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# Addressing the Addressee: Shakespeare and Early Modern Epistolary Theory

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## *Abstract*

Considering the emergence of epistolary theory in mid-sixteenth-century England, its value and function, the article attempts to show how these theories helped to construct, in contemporary correspondence, the addressee's identity. One of the most important precepts was, as Angel Day states in his manual *The English Secreterie*, that, when composing a letter, writers tailored their text to the addressee. Even invented letters in Shakespeare's plays reveal that, while correctly addressing the addressee does not necessarily guarantee success, address was considered the most important tool at the writer's disposal when attempting to secure the addressee's good will. Importantly, the observance of this precept even in drama indicates that epistolary theory had a more pervasive influence in early modern England than previously thought.

*Keywords:* Early Modern Drama, Epistolary Theory, Letter Writing, Shakespeare

## 1. *Introduction*

*Julia:* And is the paper nothing?  
*Lucetta:* Nothing concerning me.  
(*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* 1.2, 73-74)

The paper is certainly something. If the paper, a letter from her lover, had been nothing, Julia would have walked away after tearing it. If it had been nothing, she would have left her tailor-made puzzle in pieces. As it happened, she gathered the fragments in an attempt to recompose the letter. She asked the wind to 'blow not a word away / Till I have found each letter in this letter' (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 1.2, 119-120),<sup>1</sup> knowing that the meaning of the message would be altered if constructed improperly. She managed to organize each section, including the pieces with 'To Julia', 'To the sweet Julia' and 'Poor forlorn Proteus', fold them, and afterward seal the bundle with a kiss rather than wax (1.2, 119-120).

This letter-tearing scene in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is striking indeed. The letter's deconstruction and overt reconstruction call attention to the presence of epistolary theory on stage. After tearing the letter, Julia considered its individual pieces. The section that she read with 'To the sweet Julia' for instance is the message's salutation, a property of a letter whose everyday use

was guided by pedagogical texts and letter writing manuals of the day. By dramatizing a salutation or subscription, Shakespeare drew the epistolary theory of these texts onto the stage. Indeed, this attention to epistolary detail is characteristic of his plays. In *Twelfth Night*, for instance, Malvolio lingers over each element of the message, imploring, 'By your leave, wax – soft, and the impressure her Lucrece, with which she uses to seal – 'tis my lady' (2.5, 90-92). Similarly, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Boyet scrutinizes Don Armado's letter, focusing on the subscription and signature: 'Thine in the dearest design of industry' signed 'Don Adriano de Armado' (4.1, 85-86). Notably, the dramatist's use of salutations and superscriptions, or as Janet Gurkin Altman terms them, 'formal properties' (1982, 4), is not an inculcated habit of mind on the dramatist's part. Rather, his use of them is deliberate; for listing formal properties (properties that were previously hidden within the letter's interior space) makes them accessible to the audience. In turn, they become another source of meaning on stage.

Granted, many scholars have questioned the importance of epistolary theory in drama by focusing on the letter's reader or messenger. As Julian Hilton points out, 'the letter scene in effect, is an elliptical version of the more classical messenger scene, the letter itself eliding messenger and message. But such scenes also teach us a great deal about the reader in that invariably the reading of the letter is accompanied by comments, the nature and tone of which give us clues to his character' (1991, 141). Polonius' response to Hamlet's love letter is a prime example: '-that's an ill phrase, a vile phrase, "beautified" is a vile phrase' (*Hamlet* 2.2, 12-13). These comments speak to his character, rather than offering an accurate account of the letter's content. In a similar vein, Alan Stewart states that letters 'contain texts, certainly, but the message they convey is not primarily about the text, but about from whom they come, to whom they go, and how they make the journey' (2008, 23). Stewart argues further, 'Shakespeare's plays are clearly permeated by the grammar of letters and letter-writing, it would be wrong to assume that Shakespeare relies on a misplaced superscription or inappropriate folding for dramatic effect' (66).

An understanding of the roles of messengers is crucial for a thorough appreciation of letter scenes. However, shifting attention away from the text entirely has undermined Shakespeare's use of formal properties. I will argue that Shakespeare does rely on features like a superscription for dramatic effect. Indeed, formal properties may not be visible in the literal sense – initially, if ever. But, as Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa have argued, Elizabethan staging was symbolic rather than realistic: audiences had to work at visualizing the spectacles the words described (2000, 1). In this instance, the formal properties of a letter remained hidden until a character began to linger over them, listing them one by one to build an image of its interior space. The properties within this image were representatives of Elizabethan epistolary theory. Once they were presented, they communicated meaning specific to

precepts of letter writing. In fact, they function similarly to the red, black, or green wax of a letter: the latter two signified news of death and taxes.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, their meaning was impervious to the commentary that surrounded it. Formal properties, once they were articulated, also carried independent meaning. This signification has a particular purpose in Shakespeare's plays. A look at a few of his letter scenes reveals that, as the formal properties coalesce, so too does the identity of the letter's writer or addressee.

However, in order to fully appreciate the significance of Shakespeare's use of formal properties, it is necessary to discuss the traditional precepts of letter writing. First, I will briefly outline the historiography of early modern epistolary theory. This will underscore the methodologies underpinning formal properties, resulting in the epistolary construction of a writer and addressee's identity. Secondly, I will examine two non dramatic letters, emphasizing writers' everyday use of formal properties. These two sections will inform an examination of the letter scenes in *Twelfth Night*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *As You Like It*. Notably, these plays, as well as those quoted above, are comedies. The scope of this essay does not allow for a detailed discussion of genre. However, it should be pointed out that Shakespeare's treatment of letters in comedies differs from that of others genres. Indeed, tragedies, histories and comedies deal with different classes: characters in histories and tragedies (kings, queens, and noblemen and women) typically communicate horizontally. That is to say, they correspond with their equals. By contrast, the social aspirations of characters in comedies (stewards, merchants, shepherds) lead to correspondence with their superiors, leading to vertical communication. In turn, letters in comedies are employed to negotiate social terrain in fascinating ways.

