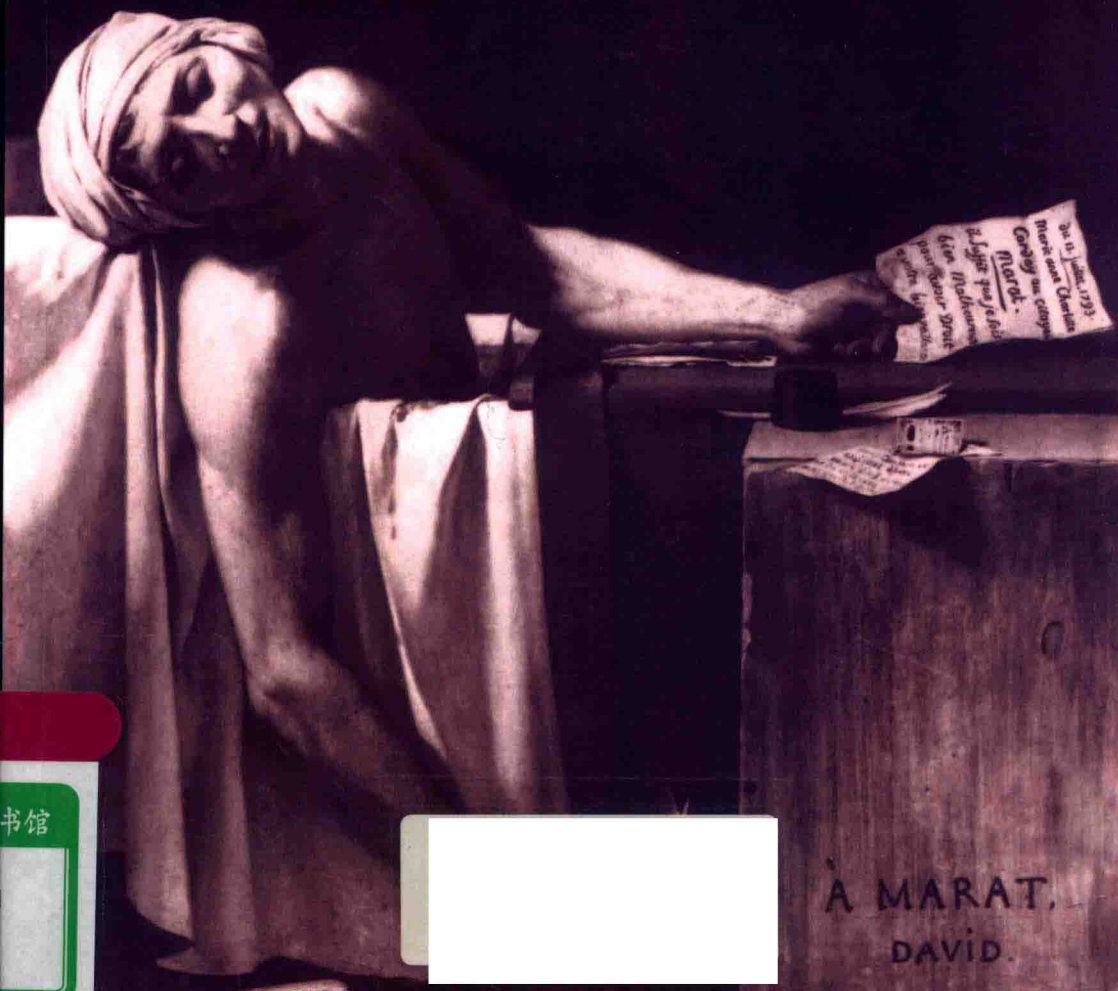
ROMANTIC CORRESPONDENCE

Women, politics & the fiction of letters

MARY A. FAVRET



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The literary importance of letters did not end with the demise of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel. In the turbulent period between 1789 and 1830, the letter was used as a vehicle for political rather than sentimental expression. Against a background of severe political censorship, seditious corresponding societies and the rise of the modern Post Office, letters as they were used by Romantic writers, especially women, became the vehicle for a distinctly political, often disruptive force. Mary Favret's study of Romantic correspondence re-examines traditional accounts of epistolary writing, and redefines the letter as a "feminine" genre. It also reconsiders a central concept of Romantic poetry in historicist, feminist and prosaic terms, by asking us to question the categories of gender and genre which determine our sense of Romantic literature.

