Humanistic Letter-Writing

by Gábor Almási

In Antiquity the letter was defined as a conversation between absent friends. This "familiar letter" was rediscovered during the early Renaissance, eventually leading to a revolution in epistolography. However, as Latin was a prestigious language learnt at school by reading masters of eloquence, it was less suited to the plain style than the vernacular, which started dominating letter-writing from the second half of the 16th century. This article argues that the humanist letter was a semi-public literary form, and that it was this feature which allowed for its many different uses. Among the functions of correspondence, networking and knowledge distribution are emphasised.

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Introduction

> It is good to break silence, and balance one's more serious studies with letter-writing. For the mind must be refreshed sometimes by diversions of this kind, and by making an exchange of the duties of courtesy, especially for such things as both adorn the intellect and swell the number of one's friends.[1]

Contrary to what Henry Oldenburg (ca. 1617–1677) (➔ Media Link #ab) suggests, letter-writing was not only an occasion for diversions. Epistolography was "perhaps the most extensive branch of humanist literature", and it remained so also in the 17th century.[2] Letter-writing was a deadly serious business both in terms of time, commitment and scientific progress. This "exchange of the duties of courtesy" was what made the Republic of Letters function. In this sense, correspondence was an end in itself. Although supposedly private in character, epistolary interactions were at least as much responsible for the creation of a public sphere as the printing press. For the same reason, it may be claimed that correspondence was among the most important vehicles of the scientific revolution.

▲ 1

The Theory of Letter-Writing

Although the practice and concept of letter-writing displays great continuities from Antiquity to the Renaissance the changes were also significant. Just as in the 17th century, already in ancient times the letter had frequently been defined as a kind of conversation between absent friends. Nevertheless, Greeks and Romans took this precept more seriously and more narrowly than later times. In Antiquity the concept of the letter was principally that of the familiar letter. It had to be brief and ought to treat a simple subject in simple terms. "If anybody should write of logical subtleties or questions of natural history in a letter, he writes indeed, but not a letter" – claimed Demetrius (ca. 350–283 B.C.) (➔ Media Link #ad).[3] In terms of style not many variations were allowed. Demetrius mentions only the plain and the graceful, and Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.) (➔ Media Link #ae), by far the most influential authority in Latin epistolography, acknowledged the existence of many sorts while claiming that only two of them pleased him greatly, the familiar or jesting and the grave.[4] A letter in the plain style needed to be direct and natural; it was not constrained by strict rules, since too much elaboration also contradicted "the laws of friendship".[5]

▲ 2

By the Middle Ages, letters of all kinds enjoyed the same legitimacy. "Letter" was now an extremely broad category, including practically anything that had a salutation and a signature. No wonder late medieval *dictatores* and Renaissance humanists found it difficult to categorise letters and borrowed the rhetorical concepts of oratory when describing them. Little difference was seen between *sermo* and *epistola*, and the writing of both needed to comply with narrowly defined rules. The efforts to classify letters resulted in the precise circumscription of a large number of different types. In 1522 Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469–1536) (➔ Media Link #af), although breaking with tradition in many respects and liberal in questions of style and form, still organised his manual on letter-writing according to these groups, mentioning thirty of them (e.g. letter of petition, recommendation, consolation, lamentation, congratulation, thanksgiving, narration, order, love, etc.).[6] Getting rid of the theoretical lore of the Middle Ages was more difficult than could be expected, and the theory of letter-writing remained embarrassingly linked to scholastic rhetoric until the end of the 16th century.[7] Nonetheless, the rediscovery of the familiar letter in the early Renaissance meant that *in practice* letter-writing developed gradually into a new art, whose style was reframed in imitation of Cicero, and was liberated from the restrictions of scholasticism.

