
Letter Manuals, Literary Innovation, and the Problem of Defining Genre in Anglo-American Epistolary Instruction, 1568–1800¹

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BETWEEN the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, cultural ideals and social practices of letter writing spilled across key fault lines in England as well as in America. Once the specialized skill of elite white men seeking to wield intellectual authority in public life, letter writing became a common way for middling white families to pursue polite self-improvement and to affirm sentimental bonds in private life. Because letter writing was so new to so many people, they tended to be acutely self-conscious and somewhat anxious about the proper etiquette and style for the writing of letters. It is this pervasive self-consciousness which highlights the augmenting cultural significance of letter writing, because people ceaselessly articulated that significance to each other. In their newfound impulses to write letters, and in their choices of specific habits and styles of writing, ordinary people helped foster a sweeping change in the process of how cultural ideals were circulated in the early modern period. Even if any single letter may have been minuscule in the full scope of life, it is the cumulative force accruing from the personal letters of innumerable ordinary women and men that created a prescriptive

1. This essay is a revised version of a paper presented to the annual meeting of the Bibliographical Society of America held on 28 January 2000 at Hunter College in New York City. I would like to express gratitude to James Green of the Library Company of Philadelphia for his ongoing advice about the Anglo-American book trade and to Michael Winship for inviting me to present my research at the annual meeting.

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force in letter writing itself. People did not merely parrot ideals from the culture around them; the writing of letters enabled people to shape those ideals actively for themselves.²

Cultural historians and literary scholars usually look, however, not to personal letters but to printed books as the principal domain where cultural ideals circulate, because books ostensibly have more generalized ambitions to define the world for large audiences. People in the early modern period could learn how to write socially acceptable letters not only from cues in personal letters, but also from the guidance of a burgeoning array of specialized books. Penmanship manuals began to flourish in the sixteenth century to counsel people in meeting standards of what was then deemed to be elegant handwriting.³ In the eighteenth century one measure of augmenting concern about the proprieties of writing can be seen in the sudden efflorescence of English grammar books. The discipline of grammar had long been preoccupied solely with Latin and Greek prior to the eighteenth century, but a new focus upon vernacular English reflected an accelerating expansion in the literacy skill of writing through society in both England and America.⁴ Contributing, too, to this expansive "writing revolution" was the letter manual, a new kind of specialized book that mirrored the transformation of letter writing from an elite activity to a popular form of communication.

Yet the term "letter manual" evokes complex problems that are involved in defining a literary genre. Anyone who studies print culture in the early modern period is familiar with the difficulties of identifying even the most basic publishing data. In an era before standardization of

2. An emphasis on social practice as a source of cultural prescription was a central theme of my dissertation; see Konstantin Dierks, "Letter Writing, Gender, and Class in Early America, 1750-1800" (Ph.D. diss., Brown Univ., 1999).

3. On penmanship manuals in England, see Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990). On penmanship manuals in America, see Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1996).

4. On English grammar books, see Sterling Andrus Leonard, *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage, 1700-1800* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1929); Carey McIntosh, *Common and Courtly Language: The Stylistics of Social Class in 18th-Century English Literature* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1986); Tony Crowley, *Language in History: Theories and Texts* (London: Routledge, 1996); Carey McIntosh, *The Evolution of English Prose, 1700-1800: Style, Politeness, and Print Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998).

