ANCIENT EPISTOLARY FICTIONS

The letter in Greek literature

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CHAPTER I

A culture of letter writing

> Nature, pleased with the customs of friendship,
> invented tools so that those absent could be united:
> the reed-pen, paper, ink, a person's handwriting,
> tokens of the soul that grieves far away.
>
> *Anth. Pal.* 9.401 Palladas

This first chapter will touch briefly on two issues of epistolary practice in ancient Greece: first, a working definition of a "letter," including some practicalities of writing and sending in antiquity; second, a consideration of the cultural context of ancient Greek letter writing: its origins in myth and history, and its changing status over time.

PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF THE LETTER

A logical starting place for our definition is an exploration of the ancient terminology for "letter." Centuries of Greek practice reveal a number of terms, including βύβλος or βυβλίον (papyrus) and δέλτος (tablet), which are used metonymically and thus emphasize the materials used for writing, and γράμματα (alphabetic letters) and other derivatives of γράφειν (to write), which refer to the act of writing itself.[1] The word ἐπιστολή,[2] derived from the verb ἐπιστέλλειν, refers to the necessity of sending a communication over a certain distance: an ἐπιστολή is anything sent by a messenger, whether oral or in writing. While Thucydides, for example, uses the word for both oral and written messages, Xen-

[1] For the historical development of the individual terms, and their usage by specific authors, see Stirewalt (1993) 67–87: "Greek Terms for Letter and Letter-Writing."

[2] Stirewalt (1993) discusses the difference in meaning between the singular and the plural form (84–85).

ophon and the orators limit its definition to a written form; by Hellenistic times, ἐπιστολή or ἐπιστολαί are the common terms found in papyri for both private letters and official documents.[3] The early history of ἐπιστολή in Greek usage points to an association of letter writing with official or military oral communication;[4] the extension of the word to the writings of private citizens came later. The ancient definition of "letter" thus remains closely connected to its original context: a written message, usually private, sent to accompany or replace an oral injunction or private conversation between two persons geographically removed from one another.

In our own culture, we should have no trouble defining the object: a letter is a message, written and signed by its author, sealed, addressed, and finally delivered (by hand, airmail, or pony express) to an addressee. The situation calls for a letter either because the addressee is absent and could not have been communicated with otherwise, or because the writer prefers the medium of writing to communicate matters of secrecy, formality, or emotional delicacy. The letter contains an epistolary greeting, a conventional closing, and perhaps a postscript; the body of the letter may be handwritten, dictated, or typed, but the final signature is usually in the writer's own hand.

Since the advent of such modern technologies as electronic mail and faxes, however, these definitive characteristics have become slightly more varied. Perhaps the biggest change is that the new forms of mail are disconnected from their sources: there is no "signature," only standardized fonts; there is no contact with a physical object previously handled by another person. The privacy of a sealed communication and the suspense of unfolding an envelope or a page have been replaced by codes and passwords, or commands to "scroll down" (a wonderfully anachronistic image). The envelope and stamp have disappeared, although the return address remains on the cover page of a fax and in the screen headings of an e-mail. The conventional format of greetings, paragraphs, and closing formulas has been abandoned for the more casual style of electronic transmission, which no longer demands capitalization or formal punctuation. Certain documents,

[3] Stirewalt (1993) 82–83. The earliest use of ἐπιστολαί for letter appears in Thucydides (e.g. 1.129) and Euripides (*IT* 589).

[4] See J. L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia 1986) 191–93.

however, remain unsuitable for electronic delivery: the highly formal genre of the wedding invitation, for example, or (at the time of writing), a text with the power to bind its signatory legally.

Electronic mail has also redefined the audience, and what it means to publish a letter: a computerized "list" allows a letter to be read by numerous unknown readers with a common interest, although such a list focuses primarily on the distribution of information, and lacks the aesthetic dimension of the epistolary collections of a Horace or a Cicero, for example, who published their epistolary poetry books for a wide audience, but obviously using slower mechanisms of publication and dissemination. The modern public's "access" is instantaneous, and their responses are equally quick. Speed and convenience are critical features of this new epistolary mode: a "regular" letter delivered through the postal service is no longer the unmarked term, as avid users of electronic mail now condescendingly label it "snail mail." In a final postmodern twist, a company in California (of course) now offers a service called Letterpost for those who are "too technologically absorbed to put paper to envelope" but still want to communicate with non-computer literate friends and family: for a small fee, it prints out e-mail, puts it in an envelope, and drops it in the nearest mailbox, thus converting e-mail back to snail mail.[5]

