Alan Stewart and Heather Wolfe:

Letterwriting in Renaissance England

Washington, D.C.: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 2004

216 pages (illustrations; index)

[Distributed by University of Washington Press, Seattle and London]

ISBN: 0-295-98509-7

Price: $45

M. Thomas Hester, Robert Parker Sorlien†, and Dennis Flynn (editors):

John Donne's Marriage Letters in The Folger Shakespeare Library

Washington, D.C.: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 2005

110 pages (illustrations)

[Distributed by University of Washington Press, Seattle and London]

ISBN: 0-295-98510-0

Price: $35

Gary Schneider:

The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500-1700

Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005

388 pages (illustrations; index)

ISBN: 0-87413-875-2

Price: $65

With the exception of a few brief studies of letter-writing manuals in English, twentieth-century scholarship on the vernacular epistle in Renaissance and Early Modern England focused on the origins of the epistolary novel and the eighteenth-century familiar letter or on the letters of such major literary figures as John Milton. While these areas of scholarship are by no means exhausted, in the 1980s focus began to shift to the cultural contexts of letter writing, especially court politics and rhetoric, gender, and the organization and material conditions of a pre-industrial society. Key studies include David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order* (1980); Frank Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege* (1984); Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter* (1990); and Richard Rambuss, *Spenser's Secret Career* (1993). A. R. Braunmuller, editor of *A Seventeenth-Century Letter-Book: A Facsimile Edition of Folger MS. V.a. 321* (University of Delaware Press, 1983), wrote a seminal article on the social significance of epistolary formats,

and feminist conferences, essay collections, and editions began examining the letter as a genre of writing open to women. The last five years of the twentieth century saw publication of, on average, at least two monographs each year that pay significant attention to letter writing in English: Joad Raymond, *The Invention of the Newspaper* (1996); C. John Sommerville, *The News Revolution in England* (1996); Seth Lerer, *Courtly Letters in the Age of Henry VIII* (1997); Peter Beal, *In Praise of Scribes* (1998); Anna Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility* (1998); Philip Beale, *A History of the Post in England* (1998); Cecile M. Jagodzinski, *Privacy and Print* (1999); Lynne Magnusson, *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue* (1999); Susan Whyman, *Sociability and Power in Late-Stuart England* (1999); and Barbara J. Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact* (2000); not to mention editions of letters and collections of essays about them.

In the twenty-first century, the pace of scholarly production on English letter writing, in tandem with studies of epistolarity in other vernaculars, such as French, and in Renaissance Latin and even Greek, has hardly slowed. Perhaps it is no accident that our electronic age finds itself increasingly fascinated with the letter written by hand without benefit of mass-produced pen and ink or of electricity (not to mention electronics), in a forgotten code of civility, sometimes by a secretary, on parchment or paper that was then folded, addressed, sealed with wax, and delivered to the fortunes of whatever carrier could be found. This mode of communication and the pre-industrial society that produced it are becoming harder to imagine. Recently *The Washington Post* carried a front-page article on the new orthography of emotion – "'H8' (hate), 'iluvu' (I love you), and 'ruok' (are you okay)" – that devotees of text messaging are developing to cope with the brevity and dexterity enforced by composing a 'letter' on a tiny numeric keyboard today. One interviewee claimed that he can break up with a girlfriend in the 160 characters or less usually allowed on a mobile telephone (Yuki Noguchi, "Life and Romance in 160 Characters or Less: Brevity Gains New Meaning as Popularity of Cell Phone Text Messaging Soars," December 29, 2005, A1, A10). The exhibition catalogue, edition, and monograph reviewed here demonstrate that interest in the increasingly ancient art of letter writing in English during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries remains strong in scholarly circles and can attract a wider public.

