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MOVING LETTERS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EPISTOLARY WRITING Arrivals and Departures

HÉLÈNE DACHEZ AND ALLAN INGRAM

Feeling surprised, deeply worried—and perhaps a little angry—that he has so far received no answer to his previous letter, dated 28 August 1732, George Cheyne wrote to the Duchess of Huntingdon on October 28:

Madam,

I am no longer able to bear your ladyship's silence. I have not had the honour of a line, from any one belonging to your ladyship, since your order upon Mr. Brand, which I acknowledged next post in the best manner I could. I am afraid your ladyship's or mine has miscarried.

I am afraid you have been out of order in a manner as not to admit any delay. I am afraid I have fallen in disgrace with your ladyship, contrary to my most earnest intention. I am afraid something of great concern has happened to the valuable and honourable family—in short, madam, I am afraid of a thousand contrary things. I humbly beg your ladyship free me somehow from my pain and fears one way or another, for uncertainty is one of the greatest pains.¹

That a two-month gap between the sending of a letter and the non-reception of its answer should be insufferable for such a keen and assiduous writer as Cheyne shows that to and fro movements are the life and soul of epistolarity. Without such vital exchanges, the message—whose function is to turn distance into closeness, gaps into bridges, to be a substitute for the writer and to compensate for his or her absence—literally becomes a dead letter and the dialogue falls into awkward anguished silence.² On top of being a text meant to be read in the peace and quiet of the addressee's home, a letter is an object designed to go from one place to another or to several others. Motion is part of its essence and a lot can happen to a letter on the move, especially in a country and during a century where people, goods and books—circulating libraries date from the 1740s—were encouraged and expected to be mobile. Laurence Sterne appositely sums up the spirit of the time when he says that “so much of motion, is so much of life, and so much of joy—and . . . to stand still . . . is death and the devil—.”³ It is highly symbolical that Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* should hide her letters in the earth at the foot of a sunflower—a plant that moves toward the sun and follows its course—where a servant is supposed to collect them and take them to her parents, as if to compare the messages to seeds whose nature is to grow and to emphasize that however static letters might be at some stage, they are more often than not either on the move or on the verge of motion.⁴

¹ George Cheyne, *The Letters of George Cheyne to the Countess of Huntingdon*, ed. Charles F. Mullet (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1940), 13.

² In one of his private letters Samuel Richardson mentions the advantages of “the pen that makes distance presence; and brings back to sweet remembrance all the delights of presence” (Samuel Richardson, *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. John Carroll [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964], 65).

³ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinion of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 7.13, 396.

⁴ Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; Or, Virtue Rewarded*, ed. Mark Kinkead-Weekes (London: Dent, 1991), 104. In the same way, *Clarissa* hides her letters in the garden (106) and her aunt

According to Janet Gurkin Altman, "[in epistolary novels] relatively little 'happens' independently of the letters."⁵ As the unfolding of the plot partly depends on what happens to letters, considered in their material aspect as objects going from one place to another, writers thoroughly exploit the letter's moving capacity. The letters' movements are indeed part of the narrative and the characters' fates often depend on them. In Richardson's *Clarissa*, expected movement is perversely turned into unexpected stasis, with tragic consequences for the heroine. It is precisely because Lovelace willingly fails to collect the letter in which Clarissa tells him she refuses to go with him on the following day—as she had previously agreed—that she feels compelled to meet him in an interview that eventuates in her elopement with him. Her messages to Anna, written on the Sunday at 4:00 p.m., and then at 7:00, 9:00, and finally at 7:00 on Monday morning, reveal her growing and soon unbearable feeling of panic. Although she had prepared herself "to stand the shock of his exclamatory reply," when he learned she had changed her mind, she is helpless when faced with her motionless letter: "MY letter is not yet taken away!" she exclaims, "—If he should not send for it, or take it, and come hither on my not meeting him tomorrow . . . what shall I do? . . . THERE remains my letter still . . . What can the man mean, I wonder! . . . OH my dear! There yet lies the letter, just as I left it . . . —If he receive not the letter, I must see him" (363).⁶