## 2. Early Modern Epistolary Theory

Turning to traditional precepts of letter writing, the historiography of early modern epistolary theory begins in the late eleventh century and ends in the mid-fifteenth century. *Ars dictaminis*, the medieval art of letter writing, consisted of a highly formalized code of rules governing the composition of letters in Latin (Witt 2005, 68). Medieval epistolary manuals and everyday practitioners recognized three letter types: demonstrative, deliberative and judicial. These functioned as public instruments used to write contracts, requests, and legal agreements. Medieval practices remained fairly static until the emergence of humanism. Petrarch's discovery of Cicero's familiar letters caused classical authors to become a central focus of epistolary practices. Inspired by the elegance of familiar letters, prominent humanists began to use them as forms for imitation. By comparison, medieval letter forms seemed unnecessarily strict. As a result, humanists, Desiderius Erasmus in particular, launched an attack on medieval theory, writing treatises that Alois Gerlo has

called a manifesto against the outdated manuals and old-fashioned methods of the day (1971, 103). Indeed, Erasmus' early work reflects his distaste for the strictures of medieval letter writing. Later, however, he began reacting to what Judith Rice Henderson calls, 'extremes of classicism in sixteenth-century Italy' (1983, 331). His attempt to create theory based upon familiar letters was not unanimously accepted by humanists across the continent. For many were the professional benefactors of *ars dictaminis*, inheriting various offices of teachers or secretaries. The use of letters as public instruments was irreparably codified into letter writing culture. To reject *ars dictaminis* was to gut communication norms of education and business. Therefore, rather than discard the medieval letter types, Erasmus simply added the familiar letter to the list of demonstrative, deliberative, and judicial. In turn, epistolarity became a hybridization of medieval and humanist methodologies.

These epistolary precepts were adopted by the Tudor education system, making them a cornerstone of everyday life in early modern England. The authors of mid to late-sixteenth-century epistolary manuals, William Fulwood, Abraham Fleming and Angel Day, for instance, also amalgamated demonstrative, deliberative, judicial, and familiar letters, propagating this hybrid of epistolary theory. This transmission, however, necessitated heavy adaptation: those who penned vernacular manuals had different aims than humanist educators. As Lynn Magnusson has argued, Erasmus provided models for 'horizontal relations of reciprocal friendship' (1999, 61). That is to say, he composed letters in Latin, the language of scholars, in an attempt to refine the epistolary practices of the social and intellectual elite. However, this particular method did not address the needs of the growing middle class. Thus, a demand for vernacular handbooks materialized. Fulwood and Day in particular adapted aging methodology, offering vernacular instruction to the intellectual elite, as well as members of the middle class, such as merchants and secretaries. As a result, they scripted elaborate discursive models for enacting 'vertical' as well as 'horizontal' relations (Magnusson 1999, 61).

These manuals instructed the reader on the use of salutations, margins, signatures, and superscriptions, and their ability to communicate both verbal and visual meaning. A look at the theories of a letter's formal properties underscores their textual, as well as visual impact. As Day states in *The English Secretorie*, to write a 'sound and perfect' letter, a writer must first 'frame him selfe' on the page. To do so correctly, he must extend

consideration of the person to whome, and the cause whereof we meane at any time to write. In accompt of the person, is to be respected, first the estate and reputation of the partie, as whether hee be our better, our equal, or inferiour, next the lightnesse or grauity, as whether he be old, young, learned, vnskilfull, pleasaunt, sage, stately, gentle... or of what disposition, shewe, or profession soeuer he be, that according thereunto, the method of his Epistle may immediately be ordered. (1586, B3 r-v)

In other words, a writer must carefully consider the addressee's identity, including their status, before writing the letter. After this deliberation, the writer situated the salutation, subscription, signature, and superscription on the page according to the writer and recipient's relative superiority, equality, or inferiority.

Many manuals offered explications of each of these properties. Fulwood states: 'The first is the salutation... which is made in sundrie maners'. This element is the initial greeting at the top of the page. 'The second is the Subscription, which must be done according to the estate of the writer, and the quality of the person to whome we write'. The subscription is placed after the body of the message and serves as a farewell. Fulwood offers an example for a letter to a superior: 'By your most humble and obedient sonne, or seruant', and to an equal, 'By your faithfull frende for euer', and an inferior, which is simply, 'By yours'. He continues, 'The third is the Superscription, which must be upon the back of syde, the letter closed, sealed and packed up after the finest fashion'. Here, the recipient's address is placed, 'therewith the name of his dignitie, Lordship, Office, Nobilitie, Science, or Parentage' (1578, A8<sup>r</sup>). While Fulwood lists properties and examples for each, Day provides a lengthy chapter on 'Diuers orders of greetings, farewells, and subscriptions' (1586, B7<sup>v</sup>). Needless to say, a letter writer had a rather large bank of salutations and subscriptions from which to draw.

Indeed, each formal property was chosen to reflect the status of the writer and addressee respectively. Similarly, their respective status governs the location of the property on the page. Fulwood instructs: 'to our superiors we must write at the right side in the nether end of the paper... And to our equalles we may write towards the midst of the paper... To our inferiors we may write on high at the left hand' (1578, A8<sup>r</sup>). While these rules governed horizontal space, other manuals instructed on vertical space. John Massinger, in *The Secretary in Fashion*, maintained that within the lines of the superscription 'there must be as great a distance as may be between the first and second line, because the further they are distant, the greater respect they signifie' (1654, B5<sup>r</sup>). Next, the signature was positioned on the page. Penning one's name in the bottom right hand corner demonstrated respect for a superior. The negative space around each property carried as much meaning as the property itself. Jonathan Gibson has deemed this 'significant space' (1997, 1). Outlining these guidelines underscores the importance of visual organization in letter writing. Indeed, their organization would likely be noticed before the content of the letter was read. Appropriate spacing conveyed respect, but it also allowed a letter writer to perform social manoeuvres: manipulating visual conventions could alter perceptions of class.

