The verse epistle

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Although accepted as an important form in the long eighteenth century, the verse epistle has received less than its due of critical attention. Its neglect may be explained in part by the difficulty of defining it. Unlike most literary forms, such as elegy or pastoral, its subject matter is unrestricted. Most kinds of poem may be written as epistles, including elegies and pastorals; the style and tone will vary as widely as the subject; and any appropriate verse form may be used. A further reason why critics have on the whole neglected the verse epistle is that most of those who wrote in the form, especially during its heyday in the eighteenth century, are now, except for Pope, little known. Examples include John Byrom, John Oldmixon, and Allan Ramsay, all of whom wrote at least as many epistles as Pope, if not more. The fact that the form was so widely practiced is a good reason for studying it, especially when scholars and critics are transforming the canon of the period’s verse. Other reasons are the light it casts on eighteenth-century culture and society, including the advances in communications, literacy, social behavior and publishing that helped promote it. For example, as Karina Williamson points out, “It can scarcely be a coincidence that the beginning of this period saw the foundation of the Post Office in Britain (1660), the rapid development of a nationwide network of postal services, and hence a vast increase in letter writing of all kinds” (Williamson 2001: 76).

Little research exists, however, on the popularity of the verse epistle among writers of the period. Jay Arnold Levine cites two pointers: Raymond D. Havens’s remark that “Dryden’s Miscellany (1684–1709) contains but ten verse epistles, while Dodsley’s (1748–58) offers forty-five specimens”; and the fact that the epistolary content of the Gentleman’s Magazine declined “from a peak of thirty-nine in 1731–40 (the period of Pope’s activity) to a low of eleven in 1771–80” (Levine 1962: 658, using
statistics supplied by Calvin D. Yost). However, Havens does not state his criteria for identifying epistles, and Yost includes only poems that have the word “epistle” or “letter” in their titles (Yost 1936: 103). One printed and one electronic source provide data on which to base more representative estimates, though even they cannot wholly solve the problem of identification, which there is not space to explore here. The printed source is David Foxon’s *English Verse 1701–1750*; the electronic, Chadwyck-Healey’s *Literature Online*. As these have different functions, the information they offer produces different results. In particular, as his title and subtitle indicate, Foxon covers only half of the century and only separately printed poems, while the scope of *Literature Online* is limited by several factors including copyright. Nevertheless, despite these restrictions, Foxon catalogues nearly 10,000 poems, at least 500, or 5 percent, may be classified as epistolary; and the “Search Texts” option in the second edition of *Literature Online*, limited to poetry and to the eighteenth century, produced a total of 1,060 poems with the keywords “epist*,” “letter,” or “letters” in the first line or title. The latter total includes a relatively small number of poems that are not epistles or are duplicates. It excludes, however, the much larger number of poems that are epistles but do not have the keywords in their titles or first lines – the most famous being Pope’s “Eloisa to Abelard.” Allowing for such omissions, and with a total of 37,901 poems indexed by *Literature Online* as eighteenth-century, it is likely that the proportion of epistolary verse in the database is similar to that in Foxon. By way of comparison, the only kinds of poem that the same search showed as more numerous were the hymn (2,428 poems indexed under “hymn” or “hymns” in their title or first line), the ode (2,387 under “ode” or “odes”), and the song (1,560 under “song” or “songs”). This suggests just how popular a form the verse epistle was. It far outranks, for example, not only the elegy (614 poems with “elegy” or “elegies” in title or first line), the fable (528 with “fable” or “fables”), and the satire (170 with “satir*,” 70 with “satyr*”), but even the ballad (660 with “ballad” or “ballads”).

Of the two differences mentioned above between poems catalogued by Foxon and those available from *Literature Online*, the more significant is that Foxon lists only those printed separately. In consequence, many of the poems he indexes are occasional or ephemeral, though some – most obviously Pope’s – were republished later in collections. A related point is that well over half of the verse epistles he describes were
first published anonymously, and in a large number of cases the author remains difficult or impossible to identify. As well as a vital resource for tracking political, religious, and literary controversies of the period, Foxon provides the means to assess how many poems of various kinds were published separately in each of the years he covers. In the case of verse epistles, 35 may be classed as such in 1701–10, 97 in 1711–20, 111 in 1721–30 (with 31 in 1730), 176 in 1731–40 (with 28 in 1735), and 92 in 1741–50. This shows a clear rise and decline in popularity, peaking in the early 1730s when Grub Street activity was at its height. It must again be emphasized, however, that the separately published verse epistle is not necessarily the same kind of poem as one that appears in a collection. It is much more likely to engage directly in contemporary affairs, and its content is more often satirical. The fact that the number of verse epistles catalogued by Foxon decreases after 1740 should therefore not be taken to indicate that the form itself declined at that time. It may point instead to a decline in the market for separately published verse of a topical or satirical kind.