The Folger Shakespeare Library, in the elegant Renaissance-inspired decor of its exhibition hall across from the Library of Congress on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., showcased some of its greatest treasures from November 18, 2004, through April 2, 2005, under the title *Letterwriting in Renaissance England.* The exhibition catalogue and the companion edition of John Donne's marriage correspondence are equally elegant records of that event and the scholarship that produced it. Printed on heavy (28 lb.) cream-colored paper of sufficient length (31 cm) to reproduce many letters in actual size, the two volumes are handsomely designed with ample white space and meticulous photography that does justice to yellowed parchment pages and the scribal hands in which they were written, even to ink blots, folds, seals, stains, and subsequent inscriptions by carriers, collectors, and librarians. Not only the letter itself, recto and verso, but also a covering paper, where it exists, are sometimes reproduced to illustrate contemporary customs of addressing a letter and tracking its delivery. The number of illustrations is generous, although not all items exhibited have been photographed.

The soft cover of the catalogue reproduces, as folded for delivery, a letter of August 26, 1588, by William Cecil, Baron Burghley, written from the Strand on board the flagship of the English fleet battling the retreating Spanish Armada, to Queen Elizabeth's Lord Admiral, Charles Howard, Baron Howard of Effingham. Burghley's superscription (that is, address, as a useful Glossary tells us) commands the royal letter carriers:

post hast
hast
hast
post hast for lief.

The postmasters' time stamps capture with eloquent brevity their efforts to rise to the occasion of supplying two English ships battling the Spaniards near New Haven. Beside Burghley's signature, the postmaster has written:

London. 26. Aug.
at 9. in the
morninge./.

Timestamps in different hands on the verso of the sealed letter read:

at dartford at tue in the after
none
Rochester at fyve
Syttyngbor*n* p*a*st 6.
Caunterbury past .8.

This example illustrates the conventions used in the extensive transcriptions of manuscript documents in the catalogue. Spacing on the page and lineation of texts have been preserved as far as possible, and the texts have not been modernized, except that "certain abbreviations that might be confusing to modern readers" have been expanded using italic letters (p. 7), for instance, "p*a*st" for "pst" above. Superscriptions have been silently lowered, as in "Ma^{tie}" ("Ma*ies*tie") and "y^{r}" ("y*ou*r"). Manuscript deletions are indicated by a single strikethrough and additions are enclosed in carets. The goal has been to reproduce the appearance of the document. The resulting collection of transcriptions and reproductions has the added value, I would suggest, of supplying examples to anyone who might be interested in learning to read Renaissance manuscripts.

After quoting James Howell's poetic address "To the knowing Reader of Familiar Letters" from *Epistolae Ho-Elianae* (London, 1650), describing the varied functions of letters, the catalogue's introduction explains that the exhibition is about "not just the letters themselves, but also the myriad *processes* of letterwriting: the penning, sending, receiving, reading, circulating, copying, and saving of letters" (p. 10). Appropriately, the first section of the exhibition is on "Tools". It includes a popular book of instructions on making pens and ink, on posture and penmanship, and ways of writing the alphabet in such different hands as "*English* [...] *French secretarie* [...] *Italian, Roman, Chancelry & court hands*"; a recipe for ink from a family cookbook; a letter of a nephew to his uncle practicing penmanship; and seventeenth-century writing implements: a writing box, candlestick, seal matrix, and charming walnut inkwell with an opening for a quill in each of its four corners. The base of the hole for the quill being used "opens into the central part of the well so that the quill can fill with ink", while unused quills await the future attention of the writer. The tools are from a private collection in New York, as are some paintings of letter readers (not illustrated) in the concluding section on "The afterlife of letters".

In a section on "The postal 'system'", another private collection in New York yields two extremely rare examples of unopened letters, with seals intact: they were written in 1724 from King George I to the duc de Bourbon and the duc d'Orléans. However, most of the exhibition is drawn from the Folger's own superb collection of documents illuminating the age of Shakespeare. Throughout the catalogue, woodcuts, engravings, and illuminations illustrate the

process of writing, reading, and delivering letters, as they did for the original readers of a variety of books, including early epistolary fiction or satire and editions of Ovid's *Heroical Epistles*. A manuscript bill for letterwriting supplies and postage (c. 1650) and a printed road map of postal routes (1720) help to complete the picture of the difficulties and expense of communication in the Renaissance and Early Modern period, and the efforts made to overcome them.