The definition of a letter may continue to change along with the technology invented for its production and transmission, or perhaps these changes will be so radical that new forms of communication will arise, which are not letters, but which may share some characteristics with letters. The rapid change in the practice of letter writing that has overtaken our society may not be comparable to the events of any one era in antiquity, but it does provide us with an appreciation of the interconnectedness of letter writing and other social and cultural practices. Starting as a token of power and authority in the hands of the few, letter writing in the classical period remained a relatively unusual activity. Letters flourished as literacy slowly developed, and at the more educated social levels, letter writing became part of everyday life in Hellenistic Egypt, both in administrative affairs and in private households.[6] The gradual development of a culture of letters also

[5] *The New York Times*, Thursday, May 27, 1999, D8.
[6] W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge MA 1989) 127–28.

presumably effected a change in education, as the curricula adapted to the requirements of "modern" life; so, too, schools in today's society have introduced classes in computer skills.

The written nature of the letter may be seen as the only defining feature to survive the massive changes in epistolary technology from antiquity until now. What were some of the actual physical circumstances of writing and sending a letter in ancient Greece? Epistolary fictions frequently allude to the physical nature of the letter itself, and the difficulties of ensuring a safe delivery, as if such references could invest their letters with the sort of concreteness found only in the material world. Thus writers of fictional letters apologize for their shaky handwriting, mention tears shed on the page, or worry about the next boat leaving for Athens. An understanding of the situation of "real" letters will deepen our appreciation of the fictional recreations of these circumstances.

The materials used for letter writing changed over time as new supplies were developed or became more readily available. One of the earliest forms used was the folded, hinged tablet (δέλτος, πίναξ), which could be of clay (tablets found at Knossos and Pylos),[7] wood with a waxed surface (Homer *Iliad* 6.168–70; Hdt. 7.239.3; Plautus *Curc.* 410), metal (the late sixth-century BCE lead letter from Berezan), or ivory (Augustine, *Letters* 15.1).[8] The tablets were inscribed with a sharp-pointed pen, then folded, secured with thread or bands, and finally sealed with wax and a signet ring. The malleability of the waxed surface allowed for multiple reuse (Propertius 3.23.3). The use of ivory tablets is uncommon, as we learn from Augustine's apologies to a friend:[9]

> Does this letter not show that, if we are short of papyrus, we have at least an abundance of parchment? The ivory tablets I possess I have sent to your uncle with a letter; you will the more easily forgive this bit of skin, since my message to him could not be postponed, and I considered it very impolite not to write to you. If you have any tablets of mine beside you, please send them back for such emergencies as this.

[7] L. H. Jeffery, "Writing," in A. J. B. Wace and F. H. Stubbings, eds., *A Companion to Homer* (London 1962) 555.

[8] See R. G. Ussher, "Letter-Writing," in M. Grant and R. Kitzinger, eds., *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean*, vol. III (New York 1988) 1575–76.

[9] Augustine to Romanianus, *Ep.* 15, as translated by J. H. Baxter, *St. Augustine: Select Letters* (Cambridge MA 1980) 13–16.

Augustine grumbles that the shortage of papyrus forces him to use his highly valuable ivory tablets as well as the less desirable (but still fairly high-grade) parchment for his correspondence. His letter also reveals that, in a lapse in an exchange, tablets might stop circulating in the addressee's house, rather than being returned empty to their owners. He requests the return of any tablets stored at his friend's house. We may also read between the lines of this request a gentle reprimand to a friend who has not written back.

Returning to archaic times, an unusual variation on the flat surfaces used for letter writing is the Spartan method of sending coded messages into the field. The message itself, usually some sort of military command, was written on a strip of leather rolled at an angle around a particular stick called a σκυτάλη. When it was taken off the stick, the words were unintelligible, but the addressee had an identically shaped stick, and when he rewound the leather strip around it, the message would become readable again.[10]

The preferred medium for letters, however, as Augustine suggested above, was papyrus, imported from Egypt, and written on with an inked reed pen. The papyrus fibers were treated, pasted together and polished to form a smooth writing surface, and then folded, rolled, tied up and sealed to ensure privacy. Papyrus letters carried an address on the outside, and occasionally the date of the sending. Papyrus is known to have been used in Athens as early as 490 BCE, although it was probably still fairly expensive in the late fifth and early fourth centuries.[11] Hundreds of letter papyri, the earliest dating from the third century BCE, have been excavated in Greco-Roman Egypt, and more continue to be unearthed.[12]