The book deals not only with fictional letters which circulated in the novels of Jane Austen or in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but also with political pamphlets, incendiary letters and spy letters available for public consumption. Mary Favret argues that the travel letters of Mary Wollstonecraft and the foreign correspondence of Helen Maria Williams disturb any simple notions of epistolary fictions and the "woman of letters" by insisting on the democratizing power of correspondence. At the same time, the history of correspondence promoted by the British Post Office deflects that democratizing power by channeling letter-writing into a story of national progress.

ROMANTIC CORRESPONDENCE

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN ROMANTICISM

This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again and again by what Wordsworth called those "great national events" that were "almost daily taking place": the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad and the reform movement at home. This was a literature of enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion and literature were reworked in texts such as *Frankenstein* and *Biographia Literaria*; gender relations in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Don Juan*; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of response or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of "literature" and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded.

The categories produced by Romanticism have also been challenged by recent historicist arguments. The task of the series is to engage both with a challenging corpus of Romantic writings and with the changing field of criticism they have helped to shape. As with other literary series published by Cambridge, this one will represent the work of both younger and more established scholars, on either side of the Atlantic and elsewhere.

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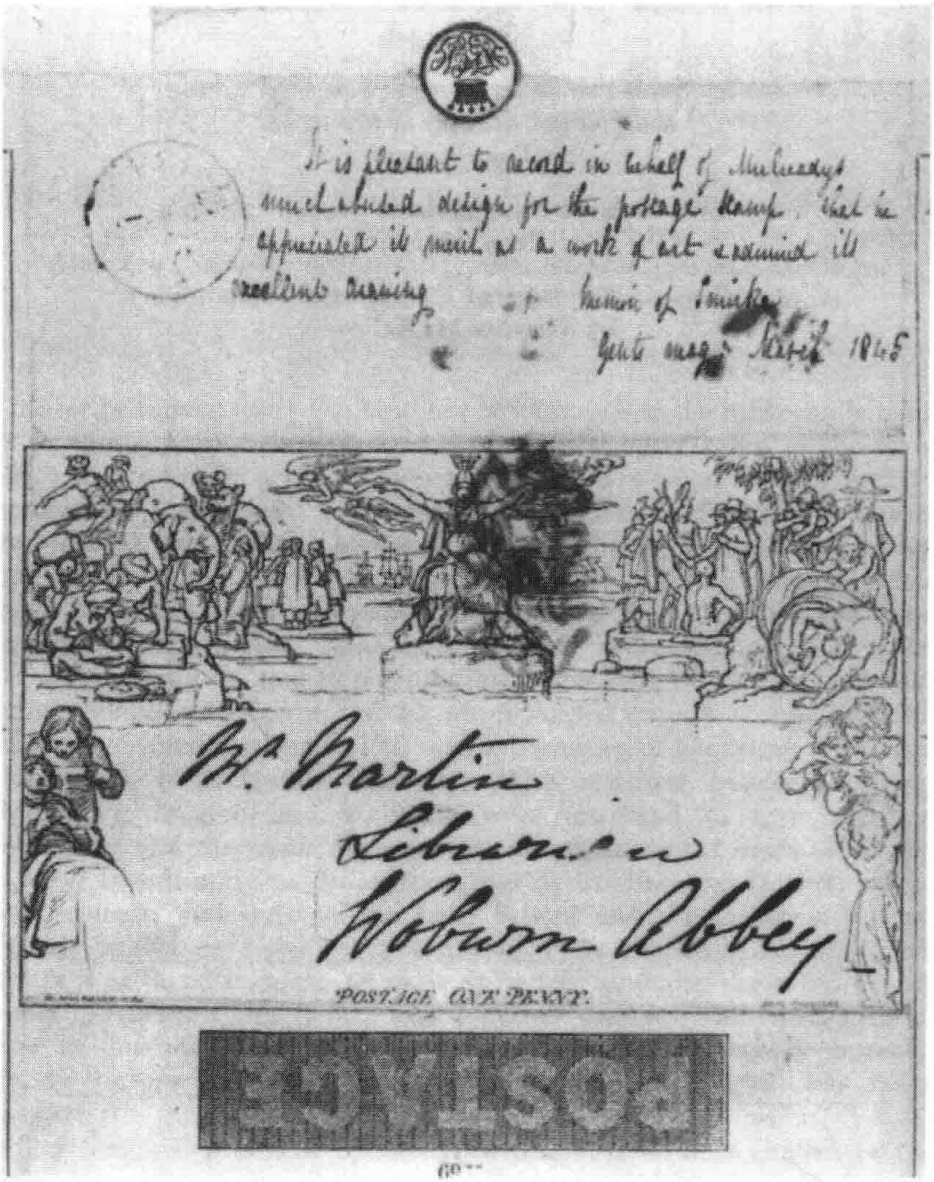