A chapter on "Manuals" and the following two chapters on "The material letter and social signals" and on "Secretaries" pay particular, although not exclusive, attention to handbooks in English on letter writing and a few of their Continental sources in Latin and the vernaculars. Little is said about the verbal styles of salutation, submission, and flattery that rhetoricians usually study, but the documents transcribed supply a wealth of examples. The Latin tradition is represented primarily by Erasmus and is less assured than the treatment of the vernaculars. "Alberic of Monte" (Monte Cassino, rather) is identified as a pioneer of the *ars dictaminis* (p. 21). Erasmus is said to have worked on *De conscribendis epistolis* for "several years" (indeed, periodically from 1498 until the authorized publication of this treatise on letter writing in 1522, nearly a quarter century: p. 22). The more than 3,000 of his letters extant are said to be an "astonishing number, given the vagaries of archival survival from the period", though the authors of the catalogue acknowledge that Erasmus published many of these himself, "sometimes altering and manipulating them" to advertise his network, "what a later generation would dub a 'republic of letters'" (p. 22). These statements are true, but one should note that in the publishing houses where he primarily worked, Erasmus wrote many of his letters specifically for print: for volume after volume of his collected letters and as dedicatory epistles, apologies, and tributes to dead colleagues appended to his other works. The recipient to whom Erasmus addressed a letter might have received it only in its published form (if at all). Moreover, Erasmus himself imagined a "republic of letters" in his dialogue *De recta pronuntiatione*. Of the few other Renaissance authors of Latin letter-writing manuals mentioned, Aurelio Brandolini's name is misspelled (as "Brandolino", p. 22). However, the catalogue amply compensates for infrequent inaccuracies by its discussion of the material aspects of protocol that rhetoricians often ignore: the size and quality of the paper, the hand-writing (of the writer or of a secretary), the color of the seal (black for mourning, red over a strand of embroidery floss for intimacy), the place of the signature on the page (near the end of the message to assert status in relation to the correspondent, or in the lower right-hand corner for prostrate submission to ask forgiveness or assistance). The evidence for these customs comes partly from manuals, partly from apologies when writers had difficulty meeting their correspondents' expectations, for example, when appropriate paper was unavailable or illness made the physical exertion of writing difficult.

Expectations that a letter would be read and circulated, enclosures of messages to another party, and preservation of letters in official files and personal letter books are treated more fully in "The afterlife of letters". Fear of disclosure is a theme of the "case studies" that accompany the chapters on "Secretaries", "Love and friendship", and "Lost and found". The first of these, "Essex and his secretaries", includes a correspondence that Francis Bacon 'framed' between his brother Anthony and Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, in 1600, to help restore the Earl to Queen Elizabeth's favor, along with Bacon's 1604 apology for these "confected" letters – after his prosecution of Essex in the latter's 1601 trial for treason led the Earl to reveal their authorship. Francis Bacon appears again as inventor of a cipher in the fascinating chapter "Lost and found", on the haphazard nature of letter delivery and dangers of interception and censorship. Ciphers, invisible ink, oral delivery of a dangerous message by a bearer authorized by the letter carried, and instructions to the recipient to burn the letter were among the strategies to prevent the disastrous interception of correspondence. The most notorious example of such interception was the private letters of King Charles I, captured at Nasby-Field in 1645 during the English Civil

War by the forces of Sir Thomas Fairfax and published by Parliament as *The Kings cabinet opened*. The case study that follows this chapter on epistolary dangers, "James I's secret letters", reveals that King's fear of being implicated in the infamous murder in the Tower of London of the imprisoned Sir Thomas Overbury by the Countess of Somerset and probably her husband, King James' favorite, Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset. The King's four letters addressed to the Lieutenant of the Tower, Sir George More, were carefully preserved by More and his descendants in an envelope describing their context.

The chapter on "Love and friendship" notably includes the autograph letter of another monarch's favorite, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, to Queen Elizabeth I, but the exhibition also samples expressions of affection and anguish ranging through all the literate classes. The case study following this chapter, "John Donne's marriage letters", includes a reproduction (98% size) and transcript of only one of the extant letters related to Donne's ill-advised but romantic elopement with his beloved Anne More: Donne's autograph letter of 2 February 160l/2, to Sir George More, Anne's father, confessing the marriage. Donne and two of his friends who participated in the marriage ceremony were imprisoned and later released. Four other autograph letters of Donne to More and to Sir Thomas Egerton, whose patronage Donne lost because of his marriage, are catalogued.

