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# From Epistolary Form to Embedded Narratological Device: Embedded Epistles in Austen and Scott

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From Epistolary Form to Embedded Narratological Device:  
Embedded Epistles in Austen and Scott

Tonja S. Vincent

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### From Epistolary Form to Embedded Narratological Device: Embedded Epistles in Austen and Scott

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The perception that the epistolary form was rejected by novelists during the Romantic Era has largely been accepted by scholars. However, in looking at the period's two most prominent authors, Walter Scott and Jane Austen, we see that the epistolary form remained vibrant long after its supposed demise. Throughout their careers, both Austen and Scott employed embedded letters as a tool to create authenticity. Both Austen and Scott use what I call "literary letters" to create a sense of realism in their novels that contributed to the rise of the novel.

Scholars often claim that Austen eschewed the epistolary form with *Lady Susan* and solidified her rejection by revising both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* from epistolary novels to third person narration. But a careful examination shows that Austen followed Richardson's tradition with *Lady Susan*, that *Sense and Sensibility* was not originally written in epistolary form, and that Austen retained sixteen critical letters in *Pride and Prejudice*. In fact, Darcy's five-page letter to Elizabeth signals Austen's continued reliance on the form as it completely changes the dynamics of the novel and transforms Elizabeth from a static protagonist to a dynamic heroine. Further indication that Austen found value in the form is seen in her later and often considered more mature novels, *Emma* and *Persuasion*, where she found innovative ways to turn the epistolary form into an embedded narratological device.

The value of letters in Scott's novels is often overlooked. For instance in *Heart of Midlothian*, Jeanie Down's claim that letters cannot feel is often cited as an argument that oral testimony is more valuable than written, yet it is a letter that ultimately gets her an audience with the queen. In fact, in both *Heart of Midlothian* and *Redgauntlet*, Scott explains the legal implications of the written testimony, its preference over oral testimony, and its power in persuading both in and out of court. And in *Guy Mannering*, Scott relies on embedded letters to develop important plot points including the identity of the lost heir, create believable characters, and explore the conflict between Scottish traditions and law. And although *Redgauntlet* is often considered the moment Scott eschewed the epistolary form, the way he employs letters to create the illusion that his characters are authentic historical figures helps him explore notions of national identity.

Keywords: Walter Scott, Jane Austen, epistolary, embedded letter, realism, *Persuasion*, *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Redgauntlet*, *Guy Mannering*, *Heart of Midlothian*

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From Epistolary Form to Embedded Narratological Device:  
Epistles in Austen and Scott

In June 1771, two months before Walter Scott was born, the *Monthly Review* stated that the epistolary novel was the “high mode of romance”; in 1797 the same periodical asserted that the form was “difficult to sustain”; and in 1824 it condemned Scott’s use of epistolary form in *Redgauntlet* (Rev. of *Fatal Compliance* 499; Rev. of *Marquis* 91; Rev. of *Redgauntlet* 198). The seeming demise of epistolary fiction suggested by these quotes is traced by James Raven, who has shown that, whereas in the 1780s epistolary novels represented roughly 54 percent of published novels in Britain, by 1799 they accounted for only 11 percent of the market (32). In fact, as Peter Garside has argued, by 1810 many publishers were actively discouraging epistolary novels because of the form’s ties to radical politics. In one case the publisher J. F. Hughes even revised Ann May Hamilton’s epistolary novel *The Irishman* into third-person chapters without her consent (49).

The trend-line suggested here has been largely accepted by scholars, who tend to cling to the notion that early-nineteenth-century British novelists almost uniformly rejected the epistolary form in favor of third-person narration. Consequently, despite the regular appearance of letters in the works of the age’s most celebrated novelist, Walter Scott, surprisingly little has been written about how or why he used epistolary form. In contrast, if we turn to scholarship on the writer who has since replaced Scott as the most popular Regency novelist, Jane Austen, we find extensive commentary on her use of the form, especially in her juvenilia and *Lady Susan*.

Many leading Romanticists, including Nicola Watson and Mary Favret, view the epistolary form in the early Romantic era’s novels as inherently politically charged. Building on ideas put forth by Marilyn Butler, Watson argues that the epistolary novel’s demise was not due

“to the increasing sophistication of the novel” but to the form’s “problematic political resonances . . . in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period” (17). And Favret asserts that, contrary to modern thinking, “epistolary fictions” often were about “court intrigue, international spying, social and political critique” (35). Favret also emphasizes that the decreased use of epistolary form in novels in the nineteenth century marked a political shift from the eighteenth century, when letters were viewed as private and feminine (25). Thomas Beebee similarly argues that only in recent eras have letters been seen as private, as during the early modern period they were considered public and equivalent to legal documents (13).

While many scholars have concluded that because of such cultural shifts the epistolary novel all but vanished around 1800, in this essay I will argue that we can see vestiges of it in two of the later Romantic period’s most important and influential novelists, Scott and Austen. Both writers used embedded epistles in their novels to establish identity, forward their plots, and validate claims. By understanding how these two novelists used epistolary chapters and embedded letters within their narratives to help the reader identify with the characters and understand the multiple subplots, we can see how the epistolary mode remained vibrant well after its supposed fall from favor.

My examination of embedded letters in the novels of Austen and Scott moves away from the prevalent notions that novelists’ letters were inherently tied to feminine domesticity or revolutionary ideals in the early nineteenth century. Instead, I argue Austen and Scott saw literary advantages of embedding letters within their narratives both to advance their plots and validate the claims of their characters. I suggest that Scott and Austen used letters within their novels less for ideological than narratological ends, perceiving the device as a tool that creates authenticity and establishes identity.

