proposal in them".[17]

When dealing with Jane Austen's reticence about reporting successful proposals in her novels, Ferguson also mentions Charles Dickens as a later writer who shared this same attitude:

---

[13] Susan Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English: A Pragmatic Approach* (Amsterdam ; Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002), 56.

[14] John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. Urmson J.O. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 6-7.

[15] Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, Annotated edition (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006), 177.

[16] Robert A. Ferguson, "Proposals and Performative Utterance in the Nineteenth-Century Novel: The Professional Man's Plight', in Martha C. Nussbaum and Alison L. LaCroix, *Subversion and Sympathy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199812042.003.0014, 275-276.

[17] Ferguson, "Proposals and Performative Utterance in the Nineteenth-Century Novel", 275.

"the more Jane Austen and Charles Dickens care about a marriage, the less we hear of the actual proposal that secures it",[18] claims the scholar. *David Copperfield* is an example of this kind of omission: after a lengthy declaration to Dora, David only reports at a point, "I was in a state of perfect rapture. Dora and I were engaged. I suppose we had some notion that this was to end in marriage." Even when David declares his love to Agnes Wakefield, in chapter LXII, the proposal is not in direct speech (although part of the declaration is):

> If she did so love me (I said) that she could take me for her husband, she could do so, on no deserving of mine, except upon the truth of my love for her, and the trouble in which it had ripened to be what it was; and hence it was that I revealed it. [19]

Even in cases where the proposal is part of a dialogue, the exact words used to accept it, which make it a performative act, are often omitted. In *Little Dorrit,* for instance, where the gender roles are switched, and it is for Amy to declare her love to the ailing Arthur, she implicitly proposes to him ("Never to part, my dearest Arthur; never any more, until the last!...") but we find no trace of his answer, the focus, after the declaration, moving to Maggie's tearful reaction to the melodramatic scene. In Dickens' as in Austen's works, when the verbal proposal is too clearly quoted, it is usually rejected (see Mr Guppy's in *Bleak House*) or even not delivered in the end. In *Great Expectations*, Pip rehearses his proposal to Biddy (thus revealing it to the reader) before going to her village, but then, on his arrival, he finds out that she has just married Joe.

Dickens was not the only Victorian writer to show some hesitation when it came to reporting proposals. Margaret Oliphant's *Miss Marjorybanks* (1866) represents a further confirmation of this attitude. In this novel, the eponymous heroine struggles to improve the social life of the provincial town of Carlingford and decides to support the election of Mr Ashburton as an M.P. for the town. Once he wins the election, Mr Ashburton proposes to her. However, he is interrupted by the arrival of another man, her cousin Tom, whom she had rejected ten years earlier and whose offer this time she will accept. Both the proposals, one because interrupted, the other for its reply, confirm this certain discomfort on the part of the writer in facing this particular life-changing moment.

This is Tom's proposal:

> "I can't help feeling as if there might be a chance for me yet. And that is why I have come home." [...] "Lucilla," said Tom, and there was decision in his eye, "somebody came downstairs as I came in. I want to know whether it is to be him or me!"[20]

---

[18] See note 17 above.
[19] Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 867.

Lucilla takes time; she is confused. She does love Tom, but she is also slightly annoyed by his straightforwardness ("I am not going to be tyrannised over like this"), and when he keeps urging her with the question, "Will you have him or me?" she finally replies with a circumlocutory "I would not have him […]".[21]

Another significant example comes from Trollope. In *Doctor Thorne* (1858), the narrator reports the moment in which Frank Gresham proposes (for the first time) to his Mary and tries to overcome all the possible objections to their union that she rises. Frank's proposal in itself is quite inarticulate, and later the narrator comments that even if it did not have that "propriety of language in which such scenes are generally described as being carried on. […] there had been warmth, and a reality in it not in itself repulsive". To justify his character's clumsy offer, the author tells of having overheard once a very awkward dialogue between two strangers on a beach and which would prove that, in actual fact, proposals are not always like they are imagined in books:

> Gentleman. "Well, Miss ——, the long and short of it is this: here I am; you can take me or leave me."
> Lady—scratching a gutter on the sand with her parasol, so as to allow a little salt water to run out of one hole into another. "Of course, I know that's all nonsense."
> Gentleman. "Nonsense! By Jove, it isn't nonsense at all: come, Jane; here I am: come, at any rate you can say something."
> Lady. "Yes, I suppose I can say something."
> Gentleman. "Well, which is it to be; take me or leave me?"
> Lady—very slowly, and with a voice perhaps hardly articulate, carrying on, at the same time, her engineering works on a wider scale. "Well, I don't exactly want to leave you."
> And so the matter was settled: settled with much propriety and satisfaction; and both the lady and gentleman would have thought, had they ever thought about the matter at all, that this, the sweetest moment of their lives, had been graced by all the poetry by which such moments ought to be hallowed.[22]

Trollope liked making his narrators intervene in his novels to remind readers of the gap between art and life and to make the artifice of his novels "deliberate and dramatic".[23] For example, earlier in the same novel, he had pointed out that a scene where a character was

---

[20] Margaret Oliphant, *Miss Marjorybanks* (London: The Zodiac Press, 1969; Project Gutenberg, 12 February 2013), Ch. L, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/41286.

[21] See note 20 above.

[22] Anthony Trollope, *Doctor Thorne* (Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 1980; Project Gutenberg, 28 March 2016), Ch.VII, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3166

[23] *Kincaid, James R.,The works of Anthony Trollope, Clarendon Press, 1977, online version* *https://victorianweb.org/victorian/authors/trollope/kincaid/2.html* *(accessed on 5/10/2021)*

squeezing the other's hand was actually a short one although, because of the narrator's "tedious way of telling it"[24], it seemed to protract too long for the situation.

Considering this particular example, however, one might also wonder whether, besides a certain delicacy, for some authors, this reticence to transcribe successful proposals might have depended on considerations of a different nature. The awareness that in the process of fictionalisation, the scene risked being idealised and therefore could seem unrealistic to the readers (many of whom had received or made real proposals themselves) might have been another possible reason behind this attitude.

However, as anticipated, in the case of proposals by letters, writers usually linger on their content, whether by presenting their words literally or letting us witness their reading and interpretation process. This section aims at identifying the distinguishing Victorian elements in the way epistolary marriage offers was fictionalised and represented in painting, and suggest the possible rationale underpinning the authors'/artists' choices.

To this purpose, four epistolary marriage proposals from novels published in the period considered in this study, as well as some pictorial representations, will be analysed. The literary examples considered for this study are taken from *Bleak House* (1852-53) by Charles Dickens, *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864-65) by Antony Trollope, *The woman's Kingdom* (1868) by Dinah Maria Craik, and *Middlemarch* (1871-1872) by George Eliot.[25]

In *Bleak House*, the main character, Esther Summerson, receives as many as four marriage proposals in the course of the novel. Two (which she turns down) are from the ridiculous Mr Guppy who, ambitious and self-centred as he is, first asks her to marry him, then is ashamed of having asked her hand when she is disfigured by smallpox, and finally wants to marry her again when he finds out she is Lady Dedlock's daughter. As Ferguson points out,[26] like Jane Austen's clerics, Mr Guppy represents the professional man who confuses what J.L. Austin calls the three levels of language: the performative utterance (the words used), the illocutionary status (the

---

[24] Moody, Ellen, "Partly Told in Letters: Trollope's Story-Telling Art",The 12th Annual Trollope Society Lecture, delivered 23 November 1999, "The Victorian web" https://victorianweb.org/authors/trollope/moody1.html (last accessed on 10/10/2021.

[25] All quotations from these novels are taken from:

Charles Dickens, George Ford, and Sylvere Monod, *Bleak House*, Critical edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977).

Anthony Trollope and Stephen Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, New Ed edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1975).

Dinah Maria Mulock Craik, *The Woman's Kingdom : A Love Story* (Leipzig : B. Tauchnitz, 1868), http://archive.org/details/womanskingdomlov00crai.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch (Norton Critical Editions) 2nd (Second) Edition Text Only*, ed. Hornback,Bert G. (New York: Norton, 2000).

[26] Ferguson, 'Proposals and Performative Utterance in the Nineteenth-Century Novel'.

circumstances) and the perlocutionary significance (the impact of the words delivered). In other words, these professionals are so full of their specialised knowledge that they forget any social and personal understanding. They behave almost perfectly according to etiquette. They present their status and position and involve the parents in their proposals (Mr Guppy makes the second one in the presence of his mother) but forget to consider the addressee in their considerations, taking for granted that their offer will be accepted. In Carol and Peter Stern's terms, as seen in the previous chapter, these suitors focused on the emotionology aspect without considering emotions.

Allan Woodcourt's proposal, on the contrary, included everything Esther would have liked to hear, such as the praise of her selfless character (which is presented as "not a lover's praise but the truth") and words of tenderness and true love (he even cries when rejected). She clearly loves him back dearly but is compelled to turn down his offers because she has already accepted to become the wife of the generous Mr Jarndyce, to whom she owns a great debt of gratitude. "O, too late to know it now, too late, too late. That was the first ungrateful thought I had. Too late"[27] is the comment of Esther, the narrator of the scene, when she learns about Woodcourt's love.

To the purpose of this study, however, the most relevant proposal included in *Bleak House* is the one from Mr Jarndyce as it is in epistolary form. The letter's reception, reading and the relevant reply deserve a dedicated chapter of the novel (XLIV) tellingly entitled *The Letter and the Answer*, which comes about two-thirds of the way through the volume.

In the previous chapter Sir Leicester Dedlock pays an unexpected visit to Mr Jarndyce to tell him that despite his feud with his friend Mr Boythorn, he, his guards, and Mr Skimpole are welcome to Chesney Wold to see the family's art collection. Esther, worried about meeting Lady Dedlock on such an occasion as a visit to her house, reveals to Mr Jarndyce that she has recently found out she is Lady Dedlock's illegitimate daughter. The following day, after reassuring Esther that they will not go to Chesney Wold, Mr Jarndyce anticipates he will write her a letter:

> "I have long had something in my thoughts that I have wished to say to you. […] I have had some difficulty in approaching it, and I still have. I should wish it to be so deliberately said, and so deliberately considered. Would you object to my writing it?"[28]

The reason for Mr Jarndyce opting for a written proposal rather than a verbal one can be easily deduced from these words. He is aware that so far, Esther has seen him as a fatherly figure because of his age, his role as a guardian and his protective manners towards her, so he feels

[27] Dickens et al., *Bleak House*, 731.
[28] Dickens et al., *Bleak House,* 535.

embarrassed in presenting himself as a possible husband now. Moreover, he does not want to put any pressure on Esther to accept his offer (even when he mentions the letter to her the first time, he insists on the fact that nothing will ever change between them in any case) and for this reason, he prefers her to be alone at the moment of receiving it. His use of the adverb "deliberately", which is emphasised by repetition and that originally meant "with careful thought or consideration; not hastily or impulsively"[29], seems to suggest that he is aware that this decision requires some considerations that will have to be guided by the head more, or rather than, an impulse from the heart. Ada, Mr Jarndyce's ward, is about to become of age, and at that moment, there will no longer be the need for a governess in the house, putting the peaceful "present mode of life" at Bleak House to an end. Mr Jarndyce's proposal is presented as a solution to this problem.

Esther herself starts her account of the letter with the words, "it was not a love letter though it expressed so much love"[30]. Moreover, Mr Jarndyce never uses the term "wife" in his proposal ("it asked me, would I be the mistress of Bleak House?") and not even when Esther kisses him to accept the offer in the scene of her reply. By proposing to her to become the "mistress of Bleak House" and the "dear companion of his remaining life", Mr Jarndyce seems to belittle the changes that the marriage will bring about. She is already a confidant and a friend to him, and the housekeeping keys she has been given on her arrival at Bleak House which she kisses while considering the offer are a symbol of her managing position in the house. After all, as Danahay claims, "'housekeeper' and 'housewife' are obviously closely related terms; both participate in the nineteenth-century British cultural construction of the feminine in terms of domesticity".[31]

This marriage proposal is sent in a non-postal way from one room to another of Bleak House, with little Charlie as the go-between. Nevertheless, the space between the two rooms seems unusually dilated to Esther, reminding the readers that it is Esther's perception of the events that they are reading rather than an objective account of the facts:

> Charley went up the stairs, and down the stairs, and along the passages— the zig-zag way about the old-fashioned house seemed very long in my listening ears that night— and so came back, along the passages, and down the stairs, and up the stairs, and brought the letter.[32]

---

[29] OED.

[30] Dickens et al., *Bleak House,* 537.

[31] Martin A. Danahay, "Housekeeping and Hegemony In 'Bleak House'", Studies in the Novel , winter 1991, Vol. 23, No. 4, (winter 1991), 416-431, 416.

[32] Dickens et al., *Bleak House,* 536.

As Camilla Humphery points out,[33] the letter is the third of a trio that marks the development of Esther's character and her "journey to self-realisation". The first one is the letter from Kenge and Carboy, which appoints her as a companion to Ada and will mark the start of her new life at Bleak House. The second is the letter from her mother, Lady Dedlock, where the woman reveals to her daughter that she did not abandon her at her birth but was led by her sister to think she was born dead. In the end, after Mr Jarndyce's proposal (the third letter), a fourth written text will represent the conclusion of Esther's story, the name of the little house that Mr Jarndyce gives to Esther and Mr Woodcourt after renouncing a marriage that would have made him happier than his wife: "We went out of the porch and he showed me written over it, Bleak House."[34]

As mentioned, Mr Jarndyce's written proposal is not disclosed to the reader but is filtered instead through Esther's perspective. As Christensen suggests, Esther interprets the text not as something defining Mr Jarndyce's condition but as an "incident in the narrative of her life".[35] When Charlie arrives with the letter, she asks her to put it on the table and then sits "looking at it without taking it up, thinking of many things". These "many things" are the main events of her life, which she regards as a continuous (and undeserved) rise from the darkness of her childhood, through the death of her aunt and the solitary time spent with Mrs Rachel, to the new bright life among caring friends and the recovery (even if she is disfigured) from her illness: "and all this happiness shone like a light from one central figure, represented before me by the letter on the table". [36]

This revision of her life is the only context she considers when reading the letter, and even before opening and reading it, Esther has already decided the pivotal role it will have in her life. When she finally opens it, as Christensen highlights, she tries to control its text in order to make it fits into her narrative: "She claims the right to distrust, and her reading deconstructs many of Jarndyce's statements so as to invert their apparent significance."[37]

Her account starts with a key sentence in this act of appropriation of the text: "it addressed me as if our places were reversed, as if all the good deeds had been mine, and all the feelings they had awakened his." Here she questions the essence of the letter itself, implying that what follows

---

[33] Camilla Humphreys, 'Dickens's Use Of Letters In "Bleak House"', *Dickens Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1989): 53–60.

[34] Dickens et al., *Bleak House,* 751.

[35] Allan C. Christensen, '"Not a love letter": Epistolary Proposals of Marriage and Narrative Theory in *Bleak House* and *Middlemarch'* in M. Costantini, F. Marroni, and A.E. Soccio, *Letter(s): Functions and Forms of Letter-Writing in Victorian Art and Literature*, Scienze Dell'antichità, Filologico-Letterarie e Storico-Artistiche (Aracne, 2009), 61.

[36] Dickens et al., *Bleak House,* 537.

[37] Christensen, '"Not a love letter", 62.

is the result of the kind intention of her suitor to make her feel loved and important, while she feels she is only a disfigured and illegitimate woman. Mr Jarndyce insists on the fact that she "would gain nothing by such marriage and lose nothing by rejecting it", but she believes these words are only out of kindness. On the contrary, she feels that, after all the good she has received from Mr Jarndyce, she has no real choice, and there is only one option for her:

> "But I knew it, I knew it well now.[…] I had but one thing to do. To devote my life to his happiness was to thank him poorly, and what had I wished for only the other night but some new means of thanking him?" [38]

This marriage will be the "close of the benignant history" which started in darkness and brought her to Bleak House and to that letter that had "shone like a light" on her bedroom table.

The unsaid is also essential for Esther's interpretation of the letter. Mr Jarndyce's not mentioning her "disfigurement" and her "inheritance of shame" does not mean that, in his regard for her, he does not care about these aspects, but it becomes for Esther a further proof of his magnanimity and a further reason to feel grateful to him and consequently obliged to accept his proposal.

Referring to Derrida and Brooks, Christensen notices that this episode can be seen as a paradigm of the psychoanalytic situation, where the letter writer, like the analysand, presents his narration to the analyst who actively engages in interpreting it. To quote Brooks, from Christensen, in this situation emerges "an uneasy dialogue between narrator and narratee, a struggle to construct and to control the text".[39]

Nonetheless, the struggle to interpret a text through its explicit and implicit meanings could also lead to misinterpretation. Based on Fitzmaurice's study on how epistolary meanings are made and read, we could classify this example as a case in which "readers infer meanings other than those intended by the utterers".[40] In the dialogue between the writer and the recipient that precedes the letter, which forms part of its context, Mr Jarndyce makes sure Esther is persuaded of his sincerity when he says that whatever the content of the letter will be, nothing will change in his regard for her. He even tries to make her forget the gratitude she feels towards him:

> "Ah, guardian, what have you done for me since that time!"
> "But," said he, "that is not to be remembered now."
> "It never can be forgotten."

---

[38] Dickens et al., *Bleak House,* 538.
[39] Christensen, '"Not a love letter", 60.
[40] Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English*, 39.

> "Yes, Esther," said he with a gentle seriousness, "it is to be forgotten now, to be forgotten for a while. You are only to remember now that nothing can change me as you know me. Can you feel quite assured of that, my dear?"[41]

We may reasonably suppose then that Mr Jarndyce is sincere in feeling unworthy of the young and selfless woman he is proposing to and that he genuinely wishes to leave her free to decide. The dialogue above is the fundament of the letter's implicature, defined by Fitzmaurice as the "meaning that the utterer intends the interpreter to calculate given what he has said and the circumstances in which he has spoken".[42] However, as we have pointed out, Esther will not take those words at face value and will use the context of her own narrative to infer from Mr Jarndyce's words and silences meanings he did not intend. As Fitzmaurice explains, in fact, sometimes

> interpreters infer implicit meanings (rather than implicatures) partly as a function of their perceptions of their interlocutor's motives and reasons for saying what they do, and partly as a condition of their own mental world, their personal stance, and their sense of themselves in relation to their addresses.[43]

Let us now consider Esther's non-epistolary reply briefly. After taking her decision to accept the proposal, Esther bursts out crying for a reason that she cannot define (or that she, as the narrator, does not want to admit). However, in light of her following actions, the reader will easily recognise these sobs as the consequence of her realisation that she will not be able to marry the man she really loves, Mr Woodcourt.

Esther looks at herself in the mirror and reproaches her image for her red and swollen eyes. At that moment, to use a metaphor already mentioned for other Victorian examples and borrowed from advice literature, her heart and her head face each other: on the one hand, her image, that is her sentimental self, cries for Mr Woodcourt, and on the other, her rational part that knows that she has to marry Mr Jarndyce, tries to persuade herself of the righteousness of this decision: "When you are mistress of Bleak House, you are to be as happy as a bird. In fact, you are always to be cheerful; so let us begin for once and for all"[44] and then, "you are happy for life. Happy with your best friends, happy in your old home, happy in the power of doing a great deal of good, and happy in the undeserved love of the best of men."[45]

---

[41] Dickens et al., *Bleak House,* 536.
[42] Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English*, 70.
[43] Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English*, 83.
[44] Dickens et al., *Bleak House,* 538.
[45] See note 43 above.

The actions that follow are almost performed with a sort of rituality in the context of a sacrifice. She kisses the housekeys, a symbol of her position in the house which she will conserve by marrying Mr Jarndyce, and makes her alter-ego, Ada, kiss Mr Woodcourt's dried flowers in her sleep before burning them. This act symbolically puts an end to her romantic attachment to the man she cannot marry. Later in this chapter, we will see how this idea of a woman sacrificing her romantic inclinations in favour of her duty towards her family or the people she loves also emerges in some epistolary paintings.

Every day in the week that follows the letter, Esther expects Mr Jarndyce to solicit an answer from her. However, he keeps silent about it, again confirming that his words about leaving her free to decide and at her own time were based on the sincere doubt of his worthiness of her, despite her interpretation. She then decides to pen her reply, but another week passes before she realises she cannot write "an answer that at all began like a good answer".

With the deconstruction that she has made herself of Mr Jarndyce's letter, one might venture to assume that Esther cannot write a reply because she is afraid that she might betray herself and that Mr Jarndyce might read between the lines that her acceptance is more based on the sense of duty and gratitude rather than on the love a wife should feel for her husband. After all, it is the medium itself chosen by Mr Jarndyce, the letter, that allowed for all this reasoning on the part of Esther (she reads the letter three times). As Fitzamaurice argues,

> calculating meaning in reading a letter differs crucially from the practice of calculating meaning in the course of a conversation because the letter provides a linguistic record that accommodates revisiting and rereading whereas a conversation can remain only more or less imperfectly in the memory. The linguistic structures that make up the content of a letter provide the formal basis for inferring different kinds of meaning. [46]

In the end, Esther's reply will not even be entrusted to words, neither written nor spoken, but to what Fitzmaurice (after Mey) would call a "pragmatic act"[47]. After entering the drawing room and telling him that the answer is ready, she embraces and kisses him. However, not even this gesture is taken at face value, and Mr Jarndyce asks Esther for verbal confirmation, again avoiding the word "wife": "and he said was this the mistress of Bleak House; and I said yes".

[46] Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English*, 64.

[47] In the chapter "Making and reading epistolary meaning", Fitzamaurice defines "pragmatic acts" as follows:"These consist of acts that conveyed not so much by the language that accompanies them but by the combination of expectations and behaviour of the participants, and the material conditions afforded by the context." See Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English*, 62.

Interestingly enough, as often happens in other Victorian fiction, the irrelevant dialogue that precedes this scene is reported *verbatim*, while the final answer is narrated.

Many more episodes, in addition to the one just analysed, concern written documents in *Bleak House*, so much so that in his introduction to the novel, J.H.Miller hints at a certain obsession for them.[48] However, from the messy written statements in Chancery court that do not lead to anything to the hoards of papers in Mr Krook's shop that he cannot read, from the myriad of letters sent for telescopic philanthropy purposes by Mrs Jellyby to the letters sent by Madame Hortense to frame Lady Dedlock, all these documents, in the end, prove ineffective. According to some scholars, in fact, they only seem to throw into relief the inefficacy of the written word. Nevertheless, one might object that it is a certain scepticism towards communication in general (and not only the written one) that oozes from the pages of *Bleak House*, as the episode analysed above seems to suggest, with its spoken words that are not believed even if said in earnest and its misread written words and gestures that require confirmation.

The second example of an epistolary marriage proposal is from Antony Trollope's *Can you forgive her?* (1864-65), the first of the so-called *Palliser's* or *Parliamentary series* of novels. Despite the reference to politics that the latter collective name given to the sequence suggests, this novel does not only deal with the public sphere. On the contrary, it suggests how the basis of a happy married life is a correct balance between public and private life for men, and between love and prudence in the choice of a husband for women.[49]

Trollope is certainly the Victorian author who more than any other exploited the form and theme of letters and often connected it with marriage issues. His novels are packed with letters, more than those of any other Victorian writer. *He Knew He was Right* (1869), for instance, which is considered one of his best works, contains as many as 86 letters, and of his 47 major novels, only one (*Harry Heathcote of Gangoil*) does not include epistolary references. When not presented in full, letters are woven into the third person narration to dramatise the relationship between the writer and the reader of the novel and the writer and the reader of the letter. No wonder some critics have considered him as the "most epistolary of non-epistolary novelists".[50]

---

[48] Charles Dickens*, Bleak House*, ed.Norman Page, with an introduction by J. Hillis Miller Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971).

[49] See David S. Chamberlain, 'Unity and Irony in Trollope's Can You Forgive Her?', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 8, no. 4 (1968): 669–80, https://doi.org/10.2307/449472.

[50] David Pearson, '"The Letter Killeth": Epistolary Purposes and Techniques in Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37, no. 3 (1982): 396–418, https://doi.org/10.2307/3044659.

If Pearson identifies 23 types of letters that keep returning in Trollope's works (such as the dictated, the laboured and the backfiring one)[51], Ellen Moody pinpoints three phases in his career according to his use of fictional letters. *Can you forgive her?* would belong, according to the American scholar, to the second or middle phase, the one in which "a reader can get the gist of all that has happened of importance in a Trollope novel just by reading its letters and semi-epistolary narratives in a row and skipping everything else*".*[52] Specifically referring to this novel, she then claims that the correspondences of the main characters "provide a discontinuous epistolary novel inside the novel's larger terrain." However, not many other scholars have given Trollope's use of letters much attention, perhaps, as Pearson suggests, because he did not expand on his epistolarity in his autobiography, as he did, for example on the use of dialogues.[53]

The main three plots of *Can you Forgive Her?* are dominated by three female characters, a maiden, a wife and a widow, who all have to answer the question that serves as a unifying motif of the three stories, "What should a woman do with her life?". As mentioned above, the theme of the choice of a husband in fiction was quite common at the time. Nevertheless, what surprised Trollope's readers and even his publisher (who tried -in vain- to persuade him to shorten the story),[54] was the introduction of a comic subplot about a wealthy widow who has to choose between two suitors and of another about the young wife of a Member of Parliament who is tempted into eloping with the man she loved before her marriage. All these plotlines are dotted with letters which, as Moody claimed, alone could give the general idea of the story. In particular, of the three women, two receive a letter with a proposal at a certain point of the complex plot, a proposal of marriage in one case and elopement in the other.

This chapter will deal with the first case and, more generally, the plot involving the main character Alice Vavasor, whom the narrator asks the reader to forgive in the title. Alice Vavasor is a twenty-four-year-old woman who lives with her uncaring father in London and, at the beginning of the novel, is engaged to the wealthy, respectable and reliable John Gray. Living in a country house in Cambridgeshire and being almost entirely uninterested in public life, Gray is the opposite of Alice's cousin, George Vavasor, to whom she was engaged for a while before meeting Gray but whom she left because of his recklessness. George is an impulsive and violent spendthrift who

[51] Pearson, '"The Letter Killeth", 401.

[52] Ellen Moody, "Partly Told in Letters: Trollope's Story-Telling Art",The 12th Annual Trollope Society Lecture, delivered 23 November 1999, "The Victorian web" https://victorianweb.org/authors/trollope/moody1.html (last accessed on 10/10/2021)

[53] Pearson, '"The Letter Killeth", 397.

[54] See Chamberlain, 'Unity and Irony in Trollope's Can You Forgive Her?'

lives in a London flat whose address is kept secret even to his own sister. He also has a *cicatrice* on his face which flares red when he gets angry. However, his ambition to become a Member of Parliament (which is actually based on his desire to gain a position of power and not on a genuine interest in public affairs) and his alluring manners make him a fascinating figure for Alice, who is looking for a greater "cause" to support that is not the mere married life expected for middle-class women of her age. During a trip to Switzerland with George and his sister Kate, Alice, who believes herself a modern and independent woman, is subtly persuaded by her two cousins that John Grey is unsuitable for her. On her return to England, she, therefore, rejects Gray and later accepts the written marriage proposal of her cousin George. These essentially are the great mistakes the reader is asked to forgive her for, which are particularly serious because Alice is aware that she still loves the man whom she rejects and feels a sort of revulsion for the one she accepts. Nevertheless, as Chamberlain argues,[55] instead of finding a balance between "prudence" and "romance", or head and heart as we called them, she renounces both on a quest for an independence which is, however, only apparent. Most of her decisions, in fact, are based on what the others think or do, either because she lets them persuade her or only because she wants to contradict them.

Despite her father's disapproval, her arrangement with George includes her promise to allow him to use her money to stand in the parliamentary elections before the marriage. When Grey learns about that, he resolves to secretly give George the money he needs for the campaign so that Alice will not end up ruined when her cousin will surely leave her after using all her capital. Alice, however, repents her decisions soon after making them and, in the end, will jilt her cousin and marry Gray, "the worthy man". She is, as Wall claims, a "vacillator", a kind of character that Trollope was particularly fascinated by as "to follow the process by which a person first comes to, and then reverses a decision must be to discover a good deal about her personality".[56]

The story unfolds through the narration of a third omniscient narrator, that in Trollope's style, often addresses the reader intrusively, for example, to plead understanding for a character's behaviour, and a series of letters. These epistolary texts, interwoven with the narration of the moment of reading and reacting to the message, shed light on the reasons why Alice behaves as she does.

The first embedded letter of this plotline, which is also the first of the novel, is actually a reply. In Chapter 2, Lady Macleod, Alice's aunt, advises her niece against going ahead with her

[55] See note 55 above.
[56] Wall, Stephen, "Introduction", in Trollope*, Can You forgive her?*

plan to travel to Switzerland with her cousins Kate and George. He is a “wild man”, and, as two years earlier they were about to engage, this trip together seems inappropriate now that she is going to marry another man. Annoyed by her aunt’s interference, Alice tells her that she has sent her fianceè a letter “letting him know that such were our arrangements” and is waiting for his reply. Alice’s character starts to be revealed by the way she behaves in this first letter exchange. First of all, in her message, she does not *ask* for her future husband’s approbation, as it would have been proper to do according to Lady Macleod, but just to “let him know” about what she has already decided as she thinks “he has no right to claim my obedience on any subject”.

Moreover, she is quite clear that if he told her not to go with her cousin, she would not “take his advice” and would even feel offended by such a lack of trust on his part. Nevertheless, she also declares assured that Gray would not dare object to her plans. After her aunt has left her, though, she sits and thinks about the two men they have been discussing, the “wild one” and the “worthy one”, feeling a preference for the first and almost expecting to find in the reply of her future husband what “she had declared him to be incapable of making”.

As the narrator points out, the letter from Mr Grey that she receives the following day is “a sample of his worthiness”. Alice opens it by tearing it rapidly, demonstrating that she is anxious to know its content and not at all so disinterested in Mr Grey’s opinion about the matter as she pretended to be with her aunt. She reads it twice, then she analyses it “bit by bit, taking it backwards, and sipping her tea every now and then amidst her thought”. Her previous letter is also taken into consideration in order to interpret Mr Grey’s reply better:

> And there had been in Alice’s words, as she told him of their proposed plan, a something that had betrayed a tremor in her thoughts. She had studiously striven so to frame her phrases that her tale might be told as any other simple statement,— as though there had been no trembling in her mind as she wrote. But she had failed, and she knew that she had failed. She had failed, and he had read all her effort and all her failure. She was quite conscious of this.[57]

The Johnsonian contrasting ideas of the letter as a mirror of one’s soul and, at the same time, an effort to convey a specific image of oneself to the addressee emerge powerfully in this analysis. Alice is perfectly aware that her inner hesitation in doing something she knows would defy propriety transpires from the words she uses despite her best efforts to conceive it. In Fitzmaurice’s words, it is a case in which “speakers convey more than what they say”, a category

[57] Trollope and Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 61.

she associates with the one in which speakers convey "other than what they say",[58] as in the case of Mr Jarndyce's letter.

