Written in haste: practical letters and everyday criticism in the fifteenth century

> And the blessed Trinity have you in his keeping. Written ⌐in haste¬ at Hellesdon the ~~Twe~~ Tuesday next after Saint Luke. By yours, M. P.

Let's start with an ending. In Hellesdon, Norfolk, England, on 21 October 1460, one Margaret Paston closed a long letter to her husband with a conventional farewell: a blessing, the place, the date and the formula that the letter had been *written in haste* (Paston 154).[1] (I have modernized the spelling of quotations, as the focus here is not linguistic.) Being *written in haste* seems a fit description of this kind of letter, for this and most of the letters of Margaret Paston and her family deal with urgent, ephemeral and everyday business. Elsewhere in the letter Paston tells how someone has sold the sheep's wool for twenty shillings a stone; the household has a new horse from the fair; the mills have been rented out for twelve marks. She mentions other texts as practical as her letter is: her husband had sent her instructions on various errands and had asked for "the writings" on some legal matter (154). Later he replies referring to some "copies" of other documents kept in "the great standing chest in one of the great canvas bags" (155). Such practical literacy is time-dependent: Margaret Paston answers her husband's letter which came on Sunday "last past;" a servant will reach her husband "on Sunday or on Monday next coming;" a legal hearing has happened "This day;" she promises "knowledge ... in haste" of the outcome (154). Her letter is addressed to her husband "in haste" as well, in the address on the dorse or reverse, which would be visible when the letter was folded: "To my right worshipful husband John Paston be this delivered in haste" (154). This practicality predominates in the Paston letters, and it is no

surprise that amid this pressing paperwork she should sign the letter as one "Written ⌐in haste¬."

It is more surprising that those words "in haste" are written between the lines—an interlinear insertion—for this made them less hasty. They would be placed there because they were added later, whether seconds later, after just a few letterforms or words more, or later still, say, when rereading the letter before sending. However late, this belatedness and retrospection are inherent to the physical process of interlining.[2] Contrast the crossing out of the misspelling "Twe," a false start of "Tuesday," deleted *before* carrying on. That is,

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[1] Quotations come from the old-spelling editions of four collections of letters: *The Cely Letters 1472–1488*, ed. Alison Hanham, EETS os 273 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Davis (vols 1–2), Richard Beadle and Colin Richmond (vol. 3), EETS ss 20–22, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004–5); *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, ed. Joan Kirby, Camden Society, 5th ser., 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *Stonor Letters and Papers 1290-1483*, ed. C. L. Kingsford, rev. ed. Christine Carpenter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). But I imitate the modernization of spelling in *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, ed. Norman Davis, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), xxv–xxvi, although I preserve all archaic pronouns and inflexions, which Davis treats variously. I also mark, as some editors do and others do not, ⌐interlinear insertions¬ (as here) and I restore any words ~~crossed out~~ by scribes (marked thus) which editors usually leave in the textual apparatus. In parenthetical references, letter-numbers come from each edition, where necessary prefixed by the name of the collection. (I do not give line-numbers, as most letters are short enough to find the phrase in question.)

[2] See Daniel Wakelin, *Scribal Correction and Literary Craft: English Manuscripts 1375–1510* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 112–14.

although Paston likely did write in haste, she had a fraction of time enough to pause and replay these words, as well as five other interlinear additions (including the reference to "the writings" her husband wants). This letter was not written in as much haste as it might have been, and the haste, however genuine, was narrated with some retrospection or self-reflection. Such added *haste* is not unique in the letters of the time: on 16 November 1461 another missive by Margaret Paston concluded "Written ~~at~~ in haste at Norwich." After starting "Written at," presumably starting to mention Norwich, the writer crossed out "at" and used "in haste" before resuming "at Norwich" again (Paston 164). Elsewhere, Paston uses *written in haste* in both drafts of a letter in two versions, that is, as part of revised, polished writing, not entirely, therefore, in haste (Paston 209.A and 209.B). And other correspondents of the Paston family occasionally add "in great haste" or "in haste" between the lines as afterthoughts (Paston 577, 731).[3] Why would they take time to say that their letters were written without enough time? That question is the focus of this article; the possible answers suggest some things about attitudes then to everyday literacy—to writing *in haste*—and about critical responses to it now.

For Margaret Paston there is a puzzle about the source to consider. Like most fifteenth-century women of her genteel class she was probably not fully educated to write her letters herself.[4] The two letters with "in haste" interlined or expanded are both in the handwriting of her younger son, John III. (Both her husband and two of her sons were called

[3] Also, in Paston 471 a whole phrase "Written at Rougham the Sunday night next after New Year's Day in haste, as it seemeth" might be added, as the editor Davis notes, in a different hue of ink, i.e. later: see London, British Library, MS Additional 34888, fol. 63v.

[4] On her use of scribes, see e.g. Joel T. Rosenthal, *Telling Tales: Sources and Narration in Late Medieval England* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 104–14.

John.) This mediation of women's words through men's pens is an important part of fifteenth-century writing, as in *The Boke of Margery Kempe* and other vernacular theology.[5] It is not clear how far amanuenses followed precise dictation by the 'author' and how far they worked only from rough instructions, and so a person dictating such as Margaret Paston, stood over him or checking later, might have noticed something missing and insisted on restoring it.[6] Or if she were dictating, she might have forgotten to say "in haste" and corrected herself. We cannot know for sure. Whichever happened, the phrase was important enough to be added, and it was important to Margaret Paston, who uses *in haste* or *in great haste* in 49 of her 107 surviving letters.

She is not alone in that, for the phrase was a common convention. Joel T. Rosenthal has referred to it in passing as a "tag" and "a conventional one, appearing in letters both long and short," and Richard Beadle as "an epistolary cliché" in a "surprisingly large number of letters"—though he wonders whether or not writers were indeed "constrained by pressure of time," the question reopened here.[7] The popularity of the phrase emerges from its appearance in 256 of a survey of 1616 letters dating from 1400 to 1520 (about 16%) from four well-edited collections.[8] In letters to and from the Paston family of Norfolk, and their close associates Sir John Fastolf, William Worcester and others, some 148 are signed *written* or *writ in haste* or *written in great haste*; 17 uses omit the verb (e.g. Paston 544, 545, 553 etc.). This phrase almost always includes the date on which the letter was written and about half the time includes the location. Another 17 letters are signed *hastily*, most of them authored by

[5] On dictation, see Christopher Cannon, "'Wyth her owen handys': What Women's Literacy Can Teach Us about Langland and Chaucer," *Essays in Criticism* 66 (2016): 277–300.

[6] Richard Beadle, "Private Letters," in A. S. G. Edwards, ed., *A Companion to Middle English Prose* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004), 289–306 (290–1), stresses the independence of amanuenses.

Worcester or in his handwriting on behalf of others (e.g. Paston 507, 526, 537 etc.). Beyond the Pastons, *in haste* occurs in 28 letters from the Stonor family and their associates, with a slight tendency not to use the verb *writ* or *written* (e.g. Stonor 284, 290), and in 25 linked to the Plumpton family. *In haste* and *in great haste* are in 38 of the letters to and from the Cely family of wool merchants, although, curiously, the phrase peters out half way through the chronological run of their correspondence.[9] Expressions of haste remained common in closing sixteenth-century letters too.[10] This phrase bears comparison with another concluding phrase which sometimes occurs alongside *in haste* and proves useful (below) for explaining it: that is *no more* or *no more at this time*. Some version of *no more* is almost as common in the Paston letters (130 uses), and some writers such as John Paston II and Margery Paston prefer it; and it is much more common than *in haste* in the Cely letters (140 uses). In both sets of letters it occurs some 21 times alongside *in haste* (e.g. Paston 18, 118, 129). This co-occurrence suggests a connection between the two phrases, as do a few more expansive apologies that the writer has no "leisure" to write more—that is, writes no more due to haste (e.g. Paston 182, 194, 211). Overall, the frequency of ending *in haste* might suggest that Margaret Paston and others correct their letters to bring them in line with this convention.