In what follows, I will first look at epistolary vestiges in Austen's early novels. Next, I will examine how Austen continued to use letters in her later novels, which were conceived, written, and published after the epistolary form's supposed demise. Turning to Scott, I will then consider his often overlooked reliance on embedded letters. Finally, I will review the similar ways in which these two important novelists included letters at critical plot points, thereby dispelling the conception that the epistolary form died during the Romantic period and reasserting the importance of epistolarity in the rise of the nineteenth-century novel.

#### Austen's Early Career: Epistolary Revisions

The inclination to minimize the extent to which Austen used epistolary devices can be found as early as 1821, when, in an important early appraisal of Austen's works, Bishop Richard Whately observed, "Though she has in a few places introduced letters with great effect, [she] has on the whole conducted her novels on the ordinary plan, describing, without scruple, private conversations and uncommunicated feelings" (362). Similar assumptions about Austen's uses of epistolary modes have carried over to our day. For instance, Susan Pepper Robbins claims that because *Lady Susan* began in letters but "concluded abruptly in a narrative voice, Austen abandons letters, a mode of narration which does not accommodate her changing view of the world" (216).

While more inclined to recognize epistolarity in Austen's works, other scholars think of her letters more in ideological or historical than strictly narratological terms. Watson, for instance, asserts that Austen "redirects" the letter, employing epistolarity as an "alienated artefact" with political resonance (20). She further claims that by using embedded letters Austen was expressing her anti-Jacobin leanings because the epistolary novel was prominently

associated with radical writers (3). Additionally, Beebee argues that Austen uses “letters in important ways but not as the carriers of the plot” (181), suggesting that epistolary form “haunts” Romantic writers of Austen’s generation like a “ghost” from their childhood (166-82). And, although Amy Wolf acknowledges that Austen used letters as more of a literary device than political tool, she never extends her argument beyond *Mansfield Park*.

As noted above, after reaching its zenith in the early 1770s, by the end of the eighteenth century the epistolary novel’s popularity was waning. It is important to remember, though, that Austen’s literary tastes were formed during the late vogue of epistolary novels. Because of this she would have been familiar with multiple ways in which the form could be used to tell a story. According to her brother Henry, Austen’s favorite novel into her later years was Samuel Richardson’s 1753 epistolary novel *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (33). As late as September 1813, Austen displayed her fondness for Richardson’s novel, as in a letter to her sister, Cassandra, she compares her own new cap to one worn by the novel’s heroine, Harriot Byron (229). A month later, Austen again likened herself to this character, saying that “like Harriot Byron I ask, what am I to do with my Gratitude[?]” (244). Tellingly, Austen made these complimentary nods to Richardson after her first two novels were published and while she was drafting *Mansfield Park*.

It is also important to note that, while all of Austen’s completed novels were published in the 1810s, many were begun two decades earlier, when epistolary fiction remained relatively common. To help better understand Austen’s literary timeline, the following table shows the dates (so far as can be determined) when each of Austen’s novels were drafted, revised, and published.

Novel	Earliest Known Draft	Pre-Publication Revisions	Publication
<i>Lady Susan</i>	Autumn (?) 1794		1871

<i>Sense and Sensibility</i>	Drafted as <i>Elinor and Marianne</i> (probably) 1795	Revised into <i>S&amp;S</i> November 1797 Winter 1810 accepted for publication	October 1811
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	Drafted as <i>First Impressions</i> October 1796 – August 1797	Revised into <i>P&amp;P</i> (Winter (?) 1811	January 1813
<i>Northanger Abbey</i>	Drafted as <i>Susan</i> 1798 – Summer 1799	Revised as <i>Susan</i> Winter 1802	December 1817
<i>Mansfield Park</i>	1811 – July (?) 1813		May 1814
<i>Emma</i>	21 January 1814 – 29 March 1815		December 1815
<i>Persuasion</i>	8 Aug 1815 – 18 July 1816	6 August 1816	December 1817

Source: Le Faye, Deirdre. "Chronology." *Jane Austen in Context*.

Notably, as indicated on the table, Austen wrote the early, epistolary draft of *First Impressions* (later renamed *Pride and Prejudice*) two years after completing the epistolary tale *Lady Susan* and a year after drafting *Elinor and Marianne* (the early version of what became *Sense and Sensibility*). Though critics often cite the eventual revision of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* into third-person narration as proof of her supposed abandonment of the epistolary form, the record is not nearly as straightforward as many have assumed. In an important essay, D.W. Harding suggests that Brian Southam and other Austen scholars have too hastily credited Austen's family's childhood memories of her originally drafting both of these novels in letters. As Harding points out, Southam's argument is to a certain degree contradictory, as, while he claimed that Austen had "abandoned letters before completing *Lady Susan*" (54) and that Elinor is "by temperament and circumstance . . . not an epistolary heroine" (56), he also asserted that *Sense and Sensibility* was initially written an epistolary novel. Looking more deeply, the notion that *Sense and Sensibility* was drafted as an epistolary novel is based mainly on conjecture. For instance, Southam argues that the unnamed character Elinor is said to be missing in Chapter 11 is possibly a deleted character from *Elinor and Marianne* (56). A simpler

answer, however, is that the unnamed character from her Norland days is Edward Ferrars or her deceased father.

Despite this, as Harding points out, there is a “stubborn persistence” to “the story that *Sense and Sensibility* was originally in the form of letters, though nobody can see who the correspondents could have been” (464). Although Elinor often reflects upon various letters, secret correspondence, and the implications of male-female correspondence, there are no residual letters which are crucial to understanding the plot or the characters, as there are in *Pride and Prejudice*. In short, critics should reconsider the now-common view that by reworking both of her first two novels from epistolary form to third-person narration Austen somehow signaled her disillusionment with the form.