Gray, on his part, feels her uneasiness and yet, very gentlemanly and wisely, does not openly oppose her plans. However, he makes quite clear his position about the matter by using irony and hinting that, if asked, he would have accepted the position of the male companion for the trip. There is no doubt about the implicature of his text. Furthermore, he does not give Alice reason to accuse him of not trusting her as he blames George's well-known unreliability rather than his past affair with her for his disapproval:

> But I doubt his being punctual with the luggage. He will want you or Kate to keep the accounts, if any are kept. He will be slow in getting you glasses of water at the railway stations, and will always keep you waiting at breakfast. I hold that a man with two ladies on a tour should be an absolute slave to them, or they will not fully enjoy themselves. He should simply be an upper servant, with the privilege of sitting at the same table with his mistresses. I have my doubts as to whether your cousin is fit for the place.[59]

As it happened with Mr Jarndyce's letter, therefore, what is not said is again proof of the writer's magnanimity, which, however, in this case, seems to annoy the fictional reader. Alice, in fact, believes her fianceè to be too dull in his perfection, so this reply irritates her, who feels almost disappointed by the nobility oozing from its lines: "and she knew that he was noble and a gentleman to the last drop of his blood. And yet— yet— yet there was almost a feeling of disappointment in that he had not written such a letter as Lady Macleod had anticipated".

What the letter does say is equally disturbing to Alice: any reference Gray makes to their future marriage, for example, the fact that his gardener is adjusting the garden according to the mistress' commands ("I didn't give commands […] He asked me how I liked the things, and of course, I was obliged to say", she comments), or his calling himself "husband", makes her shrink, even though elsewhere she admits to find Gray extremely handsome and to love him. Wall suggests that although the reasons given for her jilting Mr Gray are "mixed and confused", "her perverse necessity" to resist such a satisfactory union is due to Alice's tendency to self-punishment as if she had to "pay" somehow for her independence.[60]

This first epistolary exchange is a necessary premise to the second pivotal correspondence of this plotline, where, after Alice has jilted Mr Gray, George finally proposes to her, and she accepts.

---

[58] Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, 70.
[59] Trollope and Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 58.
[60] Wall, Stephen, "Introduction", in Trollope*, Can You forgive her?*, 13 – 15.

The offer is reported within Chapter 30, while its reply is in Chapter 32, where the entire novel comprises 80 chapters. Trollope often separates a letter from its answer to create an expectation on the part of the reader and present it when it "will make the greatest impact on us".[61] As Moody points out,[62] he also avoids making a letter correspond with an entire chapter where the narration is in the first person as other contemporary writers do: the titles themselves inform us that these are chapters "Containing a love letter" and "Containing a reply to a love letter" rather than simply "A love letter" and "The reply". As we mentioned above, Trollope's style is a mixed one where the voices of the narrator and characters merge, and the context of the writing and reading of the letters is given space and importance as to their exact words.

In the specific case of George Vavasor's proposal, for example, the circumstances of its creation and sending are quite relevant for the reader's correct interpretation of its words and its writer's personality.

The chapter starts by describing Vavasor alone in his rooms in Cecil Street. His friend Burgo Fitzgerald has just visited him to ask for some financial help. He is planning an elopement with Lady Glencora, the woman he loves and who has married a member of Parliament against her will. George accepts to sign a bill for him, but he himself needs funds for his political campaign. The conversation they had reminds George of when Burgo and Lady Glencora's union was first opposed by her family. Alice had refused to help the couple at the time, but she had said that as Glencora had promised to marry Burgo, although he was a spendthrift, she should have kept her promise and taught him "to be otherwise". She had also added that "if a woman […] won't venture her fortune for the man she loves, her love is not worth having". George draws a parallel between his situation and Burgo's, and the memory of those words triggers some considerations that will lead him to write the letter of proposal. Quite oddly for a person about to write a marriage offer, the first thought is that his "Bohemian propensities" make him unsuitable for the old fashioned institution of marriage that he defines as "distasteful" and "terrible". However, he admits that "if a Siamese twin" (meaning a wife) was necessary for him, it could have been only Alice. This "necessity" is, obviously, a financial one.

It is at this point that Vavasor decides to write the letter. Before penning it, though, he reassures himself, "I needn't send it when it's written […]and the chances are that I won't".[63] He, a

---

[61] Ellen Moody, "Partly Told in Letters: Trollope's Story-Telling Art",The 12th Annual Trollope Society Lecture, delivered 23 November 1999, "The Victorian web" https://victorianweb.org/authors/trollope/moody1.html (last accessed on 10/10/2021

[62] See the note 61 above.

[63] Trollope and Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 331.

gambler through and through, leaves such a momentous decision for his and Alice's life to chance. After writing it and putting it in an envelope, he plays with it near the fire "as though willing that the letter should escape from him and perish if chance should so decide. But chance did not so decide".[64] Next, he rereads the letter, bets with himself about the possibility of Alice accepting it ("I'll bet two to one that she gives way […] women are such out-and-out fools") and then leaves it to a coin to decide. As the proud postal man as he was, Trollope informs us via the narrator that having the letter been posted on Christmas Eve morning, "In accordance with postal regulations, it reached Vavasor Hall and was delivered to Alice on the Christmas morning".

Let us now focus on the content of the letter. After such premises as those explained above, it is not surprising that Vavasor's proposal is poles apart from the letter Captain Wentworth wrote to Anne at the beginning of the century. Both, actually, refer to the past relationship between the lovers, but if Wentworth talks about unchanged (and even increased) feelings for Anne in the past nine years, George focuses on what has changed in the time they were apart:

> We are both older than we were when we loved before, and will both be prone to think of marriage in a somewhat different light. Then personal love for each other was most in our thoughts. God forbid that it should not be much in our thoughts now! Perhaps I am deceiving myself in saying that it is not even now stronger in mine than any other consideration. But we have both reached that time of life, when it is probable that in any proposition of marriage we should think more of our adaptability to each other than we did before. For myself I know that there is much in my character and disposition to make me unfit to marry a woman of the common stamp. You know my mode of life, and what are my hopes and my chances of success. I run great risk of failing. It may be that I shall encounter ruin where I look for reputation and a career of honour. The chances are perhaps more in favour of ruin than of success. But, whatever may be the chances, I shall go on as long as any means of carrying on the fight are at my disposal.[65]

While the chance is again mentioned as the driving force of his life, he reveals and suggests for her a more mature view of marriage as a question of "*adaptability to each other*" than a question of love. Actually, he is probably aware that she cannot really love him, and is trying to make their marriage look acceptable to her all the same in order to improve his future prospects.

In the following part of the letter, in fact, Vavasor will also admit that in case they should marry, he would use Alice's money to obtain the seat in Parliament he so much aspires to, having stated earlier (see the quote above) that a defeat is more likely than a victory. The sentence that follows, "I will hardly stoop to tell you that I do not ask you to be my wife for the sake of this aid",

[64] Trollope and Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 334.
[65] Trollope and Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 332.

as Fitzmaurice suggests about the negative forms,[66] only calls its opposite, positive statement in the context of the interpretation. After witnessing the moment of its composition, however, the reader had already no doubts about this message not being a love letter, despite the chapter's title and George's attempts to make it looks otherwise when he writes: "Since the time in which I might sit with my arm round your waist, I have sat with it round no other waist. Since your lips were mine, no other lips have been dear to me."[67]

The other points that George advances to persuade Alice to accept him are a reference to Providence, which made Alice jilt Grey in the end, making it possible for her cousin to renew his affection for her,[68]and her ambition. He knows that she aspires to something more than marriage and says, "I should say that it must be essential to your ambition that you should join your lot to that of some man the nature of whose aspirations would be like to your own."

In conclusion, although he repeats the question "will you be my wife" five times throughout the text, the letter with which George asks for Alice's hand, rather than a love letter, looks more like a proposed agreement between two adult people who could adapt to each other and meet their reciprocal material needs (need for protection for Alice and money for George).

Between this proposal and Alice's reply, the chapter "*Among the Fells*" serves as a delaying device and discloses the addressee's thoughts about the letter. On Christmas day, after receiving the offer, Alice walks in the area around her grandfather's house in the Lake District with her cousin Kate, George's sister. Kate has always been Alice's closest friend, but she betrayed her friendship when, trying to fix her up with her brother, she allowed him to read some of Alice's letter to persuade him to propose again. For this act, she is judged very severely by the narrator as "a wicked traitor,— a traitor to that feminine faith against which treason on the part of one woman is always unpardonable in the eyes of other women."[69]

According to Altman, Kate belongs to the cathegory of "epistolary active confidants" who "not only listen to, comment upon, and relate part of the hero's story, but actually influence it*."*[70] Altman furtherly explains that,

> This more enterprising[71] type of confidant usually has a well-delineated personality, independent from the hero's; after listening to the hero's plight, he decides either to help him attain his goal or to hinder him.

---

[66] Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English*, 66.
[67] Trollope and Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 332.
[68] See Rev Casaubons's proposal in Middlemarch for another reference to Providence in a proposal.
[69] Trollope and Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 165.
[70]Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Yale University, 1973), 50-52.

Kate supports Alice in her decision to reject Mr Grey and plots to make her marry her brother. However, what makes her less culpable, from the moral more than the epistolary point of view, is her thinking that this was indeed the best option for the two, especially for her brother, and her repenting her actions when she realizes his true selfish, violent nature:

> To give Kate Vavasor her due, she was, at any rate, unselfish in her intrigues. She was obstinately persistent, and she was moreover unscrupulous, but she was not selfish. Many years ago she had made up her mind that George and Alice should be man and wife, feeling that such a marriage would be good at any rate for her brother. It had been almost brought about, and had then been hindered altogether through a fault on her brother's part. But she had forgiven him this sin as she had forgiven many others, and she was now at work in his behalf again, determined that they two should be married, even though neither of them might be now anxious that it should be so. The intrigue itself was dear to her, and success in it was necessary to her self-respect.[72]

Confidentiality confirms itself as a critical element of the epistolary culture of this century, as well as an element of letter culture which "structures the thematic, character relations, and narrative action of letter novels to a remarkable degree".[73]

While they are walking among the fells, Kate reads aloud a letter from her aunt, Mrs Greenow, the widow courted by two men. However, this episode is almost annoying for the readers who know that another, more serious and important letter is lying in Alice's pocket.

During their walk, Alice ponders about the received offer and, in two subsequent paragraphs, we find first the comments on the letter by the narrator, who goes back to the context of its composition, and then her own, both introduced by the same statement about the craftiness of the letter (the emphasis is mine):

> *Her cousin's letter to her had been very crafty*. He had studied the whole of her character accurately as he wrote it. When he had sat down to write it he had been indifferent to the result; but he had written it with that care to attain success which a man uses when he is anxious not to fail in an attempt. Whether or no he cared to marry his cousin was a point so little interesting to him that chance might decide it for him; but when chance had decided that he did wish it, it was necessary for his honour that he should have that for which he condescended to ask.
> *His letter to her had been clever and very crafty*. "At any rate, he does me justice," she said to herself, when she read those words about her money, and the use which he proposed to make of it. "He is welcome to it all if it will help him in his career, whether he has it as my friend or as my husband." Then she thought of Kate's

---

[71] More enterprising of the mere "passive confidant-Information receiver" which was dealt with earlier in the chapter "Of Confidence and Confidants", Altman, *Epistolarity*,47.

[72] Trollope and Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 166.

[73] Altman, *Epistolarity*, 47.

> promise of her little mite, and declared to herself that she would not be less noble than her cousin Kate. And would it not be well that she should be the means of reconciling George to his grandfather? George was the representative of the family,— of a family so old that no one now knew which had first taken the ancient titular name of some old Saxon landowner,— the parish, or the man.[74]

Alice does not love George and does not look for any love signs in the letter, but she appreciates his sincerity in mentioning his money needs. Helping him conquer a seat in Parliament, restore his honour and reconcile him with their grandfather, become the cause she feels the need to support, her duty. Only duty, then, not love, is what prompts her to accept the proposal, which is what makes it difficult to forgive her, as the narrator specifies.[75]

The scene at the fells, when Kate finally reads the letter that her brother has sent to Alice, is the subject of one of the illustrations for the novel by Hablot Knight Browne, (Phiz, 1815-1882). The picture depicts the two women in a romantic spot overlooking the lake with Alice staring at the horizon and Kate absorbed by the reading of the letter (see Figure 1). However, Moody points out that this picture does not convey the inwardness that Trollope expected to emerge from the illustrations in his novels.[76]

We can hardly see the features of the women's faces, and therefore we cannot perceive the anxiousness of Katy in reading the letter nor the struggle in Alice's soul, as she has rejected a noble man to risk everything on a rascal out of her sense of duty. Phiz belonged to the old school of illustrators whose work was characterised by a more satirical and linear style inherited by Cruikshank and his contemporaries. It was Dickens's style of illustration, with all his melodrama and exaggerated features but not Trollope's, whose work was more realistic and introspective. For this reason, after the first half of the novel, the publisher was prompted by the author to entrust the illustrations for the following chapters to Mrs Elizabeth Taylor.

In Chapter 32, which includes Alice's reply, the narrator clearly explains why this message is quoted in full, and stresses that it is revealed not in the context of its composition but rather of its reading, demonstrating that this detail was not left to chance by the author:

> In what words Alice had written her assent it will be necessary that the reader should know, in order that something may be understood of the struggle which she made upon

[74] Trollope and Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 343.

[75] "And yet it was not her love for the man that prompted her to run so terrible a risk. Had it been so, I think that it would be easier to forgive her. She was beginning to think that love,— the love of which she had once thought so much,— did not matter. " Trollope and Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 342.

[76] Ellen Moody, *TROLLOPE ON THE NET*, First Edition (London ; Rio Grande, Ohio: Hambledon Continuum, 1999).

> the occasion; but they shall be given presently, when I come to speak of George Vavasor's position as he received them.[77]

Again, the way the message is "treated" and interpreted reveals some facets of the recipient's character. At the arrival of the letter, George leaves it unopened on his toilette table while dressing. In a certain way, as Esther Summerson, he needs to prepare himself for its content, to "frame" that letter in his own narrative, affecting, even if he is alone in the room, a carelessness that he does not actually feel. It is Alice who holds the power now: only her answer can translate the proposal into a performative act and save George. He knows how her reply is essential to him, for his career and his pride, although not for his heart, but he cannot admit to depending so much on her, not even with himself.

As in the case of the proposal, Alice's reply is not a love letter. She compares their situation to that of two children who have quarrelled over a game and make up in tears. Furthermore, she explicitly excludes that any "passionate love" can exist between them and yet she does not see that as an obstacle to their union, as long as they agree that a marriage can be happy without it. "We could not stand up together", she writes,"as man and wife with any hope of a happy marriage, unless we had both agreed that such happiness might be had without passionate love".[78]

Another condition is put forth though, i.e. that the wedding will not have to take place before one year, to give her the time to recover from the recent events (her jilting the man that all her family hoped she would marry). In the meantime, Alice will consider herself formally engaged to George and will give him all the money he needs to obtain his seat in Parliament as if the two were already married. In the last lines, she asks for George's confirmation that he accepts her conditions.

This letter, which is carelessly thrown on the breakfast table by its addressee, will be shortly followed by a "very frank" and short reply which this time is reported indirectly by the narrator. Although he hopes to marry her before twelve months, George accepts her conditions and agrees to reconcile with their grandfather, as she asked him to do. What he really cares about, the money, is granted to him along with the satisfaction to have stolen from Mr Gray what he had previously stolen from him.

This correspondence, for its matter of fact and lucid style, as well as the way conditions are specified and confirmations required, seems to share more traits with business than with love

[77] Trollope and Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 352.
[78] Trollope and Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 355.

communications. The reader is already familiar with George's meanness, but Alice's letter must have been annoying for the contemporaries for its lack of feminine style, which may add to the things she had to be forgiven for. It certainly contributes to making a mockery of this "emancipated darling" (the modern woman)[79] who thinks of herself as independent, self-willed and above the notion of romantic and passionate love. Chamberlain points out that this character personifies the type of woman the writer criticises in his public lecture on "*Higher Education of Women"*, who possesses a "vague, purposeless condition of feminine intellect in which the imagination is excited, but it is not sufficiently excited for any creative power, for any real work". Alice's looking for a cause to support with no practical ideas of how to do it, and for this reason, wasting herself (like Dorothea will do in *Middlemarch*) would epitomise this attitude. After all, as again Chamberlain reminds us, Trollope did not trust his effectiveness as a lecturer[80] and used his characters to convey his messages in a more convincing way.

In conclusion, Trollope generally uses letters to investigate the reasons behind the decisions that his characters have to make as well as the conflict inside them. His fictional letters are always perfectly in tune with the characters who write them, or, in Pearson's words, "Trollope never errs by placing the wrong words in mouths (or pens)". In his autobiography he included a declaration on how novelists should write their dialogues that, Pearson confirms, he certainly applied to his fictional letters too:

> The writer may tell much of his story in conversations, but he may only do so by putting such words into the mouths of his personages as persons so situated would probably use. He is not allowed for the sake of his tale to make his characters give utterance to long speeches, such as are not customarily heard from men and women. The ordinary talk of ordinary people is carried on in short, sharp, expressive sentences which very frequently are never completed, - the language of which even among educated people is often incorrect. The novel-writer in constructing his dialogue must so steer between absolute accuracy of language which would give to his conversation an air of pedantry, and the slovenly inaccuracy of ordinary talkers, which if closely followed would offend by an appearance of grimace - as to produce upon the ear of his readers a sense of reality.[81]

The circumstances of composition and reading of the letter are also vividly described, almost in a theatrical and dramatic way (George sitting at his chair, sipping his whisky, writing, playing with the letter on the fire), and it is not surprising that he gave illustration so much

[79] Chamberlain, 'Unity and Irony in Trollope's Can You Forgive Her?'

[80] Chamberlain.. 672 note 10.

[81] Anthony Trollope, *Autobiography of Anthony Trollope* (DODD,MEAD & COMPANY, 1905), 208 , http://archive.org/details/autobiographyofa018303mbp (accessed on 14/10/2021).

importance. Perhaps as with illustrations, he might have seen letters as precious instruments for digging into the souls of his characters in a way that was hardly possible with narration and dialogues.

The third fictional example of epistolary proposals is from a novel by a less canonical author, *The Woman's Kingdom: a Love story* (1868) by Dinah Maria Craik. As Trollope did, Craik tried to disseminate her views, particularly those about womanhood and the role of women in society, which are at the core of her work, both through her essays and novels. With *A Woman's Thoughts about Women*, for instance, a series of essays published in 1858,[82] she aimed to support and advise the numerous unmarried middle-class women who were becoming a subject of social concern.[83]

Here she considered the lack of something to do as "the chief canker at the root of women's lives" and promoted for women's industriousness and self-dependence, to be exercised first within the home, and when not possible, out of it:

> […] she will find her work lying very near at hand: some desultory tastes to condense into regular studies, some faulty household quietly to remodel, some child to teach, or parent to watch over. All these being needless or unattainable, she may extend her service out of the home into the world, which perhaps never at any time so much needed the help of us women. And hardly one of its charities and duties can be done so thoroughly as by a wise and tender woman's hand.[84]

At the same time, Craik denigrates the inclination to the helplessness of some women:

> That Providence ordained it so — made men to work, and women to be idle — is a doctrine that few will be bold enough to assert openly. Tacitly they do, when they preach up the lovely uselessness, fascinating frivolity, delicious helplessness — all those polite impertinences and poetical degradations to which the foolish, lazy, or selfish of our sex are prone to incline an ear, but which any woman of common sense must repudiate as insulting not only her womanhood but her Creator.[85]

---

[82] The essays appeared in *The Edimbourg Journal* between 2 May and 19 December 1857 and a year later were collected and publishe in volume form with the title of *A Woman's Thoughts about Women.*

[83] The 1851's census had manifested a disproportion in the numbers of men and women in Britain, the latter exceeding the former by 500,000 units, and that two and half million of women were unmarried. This demographic phenomenon, that came to be called the "surplus woman" problem, was obviously an important social issue in a society in which the primary role for a woman was that of wife and mother. In short, the accepted ideal of family promoted for all the classes was statistically and scientifically impossible to achieve. Among the causes of this demographic phenomenon there was the migraton of many men to the colonies in the hope to make fortune and the fact that men tended to postpone marriage until they were able to afford a decent house with servans and possibly a carriage, which made them socially respectable. Migration of the "surplus women" was a possible solution to the problem and many societies were founded to provide employment to these unmarried women in the colonies and help them settle there, such as the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women.

[84] Dinah Maria Mulock Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts about Women* (Hurst and Blackett), accessed 24 November 2021, 15, http://archive.org/details/womansthoughtsab00crai.

[85] Dinah Maria Mulock Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts about Women,* 5.

These two antithetical aspects of womanhood emerge in the sisters at the centre of her novel *The Woman's Kingdom* (1868), who, despite being twins, could not be more different from one another. Edna is plain-looking but self-dependant, practical and virtuous. During a holiday with her sister on the Isle of Wight, she falls in love with a poor doctor, William, because he is helpful and caring with his sick brother. When back in London, William realises he loves her too and sends her the proposal of marriage that will be analysed soon. Although she is aware that their lives will not be easy as they are both poor, Edna accepts it.

After their marriage, she spends her days caring for her husband and their five children while also facing financial straits, constantly aware that their loving household makes them the richest people in the world. In short, she epitomises the angel in the house, although Craik, as the title of the novel suggests, prefers the image of the "queen" of the house[86] exalted by Ruskin's words in the epigraph she takes from "Of *queen's gardens*":

> Queens you must always be: Queens to your lovers: Queens to your husbands and your sons: Queens of higher mystery to the world beyond, But, alas! You are too often idle and careless Queens, grasping at majesty in the least things, while you abdicate it in the greatest.[87]

Victorian novels were full of "queenly" heroines, from many of George Eliot's female characters to Miss Marjorybanks whom Margaret Oliphant calls "the queen of Carlingford" not to mention the queens and fairy queens of the fantasy literature, that according to Homans, together with Ruskin words, suggest an "unexpected element of power"[88] for Victorian middle-class women.

Over the years, his "queen" Edna's influence will help William be strong in the hardest moments of his life and resist the temptations that, being a man who lives outside the house, he is more exposed to. When he wants to buy a carriage on credit, for example, to make people believe he is a successful doctor and attract more patients, it is his wife who firmly opposes this plan because "to spend money when you have it not, and do not know when you may have it, is nearly

---

[86]In the following excerpt from the novel, after being accepted by Edna, William seems gradually to transform his self-confidence under the sweet influence of what is to become his queen:
[…]*and as he went on talking, principally to Letty, and about common things, the size and arrangements of his house, and his means of furnishing it, his good angel might have heard that the man's voice grew softer and sweeter every minute. Already there was stealing into him that influence, mysterious as holy, which, with- out any assertion on their part — any parade of rights or complaints of wrong — makes all women — Christian women — if they so choose it, the queens of the world. Already the future queen had entered into her kingdom.* 175.

[87] Craik, *The Woman's Kingdom*, Frontispiece.

[88] Margaret Homans, *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture, 1837-1876*, 2nd ed. edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 68.

as bad as theft" and his success would be based on cheat and deception. In the end, William will buy a carriage only much later when he can afford to pay for it in full.

If on the one side, Craik's views have been considered sexist as they keep the two gender roles neatly separate, the woman at home and the men out in the world, on the other, the relationship between William and Edna mirrors the one that the women's rights activist Annie Swan will describe much later in the century in her *Courtship and Marriage (1894).* The Scottish journalist and writer argued that

> The ideal relationship betwixt husband and wife has always appeared to me to be comradeship,—a standing shoulder to shoulder, upholding each other through thick and thin, and above all keeping their inner sanctuary sacred from the world.[89]

Edna and William are a perfect example of this ideal union and fully conform to all the wife's and husband's mutual duties that Swan lists in her end-of-the-century work, making Craik a forerunner of these theories.

Theirs is the "*Love Story"* at the centre of the novel that has its antithesis in the affair between Edna's twin sister, Letty, and William's brother, Julius. Letty is poles apart from her virtuous twin and represents the opposite aspect of womanhood that Craik discussed in her *A Woman's Thoughts about Women*. She is clingy, coquettish and beautiful, so much so that she cannot work as a governess as she causes infatuation in the fathers and jealousy in the mothers of her pupils. For this reason, the two sisters have to set up a school in their house to earn a living.

Her irresistible looks also mesmerise Julius, William's brother, who desperately falls in love with her. However, although Letty likes him, she despises poverty and cannot think to marry such a penniless artist. Letty is incapable of thinking of marriage if not in terms of social and economic improvement, and therefore she cannot truly love a man.

Julius, for her sake, gives up on his artistic ambitions and accepts a position in trade in Calcutta that will allow him to earn the money Letty has fixed as the minimum income upon to marry. However, on her voyage to Calcutta, where her fiancée is waiting for her, she meets a wealthy Dutchman and decides to marry him instead, which will cause Julius to go mad and join the army. The last chapters are set 15 years later when Julius, who has been declared dead, goes back to England under a new name, sick, unbalanced and destitute. He finds Letty rich but unhappily married to the jealous and tight-fisted Dutchman she met on the ship and makes acquaintance with her daughter Gertrude, who resembles her aunt more than her mother. He will

---

[89] Swan, Annie, ‚*Courtship and Marriage And the Gentle Art of Home-Making,* accessed 25 November 2021, http://archive.org/details/courtshipandmarr35963gut.

end up living with his brother and his family, finding in one of his nephews, who wants to become an artist, a new reason for living.

Let us now consider the proposal of marriage that Doctor William Stedman writes to Edna some months after returning from the holiday where they have met, in Chapter 12 of the first book. As in the case of *Can you forgive her?,* the letter is embedded within the narration of its composition rather than, as happens in the other three cases, in that of its reading and interpretation.

William has just quarrelled with his brother because he wants to visit, unannounced and uninvited, the two sisters they have met on holiday even if this would be highly improper. William would like to see Edna himself but is afraid that such an impulsive and careless act may prejudice the women's respectability and therefore decides to do what he has been meditating for a while: write to Miss Kenderdine to ask for her hand.

The letter he composes is only a few lines long, and it does not feature those sentimental embellishments and cogitations that are alluded to as a sign of shallowness and self-pride.

> Some men take refuge in pen and paper, and revel therein; their thoughts and feelings flow out — and generally evaporate also — in the most charming sentences, which, even under the deepest emotion, it is a relief to them to write, and a pride in having written. But William Stedman was of another sort. To express his feelings at all was very difficult to him — to write them, and see them written, staring back at him in terrible black and white, was impossible. Therefore this letter, the first love-letter he ever wrote, was of the very briefest and most formal kind:[90]

Dr Stedman is a practical, tacit and somehow rough man. As the eldest brother, many concerns weigh on his mind, from their critical financial situation to his not-yet-satisfactory practice as a doctor and his sick brother who has artistic pretensions but is not selling paintings yet. He is described from the very first pages as "very manly" for his appearance (he was "tall and broad"),[91] his strength, with which he pushes his brother's Bath chair, and his steadfast character which Edna refers to as "the wise, tender, manly heart which was her comfort in all her troubles". As the novel often specifies the traits of personality that are typical of men and women and places Julius's poetical temperament halfway between the two[92], it does not seem too far-fetched to

[90] Craik, *The Woman's Kingdom*, 159.

[91] Craik, *The Woman's Kingdom*, 37.

[92] "His was the temperament which we so ardently admire in youth, so deeply pity in maturer years—the poetic temperament—half masculine, half feminine—capable of both a man's passion and a woman's suffering. Such men are, as circumstances make them, the angels, the demons, or the martyrs of this world." Craik, *The Woman's Kingdom*, 31.

generalise and deduce that, according to Craik, William's sober and formal style of writing about love is the one that truthful and reliable men should have.

The "all-important question" is preceded by an introduction on the propriety of a visit, while the word "love" appears just once and, paradoxically, only to express the impossibility on the part of the writer to communicate this sentiment in words:

> My brother has just told me he has discovered where you live, and means to call upon you. May I be allowed to do so first ? I have but one reason for this, and one apology for the presumption of proposing it; that I consider neither my brother nor myself have any right to intrude upon you as mere acquaintances. And besides, a mere acquaintance I could never willingly be to you.
> You and I know one another pretty well : we shall never know one another any better unless I dare to ask you one question — Could you, after any amount of patient waiting on my part, and for the sake of a love of which I can not speak — consent to be my wife?[93]

William's concern about a possible visit to the sisters, and the delicacy with which he worries about the women's reputation are in themselves signs of love. The last paragraph refers to the answer and, albeit less sensual, it reminds of Captain Wentworth's anxious wait for a sign from Anne Eliot:

> To-morrow is Saturday. If, during the day, only one line comes to me by post, I will be with you on Sunday. If I may not come — but then I know you will answer me quickly; you would not keep in needless torture any creature living.
>
> Yours faithfully,
> William Stedman[94]

After its composition, the letter is not even re-read by its writer, who, avoiding any unnecessary elaboration, has only put his true feelings on paper. He is not even worried at all about the perlocutionary force of his words, believing that that "a woman who, in so momentous a crisis, could lay weight upon accidental forms of phrase or mistakes of expression, was not a woman to be much desired".[95]

Apart from the possibility of being rejected, the only concern that he does have is the "secrecy" of the proposal, so much so that in the very first sentence, he asks, "Madam- Will you do me the honor to read this in private and alone ?"[96] He fears that Letty might advise his beloved against the marriage, perhaps on the ground of his scanty income. And yet it is Letty to collect the

---

[93] Craik, *The Woman's Kingdom*, 159.
[94] See note 93 above.
[95] Craik, *The Woman's Kingdom*, 160.
[96] Craik, *The Woman's Kingdom*, 159.

post in their little house in Kensington that morning and comment on the "funny hand" which looks like a lawyer's and that Edna already knows well as she secretly and jealousy conserves a note by the same author. Edna will do as requested, and despite Letty's protests, she reads the letter alone, in her own locked room, where also readers are banned from: "There let her be. We will not look at her, nor inquire into what she felt or did. Women at least can understand."[97]

It has already been highlighted that secrecy was a central aspect also in real life love letters as well as in epistolary paintings, where letters were hidden in trees or passed to one's beloved by stealth, and more generally were read by their addressee alone, always concealed from the prying eyes of the viewers. In this case, although Letty keeps asking to see the love message as she has always shown her correspondence to her sister, the "sacrality" of this particular moment in Edna's life and of her lover's feelings is fiercely defended by Edna:

> Edna closed her little hand fiercely over it – her one possession, foretaste of her infinite wealth to come. It was hers – all her own, and the whole world should neither pry into it nor steal it, nor share it.[98]

When Craik wrote this novel, 11 years had passed from the Matrimonial Cause Act and, as discussed in the previous chapter, the minutes of divorce causes had become a very popular entertaining topic in newspapers along with the letters from the parties involved which were thus exposed to the public eyes. Only in this light can we fully understand the passionate defence of the letter by Edna, the meek, tranquil "little woman". As a queen, she is defending her kingdom, "her possession" and "wealth" not only from the public but even from her own sister.

