

Letters as Hand Properties: Intercepted Delivery

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Abstract

The role of letters in communication has changed significantly. Today, e-mail plays a large part in written communication, and as a result, one might expect the gradual disappearance of letters as theatrical devices. However, a new play premiered in 2012 employs letters with forceful dramatic effect. Dramatic moments created by letters can be classified into four categories depending on the contributory factors: false letter, intercepted delivery, delayed delivery, erroneous delivery. In the new play, letters are used as a dramatic device to signal a sharp plot turn and forward the action. A dramatic moment is created when the protagonist finds hidden letters addressed to him from his supposedly dead mother. His father had intercepted the delivery. The revelation exposes his father's lie, which in turn motivates the protagonist to take action to leave him. In addition, a book, another written property, serves as a device for disclosure.

Key-words

Hand Properties Letters *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

I. Introduction

Letters have been skillfully employed as hand properties by playwrights in ways that are theatrically effective. For example, Lady Macbeth reads a letter from her husband alone on stage and articulates her innermost thoughts, which reveal to the audience that she is determined to make her husband a king by 'the nearest way'.¹⁾ In *A Doll's House*, Nora's life is at the mercy of letters written by Krogstad and read by her husband, Torvald.²⁾ The letters here not only twist and turn the plot but also expose the truth about Torvald's selfishness. Such dramatic moments created by letters are destined to become a thing of the past.

Information technology has revolutionised communication options, and letter writing has

become a dying art. Letters delivered by messengers or postmen were once the only reliable means of communication in a written form between people in different locations. The development of the telegraph modified the delivery system and enabled speedy communication over a very long distance. Then the fax machine, using the telephone network, reduced the time required for delivery drastically. Finally, over the last two decades, the introduction of the Internet has heralded an even more radical change. The cumbersome process of writing with pen and ink on a piece of paper is gradually disappearing from our daily lives. Instead of writing and sending letters, people now text messages. As a result, the time consuming posted letter has acquired a retronym, snail-mail, to distinguish it from the instantaneously delivered e-mail. With e-mails able to be sent globally on a round-the clock basis, no news is no longer good news. On the other hand, snail-mail has gained a new status. Sending words written by hand in a stamped envelope sometimes attracts more attention than the message itself inside the envelope. Such significant change in the routine form of written communication must surely lead to an inevitable consequence: the number of letters on stage will decrease in years to come. If letters, nonetheless, were still to be used as a convenient dramatic device, a convincing situation together with plausible justification would be essential.

Despite the social trend which predicates a gradual disappearance of letters on stage, forceful dramatic moments are still being created by letters, for example in a new play, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.³⁾ It premiered at the National Theatre in 2012, and has now transferred to the Apollo Theatre. During its initial run, the play won seven Olivier Awards including Best New Play. The purpose of this paper is to explore the dramatic device of letters as hand properties, and to examine the use of letters in this new play.

II. Hand Properties

The term ‘property’ is an old one. Peter Quince in *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* tells the craftsmen, ‘In the meantime I will draw a bill of properties, such as our play wants.’⁴⁾ Quoting this as an example, the *OED* defines property as ‘[a]ny portable article as an article of costume or furniture, used in acting a play; a stage requisite, appurtenance, or accessory.’⁵⁾ *Oxford Concise Companion to the Theatre*, on the other hand, gives a less capacious definition: ‘It covers anything essential to the action of the play which does not come under the heading of costume, scenery, or furniture. Hand-props are those which an actor handles—letters, documents, revolvers, newspapers, knitting, snuff boxes, and so on.’⁶⁾ Martin Harrison gives a similar definition, but states that hand properties are ‘carried’ not handled: ‘[A]ny article essential to the action of a

play which does not come under the heading of *scenery*, *costume*, furniture etc. A *prop* whose appearance on stage is the responsibility of the actor is known as a *personal prop*, and if carried, a *hand prop*.⁷⁾ Patrice Pavis explains that properties are '[s]tage *objects* (not including *scenery* and *costumes*) used or handled by the actors in the course of the play. Very numerous in naturalistic theatre, which reconstructs a milieu down to the last detail, today they are used less to characterize and more as theatre machines or abstract *objects*'.⁸⁾ According to Jonnie Patricia Mobley, '[Stage properties] are usually divided into four categories: hand-props—those carried onstage or handled by the actors (fans, letters, glasses); set or scene props—large items placed on the floor (furniture, rugs, statuary, rocks, bushes); dress props—things that trim the set (pictures, curtains, wall sconces, mirrors); and effects not produced in the lighting booth (doorbells, knockings, crashes, smoke, wind, fog)'.⁹⁾ Although the concept of properties or props is defined in almost every dictionary, it turns out to be rather ambiguous on a closer examination.

