The letter as object

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As these examples demonstrate, letter states are chiefly categorised by using the following criteria:

The *contents* of the letter (nos. 1, 8, 9, and 10). Here the existence of a holograph letter greatly aids identification of other states, such as drafts, revision, and abstracts in other formats, but, as Ussher's letter to Rothe demonstrates, it is also possible to identify drafts in the absence of holographs. In this case the subject matter indicates that the letter is part of a known ongoing communication process. As Vossius's letter to Ussher of 1/11 January 1632 shows, another useful indicator of draft status is the frequency of deletions in the exemplar.

The *handwriting* of the letter and signature (nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6). To distinguish whether an item was written/copied by its author, a scribe, or a recipient, it is necessary to compare the handwriting of the letter with exemplars from both sender and recipient in order to clarify correct identification.

The *format* of the letter (no. 7). Early modern letters exist in both manuscript and/or printed form. In the early modern period it was relatively common to destroy manuscript holographs once they had been published in print.

The *language* of the letter (no. 11).

3 The Letter as Object

Signed, Sealed, and Undelivered (Rebekah Ahrendt, Nadine Akkerman, Jana Dambrogio, Daniel Starza Smith, and David van der Linden)

Letters do not simply bear the words of authors to their recipients, they can also be interpreted as carefully crafted composites of substrate and writing substance. The reading of a letter begins long before it is opened, as its material features communicate a series of silent cultural assumptions. In the last decade and a half, scholars have increasingly turned their focus to the material features of letters, particularly in the early modern period.[28] Digital resources for the study of letter collections have also begun to factor materiality into their research remits, raising

[28] See most notably Sara Jayne Steen, 'Reading Beyond the Words: Material Letters and the Process of the Interpretation', *Quidditas* 22 (2001): 55–69; Alan Stewart and Heather Wolfe, *Letterwriting in Renaissance England* (Washington, DC: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 2004); Colette Sirat, *Writing as Handwork: A History of Handwriting in Mediterranean and Western Culture*, ed. Lenn Schramm (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006); Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); James Daybell, 'Material Meanings and the Social Signs of Manuscript Letters in Early Modern England', *Literature Compass* 6:3 (2009): 649–67, see https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2009.00629.x; Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England*; Harry Newman, '"A seale of Virgin waxe at hand/Without impression there doeth stand": Hymenal Seals in English Renaissance Literature', in James Daybell and Andrew Gordon, eds., 'New Directions in the Study of Early Modern Correspondence', special issue of *Lives and Letters* 4:1 (2012): 94–113; Heather Wolfe, '"Neatly Sealed, with Silk, and Spanish Wax or Otherwise": The Practice of Letter-Locking with Silk Floss in Early Modern England', in Susan P. Cerasano and Steven W. May, eds., *In the Prayse of Writing* (London: British Library, 2012), 169–89. Before this more recent interest, Pierre Chaplais, *English Royal Documents: King John–Henry IV, 1199–1461* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pursued similar questions.

new possibilities for archival access and data-driven analysis of epistolary materiality.[29] This section summarizes the essential concerns of the study of letters as objects, and explains how two current interrelated projects – *Signed, Sealed, and Undelivered* (*brienne.org*) and *Letterlocking* (*letterlocking.org*) – are seeking to theorize them in new ways and implement tools for their further study.

For much of history, a letter could not simply be rushed off: even a short, informal note would require some degree of planning and preparation. As objects, letters should be considered in relation to a series of other objects on a letter-writer's desk, which might include an inkwell, standish (inkstand), candle, feather quill (carved with a pen-knife) or pen, seal matrix, dust-box, blotter, scissors, whetstones, wax jack, and rulers.

The letter proper begins with a substrate: paper, papyrus, and parchment are most familiar to us now, but in other traditions clay, wax tablets, bark, etc. were also used. Scholars of material letters ask how thick this substrate is, whether (if it is paper) it is hand-made, if its chain and wire lines (also known as laid lines) are visible, and if its watermark enables us to identify its source. All these details enable us to understand the document's make-up. We also need to ask if it has survived largely intact or whether damage (such as mould and ink corrosion) or interventions over the years might have destroyed or altered some of its material evidence. Before writing, the substrate may need to be trimmed for neatness, prepared to ensure it did not absorb too much ink, then folded into a suitable shape for writing, often a bifolium; a crease running parallel to one edge can serve as a writing margin.