William does not have to wait long for Edna's reply, despite Letty's suggestion that she should wait to answer until they have inquired about her suitor's financial status. Her message is essential ("There was a note written, which consisted of the brief word 'come', naming the day and hour.") and is followed, a day later, by William's visit. On that occasion, he, who was going "to assume his rights, to assert his sovereignty" and claim his queen, repeated the question, but again, as mentioned before for many other Victorian stories, the scene is only briefly sketched:

> And Edna, when William Stedman took her in his arms […] asking her if she could love him, and if she were afraid to be a poor man's wife — Edna knew what that true love was.

If the love story between William and Edna as well as their correspondence represent the model that Craik suggested her readership to follow, the story of the affair between Julius and

---

[97] Craik, *The Woman's Kingdom*, 163.
[98] Craik, *The Woman's Kingdom*, 167.

Letty was the opposite alternative, a cautionary tale aimed at warning the reader of the disastrous outcome of a relationship based on the wrong premises, appearances and money. The letters between the two lovers are not disclosed, but those that Letty sent to her lover are described years later with a few bitter words:

> [The man] to whom she had written those silly letters that a fiancée was likely to write, and unto whom she had been false with the utmost falseness by which a woman can disgrace herself and destroy her lover.[99]

If William's sincere and rough letter has led Edna to "the threshold of a new life - in a new world",[100] Letty's letters are silly and false and, as such, have led her lover to folly and ruin. Furthermore, at the end of the novel, this pack of letters is used to blackmail Letty, now Mrs Vanderdecken, by Julius, who menaces to send them to Gertrude, Letty's daughter, to show her how evil her mother has been. He will not carry out his threats, but this act demonstrates that even Julius does not have to be considered only a victim. His obsessive and possessive love, which leads him to revenge, is the cause of his destruction as well as his lover's betrayal. Once again, letters are used to dramatise "non-love".

Two sisters are also the main characters in *Middlemarch* (1871-72) by George Eliot, the last novel that includes an epistolary proposal considered in this study. As happened in Craik's novel, the two are considerably different. Dorothea, the eldest, albeit not yet twenty at the beginning of the story, is highly intelligent, religious, and possesses a "theoretic" mind. She dresses plainly, but her beauty is only exalted by that, to such an extent that she is compared to the Blessed Virgin in Italian paintings. She dedicates her time to praying, designing cottages for farm workers and horse riding, although this latter makes her feel guilty as she enjoys it in a"pagan sensuous way", so she keeps promising she will quit it. This religious piety, tinged with a certain vocation to martyrdom, seems to scare potential suitors, hindering her marriage prospects. In fact, for the village mentality,

> Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on. Sane people did what their neighbors did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them.

For this reason, most of the people in Middlemarch tend to prefer her younger sister, Celia, who is less intelligent but is considered amiable and more "worldly-wise". Furthermore, although

---

[99] Craik, *The Woman's Kingdom*, 393.
[100] Craik, *The Woman's Kingdom*, 164.

she wears simple clothes too, she has that "shade of coquetry" and "common sense" that makes her more compliant with the idea of womanhood of the village than her sister.

Although her religious fervour is deemed excessive, Dorothea is very charming. In the course of the novel, she will attract the attention of her wealthy neighbour, Sir James Chettam, who falls in love with her but is rejected, of the dull scholar Rev. Edward Casaubon, whom she will marry, and finally of his nephew Will Ladyslaw, a romantic and rebellious idealist who loves her despite her being married to his uncle and for whom she will renounce to all her wealth in the end. The epistolary exchange that is most relevant for this study is the one where Casaubon proposes to Dorothea, and she accepts him, in Chapter V of Book 1.

Chapters in *Middlemarch* do not bear titles, but as always in George Eliot's novels, they are introduced by what she called "mottos", i.e. quotes from other literary works or forged by the author herself to look as such.[101] Chapter V, which after a concise introduction by the narrator ("This was Mr Casaubon's letter:") starts straight away with the proposal, features a motto taken from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy:*

> Hard students are commonly troubled with gowts, catarrhs, rheums, cachexia, bradypepsia, bad eyes, stone, and collick, crudities, oppilations, vertigo, winds, consumptions, and all such diseases as come by over-much sitting: they are most part lean, dry, ill-colored … and all through immoderate pains and extraordinary studies. If you will not believe the truth of this, look upon great Tostatus and Thomas Aquinas's works; and tell me whether those men took pains.— BURTON'S Anatomy of Melancholy, P. I, s. 2.[102]

As happened in *Can You forgive her?,* the context in which the letter is reported seems somehow to clash with the idea of an epistolary proposal of marriage as a love letter as discussed in the previous chapter. In Trollope's work, the letter was preceded by George Vavasor's admission that he was not cut for marriage, defined as an "old fashioned custom […] not adapted to his advanced intelligence". His attack against marriage becomes even more scathing when he adds that not even the beasts of the fields stoop so low as to "treat each other so badly […] drink themselves drunk nor eat themselves stupid" and "bind themselves together in a union which both would have to hate*."*[103]

In a similar odd way, in *Middlemarch*, the letter of proposal is shown in by a quote from a famous seventeenth century encyclopedic work about depression that also treats, in its third part,

---

[101] About these epigraphs see Adam Roberts, *Middlemarch: Epigraphs and Mirrors*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0249

[102] George Eliot, *Middlemarch,* 25.

[103] Trollope and Wall, *Can You Forgive Her?*, 330.

love melancholy and religious melancholy.[104] The symptoms mentioned, however, such as catarrhs, winds, and oppilations, are not certainly those typically associated with romantic love, so once again, the readers are warned that what follows might not be a love letter. The quote chosen, in fact, deals with the detrimental physical effects of excessive studies on scholars. It also mentions two theologians as examples, and the fact that Rev Casaubon, who has been working on a theology treatise for so long, later will pose as a model for the portrait of one of them (Thomas Aquinas) is a wink to the reader which confirms the correspondence between the "hard student" of the quote and the scholar in Eliot's novel.

The description of Casaubon in Chapter 2 certainly includes some of the features mentioned in the introductory motto. He has a sallow complexion, iron-grey hair, deep eye sockets, failing eyes and two white hairy moles. Nevertheless, none of these unfortunate traits affects the fascination he has exerted on Dorothea even before they meet (she has waited to meet him with "venerating expectation").[105] On the contrary, she appreciates his likeness to the portrait of the philosopher John Locke and only sees in him "a man who could understand the higher inward life, […] who could illuminate principle with the widest knowledge: a man whose learning almost amounted to a proof of whatever he believed!"[106] Once again, though, the epigraph of the second chapter warns the reader about how to interpret the two characters. The quote this time is from Cervantes' *Don Quijote* and features a dialogue between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. The first sees in a man who is advancing towards them a "cavalier […] on a dapple-grey steed, and [who] weareth a golden helmet" while his down-to-earth companion reveals him to be only "a man on a grey ass like my own who carries something shiny on his head". Don Quijote, clever but unable to distinguish reality from fiction and longing for a sense of purpose, interprets the surrounding reality based on the chivalric imagery he has read so much about in books. Dorothea is a new, female Quijote who replaces the Victorian values of the angel in the house, including the social and public engagement of the end-of-the-century women, to the chivalric imagery of Don Quijote or the romantic fantasies of her British eighteenth-century precursor, Arabella.[107]

---

[104] Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Philadelphia, E. Claxton & company, 1883), http://archive.org/details/anatomyofmelanch00burt.

[105] George Eliot, *Middlemarch,* 7.

[106] George Eliot, *Middlemarch,*15.

[107] In XVIII century the idea of a female Quijote had already made its apperance in literature, with the *The Female Quixote; or, The Adventures of Arabella* (1752) by Charlotte Lennox which imitated and parodied the novel by Cervantes. The main character, Arabella, was imbued of French romance novels and lives her life as she were in one of them. She served as a model for Jane Austen's Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* (1817).

The first and most obvious parallel of the dialogue in the epigraph is the conversation between the two sisters in which Celia highlights the ugliness of Casaubon while Dorothea only sees his great soul in his face. However, this motto also introduces the general misreading and misinterpretation of Casaubon's personality by Dorothea based on *her* delusions, which will cause her so much sorrow and disappointment in marriage. Since the beginning of their affair, the narrator informs us clearly that she "had looked deep into the ungauged reservoir of Mr Casaubon's mind, seeing reflected there in vague labyrinthine extension every quality she herself brought."[108] Exactly as Esther Summerson misinterprets Mr Jarndyce's letter to make it fit into her own narrative, Dorothea misinterprets Casaubon's personality (and letter) to make him conform to her idea of marriage.

The episode of the epistolary proposal of marriage and the relevant reply is one of the most striking, as unmediated, and most literal examples of this misreading. Casaubon's letter starts reassuring Dorothea of the fact that what we have called after Ferguson "the formula of courtship" has been complied with and that her guardian's permission has been sought before putting pen to paper. As we mentioned above quoting Ferguson, however, in fiction, this conformity with the courtship etiquette on the part of professional men has never been a guarantee of success in the nineteenth century (see Mr Collins and Mr Guppy). Very often, in fact, it was accompanied by a lack of "sensitivity to others, a delicacy in feelings and a comprehensive view of the moral situation", elements that "the nineteenth-century deplored in his [the professional man's] vocational activities".[109]

The main feature of the reverend's letter is that it is narcissistically more centred on its writer and the image he wants to give of himself than on the woman he is proposing and his sentiment for her. Casaubon's life is presented as a book that "has no backward pages whereon, if you choose to turn them, you will find records such as might justly cause you either bitterness or shame."[110] The proposal then is presented almost as a convoluted job offer:

> I am not, I trust, mistaken in the recognition of some deeper correspondence than that of date in the fact that a consciousness of need in my own life had arisen contemporaneously with the possibility of my becoming acquainted with you. For in the first hour of meeting you, I had an impression of your eminent and perhaps exclusive fitness to supply that need (connected, I may say, with such

---

[108]George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 16.
[109] Ferguson, 'Proposals and Performative Utterance in the Nineteenth-Century Novel', 285.
[110] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 28.

> activity of the affections as even the preoccupations of a work too special to be abdicated could not uninterruptedly dissimulate).[111]

Casaubon declares that he needs some help with his great academic project, and he deems Dorothea suitable to "*to supply that need*". Questions of "affection" are confined to a parenthetical remark. Nevertheless, if on the one side in his letter Casaubon manifests a disposition to treat the others as instruments, clearly looking only for a helpmate in this marriage, on the other side, Dorothea's reasons are not less narcissistic. If her desire to support him in his work might seem a sign of selflessness, her ambition is to distinguish and enrich herself by becoming learned and respected so Casaubon, the great scholar who will allow her to take part in his magnificent project, represents a means to achieve that goal. To quote Marks, "Like Casaubon's erroneous intuiting of the existence of a pristine mythological system, Dorothea believes her marriage will reveal a perfected version of her self".[112]

The proposal also contains religious references to Providence that have to be considered more than a simple professional bias. Casaubon says he is sure that their first meeting was "not to be superficially coincident with foreshadowing needs, providentially related thereto as stages towards the completion of a life's plan"[113] and later he states that Dorothea's acceptance would be considered as "the highest of providential gifts". Dorothea is therefore seen as a gift from providence, and these allusions have, in fact, the effect of removing any agency from her. As Christensen suggests, "he projects upon Dorothea, in another instance of transference [other to Esther Summerson's one], the role of fitting into and completing that pattern of his life story".[114]

The style of the letter is stiff and "labyrinthine" like its writer's mind and equally deprived of sincere emotions, except, perhaps in its final lines where he says that now he has hoped to spend the rest of his life with Dorothea, a negative answer would make him feel even lonelier than before.

When Dorothea receives the proposal, she is overwhelmed by emotions. She trembles, falls on her knees, buries her face and sobs as Esther Summerson did. She interprets that offer in the light of her improvement, the marriage as a way to overcome "the dimness and pressure of her own ignorance ad the petty peremptoriness of the world's habit". In that delusion, accompanied by the maidenly "proud delight" to have been chosen by a man she admires so much, she fails to notice that that proposal lacks any sign of love. Or rather, like Esther, she reads the unsaid

[111] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 28.
[112] Marks, 'Middlemarch, Obligation, and Dorothea's Duplicity',.29.
[113] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 28.
[114] Christensen, '"Not a love letter", 63.

according to her code of interpretation.[115] The narrator's comment foreshadows the sad consequences of her mistake:

> How could it occur to her to examine the letter, to look at it critically as a profession of love? Her whole soul was possessed by the fact that a fuller life was opening before her: she was a neophyte about to enter on a higher grade of initiation.[116]

However, her reply starts with the sentence "I am very grateful to you for loving me", which to the reader sounds like Don Quijote praising the advancing steed that is actually a donkey. As Christensen points out, like in the case of Esther Summerson, "the reader-addressee once again seeks to appropriate the text for her own purpose." [117] After all, earlier, the narrator had advised the reader that

> "Signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable, and in girls of sweet, ardent nature, every sign is apt to conjure up wonder, hope, belief, vast as a sky, and colored by a diffused thimbleful of matter in the shape of knowledge."[118]

Dorothea reads those signs according to her own code and accepts the offer with very few words:

> MY DEAR MR. CASAUBON,— I am very grateful to you for loving me, and thinking me worthy to be your wife. I can look forward to no better happiness than that which would be one with yours. If I said more, it would only be the same thing written out at greater length, for I cannot now dwell on any other thought than that I may be through life
> Yours devotedly,
> DOROTHEA BROOKE.[119]

The fact that a great scholar, as she thinks Casaubon to be, has chosen her as his wife is something that (along with his alleged love) makes her grateful and, as readers, we may infer that his doing it on the ground of her elevation of thought, capability of devotedness and mental qualities tickles her pride. She consequently limits herself to accepting the offer and declaring herself very happy for their future together, highlighting that any further addition would be futile.

Marks sees this reply as a further confirmation of Dorothea's passive response to the proposal. [120] After reading it, she surrenders to emotions and cannot even pray, maintaining a sort

---

[115] Christensen, '"Not a love letter", 64.
[116] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 28.
[117] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 63.
[118] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 16.
[119] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 29.
[120] Marks, 'Middlemarch, Obligation, and Dorothea's Duplicity'.

of childlike attitude for some time. Then, as she believes Casaubon to be the real agent of her change, all she needs to do is to accept his influence on her and accept the role that Providence and Casaubon have assigned to her. To that purpose, she uses a plain style that is strikingly opposed to Casaubon's pretentious (and fusty) phrasing.

Certainly, marriage to Casaubon will contribute to Dorothea's growth and wisdom (after all *Middlemarch* is her *bildungsroman*) but not as she expected. Her "epiphany", will start soon after the wedding, when that "labyrinthine" aspect of Casaubon's personality that she thought a sign of his profundity slowly reveals itself for what it was, confusion and insecurity, and "the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither". She will learn from Ladislow that the latest studies in theology are in German, which her husband cannot and refuse to read, and gradually becomes aware that T*he Key to all Theologies* will never be finished and be taken seriously by other scholars.

She will also realise that the purely passive role that has been offered to her does not suit her passionate personality. In the beginning, she was described as having finely formed hands and wrists and as being good at drawing plans; moreover, she "piqued herself on writing a hand in which each letter was distinguishable without any large range of conjecture". Those hands, symbols of agency, will not be very useful to her though: in her new position, she will be relegated to reading, a reading that, as Christensen points out, "will not allow her fancifully to misread and control texts but will simply subject her slavishly to the authorial power".[121]

It will be in Ladislaw that in the end, after her husband's death, she will find a more suitable companion, more passionate in his love for her and in his efforts to try to improve their world and equally unconcerned about conventions. Nevertheless, even from the tomb, Casaubon managed to hinder a union that he had long feared. In his will, which, as mentioned, can be considered as a letter that a living person writes to those who survive them, he adds a codicil that will make Dorothea lose all her inheritance should she marry his nephew. The power of the written word also survives their authors.

From the examples analyzed above, some general conclusions can be drawn on the use of letters of proposal in Victorian novels.

The first and most obvious observation arises from the position that these letters occupy in the course of the novel, and that has been indicated in each case. In all the examples considered,

[121] Allan C. Christensen, '"Not a love letter", 64.

the proposal letters are presented at the beginning or in the middle of the story rather than towards the end, as happened, for example, in *Persuasion*. This means that the proposal, and its acceptance, is not an occurrence that brings the love story between the two characters (and the novel) to a successful conclusion; on the contrary, the letter which contains it foreshadows what will happen later and triggers the action of the following chapters. In particular, in three cases out of the four considered, the epistolary proposal is *not* a love letter, as one would expect, but on the contrary, to borrow the court terminology, a proof that aims to demonstrate the unsuitability of the union which will be further developed in the rest of the plot.

This might seem at odds with the fact that all these written proposals could be considered "successful" from a pragmatic point of view, as they all elicit a positive answer from the addressee. Each of the writers has struck the right chords, or at least, their words have been interpreted by their recipients as if they did. However, only in *Middlemarch* the couple involved will actually get married, and as would clearly have happened to the other couples if they got married, the union will not be a happy one.

The Woman's Kingdom represents a sort of exception, as the proposal of marriage is a real love letter, albeit a rough and short one, and the couple involved will live happily together, overcoming various difficulties together until the end of the book. Nevertheless, also in this case, the letter is located in the first part of the novel and will cause problems. The action it triggers, however, does not concern its writer and sender but their alter egos, their brother and sister. After William and Edna's wedding, Letty lives with them and Julius, as the husband's brother, often visits the family and spends time with her. Considering his previous infatuation for her and these frequent visits, as Letty herself points out, an affair between the two is unavoidable, with all its dramatic consequences.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in the 1860s and 1870s, the public debate about divorce and the spectacularization of failed marriages contributed to casting a shade on the domestic plot in fiction. More and more tragic examples of unhappy marriages appeared in novels (see *The Woman in White, Lady Audley's Secret, Middlemarch),* and the sensational novelists found in the domestic hearth a source for a new kind of gothic.

However, as Boon points out,[122] it was not the institution of marriage itself, with the strict genre-role ideals on which it was based and the social pressure it was surrounded by, to be blamed for all that unhappiness, yet the individual, "who is held responsible for sinning against the

[122] Boone, Joseph Allen, "Wedlock as Deadlock and Beyond: Closure and the Victorian Marriage Ideal." In *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 17, no. 1 (1984): 65–81

ideal of romantic wedlock" by their "tragic misjudgements and illusions".[123] And it is the "tragic misjudgements and illusions" of their characters that novelists wanted to emerge from those epistolary proposals and their answers, that to this purpose, are often presented without the mediation of the narrator. Alternatively, when as in *Bleak House,* the letter is reported by a narrator, this is not an external one, but the character the letter is addressed to.

Readers are left to judge by themself and feel indignation for the characters' mistakes, and in one case, they are also directly asked to forgive them. However, again quoting Boone, placing all the guilt on the individual rather than to the ideology, could not do much to change the status of things:

> Whatever an author's original intention, the typical presentation of failed marriage as a closed tragedy tended to preclude a continued critique of the societal forces helping to perpetuate marital conflict; rather, the stabilization of narrative impulse and granting of readerly repose inherent in the closed tragic ending confirmed a benign view of the social universe. [124]

The characters' mistakes lie in their wrong assumptions about marriage, seen as an act of gratitude (Esther Summerson), a noble cause (Alice Vavasor) or a way to improve oneself (Dorothea Brooke and Letty Kenderdine) but also in their misinterpretations of their suitors' proposals according to those assumptions.

This aspect focuses the attention on the interpretation of the letters (and their authors) as well as on their composition. In the case of *Bleak House*, it was pointed out that the implicature does not correspond with the interpreter's meaning. In *Can You forgive her?* writer's and recipient's intentions seem to tally, as both George and Alice apparently intend their marriage as a transaction that will bring them together for mutual benefits, with no trace of sentimental implications. However, it is their sentiments that they misread, misinterpret and misrepresent in their letters. Alice immediately repents her decision, feeling revulsion for the man she accepts to marry and making George feel outraged, although he believed to be interested only in her money. In the case of *Middlemarch*, the two characters' divergent views on their marriage depend on their individual narcissisms. As Marks points out: "Dorothea's marriage reveals as two narcissistic selves can hold two radically different visions of an ideal future, never communicate each's vision to the other, and thus enter into a relationship with no spiritual connection."[125]

---

[123] Boone, "Wedlock as Deadlock and Beyond", 68.
[124] Boone, "Wedlock as Deadlock and Beyond", 72.
[125] Marks, 'Middlemarch, Obligation, and Dorothea's Duplicity', 32.

In conclusion, letters, which represented the means of communication *par excellence*, seem to have been used by novelists to cast some doubts on communicability itself. At the outset of this chapter, it was suggested that in the 1810s, Jane Austen had chosen the letter for the declaration of love of Captain Wentworth. However, over the century, the abundance of letters and the improvements in technology highlighted the intrinsic limits of human communication itself, which depended less and less on material limitations and more on the nature of the language itself. Half a century later, T.S. Eliot summarised that sense of incommunicability of the modern age in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915) with the iconic verses "That is not it at all,/ That is not what I meant at all".

Victorian writers seem well aware of the fact that even if words in letters seemed to have objective meanings, they were actually open to different interpretations, with implicit, non-intended meanings that overlapped with the meanings that the sender intended the interpreter to calculate (implicature). Both the writer and the reader try to control the significance of the text, often using different reference codes. Interestingly enough, as Christensen points out, this reflection could also apply to the narrator-reader context becoming a paradigm of the narrative process at the basis of the novel itself:

> […] instances of the narrator's miswriting and of the narratee's misreading also function as essential aspects of the narrative process, which relates to ourselves as well as to readers within the story. We must not take the texts as communications to us at face value: 'our role as readers' Brooks observes, 'involves a finely tuned and sceptical hearing, a rewriting of the narrative text in collaboration and agonistic dialogue with the words professed by the narrator'. Since 'texts, like analysands, offer resistances', truths emerge only indirectly and by implication from the "struggle for mastery".[126]

Epistolary marriage proposals in paintings

Not many artists of the British tradition had embraced the theme of the private moment of the proposal of marriage before the Victorian period, as an article on realism in painting that appeared on the *Art Journal* in 1888 seems to confirm:

---

[126] Allan C. Christensen, '"Not a love letter", 69, quoting Peter Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: John Wiley & Sons, 1994),61.

> Nearly every poet and novelist has essayed the subject, and there is, perhaps, more written about it than any other; but painters have seldom or never tried it, none at least until modern times – certainly none of the old masters. Marriage feasts, Cupids and Venuses in plenty but never lovers at the all-important moment.[127]

As often marriages were arranged by parents, the paintings on this theme had tended to include the bride's and groom's families too, as in Hogarth's "*Marriage Settlement*" (1743), which is part of the series "*Marriage a la mode*". In the wake of this tradition, in the nineteenth century, some genre painters continued to represent the moment in which a man asks a father for the hand of his daughter (see, for example, *The only daughter* by James Hayllar, 1875), however, their intent was more realistic and dramatic than moralising and satirical like in Hogarth's time.

Nevertheless, the centrality of marriage in Victorian society, along with greater freedom (even if sometimes only apparent, see Chapter 3) in the choice of a partner, possibly contributed to a more private and intimate depiction of this moment in the life of people, especially women. The representation of the proposal now centres mainly on the couple, as in the painting in Figure 4 by Millais (*Yes,*1877). When a parent is present, he/she is not the focus of the painting, like in *The Proposal* (between 1840-1859) by Frank Stone where the girl's mother is hidden behind a door or *The Proposal - The Marquis and Griselda (1850 ca.)* by Frederic George Stephens where Griselda's father occupies a secondary position. Moreover, as the century wanes, the woman is shown as "mistress of herself" and is often depicted while rejecting her suitors, as in *Off* (1899) by Edmund Blair Leighton or the cryptic *Enigma* (1891) by Sir William Quiller Orchardson.

Only few artists, though, explicitly represented the proposal in epistolary form, although many paintings bearing the general title of "*The Love letter*" or "*The letter*" and portraying a woman lost in her thought while holding the message of her lover such as those discussed earlier in this chapter, may actually hint to an offer of this kind. Painters wished to leave the viewer free to interpret the situation and the expression on the face of the subject.

The paintings which this section will focus on will be, conversely, those whose makers clearly indicated as representations of that particular moment in which the "all-important" question is read or its reply is thought of or given in letters.

The most striking example of these paintings is undoubtedly offered by the series by John Everett Millais, "*Yes or no*?" (1871), "*No*" (1875), and "*Yes*" (1877). The first of the series (Figure 2) represents a woman in mourning (she is wearing a black dress) standing in front of a writing desk where a letter lays open while holding the daguerreotype of a man behind her back. The

[127] Thomson, D. C. "Realism in Painting." The Art Journal (1875-1887) 6 (1880): 282–84. https://doi.org/10.2307/20569577 (Jstor - accessed on line 20/10/2021)

background is confused but seems to be a heavy drapery that, along with the Venetian glass vase and the writing desk, suggests we are in an upper-middle-class home. The title provides the key for reading the composition: the woman thinks about whether to accept or not the proposal she has just received. The many sheets that make up the letter and the reference to the woman's mourning condition may indicate that this is not an ordinary situation. There might be objections of some nature to the match (the woman's recent loss of a dear one, the suitor's status or character), which the lover tries to overcome in his lengthy writing, and the woman's perplexed expression gives away all her indecision. She looks slightly sad and self-absorbed in a sort of interior monologue[128] aimed at considering the options available to her. Her inner struggle may remind that of Alice Vavasor's in Trollope's "*Can you forgive her*?", torn between supporting a cause, being an independent woman, marrying the man she loves or the cousin whose ambition and honour she could help to redeem.

About twenty years earlier, between 1853 and 1854, Millais had created several drawings, such as the series of three *Married for Love, Married for Money, Married for Rank, and Accepted and Retribution* which constitute a sort of preliminary reflection on the theme. The 1850s were a decade of great public debate concerning marriage as the Matrimonial Cause Act was passed in 1857, but they were also the years in which Millais had fallen in love with Ruskin's unhappy wife, Effie Gray, whom he married in 1855 after the annulment of her first marriage.

Christine Riding claims that the drawings of those years,

> "have an aura of the contemporary novel or even melodrama – just as Millais's historical works often smack of the interconnected world of historical novels, theatre or opera –and act as precursors to his successful and lucrative career as an illustrator."[129]

Seen his interest in marriage and letters as narrative elements in paintings and occasionally in their interconnection, it is not surprising that he became a favourite illustrator of Trollope's himself[130]. Between 1860 and 1882, Millais illustrated four of Trollope's novels, *Framley Parsonage* (1860), *Orley Farm* (1861-62), *The Small House at Allington* (1862) and *Phineas Finn* (1869). He also created the frontispiece for *Kept in the Dark* (see Fig. 1b), which incidentally depicted the female protagonist alone and despairing at her desk among her correspondence. The partnership

---

[128] See Zasempa Marek, *The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: Painting Versus Poetry*, Completed in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD. University Of Silesia Katowice 2008.

[129] Christine Riding, *Tate British Artists: John Everett Millais* (Harry N. Abrams, 2006), 50.

[130] Between 1860 and 1882, Millais Illustrated 4 of Trollope's novels, *Framley Parsonage*, *Orley Farm, The Small House at Allington* and *Phineas Finn* and for *Kept in the Dark* created the frontespiece.

between the two great Victorian names was a successful one so much so that a contemporary reviewer wrote that Trollope belonged to "the school of art represented by Mr Millais" and that "Mr Trollope is a pre-Raphaelite".[131] However, their relationship was not always smooth, as Trollope was afraid to lose control over his narrative in favour of the renowned artist who had been chosen by his publisher[132].

The two other paintings of this series by Millais represent two women[133] in the moment of d*enouement*, that is, when the "all-important" question is answered. *No,* (1875) maintains the epistolary character of the first and is thus described by *The Atheneum*:

> A lady in black, standing meditating her answer to a suitor in a letter which she holds; a pen is in the other hand. This is a first rate piece of pathetic expression […] One knows that the petition is rejected with regret, the decision tempered by a vague tenderness; the lips and the eyes tell so much, and the fact is charmingly conveyed […].[134]

The Art Journal goes even further in the interpretation of the painting, saying that the woman

> is just about to affix her name to the letter she holds in her hand, and which contains the fatal word 'No!'. The story is plainly told: we need no evidence that there has been another letter that had another word.[135]

The woman is perhaps rejecting a man for whom she feels an attachment in favour of another that is a more suitable match to her and to whom she has written the "letter that had another word". Again Alice Vavasor or Lady Glengora from Trollope's *Can you Forgive her?* spring to mind.

As for the third painting of the series, *Yes* (1877), it was apparently created following the public's dissatisfaction with the unhappy development of the series. In this last piece, a man is standing in front of a woman and has probably just proposed to her. Her intense gaze and her clasping his hands tenderly as well as her lips partly opened (perhaps in the act of pronouncing a "yes"), suggests that her answer is positive. For this painting, Millais abandoned the epistolary theme but nonetheless, we are left with the impression that letters will follow. The man is wearing

---

[131] Quoted in Moody, "Partly Told in Letters".

[132] See Simon Cooke, *Millais's Illustrations for Trollope,* https://victorianweb.org/art/illustration/millais/cooke2.html (accessed on 02/11/2021)

[133] See Casteras Susan P., John Everett Millais' "Yes or No"? in *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, Fall, 1976, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Fall, 1976), pp. 18-19, Yale University: *The model for Yes or No?, according to a letter written by Millais' daughter in 1901, was a Miss Morgan; Lady Stanley (Miss Dolly Tennent) posed for the figure in No! and a professional model served as the female protagonist in Yes! for which Lionel Benson, a celebrated vocalist, also posed as the happy swain.*

[134] *The Athenaeum. London: [British Periodicals Ltd., [etc.],* N°2479, May 1st 1875, p.602, (online, accessed on 21/10/2021)

[135] Quoted in Casteras Susan P., John Everett Millais' "Yes or No"? in *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, Fall, 1976, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Fall, 1976), pp. 18-19, Yale University

a travelling coat and has a suitcase with him, and the woman is probably promising him she is going to wait for his return. Robert Abbot and his fianceè Mary, whose letters conserved in the archive of the London Postal Museum have been discussed in the previous chapter, may have experienced a similar moment on one of his departures.