Semiotic study of theatrical objects views properties from its own perspective. Tadeusz Kowzan states that 'Everything is sign in a theatrical presentation' and defines thirteen principal systems of signs used in a theatrical presentation.¹⁰⁾ Properties are listed as 'accessory' and the following explanation is given:

A practically unlimited number of objects that exist in nature and in social life can become theatrical accessories. If they only represent objects encountered in life, these accessories are artificial signs of those objects, signs at the first degree. But, as well as this elementary function, they can indicate the place, the moment or any circumstance connected with the characters who use them (profession, tastes, intention) and this is their significance at the second degree.¹¹⁾

Brownell Salomon reduces Kowzan's taxonomy from thirteen to eleven and defines hand properties as '[u]nanchored physical objects, light enough for a person to carry on stage for manual use there'.¹²⁾ Martin Esslin, on the other hand, expands it to twenty-two, and adds another ten sign systems confined to cinema and televisions.¹³⁾ He defines furniture, tools, instruments and other movable objects present in the dramatic space and used by the characters as properties. At the same time he states that 'complete iconic realism is by no means essential. Objects also obey the principle of the primacy of action in drama. Properties may . . . be entirely suggested by the actor's action: the characters may be drinking non-existing wine and be handling non-existent tools and yet satisfy the audience's imagination'.¹⁴⁾ According to Keir Elam, in his application of semiotic theory to theatre studies, 'props' are listed together with body, voice, costume, set,

lights as ‘transmitter’, one of the communicational factors in theatrical communication.¹⁵⁾ Though semiotic approach is appealing, we need a more detailed definition.

Francis Teague, in her most extensive analysis on Shakespeare’s properties, focuses on the way properties operate and offers a functional definition.

*A property is an object, mimed or tangible, that occurs onstage, where it functions differently from the way it functions offstage. At the moment when the audience notes its entry into the dramatic action a property has meaning; it may also have meaning as one of a class of objects. A property can carry multiple meanings, which may sometimes conflict. . . . Properties do not operate in performance as they do in a nontheatrical context—they mean differently. . . . One might call this characteristic of a property dislocated function; the property has a function, but it is not the same function as it has offstage (though it may imitate that ordinary function).*¹⁶⁾

Through their ‘dislocated function’, properties forward the action, offer information about characters and the condition of performance, mark place or time, satisfy generic conventions, and help make a scene spectacular. As for letters, Teague asserts that Shakespeare uses them as time-place markers especially in wartime settings: ‘When a Renaissance playwright had not only to establish the setting of the dramatic action, but also to remind the audience of the location of other characters, he found a convenient device to be a letter about offstage action, delivered to characters during a scene, so that they could read or comment on it.’¹⁷⁾

Andrew Sofer, on the other hand, offers a descriptive definition. He rigorously defines a property as ‘*a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of performances*’.¹⁸⁾ He adds that in order to become a property, a stage object must be ‘triggered’ by an actor, and that ‘it is not enough for an object to be handled by an actor, it must also be perceived by a spectator *as a prop*—in other words, as a sign’.¹⁹⁾ He describes eight ways in which ‘a prop takes on a life of its own in performance’.²⁰⁾ As for a hand property, whether it be handled, carried or used, Sofer clarifies the opacity: ‘The prop must physically move or alter in some way as a result of the actor’s physical intervention. Unlike other critics, I emphasize the criterion of *manipulation* rather than *portability* because for theater practitioners, stationary items such as radios become props once an actor turns them on or otherwise adjusts them.’²¹⁾