The catalogue's companion edition, *John Donne's Marriage Letters in The Folger Shakespeare Library*, has transcriptions and reproductions of all eighteen letters in that collection, as well as portraits and other illustrations. The two editors, M. Thomas Hester and Dennis Flynn, who were able to bring the work to its conclusion, dedicated it to the memory of their fellow editor and member of the John Donne Society, Robert Parker Sorlien, who died in 2004, but not before visiting Loseley Park in Guildford, Surrey, where the letters were preserved for centuries. The editors worked closely with the More-Molyneux family in preparing the volume. Their introduction draws on recent scholarship and original documents in appropriately expressing skepticism about long-accepted truisms established by Donne's first biographer Isaak Walton. Their own story of the courtship and elopement and its consequences to John and Anne Donne, their family and friends, is spellbinding. A "Curator's Afterword", by Heather Wolfe, the Folger's Curator of Manuscripts, narrates beautifully an equally dramatic story of the Folger's struggle – in 1939-40 as war threatened Britain and made fundraising for the British Museum impossible – to raise the funds to acquire these manuscripts, on the basis of the Folger's ownership of other Loseley papers and its extraordinary strength in Renaissance English literature.

Gary Schneider's monograph, *The Culture of Epistolarity*, focuses on much the same time period, 1500-1700, as the Folger exhibition, and likewise ventures into the centuries preceding and following wherever they illuminate the subject. He too describes material conditions, especially of letter delivery, but is less concerned with the process than with its effects on the content of letter writing. Developing his monograph from a dissertation at Wayne State University supervised by Arthur Marotti, he bases his study on approximately 40,000 letters that are available in imprints, whether early modern or modern, and on a thorough command of recent scholarship. Schneider claims that his conclusions are similar to those of James Daybell's dissertation, *Women's Letters and Letter-Writing in England, 1540-1603* (Ph.D., University of Reading, 2000), although they arrived at them independently and Daybell has studied primarily archived manuscript material. We can judge this claim when Daybell's forthcoming monograph, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*, based on 3,000 manuscript letters, is published next August by Oxford University Press. Schneider did consult manuscript newsletters in the Public Records Office and the British Museum in order to describe their appearance, and six of his monograph's seven illustrations are photographs of seventeenth-century newsletters in manuscript and in print.

Schneider's goal is "to historicize the early modern letter, placing it firmly in its specific cultural situation in order to explore its characteristic functions within early modern English society" (p. 15). Although he claims that his method is both diachronic and synchronic, his practice is usually to classify similarities in early modern letters whatever their date. The topics of classification (and thus the central chapters of the study) include anxieties about letter production, delivery, and reception; verbal expressions of social behavior and affection; reports of information, intelligence, and news; and interactions of print culture and letter writing. The study becomes diachronic when Schneider recognizes a significant change or historical development, for instance, a sudden increase in publication of English letter collections following the 1645 publication of James Howell's *Epistolae Ho-Elianae* and the intercepted letters of Charles I (*The Kings cabinet opened*) or the gradual development of the public newsletter. However, classification dominates, with two effects that weaken the readability of the monograph: first, the study often becomes repetitious as the same letters are cited, and sometimes exactly the same passages are quoted, under different categories of the classification, and second, the reader has to supply the often vital historical contexts (such as the English Civil War) of many letters. Schneider, whose first degree was in psychology from the University of Western Ontario, retains a scientist's interest in assembling epistolary texts as case studies of human nature in social contexts. He often seems reluctant to draw firm conclusions from the evidence he presents or even trace developments in a consistent historical narration, but he does analyze rhetorical strategies as a social phenomenon.