Lastly, proper handwriting was the most effective way to enhance the formal properties of a letter: clear handwriting, paired with neatly written lines, was indeed a sign of respect. While epistolary manuals did not typically

teach these techniques, separate handbooks such as John Baildon and Jehan de Beau-Chesne's manual *A Booke containing divers sortes of hands* (1602) taught handwriting specifically. They lectured on a variety of skills, including body posture and proper ways to hold a pen. They went so far as to include a poem for their readers:

Your thome on your pen as highest bestow  
 The forefinger next, the middle below:  
 And holding it thus in most comely wise,  
 Your bodie vpriight, stoupe not with your head  
 Your breast from the boord, if that ye be wise,  
 Lest that ye take hurt, when ye have well fed. (A2<sup>v</sup>)

Once these techniques were learned, there were still many nuances of handwriting to be taken into consideration. As James Daybell has recently argued, legibility often indicated a learned writer, and respect to the recipient. However, a letter with ink blots, smudges, and words crossed out may not necessarily suggest an uneducated hand, but familiarity between the correspondents (2012, 83). Thus, a close examination of handwriting enables a better conceptualization of the social hierarchies of those involved in the correspondence. Added to this complexity is the differentiation of script. A letter might contain a secretary hand, italic hand, or a mixture of both. The use of both may suggest a division of labour between a secretary and his master. This indicates that letter writing was a collaborative effort, rather than a closed, two-way mode of correspondence. As Daybell argues, significant meaning was attached to scribal and autograph letters (2012, 86-87). Letters with a mix of scripts may indicate a formal letter, one touching on matters of government, ambassadorial, legal and business matters. On the other hand, an autograph letter may suggest a familial or romantic tie, signifying a more intimate meaning.

While epistolary manuals did not instruct on handwriting, theorists did have well-developed opinions on the significance of handwriting and the use of an amanuensis, making it an important element of theory. Erasmus muses: 'How warmly we respond whenever we receive from friends or scholars letters written in their own hands! We feel as if we are listening to them and seeing them face to face'. He continues: 'A letter that is the product of someone else's fingers hardly deserves the name. For secretaries import a great deal of their own' (1980, 29). A wise letter writer would put considerable thought into the type of script used, and who wrote it. Indeed, neat and tidy script draped the letter's visual layout, bolstering its sentiment.

The formal properties outlined above constitute a complex system of signification. The wording of a salutation, for instance, is carefully considered in relation to the addressee's titles, while its location on the page represented their status. It is worth pointing out that the initial purpose of codifying the use of

formal properties was to ensure that meaning was not lost in instances where writing had to replace face to face communication. Formal and informal conversations involve more than just words: they include gestures and body language. Upon greeting a superior, for instance, one might bow, or curtsy, conveying deference nonverbally. Shifting a signature to the bottom right hand corner of the page communicated a similarly nonverbal sentiment. Gary Schneider discusses the attention writers and recipients paid to these details in his study *The Culture of Epistolarity*, stating that ‘such obligations were evident not only in letters sent “upward” but also in those epistles “downward” by royalty and the nobility – individuals were expected to acknowledge and obey the social contract of letter-writing’ (2005, 27). This appears to be relatively straightforward, but it would be more difficult in a society whose middle class was expanding and shifting. Indeed, formal properties were the tools used to manage the fluctuating nature of early modern society. Careful use of them demonstrated the writer’s consideration of the addressee’s identity and, by extension, respect. Interestingly however, this could also supplicate the addressee. Addressing an equal as a superior, for example, might render the addressee receptive to any requests the writer included in the letter. Importantly, underlying these negotiations is the notion that letter writing was a goal-oriented activity (Witt 1982, 34). They were written, not only to convey news or information, but to petition a patron, make a recommendation, foster a friendship, or court a lover. Given the opportunity letter writing involved, astute implementation of formal properties in relation to the identity of the addressee was crucial.

One of the most striking aspects of early modern letter writing is the relationship between epistolary theory and identity. To write what Day would call a ‘sound and perfect’ letter, a writer must first ‘frame him selfe’ on the page. In other words, he must fashion his identity onto the page. This is an intriguing concept, but one which has been given much critical attention.<sup>3</sup> However, little attention has been given to a letter writer’s use of formal properties to represent the identity of the addressee for purposes of supplication. The implication of a writer who ‘extendeth consideration of the person to whom and the cause whereof they meane at anytime to write’ (Day 1586, B3r) is that the use of formal properties and the recipient’s identity were inextricably linked. Furthermore, a look at early modern letters demonstrates that it was beneficial to underscore the addressee’s identity. A letter written by Robert Dudley, the earl of Leicester, to Queen Elizabeth I is an excellent example of a writer who draws upon various aspects of the addressee’s identity during composition.

### 3. *Two Nonfictional Letters*

Leicester’s letter to the queen, written in 1588 (Dudley 2004), represents two aspects of his identity. First, it signifies his role as soldier, and secondly

as Elizabeth's favourite. His letter reports on the state of her army as they prepared for the Armada battle. At first, it appears to be merely business correspondence. The superscription reads: 'To the Queens most excellent Maiesty'. The letter's interior space is defined by a wide, clean margin to the left of the page while the body of the message is aligned with the right. The script is legible; the writing is in Leicester's own hand. The second clause of the first sentence assures the queen that 'at this tyme god be thanked there ys none touching your army'. Leicester's signature is in the lower right side of the paper. Particular meaning can be drawn from these features: the superscription accurately reflects her title: the queen, while the marginal space reiterates her superiority as the monarch. His decision to personally write the letter, rather than use a secretary, ensures privacy. The topic of the letter identifies Elizabeth as the authority on militaristic decisions, and the signature conveys further respect for her status. The letter is in good order; each formal property operates to convey respect and matters of business.