*Literature Online* provides two further indications of the verse epistle’s popularity with eighteenth-century writers. The same search options already specified produced totals of 374 poems out of 48,947 for the period 1500–1699 with the keywords “epist*,” “letter,” or “letters” in the first line or title, 867 poems out of 142,494 for the period 1800–99, and 850 poems out of 131,575 for the period 1900–99. This means that, allowing as before for the limitations of the search method, the proportion of epistolary poems identified for the period 1700–99 is nearly four times greater than that for the period 1500–1699, and over four times greater than that for the period 1800–1999. The second indication is the number of eighteenth-century writers identified by the search method as having written verse epistles. This is 229, twenty-seven of whom were women.

As resources for studying the verse epistle and other types of poem, Foxon and *Literature Online* are more useful than the English Short Title Catalogue. This is not so much because ESTC, by definition, is confined to works published separately, but rather because it allows only limited searching by genre. Similar reservations apply to Thomson Gale’s *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*. *Literature Online*, however, both indexes and contains a large number of poems; and, because these poems are also published on CD-ROM in *The English Poetry Full-Text Database*, they are widely
available. The ideal and properly empirical alternative would be to read all the extant verse from the period and record all the epistles. Though such an enterprise is not wholly impracticable – Roger Lonsdale has not only read all the available verse but anthologized it – it is beyond the scope of students and, indeed, of most scholars. The main source for this essay is therefore a database of 867 poems culled from Literature Online, with reference to texts from other sources where appropriate. Such a sample is large enough to enable tentative conclusions to be drawn about the nature of the form it represents at the period. Further details about the database and the search methods are provided at the end of this essay.

Verse epistles are normally divided into two main types according to theme and style. The Horatian type is often a verse essay written in a relatively plain manner and addressed to a friend or patron; the Ovidian is a fictional letter to a lover from a mythical or historical figure, often female, and its style is usually more elevated. However, though many eighteenth-century verse epistles follow one of these traditions, many others reach beyond them. This diversity was recognized by John Bell, an early anthologist of the form, who provided 180 examples in the first seven volumes of his Classical Arrangement of Fugitive Poetry (1789), grouped as follows: Ethic; Familiar and Humorous; Critical and Didactic; Descriptive and Narrative; Satirical and Preceptive; Panegyrical and Gallant; Heroic and Amatory. Such titles suggest that eighteenth-century poets responded to the variety of Horace’s epistles and took it further. The “Ethic” epistles – a term Bell borrowed from Pope – are serious discussions of moral, social, and cultural questions, while those classed as “Familiar and Humorous” exploit the close, easy relations of friends or kin. Developments in the Ovidian form tend instead, as Karina Williamson has shown, to play with voice and gender.

As the verse epistle is an inherently diverse form, and as eighteenth-century writers varied it so flexibly, no attempt to classify it can escape arbitrariness. The following categories are therefore offered not as a model but as a way of illustrating its variety – and all the more so because many epistles cross boundaries. Among the 867 poems in my database assembled from Literature Online, the most numerous kind, making up over a quarter of the sample, is the familiar epistle. Next in order of quantity is the Horatian essay-epistle, a form that includes what Pope and Bell called the ethic type, and that, because it addresses all sorts of subjects, is best termed “discursive.” This
occupies nearly 15 percent of the sample, but it is followed quite closely by a further type for which a new name is appropriate: the dramatic epistle. On the analogy of the dramatic monologue, which it almost certainly influenced, a dramatic epistle is one in which the figure who is supposed to have written it is not the author. Epistles of the Ovidian type fall into this category, but also humorous epistles that mimic a particular style. Mary Leapor’s “The Epistle of Deborah Dough” is a good example. Almost as numerous, at over 11 percent of the sample, is the complimentary epistle. Bearing in mind its social and literary importance in the period, complimentary verse deserves more research, especially for the interest of what it has to suggest about patronage. If not addressed to an actual patron, complimentary epistles are usually written to someone else who could benefit the writer – benefit that could be cultural rather than material. For instance, while Joseph Mitchell and Richard Savage certainly sought material help when they addressed epistles to Sir Robert Walpole, and William Collins when he wrote one to Sir Thomas Hanmer, Mitchell could probably have hoped for no more than kudos, as well as sales, from his epistles to the painters Hogarth, Dandridge, and Lambert, and William Hayley from his to Admiral Keppel. Other complimentary epistles honor a friend, like Savage’s to Aaron Hill or Mary Robinson’s to a woman she does not name.

