

Generic instability in Voltaire's correspondence:
When is a letter not a letter?

The deceptively simple question 'What is a letter?' poses particular challenges in the case of Voltaire, not least because the epistolary corpus is so exuberantly large and heterogeneous.¹ The statistics alone are staggering. We know of over 15,000 letters written by Voltaire (and that figure is only a fraction of the total number he must have written, perhaps in excess of 40,000); they were composed over a period of over 70 years and are addressed to over 1,800 correspondents. He writes usually in French, of course, and was perfectly well understood in that language by Frederick II and Catherine the Great; but he also composed letters in English, in Italian, in Latin, and he managed at least a couple of letters in German, to Frederick II, and to Franz von Freytag, when in 1753 Frederick's agents were holding him under arrest.² Perhaps it is his burning desire to communicate that makes Voltaire such a remarkable and insatiable letter-writer.

Take the example of his letters to Johann Christoph Gottsched, whom he must have met during his stay at the Prussian court between 1750 and 1753. He persists in a correspondence with the German man of letters, even though they did not share an obvious common language: we know of seven letters which Voltaire wrote to the German author, dating from the years 1753 to 1756 (none in the other direction have survived), and of these seven letters, two from early on in their epistolary relationship are in Latin, four are in French, and one starts haltingly in German before moving into French: perhaps as a hint, Gottsched sends him in 1753 the French translation of his German grammar, to which Voltaire replies:

Monsieur, / Er habt mir mit ein geschench wereheret, welches ich nicht werth bin. Ich bin zu alt um zu lern eine sprache welche si so gut lehren. Mais je serai en français reconnaissant toute ma vie des bontés que vous m'avez témoignées dans mon séjour à Leipsick [...].³

¹ I am very grateful to Alice Breathe for her help with the preparation of this article.

² D4375 and D5352. Numbers preceded by 'D' refer to the letters in Voltaire, *Correspondence and related documents*, 'Definitive edition', ed. Theodore Besterman, in: *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vols 85–135 (Oxford 1968–1977). In quoting from this edition, French spelling has been modernized throughout.

³ 25 April 1753, D5269.

This is a correspondence that can hardly be contained within the bounds of one language.

I. Defining a letter: some preliminary considerations

There are two factors that strongly influence our attempts to define what a letter is or is not: (1) its function (or seeming function), and (2) the edition or editions that we use to gain access to that correspondence. Firstly, with regard to the function of a correspondence, and to the use that a given writer makes of his or her letters, we find widely divergent models, even among literary authors. A poet like Baudelaire frequently uses his letters to write about his plans and dreams: he writes to friends about his writings, and most of all about the works he would like to write. In another case, a *philosophe* like D'Alembert will exchange scientific letters with colleagues that are an integral part of his philosophical *œuvre*.⁴ At the risk of gross over-simplification, one might say that in these examples, Baudelaire's letters are about his works, while D'Alembert's *are* his works. Voltaire's complex use of the letter form resists such simple categorisation, even if fundamentally his use of letters is instrumental – as he himself says, 'j'écris pour agir'.⁵ Voltaire's letters are undoubtedly part of his *œuvre*, but they are also more than that, in so far as his activity as a letter-writer became a central element in his authorial status and posture, and his celebrity status complicates the picture – we shall return to this.

With regard to the second point, our sense of what a letter might be or do is of necessity powerfully shaped by the edition that we have to hand: every critical edition of a work is of course an interpretation of that work, and different critical editions apply (sometimes widely) divergent editorial criteria which may be more or less evident to the reader. In the particular case of Voltaire's correspondence, Theodore Besterman's monumental 'definitive' edition in 51 volumes (published by the Voltaire Foundation between 1968 and 1977) has created an intimidating corpus of 21,222 letters, of which over 15,000 are by Voltaire. It is simply impossible to study Voltaire's letters without using the Besterman edition, and so for scholars working in this area, the answer to the question 'what is a letter by Voltaire?' is 'anything in the Besterman edition': the edition has quite simply created the corpus. Besterman's achievement is staggering, and my intention here is most certainly not to criticize it. But I do want to suggest that we need to use his edition with care, or at least

⁴ See Irène Passeron, *Qu'est-ce qu'une lettre? Lettres ostensibles, ouvertes ou privées dans la correspondance de D'Alembert*, in: *Littérales* 37 (2006), p. 59–86.

⁵ In a letter to the *pasteur* Jacob Vernes: 'Jean-Jacques [Rousseau] n'écrit que pour écrire et moi j'écris pour agir' (D14117).

heightened awareness. Furthermore, now that the Besterman edition has been digitized and included in the database *Electronic Enlightenment*, it is possible to imagine how we might want at some point in the future to think about making revisions and improvements to the digital edition.

The core problem is that Besterman includes among the ‘letters’ of Voltaire a wide range of heterogeneous documents, including ‘open’ or public letters published in journals. The full extent of Voltaire’s engagement with the press remains to be studied, and it is not easy even to draw up a comprehensive list of his ‘letters’ to journals, since some are signed by pseudonyms (some more transparent than others), and others are anonymous. It is clear, for example, that Voltaire had a lifelong publishing relationship with the *Mercur de France*: he is talked about in the *Mercur* as early as 1722 (see D122), and his published letters in that journal number around ninety, stretching over 45 years from 1731 (D416) to 1776 (D20073).⁶ He also published frequently in the *Journal encyclopédique*, which was sympathetic to the cause of the *philosophes*, and in numerous other journals besides, including the *Daily Post* (e.g. D329), the *Gazette d’Amsterdam* (e.g. D1264), the *Gazette de Cologne* (e.g. D5095), the *Gazette d’Utrecht* (e.g. D5700), the *Gazette littéraire de l’Europe* (e.g. D12144), the *Journal de Paris* (e.g. D20481), the *Journal des savants* (e.g. D2593), the *Nouvelliste du Parnasse* (e.g. D415), and so forth. These ‘letters’ could for the most part be categorized as essays or articles, yet there is no absolute distinction between the private letter and the journal article, which is probably why Besterman errs on the side of caution by including everything.