Conventions—the set phrase, the habit—can be revealing for social history or historical sociolinguistics, fields which have made great use of these letters in other ways. For instance, Colin Richmond has shown that the blessings at the close of letters suggest changing tastes in devotion, and Rosenthal that the "dating of letters can direct us to such issues as mentalité, lay piety, the routines of daily life."[11] Similarly, the convention of declaring that one has written hurriedly and must stop quickly—*in haste* and *no more*—are revealing, in this case about the urgency of practical uses for the growing vernacular literacy of fifteenth-century England. These meta-textual phrases extend the many hundreds of references to writing: descriptions of documents, books, accounts, rolls; their making,

drafting, correcting, storing; the uses they had, the credit they were granted.[12] The writing of private letters in English in the fifteenth century differs, of course, from the earlier documentary practice which M. B. Parkes called "pragmatic literacy" and Paul Bertrand called "ordinary writings" ("écritures ordinaires"),[13] but most of the letters are nonetheless practical and address everyday affairs. Documents of earlier centuries were characterized by Bertrand for their "acceleration" of the writing process and of other processes and activities.[14] The first section of this article acknowledges how the reference to *haste* reflected ideas that practical writing should be hasty.

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[7] Joel T. Rosenthal, "Time to Read and a Time to Write: Dates, Days, and Saints in the Paston Letters," *Journal of the Early Book Society* 16 (2013): 171–93 (180); Beadle, 'Private Letters', 293.

[8] This tally encompasses the four editions listed in n. 1 above, but it omits the legal and financial documents (indentures, petitions, wills, memoranda, accounts, inventories) also included in each edition, as this is not a study of 'pragmatic literacy' in documents. For comparability, it omits items in the Stonor collection before 1400 (none in English) and the Plumpton collection after 1520, the date of the latest Paston letter in the edition used (Paston 866).

[9] The earliest are Cely 2, where the editor Alison Hanham reconstructs this phrase from a damaged MS, and Cely 4; after Cely 107, it only appears in Cely 145, 148, 152 and 154.

[10] E.g. Bridget Cusack, ed., *Everyday English 1500–1700: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 193. Slightly different is the Elizabethan use of *Haste haste post haste for life* in addressing official letters, to speed their delivery: see Edmund Spenser, *Selected Letters and Papers*, ed. Christopher Burlinson and Andrew Zurcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. li, 93.

The later sections of this article, however, explore what other attitudes to writing the phrase *written in haste* can reveal: crucially, the comment that writing was done speedily is not neutral; it apologizes for and criticizes that speed. As such, it invites the reader to evaluate practical texts for their success—to read critically. Such evaluative language thereby weakens a divide often drawn between writing used instrumentally for practical goals and writing assessed for its own qualities, often assumed to be stylistic or formal excellence (though other qualities emerge at the end of this article). In recent scholarship such a divide has helped to define and defend documents as a subject of interest alongside imaginative literature. For instance, Bertrand has noted a separation between pragmatic literacy and literary activity in earlier centuries, and in a groundbreaking study of letters and other documents of fifteenth-century England Malcolm Richardson has argued that practical writing is a more important component of cultural history than the self-conscious, well-

[11] Colin Richmond, "Religion and the Fifteenth-Century English Gentleman," in R. B. Dobson, ed., *The Church, Politics and Patronage in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1984), 193–208 (200–1); Rosenthal, "Time," 171.

[12] These have been explored by P. C. Pearson, "The Paston Letters: Carriage of Mail in the Fifteenth Century," *The London Philatelist* 99 (1990): 178–83, 189–95, 232–37, 276–7, and Colin Richmond, "Hand and Mouth: Information Gathering and Use in England in the Later Middle Ages," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1 (1988): 233–52.

[13] See M. B. Parkes's foundational article "The Literacy of the Laity," repr. in his *Scribes, Scripts and Readers: Studies in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemination of Medieval Texts* (London: Hambledon, 1991), 274–97, and Paul Bertrand, *Les Écritures ordinaires: Sociologie d'un temps de révolution documentaire (entre royaume de France et empire, 1250-1350)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015), 16.

[14] Bertrand, *Écritures ordinaires*, 381–3.

crafted and imaginative genres that are the usual focus of literary criticism.[15] Apologies for speedy writing seem to confirm that personal letters differ from literary genres, for they disclaim any excellence in their writing and dissuade the reader from appreciating or closely analysing the rest of the text. *In haste* implicitly dismisses the rest of the letter as something written thoughtlessly, and *no more* implies that the letter is somehow insufficient. The phrase *written in haste* probably was, indeed, written in haste with little thought on occasion. Tellingly, one writer uses it twice, as though it were just a tic: "In haste ... No more to you at this time ... . At London the 13 day of April in haste" (Stonor 287). As such, these phrases present a challenge to critical reading. Why would one read with care what claims not have been written so? And why would one comment on just one phrase, albeit across many letters, rather than many phrases in one text? This is not what customarily passes for literary criticism—unless it be a kind of 'distant reading' which refuses to treat any one text as exceptional.[16]

But as the final section of this article suggests, these apologies for thoughtless writing are nonetheless self-consciously thoughtful about writing, and in their self-consciousness these phrases themselves both exemplify a kind of artful writing and invite readers—in the fifteenth century or now—to evaluate these practical letters for their artful writing, as other genres were and are appreciated. *In haste* invites 'close reading' or perhaps, ironically, 'slow reading'.[17] That might reflect the fact that the personal letters offered opportunities to their

[15] Bertrand, *Écritures ordinaires*, 16; Malcolm Richardson, *Middle Class Writing in Late Medieval London* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011), 12–13.

[16] For this characterization, see Heather Love, "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 371–91 (374).

[17] E.g. David Mikics, *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

authors different from those offered by the 'pragmatic literacy' of more formulaic documents. Other studies of fifteenth-century letters have shown that they do contain artful writing.[18] To claim that they invite close critical attention complements similar claims about other practical works such as recipes, remedies and agricultural manuals, for instance, by Hannah Bower, Lisa H. Cooper and Carrie Griffin, who find such genres more playful and polished than their practical purposes might lead one to expect.[19] It complements, too, the attention to the qualities of everyday language by Toril Moi.[20] This article does not primarily or fully argue that these practical letters reward literary evaluation—though they sometimes do; it only considers this one set of phrases. Rather, it argues that the self-reflexive *written in haste* and *no more* show that the critical evaluation of writing was embedded in, and was one of the subjects of, everyday practical letters. Moreover, in its disavowal of writerly skill, the phrase

[18] For defences of the verbal artistry of some letters, see e.g. Norman Blake, "Style and Stereotype in Early English Letters," *Leeds Studies in English* 1 (1967): 7–17; Rosenthal, *Telling Tales*, 123–4; Diane Watt, "The Paston Women and Chaucer: Reading Women and Canon Formation in the Fifteenth Century," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 42 (2020): 337–50.