In obvious contrast to the complimentary epistle is the satirical, making up over 7 percent of the sample. This is a similar proportion to that of the humorous epistle. Both types are, again, best identified according to their primary effect or apparent aim, and both span a wide range. While the target of a satirical epistle may be the government of the day, an individual, or a social practice or fashion, humorous epistles address all kinds of subjects ranging from advice against marriage, as in William Broome’s “The Widow and Virgin Sisters,” to “trifling,” as in James Robertson’s “An Epistle to a Friend.” Especially toward the end of the century, humorous and satirical epistles tend to merge, as in the many facetious examples produced by Anthony Pasquin (John Williams) and Peter Pindar (John Wolcot). Two other related kinds of epistle are the translation, making up about 9 percent of the sample, and the imitation, making up over 4 percent. The great majority of these translate or adapt epistles by Horace, and they reward attention not only because they show the importance of the Horatian epistle as a literary and cultural model, but also because many are of high quality. In particular, the
imitation allowed wide scope for creative and witty updatings of the original, as with the many variations of Horace’s fifth epistle, a dinner invitation to Torquatus.

The other types of epistle are equally easily identified but less numerous. Some, because they stem from a specific event, are best called occasional; others are amatory or elegiac; and there remain some that are difficult to classify, among them apologies or exercises in self-defense or vindication. Finally, there is a small group of epistles that have a broadly narrative basis. Among these is a series of eight *Peruvian Letters*, first published under a different title in 1753 and collected in Samuel Whyte’s *The Shamrock; or, Hibernian Cresses* (1772). Very freely adapted from Françoise de Graffigny’s *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* (1747, translated 1748), these constitute a rare attempt to reclaim for verse the territory occupied so successfully by epistolary prose fiction after the appearance of Richardson’s *Pamela* in 1740. They also illustrate how mixed a form the eighteenth-century verse epistle could be, combining as they do features of the Ovidian epistle (the supposed writer is Zilia, a Peruvian princess addressing her betrothed), the exotic (details of Peruvian culture but also an intelligent outsider’s view of Europeans), the sentimental narrative (all the dedicatees were female pupils at Whyte’s academy), and the imitation.

A further measure of the variety of the eighteenth-century verse epistle is its elasticity of extent. The length of poems in the sample ranges from two lines, as with Elizabeth Thomas’s aptly entitled “Laconick Epistle to Clemena,” to over a thousand in the case of Samuel Wesley’s “Epistle to a Friend Concerning Poetry.” The average extent is perhaps surprisingly long, with 437 of the 867 poems in the sample running to 93 lines or more, and 168 running to more than 200 lines. Less surprising is the fact that most familiar epistles are considerably shorter than discursive, dramatic or narrative epistles. The exceptions illustrate once more how poets of the period not only exploited but sometimes played against the conventions of the form they chose.

Study of versification offers an additional way of distinguishing among eighteenth-century verse epistles and of understanding how they used formal conventions. The sample’s 867 poems give interesting evidence for the dominance of the couplet. Over 82 percent are in one form of couplet or another: more than 55 percent in iambic pentameters, over 22 percent in iambic tetrameters, and a further nearly 5 percent in anapaestic tetrameters. This possibly represents a higher proportion of
couplets than in the verse of the period generally, because the couplet had already become, in the work of Donne, Jonson, Dryden, and others, the preferred form for the verse epistle. Only six poems in the sample are in blank verse, but over 12 percent are in stanzas, the most common being quatrains (less than 4 per cent), closely followed by the Scots form of Standard Habby (of which more later). Among the curiosities are one example each of trochaic tetrameter couplets, iambic tetrameter triplets, ottava rima, and doggerel, along with thirty-odd poems in irregular forms.