publishing practices, ample numbers of books failed to note the place or date of publication, for instance. Early bibliographers struggled valiantly to overcome these kinds of difficulties, but nowadays scholars have the fantastic advantage of two computerized bibliographies — the Online Catalogs overseen by the American Antiquarian Society for American imprints and the English Short Title Catalogue overseen by the British Library for English imprints.⁵ These enable researchers to do "subject" as well as "keyword" searches, and they seem to generate fully comprehensive lists of pertinent books in the blink of eye. Yet this is something of an illusion, because the speed of computers has not been matched by requisite precision in the classifying and indexing of different kinds of books. Given the thousands upon thousands of imprints that survive from the early modern period, neither the AAS Online Catalogs nor the English Short Title Catalogue has yet been indexed with reliable consistency. Most intractable, however, is the task of categorizing books into genres, a difficulty due less to the lack of publishing standardization and more to the diffuse energy of literary innovation and the resulting hybrid nature of many books. Yet this difficulty points to a corollary research imperative at the same time, because it is critical to situate the genre of the letter manual within a broader context of print culture in order to pinpoint the full dimensions of epistolary instruction in the early modern period. Letter manuals were undeniably integral to the expansion of epistolary instruction, but they did not stand alone. Personal letters served as one important arena where epistolary ideals were prescribed, and so did books other than letter manuals.

So, what precisely was a "letter manual"? Was it, for instance, a book full of letters? The difficulty in this case is that the "epistolary form" was an utterly ubiquitous mode of presenting knowledge as well as entertainment in the early modern era. Many kinds of books were composed entirely of letters and yet devoted to the discussion of politics, theology, social manners, and countless other topics. Reading audiences may have admired and even emulated the writing style of the letters contained in

5. For an early attempt to catalog American letter manuals, see Harry B. Weiss, "American Letter-Writers, 1698-1943," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 48 (1944): 959-982; 49 (1945): 33-61. For an early attempt to catalog English letter manuals, see R. C. Alston, *A Bibliography of the English Language*, 10 vols. (Leeds: E. J. Arnold, 1965-72); while Alston did not separately catalog letter manuals, many are listed in volumes 3 and 4.

such books, but this was not the primary purpose of these books. Other books were filled with letters for their entertainment rather than edification value. Letters were here employed to titillate readers by creating the illusion that these books unveiled the secret recesses of private life, especially the scandals of romance. Such books eventually became the antecedents of the epistolary novel which would emerge and flourish in the eighteenth century.⁶ In this case, too, reading audiences may have admired the letters in these books, but entertainment — not epistolary instruction — was the primary intention.

English and American reading audiences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could have encountered letters in many of the books they read, all of which may have influenced people in how they might themselves write personal letters. None of these books has been classified as “letter manuals” in modern bibliographies or computerized databases because the popularity of the epistolary form far exceeded imperatives of epistolary instruction. But if many books employed the epistolary form in the early modern era, there were also books explicitly designed to guide people in the writing of letters. These are the books that fostered the specific cultural project of epistolary instruction. At first, these letter manuals appeared as a literary innovation, uncertain of their own appeal, of their ability to deliver information in such a way as might satisfy the desires of readers. Over time, however, they came to constitute a genre — books committed to epistolary instruction as their primary aim, rather than as a possible side effect.⁷

6. On the origins of epistolary fiction in England, see Robert Adams Day, *Told in Letters: Epistolary Fiction Before Richardson* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1966).

7. On English letter manuals, see Katherine Gee Hornbeak, “The Complete Letter-Writer in English, 1568–1800,” *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 15, nos. 3–4 (1934): 1–150; Jean Robertson, *The Art of Letter Writing: An Essay on the Handbooks Published in England during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London: Univ. Press of Liverpool, 1942).

On French letter manuals, see Janet Gurkin Altman, “Political Ideology in the Letter Manual (France, England, New England),” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 18 (1988): 105–22; Janet Gurkin Altman, “Teaching the ‘People’ to Write: The Formation of a Popular Civic Identity in the French Letter Manual,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 22 (1992): 147–80; Janet Gurkin Altman, “Epistolary Conduct: The Evolution of the Letter Manual in France in the Eighteenth Century,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 304 (1992): 866–9; Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau, and Cecile Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-*

For scholars to classify such books as “letter manuals” must still involve careful deliberation, because there were resemblances between letter manuals and other books using the epistolary form. Letter manuals could be as topical as other books, since they often conveyed moral as well as technical instruction. One of the more influential letter manuals of the eighteenth century, for instance, proclaimed an ambition to teach people not only how to write proper letters, but also how to conduct themselves in social life. The book served not only as a letter manual, but also as a conduct manual at the same time.⁸ There are, however, two features that do set apart “letter manuals” as distinct from other genres. Letter manuals typically contained self-conscious prefaces touting epistolary instruction as their primary mission, and they increasingly indicated competition with other books that shared a similar aim.

