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Words, Words, Words! An Afternoon of Letters

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On Friday, October 1st, the Penn Manuscript Collective gathered for its second meeting of the year. During the meeting with discussed and studied letters, a topic essential to the work of many of our members. On the docket were a letter from Mary Shelley to Charlotte Smith and a series of letters from George Willig, Jr. (writing on behalf of his father) to John Rowe Parker. Professor Stallybrass printed out Shelley’s letter and the class used the Kislak Center’s letters of Willig.

Our time was focused on handwriting, transcription, and the study of the physical letter. To read difficult handwriting, we learned, it is best to go letter by letter and if you don’t recognize a letter, look for a similar character in another word and go from there. For transcription, we discussed a number of conventions for writing abbreviated or unclear words. For example, a word which is abbreviated, such as Willig’s perennial “Philada.” (Philadelphia), can be written with the omitted letters included but italicized: Philadelphia.

— from George Willig, Jr. to John Rowe Parker, July 7, 1829.
Words in which the transcriber is unsure of some letters should be written with bracket around the guessed letters. For example, when a word is superscripted, it should be placed between carets and the words between which it falls. For instance, in the example below, a correct transcription should read “I ^am^ still”

— from George Willig, Jr. to John Rowe Parker, July 7, 1820

In the Willig correspondence, we studied physical aspects of the letter like sealing folds, wax seals, filing folds, and postage stamps. Additionally, we discussed written conventions—subscription, superscription, salutation—and the ways that they could help a writer “write between the lines.” The following is a selection from summer “Anatomy of a Letter” posts which give examples of the physical characteristics of the letters extent to which the written conventions were appropriated by writers.

**Physical Elements**

**Paper**

Many letters are written on either laid or wove paper. Wove paper is created by using pulped linen in a wire mesh frame in a way that the liquid material weaves itself together. **Laid paper** is made by sifting a diluted linen pulp into a mold that then creates a series of parallel ribs throughout the paper, which are referred to as chain lines. When you hold a piece of laid paper up to a light those lines are clearly seen. Wove paper, however, is made using a frame of wire mesh woven together, thus eliminating the presence of chain lines and making the frame lines almost indiscernible. Wove paper grew popular in the late eighteenth century as letter writers began to use it in their correspondences, and this method of creating paper eventually eclipsed laid paper in the early nineteenth century. Today, however, upscale stationary will have fabricated chain lines that are put in to create the illusion of the much more arduous paper making process.
Watermark

Wove paper does not possess watermarks, but laid paper does. Watermarks are incorporated by the paper making company, who wish to include their mark on the paper. Many times this will simply be a name or initial in the paper that is normally invisible but can easily be found when held up to a light. Identifying watermarks allows us to discern what type of paper a writer was using, where the writer was acquiring his paper, and the respective popularity of different paper makers' brands.

Seal

Only some of the letters we looked at possessed wax seals. This is usually because the reader would rip open the letter too quickly, causing a rip in the parchment, or the seal might have fallen off. Letters with wax seals are generally made with stamped with an emblem belonging to the owner, so a series of letters from the
same person most likely will have the same seal.

Recipient Additions/Folds

After being read, letters were often filed by the recipient—the maxim “Get it in writing!” was as true 200 years ago as it is today. Filing systems often involved several modifications to the letter.

First, in order to save space, letters are often folded when they are filed. Filing folds can be identified on letters because their lines often cut through text on the front of the letter. In the examples below of letters from George Willig and George E. Blake, another Philadelphia music publisher, the filing folds are clearly distinguished by the way they cut through the superscriptions indicating Parker’s location in Boston.

Second, after folding the letters to file, recipients of letters often wrote the names of the letters’ authors on the front of the letter in order to organize and file them more easily. John Rowe Parker seems to have written the names of his letters’ authors in the top left corner.
Textual Elements

Salutation

The salutation is the first part of text directed to the recipient of the letter and captures an important moment in which the writer establishes his or her relationship to the reader and show due respect, etc. Salutations vary widely, even within the small, early eighteenth-century collection of business correspondences we have been studying. Salutations in letters to John Rowe Parker, for example, include "Mr. Parker," "Dr Sir," "D Sir," and "Sir," to name a few. Salutations inform modern readers of the context of the letters that they study: these are a bit brusque and well, rather businesslike; other personal or political letters of the period include warmer or more flattering greetings. In a series of letters from George Willig, Jr. to John Rowe Parker, it is possible to trace the arc of relationships based on salutations that change over time.

