

The folded familiar letter as material and chronotope

George Romney's first production as an independent painter was a sign for the Post Office in Kendal, "a hand holding a letter".¹ The sign's palette is limited: dull red for sleeve and seal; white for paper and cuff. The ruffled shirt and weightier jacket provide some textural interest, but the packet itself, at odds to the frame, is flat, nondescript, its surface animated chiefly by the shadow of the bearer's fingers, although there is that faint line running beneath the seal, where one edge of the folded paper rests above the panel beneath.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

What we see in the sign is unlikely to be an envelope—that is, a flat paper container for a letter—whose use only took off from the early 1840s, when envelopes were sold ready-made and -folded.² It is also unlikely to be a wrapper or cover, a container "improvised from available materials by the letter-writer or secretary".³ Wrappers were sometimes used to send several different letters within the same package, but their widespread use was discouraged as from 1635 to 1839, the cost of sending letters was charged by their weight.⁴ Instead, what we see is most probably the exposed panel of the last folded leaf of the letter itself, the writing substrate, folded and secured (or "locked", as Jana Dambroglio and Daniel Starza Smith would put it) so as to function as its own envelope or sending device.⁵ In Romney's sign, the folded letter is inscrutable, which is rather the painting's point: that your letter—like any letter, like every letter—would be carried neutrally, securely and increasingly swiftly by the Royal Mail, whose technology and culture were at that time rapidly expanding in the country at large.⁶ Yet we need not be blind to what the sign may enable us to overlook: the peculiar dynamism of the letter's folds, which are what allow "a two-dimensional object to function as a three-dimensional one", as Julie Park notes.⁷

Contemporary viewers of Romney's sign, for the most part, would have known that letters were folded, but then as now this knowledge tends to be tacit to the point that folds hide in plain sight. As Hester Lees-Jeffries points out, in a fine, recent essay, "The folding of the letter [...], its status as a or even the folded thing, can remain largely unspoken and understood [...], axiomatic in an age before envelopes."⁸ Dambroglio and Smith hail folds as "arguably the most important manipulation in letterlocking", "used in every letterlocking category", and identify over thirty types.⁹ Yet their work, in its attention to folding, is rather the exception, and there is more work to do, not least to extend to folds in eighteenth-century letters the same flair and nuance that characterises scholarly work on folds in earlier periods.¹⁰ There is also the challenge, a methodological and creative challenge, of making folds central to an enquiry into letters, and seeing where they run.

In this essay, I offer a "thick description" (in the Geertzian sense) of how folds were used, and what and how they signified, in a variety of long-eighteenth materials, focusing on two archives of letters composed over a century apart: Dorothy Osborne's amatory letters to William Temple, from 1652-54, and Hester Lynch Piozzi's familiar letters to friends and family, largely from the 1810s.¹¹ My readings of these and other long-eighteenth-century sources—including visual art as well as artful writing, and epistolary novels as well as actual correspondence—are informed by a wealth of modern and contemporary writing about folds, philosophical, sociological, and poetical. My focus is on the "fold, tuck and seal", one of several standard letterlocking formats used since the Early Modern period in Britain. Its basis, also central to this essay, was usually a bifolium, formed from a sheet of paper—often a quarto, in the examples I discuss—folded in half to provide four writing sides. With side 1 (f. 1r) facing uppermost, the bifolium would then be folded twice horizontally (short-edge to short-edge), and twice vertically, with the opposite ends tucked in to form a compact packet. Sometimes warm wax was applied between the folds, before the letter was closed with a seal or wafer.¹² On occasion letters were secured with paper locks and sewn thread.¹³

By overlooking folds—whose presence and patterning is virtually never recorded in textual editions of letters—we make it easier to forget the letter’s materiality: its paperiness, its tactility, its manipulability and multiple affordances. We also make it easier to forget that folding signifies: that it is what Geertz would call a “symbolic action”, and Bernhard Siegert, a “cultural technique”.¹⁴ For inasmuch as folding may be constitutive of the letter, it entails much more than the manipulation of a writing substrate. Folding is a vital metaphor, thanks to which letters have outsides, insides, creases, wrinkles, surfaces, recesses, orifices. Akin to “tears, handwriting, punctuation, and even spelling”, folding also functions as an “extraverbal sig[n]”, “part of the message” of letters, to borrow from Janet Altman, and “equivalent to tones and gestures in oral discourse”.¹⁵ Folding is also richly performative: folding letters reciprocally produce folding selves, folding spaces, and folding temporalities (which three categories, following an opening section on materiality, mark the divisions of the essay below). And if familiar letters have a rhetoric, this rhetoric inheres in its folds as much as in its language.¹⁶ Folding and unfolding are something correspondents do, and something letters enact. In particular, folding is a to-be-reciprocated act of touching at a distance, a tacit knowledge that letter-writers hold in common, and a “gestured co-improvisation”, by whose movements, imagines Lisa Robertson, “[t]he distinction between inner and outer worlds” might become “permeable and supple, like a fabric”.¹⁷ The materiality of the “fold, tuck and seal” bifolium remains central to this. For the letter-locked letter does not simply enfold, like an envelope, but can unfold, reversing, revealing, developing; the bifolium conjures depths from its surfaces, and relinquishes neither.

(i) Materiality

In Empire of Letters, Eve Tavor Bannet coins the term “letteracy” to describe “the collection of different skills, values, and kinds of knowledge beyond mere literacy that were involved in

achieving competency in the writing, reading and interpreting of letters”.¹⁸ This is a category to which folding deserves to belong. Both the techniques and social meaning of folding are broached—if strikingly infrequently—in letter-writing manuals, which did so much in the long eighteenth century to inculcate both literacy and letteracy, as Bannet and Susan Whyman have shown.¹⁹ How you folded a letter was a sign of your social capital, and encoded degrees of power within a relationship. According to The Complete Letter-Writer, in an edition of 1774: “Letters to a superior should always be [doubled] in four, and inclose[d] in a cover of the same paper”. The fold, tuck and seal should only be used with “inferiors, and between equals who are well acquainted” as it “dispense[d] with ceremony”.²⁰ The illustrator and conservator William Clift, writing back from London to his family in Cornwall, upbraided them on the “foolish” manner in which they addressed, directed, and folded their letters. In 1814, he sent his brother John a specimen, “some Writing paper folded properly that you may see how they are done; the thick edge being always to be put under the thin edge where you seal it”.²¹ How a letter was folded could also be read as a sign of style, with the “habit of folding” and letter’s “shape” alone insinuating a particular author.²² “[T]he form, the fold, the seal, the superscription” of a letter confirm to Saint-Preux that it is from his lover, Eloisa, in William Kenrick’s early, free translation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s epistolary fiction Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse (1761).²³ And Dorothy Osborne, wishing to keep her amatory correspondence secret from her brother, Henry, instructs her lover, William Temple, in July 1653, to send his letters in disguise: “if you please lett [your letters] bee made up in some other forme than usuall, and dirrected [...] in some od hande, and [...] [buy] a twopeny seale”, the “forme” presumably signifying the fold (Letter 30, in M-S, 65).

The politician and diplomat Lord Chesterfield fretted about his son Philip’s ungainly letter-folding much as he did about his hand-writing. “Neatness in folding up, sealing, and directing your packets, is by no means to be neglected”, he writes to Philip, in 1751, “though, I dare say, you think it is. But there is something in the exterior, even of a packet, that may please or displease; and [is]

consequently worth some attention.”²⁴ In this, Chesterfield seems to bring letter-folding into the orbit of the *je ne sais quoi*, that supposedly indefinable certain something (good breeding, genteel manners) which—to the amusement and disparagement of his eventual, wider readership—he sought to lay bare, to “define and systematize”.²⁵ “A genteel [easy manner, and carriage]”, he writes, “prepossesses people in your favour, bends them towards you, and makes them wish to like you”. In this way, “half the business is done”.²⁶ The pleasing fold of a letter-packet is thus instrumentalised, with the power to bend others to your will. One of the meanings of “to fold”, after all, is “to bend”, and the French word, *pli*, has the opportunistic sense of bending circumstances to one’s will, as the vile seducer “peut plier ses projets aux circonstances” in Laclos’ *Dangerous Liaisons*.²⁷