That, even in her later years, Austen was far from dismissive of epistolary modes is further evidenced by the sixteen remaining letters in *Pride and Prejudice*. One of the structural ways Austen continued to rely on the epistolary form was in the introduction of characters. By using letters rather than narration to present her characters, Austen strengthens our connection to the individual characters by making them real and believable. The letter becomes a metaphorical handshake, where the reader can look into the heart of the character and come to understand him or her in unique way. In *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Marilyn Butler asserts that “Jane Austen [has a] way of presenting the individual . . . that distinguishes her from the nineteenth-century novelist” (296). And though Butler’s argument is largely focused on Austen’s treatment of the character’s “subjective consciousness” (296), this assertion could easily be extended to Austen’s innovative use of filtered free indirect discourse and use of letters. In free indirect discourse, the narrator mediates the character’s thoughts and feelings, allowing for the possibility

of readers being swayed by an unreliable narrator; however, when a character writes a letter, the reader is presented with unfiltered access to his or her views.

For instance, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Collins's introductory letter allows readers to experience his absurdities and complexities with a depth of understanding that goes beyond both Mr. Bennet's speculation that Collins is a "mixture of servility and self-importance" and Elizabeth's enquiry whether he is "sensible" (48). When Collins writes that he "cannot be otherwise than concerned at being the means of injuring [Mr. Bennet's] amiable daughters, and beg leave to apologise for it" (47), he reveals how ridiculous his ideas are and provides the reader with details about the entail which excludes Mr. Bennet's daughters from inheriting Longbourn. The letter exposes Collins's self-important attitudes as a clergyman. His desire to "heal the breach" in their family by extending an "olive branch" and offering himself as potential husband for one of Mr. Bennet's daughters (47) to compensate for their loss of the estate marks him as a vehicle for Austen to provide satirical social commentary. Further, Collins's hint that he might marry one of the Bennet sisters suggests an alternative to the potential poverty that awaits the sisters upon their father's demise. The letter also serves as a means of introducing another important character, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

In addition to using letters to introduce new characters, Austen also relies on them to expose the true character of her antagonists. For instance, by allowing the reader to see Lydia Bennet's letter written to her friend Mrs. Forster and later forwarded to Mr. Bennet, Austen uses her as a vintage epistolary stock character: the fallen woman. Lydia's behavior prior to writing her letter can be construed as that of a willful and rebellious child. But when she writes that her elopement is "a good joke" and she "can hardly write from laughing" (221), she reveals her disregard for the consequences of her actions and her complete unconcern for the social stigma

her elopement will create both for herself and her sisters. In having Lydia voice her own flouting of moral codes, Austen is able to teach moral lessons without being overtly didactic.

Austen also employs letters to forward her plot and validate crucial claims, most famously in Darcy's letter to Elizabeth, which is one of the strongest vestiges of epistolary fiction in Austen's canon. Rather than paraphrasing the letter in third-person narration, Austen includes the entire letter to reveal unknown facts about Wickham and shed new light on Darcy's motives for keeping Bingley in London. Additionally, Darcy's letter becomes the catalyst that initiates Elizabeth's growth and arguably changes the dynamics of the novel.

Since this letter comes at the climax of Volume Two, it is necessary to briefly review the events that lead to its delivery in order to fully grasp its rhetorical power. After learning from Colonel Fitzwilliam that Darcy "congratulated himself on having lately saved a friend from the inconveniences of a most imprudent marriage" (142), Elizabeth reviews Jane's letters. In the process, she realizes that, though "[t]hey contained no actual complaint, nor was there any revival of past occurrences, or any communication of present suffering . . . in almost every line of each, there was a want of that cheerfulness which had used to characterize her style" (144). It is at this moment, when Elizabeth is newly certain of Darcy's prideful meddling and acutely aware of her sister's pain, that he makes his marriage proposal.

Because I am focusing on Austen's continued reliance on the epistolary form, I will not discuss Darcy's proposal here, except to note that after Elizabeth's angry accusations, Darcy laments, "and this . . . is your opinion of me! This is the estimation in which you hold me!" (147). Prior to this, Darcy had no experience of loving anyone outside his immediate circle, so it mattered to him what Elizabeth thought of him. Neither Darcy's pride nor his heart could withstand the idea that the woman he loved should think he was a conniving meddler, someone

who purposely, merely for the sake of his own pride, ruined other people's lives. But Darcy is also aware that Elizabeth would be unlikely to listen to any explanation he might make. It is for this reason that a written explanation rather than an oral one becomes necessary—the letter acts a vehicle for Darcy to report information through an unfiltered narrative medium.

Understanding the complexities of Austen's choice to reveal Darcy's history in a letter requires an understanding of two things. The first is that a *literary* letter is different than a conventional letter, and the second is that Darcy writes what I am calling literary letters. Mary Favret has observed that conventional, or "familiar," letters serve "more as a mirror of the surrounding community than as a lens through which [we can] scrutinize the writer" (136). Building upon this point, we might conceive *literary* (as opposed to *familiar*) letters functioning as a conduit for understanding the writer's thoughts and motives. From this perspective, literary letters offer a glimpse into the writer's soul while simultaneously functioning as narratological device to reveal information and forward the plot.

Conventional letters contain scattered random accounts of the quotidian. If we look at one of Jane Austen's non-literary letters, we see a conglomeration of ideas and experiences. For instance, her letter to Cassandra dated Thursday, 1 September 1796, does not follow a narrative, but is instead a list of experiences and ideas, touching on everything from the events of a ball and the dress Austen wore to the mental state of a recently widowed relative (*Letters* 4-7). Scattered commentary like this in Austen's personal letters has led Deirdre Le Faye to comment that Austen was guilty of what in *Northanger Abbey* Henry Tilney calls a "general deficiency of subject" (37). As Favret notes, Austen's personal letters generally have the "tone of a village newspaper, rife with gossip and local color" (136). While types of conventional letters can be found in novels, they tend to distract from rather than forward the plot. In contrast, a literary

letter must have a direct connection to the story as well as a focused narratological function.