Indeed, Voltaire often seems to go out of his way to blur those distinctions between a ‘real’ and a ‘fictitious’ letter. We may consider the letter he writes to the doctor Jean Jacques Paulet in 1768 (D14977), a carefully crafted response to the latter’s *Histoire de la petite vérole* in which he manages to suggest his disagreement with the author while at the same time seeming to flatter him.⁷ This letter, which manages to be both learned – quoting Juvenal’s *Satires* – and amusing, provides a pretext for Voltaire to speak out in public on a cause, inoculation, which he had been supporting for over thirty years, since the *Lettres philosophiques*.⁸ And to underline the point that this is a public pronouncement, Voltaire signs with the full authority of his official court title, ‘gentilhomme ordinaire de la chambre du roi’. We do not possess the autograph letter sent to Paulet,

⁶ See Madeleine Fields, *Voltaire et le ‘Mercur de France’*, in: *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 20 (1962), p. 175–215 (at p. 180–82).

⁷ Voltaire’s friend Thieriot sends him a further publication by Paulet on the same subject in 1769 (see D15973).

⁸ See Catriona Seth, *Les Rois aussi en mouraient. Les Lumières en lutte contre la petite vérole* (Paris 2008).

but Besterman in his edition describes a draft manuscript with corrections in Voltaire's hand (where the letter is dated 23 April 1768), as well as six other manuscript versions. In addition the letter is printed in the *Mercure de France* in July 1768, under the rubric 'Médecine', with the title 'Lettre de M. de Voltaire à M. Paulet, au sujet de l'histoire de la petite vérole'. The version that appears here is slightly abbreviated when compared to the manuscript versions known to us, and Besterman speaks of the text in the *Mercure* being 'bowdlerized'; but is this correct? This would imply that the longer version was composed by Voltaire, and that the shortened version that appears in the *Mercure* was in some ways unauthorized. In fact we simply do not know whether this letter began life as a 'real' letter to Paulet, and then ended up being published, or whether Voltaire intended from the start that this would be a letter for public consumption, and sent a version of it to Paulet almost as a courtesy. Indeed, since we don't possess the autograph letter, we don't even know for certain that he ever sent the letter to Paulet. What is clear is that the letter was designed from the start to circulate: the number of manuscript copies suggests that Voltaire himself was responsible for the production of at least some of these, and the prompt publication in the *Mercure* was almost certainly at his initiative. Grimm, in the *Correspondance littéraire*, speaks slightly of Paulet's thesis, but adds slyly that his readers will much prefer to read Voltaire's letter to Paulet:⁹ he does not give the text of the letter, but refers to it as though at least some of his readership will know it or have access to it. Voltaire's letter to Paulet is a published essay that gains authority through its pose as a private communication.

II. Public and private in Voltaire's correspondence

This question 'Qu'est-ce qu'une lettre?' is asked by Benoît Melançon in the opening chapter of his *Diderot épistolier*.¹⁰ In wanting to situate Diderot in the history of the letter as a genre, he makes an important point about the eighteenth century as a moment of transition between two modes:

Les lettres de Diderot témoignent [...] de l'histoire du genre épistolaire: entre la lettre érudite et ostensible telle que la recueillaient en livres les XVI^e et XVII^e siècles, et la lettre réputée lieu de l'intimité telle qu'elle se développe depuis la modernité, la lettre du

⁹ *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, ed. M. Tourneux (Paris 1877–1882), issue of 15 July 1768, vol. 8, p. 134–35.

¹⁰ Benoît Melançon, *Diderot épistolier: contribution à une poétique de la lettre familière au XVIII^e siècle* (Montréal 1996).

XVIII^e siècle est le lieu d'une transition cruciale entre le public et le privé.¹¹

Melançon points to the publication of the letters of Mme de Sévigné to her daughter, which appeared in print only after 1725, as an significant turning-point:

Les premières manifestations publiques de la lettre originellement privée datent donc du XVIII^e siècle, et le rôle de la publication des *Lettres* de Madame de Sévigné est capital dans cette évolution.¹²

In the context of this critical tension between public and private, Melançon sets out to describe the corpus of Diderot's correspondence (which depending on one's definition numbers under 1,000 letters) by distinguishing between what he calls the *lettre familière* and the *lettre publique*. The *lettres publiques* are works, generally with *Lettre* in their titles, like the *Lettre sur les aveugles*, designed for publication; the *lettres familières* were conceived as private, even intimate, communications, for example Diderot's remarkable letters to his mistress Sophie Volland. He acknowledges the difficulties of the distinction, however. The letters exchanged between Diderot and Falconet in the 1760s about posterity enjoy special status as a free-standing work because the two men considered publishing them, and so these letters are rightly classified as a separate work in the new edition of Diderot's *Œuvres complètes* published by Hermann.¹³ Melançon also refers to Michel Delon's contention that Diderot might well have published his letters to Sophie Volland if the corpus had been more complete.¹⁴ Notwithstanding these partial exceptions, Melançon in the end remains confident, at least in the context of Diderot's correspondence, that he can maintain the distinction between a private (or 'real') letter and a literary artefact designed for publication.