The *petits riens*, or little nothings, of supposed good breeding aside, letter-folding also required a finely-attuned awareness of space. Not least, “[t]he writer had to remember to leave enough of the paper blank to ensure that the folding and sealing processes did not obscure what had been written”.²⁸ To the young Henry Moreton, the hapless protagonist of an early-nineteenth century North-American primer, *The Youth’s Letter-Writer*, it is a wonder that “one [might] know beforehand exactly how much one is going to say, and how much room it will take up”. His uncle assures him that “judge[ment]” will come, when one is “accustomed”, as he is, “to write a great deal”. Henry’s cousin Anna explains how she has honed her awareness of space by practice and experiment. To guarantee she leaves space for the address panel, she explains, she “fold[s] down the ends” of her paper prior to writing. To ensure that her writing around the address panel isn’t “topsy-turvy”, she then opens the letter up again, “writ[ing] on the fourth page, just as [she] did on the others, only skipping over the part between the folds”.²⁹ Alan Stewart has noted similar practices of preliminary folding in Early Modern letter-writing, where the folds act as “guide-lines” for the letter’s laying out.³⁰

Less fore-planning meant more risk, although making mistakes gave correspondents the opportunity to style it out. The writer Hester Lynch Piozzi, for example, on occasion gets muddled about which page of her doubled-over sheet of paper she should write on. A letter of October 1806 to her friend the Reverend Leonard Chappelow finds Piozzi writing page 1 of her letter with the gutter-edge to the right rather than the left of her text. Turning over a fold rather than a fore-edge to continue her letter, she laments that “having written on the wrong Way of my Paper I shall be distressed how to fold it”.³¹

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

Another letter, of March 1811, to her adopted son John Salusbury Piozzi Salusbury, finds her apologising in a postscript: “This Letter is folded wrong, and written wrong, except the kind Expressions—They are all right”.³² In this case it is possible that Piozzi began writing her letter correctly, as it were, before needing to reverse her paper’s central fold, so as to ensure that its address panel fell on an outer page, albeit on f. 1r rather than f. 2v as was customary. Such reverse folding would also displace the beginning of her letter-text from its outer to its inner leaves.³³

[FIGURE 3 HERE]

Piozzi seems to end her letter similarly, back to front, in a letter of May 1818 to another friend, James Fellowes. This time, with a bravura flourish, she likens Fellowes’ reading of her letter to his traversal of a landscape garden (the Leasowes), and her misdirection of him through it, to the mischievous actions of a gardener at its competitor, Hagley. “Oh Me!”, she writes; “I have folded my Letter wrong, and You will read it as the Critics did Shenstone’s Mottoes at the Leasowes,—all backwards: when Conducted by Lord Lyttelton’s Gardiner, who used to shew People in at the going

out Place, from 'Spite [sic] against the presumptuous Competitor to proud Hagley. [...] I should really write No. 1 on the first Page", she adds, ruefully.³⁴ As Piozzi's simile of the landscape garden implies, the letter, as a folded thing—in writing and in reading—is highly dynamic, a machine of moving parts: multi-dimensional, and manipulated both by the mind's eye and manually. As such it is akin to other forms of textual and bookish art: the plaited Valentine; the Harlequinade, with its liftable flaps; the foldable diagrams and cut-out templates of geometry textbooks; the fold-out and throw-out plates bound into the codex (itself, of course, a folded form); the Victorian pop-up theatre.

Not only writing, but also unfolding and reading letters, was a physical act, a tactile experience. In receipt of clandestine letters from Osborne, Temple would have needed to turn the substrate—infrequently letter-locked, but usually a bifolium, folded small for transit—in two and three dimensions as he read, occasioned by Osborne's habits of perpendicular writing.³⁵ In early letters (Letters 1-32) Osborne tended, after filling a side, to rotate it 90 degrees counter-clockwise in order to write perpendicularly in what was the left-hand margin, from main text to page-edge, before moving on.³⁶ If running on beyond the second folio verso, she tended to conclude at the head of the first folio recto, having inverted the substrate. Such letters (Letters 11, 13, 22, 27 and 31) would have engaged Temple in turning the paper some nine times as he read.

This drama was collapsed by Osborne into miniature packages. Letter 2 is especially "tiny", as James How notes, which would have made it "easy to conceal, or to overlook if searched for."³⁷ Other letters are also small: the address panel of Letter 51, for example, measures 45 by 50 mm.³⁸ Osborne and Temple's families were set against their match, and the risk of their letters' interception was real.³⁹ To protect their correspondence, which they sent through servants, private carriers, and other intermediaries, Osborne used an array of security devices, including wax, paper locks, and sewn thread. The small size of the letters was another measure of security, although it is a sign of intimacy too. Take Letter 49, a short, sad letter sent near Christmas Day 1653, when the lovers'

relationship was under particular strain. In its narrow, rectangular panels, seal remnants and zig-zag lines of pinholes, the letter resembles early-modern “pleated” letters as they are described by Heather Wolfe. The folded fore-edges of pleated letters were commonly bound around with silk floss, held fast by two seals placed on either side of the packet, although the means of locking could vary. If their subject-matter was diverse, their “unusual format strengthen[ed] the rhetorical impact of the voice of the sender in an intimate gift, more private and meaningful than a letter folded and sealed in a more typical manner.”⁴⁰ Tiny without and manifold within, like Margaret Cavendish’s “eare-ring”, pleated letters are notably involuted forms, concealing far more than they reveal, with their disproportionate ratio of outside to inside surface area. As such they play, in their materiality, into the intimacy Osborne wished to secure with Temple. She wants, she writes in Letter 54, to live with him “out of the worlde [...] like Baucis and Philemon”, perhaps in a “litle house” on one of the islands they had seen on their voyage to St Malo, just after they had first met (M-S, 131, 269). Her wish is for “concealment”, such that “not above two persons in the worlde” could know her (Letter 55, M-S, 134).

To an extent, the material rhetoric of Osborne’s amatory correspondence anticipates the amorous world-building framed by Rousseau’s so-called “Second Preface” to *Julie*. This preface, a dialogue, sought, only part-ironically, to persuade its readers that its correspondents were truly “lover[s] influenced by a real passion”, rather than the inventions of either “letters written on purpose to be printed” or “dramas and romances” in “emphatical” style. Rousseau’s lovers, Julie and Saint-Preux, “finding nowhere what they are feeling, [...] turn in on themselves; they detach themselves from the rest of Creation; and inventing among themselves a little world different from ours, there they create an authentically new spectacle”. The French for their turning in on themselves—not caught by Kenrick’s translation—is *ils se replient sur eux-mêmes*, with the verb, *se replier*, literalising the fold.⁴¹ The analogy with letters is instructive: for just as folding a letter-paper produces not outer

surface and inner depth, but a doubled surface, the lovers' intimate world is made visible, a "spectacle".

(ii) Insides and outsides

In the eighteenth century it was commonplace to construe letters as having insides and outsides. This was especially because letters were folded for transit, and because increasingly from that time, correspondents exchanged letters more anonymously, relying on the Post Office more than on private carriers. The absence of a direction "on the outside" of one of Piozzi's letters risks its being thrown away. The appearance of "Chester on the Post Mark" of another will be explained to her correspondent by "the Inside".⁴² In many respects, then, fold, tuck and seal letters function like envelopes, hailed by Marta Werner as "metaphors of containment, of exteriority and interiority, of enfolding and exposure".⁴³ When enclosing a banknote in a letter to John Salusbury, for example, Piozzi tells him on one of its "doublings" (that is, one of the two contiguous panels on f. 2v formed by folding the closed bifolium twice, short-edge to short-edge) to "look in the inside and tell it if comes safe".⁴⁴ He should "call it the Dandy", meaning the note, she continues cryptically, "lest your Letter shd be seen".