Further, the letter must convey a message, not merely to the characters, but more importantly, to the novel's reader.

A brief examination of an early scene in *Pride and Prejudice* shows that Darcy is an expert writer of literary letters. During the days of Jane's illness at Netherfield, the conversation turns to letter writing, allowing us to witness how seriously Darcy takes his letters. He mends his own pens, struggles to write long descriptive letters, and is accused by his friends of striving "too much for words of four syllables" (35). Darcy agrees with his friends that his own "stile of writing is very different from" that of Bingley, who writes "in the most careless way imaginable . . . [leaving] out half his words, and blot[ing] the rest" (35). And Bingley concedes that his "ideas flow so rapidly that [he has] not time to express them—by which means [his] letters sometimes convey no ideas at all to [his] correspondents" (35).

Darcy's famous epistolary apologia to Elizabeth is therefore, not surprisingly, a literary letter. His explanation of the events does not in any way indicate that he believes he acted wrongly either in preventing Bingley from marrying Jane or from refusing to give Wickham the living. He expresses no conflicted feelings or remorse for his actions, nor does he ask for forgiveness. But there is directness in his relation of events, a stark and compelling revelation of honesty and integrity, which results in the reader beginning to understand the complexity of Darcy's character. No longer merely a prideful aristocrat, we see him as a son, as a brother, even as a budding hero.

Darcy's letter is so critical to the plot that it is hard not to imagine it as a core structural remnant of Austen's epistolary first draft. The letter not only describes what has happened, but it also functions as a catalyst for the remainder of the plot. Darcy's letter persuades Elizabeth in

ways that his oral testimony never could have. Because Darcy's explanation is in writing, it gives Elizabeth a chance to reflect and analyze rather than react with emotion as she did after his marriage proposal. The narrator describes Darcy's letter as being "two sheets of letter paper, written quite through, in a very close hand.—The envelope itself was like-wise full" (150). This letter, running to six pages in the 2008 Oxford World's Classics edition, is given in its entirety without narrative interruption. Readers therefore experience Darcy's apology before receiving Elizabeth's insights and reactions, enabling them to see for the first time into Darcy's thoughts and come to know and understand him.

If, as I am arguing in this section, Austen continued to rely on epistolary modes, Darcy's letter can be seen as the pinnacle of her technique, as he at once introduces characters, validates claims, and forwards the plot. The letter is, in fact, so significant to the plot of the novel that Austen reinforced its importance by following it with a five-page rhetorical analysis, in which the narrator carefully dissects both Darcy's claims and Elizabeth's reflections. The letter forces Elizabeth to come to painful realizations about herself and her family. It changes Elizabeth's perception of the entire novel's events and redirects her actions. In short, Darcy's letter changes the core dynamics of the novel and sets in motion the modern claim that the novel has a fairy-tale-like quality. It transforms Elizabeth from a static protagonist to a dynamic heroine.

#### Austen's Later Novels: Epistles as a Narratological Device

While we might expect epistolary remnants in Austen's early novels which were drafted while the mode was still popular, it is less predictable in her later novels. Yet notably, Austen continued to rely on the epistolary form in her novels that were conceived, written, and published after the supposed demise of the epistolary novel. In fact, she employed letters in her later novels

in much the same way as she did in her early novels. She depended upon letters in *Mansfield Park* to teach moral lessons about Maria Bertram just as she had earlier used letters to teach moral lessons about Lydia Bennet. And in *Persuasion* she exposes Mr. Elliot's motives and allows Anne to see his true character via a letter. Just prior to reading Elliot's letter, Anne informs Mrs. Smith that she "consider[ed Mr. Elliot] with great respect" (158). But after reading Mr. Elliot's letter mocking her family, Anne realizes that he "is a disingenuous, artificial, worldly man, who has never had any better principle to guide him than selfishness" (168). Elliot's exposure through an epistle signals Austen's abiding confidence in letters to effectively develop and expose characters. But this is not the only indication that Austen found letters to be an effective narratological device. In fact, in *Emma* Austen deployed letters in a new and interesting way which created interesting plot twists and subplots.

Like *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma* is full of letters that the reader hears of but never sees, many of which reveal significant social attitudes. The importance of letters in *Emma* is accordingly often overlooked. In fact, understanding the novel's complexities requires rereading because the secret correspondence of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill is not revealed until the end of the novel. When one rereads *Emma*, it becomes apparent that the unseen letters are clues to the subplot of the secret engagement. From the beginning of the novel, the reader is told of the wonderful letters Frank and Jane write their respective families. These letters are never seen, but they are everywhere discussed and hailed as examples of what a letter should be. Miss Bates is full of praise for the length and "chequer-work" (123) of Jane's letters, and Mr. Woodhouse exclaims that Frank writes "a very proper, handsome letter" (77). A clue that these two gifted letter writers are carrying on a secret correspondence comes when Mrs. Elton creates a tremendous fuss because Jane emphatically insists on collecting her own mail. No one is at all

suspicious that this paragon of virtue would have a secret motive for her trips to the post office. As Frances Ferguson points out, Jane and Frank engage “in the kind of private correspondence that the epistolary novel so regularly features” (178). This private epistolary correspondence suggests that Austen continued to see value in the form to the point of developing new and interesting ways to use it as a narratological device.