According to a contemporary reviewer who wrote for the *Art Journal*, these paintings are great examples of Millais's realism as they do not include those symbols of sentimentality that were often included in the illustration of love:

> One would therefore be inclined to think that Mr. Millais should treat what may be called an original subject in an original way, and use his imagination in his picture as well as in his title. But he does not. As a pre-Raphaelite, he considers that when he has thought out the subject of his picture he has exhausted his art; so he simply paints two portraits – one a lady, loving and lovely, the other a man, handsome and presumably happy. The spectator may bring with him as much poetic thought or imagination as he likes; but the painter gives him as little as possible, for the fault of Realism must always be that it takes too slight notice of these. Those pictures of Mr. Millais are beautiful works of Art, but they are only portraits, not embodiments of "yes!", "NO!" or "Yes or No?". The meaning of the last might certainly be guessed, but it would only be a guess, while the others could be either both 'Yes !' or both' No !' so little do the pictures tell of their own story. The thought of the pictures is idealistic, but the execution is purely realistic, and though they are bound to live in the spectator's memory as lovely pictures, it is only as works of Art in portraiture, not as lovers applicable to all time.[136]

In these paintings, Millais certainly does not depict the moment of the proposal in blissful sentimental tones, like those painters who portrayed women hiding their secret letters for their lovers in tree trunks (see Fig. 30, 31 and 32 in the Appendix to Chapter 5), which have often accounted for the bias against Victorian painting. Although this could be a moment of happiness for the subject, here it is represented as a choice and a slightly problematic one. Even when the answer is positive, the departure of the lover confers to the scene some sadness.

Another painting that alludes to a proposal and bears the same title as Millais's painting in Figure 2 is "*Yes or No*" (1873, Fig.5) by the painter and member of The Etching Club of London, Charles West Cope (Fig. 5). The painter himself, in his *Reminiscences of Charles West Cope, R. A.,* describes this work exhibited at the Royal Academy as "a girl kneeling at a table, in doubt what answer to return to a 'proposal'". Incidentally, he adds a note for that year about the marriage of his "dear daughter and playfellow, Margaret" (whom he had portrayed as a girl some year earlier) to the Rev. A. Auchmuty.[137]

[136] T.C. Thomson, "Realism in Painting" in *The Art Journal* (1875-1887) New Series, Vol. 6 (1880), pp. 283.

[137] Cope, Charles West, *Reminiscences of Charles West Cope, R. A.,* London : Bentley (1891), archive.org, accessed on 01/11/2021

The scene is perhaps less introspective than Millais's and, despite its title suggesting a doubt and the possible need to ponder upon the answer, everything in the painting gives the idea that the girl has rushed to the writing desk in order to pen her reply. She was probably enjoying a walk outside when a messenger arrived with a letter containing, presumably, a proposal: her parasol and the basket of flowers she was carrying have clearly been ditched in haste, causing the flowers to scatter about the floor, her red coat and straw hat have been carelessly dropped on the chair next to the desk, the drawer where the writing paper is probably kept is still ajar, and the envelope that contained the letter of proposal is on the floor. The girl is not even sitting, but, as the painter himself specifies, she is kneeling at her desk. While she is earnestly re-reading what she has just written, the open door allows the viewer a glimpse of what is happening on the doorstep. Here the woman's maid is engaged in conversation with the messenger who has delivered the letter and is now probably waiting for the reply. We are clearly in the countryside, and the Mercury[138](as novelists often call those who deliver messages), rather than being an official Royal Mail postman, might be a postboy or one of the suitor's servants.

Returning to the detail of the open door, to better appreciate its significance, it might be useful to refer to Georgina Cole's studies on doors and doorways in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century painting.[139] As the scholar points out, these elements have been an important presence in western representation since ancient times as a symbol of transformation.[140] In modern times, European genre painters had often included doors (as well as their variant, windows) in their works. Starting from the seventeenth century's Dutch painters such as Vermeer, De Boch or De Hooch (whose preference for this element is defined by Cole as "almost obsessive") up to the eighteenth-century English like Hogarth or Gainsborough, doors have fascinated the artists interested in the representation of everyday life. It is perhaps for this reason, Cole ventures to say, that these elements have been overlooked by critics as ordinary useful items which form part of a realistic background or mere technical devices to give light and confer tridimensionality to a painting. However, they also need to be considered for their metaphorical purport:

> Doors and doorways orchestrate and arrange our movements in the constructed world. They are instruments of an architectural patterning – in, out, entrance, exit – that shapes and contains both the human and the social body. As limina, or

[138] See Dickens in *Bleak house*, Trollope in *Can you Forgive her?*

[139] See Georgina Cole, "Wavering between two worlds': The doorway in seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting," in Philament 9 (2006): 18-37 and Cole Georgina, *Painting the threshold: doors, space and representation in eighteenth-century genre painting*, PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2010.

[140] See Haarløv Britt, *The half-open door : a common symbolic motif within Roman sepulchral sculpture*, Odense : Odense University Press, 1977.

> threshold, doors demarcate and delimit, but also allow the conjoining of, different spaces. They mediate between inside and outside, home and world, private and public, forming permeable boundaries between heterogeneous zones of experience. Perhaps because of their pervading presence, doors have long been appropriated as a site of symbolic or metaphorical meaning. Within the history of western representation, the door crystallises an image of ambivalence or movement between states, signalling either a physical or metaphysical transformation.[141]

Considering this idea of the door as something that can separate (when closed) the outside, public world from the inside and the private hearth,[142] but at the same time (when open) can unite the two spheres, it should not surprise that it is often associated with letters. After all, the letter is *par excellence,* the means that connects those two spheres by crossing that threshold. Moreover, as we mentioned earlier, for women (who are more often represented than men in the epistolary paintings of this age), letters are a way to leave the house to which the dominating culture seemed to relegate them.

The demarcation between inside and outside stressed by the presence of the door also has another function, making the viewers share the same space as the subject: we are *in* the house with the young lady. And we may not know the content of the letter, as generally happens in epistolary paintings of this kind, but as Sutton writes about a painting by Ter Boch, "the use of the profile view of the letter writer paradoxically has the effect, not of excluding the viewer, but encouraging our lingering consideration of her form and state of mind". The voyeuristic taste that in fiction is met by allowing readers to access an embedded letter here is satisfied by creating this sense of participation of the viewer in the scene.

Many are the Victorian paintings that can be mentioned to illustrate this point: from *The Governess* by Richard Redgrave (1844, Fig.6) to *The Valentine* by George Smith (d.u., Fig.7) or *An interior* by William Mulready (1835-42, Fig. 8). In all these cases, the letter is accompanied by an open door, and it is interesting, by contrast, to compare them with *Trust Me* (*1862*) by Millais already discussed in Chapter 1 (App.to Chapter 5, Fig. 11). Here the closed door and the patronising request of the man to see the woman's letter create a claustrophobic atmosphere for the viewer, who finds himself entrapped by that closed door exactly like the woman.

West Cope's representation of an epistolary reply to a proposal does not give the viewer clear hints about what the possible answer might be. Nevertheless, the rose, symbol of appreciation and love which blooms in June, the month in which West Cope's daughter got

---

[141] Cole, "Wavering between two worlds'.

[142] On the importance for Victorians to keep these two spheres distingushed, see the previous chapter.

married the same year in which the painting was exhibited, the open door, that as discussed above in traditional painting, alluded to a change in status, and the rush in the answer, may all be suggestive of a positive reply.

A "collateral" aspect of the proposal that we often find in novels and makes its appearance in painting too is the idea of "sacrifice". It was mentioned earlier that when Esther Summerson receives the proposal by Mr Jarndyce and feels compelled to accept it out of her gratitude towards him, she burns Mr Woodcourt's dried flowers. At that moment, she feels she has to sacrifice her romantic hopes to her duty. In some way, Alice Vavasor does the same when she accepts the offer of her cousin that she does not love, but she could help to redeem himself, rather than that of the upright man she does love. She sacrifices herself to a greater cause than the simple married life which would expect her in the perfect house of Mr Gray, and in the name of her independence of choice, she resolves to do something that all her family disapprove of although it would make her unhappy.

Painters sometimes represented this sacrificial component that may underpin the choice of a future husband with the aid of letters. Burning the old lover's letters corresponded to Esther's burning Mr Woodcourt's dried flowers. In the next chapter, we will deal with the theme of burning old letters to cut with one's past, but in this specific case, the act of burning has almost more to do with the future and becomes an act of agency for the woman who performs this ritual before taking action (accepting or marrying the man she has to rather than the one she would wish to).

Unfortunately, the most significant illustration of this theme in a painting has been lost in time, and I could only find some descriptions and a sketch of it. The painting in question is the one described by the novelist Henry James in his anecdote about his visit to the Royal Academy Exhibition in 1877 (the same in which *Yes* by Millais was displayed) that I have related in Chapter 1. James saw *The Sacrifice* by Marcus Stone (for a sketch, see Fig.8) as an example of the "importunately narrative quality of the usual English picture" and was irritated by the fact that viewers considered it as the representation of a real moment in the past and commented about it accordingly.

Here is the review of this painting that appeared on the *Athenaeum*:

> A girl in pale rose satin, daintly trimmed and prettily laced, and other elements of our grandmother's dressing, stands before an empty fireplace and deliberately burns a love-letter, or something of that sort, which is her sacrifice to duty or fortune; the paper flames slowly in her hand. Her parents, full of sympathy appear behind; the

> mother hides her face in her hand and leans on a table the father, a less old fellow, seems also to be deploring an inevitable necessity[…][143]

The *Standard* furtherly explain the woman's sacrifice:

> It shows a most delicate appreciation of an interesting phase in the life of a young girl of rank, who, for family reasons, gives up all that can make her life happy to bless her parents, whose shattered fortunes require the sacrifice of her heart.[144]

Marcus Stone, incidentally, was another painter who, like Millais, often exploited the narrative potential of letters in his paintings and was another of Trollope's and Dickens's illustrators. As the next chapter will point out, all these big Victorian names who shared a certain fascination for epistolarity, seemed to find in each other suitable support for an intermedial presentation of this theme.

---

[143]H. C. Richardson, ed., *Academy Criticisms, 1877: A Collection Of The Principal Notices And Critiques, Which Have Appeared In The Leading Journals And Art Publications* (Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2010) 13-14.

[144] See note 143 above.

CHAPTER 5 - FICTIONAL AND PICTORIAL LOVE LETTERS

To write? or not to write? That was the question with Geoffrey.

Man and Wife, Wilkie Collins

"Oh, lovers' letters are so silly, and I think this is sillier than usual," said Cynthia, looking over her letter again.

Wives and Daughters, Elizabeth Gaskell

Love letters in novels

The choice to discuss the representation of marriage proposal letters before the more general category of love letters they theoretically belong to (only theoretically, as the previous chapter demonstrated) might deserve a note of explanation. As mentioned, in the corpus of novels considered, marriage proposal letters were embedded within the novel's narrative more frequently than general love letters. This circumstance allowed for a close reading and comparison of their content, which was considered a good starting point for the purpose of this research. As this chapter will demonstrate, novelists tended to be vaguer about the exact words used in love letters, which are often described or rendered only partially or in paraphrase. The focus is more often on the letter as an "object within the text" rather than as a "text within the text", on its materiality and what it represents rather than on its (epistolary) form, on its secondary uses (and disposals) rather than its primary purposes.

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*[1] (1851-53) offers the first example of this kind. In Chapter 5, entitled "*Old letters*", which was published on Household Words along with the following chapter under the name of Memory at Cranford, Miss Matty and her companion, Mary Smith, read, comment and then burn a packet of old family letters (Fig.38). The scene is set in a dark

[1] All quotations from *Cranford* are from Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, ed.Anne Thackeray Ritchie, (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1898) https://archive.org/details/cranford02thomgoog/page/n9/mode/2up?view=theater

atmosphere, not only because it is night but also because, as the narrator Mary explains at the beginning of the chapter, Miss Matty is particularly "chary of candles".

Miss Matty has just dozed off, and while sleeping, she has mentioned people from her past. Therefore, when her maid brings in the tea and awakens her, she is almost surprised, perhaps even slightly disappointed, to find herself in the present and not in the past she was dreaming about. This introduction creates a dim, intimate, and reflective atmosphere, strengthened by the sweet smell of Tonquin beans attached to the letters, which leads to the theme of old memories. Miss Matty's dream inspires her to review some old letters that she has meant to destroy for a while, but "a timid dread of something painful" has always led her to put off the task. Indeed, this burning of old letters turns out to be a painful activity even for Mary, who is not directly involved in those faded memories. "I never knew", Mary says, "what sad work the reading of old letters was before that evening, though I could hardly tell why".[2] Despite their lively tones, those manuscripts represent the distant echo of a time and people gone by, and Miss Matty has to suppress a sigh while undoing the packet "as if it were hardly right to regret the flight of time, or of life either".[3]

All Cranford is, essentially, the continuous juxtaposition of two worlds divided by time as well as space. On the one side, there is Cranford, with its "Amazons" and their traditional values such as gentility, small economies, the "use made of fragments and small opportunities […] that any would despise",[4] and the contempt for any mention of money, considered "vulgar". The guardian of this world is, in the first chapters, Deborah Jenkins, Miss Matty's older sister, whose influence over the people she knows survives her death, and whose favourite writer (and epistolary model) is Dr Johnson with his pompous eighteenth-century style.

On the other side, there is the modern world represented by London or Drumble, where Mary, the narrator of most of the story, lives, and from whose perspective she observes and comments on the life and eccentricities of Cranford people. The railway and the joint-stock company which goes bankrupt and makes Miss Matty lose all her money are examples of this new world that continuously menace the first one. Captain Brown is a bearer of these new ideas, with his straightforward ways, faith in progress, and love for Dickens, whose reading, according to Deborah Jenkins, is to blame even for his death.

---

[2] Gaskell, *Cranford*, 79.
[3] See note 2 above.
[4] Gaskell, *Cranford,* 30.

Mary, the main narrator of Cranford, straddles between these two words, or, as she declares using a vivid image, "vibrates" all her life between them. If, on the one side, she is a previous resident of the village and therefore familiar with its inhabitants, on the other, she is an outsider not only because she resides in Drumble now, but also, as Carse points out,[5] because she is younger and richer than the other women.[6] In some way, Mary's role is that of the anthropologist whose "ethnographic excursions into Cranford life"[7] constitute the novel. Her observations, therefore, have been compared to the "thick descriptions" of Clifford Geertz[8] because of the analysis of the context and social background that she makes to explain the behaviours of the people she talks about. However, at a certain point, the anthropologist and storyteller Mary becomes so involved in the subject of her observation that she intervenes actively in the story. As Carse argues,

> Mary Smith's narration is more than mere journalistic recording or humorous tone: Mary is a creator as well as a reporter, a narrator so steeped in the powers of narrative that she consciously shapes the events of her own plots.[9]

The episode of the burning of letters is undoubtedly a pivotal moment in this context. Mary is highly fascinated by the old manuscripts that represent the raw material for her narration and reports her as well as Miss Matty's reactions at reading them. The existence of an estranged brother revealed by those letters will also spur Mary into action. She will abandon her mostly passive role and, through a letter, will help Miss Matty to be reunited with "poor Peter", her long-lost brother.

Among the documents discussed and burnt by Miss Matty, the most relevant to the purpose of this research is the love correspondence between her parents before their marriage. The epistolary exchanges between the 27-year-old rector of Cranford and Molly, his 17/18-year-old future bride, had been dutifully tied together by Miss Jenkins, who had labelled them as "Letters interchanged between my ever-honoured father and my dearly-beloved mother, prior to their marriage, in July 1774".[10]

---

[5] Wendy K. Carse, 'A Penchant for Narrative: "Mary Smith" in Elizabeth Gaskell's "Cranford"', *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 20, no. 3 (1990): 318–30.

[6] She is the daughter of a businessman and describes herself as a well to do happy young woman (p.**).

[7]Jill L. Matus, *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[8] Carse, 'A Penchant for Narrative' p.322.

[9] Alyson J. Kiesel, 'Meaning and Misinterpretation in Cranford', *ELH;* Winter (2004); 71,4; ProQuest Central: 1001-1017.

[10] Gaskell, *Cranford,* 79.

Seen the age gap, it is not surprising that the styles and subjects of the two lovers are so different. On the one side, there is the adult cleric who insists on talking about love while on the other, his young fianceè who thinks about textiles, dresses, and her look:

> They [Note: Mr Jenkins's letters] were full of eager, passionate ardour; short homely sentences, right fresh from the heart (very different from the grand Latinised, Johnsonian style of the printed sermon preached before some judge at assize time). His letters were a curious contrast to those of his girl-bride. She was evidently rather annoyed at his demands upon her for expressions of love, and could not quite understand what he meant by repeating the same thing over in so many different ways; but what she was quite clear about was a longing for a white "Paduasoy"[…].[11]

The physical description that Mary provides of the rector (after his portrait hung in the living room) as "stiff and stately, in a huge full-bottomed wig, with gown, cassock, and bands, and his hand upon a copy of the only sermon he ever published",[12] seems again in contrast with the declaration on the part of the future bride that "she would not be married till she had a "trousseau" to her mind".[13] All these elements confirm the impression of a certain incompatibility between the betrothed. Nevertheless, Molly's letter about the trousseau was followed by a "whole box full of finery" sent to her as a present by her lover, and eventually by their wedding.

The succeeding letters are from Molly's (now Mrs Jenkins) parents on Deborah's birth. The narrator Mary, stressing on her role as a witness of the events, testifies to the growth of the carefree girl of the first letters into a caring mother:

> *It was pretty to see* from the letters, […] how the girlish vanity was being weeded out of her heart by love for her baby. The white 'Paduasoy' figured again in the letters, with almost as much vigour as before. In one, it was being made into a christening cloak for the baby. [The italic is mine][14]

More letters between the Jenkyns are read, but they belong to another phase of their relationship. Now Molly no longer addresses her companion as "My Dearest John" but as "My Honoured Husband", but these letters still revealed the sound difference between wife's and husband's personalities. Written in the period in which the rector published one of his sermons, his letters were full of Latin expressions, which, as Mary comments, "considering that the English of his correspondent was sometimes at fault in grammar, and often in spelling, might be taken as a proof of how much he 'idealised his Molly'."[15]

---

[11] Gaskell, *Cranford,* 80.
[12] See note 11 above.
[13] See note 11 above.
[14] Gaskell, *Cranford,* 82.
[15] Gaskell, *Cranford,* 83.

Molly, on her part, appeared absorbed in much more practical matters, and on her husband's letter that included an ode where she figured as Maria, she pencilled: "Hebrew verses sent me by my honoured husband. I thowt to have had a letter about killing the pig, but must wait."[16] Her note also adds that her husband asked her to send the poem to Sir Peter Arley, and in a further postscript, she says that it "appeared on the Gentleman's Magazine, December 1782", making it evident that more than a poem for his wife, the ode was instead a literary effort created in the wake of the enthusiasm for the publication of his sermon.

Mrs Jenkyns's letters, on the other hand, are described as follows:

> Her letters back to her husband (treasured as fondly by him as if they had been *M. T. Ciceronis Epistolae*) were more satisfactory to an absent husband and father than his could ever have been to her.[17]

As the ideal woman and mother, she spoke of the progress in their children's education and her charity activities for the parish poor, also trying now and then, and usually in vain, to get instructions concerning the house management. According to the practical Mary Smith, all these topics make her letters much more interesting than the lofty ones from her husband.

The contrasting nature in the two lovers' personalities and the change of the young vane Molly into a sensible and responsible mother that emerges from these letters might have some biographical tinges. About twenty years earlier, in Knutsford, incidentally, the town that served as a model for Cranford, Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson, aged 21, had married William Gaskell, a 27-year-old Unitarian minister who was renowned for being an eloquent preacher. The young Elizabeth, whom her aunt Lumb had described as ''a little giddy thoughtless thing,"[18] found herself the wife of the second minister of Manchester's Cross Street Chapel. In the letter addressed to William's sister, Eliza, which scholars have named "the Gaskells' joint engagement letter" because made up of two halves each written by one of the lovers, emerges, in fact, a discrepancy between the two that recalls the one between the Jenkinses. D'Albertis comments on the letter as follows:

> Elizabeth writes to her future sister-in-law with haste and typical irreverence, ''I can't write a word more now, seeing I have things to say to this disagreeable brother of

[16] Gaskell, *Cranford,* 84.

[17] See note 16 above.

[18] The complete sentence by Mrs Lumb and reported by Chapple, confirms the apparent incompatibility between Elizabeth and William: ", "Why Elizabeth how could this man ever take a fancy to such a little giddy thoughtless thing as you!". See J. A. V. Chapple, *Elizabeth Gaskell : The Early Years* (Manchester ; New York : Manchester University Press ; New York : Distributed exclusively in the USA by St. Martin's Press, 1997), 419. http://archive.org/details/elizabethgaskell0000chap.

> yours'' (L, 2). William, on the other hand, decorously alludes to the ''still more lovely and endearing light'' in which he regards his future bride after their first visit together to Knutsford. The experience, he writes, has served ''to knit our souls together.''William's gravity had the general effect of strengthening the seriousness latent in his wife's character, even as her playfulness caused him, however slightly, to unbend.[19]

Both in real and fictional scenarios then, love letters, which theoretically were aimed at uniting a couple, at the same time highlighted differences that were probably more evident by external readers than by the directly involved ones.

Another aspect worth noticing in this episode is that the correspondence is described not only in terms of its content but also from the material point of view. From the writing hand to the letter paper, the franking and the seal, nothing escapes the attention of the careful reporter, Mary Smith:

> The rector's letters, and those of his wife and mother-in-law, had all been tolerably short and pithy, written in a straight hand, with the lines very close together. Sometimes the whole letter was contained on a mere scrap of paper. The paper was very yellow, and the ink very brown; some of the sheets were (as Miss Matty made me observe) the old original post, with the stamp in the corner representing a post-boy riding for life and twanging his horn. The letters of Mrs. Jenkyns and her mother were fastened with a great round red wafer; for it was before Miss Edgeworth's Patronage had banished wafers from polite society. It was evident, from the tenor of what was said, that franks were in great request, and were even used as a means of paying debts by needy members of Parliament. The rector sealed his epistles with an immense coat of arms, and showed by the care with which he had performed this ceremony that he expected they should be cut open, not broken by any thoughtless or impatient hand. Now, Miss Jenkyns's letters were of a later date in form and writing. She wrote on the square sheet which we have learned to call old-fashioned. Her hand was admirably calculated, together with her use of many-syllabled words, to fill up a sheet, and then came the pride and delight of crossing.[20]

This accurate description also emphasises the idea of the passing of time and the changes that it has brought about. The paper and ink have taken on the patina of time (they are yellow and brown); some of the letters were sealed with a wafer and therefore were not contained in an envelope, which was introduced in the middle of the century; they had the watermark of the postboy rather than the stamp bearing the queen's effigy; and finally, a reference to the high cost of postages is made when it is hinted that, at the time when those letters were sent, Members of Parliaments paid their debts by transferring their franking privileges to creditors (see Chapter 2).

---

[19] Deirdre D'Albertis, "The life and letters of E. C. Gaskell" in Matus, *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell,* 19.

[20] Gaskell, *Cranford,* 87.

All these pre-postal-reform details contribute to throwing into relief the complexity of this epistolary chapter: the letters were written between 1774 (love letters between William and Molly before their marriage) and the first decades of 1800 (Deborah's letters and Peter's letters from school), and they presumably were read for the first time by their internal readers short after their composition. An intermediate temporal level is introduced between this first reading and that of Miss Matty's when Deborah has tied and labelled the letters. However, the "now" of the narration, when Mary sees and reports about the scene, is presumably the early 1840s (it is specified that the letters were about 70/80 years old). Finally, we may also add that when the novel was published in instalments between 1852-54, yet another temporal level was added, that of the extradiegetic or external target readers of Gaskell's novels.

Two of the three main characteristics of the epistolary discourse identified by Altman concerned the time (while the first was the I/you relationship, see Chapter 1): one is that the present tense of a letter is a pivot for past and future, the other is what Alton calls the "temporal polyvalence" of an epistolary act, which perfectly helps to explain the use of the epistolary discourse that Gaskell made here:

> The temporal aspect of any given epistolary statement is relative to innumerable moments: the actual time that an act described is performed; the moment when it is written down; the respective times that the letter is dispatched, received, read, or reread. (Such time lags distinguish epistolary from theatrical dialogue.)[21]

Even though the letters are not embedded in the narration, the "epistolarity" of the episode remains quite powerful from the temporal point of view.

The last aspect to consider concerning this fictional example that has been overlooked so far is the disposal of the old letters, their burning. Miss Matty explains that she wants to burn her parents' letters because they,

> had been only interesting to those who loved the writers, and that it seemed as if it would have hurt her to allow them to fall into the hands of strangers, who had not known her dear mother, and how good she was, although she did not always spell quite in the modern fashion.[22]

However, as Jolly suggests,[23] there are reasons to be skeptical about her excuse that no one will care for those letters once she is gone. Her sister Deborah's letters, for instance, are deemed by Miss Matty much superior as "any one might profit by reading them". She even disregards her

[21] Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ Pr, 1982), 118.
[22] Gaskell, *Cranford,* 71.
[23] Margaretta Jolly, 'On Burning, Saving and Stealing Letters', in *New Formations,* Summer 2009, no. 67, 25.

"candle economy" by having a second candle lit in order to see them better and not stumble "on the big words" while reading them all aloud. Nevertheless, although "Miss Matty did grudge burning these letters",[24] she still burned them all the same, which speaks volumes of the true meaning of that action. Miss Matty may have destroyed those papers more in an attempt to psychologically distance herself from the control of those who wrote them rather than the wish to destroy boring reading material.

In the previous chapter, Miss Matty had met Mr Holbrook, the man she loved when she was young, but her family had not considered suitable, being a farmer, to the rector's daughter. In the end, she had to reject him because, after the scandal concerning her brother, like her sister Deborah, she did not want to leave her father alone in such a difficult time. At the time of Mary's narration, after Deborah's death, Miss Matty meets Mr Holbrook again and even visits him in his house with his cousin Miss Pole. However, she also loses him definitely, for an illness that he has contracted during a trip to Paris. The day Mary comes back to Cranford after a time with her father, she is informed by Miss Pole of Thomas Holbrook's illness and finds Miss Matty depressed and with a strong headache:

> She came into the drawing-room at tea-time, but it was evidently an effort to her; and, as if to make up for some reproachful feeling against her late sister, Miss Jenkyns, which had been troubling her all the afternoon, and for which she now felt penitent, she kept telling me how good and how clever Deborah was in her youth; how she used to settle what gowns they were to wear at all the parties (faint, ghostly ideas of grim parties, far away in the distance, when Miss Matty and Miss Pole were young!); and how Deborah and her mother had started the benefit society for the poor, and taught girls cooking and plain sewing ; and how Deborah had once danced with a lord; and how she used to visit at Sir Peter Arley's, and try to remodel the quiet rectory establishment on the plans of Arley Hall, where they kept thirty servants; and how she had nursed Miss Matty through a long, long illness, of which I had never heard before, but which I now dated in my own mind as following the dismissal of the suit of Mr. Holbrook.[25]

Despite all her amiability, it is suggested that Miss Matty could not help feeling some grudge against that family and that sister who had made her take a decision about Mr Holbrook that she later has repented, and she obviously feels the need to make amend for her rancour by listing all the good things that that sister and her mother had done in their life.

Along with the final moment in this chapter where Miss Matty finally allows her maid, Martha, to have a follower, something that Deborah had always strictly forbidden, this passage

[24] Gaskell, *Cranford,* 86.
[25] Gaskell, *Cranford,* 72.

gives a possible key to that burning of letters. Miss Matty did love and respect her sister and family, but now she is alone, she feels the need to distance herself from them. As Margaretta Jolly points out, "Matty's merging of person with letter is obvious as she ritually drops the papers into the middle of the fire".[26] Mary describes the scene as follows:

> And one by one she dropped them into the middle of the fire, watching each blaze up, die out, and rise away, in faint, white, ghostly semblance, up the chimney, before she gave another to the same fate.[27]

There has been disagreement between critics on the interpretation of this episode. Some, for instance, see this fire as the *mise-en-scène* of the death of the letter. "Letters", claims Favret, "with all their emotional power and binding force, are sacrificed to the flames".[28] Mirella Billi,[29] echoing Favret, interprets the episode as the image of the decline and death of the personal private letter, which reflects a general reconstructing of society in the nineteenth century.

Others, like Maragetta Jolly, conversely points out that "Nowhere is the vitality of a letter clearer than when it is burned" and that "the burning of posthumous letters evokes acts of cremation, releasing the spirit from the writer's material remains." Jolly also recollects how "Franz Kafka begged for all his letters to be burned after his death precisely because he feared their power to keep him alive in a ghostly hinterland." Later in this chapter, more examples of fictional burning of letters will confirm Miss Matty's view of the burning as an extreme attempt (not always successful) to put an end to the influence that the writers of the letters had on their recipients.

Another scholar who supplies a metaphorical interpretation to Miss Matty's bonfire is Richard Menke, who sees it as a sort of symbolic passage from the old mode of letter writing and reading, to the new Victorian communication system based on technological and material innovations which will lead to the disembodying of the text with telegraph and telephone:

> In essence, however, *Cranford* has hardly annihilated those letters but only signaled a change in their mode of being. As they burn, the text achieves a deft sublation, canceling their physical existence at the moment that it reveals their contents and incorporates those contents into *Cranford*'s narrative itself; the long-frozen flow of manly passions onto paper becomes a new flow of tears from Matty and Mary as well as a flow of nostalgic particulars into the tale. Mimetically destroyed, the letters

---

[26] 'On Burning, Saving and Stealing Letters'.

[27] Gaskell, *Cranford,* 81.

[28] Mary A. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence : Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.202.

[29] Mirella Billi, 'Victorian Letters: Bad, Mad and Dangerous to read', in M. Costantini, F. Marroni, and A.E. Soccio, *Letter(s): Functions and Forms of Letter-Writing in Victorian Art and Literature*, Scienze Dell'antichità, Filologico-Letterarie e Storico-Artistiche (Aracne, 2009).

> become diegetically accessible. Surrendering their imaginary physicality, the words diffuse into the text as something more or less than mere letters, a "ghostly semblance" of themselves with far-reaching properties. At the moment of their loss as material objects, the letters of Cranford release vicarious history into the text and become information.[30]

On the other hand, considered in its entirety, *Cranford* seems to be pervaded by such an exaltation of the power of letters that it makes it hard to believe in the first interpretation. Besides the many letters mentioned and the episode just analysed, there is one point in particular in which this exaltation is clearly worded. By reading that old correspondence, Mary learns about "poor Peter", Deborah and Mathilda's brother, who left the town when he was young and was never heard of ever since. Peter had a "wild" personality and often challenged the sense of propriety of the little country town with practical jokes. When he dressed up as his sister Deborah pretending to nurse a baby in his garden, he enraged his father so much that he beat him in front of the crowd of curious spectators attracted by the scene. Peter, humiliated, left Cranford to work onboard a ship that was leaving Liverpool for India. The ship captain wrote a letter to Peter's parents to inform them of their departure and summon them to say goodbye to their son, but the missive was "detained somewhere, somehow". On receiving the letter, the family, in despair for the loss of their boy, rushed to Liverpool to forgive Peter, ask him to forgive them, and beg him to go back home. When they arrived, though, the ship had already left. Less than a year later, their mother died of a broken heart, and just the day after that, a parcel from India arrived with an Indian white shawl for her. Peter came home sometime later as a lieutenant and made up with his father but then went to sea again and was believed killed in battle.