Early modern letter-writers usually made their own ink, and the quality of ink can drastically affect a letter's afterlife – too much acidity, and it will eventually eat through the paper. Invisible inks can more subtly alter the physical state of the paper, if made visible by the recipient or interceptor: chemicals need a reagent such as water, which might leave the paper crinkled; fluids such as milk or the juice of citrus fruit need the heat of a flame to oxidize, which might leave the paper scorched. Many letters may survive with hidden writing which has never been made visible.

Once written, letters' contents have their own materiality, for example, where signatures or marginalia are placed, if cross-writing is employed, or how much blank space is left around the writing.[30] Letter-writers may employ cryptology – which can take the form of cryptography (ciphers) or steganography (codes, riddles, invisible inks) – to disguise their message, or to embed a hidden communica-

[29] Daniel Starza Smith, 'The Material Features of Early Modern Letters: A Reader's Guide', in Alison Wiggins, ed., *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence c. 1550–1608* (2013). See http://www.bessofhardwick.org/background.jsp?id=143, accessed 20/03/2019.

[30] Jonathan Gibson, 'Significant Space in Manuscript Letters', *The Seventeenth Century* 12:1 (1997): 1–9, see https://doi.org/10.1080/0268117X.1997.10555420; Anna Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Giora Sternberg, 'Epistolary Ceremonial: Corresponding Status at the Time of Louis XIV', *Past and Present* 204:1 (2009): 33–88, see https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtp018.

tion within the overt one. These, too, have their own material conventions and histories. Other material features sometimes found on historical correspondence include postal marks, seals, ribbons, and sealing wax. The borders and edges of a writing substrate can sometimes be decorated: letters announcing a death, or written during a period of mourning, might be edged in black; gilt edging is common; blue- and green-edged letters also exist. Edging is a feature which can easily be overlooked on a digital surrogate.

Early modern letters were composed in an age before the mass-produced gummed envelope had been invented. This usually meant that, after writing, the writing surface itself had to be folded up to become its own sending device. This process is called 'letterlocking', 'the act of manipulating and securing an epistolary writing substrate (such as papyrus, parchment, or paper) to function as its own envelope.[31] Letterlocking is a subcategory of a 10,000-year information security tradition, pertaining to epistolary materials, and its study encompasses the materially engineered security and privacy of letters, both as a technology and a historically evolving tradition. Letterlocking demonstrates that letters were for centuries folded and otherwise manipulated to become their own envelopes, and that this process has a rich history. Archival letters can today seem like flat, fossilized, two-dimensional artefacts, but letterlocking reminds us that they were once dynamic, three-dimensional objects which travelled through space and worked as engineered objects, often including sophisticated anti-tamper mechanisms.

The material features of letters – in particular the letterlocking aspects – have hitherto rarely been captured in epistolary databases, which have largely focused on standard content-related metadata such as date, place, author/sender, and keywords. One notable exception is *Bess of Hardwick's Letters*, for which Wiggins et al. recorded a number of material features in the metadata, making this 234-item corpus searchable by fifteen standards, including 'Letters with seals', 'Letters with significant space', 'Endorsements', 'Subscriptions', and 'Sewn'.[32] These metadata capture standards usefully group letters that exhibit common physical features, enabling them to be studied and compared more easily.

The main repository which records materiality among its metadata is the epistolary union catalogue EMLO, which enables contributors to note postage marks, endorsements, enclosures (both letters with enclosures and letters that are enclosures), seals, paper type, paper size, and handling instructions.[33] Although EMLO

[31] Jana Dambrogio, 'Historic Letterlocking: The Art and Security of Letter Writing', *Book Arts/Arts du Livre Canada* 5:2 (2014): 21–3. Letterlocking videos illustrate how these letters were once folded and secured shut, and other resources including vector diagrams and a monograph are in preparation for publication. See the 'Letterlocking' channels on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/c/Letterlocking) and Vimeo (https://vimeo.com/letterlocking), both accessed 20/03/2019. The field of letterlocking was initially developed by Dambrogio, and first introduced at the annual conference of the American Institute for Conservation and Historic and Artistic Works (AIC), Minneapolis, MN, 2005.

[32] See https://www.bessofhardwick.org/filter.jsp?filter=1, accessed 20/03/2019.