While the verse form of any poem of value is always important to its effect, it has special significance at a period in which writers were highly conscious of tradition and convention – whether they chose to comply with the norms or transgress them. At one end of the spectrum, a poem in doggerel could only be humorous, as with Swift’s “Mary the Cook-Maid’s Letter to Dr. Sheridan”; at the other, a poem in numbered iambic tetrameter triplets, the form Isaac Watts chose for “To David Polhill, Esq.,” is very likely to be serious. More subtly, a large range of inflections is possible within such standard forms as iambic pentameter and iambic tetrameter couplets. In the former case, end-stopped couplets, and the patterns of balance, antithesis, and chiasmus that they encourage, are especially fitting for poems that aspire to a serious or elevated tone; while a looser structure to the couplets, and the use of double rhymes with light endings, suit familiar, humorous, or satirical poems. The tetrameter line, on the other hand, is less easily capable of dignity than the pentameter, because it is a foot shorter. This form is therefore much more likely to be chosen for familiar or humorous poems, and it often gains a droll character of its own through comically bad rhymes featuring polysyllables and light endings – as in the form known as Hudibrastics after the poem that used it most famously. Nevertheless, tetrameter couplets are also capable of achieving a serious tone, especially if double rhymes and light endings are avoided. John Dyer and George Lyttelton used such a form for complimentary poems: Dyer in “Epistle to a Famous Painter,” Lyttelton in “Letter to Lord Hardwicke.” Several poets also used relatively formal tetrameter couplets for amatory poems, including Daniel Bellamy, James Macpherson, and William Stevenson; and some even used them for translations from Horace, for which the preferred form was pentameter couplets, though Christopher Smart was unique in doing so exclusively. Both tetrameter and pentameter couplets are also sometimes varied by triplets or (albeit rarely in the case of tetrameters) by extra
feet. Such devices, satirized by Swift at the end of his “Description of a City Shower,”
are further clues to the kind of effect at which the poet is aiming. They occur most often
in forms that invite ostentation, such as complimentary and discursive epistles.

In her brilliant essay on the topic, Karina Williamson argues that, “In terms of its
discursive properties, the epistle is in fact more, not less, distinct as a kind than satire,
verse essay or lyric” (Williamson 2001: 77). The analogy of the non-literary prose letter
is, however, misleading, even though some verse epistles were not intended as
“literature” and were written and sent as letters. Many verse epistles do not share the
discursive properties of letters, such as salutations, valedictions, set forms of address, or
details of time, place, and situation; and not all style themselves as epistles or letters in
their titles. It is the complimentary and discursive types that tend to differ most from
ordinary letters – a difference marked by the epigraphs, often in Latin, that introduce
many, and by the footnotes that accompany some. Jay Arnold Levine draws an apt
parallel when he remarks that epistles pretend to belong to private correspondence in the
same way that Cecily, in Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest, calls her diary
“simply a very young girl’s record of her own thoughts and impressions, and
consequently meant for publication” (Levine 1962: 678). But a verse epistle is by no
means necessarily the transparent and self-serving fiction this remark suggests. Above
all, writing a discursive essay in the form of a letter enables a poet to solve the problem
of tone by specifying a particular addressee. As is often recognized, Pope was especially
adroit in his choice of supposed recipients. In the four epistles that make up An Essay on
Man he addressed Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, who had led the active life in
government and the meditative as a philosopher; in Epistle to Burlington a leading
architect, patron, and connoisseur; and, in a more guileful manner, in Epistle to a Lady
his longtime friend Martha Blount – guileful in that he exploits her sex and his intimacy
with her in a bid to finesse misogynistic views. The mode of address differs according to
the subject. As Pat Rogers puts it, in An Essay on Man “Bolingbroke’s function is to
mitigate the loneliness of the long-distance speaker” (Rogers 1975: 64); whereas the
tone of Epistle to a Lady is more personal and informal, in keeping with the kind of
light, playful conversation to which, Pope suggests, women can aspire at their best.

