
Toon Van Houdt, Jan Papy, Gilbert Tournoy, and Constant Matheussen (editors):
*Self-Presentation and Social Identification. The Rhetoric and Pragmatics of Letter Writing in
Early Modern Times*

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The subject of the present volume is letter writing in the period ca. 1500-1700, with a special focus on Neo-Latin epistolography and literary and scholarly letters. In their introduction, the editors Toon Van Houdt and Jan Papy argue that letters have primarily been read either as “fascinating mirrors of their age”, i.e. as documents providing historical and biographical data for scholars, or as literary achievements, appreciated for their aesthetic value. The goal of this volume, on the other hand, is to combine historical and formalistic approaches to letter writing. Letters should not be read as straightforward historical evidence, nor be separated from their historical context and read merely for their literary value. Instead, the approach adopted here emphasises the roles of letters in social practice and aims at increasing our knowledge of the various functions and conventions of letter writing. Thus the key questions which are raised in the introduction are: Who writes what, for whom, and why.

The volume is based on papers presented at an international colloquium at Leuven and Brussels in May 2000, and includes twenty articles, most of which are written in English, but there are also French, German, and Italian contributions. It is divided into five sections according to the different roles and contexts of epistolography: (1) “The rhetoric of letter writing”; (2) “Friendship and patronage”; (3) “Exchanging letters in the Republic of Letters”; (4) “Programming”, criticizing and libelling”; (5) “Literary fame and scientific reputation”.

The rhetoric of letter writing

The first section comprises five articles, each of which demonstrates the self-consciousness of early modern writers in their epistolary enterprises. The section opens with Judith Rice Henderson’s general introduction to humanist letter writing. Henderson explores the classical background of the genre and presents one of the central issues of the book: public and private aspects of epistolary communication. She shows how the humanists had inherited two, often contradictory, traditions of epistolography: the classical tradition, which regarded the letter as a private conversation, and the medieval *ars dictaminis*, which treated letters as official documents. This double heritage affected humanist epistolography, and the humanist letter was often written with an eye to a wider audience and intended for publication. But does this mean that a ‘private humanist letter’ is a contradiction in terms? In order to answer this question, Henderson reviews some classical, medieval, and humanist ideas of letter writing, concentrating on the concepts of privacy and publicity, and defining the ‘familiar letter’ according to the letter’s addressee (friends and family members), its style (conversational, simple), and its subject matter (private or public matters concerning the correspondents). Henderson

demonstrates how these criteria, established by ancient letter writers, were adopted by Renaissance humanists such as Petrarch, Lorenzo Valla, Erasmus of Rotterdam, and Juan Luis Vives.

Charles Fantazzi, in his contribution to the present volume, compares Erasmus of Rotterdam with Juan Luis Vives, and sees a marked difference between these two famous epistolographers in their ways of defining and classifying letters. Erasmus, who in his didactic treatise *De conscribendis epistolis* was still indebted to the medieval *ars dictaminis*, based his epistolography on the three forms of oratory (deliberative, demonstrative and judicial), and mentioned the ‘familiar letter’ as a fourth category. Fantazzi argues that upon dealing with the ‘familiar letter’ in his *De conscribendis epistolis*, Vives, by contrast, no longer refers to the three *genera dicendi* and rejects a classifying approach. Thus, Vives evokes a less rigid view of the genre, recommending a simple, ‘natural’ style and emphasising the usefulness of the letter with regard to intimate communication.¹ Fantazzi concludes that Vives was no servile follower of Erasmus, but advocated a less oratorical style. However, one might want to add that Erasmus, too, openly rejected a formal, elevated style in letters and repeatedly recommended, for example, simplicity in the wording of salutation and valediction, as opposed to the excessively florid style of the medieval forms of address.

Christine Bénévent’s article also deals with Erasmus and examines his ideas of style, language, and the letter. Tim Markey examines style and tradition in Ben Jonson’s verse epistles, throwing light on Jonson’s indebtedness to Roman verse satirists and ancient moral philosophy. Kristine Haugen concludes the first section by discussing the famous dispute between Sir William Temple and Richard Bentley (the renowned librarian of the Royal Library at Cambridge) concerning the authenticity of the letters of the Sicilian tyrant Phalaris (of the sixth century BC). Temple was convinced that Phalaris’ letters were not only the first letters ever written, but also the best and most forceful ones, considering the genre’s subsequent decline. Bentley, on the other hand, argued that Phalaris’ letters were nothing but a later forgery. The article interestingly presents seventeenth-century ideas on the opposition between “the good original and the bad citation” (p. 129), and discusses the intriguing distinction between fake and original.