Upon closer examination, however, there are several features of the letter that add further meaning. For instance, the first clause of the first sentence reads: 'I am loth my most dear Lady to trwble you with some Juste cause'. Interestingly, Leicester has omitted the salutation. The lack of a salutation is not a lack of theory, but an indication of familiarity. Purposefully adding or omitting formal properties was a way to use epistolary theory to one's advantage. It added visual meaning to the letter's text. The subscription is further evidence that Leicester's correspondence is more familiar than meets the eye. It states: 'by your most fathfull [sic] & most obedient  $\text{o}\text{o}$ '. It appears traditional, until the reader comes across ' $\text{o}\text{o}$ '. A seemingly nonsensical symbol, it is a clever attempt to assure the queen that he had only her in mind whilst composing the letter: one of Leicester's pet names for Elizabeth was 'Eyes' (Stewart and Wolfe 2004, 80). In addition to the pair of eyes in the subscription, Leicester sketches eyebrows over words with double o's in the body of the message, 'my m $\text{o}\text{o}$ st swete maiesty,' and 'my m $\text{o}\text{o}$ st' dere Lady'. This feature enables Leicester to convey intimacy despite the letter's official purpose. He employed formal properties to acknowledge her status and role as a sovereign poised for war. In a twist, however, he also draws upon her physical features to remind her he is familiar with her personal identity, an attempt of a man hoping to remain the queen's favourite from afar.

Leicester drew upon various characteristics of the queen to compose his message demonstrates the advantages of adhering to epistolary theory: clever use of formal properties supplicates the addressee by appealing to his/her identity. Taking the time to represent one's identity on to the page conveys respect, fosters trust, and appeals to vanity. Similar to an artist painting the likeness of his patron, the letter writer should draft an accurate, at times complimentary, representation of the addressee. While this method does not necessarily guarantee success, formal properties are at the writer's disposal



when attempting to secure the good will of the addressee. A glance at a reaction to a poorly written letter provides a nice contrast to a well written and high functioning letter. A fictional letter, extracted from a manual by James Howell reads:

Dear Cousin,

A Letter of yours was lately deliverd me, I made a shift to read the superscription, but within, I wonderd what language it might be... at first I thought twas Hebrew, or some of her Dialects, and so went from the liver to the heart, from the right hand to the left to read it, but could make nothing of it... then I thought it might be the Chinese language, and went to read the words perpendicular, and the lines were so crooked and distorted, that no coherence could be made; Greek I perceived it was not, nor Latin or English; so I gave it for mere gibberish, and your characters to be rather Hieroglyphicks then Letters. The best is, you keep your lines at a good distance, like those in Chancery-bills, who as a Clerk said, were made so wide of purpose, because the Clients should have room enough to walk between them without justling one another; yet this widnes had bin excusable if your lines had been straight, but they were full of odd kind of Undulations and windings; If you can no write otherwise, one may read your thoughts as soon as your characters. It is some excuse for you, that you are but a young beginner, I pray let it appear in your next what a proficient you are, otherwise some blame may light on me that placed you there; Let me receive no more Gibbrish or Hieroglyphicks from you, but legible letters, that I may acquaint your friends accordingly of your good preceedings, So I rest

Your very loving Cosen, J.H. (1650, L1<sup>v</sup>)

In this letter, Howell describes a message he received from a loved one. His cursory glance revealed that his cousin misused the formal properties of the letter. The illegible writing of the superscript marred the title, and the status it was supposed to acknowledge. The most fundamental precept of epistolary theory, consideration for the addressee, was flawed from the start. Reading further revealed that the handwriting, framed by uneven lines and margins, mangled the letter's aesthetic. This distracted from the intended meaning and, worse, immediately communicated disrespect. The letter writer's poor implementation of formal properties acted to discourage rather than persuade the addressee. Interestingly, in lieu of successfully acknowledging the addressee, the formal properties expose the writer's identity as a 'young beginner'; Howell warns his cousin that an inability to compose a letter will negatively reflect the writer's reputation.

It should be reiterated that this is a fictitious letter; that is to say, it is not authentic correspondence. It does, however, mimic everyday letters. In turn, it lends itself to similar situations found in extant letters. For example, it informs Lord Burghley's letter to Robert Sidney. Burghley wrote to complain of the 'paines' caused when he had to read the 'ciphers' encoded in Sidney's letter. The handwriting was so offensive that Lord Burghley demanded Sidney 'write

in a better hand'. If this were impossible, he begged that Sidney 'let some other wryte' them instead (Beal 2008, 255). While Howell's and Burghley's complaints represent disgruntled reactions to bad writing, Jonathan Swift's self-mocking postscript emphasizes the anxieties of a letter writer. At the thought of his own writing turning against him he states: 'Burn this before you read; I am in such a hast I have not time to correct the Style, or adjust the Periods; And I blush to expose my self before so great a Critick. You know I write without the assistance of Books' (Fitzmaurice 2002, 40).

Beneath the surface of this witty post script is the concern that the mistakes Swift made will reflect upon him negatively and incite criticism. In other words, a poorly written letter reflected the writer's identity, rather than the addressee's.

The comparison between a well written letter and a poorly written letter underscores the factor which determined a letter's success: the use of formal properties to represent the addressee's identity. Astute negotiation of the page conveyed consideration, but it also supplicated the addressee. Indeed, formal properties persuaded the addressee in the writer's absence. Careless construction of a letter on the other hand, obscured meaning and conveyed disrespect. Furthermore, when a letter was poorly written, the properties of the page work against, rather than for a letter writer. In fact, the formal properties dissuaded the addressee. The formal properties of such letters did not only affect the aesthetic and textual meaning of the letter, but reflected the writer's identity negatively.