Subscription

The subscription is the writer's final message to the recipient. It follows the body of the letter and precedes the signature. Subscriptions, like salutations, are important sites of identification for both the writer and recipient: writers here re-
establish their intended relationship to the recipient and can subtly flatter, affirm or demean the recipient. In the same way the changing salutations can indicate a relationship in flux, subscriptions also show change in status and emotion. George Willig’s letters to John Rowe Parker, for instance, show a subtle shift in respect over time as Parker fails to pay a bill to Willig. In Willig’s first letter to Parker in our collection, where he first requests payment—July 7th 1820—Willig’s subscription is two lines, intended to convey respect:

With due regard

Your Obed [Servt]

In this subscription, Willig gives Parker two signs of respect: both “due regard” and a gesture of humility as ”You[r] Obedient Servant.”. Five months later, Willig has still not received his money from Parker, and his subscription is accordingly more terse, as seen on his note from December 11, 1820.

Yours respectfully

The following month, Willig writes Parker to inform him that he has still not received the money. Additionally, Willig has passed on to another man the note of lending that Parker has promised, and he hopes that the money is paid, because his other associate is ”a gentleman who would be highly offended with me if it should be returned.” Willig signs this letter from January 17th, 1821

Yours as usual
The progression in subscriptions is striking: Willig first signs in July with a doubly
honorific subscription, then removes both Parker’s status as one deserving “due
regard” and the obedience of a servant. After continuing to wait in vain for the
payment of the note, Parker removes “respectfully” from his subscription and
becomes merely “yours”—the possessive no longer signifies intentional
servanthood, regard, or respect in the relationship.

The next month, Willig opens his letter to Parker on February 15th, 1821 with the
words “I am much mortified to find that you have not paid...” Willig goes on to
explain that the holder of the note, which he has passed on intends to sue Parker
for the recovery of the amount. Willig, however has stepped in:

I have prevailed on him to wait...I therefore beg that you will inform me by return
of mail, what arrangement you intend to make respecting these notes

Clearly frustrated with Parker’s negligence and seeking to emphasize the urgency
of the situation, Willig reiterates his request for quick reply and, following his
previous change of email, signs more informally:

Expecting your speedy answers

I am as usual

It is fascinating to note the different uses towards which a two-line subscription
can be put. Where before two lines had been used by Willig to clearly express his
sentiments of respect, the two-line subscription from February 15, 1821 reinforces
sentiments of impatience from the body of the letter and reiterates a less
respectful posture towards Parker.

Willig signs his next two letters—February 25th and April 21st— with “Yours as
usual” and “Yours,” respectively. These continually shorter subscriptions seem to
show his growing impatience with Parker. His words in his final letter in the
subscription of February 15th, 1821 are in his handwriting.
I have waited with much patience, I therefore now request you to inform me, by return of mail, when and how my claim against you is to be settled.

Interestingly, Willig closes with the subscription he used in his first letter, that is
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Superscription on letter from George E. Blake to John Rowe Parker, March 28, 1818

Visualizing the letter as it appeared, unopened, to its recipient is helpful in showing how what appears as a small bit of text on a page (see above) actually dominated the space of the folded letter (below).

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Shaded areas and red lines indicate how letter would be folded and sent on letter from George E. Blake to John Rowe Parker, March 28, 1818

Upon receiving a letter, people would read the superscription and then open the letter, breaking the **wax seal**. For this reason, “superscription,” “break,” and “open” are often collocated in sentences describing letters. See the below sentences from the Oxford English Dictionary’s entry on “superscription”:

- 1622  H. Peacham *Compl. Gentleman* i. 15  “Scarce will he open a note..if Don be not in the **superscription**.”
- 1798  S. Lee *Young Lady’s Tale* in H. Lee *Canterbury Tales* II. 369  “When her eye glanced on the **superscription**, hardly could her trembling fingers break the **seal**.”
- 1806  J. Beresford *Miseries Human Life* I. xii. 321  “Eagerly **breaking open** a letter, which, from the **superscription**, you conclude to be from a dear..friend.”
- 1946  A. Bryant *Postman’s Horn* (rev. ed.) Introd. 7  “The recipient would **scan the superscription**—‘These for my loving wife, Madame Wynnengton, at—’”

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scan the *supercription*—these for my loving wife, Madame Wynnington, at the Birches in Cheshire. Warrington bag’—then break the crested seal at the back and unfold the sheet.”

