

# WRITING THE FEMALE VOICE

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*Essays on Epistolary Literature*

*Edited by* ELIZABETH C. GOLDSMITH

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## *Introduction*



THE LITERARY history of women's epistolary writing is a fascinating survey of cultural views of both the female gender and the letter genre. Since the sixteenth century, when the familiar letter was first thought of as a literary form, male commentators have noted that the epistolary genre seemed particularly suited to the female voice. Newly educated women could easily learn to write letters, and, as epistolary theory became more adapted to worldly culture, women's letters began to be considered the best models of the genre. But the new admiration for a "natural" feminine style clashed with old arguments about female virtue: to be virtuous was to be modest, self-effacing, above all not talked about, and most certainly not published.<sup>1</sup> To publish a woman's letters, even if the purpose of publication was to praise female epistolary style, was in some way to violate her personal integrity. Published epistolary writing by women was therefore rarely signed, and was often in fact produced by male writers "imitating" the way women wrote. Publishers, though, were quick to recognize the easy marketability of a woman's private correspondence, and ultimately of a literary genre based on women's letters. By the eighteenth century the practice of male authors appropriating the female voice in their fictions had become a popular and innovative narrative ploy. The most famous epistolary novelists of France and England—Laclos, Rousseau, Richardson—perfected this technique.

Any study of the female voice in epistolary literature, then, must examine male ideas of what it means to write as a woman, along with the writings of real women. All the contributors to this collection have approached the topic with a similar series of questions in mind: How has the female epistolary voice been defined by those who write it and those who read it? Has it been an ideological as much as an aesthetic construct? What have been the prescribed parameters for feminine self-expression in letters? Can the figure of the woman letter writer be seen as an emblem of changing cultural notions of both sexuality and textuality?

The essays are presented in chronological order, beginning with three pieces on the early emergence of women as skilled letter writers in

the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The longest section is devoted to studies of epistolary writing of the eighteenth century, when the popularity of the letter novel form was at its height; the essays in the closing section examine the use of the epistolary form in more recent contexts. Several contemporary novelists and critics have used the letter genre to express the impossibility of describing a unitary, integrated self. Women's voices have again been chosen in these new epistolary experiments, sometimes to portray female stories as fragmented residues that others must reconstruct (as in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*), other times to show women excluded from the dominant culture writing letters to reinscribe or relocate themselves in the world (as in Puig's *Heartbreak Tango* or Walker's *The Color Purple*).

One of the most unexpected results of compiling this collection has been the dialogues evoked among essays that are not linked by a common historical context. It is striking, for example, to observe how both Madame de Graffigny and Alice Walker, writing more than two hundred years apart, use the epistolary form to suggest an analogy between female confinement and the predicament of minority cultures, or to see how Jane Austen's subversion of conventional epistolary tropes in *Lady Susan* seems to echo Veronica Franco's efforts to forge new epistolary models for female intellectual exchange.

Several of the essays in each section focus on what has been a standard *topos* of epistolary literature since Ovid—the female letter of suffering and victimization. The association of women's writing with the love-letter genre has been perhaps the most tenacious of gender-genre connections in the history of literature.<sup>2</sup> Katharine Jensen's close analysis of rules for feminine writing in seventeenth-century France reveals how male editors of letter collections, by extolling the female love letter of abandonment and despair, contributed to a narrowing of the concept of women's writing and to a limitation of its practice to the social (as opposed to the literary) arena. Alicia Borinsky's essay on *Heartbreak Tango* argues that Puig reverses a familiar epistolary scenario—the series of letters telling the story of a woman who has been seduced and betrayed—by constructing a letter novel based on two women who begin to write to each other when a man whom they both have loved dies. In Puig's ironized version of what has been termed the “exquisite cadaver” motif,<sup>3</sup> the female voice of passion turns out to be highly self-conscious and ultimately false, and the body of the beautiful but inarticulate Juan Carlos becomes the pretext for a female bonding based on mutual distrust and manipulation. Carolyn Williams shows how Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* ironizes traditional epistolary situations by introducing a protagonist who writes letters to God until she decides that she has been

rejected by both God and men. Walker ties the conventional scenario of female abandonment to her heroine's experience of isolation from interaction with other women.