#### 4. *Letters and Letter Writing in Shakespeare*

Needless to say, this argument is predicated upon the pervasive role of epistolary theory in everyday practices. As I mentioned previously, the significance of formal properties has gone unnoticed in previous studies of letters in Shakespeare's plays. However, more recently, studies have also argued against the impact of epistolary theory in manuscript letters. Stewart, for instance, questions its influence in early modern culture, stating that, 'extant early modern letters are perversely ignorant of anything approaching the epistolary theory that was supposed to dictate them' (2008, 14). In this study, Stewart directs attention away from theory and toward materiality. That is to say, he locates significance in the writing process by concentrating on the material items of letter writing: the pen, ink, paper, and wax. This approach has gained critical momentum. James Daybell's study for example is devoted to the examination of letters as material, rather than textual forms (2012, 10). He draws upon extant early modern manuscript letters, calling attention to their physical features. These studies are crucial, and have changed our understanding of early modern epistolarity. However, they do draw attention away from formal properties, undermining their significance.

There have been studies discussing the relationship between practice and theory, stating it is far more convoluted than the studies of materiality would suggest. Indeed, Daybell offers a balance in his chapter on manuals, finding that early modern adherence to epistolary formulae is 'a complex issue, one nuanced by considerations of social status, purpose, and genre' (2012, 69). He claims further that there is a 'division between formal epistolary modes and what might be termed "everyday" correspondence' (70). Peter Mack's studies similarly complicate the rejection of epistolary theory. He states that 'practical letters devoted to the conduct of business tend to convey expected content in standard form' while 'letters of friendship are characterized by considerable freedom in structure and content' (2003, 114). Thus, a modern reader would find letters of recommendation, condolence, and legality conforming to the protocol found in pedagogical texts and vernacular manuals. In addition, Leicester manipulated epistolary theory to convey affection in his correspondence. Thus, an examination of manuscript culture suggests that epistolary theory influenced writers who were composing their letters with a particular goal in mind. Furthermore, print culture suggests that epistolary manuals (dispensers of theory) were exceedingly popular. Fulwood's and Day's manuals, for example, were reprinted nine times over a period of almost fifty years, respectively. Erasmus' *De conscribendis epistolis* was adapted into a study guide and became a compulsory textbook in grammar schools both in England and throughout Europe (Stewart and Wolfe 1999, 22).

In turn, epistolary theory trickled into many facets of life. Importantly, this influence did not bypass drama. Magnusson has argued that, more than constituting mere practical guidance, manuals scripted roles to be played out in social situations. Handbooks like *The English Secretorie* would have been an 'invaluable resource for dramatists, like Shakespeare, who sought to simulate the situated discourse of people of all ranks' (1999, 76). The impact of the permeation of the epistolary theory was twofold. First, it established a widely available set of rules which Shakespeare could draw upon and manipulate for dramatic effect. Secondly, his audience would have been familiar with the standards from which he was operating. This dynamic, paired with their own everyday experiences with letter writing, created a sophisticated relationship between dramatist and audience. As a result, Shakespeare could use the rules encoded by manuals to inscribe a 'kind of coiled power' into his letters (Barish 1991, 37). On stage, the formal properties of these compact little forces uncoiled to become representatives of epistolary theory. Examining *Twelfth Night*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *As You Like It* reveals that the dramatist used elements like superscriptions and salutations, and the precepts which guided their use, to build the identity of his characters.

In *Twelfth Night*, during Malvolio's perusal of the forged letter, Sir Andrew asks, 'c's, u's, and t's? Why that?' (2.5, 88). The tag, 'Why that?' is the epistemological question at the root of Shakespeare's letter scenes. Why does Malvolio dwell on Olivia's scripted letters? I argue that a focus on the textual tropes has

caused this scene to be misread. Malvolio's musings, seemingly full of desire for Olivia, are studded with epistolary precepts that construct an image of its interior space. As the picture builds, the formal properties uncoil. However, rather than representing him as a man who desires Olivia, they represent him as a man who longs for social mobility.

Initially, Malvolio's interest in the letter is a kind of measured curiosity when he states, 'What employment have we here?' (2.5, 79-80). This is followed by a perusal of the letter's superscript, 'By my life, this is my lady's hand' (2.5, 84-85). Later deemed her 'sweet Roman hand' (3.4, 25), the writing he recognized was italic. Next, he notes, 'These be her very c's, her u's, and her t's, and thus makes she her great P's' (2.5, 85-86). As a comic ploy to intensify interest in the message, the scripted letters have baited not only his attention, but the audience's. As his desire grows, so too does the letter. Next, he reads, "'To the unknown beloved, this, and my good wishes.'" Her very phrases!' (2.5, 89-90). While he dwells on each part, the formal properties synthesize. The handwriting conflates with the superscription and they settle in their prescribed places. 'Her very phrases', or the superscription, plays to his desire and encourages him to open the letter saying, 'By your leave, wax – soft, and the impressure her Lucrece, with which she uses to seal – 'tis my lady' (2.5, 90-93). The identification of the 'impressure' as Lucrece suggests his trespass is far greater than breaking the letter's wax. Such a violation indicates that Malvolio has lost himself in the trap the letter created.

The purpose of each formal property is to attract his attention, inciting his desire to keep reading. All the while, a detailed image is building on the stage. Fabian's side comment, 'This wins him, liver and all' (2.5, 94) is, seemingly, an apt account of the action. The next property is designed to win him, lust and all. What follows is an achievement orchestrated by Shakespeare's epistolary creativity. Malvolio reads

'Jove knows I love  
 But who?  
 Lips do not move,  
 No man must know  
 ...  
 I may command where I adore,  
 But silence like a Lucrece knife  
 With bloodless stroke my heart doth gore.  
 M.O.A.I. doth sway my life' (95-106)

The message, written to maintain his curiosity, is ambiguous. It is a riddle designed to foster his interest and persuade him to continue reading. After lingering over the acronym he exclaims 'Soft, here follows prose' (137-138). As prose follows verse, the margins of the virtual letter are contoured; their clean space widening and narrowing as he recites the text. The body of the

message fills the page and subsides with the farewell: 'She that would alter services with thee' and signature, 'The Fortunate-Unhappy' (154). The image is complete with the added postscript at the bottom.