[FIGURE 4 HERE]

Had this been a standard fold, tuck and seal, Salusbury would have needed to reverse the short-edge folds, having broken the seal, so as to open the letter up like a casket. However (as that extra mountain fold line bisecting the word "Oxford", on the address panel, suggests), his operation on this occasion would have been more elaborate, as Piozzi has folded her letter more intricately:

opening out the inscribed bifolium, then rolling it in upon itself—left-hand fore-edge to the central fold, which she then hinges closed, so as to catch the note within—before carrying on to fold and tuck much as usual.⁴⁵ Such roll-folds are hospitable to enclosures: a gift object, another letter. Yet while folded letters may enclose, they also vex the distinction between contained and container. Such letters comprise many panels—the direction and address without, with the tucked in or tucked under supplementary space at its threshold; the doublings (f. 2v), then the main bifoliate leaves within (f. 1r, f. 1v, f. 2r), here further infolded—which panels, while momentarily discontinuous, are in fact inscribed on a continuous surface. Piozzi’s strange turn of phrase might alert us to this. “In the inside”, she writes, in a usage not recorded by the OED: is this a tautology, doubling the imperative to look for the banknote within? Presumably it directs us to the letter’s inmost fold, at the heart of f. 1v, where the note will be found; and yet equally, it directs us to the words written on that leaf, where the cryptic meaning of “a Dandy’s Egg” (“a Ten Pound Note”) is explained.⁴⁶ In this way, the letter’s “inside” is at once “the space within” it and its “inner side or surface”.⁴⁷ What is inside (f. 2r, say) may also be rendered exterior to the enclosure, and ironically, what lies most deeply within (the banknote) may be the most public script of all. Piozzi’s language of insides and outsides is finely graded. Yet it remains crucial to her understanding of what her letters are and what they do because it is central to their rhetoric of intimacy. If a folded letter is “a stratification of surfaces”, to borrow from Jacques Derrida’s essay about Freud’s “mystic-writing pad”, the exteriority of its interiorized surfaces is also qualitatively different from the exteriority of its outside.⁴⁸ Salusbury should discover the Dandy; an interloper should not.

Eighteenth-century writers’ references to the outsides and insides of letters were prone to give way to the opposition of exteriority to interiority, surface to depth. There is of course a connection here to the changing, and mutually implicating, historical understandings of personal identity and of character in the period, which moved broadly from the relational model of a networked self in masquerade, to “the spatial model of surface versus depth”, as scholars such as Dror Wahrman and

Deidre Lynch have argued.⁴⁹ The part played by familiar letters in this historical narrative is perhaps susceptible to being limited, even misconstrued, by their conflation with Samuel Richardson's epistolary fiction, especially as this is supposed to discover and to valorize an interior selfhood. Yet the fold, tuck and seal bifolium remained an ambivalent form, a potential space in which correspondents might test the quality of their attachment. The locked letter's outside implicated an inside suggestive of depths to be revealed (with which the word "intimacy", in its etymological link to the Latin *intimus*, meaning "inmost" or "deepest", has an affinity), yet the folds by which the letter is constituted layer surface upon surface. According to Gilles Deleuze, here writing about Foucault, "the double is never a projection of the interior", but "an interiorization of the outside." "It resembles exactly the invagination [the sheathing or introverting] of a tissue in embryology, or the act of doubling [*doublure* or lining] in sewing: twist, fold, stop, and so on."⁵⁰ "[A]nd so on", for "the fold is defined and constituted by the possibility, even the necessity, of its future *un*folding."⁵¹ The fold, tuck and seal bifolium is represented, in the eighteenth century, in reciprocal relationship with a self supposed to be every bit as malleable, dancing between concealment and revelation, surfaces and depths.

The folded letter's play with surface and depth is a preoccupation of eighteenth-century portraiture. Central to Joseph Wright of Derby's painting *Girl Reading a Letter by Candlelight, With a Young Man Peering over Her Shoulder* (c. 1760-62), for example, is a fold, tuck and seal letter, opened out by the reading girl into a bifolium, with its inaugurating fold intact. The girl holds the folia mostly together, although the top fore-corner of the second leaf hangs slightly open, bending back on one of the short-edge folds used to lock it. This is key to the painting's technical effects. Wright was famous for his tenebrism, and here his candlelight source—positioned within the painting, between reader and letter—illuminates both the reader's face, and the letter's inside (or the verso of its first leaf, at least), likening the reader's mind and folded letter as types of interior space.

[FIGURE 5 HERE]

Wright's female reader sustains and develops the "love-letter theme" identified by Svetlana Alpers, in The Art of Describing, in seventeenth-century Dutch art. In the paintings Alpers writes about by Ter Borch, Metsu, Vermeer, and Rembrandt, "[t]he letters are commonly the object of attention", "a surface to be looked at"—sometimes tilted towards the light coming through a window, rather than glowing, like Wright's, as if from within—even as "we do not see the [letters'] contents and those who do do not reflect it in their demeanor". According to Alpers, this means that "an essential content remains inaccessible, enclosed in the privacy of the reader's or writer's absorption in the letter".⁵² Her view is largely adopted by Park in My Dark Room, which pits the inscrutability of letters as they are "drawn and painted" against letters as they are "written" by Cavendish and Richardson. The textual medium means that these letters, unlike painted ones, "open [their] contents to the reader", and "make the cognitive experience" of the "interior worlds" of their writers and readers "legible on a moment-by-moment basis". Park's caveat is that in paintings such as Vermeer's A Lady Writing (c. 1665), "internal experience" may just as well be indicated by "the physical features of the spaces where writing takes place", which are "more readily captured by the visual medium." In the Vermeer, for example, the painting in the background, and various items of furniture and clothing, "work together to articulate the woman's room as a space for thinking as well as for writing. The darkness of the room makes the woman's yellow robe glow, suggesting the growing interior brightness of her thoughts as she writes and becomes more aware of them" (P, 117, 119). Curiously, though, and perhaps because within A Lady Writing the letter is largely inert, flattened on a table, Park—at this stage of her argument—disallows letters themselves from signifying materially as well as textually. Later, however, in a discussion of pockets in Richardson's Pamela, she acknowledges that interiority might lie as well "within [...] the letter's folds", which "allow paper to turn into a form of housing for the letter's written contents as it is transported to a

different location”. In this way, the letter’s “material form” might function like its “language” to “se[t] boundaries of enclosure around the self and its world”, making letter and self alike portable properties (P, 204, 211). And thus the letter comes to rest, locked in three dimensions, a model of and for “possessive individualism”. Despite the kinetic promise of My Dark Room’s “spatial formalist” method—which “views architecture, landscape, and other features of the material world as [...] interactive sites of design and experience”—it vindicates the fold as pen not ply (P, 220, see also 181; 6-7).

Yet to extend Park’s argument just a little, the fold, tuck and seal bifolium is surely able to function as either space or surface, either room or screen, “equivocat[ing]” between “projective” (three-dimensional) and “inscriptional” (two-dimensional) space much as John Locke does in his theory of mind (P, 190). In A Girl Reading, for example, Wright creates the illusion that the letter holds light even as it mediates it: for notwithstanding the suggestion that the letter shines from its inside, the candle’s glow is softer through the doubled folium, and brighter through its first leaf, resolving seeming space into surface, although the illusion of depth remains. The notion of a “possessive interiority” (P, 5) is also put into question by the presence of the young man, which, however ambiguous (depending on how complicit the reading girl is in his overlooking her), also ensures that we see, in the girl, a “socially-turned self” rather than an inaccessibly interior one, if indeed it is adequate to conceive of the epistolarity self as a singularity at all: for of course, epistolary discourse is always relational; this is one of the reasons we write in different ways to different people.⁵³ There are certainly different “registers of association” here, any pure opposition between atomised self and society thwarted by the presence of an onlooker, who embodies the “noisy world of domestic relations” which at the time was still the location of private life.⁵⁴ As something like a representative of the reading girl’s household, the young man may abet her correspondence even as he is not wholly privy to it, rather as Osborne was abetted by her waiting woman Jane Wright, and former servant, Nan Stacy, in her commerce of letters with Temple.