Very informative and valuable as these book-length studies on stage properties are, both studies do not sufficiently cover the specific mechanism of letters as hand properties. Letters are unique in that, unlike other properties, they retain the basic original form when brought on stage.²²⁾ While

other properties that are nothing but words on a printed page are being transformed into totally different concrete three dimensional entities on stage, letters still retain the words printed on paper. Letters belong to two disparate sign systems. They function as visual signs as well as verbal signs. In terms of Kowzan's synthezizing classification, as 'Accessory', they relate to 'Appearance of the stage', are situated in relation to 'Space', and are 'Visual signs' outside actors. At the same time as 'Word', they relate to 'Spoken text', are situated in relation to 'Time', and are 'Auditive signs' emitted by actors.²³⁾ Therefore, when it comes to audience's perception, their entry into dramatic action as properties discloses only part of their meaning. The embedded dynamism which it might hold cannot be fully unfolded by manipulation alone nor by just being perceived as a property. Information about the message or the words inside has to be pronounced, though not necessarily read. To borrow Teague's suggestive coinage, letters have to literally 'speak' out. In addition, unlike other properties normally situated in relation to 'Space' alone, letters travel through time and space, from one hand or location to another during the performance. In other words, letters are meant to be 'delivered' both visually and verbally. Furthermore, while the fabricator or the owner of other properties is usually of no importance, the letter-writer or the recipient is often a vital ingredient which demands attention. These unique features lend themselves to creating dramatic moments.

Dramatic moments created by letters can be classified roughly into four categories depending on the contributing factors. The first category is those generated by the letter-writer to trigger a problem. It normally takes the form of a 'False Letter' written in order to trap others. The forged letter Maria writes in *Twelfth Night* comes under this category.²⁴⁾

The contributing factors of the other three categories are by-products of the constraints of time and space. They can be attributed to the delivery system. The second category is those triggered by 'Intercepted Delivery'. This is when smooth delivery is intentionally hampered in order to prevent the delivery of the letter. Such is the case in *Lady Windermere's Fan* when Mrs Erlynne reads Lady Windermere's letter addressed to her husband. She crushes the letter in her hand in order to hide it from his sight.²⁵⁾ It must be noted that this may happen after the letter is delivered to its intended address, for in modern times letters are more often delivered to the house, not to an individual addressee. Someone other than the intended recipient who happens to be at the address may take hold of it.

The third category is those created by 'Delayed Delivery'. This is when it takes more time than expected to have the letter delivered. In consequence, it may happen that necessary information is not communicated within the expected timeframe. The suspension normally generates tension. A letter may or may not reach its destination, but the delivery is meant to be achieved. The cause of

delay can be deliberate or accidental. Friar Lawrence's letter to Romeo falls into this category.²⁶⁾

The last category is those due to 'Erroneous Delivery'. This is when the letter is delivered to an unintended recipient. The error may be triggered with intent or without. This also includes cases when some party other than the intended recipient gets hold of a letter after proper delivery has been achieved. This leads to divulging of information, such as is the case with the letter Gloucester receives in *King Lear*.²⁷⁾

As for the new play to be discussed, its letters fall within the second category. Before exploring the use of letters in the play, its story line will be introduced.

III. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

First, an explanation about the curiously strange title: the play is adapted by Simon Stephens from the award winning novel of the same name by Mark Haddon.²⁸⁾ Its title is a quotation from Sherlock Holmes in Arthur Conan Doyle's short story 'Silver Blaze'. The protagonist, Christopher Boone, compares himself to the fictional detective as he tries to unravel the mystery of a murdered dog.

The play opens with a dead dog lying in the middle of the stage with a large garden fork sticking out of its side. The dog is called Wellington. Mrs Shears, the owner of Wellington and one of Christopher's neighbours, finds Christopher by her dead dog. A policeman comes and questions Christopher. He is taken to the police station where he has to spend some time. Christopher's attitude and response is somewhat strange. Eventually when his father, Ed Boone, comes to collect him, his odd behaviour is more apparent. The stage direction reads: 'Christopher *turns to* Ed. Ed *looks at him. He holds his hand out in front of him with his fingers stretched. Christopher does the same. They touch fingers. Then let go.*' (8)

Christopher is 'fifteen years and three months and three days'. (19) He lives in Swindon alone with Ed, for his mother, Judy, died two years ago, so he is told. He has a perfect memory for prime numbers and seeks comfort in numbers. He says, 'I like maths and looking after Toby. And I also like outer space and I like being on my own.' (27) Toby is his pet rat. As Ed admits, maths is 'the one thing he's really good at'. (22) Therefore, Ed bargains with the headmistress to allow his son to do his A Level Maths this year, at whatever price. Christopher is not good at communication, either verbally or, much less, physically. He interprets everything literally and is therefore incapable of understanding metaphors. He communicates in small sentences and he never lies. He explains why: 'I do not tell lies. Mother used to say that this was because I was a good person.