This is the image of a letter known to many, yet never truly seen by audiences. The effort Shakespeare took to create it makes the letter recognizable. However, I would argue that the sexual overtones of this scene have caused it to be misread. Indeed, depictions of reading and writing in early modern drama frequently carried sexual connotations. Epistolary tools were often phallic representations, and reading reciprocated the desire that writing conveyed. This is apparent in Leonato's description of Beatrice's desire for Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*: 'O, when she had writ it and was reading it over, she found Benedick and Beatrice between the sheet' (2.3, 134-135). Comic and vulgar lines like Malvolio's seem to define the letter's purpose. In turn, the letter becomes a manifestation of his lust, rather than an accurate depiction of the letter's content. Approaching the scene in this way suggests that his desire is 'ripe for correction, [and] leads to his misreading of the letter' (Robertson 1996, 125).

The crux of this argument is: Malvolio did not misread the letter. He interpreted it precisely as Maria intended. A re-examination of the scene reveals that Maria's use of formal properties appealed to his desire for social mobility, rather than Olivia. In other words, the superscription (for instance) attracted Malvolio because it promised, not love, but advancement. It is only once he realizes that the letter represents a chance for social mobility that he becomes lustful for Olivia. This suggests that the image of the letter is not a product of his desire – his desire is a product of the letter. This sequence has gone unnoticed due to the scene's sexual overtones. However, this progression is detectable from the beginning of the scene. He enters the stage, overdressed and daydreaming of being married to Olivia. This is not because he is attracted to her, but because marrying her would allow him to 'be Count Malvolio!' He reassures himself that these aspirations are not unthinkable, for, 'There is example for't: the lady of Starchy married the yeoman of the wardrobe' (2.5, 37-38). In turn, his thoughts lead him to have wistful thoughts of Olivia: of 'having come from her daybed, where I have left Olivia sleeping -' (46-47). Indeed, this is another chance to read the scene in relation to sexual desire. However, this lustful thought only manifests after he muses over the yeoman's good fortune. In addition, he imagines that, 'Toby approaches; curtsies', and, 'I extend my hand to him, quenching my familiar smile with an austere regard of control' (64-65), continuing, 'Cousin Toby, my fortunes having cast me on your niece give me this prerogative of speech' (68-69). The same sequence is repeated throughout this scene. He begins with a desire for social mobility, and naturally his thoughts turn to Olivia: she is his chance for advancement.

This sequence is repeated as he reacts to the letter. For instance, he first mentions the handwriting: 'By my life, this is my lady's hand' (84-85). His notation of the italic hand serves an important function. Personal handwriting

carried various meanings. In a business letter like that of Leicester's, it might be an attempt to keep matters private. Once his business letter took on an air of familiarity, however, it could represent the intimacy of equals. Regardless, it suggests the absence of a secretary or third party. In the case of Maria's letter, the audience knows better; nevertheless, Malvolio believes it is a letter to him from Olivia. For him, it represents a personally penned message that signifies the addressee is worthy of its writer's hand. Furthermore, italic was an upper class hand. Gentlemen were expected to mix scripts while upper class women were typically taught italic. It was the style thought to be easiest to learn and less strenuous in practice (Daybell 2006, 135). Writers of the lower, and sometimes middling, classes often used secretary. If Maria had constructed the letter with mixed script it would have indicated formal correspondence, or a middle class writer. A formal letter or a message from a middle class writer would not have interested Malvolio, given his desire for social mobility.

By the time Malvolio focuses on the text of the superscription, the handwriting had already baited him. The purpose of a superscription is to identify the addressee, listing the title that matches their social status. The outward direction of Maria's letter, however, reads 'To the unknown beloved'. It does not identify him, but his desire to be the person worthy of the superscription overwhelmed him. Compromised by his longing for social mobility, it does not occur to Malvolio that he is not worthy of his lady's hand, in writing or in marriage. Indeed, a proper superscription listing his name and title would have jolted him out of his reverie. The 'unknown' title, by contrast, invited him to replace it with 'To the Count Malvolio beloved, this and my good wishes'. The letter offers love, but importantly is also offers advancement.

As he reads its content, the letter transitions from verse to prose, contouring the margins, the space narrowing and widening as he recited the text. It would be difficult for a writer using both verse and prose to observe the marginal rules; that is to say, to align the body of the text with a margin. Rather, its undulating lines draw attention to the clean space around the body of the text, creating the illusion that it is in the middle of the page, the space reserved for the communication of equals. In reading the letter aloud, Malvolio offers this important information. Indeed, the theory underpinning it makes it a reliable account of its content. A look at *As You Like It* will demonstrate that a letter could be read subjectively if its contents are withheld or read silently. However, Malvolio's detailed account allows the formal properties to coalesce, signifying meaning despite surrounding commentary.

His social aspirations, in many ways, define his identity. Indeed, Maria knew of her unaddressed addressee's social aspirations, forging the letter accordingly. For at the beginning of the scene, she stated, 'Malvolio's coming down this walk. He has been yonder i' the sun practising behaviour to his own shadow this half-hour. Observe him, for the love of mockery, for I know this letter will make a contemplative idiot of him. Close, in the name of jesting'

(2.5, 15-20). Here, Maria extends ‘consideration to the person to whom and the cause whereof’ she intended to write, organizing the formal properties accordingly. In other words, she tailors the letter according to Malvolio’s identity as a steward with lofty aspirations, and appeals to his desire for equality. The hand of an upper-class woman, and superscription offering a count’s title baited him. Once the letter was open, the margins contoured the verse and prose, framing the lines communicating Olivia’s mutual attraction with equality.