The fact that the tone for such a kind of poem had come to be recognized as a
problem is significant. It suggests anxiety over how readers might receive the poet’s
views – an anxiety related perhaps to social insecurity, or to the uncertainty of the
market. Pope, whose status as a middle-class Roman Catholic placed him outside the
social establishment, and who was often exposed to satirical attack, had good reason for
choosing addressees who were sympathetic to him or in culturally prestigious positions.

Poets lower in the social order had still more reason for caution. An interesting
example is James Woodhouse’s “Epistle to Shenstone, in the Shades; On reading his
Rural Elegance.” Given the word “Shades” in its title, and the heading “Written 1784,”
this is a letter that would have perplexed any post office to deliver, as its addressee had
died over twenty years earlier. In the ode to which Woodhouse’s title refers, addressed
to the Countess of Somerset, Shenstone had assumed that country people only enjoyed
nature by thinking of the produce it might yield. Writing more than twenty years after
he, as a laboring-class poet, had benefited from Shenstone’s patronage, Woodhouse
mounts a passionate counter-claim. The poem comes from a period in which he
recognized how far patronage had constrained him (Christmas 2001: 187, 195–98), and
his choice of a deceased addressee enabled him to protest indirectly and without risk of
giving offense. Woodhouse also wrote a series of nine epistles entitled “Love Letters to
My Wife,” varying in length from 92 to 600 lines. Despite the title, and the early
exclamation “A Letter to a Wife! the subject Love!” (Letter I, l. 17), these are not love
letters but verse essays on social, moral, and religious questions. As Woodhouse puts it
near the start of Letter V, his aim is “The World’s Mistakes and Wickedness to scan” (l.
6). The form of verse epistles addressed to his wife Hannah allowed him not only to
expatiate at length and over a variety of topics, but to criticize upper-class tyranny and
oppression. Like his versification – quite elaborate iambic pentameter couplets, varied
by occasional alexandrines – the form is highly artificial, but it provided an acceptable
cover for views that might, if expressed more directly, have provoked censure.

Women writers were especially likely to use verse epistles in such a way. Among
the 112 poems by Mary Barber in her Poems on Several Occasions, a large number may
be called epistolary. Significantly, however, Barber did not use the word “epistle” in any
of her titles, preferring the more informal term “letter” in the seven directly styled as
epistolary; all are occasional poems; and three are identified as written for one of her
children. These are strategies characteristic of socially marginal poets of the period in
their efforts to avoid appearing presumptuous – and Barber was trebly marginal as a
lower-middle-class woman who was Irish. Her “Conclusion of a Letter to the Rev. Mr. C—” is an especially good example. The poem is less than a whole letter; it is written in the unpretentious form of anapaestic tetrameter couplets, common in humorous verse; and it is ironic on her own expense – especially when she imagines her correspondent fulminating against her as “a verse-writing Wife” (l. 20). Yet the ironies run more than one way. They work against her addressee, whose misogyny she comically exaggerates and then counters by not only describing her own idea of a good wife but telling her son how he should behave as a husband. Nevertheless, though more liberal than the caricature she has attributed to her addressee, the idea of the wife’s role she promotes still depends on domesticity, conventional female modesty, and subordination; and, as Christopher Fanning points out, she distances herself from it through quotation (Fanning 2001: 91–3). Like Pope’s epistles, this and her other verse letters show the importance of finding an acceptable tone by defining an appropriate addressee (a clergyman friend and, within the letter, her son). But, for her, the difficulties of suiting voice to readership were more acute. Although, therefore, Barber used the verse letter as a form for presenting a woman’s voice and perspective, her position as a writer obliged her to practice complex strategies of indirection.