Indeed, notwithstanding her desire to exist apart from “the noise and talk of the worlde”, Osborne’s letters have an audible social hum, sharing letters from others (including a love letter), and trading gossip (Letter 27, M-S 58). Her style may be her own, but it is still inflected by wider “epistolary decorums”.⁵⁵ In Wright’s painting, too, the form and content of letter-writing are socially-turned, inflected as they are implied to be by the advice of the manual, The Guide or Art of Writing a Letter, resting open on the table.⁵⁶

(iii) Making absence, presence

“[Whether we want it or not]”, writes Jean-Luc Nancy in Corpus, “bodies are touching each other upon this page, or more precisely, the page itself is a touching (of my hand while it writes, and your hands while they hold the book). This touch is infinitely indirect, deferred [...] but it continues as a slight, resistant, fine texture, the infinitesimal dust of a contact, everywhere interrupted and pursued.”⁵⁷ Even more than the deconstructionist theories of writing to which they give rise, familiar letters were fancied by early correspondents to capable of conjuring the presence of their authors. Kenrick’s Saint-Preux receives his lover’s letter “with as much rapture as your presence could have inspired: in the excess of my transport, a piece of folded paper supplying in my mind the place of Eloisa”.⁵⁸

In The Game of Love in Georgian England, Sally Holloway describes correspondents’ ritual kissing of amatory letters, wherein the material letter acts as a substitute for the lover’s body. She cites the example of Captain Martin Madan, writing in October 1723 to his lover Judith Cowper. Relaying his intention to visit the paths they had walked together, he writes: “There will I clasp ye Phantom, pull out the letter you’ve so often ask’d for, & kiss it to its native white.”⁵⁹ If this is a kind of magical thinking, it is also densely marked as such. Cowper’s presence is spectral (“ye

Phantom”), mediated by the letter, whose paper is a proxy for the “Beautifull image” Madan would like to kiss.⁶⁰ By kissing, furthermore, he imagines he would kiss away Cowper’s script, returning her letter’s substrate to its original whiteness. This points to the “native white” of his own letter, which acts, like the “white page” in Derrida’s reading of Mallarmé, to mark “the spacing between” the appearance of the word white and “the place of the writing” of that white, “a place that is white no longer”. “As the page folds in upon itself,” writes Derrida, seeming to describe a mise en abyme, “one will never be able to decide if white signifies something, or signifies only, or in addition, the space of writing itself. The use of the word pli (‘fold’) and its variations (pliage, ploiement, repli, reploiement, etc), which is as frequent, produces the same effects.”⁶¹

A teasing letter sent in January 1770 from Cambridge, by Charles Victor de Bonstetten and Thomas Gray to the Reverend Norton Nicholls, correlates body and folded page with a self-awareness comparable to Madan’s. An intertext of Bonstetten’s remark here is Milton’s “Il Penseroso”—he is playing with the guise of being melancholy. He writes:

vain deluding Joys is our motto hier, written on every feature, and ourly spoken by every solitary Chapel bel; So that decently you cant expect no other but a very grave letter. I realy beg you pardon to wrap up my thoughts in so smart a dress as an in quarto sheet. I know they should apear in a folio leave, but the Ideas themselves shall look so solemn as to belie their dress. – Tho’ I wear not yet the black gown, and am only an inferior Priest in the temple of Meditation, yet my countenance is already consecrated. I never walk but with even steps and musing gate, and looks comering with the skyes; and unfold my wrinkles only when I see mr. Gray, or think of you.⁶²

The letter's material substrate—the “in quarto sheet” or bifolium—is not merely the “dress” of Bonstetten's “Ideas”, but potentially, too, an analogy, in its creases, for “[his] wrinkles”, suggestive of a wrinkled brow, which, furthermore, his sight of Gray or thought of Nicholls might soothe.

[FIGURE 6 HERE]

Nicholls' “unfold[ing]” of this very letter might participate in such a soothing effect by imaginative transfer, as if he strokes Bonstetten's forehead. The word “wrinkles” is serendipitously placed in the manuscript page here, below one crease and across another. As such it conjoins the language of folds, and folds as a property of the letter-substrate. “Writing becomes part of the material that supports it”, as Juliet Fleming writes of Derrida's description of paper.⁶³ To an extent, Bonstetten is writing about writing. But he is also writing about feeling, with a flush of affection for his friends that resists disenchantment even as it invites it.

If the letter's paper layers “[can] be thought of as a second skin”, this also “creat[es] the conditions whereby the body's borders and surfaces might be revealed, destabilised, or violated”, as Lees-Jeffries suggests.⁶⁴ Notoriously, Richardson's letter-writing servant-girl Pamela stitches letters into her under-coat as a lining in order to hide them from her lecherous master, Mr B. Startled, on one occasion, by his sudden appearance—“just now, as I was folding this Letter”, she writes—Pamela goes “to hide the Letter in my Bosom”. But her master claims it, anyway, with a kind of pedagogical droit de seigneur: “He said, Well then, Let me see how you are come on in your Writing!”.⁶⁵ A painting by Jean Baptiste Greuze, Le baiser envoyé, and especially the frilly print made after it by Augustin de Saint-Aubin, go further, conflating a woman's delicate opening-up of her folded letter with sexual invitation.

[FIGURE 7 HERE]

We seem invited to view this print with a hetero-sexualised masculine gaze, which would require the spaces set aside for any number of non-hetero-sexualised activities—friendly correspondence between women, not least—to be made open to it; indeed, that the setting aside of such spaces positively encourages its attentions. Of course, a folded letter is only private in a qualified sense: as a doubled surface, a fold is, by one way of looking at it, already radically public, or at least, potentially so. However, so crumpled or plaited together are its volumes and cavities that it can't be appropriated by an observer in a single glance.⁶⁶ Longer drawn-out is John Cleland's description, in Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure, of what Fanny Hill initially calls her "dark and delicious deep". Its mystery is gradually revealed to us, as Fanny's "rolled up [...] drapery" (her clothes) and the "folding lips" of her labia conduct her client's "hard body" into her vaginal passage, later displayed to us by Fanny herself, in a figure both tactile and visual, in what she calls its "mantlings and folds". Cleland's textile metaphors make of the outside and inside of Fanny's body one continuous fold, making the termination of our desire in hetero-sexual, penetrative sex as-if inevitable. A continuous fold, then, but not an endless one.

Hearts are perhaps the eighteenth century's most folded organ, penetrable only by the most discerning.⁶⁷ Richardson's epistolary novel Sir Charles Grandison, for example, seemed to Anna Laetitia Barbauld to show "the female heart to be open to him in all its folds and recesses".⁶⁸ But hearts are not the only candidate, as Cleland's erotic fiction suggests. Treatises of midwifery observed the foldedness of the female genitalia, describing and in some cases displaying in illustrative diagrams the "two small folds, or doublings" of the outer labia in the inner labia or "nymphae", and the "folds or wrinkles" that mark the anterior of the vaginal passage, whose "rugae" continue internally, trailing off towards the cervix. The vagina's "folds and wrinkles" indeed "have a beautiful appearance in virgins", notes Alexander Hamilton in A Treatise of Midwifery, "not unlike the plaits of a well-dressed fine shirt".⁶⁹ Making the recesses of the interior

genitalia visible, and numbering their parts, these treatises make of the body's inside a new outside, scattering it even as they narrate.⁷⁰ As in Nancy Vickers' influential work on blazon: "description [...] is a gesture of display", and display is "from the Latin displicare (to scatter and, later, to unfold as in unfolding a banner to view)".⁷¹ This may speak to a bifurcation of meaning in the word fold itself, which when used as a suffix, might denote either plurality or arithmetical multiplication.⁷² In aloof yet sexualised remarks such as Hamilton's, and the dramatic use of surgical instruments, the treatises evidently estrange the man-midwife-observer from the folds he anatomises. While "midwifery was associated with manual dexterity"—although in practice "midwives used both sight and touch"—the treatises exhibit women's internal folds in a spectacle of estranged tactility.⁷³

[FIGURE 8 HERE]

In a "startlingly pornographic" image in Volume 7 of Richardson's *Clarissa*, the rakish Robert Lovelace likens a sealed letter to a woman's "labial folds", bragging that both "have in the past voluntarily opened themselves to his inquiring touch."⁷⁴ Over the course of the novel, Lovelace has become increasingly obsessed with the nature of the correspondence between Clarissa Harlowe and her friend Anna Howe. This is "expressed in metaphors of dressing and undressing sexual parts when [the letters] disappear into the secret recesses of her [...] cabinet and the folds of her clothing", as Park has noted.⁷⁵ Having at last intercepted a letter from Anna, he finds it fastened with some kind of open lock, allowing him to see and copy out "much of the contents" without breaking the seal.⁷⁶ Later still, Lovelace fantasises about what he would do if he were to get his hands on more of Anna and Clarissa's letters, this time to discover why Anna urges Clarissa to marry him. He writes to John Belford: "Had [the two letters] been in [my hand], the seal would have yielded to the touch of my warm finger (perhaps without the help of the post-office bullet), and the folds, as other plications have done, opened of themselves to oblige my curiosity."⁷⁷ The

“post-office bullet” was designed to remove a seal surreptitiously and intact.⁷⁸ Richardson thus aligns Lovelace’s violative actions with the Post Office’s interception of letters, legalised, when warranted by a Secretary of State, since 1711, stepped up in the 1790s, and according to some scholars “both ubiquitous and well known” until the 1840s, when a scandal broke in 1844 over Post Office tampering.⁷⁹ Ever the would-be seducer—for by definition, the partner in a seduction could not be raped—Lovelace euphemises his desires, imagining the letter springing open compliantly, even though we know he forces its lock.

