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Anatomy of a Letter, Pt. 3

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Superscription

Superscriptions are written on letters to indicate their addressee and destination. The word “superscription”’s meaning as an address goes back to its ancestor, *superscriptio*, which was used in the 4th century in the Vulgate to describe a piece of text written or inscribed on or above something. In Middle French and English, the word described a heading, a signature, or an address. “Superscription” continued to denote all of the above meanings and began to acquire a more specialized sense as pertained to letters as letter writing grew more conventional. In Angell Day’s 1586 *The English secretorie*, the author indicates the specialized meaning of superscription and its specific location on the letter:

*The directions, which on the outside of every Letter...are for the moste part infixed, and commonly are termed by the name of Superscriptions.*

The superscription was, as Day writes, written on the outside of the letter to indicate to whom and where the letter should be taken.
In the letters Nicole and I have been studying, 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).

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 Wynnington, at the Birches in Cheshire. Warrington bag’—then break the crested seal at the back and unfold the sheet.”
As Nicole mentioned earlier, 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
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 *Compl. 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. I* (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:

**Number of Pages Used**

Most of the letters that Nicole and I have been studying follow the norm that
Stallybrass and Glen have established for written letters of this time; that is, they use one page for writing. It is curious to discover that though some writers often filled the single page containing their date, salutation, and subscription with as much text as possible they were actually leaving two other pages completely blank. Indeed, the standard practice was to fold a letter in half, creating two leaves and four pages, on which only two were words normally written: page 1, with the body of text, and page 4, with the superscription. The letter would then be folded, sealed and sent.

   — Letter from George Willig, Sr. to John Rowe Parker, May 16, 1818 showing unused pages 2 and 3

Line Spacing

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 send.
the reason that the more paper that was wasted, the shorter letter one could write. For this reason, the size of paper generally shrank 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"