After hearing this story and connecting it with Signora Brunoni's tale involving an "Aga Jenkyns" met in India, Mary writes a letter to this mysterious person to check if he is Miss Matty's brother. Wishing to do something to help her friend in her financial crisis, Mary puts her storytelling and letter writing ability into action. The letter she writes is not revealed to the reader, but she informs us that it is "a letter which should affect him if he were Peter, and yet seem a mere statement of dry facts if he were a stranger"[31]. As Carse puts it, "Mary seems to recognise this power of letters to provoke a reaction when she drops her in the post"[32]:

> I dropped it in the post on my way home, and then for a minute I stood looking at the wooden pane with a gaping slit which divided me from the letter but a moment ago

[30] Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems*, 1st edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2007), 252.

[31] Gaskell, *Cranford,* 238.

[32] Carse, 'A Penchant for Narrative', 321.

> in my hand. It was gone from me like life, never to be recalled. It would get tossed about on the sea, and stained with sea-waves perhaps, and be carried among palm-trees, and scented with all tropical fragrance; the little piece of paper but an hour ago so familiar and commonplace, had set out on its race to the strange wild countries beyond the Ganges![33]

This small object that is about to cross the sea and reach a person on the other side of the planet will resolve a situation caused somehow by the late arrival of another letter, the captain's missive to Peter's parents, incidentally, delayed by the unreliable pre-reform postal system. As Glovinsky points out, if in the 1820s a letter could take up to one year to reach India through the East India Company shipping routes, in the 1860s, "thanks largely to the steam engine and increased postal organisation, the overland mail route had cut down that time to a month, and was far more secure".[34] If we may suppose that the shawl Peter sent to his mother has had a long and hazardous journey which made it reach home after her death, years later Mary's letter is imagined as undisturbed and fast ("on its race") in its route to its destination. As a matter of fact, the letter will get to its addressee and guarantee the novel's happy ending.

Returning to the theme of the burning of love letters, Kafka's reference from Margaretta Jolly's article quoted above, despite belonging to a different context and time, suggests that the burning of letters was not limited to the fictional world. The most famous examples of these "bonfires" are certainly those that involved well-known artists or literary men and women. Scholars and readers alike are in constant search of personal documents which may shed light on the events of their lives and consequently their works. For instance, the fact that Jane Austen's sister Cassandra burnt most of her 3000 letters and that only about 160 were saved is deeply deplored by the academic world and her readership, equally curious about the development of her writing style as well as her sentimental experiences. In 1860 Dickens himself made a bonfire of the many letters received from the greatest literary and social figures of the nineteenth century, and after that date, he burnt his correspondence routinely. He describes that moment in a letter to William Henry Wills, the sub-editor of Household Words,

> Yesterday I burnt, in the field at Gad's Hill, the accumulated letters and papers of twenty years. They set up a smoke like the genie when he got out of the casket on the seashore; and as it was an exquisite day when I began, and rained very heavily

[33] Gaskell, *Cranford,* 241.

[34] Will Glovinsky, 'Unfeeling Omniscience: Empire and Distant Intimacy in Vanity Fair', *ELH* 87, no. 1 (2020): 91–120, 94, https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2020.0003.

> when I finished, I suspect my correspondence of having overcast the face of the heavens.[35]

Later that year, in a letter to his friend, the actor William Charles Macready, he spoke about the subject in more serious terms:

> Daily seeing improper uses made of confidential letters in the addressing of them to a public audience that have no business with them, I made not long ago a great fire in my field at Gad's Hill, and burnt every letter I possessed. And now I always destroy every letter I receive not on absolute business, and my mind is so far at ease.[36]

This statement reminds what was discussed in Chapter 3 about the letters exposed in court. It also recalls the declaration by the lawyer protagonist of Wilkie Collins's *The Fourth Poor Traveller* (1854)[37] and also quoted in the third chapter, who says that if everybody burnt other people's letters, the Court of Justice could well close.

A great friend of Dickens's (he had written many of the letters that were burnt at Gad's Hill), Collins supported this idea in other works and short stories of his. Lewis even wonders whether the fact that Dickens's bonfire of letters happened only some weeks after the publication of a famous scene of letter burning in *The Woman in White* (1859-1860) on *Household Words* is purely coincidental.[38]

Wilkie Collins is another novelist who made full use of letters, both as "objects in the texts" and "texts in the texts" in his works.[39] On the one hand, as a sensational writer indebted to the Gothic tradition, he avails himself of manuscript letters and documents to create suspense, often playing with the shift between letter and litter[40] and dealing with its legal aspects. On the other, his multivoiced narratives, based on written testimony, diaries, personal missives and buried manuscripts, have been seen as his elaborate response to, and treatment of, modern subjectivity and forms of knowledge as much as experiments in genre.[41] As Costantini suggests,

---

[35] To W.H. Wills, 4 September 1860, PILGRIM IX 304, quoted in Paul Lewis, "The Inimitable Becomes the Inimical: Dickens's bonfire destroys literary heritage" accessed 13 December, 2021. http://www.web40571.clarahost.co.uk/wilkie/Burning/burn.htm

[36] To W C Macready, 1 March 1865, quoted in Paul Lewis, "The Inimitable Becomes the Inimical: Dickens's bonfire destroys literary heritage" accessed 13 December, 2021. http://www.web40571.clarahost.co.uk/wilkie/Burning/burn.htm

[37] Also entitled *The stolen letter*.

[38] Paul Lewis, "Burning: The evidence. The Dickensian. 2004;100(464):197-208,196, https://www.proquest.com, accessed 08 December, 2021.

[39] Jenny Bourne Taylor, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521840384.

[40] Kirstin Johnson, 'When "Letter" Becomes "Litter" : The (de)Construction of the Message from Ann Radcliffe to Wilkie Collins', *Caliban* 15, no. 1 (2004): 153–62, https://doi.org/10.3406/calib.2004.1513.

[41] Taylor, *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins, 4*.

> The distress caused by the constant shifting of their [Note: the Victorians'] points of reference (social, economic, ethical, aesthetic, and metaphysical ones) led many writers to view their condition in terms of communicative failure or distortion.[42]

Collins may have found in the fragmentation of the narration and the shift of the point of view a formal way to represent the instability of his constantly changing age.

Furthermore, it was the nature itself of the sensation novel, a genre that merged the Gothic with the realistic, that perfectly accommodated the letter within its plots. As an object highly familiar to readers that, in novels, bypass the mediation of the narrator, the letter had always carried realistic connotations. However, at the same time, it was also a potential bearer of dangerous secrets whose revelation could compromise the writer's reputation and life, and therefore it proved to be an ideal component of the novels belonging to this genre. From the most acclaimed *The Woman in White* and M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) to the less famous *The White Phantom* (M.E. Braddon, 1862-63) and the many sensation short stories published in newspapers, this kind of fiction abounded with letters of every kind. Furthermore, when the uncanny enters the sitting room of the well-off middle class, even the love letter that writing manuals presented as the foundation of a marriage-oriented relationship based on the ideal of domesticity become something to be afraid of.

The fictional burning of a letter in *The Woman in White*[43] mentioned above, which Lewis refers to as a possible inspiration for Dickens's real bonfire, is the first case of this kind from Collins's production considered here. At the beginning of this intricated novel, where the narration unfolds through a series of 'witness' statements from various characters, Walter Hartright, a drawing teacher, takes on a position as a private tutor of two orphaned young half-sisters. Here, he slowly falls in love with one of them, Laura, the heir to the property, who loves him back, but is faithful to the promise made to her dying father to marry the noble, albeit ambiguous, Sir Percival Glyde.

Laura receives a mysterious letter that warns her against her betrothed, so Walter, with the support of Laura's sister, Marian Halcombe, starts investigating the matter to try to save his beloved from a marriage that would make her unhappy. Meanwhile, he meets the mysterious

---

[42] Costantini Mariaconcetta, "Strategies of Letter Manipulation in Wilkie Collins" in M. Costantini, F. Marroni, and A.E. Soccio, *Letter(s): Functions and Forms of Letter-Writing in Victorian Art and Literature*, Scienze Dell'antichità, Filologico-Letterarie e Storico-Artistiche (Aracne, 2009), 107 .

[43] All quotations from *The Woman in White* are from Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White,* (London: Smith, Elder & Co.,1871) https://archive.org/details/womaninwhite02collgoog

Anne Catherick, who is oddly very similar to Laura and always wears white clothes but does not find anything against Sir Percival. When Laura finally decides to marry Glyde, Walter, heartbroken, resolves to leave England and join an archaeological expedition to Central America. On this occasion, he writes a letter to Marian expressing all his love for her sister that Marian decides to burn:[44]

> I almost doubt whether I ought not to go a step farther, and burn the letter at once, for fear of its one day falling into wrong hands. It not only refers to Laura in terms which ought to remain a secret for ever between the writer and me, but it reiterates his suspicion—so obstinate, so unaccountable, and so alarming—that he has been secretly watched since he left Limmeridge. [...] "The mystery of Anne Catherick is not cleared up yet. She may never cross my path again, but if ever she crosses yours, make better use of the opportunity, Miss Halcombe, than I made of it. I speak on strong conviction—I entreat you to remember what I say." These are his own expressions. There is no danger of my forgetting them—my memory is only too ready to dwell on any words of Hartright's that refer to Anne Catherick. But there is danger in my keeping the letter. The merest accident might place it at the mercy of strangers. I may fall ill—I may die. Better to burn it at once, and have one anxiety the less.[45]

The letter is dangerous for two reasons: on the one side, it reveals Hartright's true feelings for Laura, so it might damage her reputation once she is a married woman; on the other side, it discloses his suspects about her aristocratic fianceè as well as his link to the mysterious Anne Cartright. Marian burns the letter to make sure nobody will ever read it, but (as will happen also in the following example from another of Collins's works), she does not believe that that act will really put an end to the events:

> It is burnt. The ashes of his farewell letter—the last he may ever write to me—lie in a few black fragments on the hearth. Is this the sad end to all that sad story? Oh, not the end—surely, surely not the end already![46]

Marian will prove right, and the fact that the letter has been turned into ashes does not put an end to the presence of Walter in their lives. Quite on the contrary, he will come back and help her rescue Laura from the asylum where she has been closed as Anne Cartright (who has died) and frame Sir Percival and his friend Count Fosco by blackmailing them.

A second bonfire of love letters by a Wilkie Collins's character comes from the most horrific of his short stories, *The Haunted Hotel: a Mystery of Modern Venice* [47](1878). Published at the end

---

[44] For this reason it has been included in this section about the burning of love letters. It might have not been addressed to the beloved, because Walter knew that doing this would have upset her, but it may considered a love letter all the same.

[45] Collins, *The Woman in White,* 140.

[46] See note 43 above.

of the period under exam, this ghost story includes gruesome elements like a body melted in chemicals and a severed head appearing in a haunted hotel room at night. At the beginning of this novella, Lord Montbarry breaks off his engagement with Agnes Lockwood, a virtuous and beautiful woman, to marry the fascinating but obscure Contessa Narona. The Countess is then forced by her brother, the evil Baron Rivar, who has a passion for chemistry and gambling, to take part in a plan to kill (and melt in acid) Lord Montbarry himself while defrauding the insurance company to obtain his life insurance money. They replace Montbarry, whom nobody knows as they are staying abroad, with their sick courier Mr Ferrari, the husband of a former maid to Agnes Lockwood.

All this happens mainly within the background of an old palace in Venice that is refurbished and turned into a hotel for the well-off during the story. In the room where Montbarry slept, and his head is conserved in an old secret hiding place (it could not be melted with the rest of the body as the Baron burnt his hands while performing the task), three members of his family happen to sleep on the occasion of a family reunion. The three of them experience nightmares, horrible smells, and insomnia on the night of their stay. However, it is Agnes, Montbarry's former fianceè who has never stopped loving him, the only one person who sees the ghost of Montbarry's head in the room and helps his brother Harry Westwick understand what really happened to him. The Countess, on her part, gets mad for the sense of guilt and, before dying, writes a play entitled *The Haunted Hotel* where she reports the exact circumstances of the murder of her husband and the disappearance of Ferrari.

This is, in short, the plot of *The Haunted Hotel*, but let us focus on the episode of the burning of letters. On the day of Montbarry's marriage with Contessa Narona, Agnes, unhappy and alone in her room, tears up and burns the letters that Lord Montbarry sent to her during their affair in order to forget him and her past hopes for a life together. However, as the reader will find out, that bonfire will clearly prove ineffective. The scene of the burning is described thoroughly by the narrator, and it is interrupted by the arrival of Henry, Lord Montbarry's brother, who has always been in love with Agnes:

> There were none of the ordinary signs of grief in her face, as she slowly tore the letters of her false lover in two, and threw the pieces into the small fire which had been lit to consume them. […]
>
> Pale and quiet, with cold trembling fingers, she destroyed the letters one by one without daring to read them again. She had torn the last of the series, and was still

[47] All quotations from *The Haunted Hotel* are from Wilkie Collins, *The Haunted Hotel: a Mystery of Modern Venice,* (London : Chatto & Windus, 1879) https://archive.org/details/hauntedhotelmyst00coll/page/4/mode/2up.

> shrinking from throwing it after the rest into the swiftly destroying flame, when the old nurse came in […]
>
> He entered the room so rapidly that he surprised her in the act of throwing the fragments of Montbarry's last letter into the fire. […] he pointed to the flaming letter, and to some black ashes of burnt paper lying lightly in the lower part of the fireplace. 'Are you burning letters?' 'Yes.' 'His letters?' 'Yes.' He took her hand gently. 'I had no idea I was intruding on you, at a time when you must wish to be alone. Forgive me, Agnes— I shall see you when I return.' She signed to him, with a faint smile, to take a chair. 'We have known one another since we were children,' she said. 'Why should I feel a foolish pride about myself in your presence? why should I have any secrets from you? I sent back all your brother's gifts to me some time ago. I have been advised to do more, to keep nothing that can remind me of him— in short, to burn his letters. I have taken the advice; but I own I shrank a little from destroying the last of the letters. No— not because it was the last, but because it had this in it.' She opened her hand, and showed him a lock of Montbarry's hair, tied with a morsel of golden cord. 'Well! well! let it go with the rest.'[48]

The last lines, in which a part of Montbarry's physical body, a lock of his hair, is burnt along with his letters, strengthens the early modern idea of the letter as the human body, not very different from the one underpinning the description of Miss Matty's bonfire using terms like "die out" and "ghostly semblance." The letter, as Jolly suggests, recalls the legal but also the physical presence of its writer so

> literary and personal narratives of epistolary burning, like the idiom of perfume, tears, inkblot and even blood, symbolise more perverse and primitive systems in which the mortal and sexual body is exchanged. Just as people cherish or even kiss the letter from a loved one, they destroy it because of its vital, often sexual, trace.[49]

However, soon after burning the letters, Agnes wonders about the effectiveness of that act and reveals her doubts to Henry:

> I have destroyed the last visible things that remind me of him. In this world I shall see him no more. But is the tie that once bound us, completely broken? Am I as entirely parted from the good and evil fortune of his life as if we had never met and never loved?[50]

As the story unfolds, the reader is confirmed that her suspects were right. Although the destruction of the letter is twofold, as it is first torn into pieces and only then burnt, its physical destruction does not serve its purpose. Agnes is the only person to see the ghost of Montbarry's head because her bond to him, as Henry suggests, is still stronger than that of the rest of the family. She feels that connection herself:

---

[48] Collins, *The Haunted Hotel: a mystery of the Modern Venice*, 16-17.
[49] Jolly, 26.
[50] Collins, *The Haunted Hotel: a mystery of the Modern Venice*, 18.

> Remembering what your brother and I once were to each other in the bygone time, I can understand the apparition making itself visible to me, to claim the mercy of Christian burial, and the vengeance due to a crime.[51]

The novelist does not need to reveal the exact content of those burnt love letters to make the reader appreciate the deep connection they created between the two lovers. In one of his letters to his wife in which he tells about his life abroad at the service of Lord Montbarry, Ferrari, speaking of his master, says:

> “He is becoming incurably restless. I suspect he is uneasy in his mind. Painful recollections, I should say— I find him constantly reading old letters, when her ladyship is not present.”[52]

Although it is never confirmed, the reader has good reason to deduce that those old letters associated with “painful recollections” must be the letters that Agnes sent to Montbarry. He has not burnt them, and now they make him regret his decision to reject Agnes for the Countess.

It will be the burning of another manuscript, however, that will put this ghastly story to an end. In her madness caused by the sense of guilt, the Countess writes a play explaining what has really happened at the palace in Venice. The manuscript, which bears some resemblance to a letter as it is destined to the third Westwick brother who manages a theatre in London and therefore contains several addresses to him, is then burnt by the brother who has inherited the title of Lord Montbarry:

> Lord Montbarry quietly took up the manuscript, and threw it into the fire. ‘Let this rubbish be of some use,’ he said, holding the pages down with the poker. ‘The room is getting chilly—the Countess’s play will set some of these charred logs flaming again.’ [...] So Lord Montbarry disposed of the mystery of The Haunted Hotel.[53]

The scene was also the subject of the last of the six illustrations created by Arthur Hopkins for the serialised version of the novella on the magazine Belgravia (1878) and its volume edition (1979). The moment is considered the denouement of the novella as after “disposing” of the mystery of the hunted hotel by burning the play and rejecting all the supernatural components from its narrative, the new Lord Montbarry informs Henry that Agnes is finally willing to marry him.

---

[51] Collins, *The Haunted Hotel: a mystery of the Modern Venice*, 107.
[52] Collins, *The Haunted Hotel: a mystery of the Modern Venice*, 26.
[53] Collins, *The Haunted Hotel: a mystery of the Modern Venice*, 125.

The theme of the burnt manuscript was popular in the Gothic literature of the previous century, with which Wilkie Collins was certainly indebted. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), for example, the main character, Emily St Aubert, is asked by her dying father to burn, without reading them, some secret papers that are hidden under a floorboard in his room at their family house. When she goes back home (he father dies during a trip abroad), Emily burns the papers but cannot help reading a "sentence of dreadful import" that will never be revealed to the reader and yet will haunt her throughout the rest of the novel.

In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, like in *The Haunted Hotel*, then, what Johnson calls the "litterification" of the letter, that is the transformation of a letter into litter, is not enough to affect the power of the written word:

> The play will continue to live on in the mind of the person who burned it and who knows that others would have been interested in its contents, which were far from worthless.[54]

The last example of a burnt letter considered here comes from a novel that chronologically precedes those discussed so far, and yet it is so peculiar to deserve a separate mention. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*[55] (1848) confirms the general mid-Victorian trend to pass over the exact content of love letters but still make them central in the development of the plots and characters.

Although it includes many personal missives of various lengths, from the wordy ones Becky writes to Amelia about her new life at Queen's Crawley to shorter messages like that from Becky to Mrs Briggs announcing her marriage to Rawdon Crawley, no love letters are embedded in the narration. Even the message shown to Amelia in the last pages, the note George wrote to Becky on the night before Waterloo and in which he proposes her to elope with him, is only described in a few words by the narrator.[56] The moment in which this letter is read deserved for the novelist to be rendered in an illustration (Fig. 40): after all, it has an important role in Amelia's decision to finally marry Captain Dobbin. And yet, its words remain undisclosed.

Another example of love letters mentioned but not embedded is the correspondence between George Osborne and Amelia Sedley. The sarcastic narrator justifies his omission on the

---

[54] Kirstin Johnson, 'When "Letter" Becomes "Litter": The (de)Construction of the Message from Ann Radcliffe to Wilkie Collins', *Caliban* 15, no. 1 (2004): 153–62, 157 https://doi.org/10.3406/calib.2004.1513.

[55] All quotations from *Vanity Fair* are from William Thackeray and Peter L. Shillingsburg, *Vanity Fair*, Critical edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995).

[56] "You know his handwriting. He wrote that to me—wanted me to run away with him—gave it me under your nose the day before he was shot—and served him right!" Becky repeated. Emmy did not hear her; she was looking at the letter. It was that which George had put into the bouquet and given to Becky on the night of the Duchess of Richmond's ball. It was as she said: the foolish young man had asked her to fly." Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 680.

ground of these letters being “short and soldierlike”[57], those by Osborne, or too long, those by Amelia:

> [...] were Miss Sedley’s letters to Mr. Osborne to be published, we should have to extend this novel to such a multiplicity of volumes as not the most sentimental reader could support; that she not only filled sheets of large paper, but crossed them with the most astonishing perverseness; that she wrote whole pages out of poetry-books without the least pity; that she underlined words and passages with quite a frantic emphasis; and, in fine, gave the usual tokens of her condition. She wasn’t a heroine. Her letters were full of repetition. She wrote rather doubtful grammar sometimes, and in her verses took all sorts of liberties with the metre. But oh, mesdames, if you are not allowed to touch the heart sometimes in spite of syntax, and are not to be loved until you all know the difference between trimeter and tetrameter, may all Poetry go to the deuce, and every schoolmaster perish miserably![58]

The narrative description itself mirrors the features of the letters: Osborne’s messages are dismissed with a few words while Amelia's are dealt with in a detailed digression. This disparity between the two styles alone (a recurring motif in other novels considered), to use the same image as Thakeray, speaks volumes about the relationship between the lovers. If, on the one side, Amelia dedicates all her efforts to the composition of letters and copying of poetry, albeit with scarce epistolary results, Osborne is described as “an obdurate critic” of those missives and is even ashamed to receive them in the presence of his fellow soldiers. He wishes to keep his engagement secret to his friends to be admired by them as a “regular Don Giovanni”. For this reason, he will go as far as to commit what is here felt like the most horrible of the epistolary crimes: using one of Amelia’s love letters to light his cigar. The narrator stresses that “he was seen” doing that, and the reader may reasonably presume that George enacted that performance just to be seen, with the purpose to show his friends his lack of involvement in a relationship that embarrasses him.

Incidentally, the scene is witnessed by the readers too, as, although it is only hinted at in the text, it is the subject of an illustration (Fig.41). Unlike all the other bonfires discussed, in fact, the narrator does not linger on the details of the burning but only allude to it. However, the sentence is enlarged, almost as if it were seen through a microscope, or “exploded” into the illustration that perfectly conveys the purport of that gesture. The image, along with the pun of its title, “ardent love letters”, was likely to awaken a feeling of contempt in the reader not unlike the one experienced by Captain Dobbin on this occasion: “He [George] was seen lighting his cigar with one [of Amelia’s letters], to the horror of Captain Dobbin, who, it is my belief, would have given a

[57] Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 122.
[58] Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 123.

bank-note for the document". The focus of the narration here is not on the destruction or the writer of that message, as in other fictional examples, but on the meaning of that spiteful act.

Will Glovinsky, in an article on the omniscient narrator in *Vanity Fair*, gives a further reading to this episode. First of all, he sees the novel's beginning as a sort of "failed epistolary experiment"[59]. When Becky and Amelia separate making a vow of eternal friendship, the situation allows for a lengthy correspondence which seems to give the novel an epistolary direction. However, after some pages of letter writing, Thackeray seems to worry about the effects that the satirical tone he shares with Becky may have on the moralistic aspect of the novel:

> the epistolary chapter, bristling with irreverent witticisms, proves tonally destabilising because Becky's satire, though perhaps more vitriolic than the narrator's, clearly partakes of the same strain. After reproducing Becky's letters the narrator makes a notoriously ambiguous intrusion, "step[ping] down from the platform" to reassure readers that Becky's drollery is hers, not his. Like Plato, who favors the distancing third-person over dramatic mimesis when representing ignoble actions or characters, Thackeray finds that his dip into epistolarity threatens to collapse moral distinctions, and the narrative, after one more letter to Amelia in the chapter "Arcadian Simplicity," resumes its third-person omniscient mode.[60]

Another reason for the failure of this epistolary commencement of the novel lies, according to Glovinsky, in the fact that to create the impression of "almost excessive closeness of thought, experience and feeling" that works like *Pamela* or *Werther* arise in the external reader, the correspondents must share a certain understanding of each other. The distance is a geographical one "that is collapsible through the act of reading"[61]. On the contrary, Becky's sincere hints to her "scheming nature" and her "caustic sensibility" make the distance between the two characters a deeper one, and one that seems too obvious for Amelia not to see it.

Thackeray then drops the epistolary form and gives back the floor to that narrator who, as Ferris[62] suggests, with his conversational and personal tone, involves the readers to such an extent to make them almost characters. He can, therefore, "break down the barrier between fiction and life". Remarkably, this last quote referred to the third person narrator is often associated with the epistolary novel of the previous century, where the narrator did not mediate, and the reader accessed the characters' thoughts directly. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, then, for some novelists, the letter that in real life was promoted as the epitome of communication and

---

[59] Will Glovinsky, 'Unfeeling Omniscience: Empire and Distant Intimacy in Vanity Fair', *ELH* 87, no. 1 (2020): 91–120, https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2020.0003, 103.

[60] Glovinsky, 'Unfeeling Omniscience: Empire and Distant Intimacy in Vanity Fair',103.

[61] See note 58 above.

[62]Ina Ferris, "The Narrator of *Vanity Fair*", in William Thackeray and Peter L. Shillingsburg, *Vanity Fair*, Critical edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 856.

connections often became in fiction a symbol of their opposites: incommunicability and metaphorical distance.

According to Glovinsky, one of the novel's main features is, in fact, its dealing with what he calls "distant intimacy" or "epistolary distance". He associates this feeling with the epistolary culture produced by imperialistic mobility in a society devoted to domesticity. Over time, letters from the settlers in the colonies to their families in the home country, which contemporary painting continued to represent with romantic and sentimental tones (see Thomas Webster*, A letter from the Colonies*, 1852, Tate), acquired, in fact, almost perfunctory features. Their writing started to be seen as a moral duty connected to the idea of a united family, more than a pleasurable activity, as happens to William Dobbin in India:

> There on his table, his sister's letter lay reproaching him. He took it up, ashamed rather of his negligence regarding it, and prepared himself for a disagreeable hour's communing with that crabbed-handed absent relative. [63]

To demonstrate how Thackeray was conscious (and self-conscious) of this phenomenon, Glovinsky quotes an episode from his letters:

> A month before the first number of *Vanity Fair* appeared, William Makepeace Thackeray listened to his ten-year-old daughter read a letter aloud and promptly burst into tears. The writer of the letter, Thackeray's mother, was saddened that her grandchildren, after living with her for five years in Paris, had returned to their father in London. Her pain at the parting "brought back all sorts of early times" for Thackeray, who himself had been sent away by his mother from Calcutta to England as a child. As Thackeray broke down, however, he was unnerved to find that his daughter's eyes were "quite dry," leading him to tell his mother, with a strange mix of pathos and acidity, "They don't care: not even for you."[64]

Glovinsky claims that this aspect of "epistolary indifference" would have affected Thackeray's omniscient narrative style in *Vanity Fair*, and in the specific case of the love affair between George and Amelia, would have taken the epistolary form of the unreciprocated love.

Until now, this chapter has focused on literary examples of litterification of love letters in which the letter, for various reasons, ceases to exist altogether. However, this is not always the case. Instead, there are examples in which the litterified letter is rescued from its condition by an internal, non-intended reader and acquires new relevance within the plot.

---

[63] Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 438.

[64] Glovinsky, 'Unfeeling Omniscience: Empire and Distant Intimacy in Vanity Fair', 91.

A case in point can be found in another novel by Wilkie Collins included in our corpus, *Man and Wife*[65] (1870). As the title suggests, this is one of the works in which Collins explores the topic of marriage and challenges the accepted Victorian notion presented in Chapter 3. As Taylor puts it, works like *No Name* (1862) and *Miss or Mrs?* (1872), to name just a few others, "explore the grey areas created by shifting social and legal expectations about love, property and the domestic sphere."[66]

Collins's contemporaries did not appreciate the moralistic aim of this novel, which had the double intent to criticise the Irish and Scottish marriage law and the excessive athleticism that was accused of corrupting the minds of young people. An unsigned review published in the *Saturday Review* said that "If one moral is generally too much, two morals are surely unjustifiable. Mr. Collins might be content with assaulting, running and boat racing without breaking a lance at the same moment against all our marriage laws."[67] However, despite these direct attacks on institutions and fashions of the time, most Collins critics have agreed that the novelist's general positions regarding the critical themes of his time are never too radical. With marriage, like with gender, race, and madness, we find a "complex interplay of subversion and containment, critique and compromise" in his works.[68] Sometimes marriage is, therefore, a "site of conflict, confusion and intrigue" and sometimes a "means of resolution"[69]. The letter at the centre of *Man and Wife* has to be considered from this perspective.

The novel was initially conceived as a play and is therefore divided into 15 scenes. The first of these scenes, the prologue, takes place 15 years earlier than the main action when a married woman, Anne Silvester, sees her marriage annulled by her husband, who takes advantage of a loophole in the Irish marriage laws. The man aims to marry another woman who could help him enter the Parliament. These events foreshadow what will happen years later to this woman's daughter, also named Anne, who again will find herself in trouble because of the same confused Scottish matrimonial Law. *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction* summarises the plot as follows:

> Anne Silvester, a governess, has been seduced and made pregnant by a young aristocrat, Geoffrey Delamayn, a brute who cares for nothing but athletics. Anne

---

[65] All quotations from *Man and Wife* are from Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)

[66] Jenny Bourne Taylor, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 112.

[67] Norman Page, ed., *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, (Londona and New York: Routledge, 1974), 185.

[68] Bourne Taylor, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins,* 2.

[69] See note 65 above.

> cajoles Delamayn into spending the night with her at a nearby inn so as to make her his common-law wife. But on hearing that his father Lord Holchester is dying, Delamayn prevails on Arnold Brinkworth to go in his place. Arnold does so, and is falsely identified by the innkeeper as Anne's 'husband'. Lord Holchester recovers and insists that his wayward son marry an heiress, Mrs Glenarm. To do so, he disowns Anne, who bears a stillborn baby. Meanwhile, Arnold has married Anne's pupil and friend, Blanche Lundie. This match is declared bigamous when the affair at the Scottish inn becomes public knowledge. By virtue of an injudicious note Delamayn wrote [the Italics is mine], he in his turn is eventually forced to take the now unwilling Anne as his wife. He proceeds to lock her up in a secluded London mansion, under the custody of a homicidal housekeeper, Hester Dethridge. Delamayn dies of a stroke, while trying to smother Anne. She is reunited with her friends and marries Sir Patrick Lundie, who has been her ally throughout.[70]

The choice to report the entry of a standard reference book for Victorian fiction was motivated, rather than by the complexity of the plot (this is not one of the most intricated stories by Collins) by the intent to confirm, once again, how the conventional literary criticism has tended to overlook the epistolary aspects of XIX century novels. The "injudicious note" by Geoffrey Delamayn that is barely mentioned in the excerpt is, in fact, part of a letter that has a central role in the story's unfolding of a novel where, in general, letters seem to accompany every significant action and character.