“[O]vertones of sexual invasion” accompany “the intercepting or ‘violating’ of another’s words” in eighteenth-century fiction more broadly, as Ruth Perry avers. The metaphor has metafictional force, for the audience, too, is “reading letters not intended for public consumption. [...] [R]eading the letters written and intended for other eyes is the most reprehensible invasion of privacy and consciousness.”⁸⁰ Beyond epistolary fiction, a “gendered rhetoric of violence and sexual ravishment” also attended “the interception and opening” of actual letters, as Nadine Akkerman notes of political correspondence in seventeenth-century Europe.⁸¹ To be sure, these are extreme cases; the metaphor of violation is apt to erode the distinction between figurative and literal violence (to which the discovery of sedition or adultery might give rise), and so raises the stakes. It may still be germane to ask whether there are any stays to the epistolary fold’s unfolding? For while, in the long eighteenth century, the address of familiar letters, and even love letters, was restricted, their circulation was less so.⁸² Instructively, Holloway has distinguished between Georgian courtship letters, which were “regularly read to and circulated among family and friends”, and adulterous love letters, which were “secret”, that is, “personal” and “exclusive”. At the same time, Holloway notes, adulterous letters “did frequently find their way into print, subverting the secrecy that once defined them”.⁸³ Her examples of this date from the late eighteenth century, although the damaging switch between secrecy and revelation had earlier precedents too, for

example the discovery and part-publication of Charles I's letters to his wife, Henrietta Maria, by Parliamentarians, in 1645.

Not only was the interception and publication of clandestine love letters a risk; correspondence could also be closely surveilled, as it was in Osborne's experience.⁸⁴ Rather than thinking of folds as "an apparatus of privacy or secrecy", then, as Anne Carson does in her discussion of the folded lead strips used by the ancient Greeks to communicate with the oracles at Dodona,⁸⁵ we could posit folds as the means by which the invasion of privacy already inheres within the fabric of the letter itself. Intimacy would then be articulated in dialectical relation to its betrayal, an "active absence" inhering in its folds, like the "inner white" within the creases of one of Simon Hantaï's pliages, primed to "circulate" upon its unfolding.⁸⁶

(iv) Making then, now

Richardson's statement about the "converse of the pen", in a letter of c. 1746 to Sophia Westcomb, is widely known: correspondence "makes distance, presence; and brings back to sweet remembrance all the delights of presence; which makes even presence but body, while absence becomes the soul".⁸⁷ Rather like Rousseau, in the "Second Preface" to Julie, and like Madan in his letter to Cowper, Richardson here celebrates the paradox of spectral or writerly presence, and however ironically, expresses the idea so central to the genre of familiar letters: that what is then and there might really be now and here. This is a condition of precarious ambivalence, as Altman recognises in Epistolarity, which reads epistolary literature in light of the formal properties of letters in general. "[W]hatever the parameter", Altman writes, "we will always find that epistolary narrative thrives in [...] a dynamic or field of force set up by conflictual possibilities": for instance, wishing away and/or dwelling on the distance between correspondents, whether spatial or temporal;

restricting and/or expanding address; playing the discrete letter off against the open-endedness of corresponding; juxtaposing the continuities of repeated exchange with its several discontinuities (which Altman articulates in terms of narrative theory, although with actual letters one might look elsewhere, not least to the history and culture of the post). “The letter is a both-and, either-or phenomenon”, Altman writes, “signifying either bridge or barrier, both presence and absence” (A, 4, 188-189). Osborne’s letters to Temple are an apt illustration, “an Effect”, she tells him, “of the absence you complaine of [...]. [A]t the same that that my Letters tell you I am well and still your friend, they tell you too that I am where you cannot see mee and where I vainly wish you, and when they are kindest and most welcom to you, they only show that tis imposible I should desyr your happinesse more, or have less power to make it” (Letter 35, M-S, 77).

Notwithstanding the “hiatuses” of correspondence, its “language of absence”, the skew of letters, argues Altman, is towards creating the effect of presence. She calls this “presentification”, and sees it as a hallmark of the largely eighteenth-century corpus of epistolary novels of which she writes, although we might also hazard that it characterises the familiar letter in general (A, 140, 202). There is, of course, something sacrificial in this movement towards presentification, at least as far as letter-writing is concerned. As Carson puts it in connection to love letters:

[a] desire to bring the absent into presence, or to collapse far and near, is also a desire to foreclose then upon now. As lover you reach forward to a point in time called ‘then’ when you will bite into the long-desired apple. Meanwhile you are aware that as soon as ‘then’ supervenes upon ‘now’, the bittersweet moment, which is your desire, will be gone. You cannot want that, and yet you do.⁸⁸

“[H]ow much better would it bee”, writes Osborne to Temple, “if [...] I could tell you without writeing / how much I am Yours” (Letter 37, M-S, 84). And she can, when she marries him, and

their correspondence—such as has survived—dwindles and congeals. It is as if, like Ovid's Baucis, Osborne arrives in the movement from courtship to marriage at a moment of fatal simultaneity, a doubled enunciation with her Philemon, as they die, turned in to "neighbour trees" by Jupiter: "at once, adieu / Wife, Husband, said", as George Sandys renders it in his early seventeenth-century translation.⁸⁹ In their courtship letters, though, Osborne and Temple's love is vital. Her closing of the letter just mentioned is characteristic, the sign-off folded into the letter's main body, intensifying its farewell. In conformity with persisting rhetorical decorum, Osborne tends to follow this with her signature, although in common sign-offs such as "I am / Yours / D.Osborne", the distinction between farewell and signature becomes blurred, the farewell exceeding its frame, the lovers implicated—in the sense of "intertwined"—in their mutual affection. Osborne wishes, then, for a present in which "I am Yours", but must express this in a past tense form ("I could tell you"). She looks forward to a future in which they need not write because they are together, and yet this future is impossible since it entails the dissolution of the distance that sustained their desire to be together in the first place. Such is the untimeliness of epistolary desire.

The knowing wishfulness and the anachronism of making the absent present are fostered by the material properties of the fold, tuck and seal bifolium, which, once un-tucked, would reveal first what was written last, address or direction apart (which were not necessarily written last in any case). This is particularly intriguing, in familiar letters, in relation to the postscript, that part of the close of a letter either "evidently written subsequent to the rest of it", or "placed after the [...] signature". Postscripts, with their intimation of haste and belatedness, were generally relegated to informal correspondence, their use discouraged by the manuals. But they were used, often very artfully, and are essential to letters' temporal logic, as Richard Terry has explained. Postscripts, he writes, lay letter-writing's strongest claim to instantaneousness, even as, in their status as "supplement", they also "displac[e]" a letter's body-text "through superseding it in time". A telling example comes in a postscript we have already encountered in Pamela, when the heroine is

interrupted “in the actual process of ‘folding this letter’”. It is then Richardson’s “post-text” rather than his text, argues Terry, that most perfectly realizes his aspiration of “writing to the moment”.⁹⁰

Terry’s essay has relatively little to say about the placement of postscripts, noting only “the visual drop from the signature to the postscript” in general terms. He relates this to “the complex visual and rhetorical grammar” of eighteenth-century letters, their use of what scholars of early-modern letters call “significant space”, whereby white space itself has rhetorical effect, being coded, for example, as a gesture of deference.⁹¹ This idea of significant space might be extended to consider the panels created by folding and tucking, as well as their relative position within locked letters, especially the supplementary spaces articulated by folding the address panel on a bifolium’s second verso: the doublings, and the tuck-under, the edge of the letter tucked in before sealing. These spaces are peculiarly well suited for use as postscripts. They are highly dynamic, insofar as they form a threshold between a letter’s “public” outside and restricted inside, and thus participate in the intimate drama of concealment and revelation.⁹² They are also fragile: the first to emerge when a reader breaks the letter’s seal and untucks its fore-edge, which actions make the tuck-under peculiarly vulnerable, subject to occlusion by the wrong removal of a seal (although more scrupulous correspondents such as Piozzi anticipate the risk, indenting or breaking their text in order to leave blanks as appropriate).