Although Clarissa's departure from Harlowe Place depends on a motionless letter, the various turning points of her story hinge on letters-on-the-move or, to be more accurate, on letters that go greater lengths, or different ways, than they were first intended to do. They do so mainly through indirection, for letters are regularly stolen or diverted before they reach their supposed addressee, if they ever do. Summing up Michel Serres's theory of the parasite, Martha J. Koehler convincingly shows how "a binary model of sender and receiver [is replaced] with a triangular emphasis on the 'third man' or parasite who branches out onto the channel of communication and excites, transforms . . . intercepts, and/or diverts

is surprised she should be full of energy when she is outside: "how nimbly you trip along; and what an alertness governs all your motions" (Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa; Or, the History of a Young Lady*, ed. Angus Ross [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985]), 347.

⁵ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 9.

⁶ In Letter 99, Lovelace explains to Belford why he chose *not* to collect Clarissa's letter: "I told thee my reasons for not going in search of a letter of countermand. I was right; for, if I had, I should have found such a one; and had I received it, she would not have met me" (399).

the flow of messages. . . . Its presence catalyzes a new level of complexity within the communicating system.”⁷

Supposedly direct movement from A to B becomes serpentine. Indirection wreaks all the more havoc as the addressee does not know that he or she should have received a letter or that the letter he or she receives has been altered and is therefore widely different from the one that was sent. Tragic alterations take place between a letter’s departure and its arrival to its rightful addressee. Lovelace gloats over the changes he will effect on a message from Anna to Clarissa that he has been lucky enough to steal: “I [will] turn the poison of this letter into wholesome aliment” (753), he says. As if by a parasitical epistolary sleight of hand—all the more pernicious as it goes unnoticed—the “devilish house” (744) that Anna urgently advises her friend to leave becomes, in Lovelace’s rewritten words, “a very genteel house, and fit to receive people of fashion” (814). Only when it is too late does Anna understand that her letter—together with those of her friends that she herself received—have become “a villainous forgery!” (1014). “This vile forged letter, though a long one,” she explains, “contains but a few extracts from mine. [Lovelace] has omitted everything, I see, in it that could have shown you what a detestable house the house is; and given you suspicions of the vile Tomlinson—You will see this and how he has turned Miss Lardner’s information and my advices to you . . . to his own horrid ends” (1014). Like a parasite, Lovelace sucks up the original contents of the letter; and even more perniciously than a parasite, who “establishes an ‘unjust pact’ with his host in paying for his meal with ‘words’ but who makes the party ‘go’” (Koehler, 22), he perverts the binary exchange in an utterly tragic way that eventuates in Clarissa’s death.

Besides, the delivery time of the letters is out of joint in Richardson’s novel—a disruption on which the heroine’s tragic fate, and that of Lovelace too, relies. The text alternates belated and untimely letter deliveries, showing that the messages are hardly ever sent or delivered as or when they should be to enable the characters to be saved. Clarissa is repeatedly the victim of letters she gets when it is already too late, as if the messages moved at too slow a pace. Although letters traditionally have a mediatory function, in *Clarissa*, on

⁷ Martha J. Koehler, “‘Faultless Monsters’ and Monstrous Egos: The Disruption of Model Selves in Frances Burney’s *Evelina*,” *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 43 (2002): 19–41, 22, 23. The theory of the parasite is analyzed by Michel Serres in his essay: *Le Parasite* (Paris: Grasset, 1980); *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