[33] See http://emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/advanced, accessed 20/03/2019.

already allows for a rich variety of data to be captured, the incorporation into EMLO of the Brienne Collection, an extremely well-preserved archive of 2,600 undelivered letters sent from all around late seventeenth-century Europe,[34] has prompted the development of new metadata standards to record different kinds of evidence, both material and ephemeral.[35]

From a material standpoint, the Brienne Collection presents a series of opportunities and challenges related to the state in which the letters have been preserved: all are archived in their folded state, and some 600 of them have never been opened (even by their original addressee). These features have inspired two new metadata fields capturing (1) whether letters are still unopened and (2) if they have been stored folded. The *Signed, Sealed, and Undelivered* project is also developing metadata standards which more overtly define and capture evidence of letterlocking. In particular we seek to record letterlocking *formats* and *categories*. Formats refer to the shape the letter takes when folded into a packet (e.g. 3 = triangle, 4 = quadrilateral, 5 = pentagon). Categories are distinguished by the number and combination of steps required to make a packet, including (for example) folds, slits, and locks. The *Unlocking History* research team, led by Dambrogio and Smith, is working to refine format and category information into metadata standards that can be globally adopted.[36] The material features of the letterlocking data – and thus, by extension, of the letters – open up new and exciting avenues for scientific analysis, allowing scholars to relate letters' content to their material features, and to explore technological trends and innovation across centuries, borders, and cultures.

From a more immaterial perspective, but still pertaining to letters as objects, the Brienne letters challenge commonly accepted notions about the nature of correspondence routes which may necessitate further revision of EMLO's metadata fields. The letter as an object is the product not just of one 'author', but of an entire system. EMLO, like most correspondence databases, had operated on the assumption that the *origin* of a letter is one fixed geographical location where it was physically written, while the *destination* is the location of the addressee. But what if there are multiple hands writing from various locations to a destination that is never achieved? Many of the Brienne letters came to The Hague, after all, not according to the will of their senders but by accident or omission: a good number of the letters now in 'La Haye en Hollande' were intended for 'La Haye en Touraine', a small village in France.

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[34] Rebekah Ahrendt and David van der Linden, 'The Postmasters' Piggy Bank: Experiencing the Accidental Archive', *French Historical Studies* 40:2 (2017): 189–213, see https://doi.org/10.1215/00161071-3761583.

[35] Rebekah Ahrendt, Nadine Akkerman, Jana Dambrogio, Daniel Starza Smith, and David van der Linden, eds., 'The Brienne Collection', in *Early Modern Letters Online*, Cultures of Knowledge, http://emlo-portal.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections/?catalogue=brienne-collection, accessed 20/03/2019.

[36] Two forthcoming publications co-edited by Dambrogio and Smith will set out the terms of letterlocking in more detail: a monograph, *Letterlocking*, and the *Dictionary of Letterlocking* (DoLL).

Furthermore, The Hague was not the only place where these letters stopped along their originally intended routes; many bear the marks of other post offices along the way, sometimes including the dates on which they were there. In a sense, *all* of the letters in the Brienne Collection arrived at the 'wrong' destination, whether due to incomplete or indecipherable addresses or to the absence, death, or non-acceptance of their addressees. The reasons for non-delivery were carefully recorded by the post office in The Hague on nearly every letter; notes such as 'in England', 'departed', 'refused', attest to the many hands and voices implicated in the traffic of correspondence, which deserve themselves to be acknowledged and recorded. Thus, *Signed, Sealed, and Undelivered* and EMLO have developed metadata fields to record the address as intended, the route taken by the letter across time and space (including special handling instructions), and the reasons why it was never delivered.

4 The Letter as Genre – Early Modern Letter Genres (1500–1800): Definitions, Conceptualizations, Metadata

Marie Isabel Matthews-Schlinzig

Descriptive metadata records on letters should ideally also include information on epistolary subgenre/s. In order to identify an appropriate way of recording this information, it is necessary to reflect on four aspects: (1) how epistolary subgenres are conceptualized; (2) how they were defined in the past; (3) how they are studied in the present; and (4) how the current state of knowledge on letter genres can best be integrated into data sets.

4.1 Conceptualizing Letter Genres

Letter genres (i.e. epistolary subgenres)[37] are commonly conceptualized in relation to a particularly distinct feature: this includes (1) a function, theme, or purpose (e.g. farewell letter, love letter, blackmail letter); (2) institutional or social contexts (e.g. chancery letter, children's letter); (3) a particular linguistic quality, style, and/or textual form (e.g. gallant letter, epistolary treatise); or (4) prominent material qualities (e.g. illustrated letter). Some letter genres are characterized by a combination of such defining features – think, for instance, of the use of black wax to seal letters of mourning.

Letter genres emerge from and develop through epistolary cultures and practices, and in particular due to specific social, educational, economic, and institu-

[37] The terms 'epistolary subgenres' and 'letter genres' are used here interchangeably to designate different types of primarily non-fictional letter writing, including published correspondence.