William Mulready, Allegorical representation of the British Post Office for the first approved postage stamp. Engraving by Thompson, 1840. London, The British Library.

Acknowledgments

This book, now read with rear-vision, seems the logical product of two concerns: the question of whether individuals can ever understand one another and the necessity, nonetheless, of trying to communicate. In these concerns I have been educated by my friends, family and colleagues, whom I would like to acknowledge here. Yet in an acknowledgment, the pressure of these concerns bears down with remarkable force. Most of my gratitude therefore will not find expression in these pages.

This study of correspondence would never have been realized without the support of a number of exceptional readers. To Barbara Gelpi, Herbert Lindenberger and George Dekker, who helped shape the initial version; to Steven Kruger, Elizabeth Hagedorn Cook, Deirdre Lynch, Elizabeth Bohls, Jean Kowaleski and Ellen Weinauer, who commented at various stages of revision; to Donya Samara, who rescued this project at the eleventh hour; and especially to Marilyn Butler, James Chandler, Kenneth Johnston and Andrew Miller, whose advice and questions pushed the manuscript into its final form; to these readers I am indebted for more than words.

I am grateful for the resources and the collegiality provided me by two institutions in particular – the English Departments at Indiana University and Stanford University. Grants from both these universities, as well as from the Mabelle McLeod Lewis Foundation, supported me during various stages of writing. The kind assistance of Josie Dixon at Cambridge University Press also demands my gratitude.

Chapter 6 appeared in an earlier version as "The Letters of *Frankenstein*," in *Genre* 20 (Spring 1988); the material is used with the publishers' permission.

If only for my own sake, I would like to recognize here the several places where I worked on the various parts of this book. Each site left

its traces on the pages: the libraries and studies of Bloomington, Stanford, Berkeley, New Haven, Vancouver and London; and the homes that welcomed me in these various places, especially the Enthoven, McGeer, and Holden homes. I owe even more perhaps to the places of rest, and especially to Walnut Hills in Pennsylvania. Therefore, to those ultimate hosts and faithful correspondents, my mother and father, I would like to dedicate this book.