the contrary, they seem to emphasize temporal, geographical and emotional gaps. Nothing can be redeemed or recovered when the heroine mentions the letter which "had it come to my hands, would have saved me from ruin" (1019). Morden, Clarissa's cousin, is repeatedly associated with belated letters. The messages he sends seem to travel at an exceedingly slow pace, as a consequence of which they have no effect whatsoever on the plot itself and only underline how unavoidable Clarissa's doom is. Unaware that his cousin has already eloped with Lovelace, Morden writes his first letter to her to entreat her to beware of such an arrant rake (561–64). At the end of the novel he can only regret that "the letter I wrote to you from Florence . . . came too late to have its hoped-for effect. I am very sorry it did: as I am that I did not come sooner to England in person" (1299). Similarly, Letters 483, 484, and 485, where Clarissa's sister Arabella and Uncle John forgive the heroine and tell her the whole family are ready to welcome her back to Harlowe Place, ironically and cruelly arrive once Clarissa is dead (1364–66).

The tragic orientation of the novel also—and originally—relies on letters received too early. In Letter 87, Anna gives Clarissa some advice: first to come to her rather than go with Lovelace, and second, to marry Lovelace as soon as possible if she chooses to go with him (356). Clarissa writes a fresh letter to Anna (Letter 88) before she gets Letter 87, and the reader is invited to surmise that the fatal interview with Lovelace would have been different—or even would not have taken place at all—if those letters had been read in the right order. In the same way, although Belford urges Lovelace not to meet Morden, the rake writes to Clarissa's cousin before he reads his friend's letter and asks him to express an opinion on the validity of a duel. "I wrote to him yesterday, without waiting for this your answer to my last," Lovelace says, "I could not avoid it. I could not . . . live in suspense. . . . I could almost wish I had not written to Florence till I had received thy letter now before me. But it is gone. Let it go" (1478–79). Untimely sending and reception have as tragic consequences as belated ones.

In their very essence, letters are a particularly flexible medium of communication for several reasons. They first of all depend on "temporal polyvalence" (Altman, 117). Their meaning "is determined by many moments: the actual time that an act described is performed, the moment when it is written down, the respective times when that letter is mailed, received, read, and reread. . . . Meaning is relative not to one time but to two or more" (Altman, 129). In *Pamela*, the original meaning of letters—or rather the way they are interpreted—radically changes before and after the pond scene, which may therefore be read as the novel's turning point. Whereas Mr. B. first considers

Pamela as a dishonest, falsely prudish character, his opinion becomes wholly other after he reads her entire correspondence, and through this very reading. As Roy Roussel humorously notices, “in Richardson’s world . . . men and women must first become correspondents [or here, read each other’s letters] before they can become man and wife.”⁸

Epistolary novels are in essence and “in principle in flux, unfinished, open always to reshaping, refining, rewriting. Such instability is an essential feature of the text in process, and readers are partners in the shaping process of the text.”⁹ Anna Howe, for instance, helps Clarissa become aware of her true feelings for Lovelace, and shows her that her “*conditional liking*” will certainly turn into “*liking unconditional*” (287). Likewise, in a letter to Johannes Stinstra, Richardson clearly explains that “the Subject of one Letter arose often out of another” (Carroll, 234–35).

Not only are roles exchanged between writers and readers—thereby creating a dialogic way of speaking and/or writing, always on the move and always regenerated by new or changing parameters—but motion also accounts for emotion, and epistolary writing, which Jean Rousset defines as “cardiogram literature,” hinges on an “aesthetics of commotion.”¹⁰ If readers help writers to see their feelings more clearly and shift their own views, opinions and interpretations, they are also moved by what they read. Epistolary movement—in the sense of the arousal of emotion through motion—is particularly obvious through Richardson’s original technique of “writing to the moment,” which Belford defines to Lovelace. He explains to him that Clarissa writes “in the midst of *present* distresses!” and lists the advantages of this particularly dynamic, mobile and flexible technique: “How much more lively and affecting, for that reason, may her style be, than all that can be read in the dry narrative, unanimated style of persons relating difficulties and dangers surmounted! . . . the relater *unmoved* by his own story, how then able to

⁸ Roy Roussel, “Reflections on the Letter: The Reconciliation of Distance and Presence in *Pamela*,” *Journal of English Literary History* 41 (1974): 375–99, 390.