But it is not because I am a good person. It is because I can't tell lies.' (4) He does not like to be touched, and finds it difficult to share toilets with other people. When he experiences moments of distress, he screams, groans, and rolls himself into a ball, and often starts counting. He admits that he is noisy, and sometimes 'difficult to control'. (96) He goes to a Special School, where his warm-hearted teacher, Siobhan, understands him and tries to keep him out of trouble.

Christopher is given a caution at the police station, and back at home Ed tells him to keep his nose out of other people's business. However, Christopher decides to find out who killed Wellington and make it a project. Siobhan encourages him, saying, 'Well, we're meant to be writing stories today, so why don't you write about what happened to Wellington?' (14) He starts asking neighbours to see if anyone knows anything about Wellington's death. He encounters resistance from many except one, Mrs Alexander, who invites him to tea. He walks away, though, for he thinks she might ring the police. Not being able to get information, he decides to engage in logical analysis.

I think you would only kill a dog if a) you hated the dog or b) if you were mad or c) because you wanted to make Mrs Shears upset. I don't know anybody who hated Wellington so if it was a) it was probably a stranger. I don't know any mad people either, so if it was b) it was also probably a stranger. . . .

But most murders are committed by someone who is known to the victim. In fact, you are most likely to be murdered by a member of your own family on Christmas Day. . . .

Wellington was therefore most likely to have been killed by someone known to him. I only know one person who didn't like Mrs Shears and that is Mr Shears who divorced Mrs Shears and left her to live somewhere else and who knew Wellington very well indeed. This means that Mr Shears is my Prime Suspect. (21)

When Christopher tells Ed who the likely culprit is, Ed shouts at him saying, 'I will not have that man's name mentioned in my house. . . . That man is evil.' Christopher explains himself, 'I know you told me not to get involved in other people's business but Mrs Shears is a friend of ours.' (23) The explanation is not accepted, and he is made to promise to stop his detective game. Since he is forbidden to find out who killed Wellington, the book is finished without, according to Christopher, 'a proper ending'.

Ironically, however, Ed's warning confirms his logical thinking: 'Father said I was never to mention Mr Shears' name in our house again and that he was an evil man and maybe that meant he was the person who killed Wellington.' (26) So, he sets out to find out about Mr Shears, which

is not listed in the things he is forbidden to do. He goes to Mrs Alexander who tells him that his mother and Mr Shears were having an affair before he left Mrs Shears. On being told about this, Siobhan asks him whether the uncomfortable truth about his mother made him sad, to which he replies, 'I don't feel sad about it because Mother is dead and because Mr Shears isn't around any more. So I would be feeling sad about something that isn't real and doesn't exist and that would be stupid.' (31)

Meanwhile, Ed finds the book Christopher has been writing. He reads it, gets furious and questions Christopher about it, which leads to a brief fight between them. The stage direction reads: '*Ed shakes Christopher hard with both hands. Christopher falls unconscious for a few seconds. Ed stands above him. . . . He goes and picks up the book. He leaves. He comes back without the book.*' (34)

Alone in the house, Christopher decides to get his book back. While searching for the confiscated book, he uncovers a stack of unopened letters addressed to him from his mother. They are postmarked after her supposed death. He reads them and is immensely distressed. When Ed returns home, he realises that Christopher has read the letters. He confesses that he had lied about Judy's death, and that it was he who had killed Wellington. He also explains, with difficulty, the circumstances that led to Wellington's death. All this while, Christopher says nothing but groans. When Ed leaves, Christopher starts counting.