▲3

The "Familiar Letter" and the Vernacular

From the 15th century, manuals started circulating in ever greater numbers, and were soon accompanied by editions of epistolographies of single authors (starting with Francesco Petrarch's (1304–1374) (➔ Media Link #ag) *Epistolae* in imitation of Cicero's *Epistolae ad Familiares*), and from the 16th century also by anthologies of letters. The rediscovery of the familiar (i.e. private) letter, and the new consciousness of letter-writing as a classical art, amounted to an epistolary revolution. Emphasis was newly put on the plain style; and even when elaborated with great care the letter should ideally appear direct, natural, intimate, and to the point. In 1533 the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives (1492–1540) (➔ Media Link #ah) went even further than Erasmus by uncovering the nuances and the necessary psychological skills of letter-writing. He clearly stressed that the artifice of letter-writing had to be veiled.[8] Intriguingly, as a result the good letter had much in common with Baldassare Castiglione's (1478–1529) (➔ Media Link #ai) perfect courtier (as exemplified in his book *Il libro del Cortegiano* of 1516): both had to reflect easiness and nonchalance (*sprezzatura*). Anticipating later developments, Vives's point of orientation was Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 B.C.–65 A.D.) (➔ Media Link #aj), whom he quotes in questions regarding conversational style: "[Letters] would contain nothing recherché or feigned but, if it were possible, should represent how I would prefer to speak".[9] The intimate tone of conversing with friends was now an expectation even among scholars who had had no contact before, as the following letter illustrates perfectly:

▲4

Greeting. Often though I converse with you, and you with me, Erasmus my glory and hope, we do not yet know one another. Is not this monstrous odd? And yet not odd at all, but a daily experience. For who is there in whose heart Erasmus does not occupy a central place, to whom Erasmus is not the teacher who holds him in thrall? ... But what a dolt I am to approach such a man as you with unwashed hands like this – no opening words of reverence and respect, as though you were a most familiar friend, when I do not know you nor you me! But with your habitual courtesy you will put this down to strength of feeling or lack of experience; for having spent my life among scholastic philosophers, I have not even learnt enough to be able to write a letter of greeting to a learned man.[10]

The "familiar" and ironic tone of this writing plainly betrays that the author, Martin Luther (1483–1546) (➔ Media Link #ak), was well versed in the art of letter-writing, despite his claims of modesty and monastic past.

▲5

Yet it was not easy to write a Latin letter in the plain style, as Latin was a dead language which had to be learnt at school by reading masters of eloquence. Moreover, Latin was a language of prestige, while plain style necessarily evoked plebeian associations. These contradictions were recognised early, already in the second part of the 15th century,[11] but it was only from the 1530s that the solution, the familiar letter written in the vernacular, started gaining legitimacy among the most learned through a series of publications. Although initially the choice of the vernacular was simply an expression of the new esteem in which the vernacular was held, its suitability for a more intimate, confessional tone was soon generally recognised.[12] By the second half of the 16th century Latin lost its supremacy in the communication of the Republic of Letters, especially in Western and Southern Europe, where Italian and French could replace Latin

even in international communication.[13] At the same time not only did the reading public expand, but the vernacular attracted new members to the Community of Learning.

▲6

Although using the vernacular was an opportunity for more spontaneity, sincerity, and originality, only few people managed to reveal spontaneity in letter-writing. As a rule, learned correspondence, also in the vernacular, remained reflective and self-consciously elaborate, since learned (e.g. humanist) correspondence was essentially semi-public and could not entirely disregard social inequalities between sender and recipient, even when written in the "familiar" style. In general, scholarly letters were written with a larger audience in mind, and even if not, their circulation among friends and the possibility of their later publication could hardly be excluded.

▲7

Published Correspondence

The public character of Renaissance and early modern epistolography was not a novelty; a certain degree of publicity was also inherent in medieval correspondence, including the scribe (the secretary) to whom the letter was dictated, the messenger, who often carried verbal messages as well, and the company to which the letter was read. However, even if these figures were not involved, the fate and uses of a letter could never be foretold.[14] Regardless of the author's intention, letters were often copied, distributed, forwarded, extracted from and annotated, according to the needs of their users. Letters of famous men were read aloud during dinner conversations in both urban and courtly settings. Finally, letters (or extracts) were repeatedly reused in printed books to support or criticise an argument.

▲8

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.[15] 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,[16] 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".[17] Yet, published correspondence was to a certain degree fiction, not only because letters have always tended towards fictionality, and did even more so during the Renaissance,[18] but also as a result of editorial intervention, from writing wholly factitious letters to tailoring authentic letters to editorial goals.