Piozzi was not the only familiar correspondent to use the supplementary spaces of the letter-locked bifolium in this way—John Keats and Jane Austen are others—effectively zoning the letter’s panels in relation to use, time, and sociability. Take her letters to Salusbury, notable for both their verboseness and their extravagant attempts to engage the attention of her young and negligent correspondent. Piozzi builds up these letters in layers, like a collage. When writing to the full extent of the bifolium (that is, when filling all four sides), she tends—there are exceptions—to write conventionally enough on sides 1-3. Like Farrar’s Anna, mentioned above, Piozzi then makes two horizontal folds, readying side 4 for use. However, unlike Anna, Piozzi does not go on to reverse

these folds in order to write on side 4 top to bottom, skipping the address panel. Instead, she writes on the doublings with her paper still folded, gutter to the left. This means that when opened out and compared with the rest of the bifolium, side 4 appears to be in “a visible disorder”.

[FIGURE 9 HERE]

In conversation with Bruno Latour, Michel Serres likened time to a crumpled handkerchief, folding together distant points. If Anna is the crumpled letter’s geometrist, spreading it out in order to rationalise its space, then Piozzi is surely its topologist, glorying in the “paradox[es]”, the “folds or twists” of epistolary space and time, inasmuch as she preserves their traces on the surface of her page: “here interrupted; there vertical, mobile, and unexpected.”⁹³ Momentarily unpleated, such a letter is not collage but garment.

If ever she exceeds the doublings, Piozzi tends to requisition the tuck-under, where in the previously prosy, anecdotal letter of October 1809, shown above, she assembles a miscellaneous list of brief observations and sentiments, juxtaposing different tenses, Janus-faced: Salusbury’s friends “Shall be my most welcome Guests at Bath”; “I saw a beautiful Fire Ball rise from our Park Last Wednesday”; “I am [your] truly anxious & Affec[tiona]te Aunt”. She structures her list by item number, eschewing all conjunctions except a first, which pivots us from political anecdote in order to ground us in the present tense of her writing (whilst also, of course, anticipating the future present tense of Salusbury’s reading, the “you” to her “I”): “& now let me tell you half a Dozan Things in as many Inches of Space”. Piozzi is conscious as ever here of the space of the page, the few inches available to her and their liminal placement on the tuck-under themselves constituting her writing as post-text, even though she has not yet signed. She does, at the end of the tuck-under—and goes on, exceeding even this space, undoing the vertical folds and writing her post-script proper perpendicularly on the doublings. In a first sally she reaffirms her and Salusbury’s bond and

extends affections to others; in a second, manifestly an afterthought, an anagnorisis as she reads herself back, she retracts an earlier impulse to send him someone else's letter: "upon second Thoughts I find it most adviseable / to keep Sir Edward Lloyd's Letter at home. // Once more adieu!"⁹⁴

While presentification may be the aim of familiar correspondence, particularly amatory correspondence, epistolary time is multivalent, its nows said to be "unseizable" and never coincident with its thens (A, 129). Writes Kenrick's Saint-Preux to his Eloisa: "You are in health, and still love me; or rather ten days ago you loved me, and was well; but who can assure me it is so at this instant?"⁹⁵ In Epistolarity, Altman catalogues the many epistolary "time lags": between the time of narration and the time of event; within narration, as the writer's present is ever-changing (which point one could also make about the reader's present in reception); and between writer and readers, whether internal or external to the letter-text. For her, and indeed for Derrida, to whose Envois she refers, this makes the epistolary present "impossible" (A, 140 and following; 129 and following).⁹⁶ For Charles Lamb, it was a "solecism"; "my Now" and "your Now", the "two presents" of writer and addressee, cannot and ought not to be confused.⁹⁷ Part of the conundrum, we could note in passing, is the proliferation within and around the letter of claims to presentness, quite in excess of those claims' negativity. What happens between letters, or more precisely, the experience of that betweenness, is also crucial. "[W]edged between two tenses", the character "I" in Roland Barthes' A Lover's Discourse finds his present "insupportable [...] a pure portion of anxiety".⁹⁸ Such anxiety alerts us to the potential risks of the description "time lag", as if the interval between letters were inert, emptied of affect and of social strategy. For time only seems inert when viewed as if from the outside, and the period between letters only seems inert when viewed objectively and after the fact.⁹⁹ To Altman's catalogue of temporal disjunctions we could then add another: the disjunction between phenomenology, the experience of the epistolary actor proceeding letter by letter, and historicity, the fact of a completed correspondence.¹⁰⁰

Near the end of Eros the Bittersweet, Carson has something like this bifurcation of phenomenology and historicity in view when she opposes the apparent madness of the lover to the rationality of the “non-lover”, who only ever “speaks from the end of the love affair as one who has never been taken over by desire at all”.¹⁰¹ The alternative “mode of perception” she urges would be “to enter the moment that is ‘now’ for the [person] in love, the present moment of desire”, “the moment of mania when Eros enters the lover”.¹⁰² This moment is “stereoscopic”: for “[l]etters”, as she recognises, “project the ideal on a screen of the actual”; the lover’s desire is to “float in the ambiguities of a space-time where absent is present and ‘now’ can include ‘then’ without ceasing to be ‘now’”.¹⁰³ Her metaphor is one of projection: but I prefer folding, hiding in plain sight, holding together but never fusing now and then, present and absent, you and I.

The philosophy of perception that Deleuze develops in The Fold is yet more minute, and suggests the “tiny perceptions”, “‘pricklings’, or little foldings” which lie between and within the distinct perceptions of which we are conscious, putting us in a state of “disquiet”. “[E]very conscious perception”, indeed, is prepared for, composed and followed by, “an infinity of tiny folds [...] endlessly furling and unfurling in every direction”. Certain of these may be integrated into present perception; certain that are not may “nourish the one that comes along”, as pain may be nourished by the “thousand tiny [...] half-pains [...] already dispersed in pleasure.” Usually we are blind to these little foldings, but sometimes, Deleuze thinks, we may glimpse them “for an instant”.¹⁰⁴ For Deleuze, then, writes Robertson, “perceiving doesn’t halt or rest at the point of figural stability.” What is not integrated into distinct perception is also what allows the little foldings “to bathe [us] in potential, in the very obscure and indiscernible agency of the present as uncoordinated disquietude. No privileged point of view can provide a coordinating vantage.”¹⁰⁵

In closing, I propose that we view the social-material practice of folding letters with just such a folding perception. As a widespread practice seldom remarked upon, folding letters may seem unthinking. The letter-folder may be likened to Serres’ female baker folding dough, “unaware” of

what she's doing even as she does it.¹⁰⁶ Yet folding is sometimes glimpsed, most strikingly by Piozzi. She is an exceptional letter-writer, to be sure. But she is also one who in the quality of her noticing helps us to understand a set of conventions and a rhetoric that for others went without saying. And if the power of practice resides above all in the doing, then the power of folding is to knit letter-writers together, just as the girl in Wright's painting is implicated in others in her reading, her folded interiority, her writing, her use of manuals, her being overlooked. She is inconspicuous, although in her speaking example is remarkable.

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¹ John Romney, Memoirs of the Life and Works of George Romney (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1830), 19.

² Prince Dimitry Kandaouroff, Collecting Postal History: Postmarks, Cards and Covers, trans. and ed. William Finlay (London: Peter Lowe, 1973), 52.

³ Jana Dambrogio, Daniel Starza Smith, and the Unlocking History Research Group. 2023. Dictionary of Letterlocking (DoLL). Last updated: 4 December 2023. Date accessed: 4 January 2024.

⁴ See James Daybell, The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512-1635 (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 100; Kandaouroff, 49.

⁵ "Letterlocking," in DoLL. Last updated: 4 December 2023. Date accessed: 4 January 2024.

⁶ See Howard Robinson, Britain's Post Office (London: OUP, 1953). On postal developments in Kendal, see Roger K. Bingham, Kendal: A Social History (Milnthorpe, Cumbria: Cicerone Press, 1995).

⁷ Julie Park, My Dark Room: Spaces of the Inner Self in Eighteenth-Century England (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 204. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated P.

⁸ Hester Lees-Jeffries, “Shakespeare, in Folds,” Inscription issue 3: Folds (November 2022), 27.

⁹ “Folds/Creases,” in Jana Dambrogio, Daniel Starza Smith, et al. 2016–. Dictionary of Letterlocking (DoLL). Last updated: 30 December 2017. Date accessed: 17 June 2024. By “letterlocking”, they mean “the materially engineered security and privacy of letters” (“Letterlocking”, in DoLL).