Later, Christopher tells Ed, 'I can't live in the house with you any more because it is dangerous.' (48) He fears that Ed might kill him, for he has already killed Wellington. He knows it as a fact that 'you are most likely to be murdered by a member of your own family on Christmas Day.' He decides to go to London to live with his mother. Guided by his mother's address on the envelope, he sets out on his quest for refuge. Although he has just had a lesson with Siobhan on 'Life Skills', which was 'Using Money' and 'Public Transport', the journey is an incredibly challenging one for someone who has never bought a ticket, nor boarded a train, not to mention an underground or an escalator. After a long and eventful journey, feeling sick at times, he finally reaches the address on the envelope, and waits outside. Judy comes home with Roger, Mr Shears, and is delighted to see Christopher. When asked why he had not written to her, he answers, 'Father said you were dead. . . . He said you went into hospital because you had something wrong with your heart. And then you had a heart attack and died.' (77) Judy is horrified to learn this.

On the other hand, Roger is not happy about having Christopher live with them. Christopher, who is scared of Roger and unable to find refuge in London, is quite eager to go back to Swindon. He insists that he must sit Maths A Level. Unlike Ed, Judy does not appreciate how important the exam is for Christopher, and so calls the headmistress and asks for it to be postponed till next

year. On hearing this, Christopher screams uncontrollably. However, not long after, Christopher and Judy move back to Swindon, and so Siobhan rearranges for the exam to be taken. Judy gets a job and a small bedsit without a toilet. Meanwhile, Ed tries very hard to earn back his trust, but Christopher remains terrified of him. One day, Ed comes with a puppy for Christopher, which he names 'Sandy'. Thanks to Sandy, Christopher begins spending some time at Ed's house. Christopher eventually receives his exam results. He gets an A*, and Ed arranges with the headmistress for Further Maths to be taken the following year. Christopher asserts, 'I'm going to pass it and get an A* grade. And then in two years I'll take A level physics and get an A* grade. And then I'm going to go to university in another town. . . . I can live in a flat with a garden and a proper toilet.' (99) His ultimate goal is to become a scientist. He is proud of having travelled to London, solved the mystery of Wellington's murder, and having written a book. The play ends with Christopher asking Siobhan, 'Does that mean I can do anything?'

IV. Written Properties

Written properties in two different forms are employed in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*: book and letter. The book will be discussed first, for it concerns the overall structure of the play.

IV— 1. The Book

Simon Stephens creates an excellent adaptation of Haddon's book. Utilizing metatheatrical devices, he fills his play with moments that emphasise the artificiality of theatre. He reminds the audience, now and then, that what the audience is watching is a play based on Christopher's book. The adoption of Siobhan as a narrator is the most obvious of these devices. Siobhan does this part by reading the book. The book functions both visually and verbally. Since the book is narrated in the first-person perspective, Siobhan is narrating Christopher's words, not her own nor anyone else's. The book is, in other words, a surrogate Christopher. This surrogate Christopher speaks directly to the audience, breaking the fourth wall. 'The separation of the word from the subject speaking,' explains Kowzan, 'can assume different forms and play several semiological parts.'²⁹⁾ Kowzan lists 'a sign of inner monologue' as one. Thus, the book enables the audience to delve into Christopher's inner thoughts. It portrays the inner workings of Christopher's mind and his emotions. For example, Siobhan reads: 'Sometimes when I want to be on my own I get into the airing cupboard and slide in beside the boiler and pull the door closed behind me and sit there and think for hours and it makes me feel very calm.' (24) Not only the words in the book but also the

tone in which she narrates the book bears a semiological effect.³⁰⁾

The book performs several other functions. It first marks the time. At the opening of the play, as Christopher stands by the dead dog, Siobhan opens the book and reads from it: 'It was seven minutes after midnight. The dog was lying on the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs Shears' house.' (3)

Then the book is used as an explanatory device, and takes the audience quickly into the world of the play. It introduces the protagonist: 'My name is Christopher John Francis Boone. I know all the countries of the world and the capital cities. And every prime number up to 7507.' (4)

The book also manipulates the passage of time, incorporating flashbacks. It enables fluid treatment of time whereby past and present flow into one another seamlessly. The seamless flow back and forth highlights the intervening scenes and flashbacks. Siobhan reads: 'Mother died two years ago. I came home from school one day and no one answered the door, so I went and found the secret key that we keep under a flowerpot outside the kitchen windows. . . . An hour later Father came home from work.' (12) When Ed enters, the audience is taken back to witness a significant event that occurred two years ago:

Ed: I'm afraid you won't be seeing your mother for a while.

Christopher: Why not?

Ed: Your mother has had to go into hospital.