The use of a love-letter exchange to represent, paradoxically, the failures of both epistolary and erotic interaction is not restricted to contemporary texts, as Suzanne Pucci shows in her essay on Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*. While the letters exchanged between the traveling Usbek and his harem women seem simply to represent female sentiment and passion in terms of a male voyeuristic fantasy, the progression of this correspondence and its apocalyptic conclusion may be read as a metaphor for the violent experience of exile and self-estrangement that is central to Montesquieu's philosophical point. Epistolary duplicity comes to signify the failure of language to sustain a reliable or authoritative system of communication.

In examining both the constructions and the subversions of conventional epistolary form, several contributors have addressed the question of how women writers responded to reader expectations about female letter writing. Patricia Spacks argues that the plots of letter novels by eighteenth-century English women writers tended to reinforce social restrictions on female enterprise. A stunning exception is Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*, which Spacks shows is a unique and bold experiment in the real, subversive possibilities of the letter novel form. Sally Winkle's study of two letter novels by the German writer Sophie La Roche traces some of the troubling contradictions in La Roche's experiments with the newly popular genre, contradictions that seem to reflect her reluctance to sustain a challenge to prevailing gender ideology. For La Roche, the woman-centered novel must ultimately adopt the myths of a feminine destiny as created by men. Yet her second, more conventional novel seems nonetheless to express the author's anxiety about the tension between the public and private selves inherent in the contemporary ideal of womanhood, as she splits the conflicting voices of her first heroine into two separate characters. The essays by Margaret Rosenthal and myself both examine how women writers responded to early definitions of the ideal female epistolary voice. Rosenthal studies the Renaissance poet Veronica Franco's fascinating and subtle variations on models provided by Ovid's *Heroides*. The autobiographical thrust of Franco's poetry, Rosenthal argues, has been overemphasized by readers who have neglected the complex intertextual system of references that she uses to suggest a specifically feminine literary tradition. The double standard faced by early women writers, aptly described by Ann Jones as "the tension between public accessibility and private chastity,"<sup>4</sup> was particularly strong for writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But

interpretive models provided by the earliest editors of letter collections continue to influence the way women's letters are read. My own essay on seventeenth-century attitudes toward the publication of women's letters takes a closer look at some of the historical consequences, for women writers, of reading female letters as "natural," "authentic," and essentially nonliterary. The legacy of seventeenth-century theorizing about female epistolary writing is particularly strong in the editions of numerous correspondences that have not been reedited in the last century.

Domna Stanton has recently pointed out that the term "autobiographical" is often applied pejoratively to women's writing and positively to men's. Women are not represented in the major theoretical studies of autobiography, yet women's writing is often read as being exclusively concerned with the personal and private.<sup>5</sup> Historically, women's letters have been subjected to a similar process of misreading. The two essays in our collection dealing with real correspondences expose the fallacy of labeling even the most intimate of letter exchanges as transparent expressions of the private self. Kathryn Crecelius finds in George Sand's letters to her mother, written over a twenty-five-year period, an astonishing gap between Sand's epistolary enactment of their relationship and the story she presents in her autobiography. For Sand there is, moreover, an essential *quid pro quo* between her private epistolary contacts with her mother and her public development as a writer—she discovers that to strengthen her public voice she must repress her expression of filial need in the letters. Julie Hayes's reading of Sade's correspondence from prison with his wife and his intellectual "sister," Milli Rousset, reveals a systematic disruption of standard literary concepts of epistolary relationships. In this letter triangle it is the man who writes from confinement and the women who are at liberty to provide him with news of the world outside and information about what might eventually become of him. Yet the "free" Marquise de Sade can write only with the voice of a cloistered nun, in a naïve and untutored style; she refuses to attempt the more sophisticated speculations her husband demands of her and grants only the most obvious level of meaning to her text. The consequences of this ironic situation for her correspondent's strategy of reading and writing are dramatic, as he transforms the circuit of epistolary communication into a fantastic mechanism for verbal aggression and intimidation.