Although letters are referred to throughout *Emma*, the reader only sees the text of two, both of which come at the end of the novel. For the first time in a novel where letters are everywhere heard of but never seen, the book’s final volume reproduces complete epistles. The first is from Mrs. Weston to Emma. The second, from Frank Churchill to Mrs. Weston, justifies his behavior and explains the circumstances of his secret engagement to Jane. Like Darcy’s letter, this second letter functions as a literary apologia, allowing us important new insights into Frank Churchill’s motives and behavior.

Beebee draws upon Churchill’s letter to support his claim that the epistolary form haunts Austen and other Romantic writers. He argues that Churchill’s letter “is typical of Austen’s use of epistolarity” in “that the letter does not advance the plot in the least. Instead, it becomes Frank Churchill’s longest exposition on his own character, and another object of analysis for Emma to misjudge and for Knightley to correct her on” (180). Such a reading fails to see that Frank’s letter not only reveals his character and exposes the subplot of the secret correspondence, but also acts as a mechanism for a role reversal between Emma and Mr. Knightley. The letter changes the dynamics of their relationship.

In a relationship that has thus far been largely pedagogical, with Mr. Knightley teaching and guiding Emma to have more consideration for others, there is a distinct shift during their conversation about Churchill’s letter. Having herself realized that Churchill “had been wrong,

yet he had been less wrong than she had supposed” (348), Emma is in a position to help Knightley move past his first impressions that Churchill “trifles here[,] ...knows he is wrong[,] ...[and is] playing a dangerous game” (349-50). Emma’s entreaty for Knightley to continue reading and “find how very much he suffers” (351) leads him to acknowledge that “there *is* feeling here” (351). This interaction marks a shift in their pedagogical relationship. The teacher has become the student. By Emma illuminating for Knightley the best qualities of Churchill and by her spoken “wish” that he would “think kinder” of his perceived rival (351), she teaches Knightley to set aside his jealousy and have greater charity.

Churchill’s letter, like Darcy’s, reveals important plot points and acts as a narrative catalyst. Unlike Darcy’s letter, however, it cannot be imagined as a vestige of the epistolary form, because Austen drafted *Emma* in third-person narration. Instead, the letter provides evidence of how Austen turned remnants of the eighteenth-century’s epistolary form into narratological devices and is an indication of her dependence on letters at important narrative moments. It can also be viewed as an indicator that Austen continued to believe allowing her characters to speak without narratorial interruption was a valuable tool for validating the claims of her characters.

For evidence that Austen retained her appreciation for epistolary devices, we need only remember her final completed novel, *Persuasion*. The surviving manuscript for *Persuasion* shows how Austen revised the ending, shifting from dialogue to Wentworth’s famous letter to Anne. Whereas the original ending, as Carol Shields asserts, lacks “tension and drama” (168), the revision gives Anne “an active rather than passive role” (169). Above all, what makes the revised ending of *Persuasion* work is Austen’s reliance on the epistolary form. Up to this point, Anne and Wentworth have communicated almost wholly with ineffective looks and glances. In

order to end their estrangement, they need words. It was Anne's words spoken to Captain Harville, but intended for Captain Wentworth as well, that convinced Wentworth there was hope. This hope was the catalyst that compelled him to write the most romantic letter in all of Austen's novels. Favret goes so far as to argue that this letter, and the moment building up to it, follows the lead of great Romantic lyric poets in its ability "to explode a form" (166). Wentworth's literary letter is Austen's most powerful lyrical moment.

#### Walter Scott: Epistles as a Narratological Device

Unlike the plethora of scholarship discussing embedded letters in Austen's narratives, relatively little has been written about why or how Walter Scott used epistolary form within his novels. This is surprising given Scott's role as a historian of the novel and master of its tools, and perhaps more surprising (for reasons I will explain) given his legal background as an advocate and judge. Scott studied law at the University of Edinburgh and continued to practice law even after becoming a best-selling author. Because of this, the letters in Scott's novels—often understood as forms of evidence—seem worthy of study, especially given how often embedded letters direct his plots. In fact, the plot resolution of Scott's second novel, *Guy Mannering*, is entirely dependent upon an embedded letter.

The tale of a young heir who was kidnapped after witnessing a murder, *Guy Mannering* explores the tension between the old-world superstition of Scottish gypsies and modern notions of law and inheritance. Although letters play an important role in the novel, their significance is often overlooked, perhaps due to a misunderstanding of their intended purpose. In *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850*, Beebee asserts that "letters are a function not a thing" and "a letter within a novel presupposes that the reader will be on the outside" (8). And in *The*

*Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness*, Joe Bray asserts that the epistolary novel allowed novelists to delve into the conflicted feelings of their characters. From Beebee's suggestion we can infer that, although embedded letters are literally addressed to characters within novels, the actual intended recipient of the letters is outside the novel. And from Bray's claim, we learn that letters allow a novel's reader to understand the letter writer in more complex ways.

By applying the ideas of Beebee and Bray to the embedded letters in *Guy Mannering*, we can gain significant insights into Scott's varied use of epistolary function. Mannering writes his letters to his friend Mervyn in a clear, straightforward manner. In contrast, Julia Mannering's letters to her friend Matilda are scattered, random, and steeped in the picturesque.

Unquestionably, the letters provide a strong understanding of each writer. Guy Mannering's feelings are clear: he feels remorse for challenging a junior officer to a duel, believes that he killed the junior officer, and lives with the weight of that guilt. In contrast, Julia's emotions are complex and conflicted, as she struggles to decide whether she should tell her father the truth or remain loyal to her mother's wishes. Mannering's letters give a sense of a military campaign, and Julia's feel torn from the Radcliffean Gothic.