¹⁰ James Daybell, Alan Stewart, and Alison Wiggins have written about letter-folding in early-modern epistolary culture; Julie Park touches on folding in eighteenth-century epistolary culture; and Marta Werner writes about folding in relation to Emily Dickinson’s envelope poems and so-called “Master” documents. Dambrogio and Smith’s book, Letterlocking, is forthcoming as I write.

¹¹ See Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”, in The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

¹² Daybell, Material Letter, 2, 6.

¹³ See Alison Wiggins, Bess of Hardwick’s Letters: Language, Materiality, and Early Modern Epistolary Culture (New York: Routledge, 2017), 190.

¹⁴ Geertz, “Thick Description”, 10; see Bernhard Siegert, “Introduction: Cultural Techniques, or, the End of the Intellectual Postwar in German Media Theory”, in Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 1-17.

¹⁵ Janet Gurkin Altman, Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 134. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated A.

¹⁶ For all that eighteenth-century writers likened familiar epistolary writing to conversation, they were well aware that the familiar style was just that. See for example Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, 2 vols (London: 1783): “Concealment and disguise take place, more or less, in all human intercourse [...] In writing to the most intimate friend, a certain degree of attention, both to the subject and the style, is requisite and becoming” (Lecture 37, II. 298, 299). Dorothy Osborne, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, was avant garde in the intimacy of her epistolary address to Temple, although she too was aware that “free and Easy” style had a rhetoric. Criticising another correspondent’s faults, she observes: “there are many pritty things shuffled together which would doe better spoken then in a letter, notwithstanding the received opinion that People ought to write as they speak (which in some sence I think it true).” Dorothy Osborne to William Temple, Letter 61, in The Letters of Dorothy Osborne to William Temple, ed. G. C. Moore-Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928; repr. 1959), 189. Note that the dating of her letters is largely conjectural. For ease of reference, I cite letters as they are numbered by Moore-Smith (hereafter cited parenthetically by page-number and abbreviated M-S); manuscripts are ordered differently in the British Library binder.

¹⁷ Lisa Robertson, “Untitled Essay”, in Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, The Codex, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities, and Related Aporias, 3rd edn (Ontario: Book*hug Press, 2020), pp. 71-87 (p. 83); Lisa Robertson, The Baudelaire Fractal (London: Peninsula Press, 2020), pp. 105-6.

¹⁸ Eve Tavor Bannet, Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1680-1820 (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), xvii.

¹⁹ See Susan E. Whyman, The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800 (Oxford: OUP, 2009), and Bannet, Empire of Letters.

²⁰ Anon., The Complete Letter-Writer (Edinburgh, 1774), 29.

²¹ Cited by Frances Austin, “Letter Writing in a Cornish Community in the 1790s,” in David Barton and Nigel Hall, eds, Letter Writing as a Social Practice (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000), 51.

²² See The Edinburgh Review, 29 (Edinburgh, 1818), 112, on identifying Sir Philip Francis as “Junius” by his “habit of folding and directing official letters”, and Mrs John Farrar, The Youth’s Letter-Writer (New York: R. Bartlett and S. Raynor, 1834), 45: “I always know your letters, when they come to our house by their pretty shape.”

²³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Eloisa: Or, a Series of Original Letters Collected and Published by J J Rousseau, trans. William Kenrick, 4 vols (Dublin: James Hunter, 1761), IV. 124, Letter 157.

²⁴ Lord Chesterfield to Philip Stanhope, Letter 45 (19 December 1751), 870, in Christopher Mayo, Lord Chesterfield’s “Letters to his Son”: A Critical Edition, Order No. 3127117, Brandeis University, 2004, <https://ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/lord-chesterfields-letters-his-son-critical/docview/305227177/se-2> (accessed March 25, 2024).

²⁵ Mayo, in *ibid.*, 13.

²⁶ Lord Chesterfield to Philip Stanhope, Letter 59 (25 July 1741); Letter 162 (22 September 1749), in *ibid.*, 264, 576.

²⁷ [Choderlos de Laclos], Les liaisons dangereuses, 2 vols (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1797), Vol. 1, Letter 64, 205.

²⁸ Alan Stewart, Shakespeare’s Letters (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 50.

²⁹ Farrar, Youth’s Letter-Writer, 41.

³⁰ Stewart, Shakespeare’s Letters, 51.

³¹ Piozzi to Chappelow, 11 October 1806, in The Piozzi Letters: Correspondence of Hester Lynch Piozzi, 1784-1821 (formerly Mrs. Thrale), ed. Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, 6 vols (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1989-2002), Volume 4: 1805-1810 (1996), 117.

³² Piozzi to Salusbury, 30 March 1811, in The Piozzi Letters, ed. Bloom and Bloom, Volume 5: 1811-1816 (1999), 94.

³³ See also Piozzi to Samuel Lysons, 26 February 1785: “Here have I been writing on the fourth Side of the paper I swear—and took it for the 3d” (The Piozzi Letters, ed. Bloom and Bloom, Volume 1: 1784-1791 (1989), 130).

³⁴ Piozzi to Fellowes, 6 May 1818, in The Piozzi Letters, ed. Bloom and Bloom, Volume 6: 1817-1821 (2002), 182.

³⁵ Of the 69 manuscript letters extant from Osborne to Temple, 11 bear handling instructions such as addresses or directions. 4 further letters bear the marks of security devices (such as wax, torn paper strips, or pinholes) directly on the substrate, without any handling instructions; and 4 more show signs of heavy mending, such that security devices (such as wax seals) may once have been removed, damaging the substrate. On Osborne’s use of bifolia, see M-S, xlix. Of the 69 letters, 48 are bifoliate. Most of these are in quarto rather than folio format, which was relatively new at the time, as Daybell notes, Material Letter, 100.

³⁶ Moore-Smith gives a broad overview of the mise-en-page of Osborne’s manuscripts at M-S, xlviii-xlix.

³⁷ James How, Epistolary Spaces: English Letter-Writing from the Foundation of the Post Office to Richardson’s Clarissa (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 27.

³⁸ See BL Add. MS 33975 44 f. 1v.

³⁹ In Letter 30 Osborne accuses Henry of trying to intercept her letters, and in Letter 23 she mistakenly blames a carrier for breaking a letter seal (M-S, 65, 48).

⁴⁰ Heather Wolfe, “‘Neatly sealed, with silk, and Spanish wax or otherwise’: the practice of letter-locking with silk floss in early modern England,” In the Prayse of Writing: Early Modern Manuscript Studies, Essays in Honour of Peter Beal, ed. S P Cerasano and Steven W May (London: British Library, 2012), 169, 182, 170.

⁴¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Julie, or the New Heloise, trans. and ed. Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché, The Collected Writings of Rousseau, Vol. 6 (Hanover; London: University Press of New England, 1997), 11. French translation sourced from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Collection complète des œuvres, Genève, 1780-1789, 17 vol., in-4°, édition en ligne: www.rousseauonline.ch, accessed [25 March 2024].

⁴² Piozzi to William Augustus Conway, 22-24 June 1819, in The Piozzi Letters, ed. Bloom and Bloom, Volume 6: 1817-1821 (2002), 289; Piozzi to Salusbury, 21 December 1810, in *ibid.*, Volume 4: 1805-1810 (1996), 322.

⁴³ Marta Werner, “Itineraries of Escape: Emily Dickinson’s Envelope Poems,” in Emily Dickinson, The Gorgeous Nothings, ed. Marta Werner and Jen Bervin, preface by Susan Howe (New York: Christine Burgin / New Directions, in association with Granary Books, 2013), 217.

⁴⁴ The term “doublings” is used in this sense in John Keats’ letter to John Hamilton Reynolds of 21 September 1817, and interpreted beautifully by Oliver Herford in his current work on Keats’ letters. It is adopted by the Letterlocking Project in a Vimeo video of 2017: <https://vimeo.com/189328935>.

⁴⁵ The fold-line bisecting “Oxford” may suggest that Piozzi bodged the first vertical fold of the address panel, guided by the bulk of the roll-folds to fold her packet in half, leaving no room for the tuck.

⁴⁶ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “inside (n.1, adj., adv., prep.),” February 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9241044041>; Piozzi to Salusbury, 13 June 1811, in The Piozzi Letters, ed. Bloom and Bloom, Volume 5: 1811-1816 (1999), 105-6.

⁴⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “inside (n.1, adj., adv., prep.),” February 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9241044041>; Piozzi to Salusbury, 13 June 1811, in The Piozzi Letters, ed. Bloom and Bloom, Volume 5: 1811-1816 (1999), 105-6.