⁹ Florian Stuber, “Introduction,” *Clarissa; Or, the History of a Young Lady*, eds. Florian Stuber, Jim Springer Borck, and Margaret Anne Doody (New York: AMS Press, 1990), 8 volumes, 1.11.

¹⁰ Jean Rousset, *Forme et signification: Essai sur les structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel* (Paris: Corti, 1962); the author speaks of “[une] littérature du cardiogramme” (87). We have borrowed the phrase “esthétique de la commotion” (100) from Regina Bochenek-Franczakowa, *Le Roman épistolaire à voix multiples en France de 1761 à 1782. Problèmes de forme: destinataire-destinataire* (Kraków: Nakładem Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1986). Janet Gurkin Altman remarks that “the letter writer simultaneously seeks to affect his reader and is affected by him” (88).

move the hearer or reader?" (1178, *emphasis ours*). Whether he be intra- or extradiegetic, the reader cannot but be deeply affected by Clarissa's "moving eloquence" (1337), Belford says. Even the writer literally feels in his body the effect of emotional writing, and Lovelace explains to his friends, in words echoing Isaac Newton's theory of vibration, that "the busy scenes I have just passed through have given emotions to my heart. . . . My heart . . . has communicated its tremors to my fingers; and in some places the characters are so indistinct and unformed that thou'lt hardly be able to make them out" (936).

Significantly enough, in his letters, Richardson insists on his desire to speak from the heart and address the heart—and not, or at the very least not only, the head—of his readers. "I . . . have nothing but *heart* to recommend me;" he says, "and . . . write whatever, at the moment, comes uppermost, trusting to that heart, and regarding not head" (Carroll, 166–67). He is deeply shocked at Abbé Prévôt's deletions, especially when moving parts have disappeared from the French translation: "I knew not, that such Mutilations were allowable, except the Translation had been called an Abridgement" (Carroll, 238), he complains, "this gentleman has thought fit to omit some of the most affecting parts; as the death of Belton; Miss Howe's lamentation over the corpse of her friend; Sinclair's death, and remorse; and many of the letters that passed between Lovelace and Belford, after Clarissa's death" (Carroll, 223). Fortunately, Abbé Prévôt did not go so far as to suppress the pages relating Clarissa's death, that Aaron Hill found intensely moving: "you *move* . . . twenty thousand times more *forcibly*, than all the *Tragedies*, of all Nations in the World."¹¹

Emotion circulates between writer and reader at the same time as the text itself—as an object—circulates among an ever-increasing number of people. Belford acts as the mediator who first completes and organizes the text, and then edits two copies of it that he circulates, in accordance with the wish Clarissa expresses in her will (1418). *Clarissa*, a novel on the move, becomes the substitute for the heroine's now motionless body. "Getting the lady buried," Ann Louise Kibbie writes,

serves as another beginning, inaugurating the posthumous section of the novel. . . . Now disembodied—communicating through her last will and testament, and even more forcefully through the packet of posthumous letters she gives to Belford—Clarissa sets

¹¹ John Carroll, ed., "Introduction," *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 3–35, 13.

about controlling the circulation of her own story, authorizing “a complement” of all the documents relating to it.¹²

As a consequence of increased textual movement and circulation, a shift takes place between internal private readers (the original addressees of the letters) to internal public (other characters in the novel reading the letters), to external public (extradiegetic readers), to such effect that “we pass almost imperceptibly from the fictional to the real, historical world in a narrative that portrays the story of its publication” (Altman, 111). As the editor of *Clarissa*, Belford—the good “ford,” which enables crossing from one place to another—moves freely and easily between the real world of the extradiegetic reader and the fictional world of the intradiegetic reader and character.¹³

But fiction does not have exclusive rights to moving letters, or rather to those devices that made the epistolary form so peculiarly suited to fictional purposes. Other letters, between members of the living, rather than the imagined, community, inevitably reveal similar frustrations and similar displays of emotion within their pages. Here is an example from 27 July 1784.