For instance, the following letter written by Colonel Mannering to Mervyn explains the circumstances of his duel with Brown and provides interesting insights to Mannering's character:

I have absolutely forgot the proximate cause of quarrel, but it was some trifle which occurred at the card-table, which occasioned high words and a challenge. We met in the morning beyond the walls and esplanade of the fortress which I then commanded, on the frontiers of the settlement. This was arranged for Brown's safety had he escaped. I almost wish he had, though at my own expense; but he fell by the first fire. We strove to assist

him, but some of these *Looties*, a species of native banditti, who are always on the watch for prey, poured upon us. (71)

While Mannering does indicate reasonable emotional responses and expresses sincere regret about this tragic event, he does not become overly dramatic as he goes on to explain how Brown was abducted by the *Looties* and was believed to be dead. He also reveals that, much to his remorse, the true reason he sought the duel was because he believed Brown was spending too much time with his wife.

In contrast, Julia's letters to her friend are overtly dramatic. She begins one letter by writing:

Alas! My dearest Matilda, what a tale is mine to tell! Misfortune from the cradle set her seal upon your unhappy friend. That we should be severed for so slight a cause—ungrammatical phrase in my Italian exercise, and three false notes in one of Paesiello's sonatas! But it is part of my father's character—of whom it is impossible to say, whether I love, admire, or fear him the most. His success in life and in war—his habit of making every obstacle yield before the energy of his exertions, even where they seem unsurmountable. (91)

These letters give vastly diverse images of Colonel Mannering. His daughter thinks of him in the light of a god who controls the universe, whereas he acknowledges his weaknesses and inability to influence outcomes. And Julia's letter reveals a young woman who turns simple events into dramatic tragedies.

Like the aforementioned letters in Austen's novels, both Colonel Mannering's and Julia's letters give insights into the character without the biased filter of a narrator and provide critical plot points using narratological devices of epistolary fiction. Like Darcy, Colonel Mannering and

Julia write *literary* letters. Comprising the greater part of chapters 12 through 21, their letters function, as Beebee says of epistolary-novel letters in general, “simultaneously as a narration of what has happened and an instrument to make things happen” (15). They effectively create a bridge between the opening chapters and intervening seventeen years, introduce new and important characters, establish significant plot points, and catalyze future action.

Through Mannering’s letters we learn he became a colonel, served in India, married, had a daughter, and (as noted above) fought a duel with one of his junior officers, Vanbeest Brown, whom Mannering believed to have had an inappropriate relationship with his wife. Mannering’s letters also reveal his emotional trauma following the duel and the belief that Brown died from the injuries sustained in it. The letters illustrate Mannering’s internal guilt over the death of his wife, who succumbed to grief after the duel. His correspondent, Mervyn, reveals Julia’s mysterious behavior, which convinces Mannering that she should be brought to Scotland.

Through Julia’s letters we learn that Brown was, in fact, smitten with her rather than her mother. We also come to see that she loves her father but feels he is oppressive, and, crucially that Brown in fact survived the duel and followed Julia to England and then Scotland. Julia’s letters also significantly disclose Brown’s history: he was born in Scotland, believed himself to be an orphan, was adopted by a man in the shipping business, and was educated as a clerk before joining the military in India. Quite clearly, then, these epistles function as revelatory narration to propel the plot.

The letters also work together to become puzzle pieces for their true intended recipients—the readers of Scott’s novel. Matilda never makes an appearance in the novel, as she is merely the unseen recipient of Julia’s letters, and Mervyn likewise only enters the plot as Mannering’s correspondent. But because the novel’s reader sees both the letters between

Mannerling and Mervyn and the letters written by Julia to Matilda, the reader can put the puzzle pieces of the plot together and realize what none of the characters have understood—namely, that Brown is the missing heir of Ellangowan

#### Walter Scott: Epistles as Evidence

Having established how Scott, like Austen before him, used embedded letters to reveal character and advance plot, I will conclude this essay by turning to the most significant way in which Scott used epistles in *Guy Mannering*, specifically to validate claims and offer legal proof of identity and ownership of property. To appreciate this technique, we must rid ourselves of the modern conception that letters are an inherently *private* form of communication, instead seeing them in their traditional light as a fundamentally *public* mode of discourse. As Beebee suggests, “in the early modern period there was little difference between the letter and the official document” (12). It therefore follows that, as a trained lawyer, Scott would have identified letters as analogous to legal briefs.

In fact, in *The Heart of Midlothian*, Scott clarifies the importance of written testimonies in the Scottish Courts by explaining that the testimony of a suspected person is recorded and becomes “*adminicles* of testimony” (223). These *adminicles* are used to “corroborate what is considered as legal and proper evidence” and therefore “become the means of condemning the accused, as it were, out of their own mouths” (221-23). In Scott’s world, written evidence could be used in a court whereas oral reports were considered hearsay and therefore inadmissible. Although it may seem that *Heart of Midlothian* downplays the power of written testimony when the heroine, Jeannie Deans, declares that “writing winna do it – a letter canna look, and pray, and beg, and beseech, as the human voice can do to the human heart” (267), it is not Jeannie’s oral

request alone that saves her sister. What ultimately gains Jeannie the opportunity to plea for her sister is, in fact, a letter. When Jeannie visits the Duke of Argyle to request an audience with the queen, he at first denies her petition (349). It is only after Jeannie shows him a letter written as if from the grave by his grandfather instructing those “in the house of Argyle . . . to protect and assist . . . Benjamin Butler, and his friends or family” (350) that he agrees to expend his political capital to arrange for Jeannie to see the queen.