Christopher: Can we visit her?

Ed: No.

Christopher: Why can't we?

Ed: She needs rest. She needs to be on her own.

Christopher: Is it a psychiatric hospital?

Ed: No. It's an ordinary hospital. She has a problem . . . a problem with her heart. (12)

Siobhan then slips in as Christopher's mentor and involves herself in the current action of the play which brings the audience back briefly to the present. This is when she encourages him to write a book. Immediately after this, Ed leads the audience back to the past:

Ed: Christopher, I'm sorry your mother's died. She's had a heart attack. It wasn't expected.

Christopher: What kind of heart attack?

Ed: I don't know what kind of heart attack. Now isn't the moment Christopher to be

asking questions like that.

Christopher: It was probably an aneurysm.

Ed: I'm sorry Christopher, I'm really sorry. (14-15)

These two telling moments inform the audience that Christopher lives in a world of phenomenology and cannot empathise with other people, not even his parents.

The book also forwards action. When this is done, different time periods unfold in parallel: while Christopher's words are narrated in the past tense as written in the book, the audience views the action in the present. That is to say, the event the audience sees on stage becomes merely representative of what has happened. Consequently, the audience is forced to acknowledge the artificial nature of the onstage events. Such reference to reality leads to an acute awareness of onstage events and builds tension, pitting surrogate Christopher against the character Christopher, and the character Christopher against the actor acting Christopher. A typical example is depicted during Christopher's search for the confiscated book. Siobhan reads out a large section from the book while the audience watches Christopher eagerly moving around the stage miming what is being narrated: 'When I got home from school Father was still at work so I went outside and looked inside the dustbin. But the book wasn't there. . . . One other possibility was that Father had hidden my book somewhere in the house. So I decided to do some detecting and see if I could find it. I started by looking in the kitchen. . . .' (35-36)

All these 'dislocated functions', to borrow Teague's words, blend effectively in the first half of the performance, and the book disappears after the intermission.

IV— 2. The letters

Judy has been writing to Christopher ever since she left Swindon. Her letters are delivered to the intended address, but not to the intended recipient. Ed, having told Christopher that his mother had died of a heart attack, had to intercept the delivery and hide them away. The interception and subsequent act of deception, is exposed in a dramatic manner.

The discovery of the letters is reinforced by a metatheatrical device, making it a compelling moment. It is when the audience's awareness of the stage action is stimulated that the unexpected presence of her letters is acknowledged. Christopher is looking around the house for the confiscated book following the words of surrogate Christopher. The searching goes on for a while, and when he eventually finds it, he happens to notice an unopened envelope addressed to him. Siobhan reads:

Then I looked in his clothes cupboard. In the bottom of the cupboard was a large plastic toolbox which was full of tools for doing-it-yourself but I could see these without opening the box because it was made of transparent grey plastic. Then I saw that there was another box underneath the toolbox. The other box was an old cardboard box that is called a shirt box because people used to buy shirts in them. And when I opened the shirt box I saw my book was inside it. Then I heard his van pulling up outside the house and I knew I had to think fast and be clever. I heard Father shutting the door of the van. And that is when I saw the envelope. It was an envelope addressed to me and it was lying under my book in the shirt box with some other envelopes. I picked it up. It had never been opened. (36-37)

Surrogate Christopher found this 'interesting and confusing', and so does the 'real' Christopher on stage, as does the audience, too.

As explained earlier, letters as hand properties belong to two disparate sign systems: visual and verbal. The information, both visual and verbal, the crucial hand property carries, is unfolded very skillfully layer by layer by both Christophers. First, visual information is exhibited: an unopened envelope addressed to Christopher. He manipulates the envelope and recognises a familiar handwriting. Siobhan reads: 'I only know three people who do little circles instead of dots over the letter i. And one of them is Siobhan. And one of them was Mr Loxley who used to teach at the school. And one of them was Mother.' (37)

Ed comes home, so the envelope remains unopened. Christopher and the audience have to wait a while for further verbal information to be revealed. Once in his room alone, Christopher opens the envelope and reads the letter. The narrator is Judy. The letter says that some time has passed since the last letter was written, that a new job and a new flat have been found. It asks Christopher to write to the new address, written at the top. Surrogate Christopher was confused, and so is the 'real' Christopher. Siobhan reads:

Mother had never worked as a secretary for a factory that made things out of steel. And Mother had never lived in London. And Mother had never written a letter to me before. There was no date on the letter so I couldn't work out when Mother had written the letter and then I looked at the front of the envelope and I saw there was a postmark and there was a date on the postmark, 16 October 2011, which meant that the letter was posted eighteen months after Mother had died. (39)

Since ‘the subject speaking’ is narrating her own words, the audience takes it for granted that the letter is from Judy herself; but Christopher not so. Surrogate Christopher says, ‘I decided that I would not think about it anymore that night because I didn’t have enough information and could easily LEAP TO THE WRONG CONCLUSIONS.’ (39) So the ‘real’ Christopher and the audience have yet to wait for further information.

The following day while Ed is out, Christopher goes into his bedroom and recovers the rest of the letters. He finds forty-three of them, two of which are read out. The first one is nostalgic, and as Judy reads it, it becomes a monologue. The second one is also nostalgic, but towards the end it becomes introspective. When Judy starts making a revelatory confession, Siobhan comes in and shares the monologue. Siobhan says, ‘I wonder if you can understand any of this. I know it will be difficult for you,’ and her last words are ‘Christopher I never meant to hurt you’. (45) Siobhan’s interruption prevents the audience from identifying with Judy.

All this while, Christopher on stage is rather distanced, indifferent to the sentimental and emotional atmosphere created by the monologue. He assembles a toy train set that pops out from boxes beautifully designed by Bunny Christie. He keeps on playing with it as if the voices of Judy and Siobhan do not reach his ears. If letters as hand properties were to be a vivid illustration of the relationship of the letter-writer and the intended receiver, what we have here is an embodiment of disconnectedness. Judy’s emotional appeal is unrequited. Only words like ‘dream’, ‘astronaut’, and ‘maths’ reward attention. It may be said that these words serve semiological effect.³¹⁾ Judy reads: ‘Do you remember you used to say that you wanted to be an astronaut? Well I used to have dreams where you were an astronaut and you were on television and I thought that’s my son. I wonder what it is that you want to be now. Has it changed? Are you still doing maths? I hope you are.’ (45) Christopher is devastated. The stage direction reads: ‘Christopher *moves to the middle of the track. He crouches down. He rolls himself into a ball. He starts hitting his hands and his feet and his head against the floor as the letter continues. His trashing has exhausted him. He has been sick. He lies still for a while, wrapped in a ball*’. (45) Coming home, and seeing Christopher in this state, Ed realises that Christopher has read the letters.

The Intercepted Delivery is exposed, and as a direct consequence, Ed is made to confess that he had lied about Judy, and that he had killed Wellington. The confession leads to Christopher’s decision to leave his father. A sharp change of direction in the plot is signaled as Christopher mumbles Judy’s address written in her letters.

The letters are later mentioned when Ed comes up to London to see Christopher. Judy accuses Ed of wiping her out of Christopher’s life, and says, ‘I wrote to him every week,’ to which the distraught father shoots back, ‘What the fuck use is writing to him?’ Here, writing snail-mails

every day is weighed against everyday care: 'I cooked his meals. I cleaned his clothes. I looked after him every weekend; I looked after him when he was ill. I took him to the doctor. I worried myself sick every time he wandered off somewhere at night. I went to school every time he got into a fight. And you? What? You wrote him some fucking letters.' (80) For Judy, letter writing is an act of caring, and each letter she writes denotes love. It is, what Sofer calls, 'a fetishized prop'. Sofer explains that '[a] fetishized prop is one endowed by the actor, character, or playwright with a special power and/or significance that thereafter seems to emanate from the object itself. No longer a transparent sign, a fetish takes on inordinate significance and becomes the focus of a character's projected desire, fear, or anxiety. By extension (contagion?), the object then serves the same function for the audience'.³²⁾

There is another Intercepted Delivery to be noted. It concerns the letter mentioned in the flashback scene. When Ed tells Christopher that his mother is in hospital, Christopher says, 'I'll make her a get-well card. If I make her a get-well card will you take it in for her tomorrow?' (13) Christopher who cannot tell lies would surely have written this card, and Ed must have intercepted the delivery.