For instance, the evil character, the gambler and athlete Geoffrey Delamayn, is said to hate letter-writing and composes only short and "Spartan" messages, one of which (the "injudicious note" mentioned above) will be nevertheless long enough to legally force him to an unwanted marriage. Chapter 14, in the Third Scene, is appropriately entitled "*Geoffrey as Letter-Writer*" and describes the crucial moment in which, after promising to marry Anne and dishonouring her, he arrives in London where his (apparently) dying father has ordered him to marry a wealthy heiress. He feels all the pressure of communicating the news to Anne and, despite all his athletic masculinity, his courage fails him. His vacillation about whether to write or not becomes here the almost existential dilemma, expressed in Hamletic terms, between doing what he should and what he wants to do:

> To write? or not to write? That was the question with Geoffrey. [...]
> The doubt lay, as usual, between two alternatives. Which course would it be wisest to take?—to inform Anne, by that day's post, that an interval of forty-eight hours must elapse before his father's recovery could be considered certain? Or to wait till the interval was over, and be guided by the result? Considering the alternatives in the cab, he decided that the wise course was to temporise with Anne, by reporting matters as they then stood.

---

[70] John Sutherland, *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction*, 2nd edition (Harlow, England ; New York: Routledge, 2009), 409.

> Arrived at the hotel, he sat down to write the letter—doubted—and tore it up—doubted again—and began again—doubted once more—and tore up the second letter—rose to his feet—and owned to himself (in unprintable language) that he couldn't for the life of him decide which was safest—to write or to wait.[71]

Obsessed as he is with physical activity, he postpones the decision and takes a long bath before doing some weightlifting in the public house where he usually trains. Later, while still there, he decides to write and then again, when the missive is ready to be despatched to the post, he reopens it, rereads it and tears it up before proceeding with a boxing session and finally a play at the theatre with some friends. "Write to Anne?" he concludes at the end of the chapter,

> Who but a fool would write to such a woman as that until he was forced to it? Wait and see what the chances of the next eight-and-forty hours might bring forth, and then write to her, or desert her, as the event might decide.[72]

The character's approach to letter writing becomes a sort of benchmark to judge his personality, and not only in the case of George. Arnold himself, Geoffrey's friend who truly love Blanche and risks his marriage and reputation for being involved in Geoffrey and Anne's secret schemes, more than once needs the help of others to write a letter, which mirrors his good but too ingenuous personality. When Sir Patrick dictates the letter to him to ask his solicitor to prepare a marriage settlement with Blanche, he reprimands him with the following words:

> Oh, the rising generation! Oh, the progress we are making in these enlightened modern times! There! there! you can marry Blanche, and make her happy, and increase the population—and all without knowing how to write the English language![73]

The written word also takes on scary shades in the character of the sinister cook Hester Dethridge. The woman, who initially is thought to be mute, is then revealed to have made a vow of silence after killing her husband. Hester only expresses herself through short but sharp messages written on the slate hanging at her side (defined by Geoffrey as an "infernal slate"), which often scares her interlocutors for their directness. Her blunt and honest writing style ("I keep nobody's secrets but my own"[74], she writes once) accompanied by "singularly firm upright characters for a woman in her position of life",[75] gives away her strong personality which led her to

[71] Collins, *Man and Wife,* 172.
[72] Collins, *Man and Wife,* 175.
[73] Collins, *Man and Wife,* 300.
[74] Collins, *Man and Wife,* 116.
[75] Collins, *Man and Wife,* 115.

rebel against her abusing husband by suffocating him in his bed. George will get hold of her written confession and blackmail her but will end himself a victim of her "fits".

Let us now focus on the "love letter" around which most of the action revolves. When Anne realises that Geoffrey is taking his distance from her after they have consummated their love and he has proposed, she writes him a letter to claim his promise. More than a love letter, then, this is the plea of a desperate woman who finds herself in the "fallen" condition so much stigmatised by Victorian society to the person who promised her eternal love:

> WINDYGATES HOUSE, August 12, 1868.
>
> "GEOFFREY DELAMAYN,—I have waited in the hope that you would ride over from your brother's place, and see me—and I have waited in vain. Your conduct to me is cruelty itself; I will bear it no longer. Consider! in your own interests, consider—before you drive the miserable woman who has trusted you to despair. You have promised me marriage by all that is sacred. I claim your promise. I insist on nothing less than to be what you vowed I should be—what I have waited all this weary time to be—what I am, in the sight of Heaven, your wedded wife. Lady Lundie gives a lawn-party here on the 14th. I know you have been asked. I expect you to accept her invitation. If I don't see you, I won't answer for what may happen. My mind is made up to endure this suspense no longer. Oh, Geoffrey, remember the past! Be faithful—be just—to your loving wife,
>
> ANNE SILVESTER.[76]

Nevertheless, Anne is not a passive victim and has conceived a plan. At the party held by Lady Lundie that she mentions in the letter, she invites Geoffrey to join her in a remote inn at Craig Fernie, where he will be presented to the owners as her husband. This, according to Scottish Law, will be enough to validate their marriage.

However, Geoffrey is called back to London because his father seems to be dying. At this point, he uses some blank space on the back of Anne's letter to pencil a note and inform her that although he cannot meet her, he still intends to marry her:

> DEAR ANNE,—Just called to London to my father. They have telegraphed him in a bad way. Stop where you are, and I will write you. Trust the bearer. Upon my soul, I'll keep my promise. Your loving husband that is to be,
> GEOFFREY DELAMAYN.
> WINDYGATES HOUSE, Augt. 14, 4 P. M. In a mortal hurry. Train starts at 4.30.[77]

---

[76] Collins, *Man and Wife,* 154.
[77] See note 74 above.

To make sure she receives the message timely and does not do anything reckless, Geoffrey sends his friend Arnold as a messenger to the inn. The owner, who should have been the unaware legal witness required by Law for this marriage, knowing that Anne is waiting for her spouse, takes Arnold for her husband, thus validating the wrong union. It is at this point of the story that, to use Johnson's periphrasis again, "the letter becomes litter". After reading Geoffrey's lines pencilled behind her own letter, Anne understands that her plan has failed and throws the letter away:

> She turned to the last page, and read the hurried penciled lines. "Villain! villain! villain!" At the third repetition of the word, she crushed the letter in the palm of her hand, and flung it from her to the other end of the room. The instant after, the fire that had flamed up in her died out. Feebly and slowly she reached out her hand to the nearest chair, and sat down in it with her back to Arnold. "He has deserted me!" was all she said. The words fell low and quiet on the silence: they were the utterance of an immeasurable despair.[78]

After that act of destruction, Anne feels the rage in her subside, as if cathartically its fire has extinguished with the destruction of that piece of paper, but only to leave her in despair. However, the mean and ignorant servant of the inn, Mr Bishopriggs, later notices that "morsel of crumpled paper, lying lost between the table and the wall" and hides it in his room, thinking it might turn useful.[79] It is when Mr Bishopriggs finally reads the letter that the extradiegetic reader is allowed to access the message too for the first time. As if we were spying behind the old servant's back, we are sharing his condition of non-intended reader.

It is worth noticing that quite exceptionally in the corpus considered, the letter is embedded in the novel twice. The repetition may depend on the novel's length and the novelist's wish not to force his readers to go back to look for the letter to review its content. This search, in fact, might have been quite difficult, especially in the case of the serialised edition and the three-decker one. However, this is also a reminder of the centrality of that missive within the plot that, as we have seen, is not even mentioned, if not briefly and partially, in some of its summaries.

Going back to Mr Bishopriggs's use of the letter, the man, whom the inn's owner describes as "a man who was not to be trusted to respect any letters or papers that happened to pass through his hands",[80] menaces to expose Anne's secret to Geoffrey's wealthy future wife.

[78] Collins, *Man and Wife,* 128.
[79] Collins, *Man and Wife,* 135.
[80] Collins, *Man and Wife,* 265.

However, Anne finds him and wins her battle with him by deconstructing the value of the letter he has in his hands:

> If you choose to own the truth, and produce the letter," she resumed, "I will give you this, as your reward for finding, and restoring to me, something that I had lost. If you persist in your present prevarication, I can, and will, make that sheet of note-paper you have stolen from me nothing but waste paper in your hands. You have threatened Mrs. Glenarm with my interference. Suppose I go to Mrs. Glenarm? Suppose I interfere before the week is out? Suppose I have other letters of Mr. Delamayn's in my possession, and produce them to speak for me? What has Mrs. Glenarm to purchase of you then? Answer me that![81]

This time Anne decides not to destroy the letter, and she will use it to force Geoffrey to marry her. His written intention to make of her his wife at the precise time and place specified in his note (that Arnold suggested Geoffrey should add, unaware of the importance it will acquire legally) will nail him to his duty during a sort of mock trial that takes place at Lady Lundie's, where everything had started. The letter that became litter has turned into a letter again thanks to a "discerned and discerning reader" who has been able "to translate litter back into letter"[82]. As Johnson concludes her article on litterified texts,

> the line between text and trash often lies obscured, and, [...] the reader is thus forced to distrust appearances as well as his own prejudices when sifting letter from litter and wisdom from waste.[83]

The latter example anticipates that despite the undisputable dramatic end to which letters were often destined to in Victorian fiction, those that were conserved often found new legal and monetary values that their writers had not considered at all at the moment of their composition.

If Charles Dickens's bonfire of letters were not enough to illustrate his view on how one should dispose of old letters, he also used some of his novels to exemplify the potential (dangerous) consequences of keeping them.

Talking specifically of love letters, for instance, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1836), the first of Dickens's novels, demonstrates that, although that first attested bonfire took place in 1860, the novelist had been quite aware of the potentially dangerous legal implications of letters since the very beginning of his career. Dickens was working as a reporter in 1836 and, in that capacity, followed the Norton vs Melbourne trial (see Chapter 3) in which George Norton, a member of the Parliament, accused his wife to be involved in a relationship with Lord Melbourne.

---

[81] Collins, *Man and Wife,* 416.
[82] Johnson, 'When "letter" become "litter"', 161.
[83] See note 80 above.

On that occasion, as mentioned in Chapter 3, the quick notes that Lord Melbourne had sent to Mrs Norton were interpreted and presented in court as "love letters" on the ground of their not seeming love letters. The familiarity they implied being deprived of any formulaic expressions proper of the epistolary style alone was considered enough to see them suspiciously and count them as love letters.

Dickens must have been astonished at the way those private messages were exposed to the public and interpreted to make them support the plaintiff's case, to such an extent that a similar scene appeared that same year in one of the instalments of his *Pickwick Papers*. In one of his picaresque adventures, Samuel Pickwick is sued by his landlady, Martha Bardell, for breach of promise of marriage after she has misinterpreted some of his words to her concerning hiring a new manservant.[84] In particular, among the evidence presented, there are two letters that Pickwick had written to his landlady and whose tendentious interpretation imitates, with caricatural tones, that of Melbourne's messages in the Norton vs Melbourne's trial:

> Two letters have passed between these parties, letters which are admitted to be in the handwriting of the defendant, and which speak volumes, indeed. The letters, too, bespeak the character of the man. They are not open, fervent, eloquent epistles, breathing nothing but the language of affectionate attachment. They are covert, sly, underhanded communications, but, fortunately, far more conclusive than if couched in the most glowing language and the most poetic imagery—letters that must be viewed with a cautious and suspicious eye—letters that were evidently intended at the time, by Pickwick, to mislead and delude any third parties into whose hands they might fall. Let me read the first: "Garraways, twelve o'clock. Dear Mrs. B.—Chops and tomato sauce. Yours, Pickwick." Gentlemen, what does this mean? Chops and tomato sauce. Yours, Pickwick! Chops! Gracious heavens! and tomato sauce! Gentlemen, is the happiness of a sensitive and confiding female to be trifled away, by such shallow artifices as these? The next has no date whatever, which is in itself suspicious. "Dear Mrs. B., I shall not be at home till to-morrow. Slow coach." And then follows this very remarkable expression. "Don't trouble yourself about the warming-pan." The warming-pan! Why, gentlemen, who does trouble himself about a warming-pan? When was the peace of mind of man or woman broken or disturbed by a warming-pan, which is in itself a harmless, a useful, and I will add, gentlemen, a comforting article of domestic furniture? Why is Mrs. Bardell so earnestly entreated not to agitate herself about this warming-pan, unless (as is no doubt the case) it is a mere cover for hidden fire—a mere substitute for some endearing word or promise, agreeably to a preconcerted system of correspondence, artfully contrived by Pickwick with a view to his contemplated desertion, and which I am not in a condition to explain? And what does this allusion to the slow coach mean? For aught I know, it may be a reference to Pickwick himself, who has most unquestionably been a

[84] See for example the following exchange between the two: " '*Do you think it a much greater expense to keep two people, than to keep one?' 'La, Mr. Pickwick,' said Mrs. Bardell, colouring up to the very border of her cap, as she fancied she observed a species of matrimonial twinkle in the eyes of her lodger; 'La, Mr. Pickwick, what a question!'*" Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers,* (London, 1836; Project Gutenberg, 22 April 2009), Ch. XII, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/580/580-h/580-h.htm.

> criminally slow coach during the whole of this transaction, but whose speed will now be very unexpectedly accelerated, and whose wheels, gentlemen, as he will find to his cost, will very soon be greased by you!'[85]

This passage, which was also the subject of an illustration by Phiz (Fig.42), certainly caused laughter in the audience, but, as the minutes of the Norton vs Melbourne trial reported in newspapers specified in asides, so did the original reading and presentation of the letters in the real trial. And yet, albeit humorously, Dickens was touching on the serious Victorian concern over the publication of private messages, the horror at seeing a public laugh at them and the uses that could be made of letters written lightheartedly without much thinking of the possible consequences of the words used. Undoubtedly, this anxiety was not a Victorian novelty but acquired at the time a new dimension thanks to the ever-growing printing and newspapers markets.

The theatricality of the scene is evident (again, see Chapter 3) and, also considering its popularity, it should not surprise that several plays were inspired by it. Even more remarkable was, however, the fact that the case Bardell v. Pickwick was also cited in legal volumes and quoted in court by real barristers or used as a source of comparison in newspaper articles concerning similar cases.[86]

If in *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens dealt with one of the possible "secondary uses" of love letters with humour, in later novels, the motif acquired more dramatic tones. It is the case, for example, of the much-searched-for love correspondence between Captain Hawdon and Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*[87] (1852-53). The narration never alludes to the content of those letters, but it is their being love messages exchanged between a woman who has then married an aristocrat of irreprehensible reputation and a soldier that lies their value. Carefully hidden in Captain Hawdons's room after his death, they are spotted and stolen from his room by Krook. He is not the "discerned and discerning reader" mentioned by Johnson, as he cannot read, but it is probably because those signs on paper are unknown to him that he is so suspicious about them. Talking of little Jo, the narrator had said:

> It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of streets, and on the

---

[85]Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers,* (London, 1836; Project Gutenberg, 22 April 2009), Ch. XXXIV, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/580/580-h/580-h.htm.

[86] See Ginger S. Frost, *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England*, Reprint edizione (Place of publication not identified: Univ of Virginia Pr, 2015), p. 8-9.

[87] All quotations from *Bleak House* are from Dickens, Ford, and Monod, *Bleak House*.

> doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postmen deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language—to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb![88]

Mr Krook's reaction to those mysterious symbols is to consider all of them, that is, all the documents he preciously conserves in his crammed shop, as potentially valuable, even without knowing their content and therefore being able to profit from them. As Humphreys highlights,

> Krook's obsession with documents, his 'rummaging among litter of paper' reflects an age exploding with new publishing ventures, an era in which the written word pervade every day life. Krook's tracing of letters and his requests for the meaning of words indicate his awareness that the ability to read is a key to changing society.[89]

After his death, Smallweed inherits Krook's shop and sells Hawdon's letters to Mr Tulkinghorn, who, in turn, will use them to blackmail Lady Deadlock. As they can read, the two men manage to do what Krook could never do: translate that "litter of paper" into money and power.

That love correspondence is, therefore, a potential source of profits for Krook and a real one for Smallweed, a means to conquer Esther's hand for Mr Gruppy (who hopes, by finding Esther's mother to persuade her to marry him), a way to safeguard her reputation for Lady Dedlock and a weapon to ruin someone else's one for Mr Tukinghorn. Like the letter in Poe's *Purloined Letter*, or Collins's *The Stolen Letter*, this multiplicity of perspectives represents "the plurisemantic potential of all written messages"[90] as well as the modern focus of the *signifier* over the *signified*.

As anticipated in Chapter 3, blackmailing based on the possession of "incriminating" love letters, where what the letters represent for the various characters is considered more important than their actual content as in the acclaimed Poe's short story, can be found in many other novels of the period we are dealing with. *Wives and Daughter*[91] (1864) by Elizabeth Gaskell, for instance, includes various examples of love letters, from the intercepted "flaming" one that the apprentice, Mr Coxe, writes to Doctor Gibsons's daughter, Molly (see Figure 43), to the lengthy ones in which

---

[88] Dickens, *Bleak House*, 198.

[89] Camilla Humphreys, "Dickens's Use of Letters in 'Bleak House'", *Dickens Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1989): 53–60. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45291258.

[90] Costantini Mariaconcetta, "Strategies of Letter Manipulation M. Costantini, F. Marroni, and A.E. Soccio, *Letter(s): Functions and Forms of Letter-Writing in Victorian Art and Literature*, Scienze Dell'antichità, Filologico-Letterarie e Storico-Artistiche (Aracne, 2009), 112, https://books.google.it/books?id=DNkqAQAAIAAJ.

[91] All quotations from *Wives and Daughters* are from Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters: an Everyday Story* (London: 1866; Project Gutemberg, 26 December 2001) https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4274/4274-h/4274-h.htm

Roger tells his fianceè Cynthia about his scientific expedition in Africa and that she deems "silly" (see the second epigraph to this chapter). However, the narrator describes these letters as quite the opposite, full of references to Aristotle and Pliny, while Cynthya demonstrates her own silliness by leaving them aside to finish her bonnet cap before paying her calls. This is but another epistolary example which emphasises the sound difference that can exist between the personalities of two lovers and that, with Gaskell, as hinted above, is possibly loaded with biographical allusions.

The novel also includes a case of blackmailing that seems to touch on all the aspects of the matter considered so far. The scoundrel Mr Preston, who works as a land agent for Lord and Lady Cumnor, has been obsessed with Cynthia Kirkpatrick since she was 15 when, living far from her uncaring mother, she borrowed some money from him. Now that Cynthia is promised to Roger Hamley, Preston threatens to show her letters, in which she promised to marry him, to her fianceè. When Cynthia reports the story to Molly, her half-sister, her words epitomise the Victorian anxiety that surrounded private love letters: "I couldn't bear to have it all known and talked about, and my silly letters shown—oh, such letters! I cannot bear to think of them, beginning, 'My dearest Robert,' to that man."[92] Although slightly cross with Cynthia for having accepted to marry Roger (whom she loves dearly) in spite of this "half-cancelled engagement hanging" over her, Molly intervenes trying to negotiate the return of the incriminating letters with Preston. During their conversation, the characters address the very heart of the question, his right to own those letters:

> [...] You have some letters of hers that she wishes to have back again."
> "I daresay."
> "And that you have no right to keep."
> "No legal, or no moral right? which do you mean?"
> "I do not know; simply you have no right at all, as a gentleman, to keep a girl's letters when she asks for them back again, much less to hold them over her as a threat."[93]

As Jolly argues when discussing the publication of letters in more recent times,[94] if the writers own the "copyright" on the text of a letter which is constituted by *their* thoughts, *their* words, and *their* material elements (handwriting, paper, ink), the recipient owns the object itself. After all, it was the tension between these two components of the legal nature of letters that Victorians were so much concerned about.

---

[92] Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters,* XLIII.
[93] Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters,* XLIV.
[94] Jolly, *On Burning, Saving and Stealing* Letters, 32.

In the end, Molly will manage to obtain those letters back from Preston by cleverly deconstructing their power over Cynthia, exactly as Anne Silvester had done in Collins's *Man and Wife*. Instinctively, Molly sees in the truth the only way out from that situation and menaces Mr Preston to tell all about those letters to her father and Lord Cumnor, his employer. Once the secret is revealed, the letter will lose all its power and value. Preston is surprised at the young woman's move:

> He felt [...] that, clever land-agent as he was, and high up in the earl's favour on that account, yet that the conduct of which he had been guilty in regard to the letters, and the threats which he had held out respecting them, were just what no gentleman, no honourable man, no manly man, could put up with in any one about him. He knew that much, and he wondered how she, the girl standing before him, had been clever enough to find it out. He forgot himself for an instant in admiration of her.[95]

Molly will not get those letters on that occasion, but the following day they will be sent to an incredulous Cynthia who had not placed much hope in her half sister's ability to deal with a man like Preston. Once in possession of the letters, Cynthia obviously promises that she will burn them directly.

In all the cases mentioned, the characters who exchange love letters do non really love each other, confirming, as already pointed out in the previous chapter, that in fiction, the means of love communication *par excellence* is generally turned into the evidence of a problematic situation. The last example of this chapter does not include any stealing or destruction of letters, and yet here, the dictation of letters becomes a way to exercise one's power on others (and more specifically, a woman's power on a man).

In *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite*[96] (1870) by Antony Trollope, the scoundrel George Hotspur does everything in his power to marry his cousin, the heiress Emily Hotspur, and consequently inherit her father's property as well as his title. Emily's father, Sir Harry Hotspur, is aware of George's recklessness and forbids his daughter to marry him although, at the bottom of his heart, he yearns to keep the title and the property together. Sir Harry is another Trollopian vacillator (like Alice Vavasor discussed in the previous chapter), and his indecisiveness allows George to get closer to Emily and propose to her (another fictional blurred proposal). He keeps promising he will reform, but by the time his dishonourable conduct is revealed by the solicitor

[95] Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters,* XLIV.

[96]All quotations from *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite* are from Antony Trollope, *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite* (New York: 1871, Project Gutemberg, 5 January 2009) https://www.gutenberg.org/files/27712/27712-h/27712-h.htm

whom Sir Harry appointed to investigate his character, it is too late. Emily has already fallen in love with him and will die of sorrow in Italy while he marries his mistress, the actress Lucy Morton. Once again, as happened for George Dalamayn in Collin's in *Man and Wife*, novelists are quite precise in describing the letter-writing activities of the blackguards as extremely revealing of their distorted moral.

Pearson argues that, generally, Trollope's villains,

> seem to be either Machiavellian virtuosos of the pen (such as Ferdinand Lopez in The Prime Minister, e.g., ch. 22) who create havoc for those around them by their sheer gift for written expression; or virtual illiterates (such as Sir Felix Carbury or the Marquis of Brotherton) who toss off the most telegrammatic and insulting stuff that nobody but themselves would call civilised communication.[97]

George Hotspur, however, is an evil character somewhere in the middle between these two extremes as he is aware of not being a good letter writer and accepts his women friends' (Lady Altringham's and Lucy Morton's) help when he needs to compose crucial letters. This is because he is first and foremost a weak character, as all his letter-related behaviour demonstrates. Sometimes, for instance, he needs to drink to find the courage and inspiration to write, while on other occasions, he repents after posting a letter. However, his most serious epistolary sin is asking a friend to dictate him a love letter to the woman he wants to marry (but whom he clearly does not love despite his assertions). As Lansbury (quoted in Pearson) suggests in her work on Trollope's legal fiction, in his novels,

> Letters are of particular significance in the elucidation of intention since they are, in a sense, testimony, as distinct from evidence that is spoken and may be occasioned by the impulse of the moment. If a character cannot commit the truth to paper, then the reader is left in doubt about his honesty. A letter is an occasion when a character is called upon to write under oath. For many, of course, the letter, like a great deal of sworn testimony known to Law, simply offers an opportunity to deceive from a distance.[98]

This is undoubtedly true for George Hotspur. His inability to write letters adds to his vices, such as the love for drinking, races or gambling, but he is not even as cunning as he needs to be to lie on paper. When he writes to Emily's mother to tell her he is going to accept their invitation to visit Humblethwaite, for instance, his friend Lady Altringham has to rewrite that letter completely for him as it made him look "too eager" (as he, in fact, is).

---

[97] David Pearson, '"The Letter Killeth": Epistolary Purposes and Techniques in Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37, no. 3 (1982,): 396–418, 402 - https://doi.org/10.2307/3044659.

[98] Lansbury, Coral, quoted in Pearson, '"The Letter Killeth": Epistolary Purposes and Techniques in Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite', 399.

Another example of what Pearson calls "the dictated letter" is the (love?) note George personally delivers to Humblethwaite for Emily. After he has magniloquently turned down Sir Harry's proposal to pay all his debts if he renounces Emily's hand and fortune, George does no longer hear from Sir Harry or Emily. Worried, he goes to Humblethwaite and delivers a letter to Sir Harry, which includes the following note for his cousin, open and therefore accessible to his uncle:

> Dearest Emily,— After what has passed between us, I cannot bear not to attempt to see you or to write to you. So I shall go down and take this letter with me. Of course I shall not take any steps of which Sir Harry might disapprove. I wrote to him two or three weeks ago, telling him what I proposed, and I thought that he would have answered me. As I have not heard from him I shall take this with me to Humblethwaite, and shall hope, though I do not know whether I may dare to expect, to see the girl I love better than all the world.— Always your own, George Hotspur.[99]

The narrator hastens to specify that he did not indite the letter by himself, as

> Cousin George, though he could often talk well,— or at least sufficiently well for the purposes which he had on hand,— was not good with his pen on such an occasion as this. Lady Altringham had sent him by post a rough copy of what he had better say, and he had copied her ladyship's words verbatim. There is no matter of doubt at all but that on all such subjects an average woman can write a better letter than an average man; and Cousin George was therefore right to obtain assistance from his female friends.[100]

In addition to confirming women's superiority over men in matters of letter writing (discussed in Chapter 1), this example is extremely interesting also from the narrative point of view as here the levels of writing and reading multiply exponentially. The novelist, Trollope, creates a letter that he imagines the character of Lady Altringham would have written for George, who copies and therefore endorses it. As for the reader, Emily is the most obvious one, but when writing, Lady Altringham also has Sir Harry in mind, as he will be allowed to read the message before delivering it to its addressee. The reader of the novel, as the last layer (and target) of this epistolary "Chinese box", knows who really wrote the letter and is the only one who can appreciate these levels by comparing the narration and what Lansbury defines the three truths:

> Letters are used for exposition and examination, adding strength to the character's testimony. What is spoken constitutes one truth; what is thought, another; and that which a character chooses to write is evidence of a different order altogether.[101]

---

[99] Trollope, *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite,* XVIII.

[100] See note 98 above.

[101] Lansbury, Coral, quoted in Pearson, '"The Letter Killeth": Epistolary Purposes and Techniques in Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite', 399.

The tone of this note is not the flippant one the reader would expect from George, but sentimental as only Lady A. could make it, and both Emily and her father are impressed by it. This is not the case for the novel's reader, though.

A similar "multiple-layer epistolary structure" returns for the last letter quoted in the novel. It is not a love letter, quite on the contrary, as we will see, but it is essential for the conclusion of the affair. Pressed by unscrupulous creditors, George finally decides to accept Sir Harry's proposal and renounce Emily definitely, and yet he does not feel up to the task of writing the critical letter which would communicate this decision to his uncle and cousin. Once again, therefore, he turns to a friend, this time his mistress, for help. He had already asked her assistance for this letter some chapters earlier when he was considering the possibility to accept Sir Harry's offer:

> […] She will never be your wife. Take Sir Harry's offer, and write to her a letter, explaining how it is best for all that you should do so."
> He paused a moment, and then he asked her one other question:
> "Would you write the letter for me, Lucy?" She smiled again as she answered him:
> "Yes; if you make up your mind to do as Sir Harry asks you, I will write a draft of what I think you should say to her."[102]

This dialogue as well as Lucy's smile reminds the reader of the subjugated position that George holds when in presence of Lucy:

> In ordinary society George Hotspur could be bright, and he was proud of being bright. With this woman he was always subdued, always made to play second fiddle, always talked like a boy; and he knew it. He had loved her once, if he was capable of loving anything; but her mastery over him wearied him, even though he was, after a fashion, proud of her cleverness, and he wished that she were,— well, dead, if the reader choose that mode of expressing what probably were George's wishes. But he had never told himself that he desired her death.[103]

Lucy seems to be aware of her predominance, and she takes advantage of it when writing the letter for him and forcing him to copy it. He tries, in vain, to procrastinate until he arrives at his club, but she is peremptory: "Rouse yourself and do it now. Don't be such a poor thing." They quarrel, as she accuses him of postponing the copying because he still loves Emily, but he sorts everything out by telling her, "I hope to make you my wife."

With this letter, however, Lucy makes sure that the union between Emily, her rival, and George will definitely become impossible and at the same time takes her revenge on her rival. The letter is thus presented:

[102] Trollope, *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite,* XV.
[103] Trollope, *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite,* XI.

> The letter which he copied was a well-written letter, put together with much taste, so that the ignoble compact to which it gave assent should seem to be as little ignoble as might be possible. "I entered into the arrangement," the letter said in its last paragraph, "because I thought it right to endeavour to keep the property and the title together; but I am aware now that my position in regard to my debts was of a nature that should have deterred me from the attempt. As I have failed, I sincerely hope that my cousin may be made happy by some such splendid alliance as she is fully entitled to expect."[104]

Again, the text is written by a woman and endorsed by George, who, this time, while copying it, understands that there is something wrong in the wording, although he cannot define what. The letter is addressed to Sir Harry's solicitor, Mr Boltby, who passes it to Sir Harry and his wife and finally to Emily. Before reading it, she refused to accept the end of her affair with the cousin and kept defending him as she hoped to reform the "black sheep", but then she understands.

All these readers, however, make out what George has missed, i.e. that the purport of those words was that "the writer had never for a moment loved the girl whom he had proposed to marry".[105] The fact of considering the marriage only as an arrangement to keep title and property together as well as the reference and wishes for a future splendid alliance for his cousin along with the lack of any words of affection, all point to that conclusion. Sir Harry even suspects that George had the letter written by someone else as "'It has more craft,' said he, 'than I gave him credit for.'" As Pearson points out, Lucy Morton's "enigmatic smile" when George asks her to write this letter for him, might hide this plan of revenge towards the person who had tried to steal her lover. Therefore, the letter becomes a means to manipulate people, shape reality according to one's wish and a weapon of vengeance.