Dramatic epistles provided another way in which poets of the period could exploit the form’s potential. If James Woodhouse could write an epistle to someone who was dead, Philip Freneau could assume the voice of a dead writer for his “Epistle from Dr. Franklin (deceased) to his Poetical Panegyrists,” Pope could use a canine voice for “Bounce to Fop. An Heroick Epistle from a Dog at Twickenham to a Dog at Court,” and Anthony Pasquin could conduct correspondences between a house in Cheapside and a villa at Hampstead, and between Carlton House and Brighton Pavilion. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was especially adept at assuming different epistolary voices, and, as a writer of much higher social rank than Mary Barber, and one who did not normally allow her verse into print, she faced fewer constraints. Two striking examples are “Epistle from Mrs. Y[onge] to her Husband” (not in Literature Online, and not published until 1972) and “Epistle From Arthur G[ra]y to Mrs M[urra]y.” Both comment on contemporary scandals. In the first Montagu writes as Mary Yonge to protest against a well-known libertine who, while legally separated from his wife, detected her in a love affair and cashed in by recovering damages from her lover,
divorcing her, and remarrying to advantage. As Isobel Grundy remarks, the poem not only attacks the sexual double standard but “broadens out from this particular case to general advocacy for ill-used wives” (Grundy 1999: 240). The epistle is in the Ovidian tradition of a verse letter from an abandoned woman, though it is unusual in that its author was a woman too. The “Epistle From Arthur G[ra]y” goes further. Not only does Montagu cross boundaries of sex and rank to write in the voice of a footman convicted of the attempted rape of his mistress, she crosses boundaries of genre as well. In part the poem is another Ovidian epistle, though the author is a woman and the rejected lover a man; in part it is also a satire. Its obvious targets are the upper-class men who, like William Yonge, “make Love a Trade” and enjoy their lovers’ beauties “in a Strumpet’s Arms” (Montagu 1977: ll. 44, 55). But Grundy suggests that the rape charge may have been brought to cover up an affair between Griselda Murray and Gilbert Burnet, that Gray may have aimed to catch the couple in bed, and that Montagu may have known all this. If so, “She was not sympathizing with the proletarian lover, but mocking him as an improbable fiction; she did not blame a rape victim but mocked and goaded a false claimant to chastity” (Grundy 1999: 230). [See ch. 13, “LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU, SIX TOWN ECLOGUES AND OTHER POEMS.”]

One of the letters and two conclusions to letters in Montagu’s correspondence are in verse, and others contain verse passages. This was characteristic of a culture in which writing verse was a social accomplishment, and many verse letters were written by people who would not have considered themselves poets. An example (not in Literature Online) is a poem by Lady Sarah Dick to Allan Ramsay thanking him for the gift of his poems and an accompanying verse epistle. It begins:

Dear Allan thanks to you and muse  
Comes from myself and Knight my Spouse  
For your kind canty cosh Epistle  
It warm’d my Heart and made me whistle  
In spite of gloomy glourry weather  
It made my soul as Light as Feather.

(Ramsay 1951–74: vol. 6, p. 158, ll. 1–6; “canty” means “merry,” and “cosh” means “warm” as in “intimate”)
This is very clearly a familiar epistle. The fact that Lady Dick does not disdain so ribald a word as “Bums” (l. 21) is strong evidence that she neither expected nor wished it to be printed, and it was not published until the end of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, her unpunctuated iambic tetrameter couplets, with their comic rhymes and even a triplet, are sprightly, competent verse. The poem attests to the fact that writing verse was a means of amusement and entertainment for many people, not necessarily highly educated and not necessarily with any ambition as poets. Equally interesting is the fact that the epistle by Ramsay to which Lady Dick responded also remained, like others by him, unpublished till long after his death. This indicates that even a poet might write verse epistles that he did not expect to be printed.

Ramsay wrote at least thirty verse epistles, including a fine example to John Gay, and most are familiar. Three that were probably intended both as friendly exchanges and for publication were printed early in his career, along with the verse letters to which they replied, as *Familiar Epistles Between W— H— and A— R—*, and, after several reprintings, they were collected a year or two later in the first volume of his *Poems* in 1721 (Ramsay 1951–74: vol. 1, 115–34). All six are headed with a place-name and date, and most begin with a salutation and end with a valediction. William Hamilton opens the series by praising Ramsay’s verse and wishing to be better acquainted, preferably over “a Bottle / Of reaming Claret” (“Epistle I,” vol. 1, p. 117, ll. 45–6). Ramsay replies with equal warmth and in the same stanza form, praising Hamilton’s ability to “hit the Spirit to a Tit[el]le, / Of Standart Habby” (“Answer I,” vol. 1, p. 119, ll. 35–6). The first stanza of Hamilton’s response illustrates the *joie de vivre* and cordiality that mark this specifically Scots tradition:

Dear RAMSAY,
When I receiv’d thy kind Epistle,
It made me dance, and sing, and whistle;
O sic a Fyke, and sic a Fistle
I had about it!
That e’er was Knight of the *Scots* Thistle
Sae fain, I doubted.
(“Epistle II,” vol. 1, p. 119, ll. 1–6; “sic a Fyke, and sic a Fistle” means “such a commotion,” and “fain” means “joyful”)