▲9

As recent research has repeatedly underlined, (published) humanist letters were not simple reflections of the self, but rather tools of self-conscious image-building, self-fashioning. Selections of Erasmus's letters, for example, were meant to serve his programme of religious improvement through a cohesive world of learning built on a Europe-wide scholarly brotherhood; the great humanist typographer Aldo Manutio's (ca. 1450–1515) (➜ Media Link #al) son Paolo (1512–1574) (➜ Media Link #am) figured in his own editions as the hero and saviour of classical Latin. The *Epistolae* of Marcus Antonius Muretus (1526–1585) (➜ Media Link #an) served as an apology for his life and as revenge for having been forced to escape from France in his youth; Justus Lipsius's (1547–1606) (➜ Media Link #ao) *Centuriae* were designed to reflect the wise, secure man faithful to the message of his great work, the *Constantia*.[19] Tycho Brahe's (1546–1601) (➜ Media Link #ap) *Astronomical letters* served both to document his observational activity (underlining its merits and excusing its failures) and establish his priority and authority in cosmology and scientific discoveries.[20]

▲10

The Function of Letters

The enormous popularity of letter-writing may not be fully explained by merely referring to the goals of authors or editors. The explanation has also to take social aspects into account. Once again, it is useful to go back to our sharp-minded Demetrius.

▲11

> There is perhaps some truth in what he [Artemon] says [i.e. the letter is one of the two sides of a dialogue], but not the whole truth. The letter should be a little more studied than the dialogue, since the latter reproduces an extemporary utterance, while the former is committed to writing and is (in a way) sent as a gift.[21]

What Demetrius underlines here is the temporality and social function of letters. A letter is a gift, while, as Oldenburg noted, responding to a letter is a duty.[22] The nature of the letter as a gift, particularly in Early Modern Times, was further supported by the fact that letters frequently travelled together with more material gifts: books, species of artefacts, plants, seeds, pieces of collections, etc. The exchange of letters served not only the goal of knowledge distribution and the spread of information of all kinds, but was the principal instrument for an exchange of gestures. And this was what animated the Republic of Letters. When letter-writers and theorists kept referring to the ideal of friendship and to the concept of letters as conversation between absent friends, they were reflecting upon the idea of a social network (i.e. men joined by the pursuit of scholarship, shared education, and social obligations) and the essential role of correspondence in keeping this network alive. In fact, the exchange of favours and gestures was at the very core of letter-writing; no wonder medieval manuals called one of the principal segments of the letter *petitio*. A good proportion of learned letters served no other reason than keeping one's network alive, and a number were sent only because occasional access to a courier was available.

▲12

Correspondence was thus the principal tool of networking, which was in turn an essential aspect of scholarly life. This was all the more true in the 15th–17th centuries, when the majority of scholarly communities were still informally organised, when access to patronage depended on personal contacts, when scholarship was supported through multiple channels of patronage, and when academies or universities had a secondary role in guiding research (at least until the second half of the 17th century). The complexity of these networks may be easily perceived from the fact that some leading scholars corresponded with 300–500 people, while the items of their correspondence could easily reach 5,000–10,000 letters.[23]

▲13

In order to manage such vast correspondence, letter-writers needed to develop special techniques. A case in point is the Italian polymath Gian Vincenzo Pinelli (1535–1601) (➜ Media Link #as). As his biographer narrates, Pinelli was an extremely conscientious letter-writer. He annotated all the letters he received, registering a summary of each in a codex, recording the sender's name, the date and place of writing, and an outline of how he would respond. Every week he put the new letters in a separate box, and those already answered were organized in strict chronological order. Another table helped him with the exchange of gifts. One column listed the objects that friends were expecting from him, another the pieces he had requested.[24]

▲14

Brokers of communication, such as Pinelli, had a major role in orchestrating correspondence networks, the sum of which may be called the Republic of Letters. However, correspondence networks consisted of more than a few celebrities and their learned friends, kept together by mutual scholarly interests. Although writing familiar letters was supposed to imply certain norms of scholarly sociability, ignoring differences in age, sex, social hierarchy, location, nationality and denomination, these differences in fact had a crucial role in organising networks. Nevertheless, if the constraints of one's social, regional or ideological circumstances could be overcome through any vehicle of communication, it was principally through the letter. This potential of the humanist letter as an act of friendship was even more exploited during the confessional age from the later part of the 16th to the 17th century. As an example may serve the correspondence of the Protestant Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) (➜ Media Link #au) with the Jesuit Jean Deckers (1560–1619) (➜ Media Link #av) on matters of Christian chronology. Although the two intellectuals agreed with regard to an earlier date of Christ's birth, they disagreed about various other issues (not least confessional ones). Still their correspondence was maintained in the name of "sweet conversation", affirming that it was "permissible to have varied views in this area [chronology] and keep one's friendship intact".[25]

▲15

While networking was crucial to correspondence, one should not downplay the importance of letters in knowledge distribution either. Until at least the end of the 17th century, that is, the emergence of scholarly journals, the flow of information was primarily through personal channels, and the most important forum for discussing scientific questions was the

letter. The importance of epistolography in knowledge distribution is particularly obvious in the field of the natural sciences, which (starting in the second half of the 16th century) became more important in scholarly communication.[26] For the botanist, the astronomer, the cartographer, the geologist, the mathematician and others, correspondence served as a research instrument: it was the essential source of updated scholarly information.