[19] Carrie Griffin, "Instruction and Inspiration: Fifteenth Century Codicological Recipes," *Exemplaria* 30 (2018): 20–34; Hannah Bower, "Similes We Cure By: The Poetics of Late Medieval Medical Texts," *New Medieval Literatures* 18 (2018): 183–210, and *Middle English Medical Recipes and Literary Play, 1375–1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); and Lisa H. Cooper, "Agronomy and Affect in Duke Humfrey's *On Husbondrie*," *Speculum* 95 (2020): 36–88.

[20] Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). For other appreciation of the everyday, see e.g. Rita Felski, "Everyday Aesthetics," *Minnesota Review* 71/72 (2009): 171–9.

challenges readers *not* to bring protocols of literary criticism to these practical texts, or at least not without emending their critical assumptions and criteria. That is the challenge these letters offer to critical readers now.

I—Haste

To the era of email, the fifteenth-century post looks like what Lavinia Greenlaw called, in a superb poem, "A World Where News Travelled Slowly."[21] But some text technologies had expedited the process of writing a letter by the fifteenth century. Most fifteenth-century English letters are on paper, not cheap but at least ready-made; as Orietta Da Rold has shown, it was not scarce, though its scarcity was used as a rhetorical trope.[22] The letters are mostly in the cursive kinds of handwriting done quickly with less care for calligraphy. And crucially in the fifteenth century people increasingly used English, which will have eased, maybe speeded, the writing for many people with limited Latin literacy. Correspondence was not quick but it might have seemed quicker than other kinds of writing, such as the copying of codices. Yet travel was slow, and post travelled not through a centralized postal system but by carriers, people paid to transport goods and messages between major towns, or by servants of the writer or recipient sent for the purpose.[23] These haphazard and intermittent connections evidently increased the need to seize a fleeting opportunity for writing. As one writer observes, "The messenger was on horseback when I wrote you this bill, and therefore it was

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[21] Lavinia Greenlaw, *A World Where News Travelled Slowly* (London: Faber, 1997), 39.

[22] Orietta Da Rold, *Paper in Medieval England: From Pulp to Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 150–2.

[23] The practicalities are reconstructed by Pearson, "The Paston Letters."

done in haste" (Paston 1036). Having *written in haste* might be the first stage on that urgent journey.

This hasty writing also made sense as part of the hasty living which these letters vividly imagine. Despite the slow transport, these people were busy and they often sought for speed. Addressees are urged to do business "in haste" (Paston 921, Cely 120) and authors promise to do things "in haste" or "in great haste" (Paston 961, Cely 27). One common phrase in the Cely letters is *I pray you* (or *thee*) ... *in haste* or *in as short a space*, and what is prayed for is usually an *answer* or *writing* (Cely 72, 74, 126, 195, etc.). People often press their addressees to write back swiftly: they urge "Haste ye the answer of all my matters unanswered" (Paston 981), or "send it me in all haste, for that I may answer ⌐to¬ his bill the better" (Paston 1011), or "send me hasty word" (Paston 988), and here haste is good. Indeed, they refer to haste of reply as "goodly haste" (Paston 989; Cely 236). The urgency sought in reply could compel that in the writing: "The cause that I send to you this hastily is to have an answer in haste from you" (Paston 180). In such epistolary stichomythia, it is no surprise that occasionally *written in haste* is expanded so that it is clearly a boast or reassurance that the author has responded quickly—which slow delivery would have made less evident: people protest that letters were "Written in haste within an hour after the receipt of your letter," as one says (Paston 454), or "Written in haste the morrow upon Whitsunday, for I received your letter a Whitsunday at even" (Paston 970), or "In haste this same night" (Paston 974). That complements the careful dating even down to the day or hour that Rosenthal has found in the Pastons' letters. As they treated timely topics, precision was needed "given the vagaries of the post."[24] The Cely family, who write back and forth across the English Channel, meets this problem by often stating how things stood *at the making* or *at the writing of this letter*; it is a common tic in a few dozen of their letters (e.g. Cely 25, 37, 52, 56, etc.). The simpler

[24] Rosenthal, "Time," 171–2.

subscriptions *written in haste* complement other pleas for or claims of haste and references to the time of writing. In one respect, then, the phrase reflects the real urgency in practical writing of this period by a laity using literacy for everyday business.

Its reference in the real world, however, is not as simple as it seems; what is interesting is the rhetoric around haste, by which people imagine evaluative criteria, some positive, some negative, for rapid writing. First, one could sceptically question the necessity for haste in the real world. Much of the business which the letters discuss was slow for reasons beyond delays in the post: bartering over wares, long legal proceedings or even the fitful Wars of the Roses. To paraphrase Lear, reason not the need for speed in such affairs. And many of the matters raised are not needful at all. For instance, somebody writes "in haste" to say that he has sent a servant to collect his favourite pet, a "flecked spaniel ... the which I would be loath to forego," and he adds, "I have none other cause to send him [the servant] for but only that." He admits, then, that sending a letter and indeed a servant is entirely frivolous, so his closing "In haste with the hand of your brother" cannot be entirely utilitarian—though no doubt he does not want to lose his pet (Cely 65; "brother" is here an associate).

Second, more importantly, it is not clear from the letters that people's correspondence *was* fast-paced. The letters do not describe but prescribe a world of pressing practicality that is as much a fiction as a fact. That is clear when the phrase *be this delivered in haste* is used in the address on the outside of several letters. Indeed, the Stonor letters urge haste in the address more often than they apologize for it in the close, though sometimes the terms occur together (Stonor 94, 197, 240, 328, 355). Telling is the jussive subjunctive *be this* in that injunction: "To my right worshipful husband John Paston be this delivered in haste," as Margaret Paston's letter put it (154, quoted above; see also e.g. 781, 800, etc.). Perhaps there was a real wish to crack the whip on handwriting and horseback riding; but the address *be*

this delivered in haste was more an aspiration than an actuality, or even an affectation of urgent importance, as Rosenthal has suggested.[25] That is true in other business the letters evoke: for instance, when somebody tells John Paston II that "I trust to bring or send ~~with me the~~ ⌐hastily the¬ cloth of gold," then the hastiness cannot be trusted, for though he has tried to acquire some cloth, he has had "none ⌐plain¬ answer" but only "hope" (Paston 782). Moreover, this writer's "hastily" was interlined, an afterthought again, itself not a "⌐plain¬ answer" but a self-conscious effort to make his endeavours sound more expeditious than they were—and, for a split second, slowing down to do so.

And, third, the protest that amid these delays at least the author had *written in haste* would often have been partly untrue, for the act of writing itself was slow. Despite the adoption of paper, paper and pens were not as ready at hand and throwaway then as they have become. And many missives were made as physical documents by amanuenses—by family, servants, secretaries, chaplains—and arranging an amanuensis would slow things down to some degree. A few letters comment explicitly on the slowness of the process of penmanship, as Rosenthal observed, reporting that they had taken a long time, in one case several days.[26] That dilated process is implicit too in the letters' form: the closing phrases *written in haste* and *no more* are often followed by more writing, even by more promises of hasty action. Several Pastons, after protesting that they have *written in haste*, nonetheless find time for lots more lines, sometimes over a dozen (e.g. Paston 126, 161, 169, 177, 179, 187, 190, 208, 213 etc.). For example, Margaret Paston seems to end one letter with "No more at this time. ... Written in haste on Trinity Sunday at even," but then she appends twenty-one lines more of he-said-she-said, including stories of people acting "in haste," and finally stops by promising that "Of all other matters I shall send you word in haste" (Paston 129). The effect is vivid in

[25] Rosenthal, *Telling Tales*, 117.