With these two criteria in mind, it is possible to turn from soft cultural context to hard bibliographical data. 1568 marks the publication of the first book in England that appears to fulfill the criteria of a letter manual.⁹ After that, a rising cultural interest in epistolary instruction can be discerned in the growing production of letter manuals over time — 3 new titles and 11 extant imprints from the sixteenth century, 32 new titles and 98 extant imprints from the seventeenth century, and 53 new titles and 274 extant imprints from the eighteenth century. Of course, tabulating extant imprints gives only an incomplete image of book production in any given era (since it omits known imprints for which no copies have survived), but these numbers by themselves evince a sustained and sharp expansion.¹⁰ While *The Enemy of Idleness* may have been published as a tentative gesture in London in 1568, *The New Universal Letter-Writer* would be published in a competitive field in Philadelphia in 1800.¹¹ In America, though, the numbers of letter manuals were consider-

Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century, trans. Christopher Woodall (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997).

On American letter manuals, see Dierks, chaps. 1, 4, 6.

8. See Brian V. Downs, ed., *Familiar Letters on Important Occasions, by Samuel Richardson (1741)* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1928).

9. William Fulwood, *The Enemy of Idleness* (London: Henry Bynneman, 1568).

10. Tabulations are derived from computerized searches of imprints catalogued in the English Short Title Catalogue.

11. See *The New Universal Letter-Writer: Or, Complete Art of Polite Correspondence* (Philadelphia: D. Hoggan, 1800).

ably thinner than in England — 16 new titles and 63 extant imprints occurring only in the eighteenth century.¹² Yet this book production does reflect augmenting cultural interest in epistolary instruction in America beyond whatever English letter manuals were imported for sale. Newspaper advertisements indicate that English letter manuals were routinely imported into America both before and still after the American War of Independence, not only by booksellers but also by other shopkeepers, and not only in urban centers, but also in more rural areas.¹³

Together, all of this commerce in letter manuals indicates that growing ranks of authors, printers, and booksellers imagined that there was enough consumer demand for epistolary instruction that they might hope to turn into economic profit for themselves. And it is such a combination of entrepreneurial energy and consumer demand that has the capacity to foster a particular genre like the letter manual out of a broader cultural fascination with the epistolary form. The gradual emergence of a competitive field and the resulting consolidation of a genre did not mean, however, that the letter manual would become fixed in stone. While bibliographers may understandably be somewhat frustrated by the persistent hybridity of books that defy precise categorization, literary scholars have come to applaud such ambiguities as evidence of cultural contradictions and contestations. Although once treated as static aesthetic categories, “genres” are now viewed by literary scholars as inherently dynamic processes able to accommodate both the steady replication of conventions and yet the continual emergence of innovations as well.¹⁴

12. Tabulations are derived from computerized searches of American imprints catalogued in the Online Catalogs of the American Antiquarian Society.

13. On American importing of English books related to letter writing, see Dierks, chaps. 1, 4.

14. For calls for a loosened definition of genre to accommodate inherent dynamism, see Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Models* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982); Carolyn R. Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 151–67; Ralph Cohen, “History and Genre,” *New Literary History* 17 (1986): 203–19; Charles Bazerman, *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright, eds., *Romanticism, History, and the Possibilities of Genre: Re-Forming Literature, 1789–1837* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998); James Watt, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre, and Cultural Conflict, 1764–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999).