The quintessential epistolary expression of love, that is the Valentine, also acquired in fiction similarly unexpected and multifaceted roles and meanings. In *Mary Barton (1848)*[106] by Elizabeth Gaskell, for instance, the eponymous character receives a valentine from the man who has known and loved her since when they were children. The letter is anonymous, according to valentine's tradition (see also the real example quoted in Chapter 3) but Mary thinks to knows who has sent it and it is someone she does not love, not yet, at least. Her indifference for the sender is evident when she uses that valentine as mere stationery. Her father, an active member

---

[104] Trollope, *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite,* XXII.

[105] Trollope, *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite,* XV.

[106] All quotations from *Mary Barton* are from Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, (London, 1848; Project Gutemberg, December, 9, 2013) https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2153/2153-h/2153-h.htm

of the Unions, asks her to copy down a poem that his friend Job reads to him to cheer him up after his failed attempt to present the factory workers' situation in parliament. Mary writes that poem on the back of Jem's love card:

> The next day on the blank half sheet of a valentine, all bordered with hearts and darts – a valentine she had once suspected to come from Jem Wilson – she copied Bamford's beautiful little poem.[107]

The poem contains a moving description of the condition of the poor and stresses how it is God that they really must rely upon rather than only the Parliament. That recycled love letter that becomes material support for radical and political ideas may suggest that love and social/political issues are more interconnected than one would expect, being two sides of people's lives. After all, the entire novel seems to confirm this view by merging the conventions of domestic and political fiction. As Koehler points out,

> The sheet of paper which, on one side, carries an expression of romantic love, and, on its reverse, a fervent statement about working-class solidarity requires us not only to acknowledge the interaction between the "industrial" and the "domestic," but to view them as inseparable parts of one whole.[108]

However, this is only the first use of this valentine in the novel. Later it will become no less than an instrument in the murder of a person. When the disillusioned and angry John Burton shoots Henry Carson, he will use a piece from that valentine as a wadding paper to load his gun. Mary's aunt, Esther, a fallen woman who acquires detective features in this episode, finds that piece of paper and realizes it might be essential in finding out who was the real murderer:

> Suddenly (it was before the sun had risen above the horizon) she became aware of something white in the hedge. . . . . What was it? It could not be a flower; – that, the time of year made clear. A frozen lump of snow, lingering late in one of the gnarled tufts of the hedge? She stepped forward to examine.
> It proved to be a little piece of stiff writing-paper compressed into a round shape. She understood it instantly; it was the paper that had served as wadding for the murderer's gun.[109]

When Mary, now in love with Jeb, the sender of the original valentine, sees that piece of paper and finds the rest of the card in her father's pocket, she is finally able to reconstruct what

[107] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton,* Chapter IX.

[108]Karin Koehler, 'Valentines and The Victorian Imagination: 'Mary Barton' and 'Far From The Madding Crowd'', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 45, no. 2 (June 2017): 395–412, 398, https://doi.org/10.1017/S106015031600067X.

[109] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton,* Chapter XXI.

happened. At this point, she “eschews the demand for feminine passivity and privacy”[110] that her role as a woman implied: she burns the card (another bonfire) to help her father but also strives to demonstrate that Jen, who has been accused of the crime, is actually innocent.

As Koehler argues, this valentine

> captures a duality inherent to epistolary communication: on the one hand, letters are objects of circulation, distinguished by their ability to transgress boundaries. On the other hand, due to their “tangible, documentary nature,” letters can become sources of information, of evidence that can be scrutinised for insight into the writer’s heart and mind, or, more ominously, used to monitor, censor, and punish his or her thoughts and actions (Altman).[111]

Jen’s valentine in *Mary Barton* was not the only one to be involved in a murder case in Victorian fiction. The valentine card Bathsheba Everdene sends to farmer Boldwood in *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874)[112] by Thomas Hardy triggers the events which will lead the addressee to kill a man for her. In a moment of relaxation spent with her maid Liddy, Bathsheba decides to send one of her farm boys a valentine she bought the day before at the market, but then the conversation veers on Farmer Boldwood, the respectable and serious farmer who seems to be immune to Bathseba’s charm. It is then that the woman, in an act of vanity and rebellion against “the most dignified and valuable man in the parish” who, however, “withholds his eyes” and does not look at her in church, decides to send him the valentine instead. In her heart, she feels the recklessness of that action, as she admits “he wouldn’t see any humour in it”, but then she entrusts the final decision to chance. With a reference to the custom of the lot which had characterized Valentine’s day celebrations for centuries (see Chapter 3) and that is anticipated by the Sortes Sanctorum game she has with Liddy at the beginning of the chapter, she tosses the hymn book, “Open Boldwood – shut Teddy”.

The card that she has inscribed with some typical valentine verses (they are very similar to those written by William Steele in the real valentine quoted in Chapter 3) and that would have been considered as a joke by a farmer boy, become when received by an eligible bachelor, a more serious matter. The seal itself, bearing the words “MARRY ME” adds to the other material features in leading the addressee, who is taken aback by it, to believe this is a truthful declaration of love. As Koehler points out,

---

[110] Koehler, “Valentines and The Victorian Imagination”, 402.

[111] Koehler, “Valentines and The Victorian Imagination”, 403.

[112] All quotations from *Far From the Madding Crowd* are from Thomas Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd* (London, 1874: Project Gutemberg, August 6, 2021).

> In a clear illustration of the notion that "the medium is the message", then, Bathsheba's valentine is susceptible to misconstructions precisely because it perfectly emulates Victorian conventions of romantic correspondence and courtship".[113]

Boldwood's reaction to the arrival of the card is a crescendo of passion for the image of the person who wrote it, which however, is very different to the real Bathsheba:

> When Boldwood went to bed he placed the valentine in the corner of the looking-glass. He was conscious of its presence, even when his back was turned upon it. It was the first time in Boldwood's life that such an event had occurred. The same fascination that caused him to think it an act which had a deliberate motive prevented him from regarding it as an impertinence. He looked again at the direction. The mysterious influences of night invested the writing with the presence of the unknown writer. Somebody's—some woman's—hand had travelled softly over the paper bearing his name; her unrevealed eyes had watched every curve as she formed it; her brain had seen him in imagination the while. Why should she have imagined him? Her mouth—were the lips red or pale, plump or creased?—had curved itself to a certain expression as the pen went on—the corners had moved with all their natural tremulousness: what had been the expression?
>
> The vision of the woman writing, as a supplement to the words written, had no individuality. She was a misty shape, and well she might be, considering that her original was at that moment sound asleep and oblivious of all love and letter-writing under the sky. Whenever Boldwood dozed she took a form, and comparatively ceased to be a vision: when he awoke there was the letter justifying the dream.
>
> […]
>
> The substance of the epistle had occupied him but little in comparison with the fact of its arrival. He suddenly wondered if anything more might be found in the envelope than what he had withdrawn. He jumped out of bed in the weird light, took the letter, pulled out the flimsy sheet, shook the envelope—searched it. Nothing more was there. Boldwood looked, as he had a hundred times the preceding day, at the insistent red seal: "Marry me," he said aloud. [114]

Following that valentine, Boldwood will develop an obsession with Bathsheba, almost a monomania, that will lead him to kill her abusive husband in the end. Once again, love letters were used by writers to represent transgressions of borders and rebellions against conventions rather than simply as mere expressions of love.

Drawing general conclusions on the representations of fictional love letters by the analysis of such a variety of novels and novelists presents itself as a very arduous task. As the use of letters in fiction was no longer part of an established genre with its own form and style, novelists felt freer to experiment with this medium also drawing, as I hope I have demonstrated, a great deal on

[113] Koehler, "Valentines and The Victorian Imagination", 407.

[114] Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, chapter XIV.

their personal experience, not only as letter writers but also as witnesses and active agents in a historical moment where communications were bursting and taking new forms and proportions.

Nevertheless, one of the most manifest conclusions that could be made concerns the enormous power that was conferred to the written epistolary word, that in contrast with the printed one of the press, which was the arena of the public opinion, was loaded of bodily, personal and private meanings and secrets.

At the end of her study on the alleged death of the letter in literature after the romantic period, which was one of the triggers for this work, Mary Favret specifies that,

> I am not trying to argue that the letter in nineteenth century England was no longer a viable form of communication. This is far from the case. Rather, the fiction of this period no longer employed the epistolary mode to represent interpersonal communication; furthermore it deliberately staged the death of the letter.[115]

Indeed, the novel in epistolary mode was no longer considered suitable to represent the new and constantly shifting reality that Victorians found themself to face, but letters did. They kept representing the anxiety of a society in which the new role of women was growingly affecting the idea of love and marriage, in which the legal status of marriage itself was being questioned and addressed with new reforms and laws, in which the increasing migration to the colonies was separating the families and the downsides of industrialisation were ever more evident. The fact that letters in novels, in an age of great advancements in technologies and communications, are often used to represent incommunicability, only shows a deeper and more modern awareness that human relationships do not depend exclusively on material or external means, a lesson that should resonate with the contemporary times too. So powerful is the effect of the written word on human memory that the various attempts at destroying letters by tearing or burning them in order to conceal secrets and take one's distance from the past often reveal ineffective. For this reason, the staging of the destruction of letters can be seen as the affirmation of their undisputable power, as Jolly argued, rather than of its end.

Pictorial love letters

---

[115] Mary A. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters*, New Ed edition (Cambridge : New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 102.

When *The General Post Office at one Minute to Six* (1860, Fig.1) by George Elgar Hicks was exhibited at the Royal Academy summer exhibition in 1860, the reaction from contemporary critics was rather dismissive. However, the painting, which managed to catch all the frenzy and excitement at the General Post Office of St Martin's-le-Grand just before closing time, would become an emblem of the impact of the new postal system on Victorian urban society. By portraying the variety of social panorama at the General Post Office, the scene stresses how the postal reform had shortened (sometimes dangerously, as the section with the pickpocket seems to suggest) the distance between classes. Each of the people represented in the painting has a story to tell that refers to a different aspect of Victorian social life. Still, it is the central figure, the woman in a dark shawl that looks anxious to deliver a letter, the most relevant to the purpose of this research.

In an illuminating article on this painting, Mark Bills[116] highlights how the contemporary viewers clearly interpreted the figure as a woman in love, afraid not to arrive in time to send her letter to her beloved. "Jack Easel", the art correspondent for *The Punch*, describing the painting, confirmed this reading with his usual caustic tones:

> There is a charming little 'party,' in a plaid shawl, hurrying to post her letter to him evidently. The envelope bears a blue stamp, and doubtless contains two-pennyworth of the usual vows, and sighs, and poetical quotations, underlined everywhere but in the right place. (We all know them: one love-letter is much like another —from the tender epistle of HELOISE down to poor BETTY'S Valentine).[117]

Bills also quotes the English edition of the volume *Sauntering in and about London (1853)* by the German Max Schlesinger, as it contains one of the many contemporary descriptions of the Post Office at closing time that might have influenced the painter. Among the crowd, Schlesinger noticed a woman whose description makes it quite remarkably similar to Hick's central figure:

> And lo! just as the clock strikes, a fair-haired and chaste English woman, with a thick blue veil, makes her way to one of the compartments and drops a letter. Thank goodness, she is in time! Heaven knows how sorry the poor lad would have been if that letter had not reached him in due course. For an English lover, they say, is often in a hanging mood, especially in November, when the fogs are densest.[118]

---

[116] Mark Bills, '"The General Post Office - One Minute to Six" by George Elgar Hicks', *The Burlington Magazine* 144, no. 1194 (2002): 550–56.

[117] Jack Easel, "The Royal Academy" *The Punch* 16 June 1860 https://archive.org/details/punch186000lemouoft/page/n267/mode/2up?q=EASEL (accessed 14/11/2021)

[118] Max Schlesinge 'The Project Gutenberg EBook of Saunterings in and About London, by Max Schlesinger.', accessed 16 January 2022, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/46571/46571-h/46571-h.htm.

Certainly, scholars cannot be sure which, among the many circulating textual representations of that scene, have really influenced Hicks.[119] However, from this introductory example, it can be deduced that the association between women's letters and love, which was already diffused in the eighteenth century, was now firmly established. It follows that, even if, of the over two hundred epistolary paintings analysed in the course of this research, only eighty contain the words "love", "Valentine", or "sweetheart, many of those that do not, but that represent a woman holding or writing a letter (most of them), could reasonably be related to a courtship situation.

A first browse at the collected pictorial scenes including love letters, reveals that some components are present in various degrees in most of them: the sentimental, the dramatic, the problem/narrative, and the postal/political. Although the paintings can hardy be divided into strict categories based on these elements, as these often coexist and overlap, in some cases, one aspect was more prominent than others. For example, the painting by Hicks itself could be seen first of all as an exaltation of the democratic new postal system that made all "equals in front of the Post" (postal/political element). However, its sentimental allusions (for example, the anxious expression of the woman in love or the girl on the brink of crying because she got lost in the crowd) and the strong narrative component (the pickpocket interrupted by a policeman while stealing from the well-off lady) also introduce the other side of the coin.

Among the mostly sentimental paintings analysed, some follow the pattern of the portrait by Sara Carpenter mentioned in Chapter 3, where a young woman holding a letter stares into space, probably daydreaming about her sweetheart. In other examples of this kind, like *Portrait of a woman with a love letter* by John Bagnold Burgess (d.u.) in Figure 2 or Charles Sillem Lidderdale's *The love letter* (d.u.) in Figure 3, the girl's dreamy and slightly melancholic look may depend, more than on bad news, on the epistolary truth that a letter implies absence, and the absence of one's beloved is a cause for sorrow. In all these examples, women share angelic traits (almost saint-like in Burgess) typical of the Victorian ideal of womanhood and are probably mulling over the words they have just read and thinking of their beloved. The Greek *parousia,* mentioned by Demetrious

---

[119] One of the attested sources of inspiration for the artist there is Dickens's description of the scene in his article St Valentine at the Post Office on the first issue of his Household Words: "Now and then there was a girl; now and then a woman; now and then a weak old man; but as the minute hand of the clock crept near to six, such a torrent of boys, and such a torrent of newspapers newspapers came tumbling in together pell-mell, head over heels, one above another, that the giddy head looking on chiefly wondered why the boys springing over one another's heads, and flying the garter into the Post-Office with the enthusiasm of the corps of acrobats at Mr. Franconi's, didn't post themselves nightly, along with the newspapers, and get delivered all over the world. Suddenly it struck six. Shut Sesame!" See Charles Dickens, "Valentine's Day at the Post Office", *Household Words,* 30 March 1850, https://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-i/page-1.html (accessed 11/11/2021)

in 270 BC, and that consisted in feeling the presence of the writer when reading a letter, seem to acquire here visual connotations. As Altman argues about epistolary literature, those letters are both metaphors and metonymies of these women's sweethearts. They are metaphors as the written message "*fosters the generation of substitute images of the lover*",[120] as these young women's gaze would suggest. Nevertheless, they are also metonymies, as in their materiality, they stand for the absent lover himself: in Lidderdale's painting, for instance, the letter is clutched, and the pose almost recalls an embrace. This idea was undoubtedly inherited from the eighteenth-century epistolary culture, even though it seems to be deprived of the sensuality it was loaded at the time. Talking about similar eighteenth-century images, Brant argues,

> Lovers who pressed letters to their hearts in countless fictions, illustrations and real-life correspondences made them another layer of skin, enacting both a desire to incorporate the beloved and its impossibility.[121]

As for the stares of the subjects, it is also worth mentioning that much has been written, especially in media theory contexts, on the "gaze" in cinema and painting and its effects on the appreciation of a work of art. The term "gaze", in this case, does not only indicate a mere act of perception but also carries communicative connotations, as it affects the relationship between the painting and the viewer. The direction of the subject's gaze shapes how the public feels about a painting, and especially when it is addressed to the viewer, it tends to overcome the boundary between art and reality, making the observers feel as if they were parts of the painting. Jennifer Reinhardt effectively describes how the concept of gaze in the interpretation of art has developed in the last centuries:

> Before the twentieth century, the gaze was noticed insofar as it functioned within its particular medium; for example, early critics recognized when gazes were returned or reflected in a painting but their analysis rarely extended beyond the canvas itself. A gaze here seems interchangeable with a glance. In contrast, contemporary art criticism focuses on how the gaze is used as a vehicle for communication, and how exactly a gaze transmits information and assumptions about the viewer/viewed. Here a gaze can transcend the medium in which it is produced and contains social implications beyond its function within the work of art. The definition of gaze has thus evolved from just a "look" into an "intent" look (i.e. the intent behind the gaze becomes crucial for its definition) and gaze can be thought of as a dynamic medium bridging the gap between art form and social theory. Other words for seeing simply do not contain this same ability to integrate politics with art history.[122]

---

[120] Altman, *Epistolarity*, 1982.
[121]Brant, *Eighteenth-century Letters And British Culture,* 99.
[122] Jennifer Reinhardt, "Gaze", The Chicago School of Media Theory Website, accessed 30/12/2021, https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/gaze/#:~:text=A%20gaze%20can%20be%20used,or%20th

In some paintings, like in *Penning a letter* by George Kilburne (d.u., Fig.45), the figure's gaze is so intense to attract the attention and interest of the viewer almost magnetically. In others, the gaze is not directed towards the viewer but is nonetheless very powerful in the definition of the scene's atmosphere: see, for instance, the husband's gaze in the painting *Intercepted Letter* by W.P. Frith in Fig. 13 and discussed later.

In some other paintings, the figure's gaze is on the letter. Women are portrayed in the act of reading their lover's message, something that is usually precluded to the viewer. Like the reader of a novel in which letters are not disclosed, and that must rely on the narrator to know their content, the observer strives to find clues in the painting that provide them with some insight into the epistolary story behind the scene. Nevertheless, painters are usually more reticent than writers in giving away information on the letter's content, perhaps endorsing Jack Easel's statement mentioned above that, "We all know them: one love-letter is much like another"[123]. A dreamy smile is then deemed enough to let the observer appreciate the sentimental atmosphere of the moment.

Among the examples of this kind are the several cottage scenes by George Smith (1829-1901), like the ones in Figures 4 and 4b, which depict young peasant women absorbed in the reading of a love letter usually by the hearth, a symbol of the home and the sacrality of domestic life. Thomas Brooks (1818-1892), another genre painter, in his *The Valentine* (1863, Fig. 5), presents a more romanticised version of a young peasant, who is depicted while reading her valentine and smiling near a window. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in addition to the technical purpose of providing a light source, doors and windows also had the metaphorical function of offering a sort of psychological release from the circumscribed world of the home in which women were often relegated.

All these paintings of beautiful countrywomen reading letters (or writing them, as we will see later) on the one side may be seen as contributing to the softer image of life in the country that genre painters promoted, but on the other also confirmed the belief in the "civilising" function of the new postal system (see Chapter 2) so much proclaimed by Hill and his supporters. In fact, thanks to the postal and education reform, literacy rates grew over the century. The sweet smile of the realistic farmer woman in John Macallan Swan (1846-1910) *Barney's letter* (Fig. 37)

---

e%20work%20of%20art.&text=In%20this%20painting%2C%20the%20spectator,spectator%20gazing%20at%20the%20painting.

[123] See note 108 above.

or, in literature, the two labouring women that in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urberwille* (1891) write a letter to Angel to try and help their friend Tess, seem to confirm that, at the end of the century, literacy was taken for granted in lower classes too.

Young country women were a favourite subject for these sentimental paintings as in the ever more urbanised Victorian society the life in the country was considered purer and healthier as still more connected with nature than the smoky city. The countryside was the perfect location for young couples to meet and have a walk and a talk in some out-of-the-way spot without supervision.

Women from upper classes were also represented while reading love letters, although the reader is often accompanied by other figures, at least in the corpus considered. For example, in Francis Sydney Muschamp's *The Love Letter* (d.u., Fig.6), the painter represents two women in elegant clothes and on a wealthy background. The first is reading her letter aloud to her companion, who is listening carefully and appears to be making comments. The slightly parted lips and the listener so protracted toward her friend confer a sort of "acoustic dimension" to the painting.

A similar composition is in *Her First Love Letter* (Fig.7) by Marcus Stone (1840 - 1921), a painter and illustrator that was already mentioned in this work as he was very fond of the epistolary subject. Here, a beautiful young woman is reading the first message of love addressed to her under the supervision of an older woman who seems to be remembering the happy moment when she received her first love letter herself. The fact that peasant women are shown more often alone than their upper classes homologues while dealing with their love correspondence might depend on the greater liberty that women from the working classes or the countryside enjoyed in courtship, as discussed in Chapter 3. They often did not have a chaperon, and especially for those living in the countryside, they could easily find hidden spots where to meet in secret their sweethearts, which made flirtation between country characters a popular subject of genre painting.[124]

The previous chapters demonstrated that novelists often used embedded love letters as examples of "deviations" from true love: some fictional letters were so full of self-interest and narcissism that they ceased to be love letters at all. Conversely, the sentimental tendency of Victorian painting made the love letter more faithful to its original purpose, i.e. communicating love, as the several dreamy gazes and smiles mentioned above suggest.

[124] Wood, *Victorian Panorama*, 1976.

There are, however, some exceptions. John Callcott Horsley's *The Morning of St Valentine* (1863, Fig. 8) depicts a fashionable young woman on the morning of the lovers' day that, sitting in the armchair of her boudoir, reads the many Valentines received. In the doorway, her maid is speaking to a boy messenger who is probably waiting for a response from the lady. However, the woman's tilted down head suggests that there is none. The lady's attitude towards her letters is quite haughty and careless: she even lets her dog play with one of them. Clearly, she is not in love with any of the men who wrote to her, and the only thing that attracts her attention is the image of her beautiful and young self in the mirror. Horsley was a moralist and even earned the nickname"Clothes Horsley" by Royal Academicians because he was against using nude models in painting classes. Here he seems to condemn the vanity and superficiality of the woman and those who write to such a detached reader and, more generally, the habit of sending Valentines.

As the cases considered so far amply demonstrate, the most popular subjects were undoubtedly women. For painters who were still prevalently men, women hold all the fascination of the object of desire that was never completely understood. Imagining women while reading a letter by a male lover or writing to their beloved, both activities that usually precluded the presence of men, allured the male painters as well as viewers.

It has to be noted that the idea of the "woman reader" was generally a source of anxiety in the nineteenth century.[125] The topic was discussed in various contexts, from newspaper articles to medical and psychological texts, from advice manuals to educational and religious works. In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft had tackled the question when, in a *Vindication of Rights of Women*, had attributed the fact that women were influenced by the novels they read more than men to their lack of actual "serious" occupations in their lives:

> Females, in fact, denied all political privileges, and not allowed, as married women, excepting in criminal cases, a civil existence, have their attention naturally drawn from the interest of the whole community to that of the minute parts, though the private duty of any member of society must be very imper|fectly performed when not connected with the general good. The mighty business of female life is to please, and restrained from entering into more important concerns by political and civil oppression, sentiments become events, and reflection deepens what it should, and would have effaced, if the understanding had been allowed to take a wider range.[126]

[125] See Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914*, Revised ed. edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1995).

[126] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects,* (London,1792; Project Gutemberg, September 2002) Section 13.2, www.gutemberg.org/ebooks/3420

Victorian men, on their part, seemed intrigued by women's mental processes, while the self-absorption in the reading was considered suspicious as it left the woman vulnerable to the influence of the texts and potentially distracted her from her duties. Novel reading (another theme that frequently appeared in painting) was considered the most dangerous because of what Henry James called "the old superstition about fiction being 'wicked'".[127] This view, which was based mainly on religious and utilitarian considerations, was still diffused throughout the century, and even when the middle class started to accept the reading of novels with more tolerance, a "protectionist" attitude was shown towards the working class and women, considered, as less educated and therefore the weakest and more easily influenced components of society.[128]

Specialist texts, like Alexander Walker's *Women Psychologically Considered* (1840), supplied the medical and scientific support to these theories. Walker claimed that the frontal part of the brain that, according to his studies, dealt with sensory perceptions was larger in women than in men. It followed that in women's brain there was less room for the back part of the brain to develop, the one dedicated to reasoning, therefore "the sensibility of woman is excessive; she is strongly affected by many sensations, which in men are so feeble as scarcely to attract attention".[129]

These ideas did not remain circumscribed to scientific literature and also appeared in newspaper and periodical articles even though women entering the medical profession started to refute them. The most practical consequence of these diffuse beliefs was that men were always very careful about what their wives read, and this "vigilance" extended to letters too. It was a common practice, in fact, for husbands to read their wives' correspondence after the marriage.

The fascination in the mental process of the woman reader emerges, as mentioned, in many paintings and is emphasised in some in which a male figure observes the woman reading a letter. The historical painter Charles Landseer (1799-1879) in his *The Love* Letter (d.u., Fig. 9) depicted the scene in a seventeenth-century context, where, in an elegantly furnished room, a woman is reading a letter while a gentleman, who seems to have rushed to her (one foot is still on the steps of the stairs), is looking at her. From his adoring gaze fixed on that figure immersed in the epistolary text, we may reasonably suppose he is the lover who has sent the letter and waits for her reaction, and perhaps, response.

---

[127] Henry James, "The Art of Fiction", *Longman's Magazine,* 4, September 1884, https://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/artfiction.html

[128] Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public : 1800-1900*, Reprint edizione (Chicago, Ill: Univ of Chicago Pr, 1983) 64,66.

[129] Alexander Walker, *Women Psychologically Considered,--- quoted in* Flint, Flint,*The Woman Reader,* 54.

George Edward Robertson (1864-1920) transported the theme even more back in time, as the two characters in his *The love Letter* (d.u., Fig.10) are portrayed in a medieval fairy tale setting. The man looking at the charming woman reading his letter seems to know he is being judged by the words he has written and awaits a final verdict from his beloved.

The "surveillance" on the part of men over women's correspondence which we mentioned above, also inspired painters to represent, with cautionary and didactic intents, the moment when a love letter which is not intended for the husband's eyes (because addressed to or sent by a lover) is intercepted. We have already mentioned the case of *Trust Me* (1862. Fig.11) by Millais, but this is not the only pictorial example of men's control over women's letters.

The first painting that composes the tryptic *Past and Present* (1858, Fig 12, 12b, 12c) by Augustus Leopold Egg (1816 - 1863) is certainly one of the most quoted by scholars dealing with Victorian morality and family. The three paintings portray, with homily-like severity, three moments in the fall of a woman. Egg represents first the humiliation of this mother and wife in front of, or better, at the feet of her husband, who has found the incriminating letter that proves her affair. Then he shows her as a destitute fallen woman under the Arches of the Adelphi, while simultaneously her adult daughters sadly think of their poor mother. As the most relevant to this section, we will focus on the first of the three paintings, exhibited as N.1 at the Tate Britain (originally, the tryptic did not bear any title but only a caption). Like the other two, but even more, this work is full of symbolic elements that help "reading" it and is the most relevant example of this section of a case in which the dramatic and narrative aspects prevail over the other mentioned.

The painting depicts the living room of a respectable middle-class family where the angry husband is clutching the love letter that proves his wife's infidelity while crushing her lover's miniature under his feet. The woman is lying desperately at his feet imploring to be forgiven, as her hands joined in prayer suggest. On the left, the couple's two daughters are playing, but one of them is looking at the scene. Jonson provides the following accurate interpretation of the clues of which the painting is disseminated and that enable us to reconstruct the story:

> Emblematic details expound every implication of the scene. An apple, divided between table and floor, exposes a rotten core. One of the pictures on the rear wall shows Adam and Eve being driven from Paradise; the other is a copy of Clarkson Stanfield's recent canvas of a derelict hulk wallowing in the waves, entitled *The Abandoned*. The children's play with a tumbling house of cards rehearses the

> traditional motif of fortune's instability. Close inspection reveals that the cards are based on a novel by Balzac, the acknowledged master of stories of adultery.[130]

As the last detail suggests, the concern about what women read and how it could influence them emerges here in the double textual references to dangerous letters and novels.

William Powell Frith (1819 –1909) took up this theme again about fifty years later. Renowned for his panoramic and social paintings, he also dedicated himself to moralistic subjects as in the series *The Road to Ruin* inspired by the Hogarthian *Rake Progress.* His *Intercepted letter* (1901, Fig.13) is slightly less pathetic and more focused on the couple than the implications of that momentous revelation.

Not always the censors are the husbands. Before marriage, women's education and social relations were under the responsibility of the mothers and the older women of the family. Some paintings, therefore, represent the moment in which these bulwarks of the girl's morality intercepted "unapproved" correspondence.

The Inquisition (1880) by Charles West Cope (1811/1890, Fig. 14) depicts the discovery on the part of two old and stern-looking ladies of a red box full of letters and tokens which were probably sent by a lover to the young woman under their care, perhaps the daughter and niece of the two. The girl's defiant gaze and stance suggest that she is standing up to her "inquisitors", possibly on the ground of her true sentiments for the lad.

In *The Caution* (1847, Fig.15) the Irish painter Nicholas Joseph Crowley (1819-1857) portrays an old woman that seems to be in the act of teaching some moral lesson to her young charge as her raised index finger would suggest. The title and context indicate that she may be warning her against the dangers of improper behaviour for such a beautiful young woman. However, the girl is hiding what we might suppose to be a love letter behind her back and the young man who has probably written it is hiding in the distance with an expression that betrays some amusement at the tardiness of that lesson.

Women are not represented only in the passive activity of reading or receiving love letters. Since the eighteenth century, with novels like *Pamela,* the paintings like those illustrating it by Joseph Highmore and the influence of French painting, the artistic tradition had sexualised the woman who writes letters. Although scholars have challenged the traditional views on Victorian sexuality as repressed and prude, it cannot be denied that, in painting, the open erotic hints which

---

[130] E. D. H. Johnson, *Paintings of the British Social Scene from Hogarth to Sickert*, 1st edition (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), 238.

could be found in the art of the previous century were replaced by an emphasis on propriety and decorum.

Again, the focus is on the woman and the letter as an object rather than its content. Rarely do viewers find hints to what is in it. Even more than in the paintings where women receive or read letters, these are non-narrative paintings, like the Dutch models of the seventeenth century to which this genre was so much indebted.

The examples are countless. From the several country girls writing at a table in the cosy atmosphere of their cottages painted by Haynes King (see, for example, Figures 17, 17b, 17c), to the refined and elegant lady by Samuel Luke Fildes (1843-1927) looking in the space to find the right words (Fig.16). In *Le Billet Doux* (1868, Fig. 18) by Alexander Johnston (1815-1891) the young lady seems to be annoyed to have been interrupted by the observer. Portrayed from the back but with her face turned towards the "intruders", the woman covers her written words with her hand in an attempt to protect them from prying eyes. The painting might have been inspired by Fragonard's *The Love Letter* (1770-1780 ca), although in its Victorian version the lady has lost all her flirtatious attitude and smile.