The actual delivery of letters could be a complicated affair. Official letters had their own channels: military dispatches went by courier – soldier or slave – and government documents went by

[10] The σκυτάλη is discussed by F. D. Harvey, "Literacy in the Athenian Democracy," *REG* 79 (1966) 585–635, esp. 625, who refers the reader to the chapter in Aeneas Tacticus (31) on secret codes. Ancient references include Thuc. 1.131; Xen. *HG* 3.3.8; Ar. *Lys.* 991 (with an obscene allusion to its similarity to an erect penis); Plu. *Lys.* 19.

[11] Harris (1989) 95: "the expensiveness of papyrus, the only material which could be used for long private messages, limited the usefulness of writing and so indirectly put a brake on literacy." Hdt. 5.58 mentions papyrus; see Hdt. 5.35 for his "living" parchment.

[12] Ussher (1988) 1576.

government messengers. But private letters were excluded from this system, and a letter writer without the financial means to dispatch his own slave depended primarily on travellers going in the right direction, or merchants plying a regular route on land or sea. Delivery was by no means guaranteed: a letter writer could expect delays on account of bad weather, accidents, or untrustworthy couriers. The situation in both classical and Hellenistic Greece contrasts remarkably with the long-standing organized postal system of the Persian empire described by Herodotus in book 8: a relay system was set up to carry royal dispatches to the far reaches of the kingdom; riders equal in number to the days of the journey were posted at regular intervals along the roads, and the messages were then passed from rider to rider, producing a postal system unparalleled in speed and efficiency (8.98). But again, the system was in place for official government business, not for private citizens.[13] Similarly, the Roman postal service ("cursus publicus") was devised by Augustus for military and official transport, involving messengers and relay stations providing a change of horse and carriage.

Now that we have briefly explored the physical nature of a letter and the systems for its delivery, let us remind ourselves of the larger cultural context of letters in Greek antiquity. I will approach letters as a cultural phenomenon in two ways: first, by asking questions about their place in the general Greek imagination, and in particular their myths of origin; and second, by looking at actual examples which may offer insights into the function and role of letters at that particular moment in history.

A CULTURE OF LETTERS

Greek antiquity was fascinated by the progress of society through individual inventions, and it therefore comes as no surprise to find the "invention" of letters attributed to a specific individual. Clement of Alexandria, a Christian well educated in pagan Greek literature who was active in the late second century CE, provides us

[13] See D. T. Steiner, *The Tyrant's Writ* (Princeton 1994) 150, for a stimulating discussion of the monarch's monopoly over the systems of communication in his kingdom, and his power to block all attempts by others to write or circumvent his system, which in turn produced elaborate stratagems for the secret delivery of subversive mail.

with a list of inventions the Greeks borrowed from barbarians: musical instruments, styles of warfare, metal smelting, and so forth. The inventions attributed to women are limited to cosmetic improvements – Medea is said to have been the first to color her hair, for example, while Semiramis is remembered for introducing purple cloth – until Atossa enters the list. Clement quotes the fifth-century historian Hellanicus of Lesbos: "Hellanicus says that the first person to compose a letter was Atossa, queen of the Persians" (πρώτην ἐπιστολὰς συντάξαι Ἄτοσσαν τὴν Περσῶν βασιλεύσασάν φησιν Ἑλλάνικος).[14]

Clement's statement is tantalizingly brief, and we are left to wonder under what specific circumstances Atossa is believed to have "invented" the letter. We have no details of the materials used or the system of sending. Did she invent letter writing as a totally new form of communication, or did she improve and codify an already existing method? Did she replace a face-to-face court encounter with a written message, in an attempt to formalize the protocol of addressing a royal personage, or was she just trying to communicate with a family member abroad? Was the letter a military or political document, and if so, did she merely devise the medium or did she also write the actual message? I am tempted to interpret this moment of invention as a public rather than a private matter. If Atossa had been trying to reach a friend or relative, she could have sent a trusted slave with an oral message. The information for which she invented the letter must have been secret, political, and with potentially serious ramifications. These requirements were also true for what we usually think of as the first instance in literature of letter writing, namely the scene with Bellerophon and Proetus in *Iliad* 6.168ff., to which we will have occasion to return.