I would like to suggest that this distinction – even if it can be argued for in the case of Diderot, and I'm not fully persuaded that it can – breaks down completely in the case of Voltaire (as it does in the case of D'Alembert).¹⁵ I would like to demonstrate that, and then ask what this tells us about the Voltairean letter and Voltaire's use of the epistolary form.

¹¹ Benoît Melançon, *Diderot épistolier*, p. 12.

¹² Benoît Melançon, *Diderot épistolier*, p. 54.

¹³ Diderot, *Le Pour et le contre, ou Lettres sur la postérité*, ed. Emita Hill, Roland Mortier and Raymond Trousson, *Œuvres complètes* [DPV], vol. 15 (Paris 1986). The nineteenth-century editions of this work all omitted the letters by Falconet and so eliminated the dialogic aspect of this work.

¹⁴ Benoît Melançon, *Diderot épistolier*, p. 16–19.

¹⁵ As Irène Passeron shows, in her article *Qu'est-ce qu'une lettre? Lettres ostensibles, ouvertes ou privées dans la correspondance de D'Alembert*.

The public/private distinction, or tension, exists self-evidently in the correspondence of Voltaire, and his letters can certainly be placed on a spectrum ranging from the completely private to the entirely public. At one extreme, we can identify letters that are personal and purely instrumental, as when the twenty-four-year-old Voltaire writes to an English aristocrat, Lord Ashburnham, to ask to borrow a horse (12 June 1718, D62):

Milord, Vous êtes une divinité à qui j'ai recours ordinairement dans mes tribulations. Souvenez-vous qu'autrefois vous m'avez prêté deux chevaux. Je vous demande à présent la moitié de cette grâce. Ayez la charité de confier un de vos coursiers au porteur.

There are also intimate letters – when he writes explicit love letters to his niece Marie-Louise Denis, he uses Italian to cloak the obscenity, not to mention the banality... (December 1745, D3272):

Vi baccio mille volte. La mia anima baccia la vostra, mio catzo, mio cuore sono innamorati di voi. Baccio il vostro gentil culo e tutta la vostra vezzoza persona.

This *lettre (très) familière* is clearly not intended for publication – though the problem here is not so much the privacy of the communication, as the bad quality of the writing (when it comes to making love, Voltaire is at his least original). Yet even in the case of this most intimate example, privacy is a tricky concept: we are lucky enough to possess the original manuscript of this last letter, and the words *catzo* and *culo* have been crossed out by Mme Denis: clearly, she could have chosen to destroy the letter (as Émilie Du Châtelet apparently disposed of her extensive correspondence with Voltaire, and as many of the letters between Diderot and Sophie Volland were destroyed), but she decided not to; instead, she modestly deleted the more explicit references to her and Voltaire's anatomy – which suggests that she may have been preparing the letter for manuscript circulation or for being read aloud, perhaps even that she expected the letter to be published at some point, albeit, she hoped, in an expurgated form.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are the *lettres publiques*, the so-called letters published in journals as articles. The use of the term 'letter' as a generic term to characterize a short prose article is well attested, and widely used by Voltaire.¹⁶ Thus a letter addressed to the *Bibliothèque française* (26 August 1736, D1134), and signed with a pseudonym 'de Molin', is a response to an article that had appeared in that journal; this article has no pretensions to being a private communication,

¹⁶ The full list of articles and other prose works using the form of 'Lettre' is extensive: see *Catalogue général des livres imprimés de la Bibliothèque nationale*, t.214 [Voltaire, t.1] (Paris 1978), 'Index des titres des œuvres de Voltaire', p. 80–86.

and should unquestionably be classified among Voltaire's journalistic writings.

Another example shows how Besterman has inflated the epistolary corpus: in 1749, Jean-Baptiste de Machault, the *contrôleur général des finances*, proposed a new tax, the *vingtième*, an important innovation for the Ancien Régime because for the first time it was proposed that a tax should apply to all three estates, including the Church. Voltaire wrote to marquis Rouillé Du Coudray, the brother-in-law of Machault, including a *Lettre à l'occasion de l'impôt du vingtième* which he asked him to pass on to the *contrôleur général* (16 May 1749, D3928). These texts emerged in the early nineteenth century, and when Beuchot published them in a collected edition for the first time, he included Voltaire's letter in the correspondence, and treated the *Lettre à l'occasion de l'impôt du vingtième* as a separate work, placing it in the 'Mélanges' for 1749.¹⁷ Moland later adopted the same arrangement, but Theodore Besterman broke with his predecessors and decided to include the *Lettre à l'occasion de l'impôt du vingtième* as part of his edition of the correspondence (D3927); his somewhat apologetic explanation is worth quoting: 'This is perhaps not a letter in the strictest sense of the word, since it was sent through a third person, and was to be returned [...]; still, it *was* sent to the addressee, so it can hardly be rejected' (D3927, Textual notes). In other words, anything sent to an addressee is a letter, even when it is an article! This is not a definition which stands up to scrutiny or even one which Besterman himself applies consistently.