Schneider applies to letter writing Philippe Ariès' discussion of factors affecting the development of the private sphere in Early Modern Europe. He also acknowledges the application of politeness theory in studies of letter writing by Whigham and Magnusson, and finds in his epistolary sample such strategies as apologies for poor style or script and for troubling the correspondent, but he doubts that politeness theory is altogether relevant to a medium of interaction that lacked physical presence and temporal immediacy or even continuity. Schneider assumes that Early Modern society was in transition, affected by the printing press, from an oral to a written culture and that it "tended to valorize speech and face-to-face interaction as [...] more reliable, trustworthy, and authentic" than epistolary communication (p. 16). Written correspondence was threatened by its dependence on such third parties as secretaries and carriers but considered a solemn social duty within the writer's epistolary community. This context produced such common epistolary themes as "the carrier's negligence" (p. 59), "cannot let this messenger goe without a letter" (p. 60), and "giue credit to this berer" (p. 65). Letter writers could manipulate the uncertainty of the epistolary mode of communication to excuse themselves or repeat a request or express displeasure or control the disclosure of something unpleasant and even manage the response of a superior to it. Letters were frequently read aloud, circulated, or even printed by the recipient, and they could be intercepted by government officials and seized, or sometimes copied or changed and sent on. Schneider's Early Modern sources disagree, however, on a number of issues. How private was the letter? Who owned it? What was its value as evidence under the law?

Schneider proves skillful as a literary critic when toward the end of Chapter 2, "Epistolary Anxiety", he begins analyzing the rhetoric of affect in the letters of Queen Elizabeth and her courtiers, recognizing – as his supervisor Marotti has taught us of sonnets – that "love is not love" in courtly correspondence. Chapter 3, "Affecting Correspondences: Body, Behavior, and the Textualization of Emotion", becomes a fascinating survey of metaphorical substitutes for physical expressions of social relationship: kissing hands, prostrating oneself at the feet of the correspondent, weeping, hugging the letter, talking by letter. Letter carriers report to the writer a recipient's reaction to a letter: pleasure, anger, blushing. Schneider discusses the delicate social and political balance that had to be maintained in determining the length and frequency of letter writing and in adjusting to changing fashions of affective language (such as Petrarchism) and

civility. He proves how difficult interpretation of this period's rhetoric of excess can be by quoting excerpts from four letters – between a married couple, between a brother and a sister, between two male friends, and between client and patron – and inviting the reader to match the relationships to these texts.

Chapter 4, "Epistemologies of the Epistle", concerns letters reporting news, ranging from personal and business information for family or friends to intelligence-gathering efforts for a courtier patron or state official. In his examination of the letter of news and the newsletter, Schneider elaborates from his own reading the scholarship of Fritz Levy, Andrew Mousley, Joad Raymond, and especially Ian Atherton to discuss such epistemological issues as "propriety, value, materiality, and reliability" (p. 145). His discussion raises, without entirely resolving, the issue of the extent to which the Renaissance separated letters as documentary and legal evidence from letters as literature and even fiction, but his evidence suggests that our conception of letters as a record of actual events, not subject to revision for publication, evolved between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Particularly interesting are Schneider's examinations of the rhetoric of reporting news and of its value, both to the recipient of information in negotiating court politics and international diplomacy and to the career ambitions of the news gatherer.

The section of Chapter 4 on manuscript newsletters is closely related to the discussion of the printed newsletter in the first of two chapters, 5 and 6, on "Letters and Print Culture". Chapter 5 surveys letters specifically written for print, primarily those gathered into collections, which functioned as sermons, essays, travel accounts, philosophical and scientific studies, political propaganda and satire, accounts of suffering for religion, or appeals and thanks for patronage. Chapter 6 surveys letters not originally written for print but subsequently collected, primarily moral-didactic, personal, and state letters. All three chapters pay some attention to historical developments, demonstrating especially the growth of a market for printed newsletters and for vernacular letter collections of many varieties in the second half of the seventeenth century.

After a day experiencing the Folger's vivid images of the letter-writing process and exciting accounts of Renaissance romance and intrigue, Schneider's monograph might serve as soporific bedtime reading, but the same could be said for most scholarly studies. Employing a sometimes disconcerting mixture of methodologies and indulging in frequent repetition of examples, it nevertheless draws together much of the vibrant recent scholarship on Early Modern letter writing, reifies the flexibility and variety of the genre that Erasmus proclaimed, and offers new insights on the material and social contexts of letter writing and the rhetorical strategies that exploited them. Studied with diligence and attention, *The Culture of Epistolarity* can enlighten and sometimes even entertain the student of rhetoric.

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