It is hard to say what Hellanicus really meant by making Atossa the first inventor. The Persians were famous in antiquity for their

[14] The Greek text is O. Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus Stromata Buch I–VI*, vol II, 3rd edn. (Berlin 1960) 50 (= *Strom.* 1.16.76.10). See also the version in Hellanicus (Jacoby *FGrH* 4 fr. 178). The word used for composing is not "to write" (γράφειν), but rather "to organize or compose in an orderly fashion" (συντάξαι, or συντάσσειν in Hellanicus), which Jacoby in Hellanicus glosses as εὗρεν. See also the discussion in W. Roberts, *History of Letter Writing from the Earliest Period to the 5th Century* (London 1843) 1–2, and M. van den Hout, "Studies in Early Greek Letter Writing," *Mnemosyne 2* (1949) 23–24. On the use of letters rather than personal interview to communicate with a king, see Hdt 1.99 (Deioces).

professional postal system described above, and the Persian monarchs carefully controlled the systems of communication within their kingdom. In this regard it may have seemed logical to assign epistolary skill to this particular cultural group. But equally notable is that the invention of letter writing is ascribed here not just to a foreigner, but to a female foreigner. We may contrast this with the attribution of the origins of alphabetic writing to Palamedes, a legendary culture hero. Euripides mentions the benefits of writing in the context of letters, as Palamedes boasts of the usefulness of his invention; the origins of alphabetic writing are tied to the need to communicate at a distance (*Palamedes* fr. 578.3–5):[15]

I invented the art of writing for mankind,
so that someone who has not crossed over the surface of the sea
may still learn clearly, in his own house, about all the things out there.

Diodorus Siculus writes in similar terms of the legendary lawgiver Charondas (*ca.* sixth century BCE), who campaigned for general literacy, emphasizing the ability of alphabetic letters to allow (12.13.2)

. . . men widely separated in space [to] have conversations through written communication with those who are at the furthest distance from them, as if they were standing nearby.

Later we learn of the supposed invention of the imaginary letter in Greek prose by Lesbonax, a rhetorician named by Lucian.[16] In these three instances, letter writing is "naturalized": it is Greek, male, and put to practical or artistic uses. A sophist in Synesius *Letter* 138c takes the argument even further: the letter is clearly so indispensable to human life that no mere mortal man could have

[15] For the Greek tragic fragments, I use Nauck's 2nd edition. The Euripides fragment is discussed in Harvey (1966) 616. Evidence for Palamedes as the inventor appears also in Stesichorus *PMG* 213, Gorgias 82B 11a30 DK. Cf. Aeschylus *PV* 460–61, who says that Prometheus is the πρῶτος εὑρετής. Hecataeus (*FGrH* 1F20) says Danaus brought writing from Egypt, while Herodotus (5.58–61) champions the view that Cadmus brought it from the Phoenicians. For further discussion, see P. E. Easterling, "Anachronism in Greek Tragedy," *JHS* 105 (1985b) 1–10, esp. 5.

[16] The Roman tradition also favored a male inventor of writing (and therefore letters): "Primus litteras Mercurius enarraverit: necessarias confitebor et commerciis rerum et nostris erga Deum studiis" (Tertullian, *De Corona* 8.2). Mercury inherited many of the gifts attributed to the Egyptian god Thoth. Notice the (typically Roman?) emphasis on the practicality of writing for business affairs.

been the inventor, but only a god.[17] It seems to me that Hellanicus' association of letter writing with the quintessential "other," female and barbarian, reflects a certain uneasiness with its possible other functions. By connecting the letter's origin with a powerful Persian queen (and at that time Persia was still very much the "enemy" in the minds of the Greeks), Hellanicus suggests that there may be something exotic, effeminate, and potentially explosive about letters in general.

As we look at more examples of letters in Greek society and literature, it becomes clearer that letter writing was often viewed with some suspicion. The act of writing was an act of power, separating those who could read and understand from those who could not. Often this division worked along lines of class or gender: an example of the latter is a distich from the comic poet Menander:[18]

> He who teaches a woman letters (γράμματα) well,
> provides a frightening snake with additional venom.