Friendship and patronage

The second section of the volume contains studies of specific sub-genres of letter writing, such as dedicatory letters and letters of recommendation. Warren Boutcher discusses past and present tendencies in his article on the study of the early modern letter and advises his readers not to study the polished and published humanist letters only, since this would only tell part of the story of letter writing, but also to take an interest in less sophisticated literary achievements. Furthermore, Boutcher calls into question the desirability of maintaining strict distinctions between different epistolographic sub-genres.

Jacqueline Glomski expands on the sub-genre of dedicatory letters, which she illuminates by three examples from the sixteenth century, written by Rudolf Agricola Junior, Valentin Eck, and Leonard Cox. Glomski sets out “to identify the tactics” used by these writers in order to approach their patrons and gain the support of their readers (p. 165), and shows that dedicatory letters are formulaic and characterised by a florid, flattering style as well as by emphatic expressions of modesty. Although Glomski only deals with three historical examples, the

¹ Fantazzi reminds us that Vives, at the beginning of his epistolary treatise, defines the letter as a genre by reference to Cicero’s letter to Curio, *fam.* 2,4,1. According to Cicero, the art of writing letters was invented as a means of keeping non-present parties informed about anything that might be of interest to them.

outlines and conventions presented here obviously pertain to the generic rules of the sub-genre of dedicatory letters in general.

Mark Morford gives a survey of Justus Lipsius' letters of recommendation. The article first introduces sixteenth-century conventions of this sub-genre and then focuses on what the letters tell us about Lipsius' relations with his students.

Elisabet Göransson's article deals with the correspondence of the Danish professor Otto Sperling Jr. (1634-1715) with Scandinavian women, especially with the renowned Swedish poetess Sophia Elisabeth Brenner. The original motivation for their correspondence, which consists of just 26 letters written in Latin over a 12-year period, had been Sperling's effort to gather information for his biographical work on learned women, *De foeminis omnium aevi doctis*. The letters discussed by Göransson draw attention to the everyday conditions of Mrs. Brenner's life as a writer and as the mother of a large family (17 children). In her letters Brenner complains about her onerous household duties, whereas Sperling in his answers urges her to continue writing and studying. Göransson analyses the stylistic aspect of the letters, touching also upon the *topos* of female *verecundia*, the stylistic virtue of displaying proper modesty, which was specifically required of female letter writers.

Exchanging letters in the republic of letters

The volume's third section sheds some light on the roles of letters in a scholarly community, especially in the context of religious and scientific controversy. The first article focuses on the seventeenth-century scholar Hugo Grotius, whose massive correspondence of 7,725 letters was edited between 1928 and 2001. Henk J. M. Nellen, one of the editors of Grotius' correspondence, discusses the letters that bear witness to the theological disputes between Grotius and his colleagues concerning the ideas put forward by Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) and Faustus Socinus (1539-1604). Grotius was accused by his correspondents of being favourable to 'Socinianism', a religious doctrine which rejected, for instance, the ideas of original sin, predestination, and redemption, and which emphasised devotion in daily practice.

Theological disputes and the controversies surrounding 'Arminianism' is the subject of Corinna L. Vermeulen's article on the Protestant minister of Amiens, Etienne de Courcelles, and his correspondence of the early seventeenth century. Vermeulen successfully shows that Courcelles was well aware of the strategic possibilities of letter writing and deliberately used his letters to build up an ideal, or, as Vermeulen puts it, "not entirely truthful" image of himself in the scholarly community (p. 280).

The last contribution to this section deals with letter writing in early eighteenth-century Italy. Antonio Iurilli analyses the correspondence between the author of the first Italian encyclopedia, Giacinto Gimma, and the professor of natural history at the university of Padua, Antonio Vallisneri.

'Programming', criticizing and libelling

Letters were also widely used as 'weapons' in polemical contexts in the *Res publica litterarum*, the world of the learned. As a point of departure for her account of the rhetoric of the academic debate, Erica Rummel presents Petrus Mosellanus' oration of 1519, which advises how to address an adversary in a scholarly or religious disputation. Mosellanus recommends that the disputants avoid personal attacks: their motives should be above reproach and the mutual goal must be truth and self-improvement. Likewise, they should show mutual respect, using matter-of-fact language only and avoiding every kind of abuse and verbal trickery. In his oration, Mosellanus portrays Erasmus as a model polemicist. But was Erasmus' conduct this exemplary? Erica Rummel concludes that whereas Erasmus in his disputes generally follows

Mosellanus' precepts, his letters are spiced with the famous 'Erasmian' playfulness, invective, and sarcasm.