I don't wonder at all dearest Madam at your being shy of writing, when you have an Idea, either of Letters being lost—or of my reading them to the guardians, nothing can so effectually destroy Confidence, for though one seldom writes about Matters of great Importance yet to have it all canvassed over by those who are *sure* to judge unfavourably, is so very offensive, that a Correspondence upon such Terms must I am sure give you more Pain than Pleasure. No one has however I assure you, ever read your Letters but myself—I sometimes read Passages of them to the Girls before Miss

¹² Ann Louise Kibbie, “The Estate, the Corpse, and the Letter: Posthumous Possession in *Clarissa*,” *Journal of English Literary History* 74 (2007): 117–43, 134–35. In the same way, Richardson mentions the possibility that movement may continue in real life too: “if [when I am dead] any of my friends desire their letters to be return'd, they will be readily come at for that purpose” (Carroll, 317).

¹³ Julia Genster interestingly notes that “[Belford's name suggests] the ability to cross the currents that separate *Clarissa* and *Lovelace*. Richardson had first conceived him as Mr. Greenville, figuring him as a combinatory, even oxymoronical figure; the rechristening marks him more urgently as a passer from one realm to another” (Julia Genster, “Belforded Over: The Reader in *Clarissa*,” eds. Carol Houlihan Flynn and Edward Copeland, *Clarissa and Her Readers: New Essays for the Clarissa Project* [New York: AMS Press, 1999], *The Clarissa Project*, vol. 9, 143–62), 150.

Nicolson—but to that you have I dare say no Objection. All your Letters have come perfectly safe. . . . You have by this Time got all our Letters I suppose, I sent you a great Packet in a Frank, with Miss Nicolson's Purse.¹⁴

"Madam" is Hester Lynch Piozzi (until earlier that same week Hester Lynch Thrale), the correspondent is Hester Maria Thrale, known as "Q" for "Queeney," her eldest daughter, then aged twenty, "the Girls" are the three younger daughters, and Miss Nicolson is the young governess, scarcely older than Queeney herself, to whom the "guardians" entrusted their welfare when they removed them to Brighton. The letter is a response to that from her mother on 23 July, worrying that "somebody stops our Letters," that she cannot write "*freely*," and that "the Guardians" might be seeing her "Stuff" (1. 95). Yet Queeney's bland "seldom" writing of matters of "great Importance" substantially understates the correspondence that had been taking place over the last month or so, that had involved some of the leading personalities of the time, and that had described love and passion, the separation of a family, treachery and betrayal, frustration, despair and jubilation, anger, resentment, forgery and even, at one point, a suspicion of impending incest, when Queeney is being troubled with unwanted attentions from Jeremiah Crutchley, whom Hester suspected of being her former husband's, the late Henry Thrale, illegitimate son.

Apart from Hester and her daughter, the correspondence included letters between Fanny Burney, Samuel Johnson, Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Carter, Susanne Phillips, and Charles Burney, as well as side references to other correspondents and acquaintances. The momentous issue was the marriage between Mrs. Thrale, widowed since April 1781, and, to the outrage of all society and most of her family, Gabriel Piozzi, the Italian singer and dancing master. The repercussions of the match, particularly during June and July of 1784, not least through the inflamed movement of pieces of paper between London, Bath, and Brighton, were sufficiently dramatic to have belonged in a novel of their own, even though the outcome was, at the end of July, a successfully accomplished marriage ceremony (or rather two ceremonies, a Catholic and a Protestant) and not, in any real sense, the death of the heroine.

¹⁴ *The Piozzi Letters: Correspondence of Hester Lynch Piozzi, 1784–1821 (formerly Mrs. Thrale)*, ed. Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1989), 6 volumes, vol. 1, 1784–1791, 103.