Additional indications of Scott’s use of letters as legal briefs are found in *Redgauntlet*, which was published in 1824. The first volume of this novel is entirely in letters. Although the narrator eschews the epistolary form at the beginning of the second volume, stating that letters often “hang as a dead weight on the progress of the narrative” (141), letters and journal entries continue to factor significantly into the remainder of the tale. In fact, twenty pages into the second volume, one of the protagonists, Darsie Latimer, begins a journal which continues for sixty-five pages in the 2011 Oxford World Classics edition. Straddling the boundary between diary and letter, this journal is eventually placed in an envelope and addressed to Alan Fairford, the novel’s other protagonist.

It bears noting that journals and diaries were traditionally included alongside letters in epistolary novels. In fact, a large portion of the second volume of Richardson’s *Pamela* was presented in diary form because Pamela was uncertain if her letters would reach her mother after being kidnapped. Scott follows this tradition after Latimer’s kidnapping, with his narrator noting that “the following Address is written on the inside of the envelope which contained the Journal” (161). The inscription that follows reads like a legal request:

INTO what hands soever these leaves may fall, they will instruct him, during a certain time at least, in the history of the life of an unfortunate young man, who in the heart of a

free country, and without any crime being laid to his charge, has been, and is, subjected to a course of unlawful and violent restraint. He who opens this letter is therefore conjured to apply to the nearest magistrate, and, following such indications as the papers may afford, to exert himself for the relief of one, who, while he possesses every claim to assistance which oppressed innocence can give, has, at the same time, both the inclination and the means of being grateful to his deliverers. (161)

Like Pamela's diary entries over eight decades earlier, Latimer's journal is wholly at home in an epistolary novel and becomes even more so when it is subsequently enclosed in an envelope and addressed to its intended readers. Adding even more complexity to Scott's introduction of Latimer's journal, the account ultimately functions as a legal witness against his oppressors.

Elsewhere in *Redgauntlet*, we again see this technique when Fairford argues his first court case using letters as evidence (150-51). The case has been stuck in the courts for years, but the narrative indicates that Fairford is convincing the court of the validity of his client's case based on epistolary evidence. Fairford uses the terms "letter" and "brief" interchangeably, suggesting that for Scott the terms were equivalent to act as modes of validating claims. It further indicates that letters were legal evidence in Scottish courts.

These passages in *Redgauntlet* are highly reminiscent of ones in *Guy Mannering*. As I detailed above, a particularly important scene in the novel comes when Mannering, under the belief that his wife was having a chaste but inappropriate relationship with Brown, entered into a duel with his supposed rival in which, by initial appearances, seems to have Brown died. Late in the novel, after Mannering has learned that Brown is not only alive but is in reality Harry Bertram, the lost heir, Mannering confronts his daughter and reveals that he knows about her clandestine meetings with Bertram and their secret correspondence. In an important 1985 essay

on the social codes of epistolary fiction, Bernard Duyfhuizen explains the transgressive nature of secretive correspondence in past societies. Viewed from this perspective, Mannering's response to Julia's secret correspondence with young Bertram shows that he has the same concerns about social transgression which Elinor expresses in *Sense and Sensibility* and Churchill's letter addresses in *Emma*.

Nevertheless, when Julia shows Colonel Mannering letters from her mother which encourage Julia to stay in contact with Bertram, Mannering believes the evidence provided in Julia's letters from her mother and concedes that Julia has "not disobeyed, one parent" (317), indicating his acknowledgement that Mrs. Mannering endorsed Bertram's suit and encouraged Julia to accept it. Mannering, however, insists that now that Brown is suspected to be the Laird of Ellangowan, everything must be circumspect, and there can be no more illicit interaction between the lovers.

This is far from the only time the letters in *Guy Mannering* operate as a legal or quasi-legal mode of validating claims, as this device is crucial in the central plotline of the lost heir and Brown's eventual recognition as Laird of Ellangowan. The novel begins with Mannering, newly graduated from Oxford, getting lost while on a walking tour of Scotland. He takes refuge at Ellangowan on the night of the birth of the old laird's first child. While waiting for the birth, Meg Merrilies, a gypsy sybil, arrives with the intention of revealing the infant's destiny. Ellangowan pompously informs her that he doesn't need her to do that because Mannering, "a student from Oxford[,] . . . knows much better than you how to spae [predict] his fortune—he does it by the stars" (15). Mannering, "entering into the simple humour" (15), states that he "will calculate [the infant's] nativity according to the rule of the Triplicities" (16). The skepticism of the resident priest causes Mannering to humorously insist on the reliability and truth of the

procedure, even though he admits to himself that it is an imprecise science. Though his training in it is half forgotten, he is confident that he remembers enough from his astrological studies to construct “a scheme of nativity” (19). The narrator asserts that this type of astrological reading was very popular at the time, and today the *OED* continues to cite *Guy Mannering* as an example of the archaic use of “nativity” to denote the astrological “time or place of birth.” In this sense, “nativity” could be seen as a birth certificate for the child, that is, legal proof of who he is as well as of his time and place of birth.

When Mannering makes the calculations, he is astonished and dismayed to discover that the child will be threatened with captivity or death in his fifth, tenth, and twenty-first years (20). Mannering is also struck by a parallel reading of the stars he performed on behalf of his fiancée, which predicted she would face peril in the year coinciding with the child’s twenty-first year. Convinced that he has misread the stars, Mannering, “like Prospero,” vows to meddle no more and hesitates to inform Ellangowan of the reading results (21). In the end, he records his predictions and seals the document before delivering it to Ellangowan with the injunction that the seal not be broken until after the child’s fifth birthday. Although the superstitious mother wishes to break the seal and satisfy her curiosity, the laird insists that Mannering’s wishes be honored. She therefore makes “a small velvet bag for the scheme of nativity” and conceals the document “within two slips of parchment, which she sewed around to prevent its being chafed. The whole was then put into the velvet bag ... and hung as a charm round the neck of the infant” (30-31).