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Freud’s Scene of Writing,” trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, Yale French Studies 48, French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis (1972), 109.

⁴⁹ See Dror Wahrman, The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 168 and following; Deidre Shauna Lynch, The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). See also Eve Tavor Bannet, Letters in the Story: Narrative-Epistolary Fiction from Aphra Behn to the Victorians (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 31.

⁵⁰ Gilles Deleuze, Foucault, trans. and ed. Seán Hand, foreword Paul Bové (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 98.

⁵¹ Lees-Jeffries, “Shakespeare, in Folds,” 27; see Gilles Deleuze, The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque, trans. Tom Conley (London: Continuum, 2006), 40.

⁵² Svetlana Alpers, The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century (London: Penguin, repr. 1989), 192-93, 196.

⁵³ The “socially-turned self” is a term Wahrman credits to Sarah Knott: see Making of the Modern Self, 168.

⁵⁴ David Vincent, Privacy: A Short History (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 50, 78.

⁵⁵ Carrie Hintz, An Audience of One: Dorothy Osborne’s Letters to Sir William Temple, 1652-1654 (Toronto, 2005), 42.

⁵⁶ On the inflection of “the language of love” by letter-writing manuals, see Sally Holloway, The Game of Love in Georgian England: Courtship, Emotions, and Material Culture (Oxford: OUP, 2019), 41-43.

⁵⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, Corpus, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 51, trans. modified.

⁵⁸ Kenrick, trans., Eloisa, II. 34, letter 81.

⁵⁹ Cited by Holloway, Game of Love, 65. On letters as figures for absent lovers, see further A, 19.

⁶⁰ Madan to Cowper, 13 October 1723, MS Eng. Lett c. 284/2, f. 4r, BLO.

- ⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, “Mallarmé,” in Acts of Literature, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 115-16; Juliet Fleming, Cultural Graphology: Writing after Derrida (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 61.
- ⁶² Charles Victor de Bonstetten and Thomas Gray. “Charles Victor de Bonstetten/Thomas Gray to Norton Nicholls, 6 January 1770”. Thomas Gray Archive, 15 Apr 2024. Web. 26 Apr 2024. <<https://www.thomasgray.org/texts/letters/tgal0574>>
- ⁶³ Juliet Fleming, Cultural Graphology: Writing after Derrida (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 141.
- ⁶⁴ Lees-Jeffries, “Shakespeare, in Folds,” 27.
- ⁶⁵ Samuel Richardson, Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded, ed. Tom Keymer with Alice Wakely (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 131, 12.
- ⁶⁶ Anon, “Collective Pleasures of Anonymity: From Public Restrooms to 4chan and Chatroulette.” in The Book of Anonymity: An Edited Collection, ed. Anon Collective (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2020), 367. They continue: “In order to ‘know’ anything about” such a fold, “an observer would have to travel and descend into it, but by doing so, would become entangled with it to the point where it can no longer be apprehended.”
- ⁶⁷ Lord Chesterfield describes the heart’s “plis et replis” in his letter to Philip Stanhope, Letter 31 (22 April 1751), in Mayo, Lord Chesterfield’s “Letters to his Son”, 817-18. See also Edward Young, Night Thoughts, Night 4, l. 733 (“My Heart is Thine: Deep in its inmost Folds, Live Thou”), cited in the OED definition of fold n.3, 1.a.. Michael Friedman and Wolfgang Schäffner’s introduction to their edited volume, On Folding: Towards a New Field of Interdisciplinary Research (Bielefeld transcript Verlag, 2016), looks to modern science when it notes the folding of proteins, brains, and embryos, 7-8 and passim.
- ⁶⁸ Anna Laetitia Barbould, ed., The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson, 4 vols (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), I, cxix.

⁶⁹ See Alexander Hamilton, A Treatise of Midwifery (London, 1781), 30, 35; Robert Wallace Johnson, A New System of Midwifery (London, 1769), 18-21. See also Cooper, A Compendium of Midwifery (n.p., 1766), 33, and William Smellie, A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery (London, 1752), 94.

⁷⁰ Jonathan Sawday discusses the Western “taboo” of exposing the body’s interior in The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 6-15.

⁷¹ Cited by Lees-Jeffries, “Shakespeare, in Folds,” 27.

⁷² “-fold, Suffix.” Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8505455173>.

⁷³ See Luisa Dacome, “Exhibit 21 - A Crystal Womb,” in Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day, ed. Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming and Lauren Kassell (Cambridge: CUP, 2018), 672.

⁷⁴ Harris, Jocelyn, [review of] Epistolary Spaces: English Letter Writing from the Foundation of the Post Office to Richardson’s “Clarissa” 16 (2005), npn; Robin Valenze, “How Literature Becomes Knowledge: A Case Study,” *ELH* 76. 1 (2009), 233.

⁷⁵ Julie Park, ““I shall enter her heart’: Fetishizing Feeling in ‘Clarissa’,” Studies in the Novel 37. 4 (2005), 387.

⁷⁶ Mr Lovelace to John Belford, Letter 238, in Samuel Richardson, Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady (1747-8), ed. Angus Ross (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 808.

⁷⁷ Mr Lovelace to John Belford, Letter 341, in Richardson, Clarissa, 1085.

⁷⁸ See Nicholas D. Nace, Notes and Queries (June 2009), 248-252.

⁷⁹ Howard Robinson, Britain’s Post Office (London: OUP, 1953), 25, 47, 55, 91; Kate Lawson, “Personal Privacy, Letter Mail, and the Post Office Espionage Scandal, 1844,” BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History, ed. Dino Franco Felluga. Extension of Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net. Web. [20 June 2023].

⁸⁰ Ruth Perry, Women, Letters and The Novel (New York: AMS Press, 1980), 130-131.

⁸¹ Nadine Akkerman, Invisible Agents: Women and Espionage in Seventeenth Century Britain (Oxford: OUP, 2018), 1.

⁸² On letters' privacy, see Clare Brant, Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 5; Bannet, Letters in the Story, 31; Sally Holloway, "'You know I am all on fire': writing the adulterous affair in England, c. 1740-1830", Historical Research 89. 244 (2016), 319.

⁸³ Holloway, "'You know I am all on fire'", 319, 322.

⁸⁴ See Hintz, An Audience of One, 107.

⁸⁵ Anne Carson, Eros the Bittersweet, ed. Sandra Newman (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2022), 111, 113.

⁸⁶ Gilles Deleuze, The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque, trans. Tom Conley (London: Continuum, 2006), 40.

⁸⁷ Samuel Richardson to Sophia Westcomb (c. 1746), in The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson, ed. Anna Laetitia Barbauld, 6 vols (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), 3. 244-49

⁸⁸ Carson, Eros the Bittersweet, 124.

⁸⁹ Ovid's Metamorphosis Englished by G. S. (London: William Stansby, 1626), 168.

⁹⁰ Richard Terry, "'P.S.': The Dangerous Logic of the Postscript in Eighteenth-Century Literature," The Modern Language Review 109. 1 (2014), 37-38, 50, 53.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹² Whyman, Pen and the People, 22 calls "the blank back side" of the letter used "for the address [...] the public part of the letter, for it will be seen by postman and, perhaps, a government censor".

⁹³ Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 57, 60, 68.

⁹⁴ Rylands MS 585. 34 f. 2v.

⁹⁵ Kenrick, trans., Eloisa (1761), ii. 35

- ⁹⁶ Jacques Derrida, The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 63.
- ⁹⁷ Charles Lamb, “Distant Correspondents,” London Magazine 5. 27 (1822), 282.
- ⁹⁸ Roland Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2002), 15.
- ⁹⁹ See Pierre Bourdieu, Logic of Practice, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 106.
- ¹⁰⁰ See Sarah Haggarty, “‘The ceremonial of letter for letter’: William Cowper and the Tempo of Epistolary Exchange”, Eighteenth-Century Life 35. 1 (2011), 149-67.
- ¹⁰¹ Carson, Eros the Bittersweet, 167.
- ¹⁰² Ibid., 170, 142-43.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., 104, 132.
- ¹⁰⁴ Deleuze, The Fold, 98-99, 107.
- ¹⁰⁵ Lisa Robertson, “Disquiet,” in Nilling: Prose Essays, 3rd edn (Ontario: Book*hug Press, 2020), 64-65.
- ¹⁰⁶ Michel Serres, Rome: The First Book of Foundations, trans. Randolph Burks (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 70.