Male authors of epistolary novels have often used female voices as forms of disguise, and literary critics have recently focused much attention on the notion of "transvestitism" in letter fiction.<sup>6</sup> The essays in this volume by James Carson, Julia Epstein, and Susan Jackson examine cross-gender narration in the eighteenth-century letter novel. Looking at

the epistolarity-sexuality equation in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, Epstein argues that Cleland creates a female voice that is not simply a projection of masculine heterosexual desire, but instead is a thin disguise for a homosexual male voice. Fanny's narrative uses the female voice as a veil, supposedly celebrating female sexuality but actually subordinating it to male narcissism. At the same time, Cleland's combined parroting and distortion of established novelistic devices—in the epistolary form of his story, its plot structure, and its unconventional ending—constitute a complex critique of both conventional novel plots and the sociosexual ideologies they sustain.

Carson's study views the use of the female voice in Richardson's epistolary novels as a method of authorial self-criticism wherein Richardson expresses his desire to transcend the boundaries of the self and, at the same time, his recognition of the impossibility of such a gesture. This reading challenges the adequacy of the traffic-in-women paradigm, which views cross-gender narration as subjecting women to a male homosocial structure. In so doing he reassesses both the dramatic force of female resistance in Richardson's novels and the reasons for authorial identification with the male villain. Jackson's analysis of the "virtuoso ventriloquism" in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* reveals how Laclos causes the female voices in his text to proliferate, only to bring them all back under the authority of the editor's third-person commentary. Laclos's own epistolary conversations with Madame Riccoboni about the novel further expose the contradictions inherent in his views of what it means to "write as a woman."

One of the oldest letter narrative situations—the cloistered woman resorting to letters as a way of reorienting her life—forms the basis of two novels studied by Linda Kauffman and Janet Altman. The narrator of Margaret Atwood's nightmare of the future, *The Handmaid's Tale*, addresses herself to an unknown listener. But, as Kauffman clearly shows, the recorded trace of the narrator's voice is appropriated by her scholarly editors just as surely as her body had been enlisted in the service of a gynophobic political regime. The vision of feminine destiny that the novel offers is in the end no more hopeful than the cries of Ovid's abandoned heroines. Interestingly, an epistolary novel written by Madame de Graffigny some two hundred years earlier manages a far more optimistic transformation of the same conventions of the genre. Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Letters of a Peruvian Woman* presents a female narrator who uses the epistolary mode to reconnect with a world from which she has been violently exiled. In her thoroughly original reading of this text, Janet Altman demonstrates how the novel challenges the dominant view of history as a record of male conquests, and posits an equiv-



alence between the place of the female and the place of "new world" peoples in European culture. Graffigny's Peruvian lady ultimately uses her various environments of captivity to develop a critical understanding and personal autonomy that had no model in earlier epistolary tales of female confinement.

One of the most interesting, and perhaps surprising, results of bringing these essays together has been the evidence they have accumulated to show to what extent the female voice in the epistolary tradition has been a history of restrictions or failed interactions. The one genre with which women have been persistently connected has specialized in narrowing the range of possible inflections for feminine expression. Our collection may seem to suggest that female epistolary voices tend to describe confinement more than liberation, isolation more than interaction. For an author like Margaret Atwood, this is because feminine experience has not fundamentally changed in the modern age. Not the least of the depressing moments in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the postscript, when an officious historian seems to echo, three centuries later, Laclos's arguments in his letter to Riccoboni that a woman's voice can at best be only an increment, an embellishing ornament to the more solid, male powers of observation. To study the history of the female epistolary voice, it would seem, is to record the ways it has been silenced.