The sequence (and there are twenty-three surviving letters from Hester Piozzi herself, as well as others between the different correspondents) had been preceded by a good deal of physical movement. Gabriel Piozzi had left England for Italy the previous year as Hester attempted to placate her family, not least her daughters, and society generally, by giving him up. He was recalled (with the grudging agreement of her daughters) in the summer of 1784, leaving Italy on 2 June. Meanwhile, the daughters, in consequence, were moved at the guardians' insistence to Brighton and Hester herself went to Bath to await Piozzi. The letter sequence begins with a degree of urgency as she writes to Fanny Burney on 20 May, worried about finding a suitable companion for the daughters. She asks for Burney's advice, then retracts that request, and anticipates her own journeys from Bath to London, or perhaps to Sussex. Yet under the rush there is also tension: "Now make me no Answer at all to all this Rhodomontade," she writes, still to Burney, "but tell how much you love me" (1.60). Then, in a second letter, "I only write six Words lest you should think me sick, dead, or distracted" (1.61). Indeed, underneath the affection there is real apprehension of changing affections, as she writes in a third letter on 24 June: "I am delighted my sweetest Soul to receive your pretty dear Scrap: I had forgotten my own promise, and was thinking only of suspicion lest your Love should be diminished towards your H: L: T. The dismal Stories I heard in London . . . were such that as kept me in a perpetual Transition from Laughing to crying and back again" (1.62).

Changing affections, and the need for constant reassurance, are to the fore in the letters to Burney: "I am ashamed to think that I could suspect you of alienated Kindness: you are all Virtue. . . / Fare you well! and write quickly" (1.63). Yet that which was being held back with Burney, Piozzi's fear of social disapproval and of being shunned by her former friends, very swiftly became a reality with others, and most dramatically with the by then aged Samuel Johnson. On 30 June she sent to him, as one of the guardians, a circular letter informing him of the daughters' move to Brighton, and that Piozzi's "coming back from Italy . . . would be succeeded by our Marriage." (1.72) She added, however, a personal letter in view of their "Friendship":

I should beg your pardon for concealing from you a Connection which you must have heard of by many People, but I suppose never believed. Indeed, my dear Sir, it was concealed only to spare us both needless Pain; I could not have borne to reject that Counsel it would have killed me to take; and I only tell it you now, because all is *irrevocably settled*, and out of your power to

prevent. Give me leave however to say that the dread of your disapprobation has given me many an anxious moment, and tho' perhaps the most independent Woman in the World—I feel as if I was acting without a parent's Consent—till you write kindly to your faithful Servant. (1.72)

Meanwhile, as Hester handles her friends and family, sending to each the missive that touches, she trusts, the right emotional chords, orchestrating, as far as she can, the reaction and response to the impending event, Gabriel Piozzi moves closer: he has set out, she expects him by "the 2d. of July" (1. 62), he is due, he writes—"here are four from Piozzi . . . I'll enclose one of 'em. Oh! here's new ones—Good God! he's come sure enough! he must be come by now" (1. 63–65), he's "safe in London at last . . . but very ill; . . . He is *safe* however, and but 100 Miles off" (1.70). and finally, as she writes to Fanny Burney on 1st July ("written in the Night at Bath"):

I cannot sleep—how should I! my Piozzi is come home! he lives, he loves me, he sleeps tonight at Harford's on the North Parade, in the Bed *you* slept in there. I have seen him, I have rejoiced over him: I have cried, and prayed, and thanked God—and cried again for Joy, a whole Day, and almost a whole Night. Let me now write to my Burney; She will forgive and soothe my Frenzy, think, my dear Creature! Seventeen Months of Absence. . . . *Can* I love him too well? has he not cost me my life almost? have I not purchased him with my very Vitals? (1. 75)

Movement begets movement, arrival begets even more movement—a sleepless letter as written from the moment as anything in fiction, and as ready to stimulate a response.