The most obvious observation that emerges from this analysis is that the preference of English painters for women subjects when dealing with the epistolary theme is almost exclusive. When they are not the messengers, men are observers or censors of the women's epistolary activity. In portraits, they are often depicted holding letters at their writing desks, but the focus is on the sense of power and authority that their figures inspire in the viewers, and the letter is only instrumental to that (see, for example, the portrait of *Sir Francis Grant Edward Clive Herbert 2nd Earl of Powis* by Francis Grant 1845 in Fig.19). Despite the few exceptions, like *News from my lad* (Fig.20), by James Campbell (1828-1893), where a locksmith reads the letter that his son writes to him from India,[131] very rare are, instead, the paintings in which a man is shown while reading or writing a love letter. We may infer that the young man in *The Letter* (Fig.21) by Alfred Bayes (1831-1909) is reading a love letter, from his uneasy attitude and the rush with which he has dropped the envelope to read its content, but the setting is the eighteenth century, not Victorian England. Another example is the young boy who writes a Valentine in William Henry Hunt's *The Valentine* (Fig.22), but it is a child, not a man, that is depicted.

---

[131] It is one of the few cases in which part of the letter is readable for the viewers. The letter begins with 'Lucknow March 1858. My dear old Daddy, I dare say you will read this in the old shop and here am I under the burning sun of India'. 1858 was the year of the Indian mutiny and the massacre of English troops, and the reference places the painting in a precise moment in space and time, allowing the reader to imagine the father's feeling and relief at the reading of the letter.

An explanation to this can be found in Bergers seminal work about reading painting, where he summarises in a few lines how genders have been traditionally represented by the visual arts in the Western cultures:

> According to usage and conventions which are at last being questioned but have by no means been overcome, the social presence of a woman is different in kind from that of a man. A man's presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies. If the promise is large and credible his presence is striking. If it is small or incredible, he is found to have little presence. The promised power may be moral, physical, temperamental, economic, social, sexual - but its object is always exterior to the man. A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. His presence may be fabricated, in the sense that he pretends to be capable of what he is not. But the pretence is always towards a power which he exercises on others.
> By contrast, a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste - indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence. Presence for a woman is so intrinsic to her person that men tend to think of it as an almost physical emanation, a kind of heat or smell or aura. [132]

Nothing like the epistolary painting of Victorian Britain could epitomise better this general overview of the difference between the representation of genders in painting. In the age that had replaced the cult of sensibility with that of utility, a certain association of man with power and work rather than love in epistolary painting is not surprising.

The last aspect of Victorian painting that this section will deal with is what was called above, "the postal" component. The campaign in favour of the Postal Reform had given, as mentioned in Chapter 2, a sentimentalised view of the penny post as a means to help families remain united despite the distance, soldiers to feel closer to their beloved ones, lovers to communicate more often. Painters drew from that public imagination of the post and at the same time contributed to establishing it.

Elements introduced by the postal reforms (the Penny Post in 1840 but also subsequent ones), like the pillar boxes or the post boxes, started to appear in paintings. In particular, the postman became a central figure in popular culture and, in his role of messenger of love, a favourite subject for painters. Now that he was no longer the person to whom people had to pay the charge of the letters they received, his arrival was no longer feared as it was before. On the contrary, he was awaited impatiently, as the letters from Elizabeth Barret Browning quoted in Chapter 3 suggest.

---

[132] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (Penguin Classics, London,1972), 45-46.

In the 1860s, the postman even became the subject of a song, *The postman's Knock*[133] which was very popular:

Every morning as true as the clock
Somebody hears the postman's knock

What a wonderful man the postman is
As he hastens from door to door
What medley of news his hands contain
For high, low, rich or poor
In many a face he joy can trace
As many a grief he can see
But the door is open to his loud rat-tat
And his swift delivery

Every morning as true as the clock
Somebody hears the postman's knock

Number one he presents with news of a birth
With tidings of death number 4
At 13 a bill of terrible length
He drops through a hole in the door
Now a cheque or an order for 15 he brings
For 16 his presence to prove
For 17 doth an acknowledgement get
And 18 a letter of love

Every morning as true as the clock
Somebody hears the postman's knock

On the back of the song was the illustration of a postman in uniform who was knocking at a door and almost posing at the viewer, proud to be about to carry out another delivery (see Fig.23). The contrast between the knock on the door that scared the low-income families who could not afford to pay for the letters from their beloved that Hill mentioned in his autobiography and the arrival of the "wonderful man" of the song is evident.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, like almost every aspect of Victorian society, the reform also became the object of satire, and the scandals of the end of the century involving postmen found drunk or turned out to be rent-boys certainly affected the image of the postman as a silent benevolent messenger.

However, genre painters, who saw the life in the countryside as less corrupted than the one in the troubled urban context, kept portraying country village postmen whose work they gave a

[133] The Postman's Knock, composed by W. T. Wrighton with lyrics by L. M. Thornton. Published by Robert Cocks & Co, New Burlington Street, London. Dedicated to "Sir Rowland Hill, late of the General Post Office".

sentimentalised view. Their picturesque and peaceful scenes are in striking contrast with the busy bustle of Hick's post office that opened this virtual gallery.

The impatience shown by Barret for the arrival of the postman and with him of the lover's letters is often represented in painting. In J.P. Hall's *The country letter carrier* (Fig.24), two young country girls are literally assaulting the postman to reach the letter he is holding and which, however, seems to be addressed to what is perhaps the oldest of the three sisters, the young woman on the right. She, on her part, is pretending not to care about the letter but, in fact, keeps her eyes well fixed on the scene while the positions of her hands give away a certain uneasiness. All this, under the benevolent gaze of the mother who observes the scene while reading her newspaper; she seems amused and not at all surprised or worried about the arrival of the letter, so we might deduce she knows that her eldest daughter was expecting one and from whom.

In *The Postman* by Thomas Liddall Armitage (1855–1924) (Fig.25), viewers have the impression that the mother is well aware of the sentimental nature of the letter the daughter is waiting for, and her posture suggests she is even explaining it to the postman, causing a slight smile in him and some embarrassment in the young lady.

William Edward Millner (1849-1895) made the village postman (*The Village Postman*, d.u.,Fig.26) the central figure of one of his paintings and represented him standing in a peaceful village lane while patiently searching among his letters and carrying books, telegrams and parcels.

Some artists emphasised the delicate nature of the postman's activity by stressing the secrecy of the message he is carrying. For example, Edward Robert Hughes (1851-1914) in *The Secret Letter* (d.u., Fig.27) depicts two girls who seem to be rushing the postman to give them the letter they are waiting for before their mother wakes from her doze. We may presume that the family does not approve of the sender or that they are unaware of the girl corresponding with someone. Secrecy, which played such a prominent role in real life letters as well as fictional ones, remained a significant aspect of romantic epistolary exchanges.

If some painters represented the moment of posting a letter in pillar boxes (see Frederick Daniel Hardy's *Posting a letter*, 1879, in Fig. 28, or Alexander Johnston's *The Pillar Box,* 1876, in Fig.29), a myriad of overly sentimental scenes presented women hiding their letters in the trunk of a tree, a secret spot for a forbidden exchange (see William Oliver's *The secret letter*, d.u., Fig.31, or *The Letter Box* by Arthur Hopkins, Fig.30).

The tendency to moral didacticism and sentimentalism that characterised many of these Victorian epistolary paintings and genre painting in general, has often made it unpopular among

art historians and critics, who rarely gave it a proper degree of acknowledgement. Nevertheless, the most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that many painters of different levels of artistry tried their hand at the epistolary theme, certainly more than one would expect, seeing the scarcity of studies on the topic. Even those who dealt with other types of paintings sooner or later gave in to the temptation to depict the letter, and often in love-related contexts.

The landscapist William Turner, for instance, in his *Rembrandt's Daughter* (1827, Fig.33) represents the Dutch painter spying on his daughter who is reading a love letter. A couple of years later (1830, Fig. 33b) he worked on another Rembrandt-style painting representing a woman who is concealing a letter from another, confirming the interest of the painter in the aspect of secrecy of the epistolary theme.

Edwin Landseer, renowned for his paintings and sculptures of animals, portrayed the mourning Queen Victoria on her horse while reading her correspondence (*Queen Victoria at Osborne* 1865-67, Fig.34) and created a delicate chalk drawing of a woman (possibly Georgiana, Duchess of Bedford), reading a letter (Fig.35). Historical painters, on their part, preferred to set their epistolary scenes in past ages, as happened with Lawrence Alma Tadema (1836-1812) and his *The Letter from an absent one* (d.u., Fig.36), in which the roman context required a rolled letter.

Some other artists, like Haynes King, Marcus Stone, William Oliver and John Everett Millais, to name just a few, demonstrated a keen interest in letters, their narrative potential and its capacity to extend backwards and forward the time scope of a frozen scene and included letters in several of their works. All these examples confirm the initial thesis that letter-writing culture in Victorian Britain was part of those "emergent ideas" with which, according to Roston, "each creative artist needed to respond individually",[134] and that painters and novelists alike could not help but let emerge in their works.

[134] Murray Roston, *Victorian Contexts: Literature and the Visual Arts*, 1st ed. 1996 edition (New York; Secaucus: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 3.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Collections of Letters, Manuals and other Victorian Publications

Abbott,Robert. Letter to Robert to Mary. Birmingham University Archive.

Abbott,Robert. Letters to Robert to Mary. The Postal Museum Archive. London.

Anthony Trollope. *Autobiography Of Anthony Trollope*. New York: Dodd,Mead & Company, 1905. http://archive.org/details/autobiographyofa018303mbp.

Blair, Hugh. *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres by Hugh Blair, D.D. F.R.S.E.* London: Baynes and son, 1823.

Bronte, Charlotte. *Selected Letters.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Browning, Robert, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1845-1846*. New York: Harper & brothers, [c1898]. http://archive.org/details/lettersofrobertb02browiala.

Burton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Philadelphia: E. Claxton & company, 1883. http://archive.org/details/anatomyofmelanch00burt.

Clarke, Andrea. *Love Letters: Intimate Correspondence between Famous People*. London: British Library Publishing, 2011.

Craik, Dinah Maria Mulock. *A Woman's Thoughts about Women*. London: Hurst and Blackett, 1859. http://archive.org/details/womansthoughtsab00crai.

Ellis, Sarah Stickney. *The Wives of England : Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, & Social Obligations*. London: Fisher, 1843. http://archive.org/details/wivesofenglandth00elliuoft.

Emmerson, George S. *Arthur Darling: The Romance of Arthur Sullivan and Rachel Scott Russell*. London, Ont: Galt House, 1980.

Foundling Hospital fonds. *Letters from the Mothers to the Secretary*. Manuscript on paper. A/FH/A/09/019/012, A/FH/A/09/019/13, A /FH/A/09/019/007/1-632. The London Metropolitan Archive. The Foundling Hospital Collection.

Johnson, Samuel. *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* London: Alexander V. Blake, 1840.

Letters from Charlotte and Caroline Green. Manuscript on paper. Private collection of the Fienga Family. Pesaro.

Mercer, Beatrice Catherine. *Dearest Bertie -My Darling Jack*. London: Willow Books, 1983.

Montagu, Mary Wortley, James Archibald Stuart-Wortley-Mackenzie Wharncliffe, W. Moy (William Moy) Thomas, and Louisa Stuart. *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*. London : Henry G. Bohn, 1861. http://archive.org/details/lettersworksofla01inmont.

Richardson, H. C., ed. *Academy Criticisms, 1877: A Collection Of The Principal Notices And Critiques, Which Have Appeared In The Leading Journals And Art Publications*. Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2010.

Richardson, Samuel. *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1964. http://archive.org/details/selectedletterso0000rich

Saunterings in and About London, by Max Schlesinger.' Accessed 16 January 2022. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/46571/46571-h/46571-h.htm

Seton, George. *Gossip about Letters and Letter-Writers*. Edmonston and Douglas, 1873

Stickney (Sarah), afterwards ELLIS. *The Young Ladies' Reader. With Observations on Reading Aloud and Remarks Prefixed to the Divisions of the Work*, 1845.

Thomas Cook. *The Universal Letter-Writer; Or, New Art of Polite Correspondence: Containing a Course Of ...* T. Wilson and Son, 1812. http://archive.org/details/universalletter00cookgoog.

Unknown sender. Valentine. The Postal Museum Archive. London.

Webster's Ready Made Love Letters. *New York: R. M. De Witt 1873. https://www.loc.gov/item/11002925/*

Wolfson, John, Rachel Scott Russell, Louise Scott Russell, and Arthur Seymour Sullivan. *Sullivan and the Scott Russells*. First Edition. Chichester: Packard Publishing Ltd, 1984.

Novels and other literary works

Austen, Jane, and David M. Shapard. *The annotated Pride and prejudice*. New York: Anchor Books, 2012.

Austen, Jane, and David M. Shapard. *The annotated Persuasion*. New York: Anchor Books, 2010.

Austen, Jane, and David M. Shapard. *The annotated Northanger Abbey*. New York: Anchor Books, 2013.

Austen, Jane, and David M. Shapard. *The annotated Emma*. New York: Anchor Books, 2012.

Braddon, Mary Elizabeth. *Lady Audley's Secret.* London: Penguin, 2010.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1866. https://archive.org/details/alicesadventur00carr/mode/2up

Carroll, Lewis. *Eight or Nine words about letter-writing.* Oxford : Emberlin and Son, 1890. https://archive.org/details/eightorninewisew00carr/mode/2up

Reade, Charles. *Hard Cash: A Matter-of-fact Romance*. Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1864. http://archive.org/details/hardcashamatter01readgoog.

Collins, Wilkie. *Men and Wife.* Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Collins, Wilkie. *The Haunted Hotel: a Mystery of Modern Venice*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1879. https://archive.org/details/hauntedhotelmyst00coll/page/4/mode/2up.

Collins, Wilkie. *The Woman in White*. London, 1860; Project Gutemberg, 29 September 2014. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/583/583-h/583-h.htm

Craik, Dinah Maria Mulock. *The Woman's Kingdom : A Love Story*. Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz, 1868. http://archive.org/details/womanskingdomlov00crai.

Dickens, Charles, George Ford, and Sylvere Monod. *Bleak House.* Critical edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977.

Dickens, Charles, Wilkie Collins. *No Thoroughfare*. Leipzig:Bernhard Tauchnitz, 186

Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield*. London: Penguin Books, 2004.

Dickens, Charles. *The Pickwick Papers.* London, 1836; Project Gutenberg, 22 April 2009 https://www.gutenberg.org/files/580/580-h/580-h.htm

Eliot, George. *Middlemarch (Norton Critical Editions) 2nd (Second) Edition Text Only*. Edited by Hornback, Bert G. New York: Norton, 2000.

Gaskell, Elizabeth, Thackeray Ritchie, Anne. *Cranford*. Macmillan & Co., 1895. http://archive.org/details/cranford00thomgoog.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Mary Barton*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1848. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2153/2153-h/2153-h.htm

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Wives and Daughters: an Everyday Story*. London:1866; Project Gutemberg, 26 December 2001. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4274/4274-h/4274-h.htm

Hardy, Thomas. *Far from the Madding Crowd*. London: Smith, Elder & Co.,1874. Project Gutemberg, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/107

Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: a pure woman.* London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine and Co., 1891. https://archive.org/details/tessofdurbervill01hard

James, Henry. *The turn of the Screw.* London: Marin Secker, 1915. https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.95031

Oliphant, Margaret. *Miss Marjorybanks*. London: The Zodiac Press, 1969. http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/41286.

Scott, Walter. *Redgauntlet : A Tale of the Eighteenth Century*. Edinburgh : Constable ; London : Hurst, Robinson, 1824. http://archive.org/details/redgauntlettale02scot.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.* London, Glasgow: Collins, 19--. https://archive.org/details/drjekyllmrhyde00stevuoft

Tennyson, Alfred Lord. *The Princess : A Medley*. New York : Macmillan Company, 1917. http://archive.org/details/princessmalf00tenn.

Thackeray, William Makepeace. *Flore et Zéphyr ; the Yellowplush Correspondence ; the Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan*. New York : Garland Pub., 1991. http://archive.org/details/floreetzephyryel0000thac.

Thackeray, William, and Peter L. Shillingsburg. *Vanity Fair*. Critical edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995.

Thackeray, William. *Vanity Fair*. Edited by Peter L. Shillingsburg. First edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994.

Trollope, Anthony, and Stephen Wall. *Can You Forgive Her?* Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1975.

Trollope, Anthony. *Doctor Thorne*. Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 1980. gutenberg.org/files/3166/3166-h/3166-h.htm

Trollope, Anthony. *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite.* New York: 1871, Project Gutemberg, 5 January 2009. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/27712/27712-h/27712-h.htm

Wilde, Oscar, and James David Hart. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. London: Simpkin, Marshall Hamilton, Kent, 19--. http://archive.org/details/pictureofdoriang00wildrich.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Theory and methodology

Austin, John Langshaw. *How to Do Things with Words*. Edited by Urmson J.O. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962

Barker, Chris, and Emma A. Jane. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. 5 edizione. Los Angeles: Sage Pubns Ltd, 2016

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernita' Liquida*, 22nd edition. Roma; Bari: LATERZA & FIGLI S.P.A., 2011.

Bolter, Jay David and Grusin, Richard, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, MIT Press, 1999.

Brooks, Peter. *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*. Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: John Wiley & Sons, 1994.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Reprint edizione. Cambridge, Mass: Mit Pr, 1994.

Vallorani, N. *Introduzione ai cultural studies. UK, USA e paesi anglofoni*. Carocci, 2016.

Letter-writing

Altick, Richard D. *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public : 1800-1900*. Reprint edizione. Chicago, Ill: Univ of Chicago Pr, 1983

Altman, Janet. *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State Univ Pr, 1982.

Atkinson, Dr Diane. *The Criminal Conversation of Mrs Norton*. London: Preface Publishing, 2012.

Barret-Ducrocq, Francoise. *Love in the Time of Victoria: Sexuality and Desire Among Working-Class Men and Women in 19th Century London*. Translated by John Howe. Reprint edition. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.

Barton, David, and Nigel Hall, *Letter Writing As a Social Practice*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Pub Co, 1999.

Beebee, Thomas O., *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Brant, Clare. *Eighteenth-century Letters And British Culture*. 2006° edizione. Basingstoke England ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Browne, Christopher. *Getting the Message: The Story of the British Post Office*. Alan Sutton, 1993.

Ceccarelli, Paola. *Ancient Greek Letter Writing: A Cultural History (600 BC- 150 BC)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199675593.001.0001.

Costantini, M., F. Marroni, and A.E. Soccio. *Letter(s): Functions and Forms of Letter-Writing in Victorian Art and Literature*. Scienze Dell'antichità, Filologico-Letterarie e Storico-Artistiche. Aracne, 2009. https://books.google.it/books?id=DNkqAQAAIAAJ

Daunton, Martin J. *Royal Mail: The Post Office Since 1840*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

Dossena, Marina|Del Lungo Camiciotti. *Letter Writing in Late Modern Europe*. *Pbns.218*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2012. https://benjamins.com/catalog/pbns.218.

Eve, Jeanette. 'The Floral And Horticultural In Elizabeth Gaskell's Novels'. *The Gaskell Society Journal* 7 (1993): 1–15.

Fitzmaurice, Susan. *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English: A Pragmatic Approach*. Amsterdam ; Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002.

Flint, Kate. *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914*. Revised ed. edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1995.

Frost, Ginger S. *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England*. Reprint edizione. Place of publication not identified: Univ of Virginia Pr, 2015.

Golden, Catherine J. *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010.

Greenaway, Kate. *Language of Flowers*. London : George Routledge and Sons, 1884. http://archive.org/details/languageflowers00gree.

Homans, Margaret. *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture, 1837-1876*. 2nd ed. edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999

Houghton, Walter E. *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870*. Yale University Press, 2014

Hughes, Kathryn. *The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs Beeton*. London: Harper Perennial 2006.

Jolly, Margaretta. 'On Burning, Saving and Stealing Letters'. *New Formations* Summer 2009, no. 67 (n.d.): 25–34.

Klauck, Hans-Josef, e Daniel P. Bailey. *Ancient Letters And the New Testament: A Guide to Context And Exegesis*. Waco, Tex: Baylor Univ Pr, 2006.

Levenson, Karen Chase;Michael. *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family*. Princeton University Press, 1798.

Marcus, Steven. *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*. Basic Books, 1966

Murphy, James Jerome. *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*. University of California Press, 1985.

O'Gorman, Francis, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture*. Cambridge Companions to Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521886994.

Literature

Bray, Joe. *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness*. 1° edizione. London ; New York: Routledge, 2003

Brown, Homer Obed. *Institutions of the English Novel: From Defoe to Scott*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.

Butler, Mary. ‘Letters Within Jane Austen’s Novels: A Bridge Towards Romantic Communication’. *Undergraduate Review* 2, no. 1 (1 January 2006): 103–8.

Carse, Wendy K. ‘A Penchant for Narrative: “Mary Smith” in Elizabeth Gaskell’s “Cranford”’. *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 20, no. 3 (1990): 318–30

Chamberlain, David S. ‘Unity and Irony in Trollope’s Can You Forgive Her?’ *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 8, no. 4 (1968): 669–80. https://doi.org/10.2307/449472.

Chapple, J. A. V. *Elizabeth Gaskell : The Early Years*. Manchester ; New York : Manchester University Press ; New York : Distributed exclusively in the USA by St. Martin’s Press, 1997. http://archive.org/details/elizabethgaskell0000chap.

Day, Robert Adams. *Told in Letters; Epistolary Fiction before Richardson*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1966. http://archive.org/details/toldinlettersepi00dayr.

Dr Killick, Tim. *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century: The Rise of the Tale*. 1st edition. Ashgate, 2013.

Favret, Mary A. *Romantic correspondence : women, politics, and the fiction of letters*. Cambridge studies in Romanticism. Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Ferguson, Robert A. ‘Proposals and Performative Utterance in the Nineteenth-Century Novel: The Professional Man’s Plight’. In *Subversion and Sympathy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199812042.003.0014.

Forster, Margaret. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning : A Biography*. New York : Doubleday, 1989. http://archive.org/details/elizabethbarrett0000fors_e9w4

Glovinsky, Will. ‘Unfeeling Omniscience: Empire and Distant Intimacy in *Vanity Fair*’. *ELH* 87, no. 1 (2020): 91–120. https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2020.0003.

Glovinsky, Will. ‘Unfeeling Omniscience: Empire and Distant Intimacy in Vanity Fair’. *ELH* 87, no. 1 (2020): 91–120. https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2020.0003.

Humphreys, Camilla. ‘Dickens’s Use Of Letters In “Bleak House”’. *Dickens Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1989): 53–60.

Johnson, Kirstin. ‘When “Letter” Becomes “Litter” : The (de)Construction of the Message from Ann Radcliffe to Wilkie Collins’. *Caliban* 15, no. 1 (2004): 153–62. https://doi.org/10.3406/calib.2004.1513.

Johnson, Kirstin. ‘When “Letter” Becomes “Litter” : The (de)Construction of the Message from Ann Radcliffe to Wilkie Collins’. *Caliban* 15, no. 1 (2004): 153–62. https://doi.org/10.3406/calib.2004.1513.

Koehler, Karin. ‘Valentines and the Victorian Imagination: *Mary Barton* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 45,2017, 395-412, Cambridge University Press.

Marcus, Sharon. ‘Contracting Female Marriage in Anthony Trollope’s Can You Forgive Her?’ *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 60, no. 3 (1 December 2005): 291–325. https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2005.60.3.291

Marks, Clifford J. “‘Middlemarch,’ Obligation, and Dorothea’s Duplicity.” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 54, no. 2 (2000): 25–41. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1348118.

Markus, Julia. *Dared and Done: The Marriage of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning*. New York: Alfred a Knopf Inc, 1995

Matus, Jill L. *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*. Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Menke, Richard. *Telegraphic Realism Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems*. Stanford, Calif. Stanford University Press, 2008. http://library.lincoln.ac.uk/items/136435

Menke, Richard. *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems*. 1st edition. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2007.

Moody, Ellen. “Partly Told in Letters: Trollope's Story-Telling Art”, *The 12th Annual Trollope Society Lecture*, delivered 23 November 1999, “The Victorian web”.

Moody, Ellen. *TROLLOPE ON THE NET*. First Edition. London ; Rio Grande, Ohio: Hambledon Continuum, 1999.

Normandine Shawn. ‘Jane Austen’s Epistolarity’. *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews,* 27, no. 4 (2014): 158–67.

Nussbaum, Martha C., and Alison L. LaCroix, eds. *Subversion and Sympathy: Gender, Law, and the British Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199812042.001.0001.

Page, Frederick, and John Johnson. *Anthony Trollope An Autobiography, The Oxford Trollope, Crown Edition*. Edited by Michael Sadler. Geoffrey Cumberlege: Oxford University Press, 1950

Page, Norman, ed. *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*. Routledge, 1996.

Pearson, David. '"The Letter Killeth": Epistolary Purposes and Techniques in Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite'. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37, no. 3 (1982): 396–418. https://doi.org/10.2307/3044659.

Pfordresher, John. *The Secret History of Jane Eyre: How Charlotte Brontë Wrote Her Masterpiece*. New York: W W Norton & Co Inc, 2017.

Rotunno, L. *Postal Plots in British Fiction, 1840-1898: Readdressing Correspondence in Victorian Culture*. Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137323804

Smolderen, Thierry. *The Origins of Comics: From William Hogarth to Winsor McCay*. Translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. Illustrated edition. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014

Super, R. H. *Trollope in the Post Office*. Ann Arbor: Univ of Michigan Pr, 1981

Sutherland, John. *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction*. 2nd edition. Harlow, England ; New York: Routledge, 2009.

Taylor, Jenny Bourne, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521840384

Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel*. University of California Press, 2001.

Welsh, Alexander. *George Eliot and Blackmail*. Harvard University Press, 1985.

The Victorian Context

Mitchell, Sally, ed., *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*, 1st edition. New York: Garland Publishing, 1988.

Phegley, Jennifer. *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England*. Illustrated edition. Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2011.

Roston, Murray. *Victorian Contexts: Literature and the Visual Arts*. 1st ed. 1996 edition. New York; Secaucus: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996.

Schmidt, Leigh Eric. 'The Fashioning of a Modern Holiday: St. Valentine's Day, 1840-1870'. *Winterthur Portfolio* 28, no. 4 (1993): 209–45.

Sheetz-Nguyen, Jessica A. *Victorian Women, Unwed Mothers and the London Foundling Hospital.* London: Continuum, 2012.

Staff, Frank. *The Valentine & Its Origins*. Frederick A. Praeger, 1969.

Stone, Lawrence. *Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*. 1st Edition. London: Littlehampton Book Services Ltd, 1977.

The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies. *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*. Oxford University Press, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199211524.001.0001.

Thomas, Kate. *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters*. 1° edizione. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Tucker, Herbert F., ed. *A New Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*. 1st edition. Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.

Tuite, Clara. 'Tainted Love and Romantic "Literary Celebrity"'. *ELH* 74, no. 1 (2007): 59–88.

Whyman, Susan. *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199532445.001.0001

Painting

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.

Bills, Mark. '"The General Post Office - One Minute to Six" by George Elgar Hicks'. *The Burlington Magazine* 144, no. 1194 (2002): 550–56.

Bryson, Norman, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey, eds. *Visual Theory*. 1st edition. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1991.

Flint, Kate. *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Hadfield, John. *Every Picture Tells a Story: Images of Victorian Life*. London: Herbert Press Ltd, 1985.

Johnson, E. D. H. *Paintings of the British Social Scene from Hogarth to Sickert*. 1st edition. New York: Rizzoli, 1986.

Jordanova, Ludmilla. *The Look of the Past: Visual And Material Evidence In Historical Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Jr, Arthur K. Wheelock, and Ben Broos. *Johannes Vermeer*. F First Edition. Zwolle: Yale University Press, 1995.

Leymarie, Jean. *The Spirit of the Letter in Painting*. Presumed First Edition. Hallmark Cards, 1961.

Reinhardt, Jennifer. “Gaze”. The Chicago School of Media Theory Website. Accessed 30/12/2021. https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/gaze/#:~:text=A%20gaze%20can%20be%20used,or%20the%20work%20of%20art.&text=In%20this%20painting%2C%20the%20spectator,spectator%20gazing%20at%20the%20painting.

Reynolds, Joshua. *The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Illustr. by Explanatory Notes & Plates by John Burnet*. Carpenter, 1842.

Riding, Christine, and Sir John Everett Millais. *Tate British Artists: John Everett Millais*. Harry N. Abrams, 2006

Ruskin, John, Ballantyne Press. (1902) bkp CU-BANC, Zaehnsdorf (Firm) bnd CU-BANC, and Florence S. Walter. *Of Queens’ Gardens*. [London : G. Allen, 1902. http://archive.org/details/ofqueensgardens00ruskrich.

Sutton, Peter S. *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer*. London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2003.

Thomas, Julia. *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription Of Values In Word and Image*. 1st edition. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004.

Wood, Christopher. *Victorian Panorama: Paintings of Victorian Life*. First Edition. London: Faber, 1976.

General theory for the case study

‘The History of Emotions: Past, Present, Future | Revista de Estudios Sociales’. Accessed 26 January 2022. https://revistas.uniandes.edu.co/doi/10.7440/res62.2017.02.

Barthes, Roland. *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. Translation edition. London: Penguin Group, 1990.

Coontz, Stephanie. *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*. Annotated edition. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006.

Frevert, Ute. *Emotions in History: Lost and Found*. New York, UNITED STATES: Central European University Press, 2011. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unibo/detail.action?docID=3137330

Houghton, Walter E. ‘Love’. In *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 341–93. 1830-1870. Yale University Press, 1985. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.unibo.it/stable/j.ctt1cc2mbr.17

Schor, Hilary M. ‘Love’. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46, no. 3–4 (ed 2018): 752–56. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150318000748.

Stearns, Peter N., and Carol Z. Stearns. ‘Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards’. *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 4 (1985): 813–36. https://doi.org/10.2307/1858841.

Swan, Annie S. (Annie Shepherd). *Courtship and Marriage And the Gentle Art of Home-Making*. Accessed 25 November 2021. http://archive.org/details/courtshipandmarr35963gut

William M. Reddy. *The Making of Romantic Love : Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900-1200 CE*. Chicago Studies in Practices of Meaning. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

General Sitography

(The following sites have been accessed on several occasions between 2018-2022. Each specific reference includes the relevant access date).

Victorian Web. < http://www.victorianweb.org/ >.

British Library Website , *Discovery Literature* section <https://www.bl.uk/discovering-literature>-.

Project Gutemberg, < https://www.gutenberg.org/>.

Internet Archive, < https://archive.org/>

Tate website < https://www.tate.org.uk/>

Victorian and Albert museum website < https://www.vam.ac.uk/>

The Postal Museum, London, website < https://www.postalmuseum.org/>