Yet to write about the female voice is also to propose new ways of reading that force a reconsideration of the critical assumptions behind our understanding of the epistolary genre and its traditions. Several of the essays in this book argue for radical rereadings of texts by women writers that have long been pigeonholed as inferior imitations of epistolary works by men. Others propose new critical approaches to the traditionally acknowledged masterpieces of epistolary literature. It is hoped that this collection will provoke readers to return to familiar texts, to reexamine the mechanisms of epistolary representation, and to construct new frameworks for the study of women's letters.

#### NOTES

I wish to thank the Boston University Humanities Foundation for a semester's leave from teaching, which gave me the time to develop this collection. I am most grateful, too, for many fruitful discussions with Deborah Kops of Northeastern University Press.

1. As Hortense Mancini ruefully writes: "I know that a woman's honor (*gloire*) depends on her not being talked about." *Mémoires d'Hortense et de Marie Mancini* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1965), p. 31.

2. See Linda Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

3. See Nancy Miller, "The Exquisite Cadavers: Women in Eighteenth-Century Fiction," *Diacritics* 5 (1975): 37-43.
4. In "Surprising Fame: Renaissance Gender Ideologies and Women's Lyric," in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 74-93.
5. See her "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" in *The Female Autograph* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 4-5.
6. See, for example, Nancy K. Miller, "I's in Drag: The Sex of Recollection," *Eighteenth Century* 22 (1981): 45-57; Robert Markley, "Language, Power, and Sexuality in Cleland's *Fanny Hill*," *Philological Quarterly* 63 (1984): 343-56; Terry Castle, *Clarissa's Ciphers: Meaning and Disruption in Richardson's 'Clarissa'* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 148-80; Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 36-39.

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I

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*Women and the art of letter writing:  
Origins of a gender–genre connection  
in France and Italy*



# 1

## *A Courtesan's Voice: Epistolary Self-Portraiture in Veronica Franco's Terze Rime*

MARGARET F. ROSENTHAL

*You may ask why my verses alternate, when I am better suited to the lyric mode. I must weep, for my love—and elegy is the weeping strain; no lyre is suited to my tears.*

Sappho to Phaon, 15:5–8, Ovid, *Heroides*



IN A SENSE, all of the works of Veronica Franco, the famous sixteenth-century Venetian courtesan, evoke an epistolary genre.<sup>1</sup> Many of her poems composed as *capitoli* in terza rima (*Terze Rime* 1575), and her personal letters designed for publication (*Lettere familiari a diversi* 1580), directly address members of a tight-knit Venetian “academy of virtuous men” in letter form; she requests that her addressees enter a poetic collaboration, dialogue, or friendly conversation with her.<sup>2</sup> While in the *Terze Rime* an anonymous male lover politely responds to her rigorous poetic and ideological challenges by vehemently defending his love for her, in her prose letters we hear her voice alone.<sup>3</sup> Orchestrated as an elegant duet between male and female lovers, the dialogue in the *Terze Rime* is rudely interrupted, however, by a third dissonant extratextual voice, which seeks to undermine both the male lover’s adulatory verses in praise of his beloved, and the courtesan’s repeated claims to fidelity, virtue, and intellectual abilities. This third voice denounces her as a vulgar and common whore. A confusion of identities generates eloquent retorts and propels Franco, the female persona of the *Terze Rime*, to publicly challenge her

interlocutor to a poetic duel. In this duel she defends her personal honor and reputation and speaks in support of all courtesans and other women victimized by men. After a superb poetic skirmish in *capitoli* 13 and 14, she emerges victorious in *capitolo* 16.<sup>4</sup>

Her verse epistles and personal letters, both published from 1575 to 1580, when read together as an epistolary narrative, combine to form a portrait of the courtesan's livelihood in sixteenth-century Venice and of Franco's personal concerns. She constructs this portrait by exposing and then overturning misogynists' and moral satirists' claims, exemplified by the defamatory voice in the *Terze Rime*, that courtesans are duplicitous, venal, greedy, and sexually rapacious. Franco redefines the courtesan's profession as contrary to mercenary and duplicitous love; she portrays herself as a devoted friend and mother uninterested in financial gain, a faithful companion and partner in love, and a professional writer and editor ambitiously engrossed in literary projects.<sup>5</sup>

