Carol Poster and Linda C. Mitchell (eds.):

Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present. Historical and Bibliographic Studies

(Studies in Rhetoric/Communication)

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This collective work on epistolography and epistolary theory gathers eleven articles by leading specialists on the subject and covers a period extending from ancient times to the present. As Carol Poster rightly points out in her introduction (pp. 1-6), the fact that this is the first history of letter writing and letter-writing theory should no doubt be attributed to the many-sided nature of this emerging field, which touches on several areas of knowledge, including rhetoric, literary studies, and sociology. Although epistolary theory has often been compared with rhetorical theory, there are substantial differences between the two, not least in terms of audience: whereas the audience of traditional rhetoric is large, varied, and anonymous, the addressee of a letter is in general a private individual, who is often known to the writer.

In “Classical Epistolary Theory and the Letters of Isocrates” (pp. 7-20), Robert G. Sullivan innovatively uses the Isocratean corpus of letters to reconstruct a chapter in the history of epistolary theory for which there is not much extant evidence. Departing from Isocrates’ comments on his own letter-writing practice, Sullivan highlights a number of defining features of the letter, in particular that it must be short, personal, and written in a style much simpler than that of the speech. Sullivan emphasizes, moreover, that Isocrates uses the flexibility of the private letter to express public ideas, with the individual addressee representing a wider audience. Although, in principle, the letter is defined in opposition to the speech, most of Isocrates’ letters take on a rhetorical dimension, insofar as they must be read in light of his theory of rhetorical composition.

In “A Conversation Halved: Epistolary Theory in Greco-Roman Antiquity” (pp. 21-51), Carol Poster offers a sketch of the history of letter writing in antiquity. This includes the *De elocutione* by Demetrius, exemplifying an epistolary style that reveals the personality of the letter writer; the catalogue of Ps.-Demetrius’s 21 letter types; the list of Pseudo-Libanius’s 41 specimen letters; the short treatise by Philostratus of Lemnos; letter 51 by Gregory of Nazianzus; and Julius Victor’s *Ars rhetorica.* Poster very efficiently shows the difference between Greek and Latin epistolary theory. For the Greeks, letter writers and readers were supposed to be friends – even when unacquainted – as a result of the solidarity forged by the *paideia*. The Romans, on the contrary, were concerned with social hierarchy, an issue that was to be very present, and codified to the extreme, by the medieval *dictatores*. The humanists – Vives and Lipsus especially – would reconnect with Greek epistolary theory, by emphasizing the familiar letter genre and the importance of friendship as the basis of epistolary exchange. The article ends with an annotated list of epistolary sources, including educational papyri and scholarly as well as personal letters.

In “The *Ars Dictaminis*, the Formulary, and Medieval Epistolary Practice” (pp. 52-66), Malcolm Richardson first summarizes the works of James Murphy and Martin Camargo on the

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medieval *ars dictaminis*, demonstrating how, in the eleventh century, Alberic of Monte Cassino taught letter writing as a subfield of rhetoric, and how, two centuries later, rhetoric itself became a subfield of letter writing. Richardson points out that, until the emergence of notaries and lawyers in the late twelfth century, medieval letter writing was monopolized by the clergy. Two treatises are shown to exemplify the evolution of the *ars dictaminis*: the anonymous *Rationes dictandi* (1135), which defines the *salutatio* part of the letter, and the *Practica sive usus dictaminis* (ca. 1300) by Lawrence of Aquileia, which offers a list of phrases to be used in the letter according to the social status of the addressee. Richardson finally urges scholars to examine the neglected tradition of epistolary formularies and manuals intended for middle-class readers, and to conduct computer-assisted linguistic analyses of private letters from the Middle Ages, thus suggesting new areas of research.

In "If You Can't Join Them, Beat Them; or, When Grammar Met Business Writing (in Fifteenth-Century Oxford)" (pp. 67-87), Martin Camargo describes how the University of Oxford sought to reaffirm the prerogatives of the grammar teachers who were faced with the rising popularity of business teaching. Indeed, the art of letter writing was the only area in which the two disciplines openly competed. Since business teachers offered simplified instruction in the *ars dictaminis*, they stood to attract many students normally destined for grammar instruction. Therefore, Camargo points out, in 1432 the University adopted a new statute penalizing business teachers who trespassed on the territory of the grammar teachers. This detailed and extensively documented essay touches only very lightly on epistolary theory, its main focus being the history of the university as an institution and the issue of teachers' corporate interests.