▲ 16

The essential function of the letter as a working tool was one of the most important factors responsible for the appearance of a new kind of familiar letter in the 16th century, characterised by its conciseness (with abbreviated salutations), its factual content, and its dry and often laconic style.

▲ 17

It should by now be clear why letter-writing enjoyed such great popularity. Letters (especially published ones) were read as examples of good literature (style) and morals, but also as maps of networks and connections of the Republic of Letters. Moreover, letters conveyed scientific information, and at the same time satisfied curiosity for the private and the personal. Finally, published correspondence also defined the range of fashionable and current questions in social, political, religious or scientific discourse.

▲ 18

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Appendix

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Notes

1. ^ Henry Oldenburg to Henry Lindell in the 1640s, in: Oldenburg, The Correspondence 1986, vol. 13, p. 380, cited by Avramov, Letter Writing 2002, p. 337.
2. ^ Kristeller, The Contribution of Religious Orders 1974, p. 109. Cited by Constable, Letters and Letter-Collections 1976, p. 39.
3. ^ Demetrius, De Elocutione 1902, paragraph 231 (p. 176–177). On Demetrius and antique epistolary theory in general see Poster, A Conversation Halved 2007, esp. p. 24.
4. ^ Cicero, Epistolae ad familiares 1901, II, 4.
5. ^ Demetrius, De Elocutione 1902, paragraph 227–229, p. 175.
6. ^ Erasmus, Opus de conscribendis epistolis 1534, p. 120.
7. ^ Cf. Henderson, Erasmian Ciceronians 1992; Burton, From *Ars dictaminis* to *Ars conscribendis epistolis* 2007.
8. ^ See Fantazzi, Vives versus Erasmus 2002, p. 50. Cf. Daumas, Manuels épistolaires et identité sociale 1993, pp. 533–534.
9. ^ Vives, De conscribendis epistolis 1989, pp. 104–105. Citation is from Seneca's letter 75. Translation by Fantazzi, Vives versus Erasmus 2002, p. 49.
10. ^ Luther to Erasmus on 28 March 1519. Erasmus, Ep. 933 (CWE 6: 281). Cited by Jardine, Before Clarissa 2002, pp. 396–397.
11. ^ Cf. Brandolini, De ratione scribendi 1498. See Tateo, La questione dello stile 1997.
12. ^ It is no wonder that in Italy many of the first published vernacular letters conveyed an alternative religious message. See Schutte, The Lettere Volgari 1975. See also Fragnito, Per lo studio dell'epistolografia 1981, pp. 66–70.
13. ^ It could also happen that each correspondent used his own mother tongue, like Gian Vincenzo Pinelli and Claude Dupuy. Cf. Waquet, Latin 2007, p. 163; Egmond, A European Community of Scholars 2007, p. 169.
14. ^ The best examples of the uncontrollable fate of one's letters are given by Jardin, Erasmus, Man of Letters 1993, and idem, Before Clarissa 2002. See also Clough, The Cult of Antiquity 1976.
15. ^ For some ideas relating to the different concepts of "private" in history see Henderson, Humanist Letter Writing 2002.
16. ^ Between three and four hundred editions of letters were published before 1580. Constable, Letters and Letter-Collections 1976, p. 39.
17. ^ "It may be said that everybody reveals his own soul in his letters. In every other form of composition it is possible to discern the writer's character, but in none so clearly as in the epistolary." Demetrius, De Elocutione 1902, paragraph 227, p. 175.
18. ^ Cf. Guillén, Notes toward the Study of the Renaissance Letter 1986.
19. ^ Jardine, Erasmus, Man of Letters 1993, pp. 14–53; Fragnito, Per lo studio dell'epistolografia 1981, p. 75, note 46; Ijsewijn, Marcus Antonius Muretus epistolographus 1985; Laureys, The World of Justus Lipsius 1998; Papy, La correspondance de Juste Lipse 2001.
20. ^ Mosley, Tycho Brahe's Epistolae Astronomicae 2002; Mosley / Jardine / Tybjerg, Epistolary Culture 2003.
21. ^ Demetrius, De Elocutione 1902, paragraph 224, p. 173.
22. ^ On the obligations of correspondence see Goldgar, Impolite Learning 1995, pp. 12–53.
23. ^ The number of letters in famous surviving correspondences can be striking: c. 3,100 by Erasmus, c. 4,300 by Justus Lipsius, c. 6,300 by the Polish humanist diplomat Johannes Dantiscus (1485–1548), c. 7,500 by Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), c. 8,500 by Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687), and c. 9,300 by Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560), not to mention learned politicians like Anthonie Heinsius (1641–1720) – c. 18,000 –, or Voltaire (1694–1778) – more than 20,000. Naturally, not everyone was fortunate enough to leave such a large epistolary heritage behind; for example, Thomas More's (1478–1535) known correspondence includes only c. 280 letters.
24. ^ Gualdo, Vita Ioannis Vincentii Pinelli 1607, pp. 22–23.
25. ^ Grafton, Chronology, Controversy, and Community 2009, p. 129.
26. ^ Cf. Dibon, Les échanges épistolaires dans l'Europe 1976.