[26] Rosenthal, "Time," 179, citing Paston 205, 270.

the Cely letters, where the common closing formula *no more* is often flatly contradicted by afterthoughts: “I write no more to you at this time, but Jesu keep you. Writ at London the 25 day of August in great haste. Also I will ye deal with ...” and so on (Cely 31: see also e.g. Cely 10, 19, 44, etc.). Such postscripts do suggest real haste to the degree that the letter was not planned fully in advance or was constantly revised while information came to hand. But in their inaccuracy the postscripts also remind us that claims to haste can be exaggerated; they literally had more time than they said. “And yet he semed bisier than he was,” as Chaucer says of the Man of Law. This ending seems more artful than it says it is.

II—Writing

That is at first sight surprising, as conventions might seem the antithesis of thoughtful writing, especially this one which implies a hasty lack of thought in writing. Given its use by so many people, *written in haste* might have “pragmaticalized” or “discursized” as other linguistic formulae have over the centuries, including other phrases of farewell. That is a process akin to what linguists call grammaticalization, whereby an open-class word with a strong semantic meaning becomes used as a closed-class word with a grammatical function but a bleached semantic meaning (e.g. *she will* once expressed desire; it now marks the future tense with little overtone of desire). Some words acquire not grammatical functions but social and discursive ones—the province of pragmatics, hence “pragmaticalization,” or, where the primary pragmatic function is to mark discourse structure, what Leslie K. Arnovick calls “discursization.”[27] Her example of “discursization” is the way that the blessing *God be with you* morphed in the late seventeenth century into *goodbye*, bleached of semantic reference to God but strengthened in its function of ending interactions politely without loss of face. Might *written in haste* have been semantically bleached of echoes of speed and “discursized”

as a way of ending letters thus? Compare saying “Must dash!” to end a conversation without offending the other person. Apologies have been recognized to have undergone particular attenuation of their semantic force in favour of pragmatic functions.[28] *Written in haste* might be such an attenuated apology.

That might be interesting to sociolinguistics or historical pragmatics, which often excavates unconscious conventions. Yet I would argue that *written in haste*, while a convention, was used more consciously than some collocations that sociolinguistics expounds. First, I think it retains some of its latent meaning in these letters: that is, I do not think that it is used with referential truth, claiming that a letter were actually written in haste; but I argue that its latent meaning remains to shape the less truthful way that it is used. The first sign of its semantic strength is the fact that it could be made in correction and in second drafts (as noted at the outset), when there was some reflection. It could also be commented on self-reflexively. In one letter to George Cely a fellow merchant concludes “Written in haste as aforesaid.” He had ended his letter prematurely once, added a postscript, and then tacked on this phrase; but his premature ending had not mentioned “haste” but had been a common alternative conclusion, a prayer to the Trinity (Cely 66). The haste was not “aforesaid,” then, but a reference to haste was imaginary—imagined, as something fit to finish a letter: a convention that people were aware of even when absent.

Second, the formulation *written in haste* could be varied and made more explicit, often by giving concreteness to its terms and directly evoking the scene of writing implied in

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[27] Leslie K. Arnovick, *Diachronic Pragmatics: Seven Case Studies in English Illocutionary Development* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1999), 4, 113–118. For further developments, see Andreas H. Jucker, “Speech Act Attenuation in the History of English: The Case of Apologies,” *Glossa* 4 (2019): 1–25 (4–5).

[28] Jucker, “Speech Act Attenuation,” 16, 21.

the verb *written*. The variation, I suggest, keeps frequently in mind the force of the phrase. Some variation is slight: some people prefer *written hastily* and others *in great haste* (e.g. Paston 541, 604, 629, 636, 667, 694, 709, 712) or *in right great haste* (Paston 25, 125, 126). To add an adjective or adverb compensates for some semantic bleaching as the phrase "pragmaticalized" or "discursized." The effect is stronger with the looser synonyms or periphrases which occur from time to time such as "Written in haste with short advisement" or just "Written unadvised, etc.," that is, not without advice but without reflection (Paston 315, 626).[29] Others go further in elaborating.[30] A letter by Clement Paston is "Written the 23 day of January in haste, when I was not well at ease" (Paston 114); others are "Written in haste the second Sunday of Lent by candlelight at even" or "Written in haste on St Peter's Day by candlelight" (Paston 158, 446). The letters often have these flashes of evocative detail which bring this long-dead world to life; Rosenthal calls the references to dates thus "existential."[31] These details are likely true; one can readily imagine the challenges of composing by candlelight that would make one hasty in writing. But that constraint of candlelight might be taken for granted by an equally candlelit contemporary; mentioning it becomes somewhat self-conscious, self-authorizing. The artfulness of *haste* is striking when Margaret Paston elaborates the phrase to end one letter to her husband dramatically "In haste, all in haste" (Paston 152). This is not the repetition of that would occur in uncontrolled speech in conversational dictating; this is the repetition of rhetorical emphasis, and had she,

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[29] See *MED, unavised(e, ppl.,* 1.(a), where some other citations refer to writing.

[30] A similar elaboration happens to the opening *salutatio* of *I recommend me heartily* (e.g. Cely 3, 8, 34, 35, etc.). Richard Cely the younger varies the convention in ways which play on the etymology of *heart*: *I recommend me unto you as lovingly* or *in as loving wise* or *as heart can think* or *can devise or think* (e.g. Cely 84, 86, 91, 114, 118, 134, 148).

[31] Rosenthal, "Time," 173, 178.

as a woman, been allowed a schooling in grammar, one would feel confident calling it *conduplicatio* or *diacope*. She did not need to go school to write with style.

The artistry is, though, akin to a feature of learned or *literatus* genres of the time: the modesty topos, that familiar part of Middle English texts of all kinds and of letters in Latin too. That artfulness, even archness, is suggested by one striking use of the phrase by John Sherwood, a scholar of humanist taste and the bishop of Durham: he ends one letter to a Paston with "Scribbled in the most haste at my castle or manor of Auckland, the 27 day of January 1489" (Paston 821; i.e. 1490 in modern dating). The "haste" is strengthened in literal sense by the adjective "most;" the setting in the episcopal palace at Bishop's Auckland is made concrete; and the cliché *written* is avoided in favour of the evocative "Scribbled." The verb *scribble* was rare, though used by a few others in formulae such as "Scribbled in haste" or once "Scribbled in haste with mine own hand in default of other help" (Plumpton 12; see also 149, 170, 173).[32] The context in Sherwood's letter makes clear that this apology for scribbling was artful, for his letter has the artistry one might expect from a cleric with a taste for the latest neo-Latin.[33] It is prefixed with an invocation of Christ's name in Greek, a

[32] One use by Worcester is hard to parse but seems apologetic: "I had but little thing to don when I scribbled this bill" (Paston 559; "don" is the infinitive *do*, with the archaic ending *–n*, not the past participle). Norman Davis, "The Epistolary Usages of William Worcester," in D. A. Pearsall and R. A. Waldron, ed., *Medieval Literature and Civilization: Studies in Memory of G. N. Garmonsway* (London, 1969), 249–74 (263–6), notes this as the first attestation in *OED*, *scribble*, *v.*; for other formulae in letters see *MED*, *scriblen*, *v.*, and also *Letters of Richard Fox 1486–1527*, ed. P. S. and H. M. Allen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), no. 19.