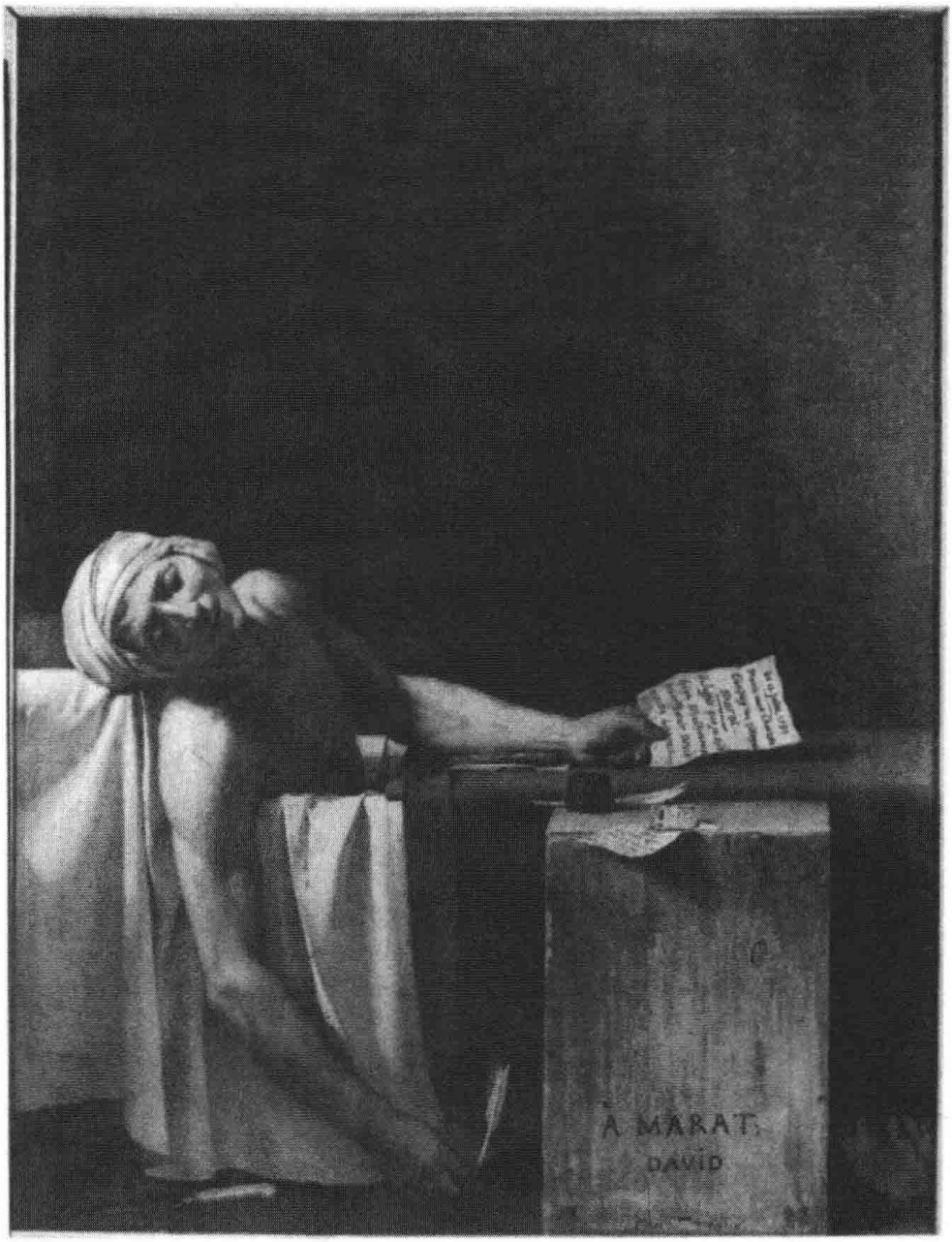

Figure 1 Jacques Louis David, *Marat Assassiné* (*The Death of Marat*), 1793.