A comparison between a well-written and poorly written letter will emphasise formal properties’ agency on the stage. Falstaff’s letters in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are an excellent contrast in this respect. There are very few letters in early modern drama that are more offensive than those delivered to Mistresses Page and Ford. Falstaff writes identical letters to both of the married women in an attempt to woo them simultaneously. Predictably, his poor writing etiquette causes offense and leads to his misfortunes. The letters are the catalyst to his buck basket and cross-dressing adventures. While the letters’ role in driving the plot is conspicuous, Shakespeare’s manipulation of their ‘significant space’ to make them a memorable impetus is not. For, it is his use of each letters’ negative space that ushers in the women’s double revenge.

The letters make their first appearance in Act one, scene three. Falstaff, upon handing them over for delivery, discloses the subject and purpose of his letters. He states: ‘I have writ me here a letter to her – and here another to Pages’s wife, who even now gave me good eyes too, examined my parts with most judicious oellades; sometimes the beam of her view gilded my foot, sometimes my portly belly’ (1.3, 51-55). His assessment of the situation indicates that he thought more about himself than the identity of his addressees. Interestingly, however, at this point, he does not disclose the fact that the letters are identical. The phrasing of his lines suggests they might vary in content. The use of ‘another’ in ‘I have writ me here a letter to her – and another to Page’s wife’ is reasonably ambiguous. That he modifies the context of Mistress Page’s letter suggests he may have tailored it to his individual experience with her. The full effect of their matching texts is not felt until Act two, scene one.

When Mistress Page enters with her letter, she is unaware of its content. She recites the message, reading, ‘Ask me no reason why I love you, for though Love use Reason for his precision, he admits him not for counsellor. You are not young, no more am I’ (2.1, 5-7). As she reads the letter’s content, the components of the letter are presented to the audience. The heavy prose of Falstaff’s introduction strains the margins, narrowing to relieve its edges with verse:

By me, thine own true knight,  
 By day or night  
 Or any kind of light,  
 With all his might  
 For thee I fight. (13-17)

Mistress Page swiftly rejects the letter on the basis of its purpose, 'O, wicked, wicked world... what an unweighed behavior hath this Flemish drunkard picked, i'th' devil's name, out of my conversation, that he dares in this manner assay me?' (19-24). The expression 'unweighed behaviour' emphasizes Falstaff's reckless consideration of the circumstances. Her ranting turns to revenge just as Mistress Ford enters with her own letter.

As they examine one another's letters, Mistress Page observes, 'Letter for letter, but that the name of Page and Ford differs' (2.1, 67-68). They contain the same undulating margins that line the same block of prose and narrow verse. Interestingly, the only difference between the two letters is the words 'Page' and 'Ford'. However, as the separate names on an otherwise identical message incite their anger, their commentary worked to etch away even this difference: 'I warrant he hath a thousand of these letters, writ with blank space for different names – sure more, and these are of the second edition. He will print them, out of doubt – for he cares not what he puts into the press when he would put us two' (2.1, 71-74). With this emendation, the letters became wholly identical. Furthermore, one letter with one image at the beginning of the scene proliferated into a thousand letters with one image. Their own messages were merely second editions. As the letters multiply, so too did Falstaff's offenses. Mistress Ford read the letter aloud in Act two, scene one, making the audience privy to its content and allowing the formal properties to speak for themselves. This letter, regardless of its later multiplication, was offensive. The formal property that signifies Falstaff's lack of consideration is derived from the concept of significant space. The organization of formal properties on the page conveyed immediate meaning. In the case of Falstaff's letters, Shakespeare inverted the concept of significant space for dramatic effect. The blank space in the middle of the text became the conspicuous space that communicates disrespect. These gap-ridden letters are the last images Mistresses Page and Ford dwell upon. Mistress Page's initial vow 'revenged I will be' (2.1, 29) becomes 'Let's be revenged on him' (2.1, 89). The significant space, inverted to work against Falstaff, is the formal property that ushers in their double revenge.

Falstaff's lack of forethought and consideration of the individual identities of Mistresses Page and Ford is at the root of these letter scenes. He attempts to woo women who were already married, indicating poor consideration of the circumstances. It was not, however, his most offensive oversight. An important part of one's identity is marital status, but Mistresses Page and Ford appear to be more offended by the audacity of writing identical letters, rather than being written in the first place. For, identical letters are the antithesis of personal identity. Their focus on the blank space suggests that, had the letters been tailored to their individual identities, Falstaff's letters may have been successful. It may seem impossible that he could woo either Mistress Page or Ford, but the letter in *Twelfth Night* demonstrates the ability of formal properties to be rather persuasive.



The letter scene in *As You Like It* is a fascinating contrast to *Twelfth Night* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Phoebe writes a 'taunting letter' (3.5, 135) to the cross-dressed Rosalind, believing she is a man named 'Ganymede'. Importantly, Phoebe carefully considered the identity of the addressee. Unfortunately, Rosalind's disguise caused her to consider the wrong one: she wrote a letter to Rosalind while she was dressed as a man, but Rosalind read it as a woman. In other words, Phoebe attempted to accurately construct the letter but, due to Rosalind's disguise, incorrectly addressed the addressee. This has implications which are twofold: Phoebe's letter never accurately represented the addressee, thus it could never be successful. In turn, the letter represented Phoebe's identity, rather than that of her addressee.