[33] On Sherwood, spelled "Shirwood," and his links to Fox, see David Rundle, *The Renaissance Reform of the Book and Britain: The English Quattrocento* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 203 n.104, 283, 291.

pretentious thing to do, and (as quoted) the setting is described showily—and less hastily than it might be—by a doublet, "castle or manor," that mark of artful style in fifteenth-century English prose. Yet he claims that he writes poorly as he writes quickly. This is a humility topos.

For most other correspondents, this humility topos did not emerge from direct learned models. There were certainly parallel phrases in the letters which English people wrote in French: *written in haste* occurs as "Escript ... en graunt hast" (Stonor 8), and *no more* as "Aultre chose ne vous say que j'escrie pour le pressent" and "Non plus pour le present' (Cely 54, 62; Paston 769). But French was another vernacular, not a learned, language for these people, for instance in the Cely family's business in Flanders. Nor is it clear that these particular phrases come from Latin models. Some of the few letters with *conclusiones* in Latin do close "Scriptum festinantissime," "Scriptum ... cum magna festinacione" and with other variants of *festinans* or "Non plura," but these do not seem to be common usages,[34] and they are used (in the collections surveyed here) only by one person, a friar, John Brackley; it is tempting to suggest that they are rendering the English idioms (Paston 581, 582, 606, 608, 609, 610, 655). There might be sources in legal formulae, say, for the Pastons, some of whom worked in the law, or in the spread of *dictamen* or in the influence of the *studia humanitatis* for Sherwood or Worcester. But Martin Camargo has noted that the handbooks for Latin correspondence, the *artes dictaminis,* do not pay as much attention to the conclusion as to the greeting.[35] One formulary for letters in English does include "No more" as its *subsalutacio,*[36] but otherwise there seem few learned models for these phrases of haste. Indeed, overall it has long been clear that the elaborate models of the *artes dictaminis* had little influence on vernacular letters, and that what influence they had faded during the fifteenth century.

Likewise, royal letters do not seem a strong influence, as the format of royal letters proved too restrictive for the range of matters covered in private.[37] The formulae *in haste* and *no more* are uncommon in the letters from the loftier nobility or royals in the collections surveyed and in other royal letters; such grandees have *given* or *written under our signet*, evoking an orderly process, and sometimes name the physical palace or castle, suggesting a sense of stasis: "Given under our signet at our palace of Westminster the 8th day of December."[38] The royal letters are in this indistinguishable from other documents which carry the king's authority and convey his commands. It would be oddly undermining for them to end modestly by claiming to be issued in haste! It is not clear that there was a learned or institutional model for this pose of humility in everyday letters.

Nonetheless, *written in haste* comments on writing in a meta-textual way; even if not *literatus* it functions akin to literary criticism. Whether or not it is an interlinear insertion on further reflection, it is always self-referential. It is implicitly so even when abbreviated to *in haste*, and the fact that the phrase can be abbreviated thus reflects that fact that sender and recipient both assume that people end letters with comments on writing itself. And in more sign-offs, the participle *written* implies a narrative—a fictionalization—of the process of writing. Whether it implies an active verb, as in *I have written*, or a passive description of the letter itself, *it is written*, refers to the author or to the text (and I suspect the latter), *written in haste* is a momentary piece of literacy criticism, a brief meta-textual assessment of the text itself. Moreover, that description is essentially a critical one: that is, in the strict sense of critique—a self-criticism. The noun *haste* is difficult to interpret, as it can have both positive and negative connotations;[39] but, circularly, the uses of it at the end of a letter, where an expression of humility is common, and in longer apologies (above) suggest that its use is negative. And as an apologetic phrase, to describe your letter as *written in haste* is to compare it to another, better letter that could have been written. It is, then, not only meta-textual,

referring to the text in hand, but meta-discursive, referring to general expectations or ideas of what letters might be. And against those expectations, the letter in hand is measured and found wanting.

It might be that the defects were in the process of writing. Much recent work has stressed the importance of considering the materials of correspondence, including kinds of script,[40] and the hasty execution of these manuscript missives could reflect that specific

[34] According to citations in *DMLBS*, *festinanter*, *festinantia* (i.e. 'cum festinantia') or *festinatim*.

[35] Martin Camargo, *The Middle English Verse Love Epistle* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1991), 9–10, 13.

[36] Linda Ehrsam Voigts. "A Letter from a Middle English Dictaminal Formulary in Harvard Law Library MS 43," *Speculum* 56 (1981): 575–81 (580). (The *subsalutacio* was a subsection of the *conclusio* in some treatises: see Camargo, *Middle English Verse Love Epistle*, 11.) The criticism in another Latin *ars dictaminis* of a *velox* or fast pace relates only to the pace of the Latin prose cursus, something not relevant to English: Martin Camargo, "Epistolary Declamation," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 79 (2016), 345–63 (351).

[37] Richardson, *Middle-Class Writing*, 118–30; Malcolm Richardson, "The Fading Influence of the Medieval *Ars Dictaminis* in England After 1400," *Rhetorica* 19 (2001): 225–47.

[38] Quoting James Gairdner, ed., *Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Reigns of Richard III and Henry VII*, Rolls Series 24, 2 vols (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1861), i, 88 (Richard III in 1484); and see similarly i, 100 (Henry VII in 1491); or e.g. R. W. Chambers and Marjorie Daunt, ed., *A Book of London English 1384-1425* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), nos. III.vii, III.viii (Henry V in 1417). The royal formulae dated back centuries and crossed languages: see e.g. Pierre Chaplais, ed., *English Medieval Diplomatic Practice: Part I*, 2 vols (London: HMSO, 1982), nos. 2, 8.

material element, their script. In particular, the defect might be in the penwork, for *written*, written or implicit, could refer to the physical process, even when an amanuensis was used.[41] People occasionally note the flaws: James Gresham apologized in a postscript that "I had thought to have written the letter above-written new, because of the foul writing and interlining, but now I lack leisure" (Paston 747): haste could harm handwriting. One letter by Agnes Paston is "Written at Paston ... for default of a good secretary" (Paston 13, where "default" means *lack*; see also Plumpton 12 above). While in his headnote to this letter the editor Norman Davis described her comment as "obscure,"[42] it might be the case that the deficiency was felt in the letterforms. This scribe, who also copies a letter by Agnes's husband (Paston 6), writes a common variety of anglicana script, fairly current and informal. Most are in such varieties of handwriting that palaeographers call cursive or *cursiva*; fifteenth-century English had a term with a similar etymology, a *running* hand.[43] Assessed visually, such handwriting might be open to adverse criticism, for cursive was adopted for convenience: it was quicker than more calligraphic set scripts, but therefore the letters linked together in ways that make them less easy to parse; some are reduced to indistinct shapes. Of course, it is dangerous to judge the handwriting of the past by the snobbery of later connoisseurs, as Elaine Treharne has rightly warned.[44] Yet fifteenth-century letters themselves describe this handwriting as less calligraphic and blame it on haste. Two people end by apologizing that that their letters are "Written with mine chancery hand in right great haste" and "Written with mine ~~nawne~~ own ~~chanse~~ chancery hand in haste" (Paston 493, 873). (At this date that is not the more formal handwriting used by the royal Chancery from the 1500s but still the general cursive handwriting of documents, in essence anglicana script, which the later formal version fossilized.)[45] In the former letter, the handwriting is modelled

[39] This is more crisply presented by *OED*, *haste, n.*, including sense P.1 for the phrase *in haste*, than by *MED*, *haste*, *n.*

on a species of anglicana script like that used by Agnes Paston's faulted amanuensis; in the latter, by an aristocrat, the handwriting is atrocious, modelled on the secretary script imported from France but so hurriedly executed that some letters, especially **m**, **n** and **u**, are indistinct —and with uncertainty over wording and spelling too (in the quotation above with crossing out on "~~nawne~~" and the rejected spelling "~~chanse~~').[46] Some of the unspecific references to haste, then, were likely apologies for handwriting. There would be a sour note, too, if such apologies for penmanship were being dictated to an amanuensis, perhaps one of lower social standing, who was obliged to condemn himself.