We also have a Delayed Delivery. The delay is deliberate, triggered by the playwright, Simon Stephens.³³⁾ It concerns the exam results. First, Stephens makes the audience witness Christopher struggle during the test. The stage direction reads: 'Christopher *turns over the exam paper. He stares at it. He can't understand any questions. He panics. His breathing becomes erratic. To calm himself he counts the cubes of cardinal numbers.*' (93) Then he makes Christopher tell his father, 'I don't know if I got all the questions right because I was really tired and I hadn't eaten any food so I couldn't think properly.' (95) Having prepared the audience for not too good a result, Stephens builds up the tension by making the audience wait. The result is delivered just before the curtain falls.

Notes

- 1) William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) 1316. David Bevington, in Chapter II of his influential book, explains how letters visualize the action of comedy. *Action is Eloquence: Shakespeare's Language of Gesture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984).
- 2) Henrik Ibsen, *Plays: The League of Youth, A Doll's House, The Lady from the Sea*, trans. Peter Watts

(Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

- 3) Simon Stephens, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, (London: Methuen, 2012). The play, directed by Marianne Elliott and designed by Bunny Christie, premiered at the National Theatre on 2 August 2012, and was transferred to the Apollo theatre on 1 March 2013.
- 4) *The Riverside Shakespeare* 226.
- 5) 'Property', *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970) Print.
- 6) 'Props', *Oxford Concise Companion to the Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, Second Edition, 1992).
- 7) Martin Harrison, 'Props', *The Language of Theatre* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, Revised Edition, 1998).
- 8) 'Properties', Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, trans. Christine Shantz (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1998).
- 9) Jonnie Patricia Mobley, 'Props', *NTC's Dictionary of Theatre and Drama Terms* (Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1995).
- 10) Tadeusz Kowzan, "The Sign in the Theater: An Introduction to the Semiology of the Art of the Spectacle", trans. Simon Pleasance, *Diogenes* 61 (1968): 57. The following are the listed thirteen: word, tone, facial mime, gesture, actor's movement on the stage, make up, hair style, costume, accessory, décor, lighting, music, and sound effect. Kowzan explains that more detailed classification is possible and that clearer sections possible by reducing the number of systems.
- 11) Kowzan 68.
- 12) Brownell, Salomon, "Visual and Aural Signs in the Performed English Renaissance Play", *Renaissance Drama* 5 (1972): 161.
- 13) Martin Esslin, *The Field of Drama* (London: Methuen, 1987) 103-5.
- 14) Esslin 76.
- 15) Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Methuen, 1980) 35-39.
- 16) Francis Teague, *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1991) 16-18.
- 17) Teague 20.
- 18) Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2003) 11.
- 19) Sofer 31.
- 20) Sofer lists the following phenomena: props motivate the stage action, props are transformational puppets, props appear to signify independently of the actor who handles them, props absorb dramatic meaning and become complex symbols, props are defamiliarized, props are fetishized, props are haunted mediums, and props come to life on stage when they confound dramatic convention. Sofer 23-29.
- 21) Sofer 12.
- 22) It must be mentioned that 'letter' here is given as a broad entry that includes any written property that changes hands and whose context is to be pronounced during the performance.
- 23) Kowzan 73.
- 24) *The Riverside Shakespeare* 418-19.
- 25) Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: William Collins Sons & Co., 1989) 408.
- 26) *The Riverside Shakespeare* 1089.
- 27) *The Riverside Shakespeare* 1275.
- 28) Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Oxford: David Fickling Books, 2003).
- 29) Kowzan 63.

- 30) Kowzan explains that 'The word is not only a linguistic sign. The way it is pronounced gives it a supplementary semiological value. . . . Even if a word is apparently neuter and indifferent, the actor's diction can give it the most subtly shaded and unexpected effects'. 63. Salomon also states that vocal tone may be 'as important an index of a dramatic character's attitude, and of the standards by which he is to be judged, as the language he utters'. (152)
- 31) Kowzan explains that 'the words, beside their purely semantic function, have a supplementary semiological function at the phonological, syntactic or prosodic level'. 62. In this sense, Christopher's pattered speech, speaking in small sentences, also has semiological effect.
- 32) Sofer 26.
- 33) In the novel, Christopher sits for three days. Although he had trouble on the first day, the second and the third days went fine. Stephens creates tension by depicting just the bad day.

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