When viewed as a process, the rise or fall of a genre betrays the shifting ideological leverage of specific social groups in a given time period. The letter manual, for instance, was stretched significantly to appeal to new social groups between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, and this expansion underlay a constant and often an explicit sense of innovation in the publication of new titles. First published in England in 1755, *The Complete Letter Writer*, for instance, proclaimed the comprehensive nature of both its audience and its contents. It boasted more model letters, more instructional material, and more supplementary materials — all meant to aid any and every kind of reader — not just men, but also women; not just the affluent, but also the middling; not just adults, but also children.¹⁵ (Excluded from this expansive vision and its self-proclaimed version of “completeness” were non-white people, however.) Whereas most letter manuals had catered solely to elite white men in the seventeenth century, many authors sought to address a considerably wider audience in the eighteenth century, and they did their conscious best to rework their contents accordingly. Some authors succeeded in such efforts, and their books were reprinted frequently, while other authors failed, and vanished after producing only one imprint.

The production of letter manuals can be viewed in terms of an overall rise between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, but it should also be scrutinized for nuance — for cycles of entrepreneurial energy, and for what these cycles indicate. While 1568 may represent the pioneering moment for the letter manual as a genre, it was the 1630s which saw the first significant flourishing of several new titles, as the fashions of French polite culture seeped across the Channel into England. Thereafter it was the 1680s that saw the burgeoning of a different kind of letter manual, one focused on the pragmatics of the business world rather than refinements of polite society. These letter manuals were meant to

For two exemplary historicist investigations of the rise of a particular literary genre, see Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987); Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993).

15. See *The Complete Letter-Writer: Or, New And Polite English Secretary* (London: S. Crowder and H. Woodgate, 1755). For the first extant American edition, see *The Complete Letter-Writer* (Boston: John West Folsom, 1790).

be distinctly English, and one new sign of their popularity is that they were the first kind of letter manual to be avidly reprinted in the British North American colonies. Finally, the greatest single decade of energized new innovation was the 1750s in England, which saw a skyrocketing popularity of a new breed of letter manuals focused neither on polite society nor the business world but on the everyday life of middling folk. These so-called "familiar" letter manuals coincided with the fabulous popularity of an exciting new kind of fiction — namely the epistolary novel. Meanwhile, the decade of greatest energy in America was the 1790s, when the curious reader could purchase American-produced letter manuals in the polite tradition, the business tradition, and the familiar tradition. These publishing cycles indicate that there were times of particular consumer demand for books that might enable reading audiences to master a cultural skill that they considered particularly useful and important for accomplishing their personal goals. In their evolution, and in their ebbing and flowing, letter manuals formed the core of the cultural project of epistolary instruction in the early modern period.

Such a confluence of eager consumer demand and optimistic publishing energy can do more than create a single genre, however, because other kinds of books, even though they have their own independent agendas, may also dabble in an area where there seems to be special cultural interest. These incursions reflected the growing spillover of epistolary instruction into other segments of print culture, as well as the widening popularity of letter writing. Conduct books, for instance, taught people how to behave in sundry social situations, yet in the eighteenth century such books increasingly commented on the art of letter writing. For instance, one of the conduct manuals most frequently reprinted in England and America, Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son*, featured extensive remarks about proper letter writing amid a much broader program of conduct prescriptions.¹⁶ A similar conduct book intended for young women likewise included a section on letter writing within its wide-ranging agenda.¹⁷ The same trend held true for pedagogical books. These

16. The first English edition appeared in 1774, and the first American edition in 1775. See *Letters Written by the Late Right Honourable Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, to His Son, Philip Stanhope, Esq.* (London: J. Dodsley, 1774); *Letters Written by the Late Right Honourable Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, to His Son, Philip Stanhope, Esq.* (New York: J. Rivington and H. Gaine, 1775).

17. The first English edition appeared in 1789, and the first American edition in 1791. See John Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady, on Useful and Interesting Subjects*

covered a host of scholastic subjects, yet they increasingly contained sections of epistolary instruction.¹⁸ By the eighteenth century, epistolary instruction could be found in many different kinds of books, which is why one must look not only at but also beyond letter manuals in order to gauge the full popularity of letter writing.