But it is not clear that *written in haste* only refers to handwriting, for the composers are not always the people writing things down, given that frequency of using amanuenses, and so this comment might not only refer to the text's materiality. The implied deficiency might also be in the composition of words—that other sense of *writer*. While many of the correspondents who profess to have *written in haste* have not written by hand, they have all composed words in the head to some degree. The professed deficiencies in their compositions could be of various kinds. First, people deliberately cut letters short for secrecy or discretion, often entrusting confidential or controversial matters to the servant who carried the letter. They not uncommonly comment that "that I would say, I may not write" and suchlike (Paston 1037) and urge the reader to "commune with the bringer hereof, and he will tell you, for I dare not write" (Cely 216; see also 228). Given the use of carriers, letters could be designedly insufficient, and some references to haste say so: one letter "Writ in haste at Walsingham" has the postscript "I pray you give credence in all these matters to Shaw, for he can tell you more shortlier than I should write" (Paston 767).

Second, "shortlier" in its reference to concision also suggests a concern about something that might be called style. That the carrier can speak more hastily—"shortlier"—contrasts the time it would take to write, or to take the trouble to write succinctly or well.

(Mark Twain is often claimed to have said, “I apologize for the long letter. I did not have time to write a short one.”) And a concern with style is made explicit in other, more extended apologies and might, therefore, be implicit in the terser *written in haste*. Some spell out the connection between the time free for writing and the quality of what is written: William Paston II wrote to his elder brother John Paston I, “I beseech you hold me excused, though I write no better to you at this time, for in good faith I had no leisure;” and then after noting his date and place of writing he repeated, “I am sorry I may write no better at this time but I trust ye will be patient” (Paston 81). That “no better” implies qualitative judgement. One John Denys apologizes for having “Written rudely in haste” (Paston 716), and one John Bokkyng even refers meta-linguistically to the process of making excuses for bad style: he explains that more information appeared in a former letter “rudely and in haste by me indited, of which I pray excuse etc.;” and he ends this new letter of apology with its own sign-off a few lines later “In haste at London” (Paston 1001). This is a clearly critical comment on a past letter which connects haste with composing “rudely,” meaning something like “roughly” or without polish.[47] There is a sense that this apology for writing “rudely” and “in haste” will be a familiar one, taken for granted as a form of words, for again it can be truncated with *etc*. (In the manuscript, the Tironian abbreviation for *et* followed by letter **c** is the conventional fifteenth-century spelling for *etc*.) *Written in haste* elsewhere is a more implicit version of this explicit, expanded apology for writing “rudely” or “no better” in style.

That reads a lot into a short convention, but elsewhere people were more than ready to comment self-consciously on the verbal craft of letters. People often promise to write *more*

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[40] For such an approach, see James Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practice of Letter-Writing, 1512–1635* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), e.g. 19.

plain or *more plainly* in their *next letter* (e.g. Cely 134, 146, 169), suggesting an awareness of a certain standard in their writing. Sometimes plainness means openness, contrasting (as above) a wariness about what can be safely written down; that seems so once when somebody promises to explain something "more plainly by mouth" (e.g. Cely 93). But at other times when it is *my next letter* which will communicate *more plainly*, the difference is one in the mode of writing. They are self-reflective about correspondence and its problems and possibilities—unpolished rudeness, uneducated lewdness, communicative plainness, ease

[41] *MED*, *writere*, *n.*, usually meant a 'scribe'. On this term, see Rebecca Krug, *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 48.

[42] *Paston Letters and Papers*, ed. Davis, Richmond and Beadle, headnote to Paston 13; and see Plate II.

[43] *MED*, *fist*, *n.*, 4, and *rennen*, *v.*, 8b.(d), citing "a goode renning fist" from the play *Mankind*, where it sounds like praise ("goode") but might not be praise in the ironic context. This antedates the first citations in *OED*, *fist*, *n.*, 3, in this sense of *handwriting*, and *OED*, *running*, *adj.*, II.23, although that first citation from 1575 is applied to handwriting and links it to haste ("hastelye wrytten in a ronninge hande").

[44] Elaine M. Treharne, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Old English Manuscripts and Their Physical Description", Matthew T. Hussey and John D. Niles, ed., *The Genesis of Books: Studies in the Scribal Culture of Medieval England in Honour of A.N. Doane* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 261–83 (274–83).

[45] So argues L. C. Hector, *The Handwriting of English Documents* (London: Arnold, 1966), 64, discussing one of these quotations. These quotations antedate the first citation in *OED*, *chancery*, *n.*, sense C.1 *chancery hand*, but one is in *MED*, *chauncerie*, *n.*, 1(b).

[46] London, British Library, MS Add. 34888, fol. 97r, and MS Add. 43491, fol. 5r.

of understanding—to make sure that important information is conveyed clearly.[48] Documents can also be described as *clear* and having *clearness* (e.g. Cely 38, 41). Even the most business-like of writing requires a certain achievement of style to communicate its business. Others' self-criticism adumbrates their critical assumptions more fully. The ever-apologetic apprentice William Cely asked his employers "to take none displeasure of mine lewd and untrue English that I wrote, for at that time ⌐my¬ mind was not quiet, for I was sick, but howsomever I wrote I meant well." (Cely 203). He has a concept of intention here ("I meant well"), which implies an ideal letter from which his words fall short, and the defect is one of education, *lewd* then being the opposite of *lered* or learned or *literatus*.[49] Similar ideas of *lewd* writing and lofty intention are voiced by William Worcester once: having vented "my lewd meaning," he asks "Forgive me of my lewd letter writing, and I pray you laugh at it (Paston 566). He has some abstract sense of how polished "letter writing" should be, and a sense that one might lack learning or be too "lewd" for it.[50] And Richard Cely the younger casts a lovely account of the countryside in spring and justifies writing "as well of japes as sad matters, like as I promised you at our departing, etc." (Cely 19). That pregnant "etc." again leaves unwritten some reflexion and self-consciousness about letters that people expressed otherwise in speech, for apparently Richard Cely and his brother had had a conversation about how to write letters. They were not literary critics but letter critics, in the middle of everyday business able to converse about textual questions. *Written in haste* continues their critical conversation.

III—How to read hasty writing

This literary criticism in everyday letters leads to several suggestions about evaluating these practical letters. The first is a suggestion, perhaps a predictable one, that writers of genres

with practical functions, such as the business-like letters, turn out to have had aspirations for their form and style nonetheless. This is to address the longstanding debate about whether everyday letters in English were shaped by artful conventions or artless charm. Norman Davis with typical balance saw them writing "unselfconsciously ... and often in haste," but also with "literary qualities" used "not entirely" by accident.[51] That balance could be calibrated by approaches like the recent brilliant criticism of other practical genres by Griffin, Bower, Cooper and others that has recognized the artifice they employ and the affects they elicit.[52] Beyond the slyly self-reflexive closing formulae (explored in this article), there are many other stylistic achievements in these letters: literary allusions, verse, proverbs, similes and metaphors, patterned syntax, humour, narratives, scene-painting, nature writing.[53] William Worcester who tried his hand elsewhere at a translation and a political treatise has some well-crafted passages in his letters; Richard Cely the younger was a fulsome and skilful correspondent; Thomas Betson in the Stonor letters is adept at extended parallelism and employs some striking metaphors; Margaret Paston tells vivid stories. And several of the letters' stylistic flourishes take writing outside the haste of the moment: there is a syntax that is—under the influence of curial prose—longwinded, ramified and elaborate, the opposite of hasty. There are allusions, proverbs and snappy sayings that seek a timeless wisdom or memorable phrasing that persists beyond the present.

