



To the Letter: Contemporary Perspectives on Epistolarity

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“Epistles to Emails: Letters, self-construction and the virtual age”.

Until the late twentieth century the letter was still a central form of communication within the private and public spheres and across their somewhat fluid boundary. Not all letters survive but they do have a tangible form and even the epistles of the very ordinary can turn up in a descendant's attic, ripe for socio-historical analysis. What is less clear is whether and how the emails and texts which have replaced letters might be preserved in a form accessible to future historians. This paper explores the shift away from letters and towards email and mobile phone messaging as forms of communication. To assist, two different sources are examined. The first is letters of offer that some young Victorian women wrote presenting their credentials to missionary societies. Although these may have been written largely as statements of religious belief, it is possible to read them as constructions of self. The second source is interviews with contemporary couples in distance relationships, where the couples discuss their use of email and texting. In particular we examine how these sources illustrate changes in presentations of self, some of which may be related to the seemingly more ephemeral nature of digital media. Such an examination questions what constitutes a letter and how important letter writing is as a technique of self. This technique has clearly been subject to significant change as social relations have become mediated in new ways via the ‘anywhere, anytime’ (as long as it is *now*) possibilities of new forms of communication.