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Introduction: the public letter, or la lettre perfide

I will ask you to direct your gaze away from the head of the martyred hero in the portrait, *Marat Assassiné*, and toward the letter in the hero's hand (fig. 1). This move upsets the composition a bit: the artist has so carefully balanced the face of the dying man with the letter he seems to have just read. Yet our adding weight to that letter compensates for the extraordinary attention which, ever since the portrait was first displayed, has been awarded to the "Marat" half of *Marat Assassiné*. Acknowledging that the dying hero alone is not the *central* figure of the painting, we can then legitimately place Marat to one side. The figure already appears detached from its audience, in a separate time and space. The closed eyes and muted features convey a distant and timeless quality: the hero is immortalized, and beyond our world. More succinctly: he is dead. The letter, on the other hand, has a life of its own. It balances this transcendent image and reminds us of the historical context – the turbulence of Paris in April 1793, when Marat, the rabble-rousing "Friend of the People," was murdered in his bath by a young woman, Charlotte Corday. The letter introduces us into its world and intrudes upon our own.

I draw attention to this image in order to stress the value of the letter not as a literary vehicle – the epistolary form – but as a figure from everyday life. Furthermore, I want to suggest that the historical, material role of the letter in the late eighteenth century was every bit as forceful in the art and literature of the period as was the formal epistolary tradition. The very idea of the letter, in David's painting and elsewhere, produced representations that threatened to disrupt the sentimental tradition which promoted it. The emblem of isolation and vulnerability found itself in a powerful, public space.

To return to the painting: unlike the serene face, the letter – like the hand, the knife, the bath and the breast – is marked with blood. In contrast to the soft, composed features of the face, the written

characters of the letter seem stark, almost too real. The black "Marat," underlined, opposes its dying referent: the written name stands in the middle of the page, but off-balance. In fact, the entire letter knocks the viewer off-balance. It tilts at an unsettling angle, mirroring the drooping head, but pulling away from it and toward its new audience. By means of the angle of presentation, the letter becomes public property. The clarity of the writing insists that you read the message. But to read, you must move – change your position, and tilt your head according to the angle dictated by the paper. By disturbing the viewer/reader, the letter upsets a portrait which would otherwise remain silent, immobile statuary. Thus the letter moves its audience to confront historical, even violent change.[1]

Parisians viewing the portrait on display in the Louvre, six months after the assassination, would have known the more sensationalized circumstances of Marat's "over-dramatic and over-publicized end."[2] They would also have recognized the duplicity behind the cryptic – and ironic – words of the letter. Translated, it reads: "From the 12th of July, 1793, Marie Anne Charlotte Corday to the Citizen Marat. It is enough that I be unfortunate to have a right to your benevolence [or kind protection]." The face value of this letter is not to be trusted: what takes the form of deferential language hides the murderous intentions of Charlotte Corday. Baudelaire labelled it *la lettre perfide* – the treacherous letter – since, in at least one sense, the letter caused Marat's bloody death. Corday had written to Marat, offering to serve as a double agent and betray to him the names of counter-revolutionaries. In agreeing to meet with her, Marat fell victim twice to the letter's duplicity.[3]

Compare the letter to the other items in the composition: Corday's knife, the pen she used, the bathtub, the inkwell, the head-wrappings, the banknotes on the writing-stand, the stand itself – these mundane articles have been transformed, as one critic puts it, into a still-life of "holy relics."[4] David has merged and transcended what, in his day, would have been contradictory traditions – the neo-classical and the Christian – but he has also created a saint out of everyday elements, and faithful to the daily newspaper accounts. Marat has become "the icon of a new religion" for revolutionary France.[5] But our attention has shifted from the disturbing letter. Strangely enough, the letter remains off the critic's list of "holy relics." Perhaps because of its duplicity, perhaps because of its invitation to be reread, the letter

defies the process of canonization. It reminds us that flattery and supplication can be treacherous, and that transcendence denies historical fact. In the face of the painting's tranquillity, Paris would have seen tension and ambivalence surfacing in the letter.

What Charlotte Corday had written was not only deceptive, it was lethal. Marat's own pen has fallen quietly, like a dying bird, dividing the painting into two areas: that of the immobile martyr and that of the written word. A second pen, however, defies the division he tries to establish. It mimics the bloody knife and, poised like a dart, threatens to attack the martyr's breast again.