Men can be trusted with literacy and letter-writing skills since they can be relied upon to put their skills to good use; women, on the other hand, Menander seems to imply, would turn their knowledge into venom, write deceitful letters, and plot and conspire against men and society. Learning letters also means learning to read, and reading tragedies, for example, could give women nasty ideas. This, of course, is the customary sexist paranoia familiar from Old and New Comedy alike. But letters seem to intensify the possibilities for danger and deceit: particularly in a military or political correspondence, the bond between the writer and his addressee is usually at someone else's expense. Letters frequently transmit secret or harmful information, and communicate information designed for a restricted audience.[19] D. Steiner argues that in Herodotus, for example, writing itself is never a neutral activity: "It rapidly gathers both sinister and pejorative associations, and appears within a complex of activities designed to illustrate

[17] R. Hercher, *Epistolographi Graeci* (Paris 1873) 723; cf. H. Rabe, "Aus Rhetoren-Handschriften: Griechische Briefsteller," *RhM* 64 (1909) 284–309, esp. 293ff.

[18] The lines are emended variously, and remain corrupt; I have taken the text from S. Jackel, *Menandrii Sententiae* (Leipzig 1964) 114: Menandri et Philistionis Disticha Parisina 1–2 = Kock fr. 702.

[19] Steiner (1994) 107.

the despotism of the Oriental monarchs ... [in] contrast with the "normative" behavior of fifth-century Greek communities," which consists of open discussions, debates, and other oral communications in the context of governing the city-state.[20] Much of her thesis, which goes far beyond letter writing to include all forms of inscription and writing, rests on the assumption, with which I fully agree, that no writing is an "unloaded tool" whose purpose and function are merely to inform: it is always more widely referential, a reflection of the culture and the purpose which produce it. Thus, Steiner argues that in Herodotus' Persia or Egypt, the king is the ultimate author and reader of all letters, the controller of all information which travels efficiently along his carefully planned postal routes.[21] Athens, by contrast, is defined by the public nature and availability of its texts, as public writing ("open" letters) covers the city walls in the form of decrees and laws; inscribed altars, grave monuments, and sculptures meet the eye at every turn. The multiplicity of hands and voices that decorates the public spaces of Athens stands in strong contrast to the despotic presence of an all-powerful Persian king. We will return to this issue when considering the embedded letters in Herodotus. But Steiner's point that the historian emphasizes the foreign nature of private writing, its essentially undemocratic nature, sits well with the myth of Atossa's invention.

It is unlikely that we will ever be able to pinpoint the exact moment of the discovery of letter writing, but we can connect historical letters with the general spread of literacy in antiquity. In Greek poetry, the first reference to writing is a reference to a letter: Bellerophon carries horrible signs (Hom. *Il.* 6.168: σήματα λυγρά), written by Proetus on a folded tablet. It is unclear whether these signs were actual alphabetic signs, some sort of pictograph, or a code known only to the writer and his addressee. Whatever the case may be for Proetus and his addressee, it is unlikely that large numbers of the population were literate at that time.

One might expect to find some letters written in the lively environment of colonization and trade during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, as people traveled widely and settled in new lands; but the evidence, if it ever existed, has not survived.[22] The earliest

[20] Steiner (1994) 127. [21] Steiner (1994) 228–29.
[22] The following section on letters and literacy owes much to Harris (1989), esp. 56–57.

historical letters we have are those of Polycrates of Samos and King Amasis, dated to the early 520s (Hdt. 3.40–43). The earliest letter that actually survives (late sixth or early fifth century BCE) is a private letter written on lead by a not very well educated Greek, found at Berezan on the Black Sea; the letter was presumably sent to or from the colony of Olbia, founded by Miletus.[23] The letter was found rolled up, probably undelivered, with the addressees' names written on the outside: "The lead (τὸ μολίβδιον) of Achillodorus to his son and Anaxagoras." Since he names his message after the material on which it was written, the writer presumably knew of no other word for letter. A number of errors, as well as the use of the third person in the body of the letter, suggest that it was written for the sender by another person, who was not himself particularly competent as a scribe.[24]

O Protagoras, your father [Achillodorus] sends [this] to you. He is being wronged by Matysas, for he [M] enslaves him and deprives him of his job as carrier. Go to Anaxagoras to explain this, for he [M] says that he [Ach] is the slave of Anaxagoras, claiming "Anaxagoras has all my things: male and female slaves and houses." But he [Ach] disputes it and says that there is nothing between himself and Matysas, and says that he is free, and that there is nothing between himself and Matysas. As for what is between Anaxagoras and Matysas, only they themselves know. Tell these things to Anaxagoras and to [Ach's] wife. [Your father] sends you other orders: take your mother and your brothers who are at Arbinatai into the city, and Euneuros himself will come to him [Ach] and go straight down there.