There are other letters that manage to be *familière* and *publique* at the same time, letters which are 'private' in the sense that they were sent to the addressee as a private communication but which were probably conceived as a public statement from the start. In this category is the letter to Lord Hervey about the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, dated c.1 June 1740, and published immediately in 1740 (D2216): in effect it is a manifesto explaining Voltaire's conception of 'le siècle de Louis XIV' as a moment of cultural supremacy. It gains all the more force for being written to an Englishman who has just been appointed a minister. This is a private letter designed from the start to have a public function too. Another example: in 1755, Jean-Jacques Rousseau sends to Voltaire his newly published *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*; Voltaire acknowledges receipt of the volume with a letter justly famous for its scathing and brilliant irony (30 August 1755, D6451):

¹⁷ See *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland, 52 vols (Paris 1877–85), vol. 23, p. 305, note 1 (note by Beuchot). See also N. Cronk, *La correspondance de Voltaire: quinze lettres inédites*, RHLF 115 (2015), p. 665–92, letters D3927-N1 and D3928-R1.

J'ai reçu, Monsieur, votre nouveau livre contre le genre humain; je vous en remercie [...]. On n'a jamais tant employé d'esprit à vouloir nous rendre bêtes. / Il prend envie de marcher à quatre pattes quand on lit votre ouvrage. Cependant comme il y a plus de soixante ans que j'en ai perdu l'habitude, je sens malheureusement qu'il m'est impossible de la reprendre.

This letter is 'personal' in the sense that Voltaire did indeed send it to Rousseau, but it appeared the same year in print, and we can reasonably suppose that Voltaire always intended to publish it, and composed it with this broader readership in mind. We may infer that Voltaire must have kept a copy (which was not his standard practice with all letters) in order to be able to publish it subsequently.

The divide between *lettre familière* and *lettre publique* might seem like a simple dichotomy, but it isn't. It is even hard to place letters on a simple spectrum moving from private to public, as a variety of factors intervene to affect the status of different 'letters'. Genre is an obvious starting-point: there are established epistolary sub-genres, like the letter of condolence – in which Voltaire excels¹⁸ – and Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac has identified the characteristic subjects of Voltaire's early letters, such as thanks, news-giving, praise, and so forth.¹⁹ But division into *sous-genres* only works up to a point; the majority of Voltaire's letters defy generic categorization, by covering a range of themes and topics, often moving between private and public in the process. Identifying the principal function of a given letter – is it primarily an intimate letter? a business communication? a public pronouncement? – is probably a better criterion than genre, but the letters so often work on more than one plane. Variety and flexibility are almost a defining characteristic of the aesthetic of the letter, and Voltaire exploits this flexibility to the full.

Identifying intended readership provides another way of trying to categorize the letters, and one might imagine a sliding scale moving from private to public, with, at one end the purely personal letter, and at the other, letters published and made available to the whole 'republic of letters'. A complicating factor here is that letters are often addressed to several readers; in some cases, more than one reader is named as an addressee, while in other cases letters are addressed to one person, but intended to be passed on. When Voltaire writes to Damilaville in Paris, he can be confident that his letter will be then shown to Diderot, whether he urges this or not; similarly, Voltaire knows that Mme Du Deffand and the duchesse de Choiseul are close friends, and a letter to either lady will be shared with

¹⁸ See Thomas M. Carr, Jr., *Sharing grief / initiating consolation: Voltaire's letters of condolence*, *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 25 (1996), p. 131–46.

¹⁹ Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac, *Voltaire dans ses lettres de jeunesse (1711–1733), la formation d'un épistolier au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, Klincksieck, 1992), p. 101–23.

the other.²⁰ In these examples, Voltaire is familiar with the social networks of his correspondents, and he writes with the assumption that a letter will be passed to other like-minded people in the entourage of his correspondent.²¹ But to what extent can Voltaire hope to control the circulation of a letter? Once letters begin to be shown and passed around, there is always the risk that copies will be made, that the text will be falsified in the process, that it will fall into the wrong hands, perhaps even be published without his permission. In the context of a literary culture in which manuscripts circulate largely unhindered, there can be no clear private/public divide – as Voltaire perfectly well understands.

And of course there is also the letter that is *designed* to be shown, the *lettre ostensible*,²² as when Voltaire writes to a publisher disclaiming all knowledge of one of his own publications, and designed to provide the publisher with an alibi in the case of an inopportune visit from the police. In these cases, the letter's *raison d'être* is to transgress the private/public divide in a quite deliberate manner: a letter containing blatant falsehoods designed to mislead a broader public masquerades as a truthful private communication to a single individual.

Another apparently obvious means of attempting to distinguish public and private is to consider the material support of the letter: we would expect a *lettre familière* to be a manuscript, and a *lettre publique* to be printed. But again, the reality is more complicated. A purely personal letter may be a holograph; or, if Voltaire has dictated the letter, it may be in the hand of a secretary, with simply Voltaire's signature or initial appended. Voltaire's readers were highly sensitive to these nuances, and concern about Voltaire's original hand, its presence or absence, recurs frequently in the letters.²³ To a close friend, Voltaire will often apologize if a letter has been dictated to a secretary (and he will usually claim ill health as the reason). The aged Mme Du Deffand, being blind, has Voltaire's letters read aloud to her – and she is flirtatiously appreciative when he writes to her in his own hand (22 May 1775, D19490):

²⁰ See 'Préface', *Voltaire: Lettres choisies*, ed. N. Cronk, Folio Classique (Paris 2017).

²¹ On the role of letters in salon sociability, see Antoine Lilti, *Le Monde des salons: sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris 2005), p. 73–79.

²² 'Ostensif' is defined in a grammatical article of the *Encyclopédie* as something 'qui peut être montré. Il y a des lettres secrètes qui ne sont que pour celui à qui elles sont adressées; et des lettres ostensives, qu'il faut montrer comme les seules qu'on ait reçues' (*Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 35 vols, Paris, 1751–1780, t.11, p. 690).