Of course, Mannering’s predictions do indeed come true. On his fifth birthday, the child is offered a horse ride from the area’s excise man. Later that evening, the excise agent’s body is found at the base of a cliff. No trace can be found of the child, and he is feared to be dead as well. The shock sends his mother into premature labor, and she dies after giving birth to a

daughter. Because it is unknown whether the smugglers or the gypsies killed the excise agent, both groups, who had previously been allowed on the estate, are forced from Ellangowan. As the banished gypsies leave, Meg pronounces a curse on Ellangowan. Seventeen years later, when the child returns, his memories are indistinct, and he does not know he is Harry Bertram, the new Laird of Ellangowan.

Ironically, Bertram's true identity is first realized by the banished gypsies, and they set events in motion to restore him to his proper place. However, although he is the "very image of old Ellangowan" (304) and his friends and sister come to recognize him as the lost heir, his enemies claim that he is merely the "natural," or illegitimate, son of the late laird (345) and that therefore he has no legal claim to the property. Thus, it necessarily becomes a matter of law to establish Brown legally as Harry Bertram, Laird of Ellangowan. As Scott, the trained lawyer, has his narrator explain, viable proof of birth for inheritance "is held in absolute indifference nowhere except in a novel" (317). As Pleydell, the Bertram family lawyer, asserts: "Mr. Bertram's recollections are his own recollections merely, and therefore not evidence in his own favor; .... I can only say what every one who knew the late Ellangowan will readily agree in, that this gentleman is his very picture—But that will not make him Ellangowan's [legitimate] son and give him the estate" (320). Without legally admissible evidence, the restoration of property seems hopeless until the chance recollection of a gypsy that his aunt Meg, now deceased, had told him that "Harry Bertram carried that around his neck which would ascertain his birth... a spell...an Oxford scholar had made for him, and she had possessed the smugglers with an opinion, that to deprive him of it would occasion the loss of the vessel" (347). At this point Bertram removes "a small velvet bag" from his neck and asserts that "he had worn it from his earliest infancy" (347-48). When the bag is opened, Mannering recognizes the scheme of

nativity, and Pleydell declares that it legal proof of birth. Ultimately, then, Bertram's necessary proof of identity comes from a figuratively and literally embedded epistle.

## Conclusion

As I have shown throughout this essay, both Austen and Scott saw the epistolary form as a narratological device which could realistically portray characters, validate claims, and create compelling plot points. They therefore continued to integrate letters within their novels despite seemingly adverse critical and popular trends. In 1824, as we will recall, the *Monthly Review* condemned Scott's use of the epistolary form in *Redgauntlet*, complaining that they "were struck with dismay to observe that it was entirely occupied with letters, and that the correspondence was carried on solely between two young gentlemen." The periodical went on to lament that Scott "has also given us a *Journal*, extending through the greater part of the second volume. The plot which this complicated machinery is intended to unravel seems scarcely worthy of so many ingenious devices" (198-201). This review ultimately predicts that Scott's use of epistolary and other first-person modes will make it difficult for readers to understand the plot, arguing that Scott has failed where Richardson succeeded (199).

Interestingly, however, just over one hundred and fifty years later, the verdict on Scott's use of epistolary devices seems to have changed. In the introduction to the 1985 Oxford World Classics edition of *Redgauntlet*, Kathryn Sutherland asserts that the tale's epistolary form enables Scott to "[establish] a world in which reality is a matter of differing perception and in which all its major characters have their perceptions authorized by their powers as story-tellers" (xiv). Sutherland clearly sees what some of Scott's contemporaries could not and what too many modern scholars often overlook: that as late as 1824, the Romantic period's bestselling novelist

employed letters to create a perception that his characters were real and that his tales were authentic historical accounts.

In this light, Scott's letters play a crucial role in his famous projects of establishing a new mode of the realist novel and thereby exploring notions of national identity. Scott's desire to create the illusion that the tale of *Redgauntlet* was a historical event is made clear in the novel's final chapter. Returning to the epistolary form with a letter from "Dr. Dryasdust" to "the Author of Waverley," Scott touches on the afterlives of the novel's characters and in so doing frames the characters as historical people and further creates the illusion that the tale's events actually happened.

Austen also sought to create a similar sense of realism through the epistolary form. Although she was not striving to create a historical understanding or a sense of national identity, Austen helped change perceptions that the novel was an inferior form of literature by employing heightened modes of social realism. In showing us her characters' written communications, she opened the window to their souls, making them seem real and relatable. Everyone knows a devious Lady Susan, a prosing Mr. Collins, a villainous Mr. Elliot, and perhaps even heroes like Mr. Darcy and Captain Wentworth. Although published posthumously, Austen's famous disquisition on the novel in *Northanger Abbey* now echoes throughout her works. Pushing back against the hyperbole of romance and gothic tales, Austen exemplified her own standards when she asserted that novels are where "some of the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (24).

Ultimately, then, considering the enormous roles Walter Scott and Jane Austen played in the amelioration of the novel, it is essential that we understand their narrative techniques, particularly where they employ similar devices. By better appreciating their reliance upon epistolary modes, we are forced to reevaluate the role literary letters played in the novel's early-nineteenth-century development. Both Scott and Austen displayed an authorial awareness of literary devices that helped them create interesting and compelling narratives that continue to find a large audience today. By looking at how both Austen and Scott relied on features of the epistolary form within their novels, we can see that this mode remained vibrant long after its supposed fall from favor. In short, Scott and Austen not only honored their literary predecessors but laid a foundation for Victorian writers like Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens, who carried on the tradition of embedding epistolary devices within third-person narration.

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