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Link #ab

- Henry Oldenburg (ca. 1617–1677) VIAF ☑ ☑ (http://viaf.org/viaf/39399338) DNB ☑ (http://d-nb.info/gnd/119115719) ADB/NDB ☑ (http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd119115719.html)

Link #ad

- Demetrius (ca. 350–283 B.C.) VIAF ☑ ☑ (http://viaf.org/viaf/88933794) DNB ☑ (http://d-nb.info/gnd/118677713)

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- Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.) VIAF ☑ ☑ (http://viaf.org/viaf/100196617) DNB ☑ (http://d-nb.info/gnd/118520814)

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- Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469–1536) VIAF ☑ ☑ (http://viaf.org/viaf/87673996) DNB ☑ (http://d-nb.info/gnd/118530666) ADB/NDB ☑ (http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118530666.html)

- (http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/erasmus-von-rotterdam-1469-1536?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500)
  Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469-1536)

Link #ag

- Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374) VIAF ☑ ☑ (http://viaf.org/viaf/39382430) DNB ☑ (http://d-nb.info

/gnd/118593234)

Link #ah

- Juan Luis Vives (1492–1540) VIAF   (http://viaf.org/viaf/71399403) DNB   (http://d-nb.info/gnd/118627295)

Link #ai

- Baldassare Castiglione (1478–1529) VIAF   (http://viaf.org/viaf/39446776) DNB   (http://d-nb.info/gnd/118519573)

Link #aj

- Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 B.C.–65 A.D.) VIAF   (http://viaf.org/viaf/90637919) DNB   (http://d-nb.info/gnd/118613200)

Link #ak

- Martin Luther (1483–1546) VIAF   (http://viaf.org/viaf/14773105) DNB   (http://d-nb.info/gnd/118575449) ADB/NDB   (http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118575449.html)

Link #al

- Aldo Manutio (ca. 1450–1515) VIAF   (http://viaf.org/viaf/96325760) DNB   (http://d-nb.info/gnd/118577387)

Link #am

- Paolo Manutio (1512–1574) VIAF   (http://viaf.org/viaf/120694653) DNB   (http://d-nb.info/gnd/119485702)

Link #an

- Marcus Antonius Muretus (1526–1585) VIAF   (http://viaf.org/viaf/100191387) DNB   (http://d-nb.info/gnd/119258951) ADB/NDB   (http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd119258951.html)

Link #ao

- Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) VIAF   (http://viaf.org/viaf/51706656) DNB   (http://d-nb.info/gnd/11857342X) ADB/NDB   (http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd11857342X.html)

Link #ap

- Tycho Brahe (1546–1601) VIAF   (http://viaf.org/viaf/73850627) DNB   (http://d-nb.info/gnd/118514237) ADB/NDB   (http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118514237.html)

Link #as

- Gian Vincenzo Pinelli (1535–1601) VIAF   (http://viaf.org/viaf/46885090) DNB   (http://d-nb.info/gnd/122386655)

Link #au

- Johannes Kepler (http://www.ieg-ego.eu/de/threads/europaeische-medien/medien-des-religioesen-transfers/juergen-huebner-johannes-kepler)

Link #av

- Jean Deckers (1560–1619) VIAF   (http://viaf.org/viaf/49966220) DNB   (http://d-nb.info/gnd/11604375X)