Act four, scene three begins with the delivery of Phoebe's letter. Silvius passes the message to Rosalind who quickly peruses it. Amidst the transaction he states, 'I know not the contents' (4.3, 9). Rosalind glances at the letter, reading it silently. Here, Shakespeare draws attention to the letter by concealing it. Her unwillingness to read it aloud has an interesting effect: the letter's inaccessibility stimulates interest in its content, making it the focal point of the stage. This message, as part of the play's subplot, establishes a juxtaposition to the main plot. In earlier scenes, Orlando posts his verses for Rosalind, terribly written, for all the forest to see. They are widely received, and widely criticized. Rosalind observes Orlando's verses to have, 'more feet than the verses could bear' (3.2, 161-162) and Touchstone deems them to bear 'bad fruit' (3.2, 114). There are many opinions about the verses, but publishing them on the trees allows the audience to interpret Orlando's writing despite the surrounding commentary. Phoebe's letter on the other hand stays hidden and becomes subject to Rosalind's personal reading. That is to say, the audience is given license to criticize Orlando's verses, but this freedom is revoked when Rosalind conceals Phoebe's letter.

After reading the message, Rosalind merely states, 'She says I am not fair, that I lack manners' (4.3, 16). Indeed, these are vague details. She states further, 'Well, Shepherd, well, / This is a letter of your own device' (4.3, 20-21). Once more, Silvius states, 'No, I protest; I know not the contents. / Phoebe did write it' (4.3, 22-23). By concealing the text, Shakespeare draws attention to the letter, but also threatens the agency of the letter's formal properties. If the letter stays hidden, it risks becoming a projection of Rosalind's fears. Her fears in this scene stem from the sexual metaphors associated with reading and writing. By reading Phoebe's message, Rosalind has reciprocated the lust that the shepherdess's writing conveys. She conceals the letter and questions its authorship in an attempt to deflect the unintentional interest she displayed by reading it (Wall 1996, 142).

Rosalind ridicules the message further, mitigating the mismatched circumstances. Silvius' protests encourage Rosalind to describe the letter's poor quality. She launches into a disparaging rant:

I saw her hand. She has a leathern hand,  
 A free-stone coloured hand. I verily did think  
 That her old gloves were on; but 'twas her hands.  
 She has a housewife's hand - but that's no matter.  
 I say she never did invent this letter.  
 This is a man's invention, and his hand (4.3, 25-30)

Rosalind's pun on the meaning of 'hand' is vital to this scene. The word's double meaning begins to construct Phoebe's identity. Indeed, the primary use of 'hand' denotes the letter's handwriting. The expressions 'a leathern hand' and 'house-wife's hand' refer to her physical hand, worn with the work of a shepherdess. In Rosalind's attempts to disparage the letter, she has given a clue to the letter's interior space. However, in the line 'This is a man's invention, and his hand', she releases the image of the secretary script, which glosses Phoebe's letter. Men often used a mix of secretary and italic script; and, secretaries often used it in the body of their master's message. However, as Maria's use of italic demonstrated, women were taught to use an italic hand. This is not only representative of gender, but class. Though it is brief, Rosalind's description reveals that the letter is representative of Phoebe's uneducated hand. Her script is associated with her leathern hand; her worn skin is that of a shepherdess making the letter synonymous with Phoebe's identity.

It is only after Rosalind has satisfactorily criticized the letter that she feels reading it aloud is safe. She states, 'mark how the tyrant writes' (4.3, 40) and begins to recite

Art thou god to shepherd turned,  
 That a maiden's heart hath burned? (4.3, 41-42)

only to interrupt herself, 'Can a woman rail thus?' (4.3, 43). Silvius responds, 'Call you this railing?' (4.3, 44). Rosalind continues to read the heartfelt message, but the damage has been done. The conflicting commentary undermines the messenger and recipient as trustworthy. That is to say, Rosalind offers a reading of the letter that derives from her anxieties, while Silvius' interjection is informed by his love for Phoebe. All that is left is Phoebe's hopeful verse, glossed in a secretary script. The complete image of the letter is devastating. Like a pinched spring, the compressed content of the hidden letter made the formal properties uncoil all the more powerfully when released.

This scene juxtaposes those with Orlando's lines, but it is also a contrast to *Twelfth Night* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. For instance, Malvolio reads the letter immediately, lingering over each detail. The scene in *As You Like It* contains a letter that is read silently and subjected to the reader's response. The audience can only access the letter through Rosalind in these moments. In turn, it becomes a representative of Rosalind's fears. However, once she

comments on its appearance, and reads its contents, the audience is given unmediated access to the letter's interior space.

In the explications of each letter, whether they are authentic or fictional, I have underscored the various ways writers consider (or disregard) the person they intend to write to. The factor that determines their success is the use of formal properties to represent the addressee's identity. Astute negotiation of the page conveys respect. Furthermore, it appeals to the addressee's good will. Again, this is true of authentic, fictional, and stage letters. However, this notion is more complex when it comes to the stage. In order to capitalize on the signification of formal properties, Shakespeare had to make them accessible first. As a result, he created an image of the letter using the commentary of the addressee. The elements of the page, newly available, offer a new source of meaning on stage. In the case of Malvolio, attention to the presence of formal properties redefined the purpose behind his actions, and by extension, his identity. The letters to Mistresses Page and Ford, by contrast, represented letters that reflected Falstaff's identity. In turn, his inconsiderate use of letter writing caused the women to take revenge upon him. Phoebe's letter is an interesting comparison to the first two plays; for, despite her attempt to consider the circumstances, and the addressee's identity, her letter ultimately failed. In addition, Phoebe's letter is read silently by Rosalind, unlike those of Maria and Falstaff. At once, it incites tension over, and fascination with, the unattainable object. Indeed, this scene is a reminder of what formal properties add to the stage, and what is lost when they are absent.

<sup>1</sup>Quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from: William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. by S. Wells, G. Taylor, J. Jowett and W. Montgomery, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988.

<sup>2</sup>For a study of wax and sealing in early modern England, see Newman 2012.

<sup>3</sup>Stephen Greenblatt (1980) discusses this notion at length, while Lisa Jardine (1993) discusses Erasmus' use of letters to fashion his professional identity. In addition, Jennifer Richards (2003, chapter 5) analyses Gabriel Harvey's and Edmund Spenser's attempts to construct their respective scholarly identities in their printed letters.

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