That historical claim about the artfulness of letters also entails a disciplinary claim now: these letters sometimes not only yield information, as has been the informative use of them as an historical source, from Eileen Power to Helen Castor, but bring enjoyment of their expression.[54] The self-critique in *written in haste* invites criticism of the letters for their literary craft—albeit a craft they profess not to possess. This would be one reorientation of our attention in handling these letters. One could readily make critical discriminations between the letters-writers for style. (There would be nothing improper in judging everyday

language this way; people regularly evaluate the wit of texts as everyday as emails or Tweets, say, some more cheering than others. *Like*.) And there would be advantages in bringing them more often beneath the critical gaze. The letters are by people of slightly (but only slightly) more diverse kinds than some other genres, notably than the poetry which was more often produced by men with clerical educations or professional roles. In particular, the history of women's writing has prompted much of the best commentary on these letters.[55] The letters also report from different and distinctively rural regions, and in the Cely collection in particular from people travelling back and forth abroad—all timely topics in the twenty-first century. Evaluating the excellence of their writing would bring another disciplinary advantage for diversifying the class, gender and geography of the canon—such as there is one—of fifteenth-century English literature.

The main methodological reminder from *written in haste*, though, is not that practical letters meet twenty-first-century literary critical criteria, but that they apply their own evaluative standards. While they worry that writing in haste makes it hard to achieve excellence in writing, with this apology they conceive, conversely, that everyday writing could be the occasion for excellence. They imply that good writing could emerge from ordinary literate practice, and not for a few but for many possible writers, as an achievement or—as they apologize for not achieving it—as an aspiration. They imply what Toril Moi has

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[47] Bokkyng's past letter was composed on behalf of his "master." And the meta-literary properties of Bokkyng's letter (Paston 1001) are increased, because it survives in a copy by one William Wayte; and it is commented on by Wayte in another letter which Wayte calls, again apologetically, "a lewd letter" (Paston 472). For a similar apology for hasty composition, see Stuart A. Moore, ed., *Letters and Papers of John Shillingford, Mayor of Exeter 1447-50*, Camden Society, new ser., 2 (Westminster: Nichols, 1871), no. 22. For the stylistic senses of *rudely*, see *MED*, *rudeli, adv.*, senses 1.(a), 1.(d).

stated outright in a recent book: that "The best literary language is ordinary language used exceptionally well."[56] Their implication in some ways parallels proleptically the argument of Christopher Cannon that grammar lessons in school "conveyed an idea of what literature was and could be,"[57] or the argument of Emily Steiner that documents came to "exemplify what it means to write a text in late medieval England."[58] Letter writers recognized for themselves that their genre contained the possibility of excellent writing—what contemporaries of humanist taste called *bonae litterae* indeed or "good letters."

But it is important not to overstate the frequency of their evaluative comments on writing, such as those on the effects of haste on style—"I write no better to you at this time, for in good faith I had no leisure" and so on (Paston 81). The writers are not self-referential in explicit terms very often. And it is most important of all not to read the implicit self-reference in *written in haste* without its avowed literal meaning. These correspondents who claimed to have *written in haste* were claiming, of course, that there was *no* time for writing well. They themselves were evaluating their writing as less polished than it could have been. So to read it looking for excellence would be to read against the grain of their claim in a way which is disrespectful. Remember that when William Worcester and Richard Cely the younger mention their experiments in epistolography they are apologizing for them. Cely (as we saw), in one of the loveliest letters, has to justify its indulgence—to justify writing "as well of japes as sad matters, like as I promised you at our departing, etc." (Cely 19). Worcester asks his reader to "Forgive" his playfulness. These people are not claiming that their letters are full of verbal craft or imaginative invention, or, if they are, they are confessing that they need not be, perhaps should not be.

Their evaluative terms offer an alternative to one otherwise successful mode of critical analysis. To acclaim these practical works as excellent writing might be possible to a degree, as in criticism of other genres such as remedies or husbandry manuals; but criticism

need not only find literariness wherever it looks—find "a text in this class," in Stanley Fish's famous formulation.[59] To apply 'close reading' or 'slow reading' to letters that are avowedly *written in haste* risks misreading their literal sense, not to read them closely enough, or to read them too closely, almost suspiciously. This is a common risk for appreciating everyday culture: Rita Felski has espied in scholarly fascination with "the everyday" an inconsistent tendency to praise that everyday practice most when "the everyday" is interrupted by self-referential critique, and a "conviction that the everyday can only be redeemed by its aesthetic transfiguration."[60] Again, there is a tendency for the critical eye to see itself staring back: to see those phrases *written in haste* as a kind of literary criticism.

Furthermore, there is too narrow a focus on form over content in singling out *written in haste* as a critique of the surface materials of letters—script or style. For self-reflection need not only be a metalanguage about linguistic form. In these letters, the apologies about a lack of clarity are apologies not about style for style's sake, but about style as a means of conveying information. Likewise, some of the few longer comments which apologize for more playful, less utilitarian elements are apologizing not for style but for content: Richard Cely notes that he writes (to quote again) "as well of japes as sad matters" (Cely 19). The key word is not *manner* but "matters."

That concern with content emerges from the phrase that is a companion of *written in haste* in many letters, and in some letters is the sole closing formula: *no more* or *no more as now* or fully *I write no more at this time*. Some correspondents use *no more* more than *in haste* (as noted above). The words *no more*, unlike "no better," imply not quality but quantity. The ideal letter that the writer has in mind is one better in volume, in content. This phrase *no more* might have "discursized" too, as it can be said superfluously after fuller apologies to the same effect. Richard Cely the younger twice says "I would write more to you but I depart" and then reiterates with a further flourish "No more" (Cely 108; see similarly

118). But the sense seems genuine in such contexts: one letter, for instance, explains that the ship to carry the letter was leaving: "I would have writ your masterships of more matters, but my space was but short, and the passage tarried ⌐not¬ but yede at the same tide that it came from Dover; but I shall write you more at large with the next passage etc. No more unto your masterships at this time" (Cely 214; "yede" means *went*). There is a practical reason for not writing more and a practical concern that the letters should have included "more matters." Such comments can lead to a promise that "with the next passage I shall write your masterships of more things" or "such news as I can hear" (Cely 238, 241). There are often explicit apologies for lacking "news" (Cely 46) or more commonly *tidings*, in a set of phrases: *as for tidings I can write (you) none* and such like (e.g. Cely 114, 124, 134, 136, etc.) or *other tidings have we none (here)* (e.g. Cely, 156, 158, 160, 163, etc.).[61] In fact, that phrase often is followed by *but* and introduces what tidings people do have (e.g. Cely 179, 183). It too is like a humility topos, yet a topos humble not about form or style but about content.[62]

And the concern with content continues to a concern with the container. *No more* expresses a sense of the letters as themselves matter, their language as an amount of ink extensible on a page transmissible through space. There is an expectation of more letters in general, almost irrespective of what they might contain. In fine passive aggression, people

[48] In addition, about a fifth of the Cely family's letters also comment meta-textually on having understood others' letters (*the which ... I have (well) understood*: e.g. Cely 2, 4, 9, 17, 22, 23, 26 etc.) or once having understood "the tenor thereof" (Cely 235).