Readers would often rip the paper of the letter in the act of breaking the wax seal as they opened the letter. Recall the above images, which show the folds of the letter and how a letter would have appeared after being sealed and sent. Compare these to the images below, which show opened letters, highlighting the residue left by the wax and the impression or rip the opening of the letter caused.

— Wax seal and residue from opening on letter from George E. Blake to John Rowe Parker, March 28, 1818

— Impression from wax seal and rip in paper caused by opening on letter from George Willig to John Rowe Parker, Dec 11, 1820
Impression from wax seal and rip caused by opening in letter from Allyn Bacon to John Rowe Parker, October 31, 1817.

While a seemingly simple element of a letter, the superscription had implications for the relationship between the sender and recipient of a letter. Like the salutations and subscriptions, superscriptions were sites of identification for both the writer and recipient. Much hinged upon the words of the superscription; indeed, some readers, like the man in Peacham’s Complete Gentleman, would not open a letter unless words of respect were indicated in the address:

- 1622 H. Peacham Comple Gentleman i. 15 “Scarce will he open a note...if Don be not in the superscription.”

Likewise, in Act IV Scene I of Shakespeare’s Henry VI, when Burgundy’s letter announcing his abandonment of Henry and alliance with Charles arrives, Gloucester can tell that something is amiss before the letter is even opened.

- 1616 Shakespeare Henry VI, Pt. 1 (1623) iv. i. 53 “No more but plaine and bluntly? (To the King.) Hath he forgot he is his Soueraigne? Or doth this churlish Superscription Pretend some alteration in good will?”

Eyeing the brusque superscription on the letter, Gloucester correctly predicts “some alteration in good will” — Burgundy’s desertion of his nephew, King Henry the IV.

Number of Pages Used, Percentage of page used, and Line Spacing

When reading a letter, the percentage of space on the page on which lines are written and the spacing of the lines are inseparable element. As Robbie Glen and Peter Stallybrass have shown, the majority of letters written from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries often filled less than a page. These short messages comprised one to two hundred words at most. While longer letters were written in this time, a multi-page letter was not representative of typical correspondences. Given these data as starting points, we can now examine a few conventions of letter writing on the spatial page:
As has been noted with salutations, subscriptions, and superscriptions, seemingly simple conventions of letter writing can carry heavy social connotations, and spacing is no different. As Stallybrass and Glen note:

*Printed handbooks on how to write letters from the end of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century paid considerable attention to the beginnings and endings of letters, the salutation and the subscription. To leave blank space between the salutation and the main body of the letter and between the end of the main body and the signature were marks of deference, materializing on the written page the distance between the humble suitor and the noble patron.*

**Size of Paper Used**

Stallybrass and Glen propose that the history of letter writing in the second half of the second millennium is one in which as much paper was wasted as possible, for the reason that the more paper that was wasted, the shorter letter one could write. For this reason, the size of paper generally shrunk from folio paper (12” x 15”) in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, to quarto paper (9.5” x 12”) in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, to octavo paper (6” x 9”) from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. Curiously, this shrinking of the size of paper trended alongside a decrease in the size of paper. In the letters Nicole and I are studying, several sizes of paper are used, mirroring the overlap in type of paper used in each period that Stallybrass and Glen have identified. While smaller sizes of paper sometimes resulted in letters that spanned more than one page, the norm for letters was one page or less.
References:
- OED Entry on "Subscription"
- Robbie Glen and Peter Stallybrass, "What is a Letter? The Single-sheet Letter in England"
- Letters from the Kislak Center for Special Collections
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