²³ Besterman's edition does not systematically identify the hand of the letters, so we cannot always gauge the extent of Voltaire's 'personal' presence in a given letter.

Je suis ravie de voir que vous vous portez à merveille. Mon secrétaire lecteur prétend que votre dernière lettre est toute de votre main. Rien, non, rien n'est affaibli en vous, j'en suis sûre.

When a letter is passed on to a third party or parties, there are two possibilities: either the original is passed on, often with a request for it to be returned, or a copy or copies are made specifically for circulation; and when this happens, a letter could easily find its way into print, either in a journal or as a separate print publication. When we learn from Besterman's edition that a given letter exists in multiple manuscript copies, this is clearly vital evidence of its circulation and reach.

Print sources are clearly essential for understanding the circulation of Voltaire's letters, but here again we need to distinguish between different forms of publication. Some letters seem to have circulated widely in manuscript before ending up in print; and we can only speculate as to whether the manuscript was supplied to the printer by Voltaire or by someone else – Voltaire's name was bound to ensure sales, so printers would have been on the look-out for material. Other letters are known to us only in their printed versions, and we know of no preceding manuscript 'tradition'; these truly are 'public letters', and in such cases we often assume that it was Voltaire himself who supplied the text to the publisher. There is also the case of newspapers reprinting letters from manuscripts that have come into their possession: Kees van Strien has studied the presence of Voltaire letters in the Dutch press, and notes that between 1765 and 1777, one journal alone, the *Middelburgsche Courant*, published in Dutch translation no fewer than eight letters by Voltaire. Of these, three cannot be identified in the Besterman edition, and while it is possible that they are invented, it is more likely that these are the only surviving traces of letters that have otherwise vanished.²⁴

'Authorial intention' is no longer a fashionable concept in literary studies, but in the study of letters, it is a necessary one. Letters could land Voltaire in trouble – that is true, even if he does sometimes exaggerate for dramatic effect. So, given the potential danger, writing a letter for Voltaire is an act of trust, he must know and have confidence in his addressee. He also has to be aware of the possibility of his letter falling into the wrong hands, and so losing control of his text. Letters can easily be copied, and we need to try to distinguish between legitimate copies (which Voltaire half expects, even in some cases encourages) and illegitimate copies (which he would certainly have opposed). When a letter is published in print, there is a similar spectrum of possibilities. At one extreme, Voltaire

²⁴ Kees van Strien, *An unpublished letter from the comtesse d'Argental to Voltaire (D10319a) and three letters attributed to Voltaire in the Dutch press*, in: *Revue Voltaire* 15 (2015), p. 253–60.

can decide to publish a letter in a journal, we might call this ‘active publishing’. At the other extreme, a private communication can be copied and published without his permission, we can call this ‘unauthorized’ or even ‘hostile publication’. And somewhere between those two extremes, there exist various gradations of what we might term ‘passive publication’, whereby Voltaire acquiesces in the publication of one or more of his letters by a third party without giving his explicit permission. Such appears to be the case of the (manuscript) *Correspondance littéraire*, which regularly published Voltaire’s letters over many years, for the benefit of its exclusive readership:²⁵ it seems difficult to imagine that Voltaire always approved in detail of these publications, but equally hard to think that, to the extent he was familiar with them, he would have disapproved.

One final point to bear in mind: the corpus of correspondence as we know it today was not fully ‘shaped’ by Voltaire – indeed in some significant respects he sought to distort it. The letters which Voltaire chose to publish in his lifetime, for example in the *Commentaire historique sur les œuvres de l’auteur de La Henriade* (1776), were chosen for their exemplary value; and in some cases, Voltaire may well have rewritten letters for the benefit of posterity, as happened in the case of his projected epistolary novel *Paméla*.²⁶ Voltaire must have intervened in other ways by destroying letters he did not wish to survive, and doubtlessly by copying letters whose survival he wished to ensure. But he never chose to publish his collected ‘correspondence’, and the corpus we know today, assembled for the first time in the Kehl edition (1784–1789) after Voltaire’s death, is a combination of those letters whose survival Voltaire ensured and others that survived serendipitously.

As the preceding examples have shown, the private/public divide does not really withstand scrutiny in the case of Voltaire’s correspondence. The letters resist all attempts at simple categorisation, and the ambiguous cases are legion. We have noted the confusion created when a ‘letter-article’ can both be classified as correspondence and be included in a section ‘Mélanges’, and, as we have seen, such hesitation may derive from editorial decisions and the weight of editorial tradition: the editions we use plays a determining role, and there is an understandable tendency, in complex cases, for modern editors to simply follow the practice of their predecessors.

²⁵ See Émile Lizé, *Voltaire, Grimm et la Correspondance littéraire* (Oxford 1979; Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 180); and Jochen Schlobach, *Lettres inédites de Voltaire dans la Correspondance littéraire*, in: *Studi francesi* 14 (1970), no 42, p. 418–50.

²⁶ Voir *Paméla*, éd. Jonathan Mallinson, *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Oxford 1968–) [hereafter OCV], vol. 45c (2010).