Jane Griffiths examines the 'Grammarians' War' of 1521. This disagreement between sixteenth-century English scholars such as Robert Whittinton, William Lily, Robert Aldrich, and William Horman concerned the principles of teaching grammar and Latin. Griffiths specifically discusses the usage in this dispute of terms such as *grammaticus*, *poeta*, and *vates*, thus throwing light on the disputants' different views of the grammarian's task, ranging from strictly philological commentary and criticism to the writing of poetry.

Jordan Avramov's article deals with Henry Oldenburg, the first secretary (in the period 1661-77) of the Royal Society of London. One of Oldenburg's duties was to take care of the foreign and domestic correspondence of the Society and thus to create an extensive communication network which included almost all of Europe. As the editor of the first scientific journal, published by the Society (*Philosophical Transactions*), Oldenburg counted among his correspondents such major scientists as Leibniz and Newton. Scientific information was conveyed mainly by way of letters, and Avramov points out how scholars advanced their careers through the writing of letters and concealed new scientific discoveries in an encoded language, which only the initiate was able to understand.

Literary fame and scientific reputation

Many of the contributions in this volume focus on the various ways in which a writer uses letters as a means to create and cultivate a public persona and further his own career. The final section concentrates on this idea of the writer's self-presentation by exploring the subjects of literary fame and scientific reputation. Karl A. E. Enekel first examines the nature of Petrarch's *Familiarum rerum libri XXIV*. As has been noted before, Petrarch carefully selected and polished his letters in order to achieve the appearance he was looking for. Enekel contributes to this discussion by showing that although Petrarch rejected Seneca's philosophical epistles and saw Cicero as his model of simplicity and spontaneity, his own elaborate letters were nonetheless closer to those of Seneca.

In her article, Lisa Jardine deals with epistolary fiction, and more particularly with the *Letters of Obscure Men* and Erasmus' alleged involvement in this famous epistolary satire written in 1515-17. Jardine first discusses those of Erasmus' letters in which he openly denies the authorship of the *Letters* and denounces both the personal invective and the misuse of his name in the correspondence. Jardine's next example is Erasmus' response to the Reuchlin affair of the 1510's. The renowned German Hebraist Johannes Reuchlin had argued against confiscation of Hebrew books and was attacked by the confiscators. Both the supporters and the opponents of these procedures claimed that Erasmus was on their side, and his letters (both real and fictitious) were included in the controversy against his will. Jardine presents the letters (published under the title *Farrago nova epistolarum* in 1519) in which Erasmus expresses his true opinion of the controversy and reveals himself to be only moderately supportive of Reuchlin's position. The article also briefly touches upon Erasmus' correspondence with Luther.

The last three articles of the volume deal with three important figures of the sixteenth century. Edward W. George explores the different aspects of self-presentation to be found in Juan Luis Vives' letters, ranging from self-disclosure to self-concealment. Philip Ford devotes his article to George Buchanan's published correspondence and dedicatory letters, which challenged the etiquette of the sub-genre by avoiding conventional modesty and *captatio benevolentiae*. Finally, Adam Mosley investigates Tycho Brahe's *Epistolae astronomicae* and the debate arising from Brahe's new cosmology, which challenged the dominant Ptolemaic and Copernican models.

The professed aim of this volume is to examine letter writing as a social practice and as a means of building up personal images. All of the contributors seem to agree that letters were not written merely for the sake of simple communication, self-analysis, or solitary meditation. On the contrary, even ‘familiar letters’ were produced for many reasons and often intended for a wider audience. Letters were used both to present a selected and often idealised self-image; to form networks in the scholarly community; as a means of attacking one’s enemies; and as a form of propaganda. The various contributions succeed in illuminating these multiple functions and intentions.

The principal achievement of the anthology is that it serves as a reminder of the fact that upon reading early modern letters, the modern reader must pay attention not only to the text itself, but also to the rhetorical situation and social context of the correspondence. It is convincingly argued throughout the volume that the letter writers were very well aware of epistolary rules, conventions, and literary techniques. Early modern letter writing did not develop spontaneously, but could only emerge within a literary and rhetorical context. As a contribution to the history of rhetoric, the volume offers many examples of the rhetorical schooling of the letter writers, who followed the various handbooks; imitated earlier letters; and formulated their own letters according to the addressee, the subject matter, and the circumstances.

It is often the case that conference acts leave the reader without a clear impression of the work’s overall arguments and achievements. The present volume is no exception. A general conclusion, summing up the different roles of letter writing and indicating future challenges in epistolary studies would have been very useful. In this conclusion, the editors of the volume might also have explored the reason why the study of literary self-presentation has been so much in vogue since the 1980’s. Could the interest in this topic reflect modern society’s obsession with personal images and constructed profiles?

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