[49] *MED, leued, adj.*, sense 1.

[50] The apology for rudeness in letters echoes humility topoi in other genres: e.g. in a formal, rhetorically elaborate petition Worcester apologizes for executing "thus rudely my poor intention," again contrasting intention and rude style (Paston, 1046).

often *marvel greatly that we have* (or *I have* or *he has*) *no writing* from their correspondents (e.g. Cely 78, 84, 118, 126), or they have "marvelled that I writeth none oftener" (Cely 201), or they wheedle and *marvel* about letters not received (e.g. Cely 235; Paston 263). They often set out directly their expectations that people should have written more, sooner, oftener. As Rebecca Krug has noted, *no more* quantifies the social obligations of correspondents, such as of Margaret Paston to her husband to whom it is her duty to report.[63] For instance, Richard Cely the elder and the younger often rebuke George Cely, son to one, brother to other, for lack of letters: "ye might write much more nor ye do ... ye may no less do but write much the more of tiding" (Cely 90; see also e.g. 104, 136, 195). Ironically, Richard the younger himself can end such a letter "I write no more ... in great haste" (Cely 90). Alongside his earlier remarks, that conventional formula clearly expresses an expectation not of style but of matter: more content or the mere materialization of a long-awaited letter.

This *no more* is comparable with *in haste*, because the two idioms are both about the problem of the material volume of writing: the shortness of time prompts and parallels the shortness of the letter. And the two idioms often occur together (as noted) in many double endings to letters. For instance, four letters copied and possibly composed by Worcester for his employer Sir John Fastolf conclude "No more for haste" (Paston 990, 991, 993, 994), and one of Worcester's own missives explains explicitly "I can no more for haste and lack of leisure" (Paston 496; see similarly 498). That doubling is surplus to requirements, giving "more" words and slowing down any "haste," but it has the effect of bulking out the writing

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[51] *Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, ed. Davis, p. xxi. This debate is set out well by Beadle, "Private Letters," 297–99.

[52] See n. 19 above.

[53] See n. 18 above.

matter. *No more* and *in haste* both apologize for truncating the letter's bulk, language as physical stuff.

It is, therefore, not finely-formed language which these comments conceptualize or conjure into being. Rather, such comments by counterpoint conceptualize a category of everyday language's practical speed and matter. One could almost invert the reminder from Toril Moi (above) that "The best literary language is ordinary language used exceptionally well," to say that for these people "Ordinary language is literary language *written in haste*." Authors of these practical letters seek not only writing that fits modern critical expectations of excellence in style; they seek writing that meets their own critical expectations of writing assessed for its matter—its extent, frequency, clarity and content. It is difficult to find a critical method for appreciating content. And it is difficult to find one for language's materiality not only as script or style but as extent or mere existence: the concern to write enough words, and often enough. To evaluate writing's quality might feel tangential to measuring its quantity, to value or or evaluate fine form is often considered antithetical to the dispensing or decoding of information, and to weigh texts by length or frequency is something that even the study of material texts seldom does. But the phrase *no more* reminds us that in a process one might call 'everyday criticism' people assess everyday writing all the time—now as then—in these ways. They assess it not only as style but as content: Moi notes

[54] E.g. Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (London: Methuen, 1924), or Helen Castor, *Blood and Roses: The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Faber, 2005), and other invaluable biographical and political histories, too numerous to be listed here.

[55] E.g. Watt, "The Paston Women," and her earlier "'No Writing for Writing's Sake': The Language of Service and Household Rhetoric in the Letters of the Paston Women," in Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, ed., *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 122–38.

that it would be counterintuitive to assess a person's writing without assessing its attention to the life world it is engaged with—its "perceptive reflection ..., clear formulation, ... accurate description."[64] These correspondents do that and they assess it as matter too: whether there is enough writing, frequently enough delivered, informative enough. *Written in haste* might not pick out a problem in practical writing but might proudly defend its timeliness, functionality—strange though such praise seems to critical eyes now trained to read slowly and commend slow writing. If critical criteria cannot appreciate the matters of writing—the content; its existence in time and space—then it is critical terms now that are insufficient. If practical writings are to be surveyed by literary criticism, as they long have been by linguistics and social history, then the critical vocabulary will need to expand. These auto-critical authors in *written with haste* and *no more* offers some critical terms compared to which our own protocols of close or slow reading stop short.

Yet to recognize those concerns with matter—content, materiality—is not enough. To stop there would be condescending, at risk of condemning everyday writing to be "eternally mired in the immanence of the quotidian," as Felski warned.[65] It would also be inaccurate, for, as Felski notes further, "the practice of daily life itself" has "recourse to distinctions between the quotidian and the exceptional" and "acts of discrimination" or "moments of

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[56] Moi, *Revolution*, 213.

[57] Christopher Cannon, *From Literacy to Literature: England, 1300–1400* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 14, 183.

[58] Emily Steiner, *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 24.

[59] For a positive account of this development, see Moi, *Revolution*, 213.

[60] Rita Felski, "Everyday Life," *New Literary History* 33 (2002): 607–22 (608–10). See also her "Everyday Aesthetics," 173–4.

experiential dissonance."[66] Just such "distinctions" and senses of "dissonance" are what *written in haste* and *no more* express. It is important not to be misled by the writers' evocation of the limits of their practical writings. That has been a risk when their letters have been looked through as historical sources about other events, and even when they have been looked at with historical sympathy as "matter-of-fact" in their attitude to writing, using it only as "necessary."[67] By contrast, when Margaret Paston and others conclude that they have "Written ⌐in haste¬ at Hellesdon" and similar, such comments observe the limits of practical writing from the outside. The subject of such statements is practical uses of writing; but the making of such statements, imagining the letter that might have been, surpasses the practical and the matter-of-fact. An imagining of improvement is the keynote on which the letters literally end (and this article ends). Ultimately *no more*'s flat negative makes more explicit than *written in haste*'s ambivalent pejorative that both phrases gesture to something beyond the letter in hand—to a less hasty letter or a longer letter, whether improved by style or content or extent. By conceptualizing practical writing *in haste*, they conceptualize in counterpoint a less practical, more polished, time-less, unbounded kind of writing. Admitting their failure to be artful, they were imagining a possibility of artfulness and were thereby being artful. It is not only that practical writing can be the object of literary criticism, as has

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[61] Richmond, "Hand and Mouth," 238–43, suggests that the quest for *tidings* reveals the smallness of the governing classes whose letters survive. For the mercantile Cely family, it also treats language as a tool for recording commodities and treats language as itself a commodity.

[62] There is also occasionally worry about the quality of information: e.g. "As of any tidings here I can none write you as yet. There is, but I cannot have the truth thereof" (Cely 112).

[63] Krug, *Reading Families*, 34.

been done well by recent critics, but that literary criticism—self-reflexiveness about practical language—occurs within that writing itself.

Written in haste, this 15 September 2022.

[64] Moi, *Revolution*, 226–27, 242. Bertrand, *Écritures ordinaires*, 360, stresses that this quality was sought in documentary texts too.

[65] Felski, "Everyday Life," 618.

[66] Felski, "Everyday Life," 618.

[67] Quoting Krug, *Reading Families*, 18, 30; see also p. viii, 5.