The epistolary genre was ideally suited for this kind of self-portraiture. The familiar letter permitted Franco to correct satirists' charges against courtesans, and it offered her a public forum for articulating her personal complaints openly, informally, and directly to a male interlocutor or to an "absent friend."<sup>6</sup> The familiar epistolary genre, inherited from the Ciceronian, Stoic, and Christian moral traditions, was widely imitated and discussed in Venetian literary academies and private intellectual circles during the sixteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Translated into the vernacular and commented on by Renaissance theorists, the classical epistles designed for publication displayed an individual's knowledge of correct civic, moral, and social conventions.<sup>8</sup> Franco capitalizes on the familiar aspect of classical epistolography in order to characterize the nature of the courtesan's voice as unmediated and truthful.

The conversational and personal tone in her poems and letters also adheres closely to the tenets of the Renaissance letter genre, which advocated the use of "plain," unadorned speech, uncorrupted by rhetorical flourishes.<sup>9</sup> Critics have consistently misread this personal and often intimate voice in Franco's works as implying nothing more than a confessional autobiography. They have collapsed the life into the works and thus failed to see how Franco manipulates classical and Renaissance literary genres in order to give prominence to the woman's voice.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, much of the strength of Franco's poems arises from their high degree of intertextual reference to contemporary literary traditions.

Franco's amorous verse epistles and familiar letters do not simply record the successes and failures of a courtesan's life within a five-year period.<sup>11</sup> Rather, they constitute fictional models (dialogue, poetic exchange, debate, verse epistle, elegiac lament) that point to, act out, and



contain the tensions present in Franco's ongoing polemical dialogue with a misogynist society. Bolstered by the authority of classical literary traditions, she contests satirists' claims that women embody dissimulation. She dramatizes and reinterprets scenes drawn from classical elegy of a woman's betrayal in love by switching traditional gender roles: in her version the male lover is duplicitous and unfaithful.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas her amorous verse epistles theatrically stage scenes of betrayal and duplicity in love and highlight the destructive effects of obsessive passions on male and female lovers, her familiar letters comment and reflect upon these scenes from a retrospective point of view. Further, in the *Lettere familiari* the woman speaker takes on the role of moral advisor. She espouses, by mimicking her male addressees' past advice to her, a correct and virtuous behavior between friends and lovers that is based on mutual respect and reciprocity of feeling:

My speaking to you on this subject is perhaps redundant and, as the saying goes, like carrying water to the sea, for I refer to matters that you profoundly understand and have explained to me; nevertheless a duty born of love and gratitude compels me to say to you that virtue lies in its own practice rather than in being aspired to: so when it comes to things that you so often taught me, you will prove how you neither understand nor own them unless you practice them when the need occurs.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout her letters, she reminds an allegedly superior aristocracy to live up to its avowed claims to fairness, justice, moderation, and honesty. She invests a humanist social vocabulary, however, with new meaning by calling attention to her self-assumed role as courtesan/advisor. In letters 3, 28, and 30, for example, she warns her male addressees of the havoc that unbridled passions such as anger, jealousy, and obsessive love can play on a human's power of reason.<sup>14</sup> This she does as a loyal friend, grateful colleague, and affectionate companion who conscientiously returns the advice offered to her in times of adversity in the manner and spirit in which she had originally received it. She reflects and theorizes in letters 36, 47, and 48 on the causes of the deceit, cruelty, slander, and abuse perpetrated against her and other women lovers. And she warns her addressees in letters 8, 14, 17, and 18 of the moral dangers and destructive effects that repeated calumny, victimization of innocent women, and feigned and calculated emotions can have on one's acquired skills and talents:

I do not know who deserves greater blame for the malicious rumors spread abroad; I, whom you tax so unduly or you, who—despite the nobility you profess and into which you were indeed born—go about