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By the end of the series, Ramsay is giving racy down-to-earth advice on how to live, opining that “That Bang’ster Billy Caesar July, . . . Had better sped, had he mair hooly / Scamper’d thro’ Life, / And ’midst his Glories sheath’d his Gooly, / And kiss’d his Wife” (“Answer III,” vol. 1, p. 131, ll. 13, 15–18; Ramsay glosses “Bangster” as “A blustering roaring Person,” “Billy” as “Brother,” and “Gooly” as “A large Knife”). He ends the series by dedicating himself to his friend: “And while my Champers can chew Bread, / Yours — ALLAN RAMSAY” (“Answer III,” vol. I, p. 134, ll. 95–6).

The verse form of Standard Habby to which Ramsay refers in his first response to Hamilton goes back to the troubadours of the eleventh century, but owes its name to a comic elegy of about 1640 by Robert Sempill of Beltrees entitled “The Life and Death of Habbie Simson, the Piper of Kilbarchan” (Damico 1975: 208–12). It consists of six lines rhyming aaabab, the a-rhyming lines tetrameter, the b-lines dimeter. Ramsay helped establish it as the stock form for the familiar Scots epistle. [See ch. 39, “POETRY BEYOND THE ENGLISH BORDERS”] Although it later became known as the Burns stanza after its most famous practitioner, it was also taken up before Burns by Robert Fergusson, and afterwards by several poets including Robert Anderson, Alexander Wilson, and, in America, Josiah Canning. The beauty of the form is that a single stanza is a suitable length for a thought or a sentence, and its structure of three tetrameter lines, followed by two dimeters with a further tetrameter between them, brings about a change of pace and movement, often with a kind of lilt or skip amplified by the rhyme. Although its compactness – not to mention its technical difficulty – renders it less appropriate for a long poem, it is more limber and capable of greater jauntiness than tetrameter or pentameter couplets. These qualities above all fit it for the familiar epistle, and some of the poems Burns wrote in the form are among his best.

Most discussions of the eighteenth-century verse epistle confine themselves chiefly, like William C. Dowling (1991), to the satirical type and to what Pope and John Bell called the ethic. Although these have obvious literary and cultural importance, the neglected familiar epistle has much to tell about literate social relations at the period and the role played in them by verse-writing. As a key example of one of the ways in which the epistle was embedded in social context and circumstance, it suggests that an adequate account of the form must consider its full variety.

The Database of Epistles from Literature Online

The first step was to identify poems from the period that might be classed as epistles by using the search methods and terms noted. As the results showed the author’s name and dates (in both cases where known), the title of the poem, the source text and its date, they were downloaded and used as the database’s foundation. Each item then had to be examined separately. Those that could not be classed as epistles were coded accordingly and other information was added to those that could be so classed: first line, verse form, type of poem, length, century in which written, sex of author, and miscellaneous notes. The resulting database of 867 poems is restricted to those known to have been written in the eighteenth century. It excludes material written before 1700 and published later, but includes material written between 1700 and 1799 and published later. The aim of this restriction was to give priority to the activity of writing rather than those of publication or marketing, though the latter option would also produce interesting results.

It must be emphasized that the total of 867 poems represents only a fraction, albeit a large one, of the verse epistles written in the eighteenth century. Most obviously, it is limited to those included in the versions of the English Poetry Full-Text Database and the American Poetry Full-Text Database available on Literature Online; and, although Steven Hall says that the former is “essentially the complete English poetic canon from 600 to 1900” (Hall 1998: 285), it is by no means all-inclusive. Based as it largely is on the New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature, it does not take full account, for example, of discoveries made by Roger Lonsdale and others, and for this reason it probably underrepresents writing by women. A less obvious limitation, mentioned above, is that the search methods and terms employed identify only poems with the keywords “epist*”, “letter,” or “letters” in their titles or first lines.

The database was compiled from the second edition of Literature Online. Results have not been updated from the third edition because its merging of the search screens
Find Works and Search Texts, which were formerly separate, produces too large a number of false hits from searches on terms such as “letters.” The third edition has a facility for searching by genre, including the verse epistle. This identifies 751 items for the period.

References and Further Reading


<for Notes on Contributors>