Most ambiguous of all other books was the parallel genre of business manuals, which aimed to teach young men how to prepare themselves for a rapidly commercializing economy. These books increasingly emphasized the importance of letter writing as a fundamental qualification for the business world. Although most known for his novels, Daniel Defoe, for instance, also produced a popular business manual in the form of letters from mentor to acolyte.¹⁹ Here was another example of the ubiquitous epistolary form, and among the first lessons Defoe imparted was how to write letters in a style suitable to the business world. Because business manuals themselves represented a new genre which flourished in the latter seventeenth century, the line between business manuals that included some epistolary instruction, versus letter manuals that offered some business advice, was sometimes murky. One of the most enduringly popular business manuals in England and in America was *The Instructor* (retitled *The American Instructor* in America although with minimal adjustment to its contents).²⁰ The book has been categorized as a letter manual — wrongly so, in my estimation, because while its first section concerned spelling, penmanship, and letter writing, the great bulk of the book is devoted to arithmetic, bookkeeping, and other business applications. Such business manuals present the complex problem of defining genre at perhaps its most intractable. The almost simul-

(London: J. Jones, 1789); John Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady, on Useful and Interesting Subjects* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1791).

18. For boys, see [R. Dodsley], *The Preceptor: Containing A General Course of Education* (London: R. Dodsley, 1748). For girls, see Charles Allen, *The Polite Lady: or, a Course of Female Education* (London: J. Newbery, 1760); [Charles Allen], *The Polite Lady: or, A Course of Female Education* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1798).

19. Daniel Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman in Familiar Letters* (London: Charles Rivington, 1726).

20. The first of many English editions appeared in 1727, and the first of many American editions in 1748. See George Fisher, *The Instructor: or, Young Man's Best Companion* (London: F. Midwinter, 1727); George Fisher, *The American Instructor: Or, Young Man's Best Companion* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin and D. Hall, 1748).

taneous efflorescence of letter manuals and business manuals toward the end of the seventeenth century often meant that authors and printers worked swiftly — a quick book for fast money. It may help modern researchers to fit books into genres in order to measure the magnitude of a cultural project like epistolary instruction as it shifted over time, but the authors and printers who produced the books were focused more immediately on the unclarities of their opportunities and risks. They were in the business of selling books for present profit, not constructing genres for future research.

Whether the outcome of bursts of innovation or chronic carelessness, some books defy easy classification even if genre is an extremely useful way for modern scholars to investigate book production, reading communities, and cultural projects. Perhaps, however, the greatest problem is not in the difficulties presented in trying to define a genre, but in the very fact of trying to do so. Focusing too narrowly on a single genre risks overlooking important contexts around genres as well as critical spill-overs between genres. In the case of letter manuals, cultural use of the epistolary form extended far beyond the letter manual, and cultural interest in epistolary instruction extended to other kinds of books such as conduct manuals. While the modern researcher should certainly be grateful for the remarkable advantages of computerized bibliographies, I hope for the day to come when the contents of all books ever printed will be entirely computerized and thus fully searchable. It is at that point that researchers will be able to appreciate more precisely the contribution that different kinds of books make to any one cultural project. A genre of books can do crucial work in concentrating specific energy upon a cultural concern, but many kinds of books can contribute to expanding the reach and magnifying the intensity of that project. Letter manuals certainly brought epistolary instruction to reading audiences in England and America in the early modern period, but so too did other kinds of books. Cultural historians seem to favor the investigation of single genres in order to grapple with change over time, but any single genre must be situated within its broader context in order to glean a fuller image of cultural change.²¹

21. On historians' proclivity for the extensive study of genres, in contrast to literary scholars' proclivity for the intensive study of texts, see Sarah Maza, "Stories in History: Cultural Narratives in Recent Works in European History," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 1493–515.