The confusion we have identified runs much deeper, however. The epistolary genre is by its nature essentially fluid, resisting easy categorization, and in Voltaire's hands, it becomes a remarkably supple form. The ambiguity – perhaps it is not a confusion – may derive in part from Voltaire's own practice, and his deliberate attempt to fudge and exploit the distinction between private and public. Voltaire positively cultivates this generic ambivalence: at the time of the Calas affair in the 1760s, for example – when Voltaire mounted a vigorous public campaign to exonerate the Protestant Jean Calas who had been unjustly sentenced to death by the Toulouse judges for the murder of his son – the letter provides the perfect vehicle for speaking out publicly, while maintaining the pretence of private communication. The complexity of these problems is intimately connected with Voltaire's authorial posture and with his emergence, as recently described by Antoine Lilti, as the first modern celebrity.²⁷ Is there even such a thing as 'private' for a public celebrity like Voltaire, whose every gesture and remark is deemed worthy of report?

The letter as a genre is open and flexible, a form perfectly suited therefore to Voltaire's inventive manipulations. Traditionally, epistolary rhetoric was said in the manuals to be an extension of good conversation, and Voltaire has a genius for controlling his voice, perhaps we should say his voices, to convey an artificial sense of natural conversation: he experiments with the form of the letter with more virtuosity than perhaps anyone in his century. In particular he can exploit the fuzziness in the distinction between private and public to create an ever-changing authorial posture, and an ever-changing relationship with his reader. His status as a celebrity makes this distinction all the more teasing and problematic. And in the final years of his life, it will be through the medium of his letters, authentic or otherwise, that the fight over his celebrity will be waged.

III. A letter which is both private and public

Theories about epistolarity can take us so far, but we also need to look empirically at specific examples, and I would like to conclude by examining two letters. The first is a letter that Voltaire sends to Théodore Tronchin from Les Délices in 1756 (18 April 1756, D6839):

Depuis que vous m'avez quitté,
Je retombe dans ma souffrance,
Mais je m'immole avec gaieté
Quand vous assurez la santé
Aux petits-fils des rois de France.

²⁷ See Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques: l'invention de la célébrité (1750–1850)* (Paris 2014).

Votre absence, mon cher Esculape, ne me coûte que la perte d'une santé faible et inutile au monde. Les Français sont accoutumés à sacrifier de tout leur cœur quelque chose de plus à leurs princes.

Monseigneur le Duc d'Orléans et vous, vous serez tous deux bénis dans la postérité.

Il est des préjugés utiles,

Il en est de bien dangereux,

Il fallait pour triompher d'eux

Un père, un héros courageux[...]

Une vieille duchesse anglaise aima mieux autrefois mourir de la fièvre que de guérir avec le quinquina, parce qu'on appelait alors ce remède *la poudre des jésuites*. Beaucoup de dames jansénistes seraient très fâchées d'avoir un médecin moliniste. Mais, Dieu merci, messieurs vos confrères n'entrent guère dans ces querelles. Ils guérissent et tuent très indifféremment les gens de toute secte. [...]

Vos deux enfants me sont venus voir aujourd'hui. Je les ai reçus comme les fils d'un grand homme.

Mille compliments à M. de la Batte si vous avez le temps de lui parler. Je vous embrasse tendrement.

Tronchin was a celebrated doctor, based in Geneva, and his fame rested largely on his advocacy of inoculation (he wrote one of the two articles on that subject for the *Encyclopédie*) – a cause, as we have seen, dear to Voltaire. Tronchin has been summoned to Paris to inoculate members of the French royal family, and Voltaire in self-deprecating mode jokes that he is happy to make the personal sacrifice of foregoing Tronchin's treatment if this means that the doctor's work in Paris will celebrate a triumph of reason over obscurantism. It is a charming letter, with a clear philosophical message, and written in a mixture of verse and prose, marking it out as a carefully composed literary performance. Besterman was able to edit the letter from a contemporary manuscript now in Moscow that he believed to be the holograph. His edition lists no fewer than twelve manuscripts, including a draft with holograph corrections, and seven contemporary copies, one of them made for his old school-friend Cideville and now in the latter's archives in Rouen (D6839, manuscript 5).

The large number of manuscript copies means that the work must have circulated widely in that form. Voltaire did not lavish such attention on this letter for Tronchin's eyes alone: he clearly intended the work to circulate in manuscript, perhaps he even encouraged the manufacture of copies. 'Publication' in the eighteenth century does not necessarily imply 'printed', and we can speak here of a letter intended for manuscript publication, in the same way that clandestine manuscripts still circulated widely in France in the first half of the eighteenth century. Voltaire knew

moreover that works that circulated in manuscript were likely to end up in print, which is what happened in this case: as early as June 1756, the letter/work appeared anonymously in a journal, the *Suite de la clef*,²⁸ and further printings followed, in the *Portefeuille trouvé* (1757), in *Monsieur de Voltaire peint par lui-même* (1766), and so forth. It is interesting that none of the printed editions of this letter are recorded in the Besterman edition, presumably because he is only concerned to list those publications which Voltaire actively authorized; but as this example shows, such a distinction is not always meaningful.

Further discoveries continue to be made, and another manuscript of this letter, offered for sale in 2013, provides a new addition to Besterman's list. Examination of the new manuscript shows beyond doubt that it is the original holograph letter: it is written in a secretary's hand, except for the last six lines preceding his signature 'V', from 'Vos deux enfants me sont venus voir...' to the end, that are more personal in tone, and which are clearly in Voltaire's own hand – this personal touch, added to what is otherwise a rather self-conscious literary performance, marks out this manuscript as the original sent to Tronchin: the private and public versions of this letter are similar, but not identical.²⁹

IV. A letter which is neither private nor public

Finally, I wish to consider a letter in the Besterman edition, from Antonio Cocchi to Carlo Rinuccini, which Besterman dates to around October 1733 (D667). We infer that Rinuccini has lent Cocchi a copy of *La Henriade*, and the letter is a critical response to the reading of Voltaire's poem; except that it is not really a critical response, it is an entirely uncritical paean of praise. Cocchi speaks gushingly of the poem's 'perfection réelle', its 'beauté inimitable', declaring that 'il n'y a rien de plus beau que le poème de La Henriade'. Besterman knows no manuscript for this letter, so his (and our) only source for the text is a publication in the *Mercure de France*, where it appeared in December 1733, with the following title:

²⁸ 'Lettre de M. de *** à M. Tronchin', *Suite de la clef, ou Journal historique*, June 1756, p. 450–452 (the text ends as 'la cour des rois', before the more personal 'Vos deux enfants...').