David intensifies the conflict between hero and assassin by adding a different sort of duplicity: he selects a small portion of the woman's *lettre perfide* and renders it in his own handwriting. Perhaps he intended to restore the note's tribute to his hero, to erase the irony and transgression; but the feminine adjective remains highly visible – *malheureuse*, unfortunate. Charlotte Corday now appeals to the viewer through that letter. Both the duplicity and the irony are redoubled. Corday silences Marat and David silences Corday, but the letter calls to its viewers/readers for the last word.

One transcription is not enough: the artist overrides – or underwrites – the unsettling letter with an alternative one. Flush with the surface of the canvas, David's tombstone-like inscription makes a directed letter of the entire still-life:

A MARAT DAVID L'AN DEUX

The upright roman capitals fight for an unchallenged immortality – upfront, direct and immediate. Like the flattering letter, the memorial inscription has a hidden agenda: in this case, to unite Marat and David in a correspondence which defies mortality. Nonetheless, like the letter, too, it cannot escape the stains of its history. When David invokes *L'An Deux* of the Jacobin calendar, he calls attention to the dating of the *ancien régime*, used by the Girondiste Corday. The "sanctified" immobility of the still-life and the unshadowed inscription must meet the challenge presented by that tilted letter, the challenge of change and difference. David's neo-classical ideal thus calls up the mortal realities of contemporary conflict. For the letter of the *malheureuse* maintains the upper hand. Along its political slant, *la lettre perfide* introduces a context which the art historian, concerned with classical and Christian iconography, virtually ignores: how the letter represented certain imaginary

relationships, or "fictions" in the revolutionary period, which were public, political and powerful.

In *Marat Assassiné*, the art historian easily spots the allusions to classical and Christian models: the Ecce Homo of classical sculpture and the Christ-figure from baroque depositions and *pietàs* are Marat's forefathers.[6] Across the intersection of classical and Christian traditions however, David adds a third dimension: the popular dimension of sentimental appeal. We see this appeal on the right side of the canvas – in the woman's letter, the journalist's banknotes for a widow and her children, and the tombstone inscription.[7] We should recognize that these stock items of the age of sentimentality have become politically charged in the painting.

In one sense, I am asking you to read the epistolary fiction creeping out from behind the image of *Marat Assassiné*. We normally associate the letter tradition of the eighteenth century with sentimental heroines, seductive villains and long, tortuous romances. David himself read and admired Richardson's *Clarissa* and Rousseau's *Julie*.[8] Moreover, he would have been familiar with an epistolary tradition in painting, where letters indicated interior spaces and female vulnerability, especially sexual vulnerability (see figs 2 and 3).[9] In the face of such a tradition, I am asking that you read in this piece of revolutionary propaganda, the popular epistle made explicitly political. Charlotte Corday's letter offers more than a figure of the melodramatic: it shows that the melodramatic covers over and yet gives shape to the contemporary realities of class conflict, sexual violence, social upheaval and civil war. Despite the victim's composure in this portrait, France is in turmoil. The familiar letter of sentimental fiction has been unhinged, just as formal matters in France – customs, institutions, definitions – have been jolted out of alignment.

In its appeal to a heterogeneous audience, *Marat Assassiné* replaces the heroine of sentimental fiction with a political hero. Whereas the letter of the sentimental novel could invade the domestic and sexual privacy of its heroine, the letter of this painting brings the viewer into the private bathroom of the hero. In both cases, the letter serves as a letter of introduction: it gains us entry. Here, however, the woman deceives and the man dies, in a reversal of familiar convention. Note how Marat, with his exposed, vulnerable body, is feminized in his status as victim. His bath becomes a bleached version of Clarissa's coffin, his own public sepulchre. And like Rousseau's Julie, Marat