In "From *Ars dictaminis* to *Ars conscribendi epistoli*: Renaissance Letter-Writing Manuals in the Context of Humanism" (pp. 88-101), Gideon Burton discusses humanist innovations of epistolary theory within the more general context of Renaissance pedagogy. In the Renaissance, letter writing became associated with the *ars humanitatis* (rather than the Medieval *ars notaria*), and humanist pedagogy emphasized eloquence and persuasion over grammatical rules. The art of letter writing therefore presupposed both mastery of classical Latin and mastery of eloquence. As Burton argues, this insistence upon eloquence was more than a mere aesthetic consideration; rather, it was based on the humanists' belief in its efficacy in influencing the world's decision-makers. Burton compares Erasmus's *De conscribendis epistolis* (1522) with his *De copia* (1512) to show that both works encourage students to master oratorical inventiveness. By contrast, the *ars dictaminis* insisted upon an unchanging *dispositio* and the use of set formulas.

In "Dictamen in England, 1500-1700" (pp. 102-126), Lawrence D. Green focuses on the highly composite character of epistolary theory in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, associating the medieval heritage of the *ars dictaminis* with the study and imitation of Cicero that was at the heart of Renaissance discussions of style. Until 1573, the major epistolary treatises disseminated in England were all imported from the continent, Green shows, including Erasmus's *De conscribendis epistolis*, which was sometimes published together with treatises by Brandolini, Hegendorf, Celtis, and Vives. In 1573, however, the situation changed when the London printer Middleton published a new edition of Brandolini's *De ratione scribendi*. In the same decade, English publishers began to produce school editions of Cicero's letters. The first successful vernacular treatises were *The enemie of idleness* (1568) by William Fulwood and *The English secretorie* (1586) by Angel Day. In 1602, Nicholas Breton started a new trend with *A poste with a madde packet of letters*, a collection of entertaining letters that was published in numerous editions; and in 1671, Henry Clare catered to women with *The female secretary*. The seventeenth century also saw the translation of such French treatises as Puget de la Serre's *The secretary in fashion* and Antoine de Courtin's *The rules of civility*. Green also highlights the strong legal letter-writing tradition in England, which began with *A new booke of presidentes* (1544) and continued up to *The compleat clark* (1655).

In "Letter Writing and Vernacular Literacy in Sixteenth-Century England" (pp. 127-140), W. Webster Newbold focuses on the three earliest treatises on epistolary art published in English: *The Enemy of Idleness* (1568) by William Fulwood; *A Panoply of Epistles* (1576) by Abraham Fleming; and *The English Secretary* (1586) by Angel Day. The first of these treatises is in fact a translation of the anonymous French treatise *Le stile et maniere de composer, dicter et escrire toute sorte d'epistre,* published in 1553 (and not 1566 as Newbold writes, relying on Jean Robertson), which in its turn derived from both the anonymous *Prothocolle des secretaries*, published in 1534 (not 1550), and Pierre Fabri's *Grant et vray art de pleine rhetorique* (1521).[1] The three treatises share a more or less Erasmian influence, but *The Enemy of Idleness* and *The English Secretary* include elements from the *ars dictaminis* as well; in Newbold's opinion, this is the reason for their commercial success.

In "Humanism and the Humanities: Erasmus's *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* in Sixteenth-Century Schools" (pp. 141-177), Judith Rice Henderson seeks to bridge the gap between the history of ideas and the concrete teaching practice in Renaissance classrooms. To this end, she focuses on the various stages in the dissemination Erasmus's epistolary treatise in the form of epitomes or *compendia*. Henderson shows how, in his *Syntaxis* (1509), Johannes Despauterius drew inspiration from Erasmus, whereas Petrus Pontanus Caecus followed Despauterius, probably without having read Erasmus's treatise. Henderson also studies the part played by Hegendorphinus's bestseller, the *Methodus conscribendi epistolis* (1526), which was indebted to Erasmus. Johannes Monhemius Ervedeldis later borrowed numerous elements from Hegendorphinus when writing *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opus de conscribendis epistolis in compendium redactum* (1539). Moreover, Henderson meticulously recounts how such theorists as Georgius Macropedius, Johannes Nemius, Georgius Wibotius Puteolanus, Hannardus Gamerius Mosaeus, Valentinus Erythraeus Lindaviensis, and Melchior Junius Witebergensis popularized, simplified, and sometimes betrayed Erasmus's epistolary ideas.