²⁹ The letter was for sale in 2013 at Art et Autographes, 9 rue de l'Odéon, 75006 Paris; see their catalogue 68, no 25614, p. 206 (with a photograph of the first page of the letter). The text of this letter is identical to Besterman's version, except that where Besterman has 'M. de La Batte', this manuscript has 'Mr de La [Bate, *crossed out*]', and 'M. de Labat' written in. The spelling 'notre ami Labat' recurs often in Voltaire's letters to Tronchin; though in one letter, to Jean Robert Tronchin, we find 'Monsieur de La Batte' (D6314).

'Lettre sur la Henriade, écrite par M. Antonio Cocchi, lecteur de Pise, à Monsignor Rinveimi, secrétaire d'état de Florence, traduite par M. le baron de C. chambellan du Roi de Suède'. In editing this for publication, Besterman normalizes these two (rather odd) names to the names of known scholars, Antonio Cocchi (1695-1758), a physician best known for his work on anatomy, and Carlo Rinuccini (1679-c.1748), a Florentine diplomat. The letter then has a further significant life which Besterman completely fails to mention: it becomes a prefatory text in an edition of *La Henriade* published in 1737, and is reprinted in subsequent editions in 1738, 1741, one of the editions of 1746, 1750 and 1751.³⁰ It is omitted from all other editions in Voltaire's lifetime, but included by the editors of the Kehl edition. The impact of Cocchi's extravagant praise was reinforced by Marmontel's preface to *La Henriade* (1746), often reprinted, which reiterates Cocchi's appreciation of the poem.³¹

On the surface, then, this seems like a straightforward example of the generic evolution of a letter. In the beginning was a 'real' letter, an exchange between two Italian scholars; then a translation of the letter was printed in a French journal, so that the letter became in effect an article; and finally Voltaire uses the letter/article as external endorsement of his most ambitious poetic work and includes it in the prefatory material of editions of *La Henriade*. This is a letter that becomes an article and then a preface – Voltaire himself refers to the letter as 'une préface' (D4263). After Voltaire's death, in all the complete editions of Voltaire's works up to and including the Moland edition, the text is included as part of the prefatory material of *La Henriade*, and not placed in the correspondence as such; it is surely revealing that Beuchot refers to the text as 'cette pièce'³² rather than speak of it as a 'letter'. In the *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* published by the Voltaire Foundation, on the other hand, the text appears twice, as part of the edition of *La Henriade*, and also (for the first time) as part of the corpus of correspondence, an editorial decision that makes a strong assumption about the generic status of the text.

The more carefully we examine this example, the more delightfully puzzling it becomes. There are no known letters between Voltaire and either Antonio Cocchi or Carlo Rinuccini, although there is a letter of 1745 written by Voltaire in Italian to Gaspare Cerati (D3199) asking him to forward copies of a book to these two scholars, whom he greatly admires ('la stima di cui ho sempre ambito'). The two Italian scholars were certainly familiar with each other, as Cocchi's unpublished works include

³⁰ In the edition by O.R. Taylor (OCV, vol. 2), these editions have the following sigles: 37, 38, 41, 46N, 50 and 51. The 'Lettre d'Antoine Cocchi' is here reproduced with an introduction, p. 312–19. See also Bengesco, vol. 1, p. 105.

³¹ OCV, vol. 2, p. 332.

³² *Œuvres de Voltaire par M. Beuchot*, vol. 10 (Paris 1834), p. 25.

a catalogue of Runuccini's library. It is possible, O. R. Taylor suggests, that Cocchi could have met Voltaire in England in 1726,³³ but there is no specific supporting evidence for this suggestion. All attempts to locate the original manuscript of the letter have failed. In an edition of Antonio Cocchi's works published in Florence in the 1760s, the letter appears in its French translation only: the editor explains that he has been unable to find the original Italian text, so has taken the text of the translation from the 1741 edition of *La Henriade*.³⁴ O. R. Taylor similarly states that he has been unsuccessful in locating the original manuscript of the letter.³⁵ The evidence of Voltaire's correspondence in 1736 is however useful in confirming Voltaire's keenness to make use of this letter. He first writes to Berger as follows (c.30 July 1736, D1119):

La lettre, dont vous me parlez et qu'on doit mettre à la tête de *La Henriade*, est de M. Cocchi, homme de lettres très estimé. Elle fut écrite à M. de Renuccini, secrétaire et ministre d'état à Florence. Elle est traduite par le baron Elderchen. Je ne me souviens pas qu'il y ait un seul endroit, où M. Cocchi me mette au-dessus de Virgile. Sa lettre m'a paru sage et instructive. Si c'était ici une première édition de *La Henriade*, j'exigerais qu'on n'imprimât pas cette lettre. Trop d'éloges révolterait les lecteurs français, mais après vingt éditions, on ne peut plus avoir ni orgueil ni modestie sur ses ouvrages. Ils ne nous appartiennent plus et l'auteur est hors de tout intérêt.