As Piozzi comes to Bath, however, so does Johnson's reply, arriving three days later, on 4 July (Johnson was in fact writing it on 2 July, on Hester and Piozzi's first whole day together). If it was a taste of things to come, of other letters moving between other, more distant, correspondents in response to the step she was about to take, it was nevertheless awful in itself and represented a fatal crisis in their relationship.

Madam,

If I interpret your letter right, you are ignominiously married, if it is yet undone, let us once talk together. If you have abandoned

your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness; if you have forfeited your Fame, and your country, may your folly do no further mischief.

If the last act is yet to do, I, who have loved you, esteemed you, revered you, and served you, I who long thought you the first of human kind, entreat that before your fate is irrevocable, I may once more see you. I was, I once was, Madam, most truly yours, Sam: Johnson

I will come down if you permit it. (1. 79)

"Coming down," in fact, was the last thing that Hester wanted. Among the various movements, actual and epistolary, that constitute the extended episode leading up to her remarriage, Johnson's sudden arrival in Bath was to be avoided at all costs. The day she received it, 4 July, she dispatched a reply, not only rebutting the "ignominy" of such a marriage as she intended, but decisively ending relations of any kind with Johnson: "Sir—I have this Morning received from You so rough a Letter, in reply to one which was both tenderly and respectfully written, that I am forced to desire the conclusion of a Correspondence which I can bear to continue no longer" (1, 81-82). She adds, in what in the circumstances is a sharp indicator of the extent to which moving letters may either substitute for, or else inhibit or prevent, movement among people: "I write by the Coach the more speedily and effectually to prevent your coming hither" (1, 82).

The same day, a Sunday, she writes too to Queeney, complaining about the delays in the marriage: "The Delays . . . are numerous and incredible; but I have had *one happy Day!* It was the 2nd. of July, I never had so happy a Day in all my Life—Thursday was Tumult, & Terror, & Hope & Anxiety—but Fryday was all Tranquillity & Peace & Comfort—and now comes the Storm." The "storm" is Johnson: "I must enclose Johnson's Letter and my Reply: will he come after that Letter reaches him?—perhaps so: When come the others?" (1, 83)

So determined was she that he should not come in person that her subsequent letter to him of 15 July (for the correspondence continued on more soothing terms) stands uniquely as a supremely manipulative document, based both on the physical movement of letters and on the emotional movement that letters might bring about. It begins with apparent sincerity, with "Not only my good Wishes but my most fervent Prayers for your Health and Consolation shall for ever attend and follow my dear Mr. Johnson" (1, 93), but ends, in the surviving copy, with an erased signature. As her editors

conjecture: "Probably erased at some later date was the deceptive signature H: L: Piozzi. HLT had wished SJ to believe that the marriage was consummated so that he would no longer interfere" (1, 94, n. 3). Moreover, while the letter itself was dated from Bath on 15 July and posted there the next day, Hester had actually arrived in London on 12 July and was still there on the sixteenth. It had therefore either been forward-dated and left for posting, or had already traveled to Bath as an enclosure for posting back to London! Letters designed to move might themselves move in mysterious ways in order to move more effectively. Johnson's erasing of the signature, her first, clearly, as Hester Lynch Piozzi, demonstrates just how moving that could be.

Johnson in his turn had already written to Queeney on 1 July, with reference to the removal to Brighton:

My Dearest,

I read you letter with anguish and astonishment, such as I never felt before. I had fondly flattered myself that time had produced better thoughts. I can only give You this consolation that, in my opinion, You have hitherto done rightly. You have not left your Mother, but your Mother has left You.¹⁵

He was to express similar sentiments to Sir John Hawkins later in the month: "Poor Thrale! I thought that either her virtue or her vice would have restrained her from such a marriage. She is now become a subject for her enemies to exult over, and for her friends, if she has any left, to forget or pity."¹⁶ By the end of November, only a month before he died, he was telling Fanny Burney: "I drive her quite from my mind. If I meet with one of her letters, I burn it instantly."¹⁷

All this was in spite of the more accommodating letters that had passed between Johnson and Hester later that July. But while Johnson was moving through, or communicating with, one set of circles, Hester continued to be engaged with "the others." There had been tension with Fanny Burney, as well as with Queeney and her two other eldest daughters, and William Seward, in whom she had confided in 1783, had been discovered as acting a duplicitous part in concert with both Queeney and Burney. She anticipated

¹⁵ *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5 volumes, vol. IV: 1782–1784, 337.

