



## Origins of the Epistolary Novel and the Principal Epistolary Works

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**Abstract:** The eighteenth century is considered as the golden age of epistolary art. If we analyse the historical and social value of letters, we notice that epistolary exchange soon becomes one of the principal ways of communication and of providing information. One of the most important qualities of the epistolary novel is its ability to effectively convey emotion. The epistolary novel removes the temporal distance between personal history and its written form.

**Key words:** novel, letter, modern Age, Eighteenth-century.

The most famous writers of the time (such as Montesquieu) and libertine writers (Laclos and Sade in particular) employed the epistolary novel in different ways. So eighteenth-century literature is characterised by the successful epistolary novel. Since the Modern Age letter has held great historical and social importance due to the power of letter to act as a vehicle for information. This emerges as one of the main reasons for the rise in popularity of the epistolary novel.

Thanks to progress in learning and in postal organization, the letter becomes an important medium for communicating information and can be viewed as a precursor to the modern gazette. So the evolution of the epistolary form facilitates news circulation concerning politics, literature, family and society: it's the main way used by aristocracy and bourgeoisie to find news. So the readers are impatient to receive a letter to enliven an ordinary life. The value of a letter lies in several aspects considering that the "art" of letter writing under the *Ancien Régime* in France clearly has an ethic as well as an aesthetic importance, a politic as well as a poetic component. So letters published as "art" under Classicism are always transformed into illustrations of the "art" of writing letters where the writing subject is positioned as a loyal (male) servant of an aristocratic order revolving around an absolute king<sup>1</sup>. However, epistolary novel gives arise in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The beginning of the Eighteenth is dominated by memoirs in which the protagonists offer their experience of life and love. The principle quality, attributed to a letter, is its capacity to transmit feelings immediately: in fact, a letter avoids temporal distance between lived experience and its written expression. In this way, the absence of a narrator guarantees the authenticity of narration because nobody can talk or think in place of characters.

"This writer serves the monarch through public speech acts that constitute a predictable and universally imitable model of courtesy. The counter current to this dominant Classical model, which coexists with it from the outset, is epistolary 'art' interpreted as inimitable but inspiring emulation, because it is understood to emanate from differing, private literary spaces that articulate the particularities of historical contingency. The latter concept of epistolary art generates discourses of cultural difference, which will assume a renewed ascendancy in the eighteenth century" (Altman).

P. V. Conroy analyses the principal elements concerning the French epistolary genre (epistolary choice, public and authenticity) in this way: "By adopting the epistolary format, the novel took upon itself that particular way of rendering the outside world that the letter had already conditioned the

reading public to accept as normal. The epistolary novel is a specific literary genre that is particularly loved by European authors during the Eighteenth century. The genre first appears in England and France and, later, in Germany. In fact, the epistolary novel is a millennium old if we consider that one of the first example is *Heroines* by Ovid who reproduces fictional correspondence between two lovers: except for three letters produced by men, all the women write to absent husbands and lovers, who apparently have other things to do. During the Middle-Ages and the Modern Age several real epistolary exchanges (Saint Catherine from Siena, Erasmus, Cromwell and Madame de Sévigné) are published and read by a large audience.

But it's especially the rediscovery of Ovid's work during the Renaissance that sees an increase in the number of readers of those letters: so their authenticity is questioned. However, the first epistolary French novel is *Astrée* by Honoré d'Urfé published at the beginning of the seventeenth century (between 1607 and 1627). But the epistolary novel becomes very popular only in the second half of the seventeenth century after the publication of *Lettres portugaises* (1669) by Guilleraiges (1669).

The novel is focused on Marianne's suffering: the girl, who is abandoned by a young and charming French officer, writes a series of letters in which she expresses her grief after her lover's escape. The technique is not innovative because it is inspired by Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. However, Marianne describes her interior struggle as being characterised by flux and reflux between reminiscences and dreams, judgements and emotions, questions and answers, decision and irresolution, regret and desperation.

And yet, *Lettres portugaises* represents the first example of an epistolary novel with one voice centred on feelings and it inaugurates a long tradition according to the Portuguese model. Among different writers using the epistolary technique, Laclos is the only one able to personalise the epistolary novel transforming it into a war bulletin in which characters confess to each other their battle plans and strategic lies. The Eighteenth century manifests the triumph and the end of the epistolary genre linked to the increasing presence of females: women become writers and readers<sup>7</sup>. The history of letter books during and after real letters, they qualified as authentic and enjoyed the same 'real' status as the true letters they resembled in format and content" (Conroy). It is said Ovid's *Heroides* is an Ovid's exercise when Latin author is studying for a law degree because legal rhetorical training in Rome includes the art of writing of imaginary speeches and epistle. Actually, no other classical work gives women characters such different and precise voices (Beebe, 1999). The letter is considered as the most prominent and often-used literary form which is reserved to female voice and experience. In other words, epistolary novel is a sub-literary genre to which women are condemned by the hierarchy of genre: "The epistolary novel became an important cultural vehicle for living women a voice, both as characters and as authors. Arguably, Western literature had never produced an array of female characters at once realistic and eloquent as it did starting with Mariana (the Portuguese nun) and continuing through Richardson's Pamela and Clarissa, Graffigny's Peruvian princess, Rousseau's Julie, and Laclos's Madame de Merteuil.

Considering the publication of *Lettres portugaises*, it is easy to recognize a significant change. In the Renaissance women can abashedly publish their own letter books and broach the same range of topics as men. In seventeenth century women's letters are rarely turned into letter books: they write anonymously and against their wills. In fact, authorship in the seventeenth century becomes a male-dominated institution, deeply connected, moreover, to political hierarchies (Altman, 1986: 45).

Also in this case authenticity is questioned. However, Beebe argues *Lettres portugaises* can be considered as genuine because no man could disorder his prose so beautifully. Successful epistolary novel corresponds to the spread of manual letters which give a model for different kinds of letters. So there are letters for those who have not taken leave of their parents before a trip, a letter from a father writing to his son who is in Paris, a letter to another son to make renounce to a duel and a letter from a mother to a daughter staying in a convent (Altman, 1992: 869).

If we analyse the importance attributed to the letter, we can affirm that Laclos' novel is inspired by Clarissa, considered as an epistolary masterpiece by the same Laclos. In fact, Richardson makes use of the letter as instrument for seduction. If Madame de Tourvel (*Les Liaisons dangereuses*) is

completely aware when she gives Valmont's plan away, Clarissa is stunned by Lovelace who seduces her before dying in a duel.

**In conclusion**, Laclos revolutionised how Rousseau used the letter. Rousseau maintains that epistolary exchange can constitute the ideal expression of a transparent communication, unlike Laclos who recounts symptoms of general perversion concerning aristocratic society, characterised by. So contemporary research considers literary libertinage as anticipation precursor to the French Revolution because it shows a doomed society.

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