He returns to the subject a couple of months later, again writing to Berger (c.25 September 1736, D1155):

A l'égard de la lettre du signor Antonio Cocchi, il la faut imprimer; elle est pleine de choses instructives. [...] Puisque le Cocchi a l'esprit si juste et si hardi, il en faut profiter. C'est toujours une vérité de plus qu'il apprend aux hommes. Il faudra seulement échancre les louanges dont il m'affuble. Il commence par crier à la première phrase: *Il n'y a rien de plus beau que La Henriade*. Ad-

³³ OCV, vol. 2, p. 313.

³⁴ 'Questa lettera fu scritta dal Dott. Cocchi in lingua Italiana, e indirizzata per mezzo delle stampe al Sig. Marchese Carlo Rinuccini già Consigliere di Stato, e Segretario di Guerra in Toscana: e poiché, malgrado tutte le diligenze usate, non è stato possibile il ritrovarla nel suo originale idioma, se ne dà qui la Traduzione, che ne fu fatta in Franzese da rispettabile personaggio, ed inserita dipoi nell'Edizione di Amsterdam 1741, affinché i leggitori apprendano in qualche modo i sentimenti del nostro Autore sopra un Poema cotanto celebre' (*Dei discorsi toscani del Dottore Antonio Cocchi medico ed antiquario cesareo dedicati a sua eccellenza la signora contessa d'Orford*, Firenze, Andrea Bonducci, 1761–1762, pt.2, p. 271). I am grateful to Ruggero Sciuto for his help with this note.

³⁵ OCV, vol. 2, p. 314.

oucissons ce terme; mettons: *Il y peu d'ouvrages plus beaux que*, etc. Mais comptez qu'il est bon d'avoir, en fait de poème épique, le suffrage des Italiens.

Voltaire insists similarly to his friend Thiriot (15 October 1736, D1168):

La lettre de M. Cocchi n'est pas à la vérité moins pleine d'éloges, mais elle est instructive, elle a déjà été imprimée dans plusieurs journaux, et il est bon d'opposer le témoignage impartial d'un académicien de la Crusca aux invectives de Rousseau et de Desfontaines.

The pressing tone of these letters makes it abundantly clear that it was Voltaire, rather than a publisher, who for his own strategic reasons was pushing for the inclusion of Cocchi's letter in the 1737 edition of *La Henriade*.

But if Voltaire's intentions are clear, Cocchi's are less so. The tone of his extravagantly uncritical letter doesn't seem altogether appropriate in a purely personal communication, and O. R. Taylor ponders tentatively whether he might perhaps have written the letter to order: 'Il est possible que Cocchi n'ait fait que prêter à Voltaire son nom et sa plume'.³⁶ Even more speculatively, one might even wonder if Cocchi might have lent his name and nothing else – in other words, is it conceivable that Voltaire himself wrote the letter? It is hard to prove this contention, of course, but in the absence of a manuscript, it is equally hard to prove the contrary. If Cocchi did write the letter, one has to explain how it came to be translated into French, and how it came to be submitted to the *Mercur de France*. There is certainly something odd about the reference in the *Mercur* to the translator being 'M. le baron de C. chambellan du Roi de Suède', while Voltaire later asserts (in his first letter to Berger, quoted above) that the translator is 'le baron Elderchen' (a fact recycled uncritically in nineteenth-century editions). Then there is the oddity of the two names of Cocchi and Rinuccini being traduced in the *Mercur* as 'Coichy' and 'Rinveimi'. Besterman's only editorial comment on the letter is to say that 'there can be no doubt about the identity of the two Italians whose names have been so strangely deformed in the title'. It is true that we can guess the names behind the mask, so in that sense Besterman is correct, but still the names are perplexing: Cocchi was primarily a physician, and not known as a literary critic; and his friend Carlo Rinuccini was a diplomat, not a man of the church, so it is hard to understand why Voltaire refers to him with the title 'monsieur' (this seems to be a – deliberate? – confusion with Giovanni Battista Rinuccini, a prominent Catholic bishop in the middle of the seventeenth century). On the other hand, if, as I suspect, it is Voltaire who is the author of this letter, and it would have been

³⁶ OCV, vol. 2, p. 190.

easy enough for him to have 'planted' it in the *Mercure*, then it is entirely likely that he would have distorted playfully the names of the author, addressee and translator, to produce something that was, though not *vrai*, at least *vraisemblable*. Unless the manuscript of the original 'letter' turns up – and that seems unlikely – we shall never be able to say with certainty whether or not Voltaire falsified this letter, and perhaps it doesn't matter. What is interesting is that the doubt remains. The generic instability of the letter extends in the case of Voltaire to a more widespread and fundamental instability concerning its truth value. In his writings beyond the correspondence, Voltaire makes much literary play with fake and falsified letters;³⁷ and so it is entirely appropriate that Besterman seems to have included an epistolary 'hoax' in his edition of the *Correspondance*.

³⁷ See John R. Iverson, *The falsification of Voltaire's letters and the public persona of the author: from the Lettres secrettes (1765) to the Commentaire historique (1776)*, in: *An American Voltaire: Essays in Memory of J. Patrick Lee*, ed. E. Joe Johnson and Byron R. Wells (Newcastle upon Tyne 2009), p. 180–200; and N. Cronk, *L'auteur patriarche: une construction en lettres*, *Revue Voltaire* 11 (2011), p. 47–60.