In "Letter-Writing Instruction Manuals in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century England" (pp. 178-199), Linda C. Mitchell draws a highly interesting panorama of letter writing manuals during the two centuries by describing the marked decline of classical learning in favour of skills aimed at helping student letter writers to rise socially. Mastering the art of letter writing appears to have been a factor in social advancement, for women as well as men. According to Mitchell, this explains why a treatise such as John Hill's *The Young Secretary's Guide* (1712) proposes 23 specimen letters. Further, Mitchell shows that, in William Mather's *The Young Man's Companion* (1710), letter writing is presented as a part of a vast programme of general education, whereas it is considered a part of grammar teaching in Anne Fisher's *A New Grammar* (1757). In conclusion, Mitchell rightly points out that the main value of the letter as an educational tool lies in its very concreteness, which goes so far as to recreate for students the 'real-life' conditions for communicating.

In "Vestiges of Letter Writing in Composition Textbooks, 1850-1914" (pp. 200-229), John T. Gage continues Mitchell's survey for another, later period by studying more than 193 composition textbooks. More than half of this large number of books, namely 52 percent, includes a section on letter writing. The study examines the relative importance of letters in each textbook; the epistolary genres included; the relation between the teaching of letter writing and the textbook's general pedagogical approach; and, finally, the type of skills acquired by practice in letter writing. Gage's analysis reveals the slow but inexorable decline of letter writing in-

[1] For the dating of Fulwood's sources, see Claude La Charité, "*Le Stile et Maniere de composer, dicter et escrire toutes sortes d'Epistres, ou lettres missives* (1553): de la *dispositio* tripartite de Pierre Fabri au poulpe épistolaire d'Érasme", in Catherine Magnien (ed.), *L'épistolaire au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Éditions Rue d'Ulm, 2001), pp. 17-32.

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struction owing to the conventional and formal character of the letter, which was incompatible with the development of a more spontaneous and 'authentic' form of writing.

In "Letter Writing in the Late Age of Print" (pp. 230-243), Joyce R. Walker argues that the widespread use of electronic mail represents a revival of the epistolary tradition. Consequently, she seeks to compare 'netiquette' manuals with traditional epistolary theory, but her comparison fails to convince this reviewer. The email is most certainly not the educational tool the letter once was; unlike the Renaissance letter, emailing does not involve an academic practice aimed at developing stylistic virtuosity – not to speak of learning. Although the email and the traditional letter are both epistolary forms, their place and importance in their respective cultures are therefore vastly different.

Many scholars have been waiting eagerly for a historical survey of epistolary practice and theory, but, unfortunately, the present collection is not entirely satisfactory. Some of the contributions (those by Carol Poster and Malcolm Richardson, for example) offer a very general synthesis likely to interest a student or neophyte, whereas others (those by Robert G. Sullivan and Martin Carmargo, for example) examine a highly specific issue that targets specialists in the field. This is not to disparage the individual contributions, which are all of outstanding quality. However, the mix of the general and specific addresses too diverse a readership and undermines, in my view, the aim of the collective work.

The bibliographies, divided into seven appendices according to the various periods from antiquity to the twentieth century (pp. 245-335), prove a valuable complement to the body of essays. Regrettable, however, is the omission of a number of recently published studies, particularly in Appendix D, "Select Bibliography of Critical Studies on Renaissance Dictamen" (pp. 305-311). This Appendix includes neither Pedro Martín Baños, *El arte epistolar en el Renacimiento europeo 1400-1600* (Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto, 2005),[2] essential for the entire period and for all of Europe, nor specific studies on letter writing in France, such as Catherine Magnien (ed.), *L'épistolaire au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Éditions Rue d'Ulm, 2001); Luc Vaillancourt, *La lettre familière au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003);[3] or even Guy Gueudet, *L'art de la lettre humaniste* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004).

The publication of *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present* is a major step towards asserting the importance of this field of research and defining its parameters. However, a genuine history of epistolary practice and theory – comparable to Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990) or Marc Fumaroli (ed.), *Histoire de la rhétorique dans l'Europe moderne (1450-1950)* (Paris: PUF, 1999) – has yet to be written.

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[2] See the review by Judith Rice Henderson in *Rhetorical Review* 5:2 (2007).
[3] See the review by Judith Rice Henderson in *Rhetorical Review* 3:1 (2005).

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