



## The Historical Influence of the Epistolary Novel

Manzila Nuriddinovna Khabibova

Bukhara State Medical Institute, teacher of English language department

**Abstract:** This article focuses on the historical and social value of letters, 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. 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.

**Key words:** The epistolary novel, epistolary form, Letter fiction, authenticity, Letter literature, the letter form.

**Introduction.** 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. 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.

Until the recent revolutions in technology and the flow of information, the private letter was the most common and the most accessible form of written narrative. Other kinds of writing were largely reserved for those who were professionally occupied with regular publications. The writing of fiction takes training and talent, and the publication of it was and largely still is a matter of market demand and the approval of individual publishers and editors. The letter might appear trivial compared the print of the mass media or the works included in literary canons, but it is a form of writing that was much more accessible than the production of a newspaper editorial, far less a novel. Anyone who can write and read and afford the stamps can also write and mail a letter, and the writing of letters was an activity so universal that their authenticity are rarely questioned except in cases of known censorship. This contributed to the realism often perceived in epistolary fiction: the “artless” language made it easier to believe that these words had not been filtered by a narrator. This perceived authenticity likely contributed to the popularity of the letter as public reading after the Reformation, because it did not violate the Puritan scepticism towards the falsehood of fiction, and because the personal nature of many letters was such that it opened for the soul-searching and introspection highly valued in the Puritan theology. The Enlightenment and the spread of Puritanism in Britain created a demand for “truth” in art, for which the letter was a particularly well-suited form: there was a new demand for realism, and the simple, everyday language of the private letter was something that the reading public could recognise from their own lives – an important departure from the flowery tales of the

romances of the previous times. Letter literature was not only used for fiction and entertainment; as Ruth Perry notes, the letter form was “a perfect frame for travel reports or essays of any length and on any subject in this new age which so valued collecting information. (Indeed, the earliest newspapers were no more than batches of informative letters published together)”. Letters were also the substance of one of the peculiarities of the time, namely the letter manuals that constructed difficult situations and then offered solutions to them, instructing their readers in proper behaviour and correct moral response. Symptomatic of the developing novel was also a secondary mission of many letter manuals: they intentionally made use of emotional subtleties to train the “sensibilities” of their audience.

**Letter fiction** has been known since Antiquity, and examples certainly existed before the rise of the novel. The epistolary novel first appears alongside the publication of letters for informative and didactic purposes, and it would soon become a major figure in the literature of the Enlightenment. The novel of letters is an inescapable part of many national literary canons, which may be seen in the critics that consider Pamela to be the first true novel in Britain, the effect *Les Lettres Portugaises* had on the French writers of the seventeenth century, or the space that *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther* occupies in the German literary canon (not forgetting its part in fuelling Goethe's rise as a literary name). The novel of letters sits comfortably in many early turning points in the history of narrative fiction. It is impossible to ignore the presence of the letter novel in the history of western literature, although its contribution to the art of writing and to the development of the novel as a genre has traditionally been considered to be of little notice. It was long discarded as a “primitive” form of the novel after it went out of fashion in the early nineteenth century, but the twentieth century saw the form taken up and used in various ways as an inroad into the mind of the characters (see, for example, Altman). The last decades of the twentieth century in particular saw a number of female revisions of the genre.

**The Epistolary Novel in the Eighteenth Century.** 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. 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 (Burel)

**Origins of the Epistolary Novel.** 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 *Heroides* 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 Guilleragues (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. 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. 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. 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. Writing-letters manuals do not end in the eighteenth century.

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