¹⁶ *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, IV, 351.

¹⁷ *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, IV, 344, citing *Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay*, ed. Austin Dobson (London: Macmillan, 1904), 6 volumes, vol. II: June 1781–August 1786, 271.

far further repercussions once the marriage took place, and far more publicly than hitherto. On the morning of 25 July, the second ceremony, the Protestant, took place in Bath, and they were man and wife. That same day Elizabeth Montagu wrote to Elizabeth Handcock Vesey:

Mrs. Thrale's marriage has taken such horrible possession of my mind I cannot advert to any other subject. I am sorry and feel the worst kind of sorrow that which is blended with shame. . . . I am myself convinced that the poor Woman is mad and indeed have long suspected that her mind was disordered. . . . I am heartily grieved for Miss Burney, and Doctor Johnson, female delicacy, and male wisdom, will be much shocked. (1, 99)

As early as 19 July, and therefore before the wedding, Elizabeth Carter had written from Deal to Mrs. Montagu: "I am informed that Mrs. Thrale is by this time Signora Piozzi, and that her daughters have chosen another guardian. Is it true? I am sorry if it is, but not surprized; and she always seemed to be a genius of that eccentric kind, which is mighty apt to be accompanied by 'a plentiful lack' of common sense" (1, 102).

Correspondence not only moves ahead of events, but even substitutes for those events in its capacity to broadcast them. Conversely, Fanny Burney, believing the marriage to have been delayed yet again, writes to her father on 26 July: "As to poor Mrs. Thrale—she only keeps retired till she finds who will seek her; she has no intention at all of *concealment*, but merely of present obscurity. . . . Poor unhappy Mrs. Thrale! What a delusion she has to awake from!—alas!—" (1, 102).

Johnson died on 13 December, but "the others" were less easily disposed of. Her relations with Queeney were never the same, nor with Fanny Burney, and she lost too the friendship of the Elizabeths, Montagu, Carter and Handcock Vesey, of the novelist Sarah Scott, of Leonard Smelt, Hester Chapone, and of William Weller Pepys and his wife, among others, and chose to fall out with many more. One, her physician Matthew Dobson, actually died on the morning of the wedding "while I was wedded to an honest Man whom he had the Impudence to say was come home so ill, and nerve-shaken by anxiety, that he *would not answer Mrs Thrale's Purpose* whose Health required a *Man*" (1, 98). She was also exposed to a good deal of ridicule in the press for several years to come.¹⁸

¹⁸ See *The Piozzi Letters*, 1, 75, n. 9.

One final letter, to Queeney, written immediately after the Protestant ceremony in Bath, crowns the sequence and in a sense celebrates its inevitable movement toward achievement. Not only are they man and wife—"in every Room when I have been on my Knees *for* this Felicity, will I bless God for giving it to my innocent & fervent Prayers" (1, 98)—but she has a report to relate which caps her triumph of will, of personality, of individual determination against the world:

Oh but the King! King George the third told his Librarian that Mrs. Thrale had made an *odd* Choice, but he doubted not it was a *wise* one, as She was one of the *best* as well as one of the most accomplish'd Women in England; & that He should be sorry Mr Piozzi carried her out of his Dominions. . . . Oh yes, & the King said how I had written a Letter to Dr Johnson in vindication of the Step I had taken, which made Dr Johnson cry. (1, 98)

Mrs Piozzi's moving letters might be real, not fictional, but their capacity for addressing the heart, it seems, was no less effective, if at times equally manipulated, than those of Samuel Richardson.