The letter opens with what will become the conventional greeting, including the names of writer and addressee: "O Protagoras, your father sends this to you." The Greek is ὁ πατήρ τοι ἐπιστέλλε (sic),[25] an interesting formulation that means that the father "sends a message" or even "sends a command." The text consists of approximately twelve lines from a father to his son, explaining that he, the father, is in grave danger of being enslaved because of a rather confusing transfer of property. He orders his son to inform the appropriate magistrate (Anaxagoras) that he is being wronged,

[23] On the lead letter, see J. Chadwick, "The Berezan Lead Letter," *PCPS* 199 (1973) 35–37; and the discussion, with further bibliography, in Harris (1989) 56–57.

[24] Chadwick (1973) 35. My translation is based on Chadwick's text. The use of third person alone does not necessarily point to a scribe, since epistolary convention often dictated it.

[25] In this letter, ε is used for the diphthong ει, and psilosis is a normal east Ionic feature of the Milesian dialect.

and to arrange the removal of his family to a safe place so that they will not suffer the same fate. Achillodorus quotes his opponents' actual words, perhaps to underline the legal context of their affairs. He also retains the third person form throughout when talking about himself, again perhaps suggesting a legalistic mindset as well as the intervention of a scribe. The second part of the letter, which contains the command to shift the family to the city, is introduced by a formula parallel to that of the opening: ἕτερα δέ τοι ἐπιστέλλε. This suggests to me that the initial greeting may reflect the early epistolary context of an injunction or command; thus what the father sends his son is not just the lead tablet itself, but more importantly the orders of action described inside.[26]

The Berezan lead letter may disappoint in its apparent triviality: a minor legal squabble between two men, expanding to affect their immediate families and business partners. But it serves us well as a model for later literary epistolary developments. Many conventions found here will reappear in fictional letters: the formal opening, the careful use of an identifiable third-person voice, the mixture of political and family affairs, the use of a letter in a time of crisis. Also, the drama of the lawsuit takes on greater urgency when we realize that this letter may never have reached its addressee; it was found still folded and sealed, and no return letter tells us how matters ended for Achillodorus and his family.

In spite of the curious letter from Berezan, which shows a man of little education, perhaps even illiterate, turning to letter writing in a time of crisis far from home, it is difficult to gauge the importance of letters in archaic society. Even in the classical era, as literacy and the functions of the written word began to expand, letters did not become commonplace. Some literary sources imply that letters were reserved for very serious occasions or for secret communications: letters quoted in Thucydides, Herodotus, and Euripides are closely connected with crises such as betrayal, deceit, and even death.[27] On the other hand, towards the end of the fifth century and after, letters are sometimes mentioned in a way which suggests that they are perfectly ordinary and normal methods of communicating. Thus in the writings of the Athenian orator Anti-

[26] Chadwick (1973) 37, translates "your father [Akhillodoros] sends you this command" and "A second command for you."

[27] Harris (1989) 88.

phon, we find a forged letter being used as key evidence in a murder case (5.53–56). The prosecution alleges that the accused murderer had written a note boasting of his deed to his accomplice. The accused claims that the note was planted in an effort to frame him; he argues that the forged letter should be dismissed in the face of a confession (elicited by torture) made by the slave who, he claims, committed the crime. He hopes that the court will believe the oral testimony rather than the suspicious letter. This example suggests that letters were acceptable evidence in court, and therefore must have been familiar to the general public.

By the late fourth century BCE, letter writing had developed beyond specialized circles to larger spheres of both private and official communications. In government affairs, the Ptolemaic bureaucracy frequently used letters to organize its vast administration. Official letter writing only increased after the death of Alexander, as the fragmented empire tried to consolidate its different centers of power.[28]

Private letter writing is also well documented in the Hellenistic period, and references in literature attest to it as common practice at various social levels.[29] Theophrastus, friend and pupil of Aristotle, paints a vivid picture of an arrogant fellow whose epistolary style reveals a major character flaw (*Char.* 24.13):

> In his letters you do not find "You would oblige me," but "My desire is this," or "I have sent to you for that," or "Be sure that you do the other," and "Without the least delay."

Herodas, in the opening piece of his collection of literary mimes, depicts a middle-class woman who points out that her friend's traveling husband/lover (Mandris) has apparently forgotten all about his wife/girlfriend back home – she has not received even one letter in almost a year (1.23–25):

> From the time when Mandris left for Egypt,
> ten months have gone by, and yet he does not send even a letter to you,
> but he has completely forgotten about you, and drinks from a new cup.

This passage suggests, then, that by the early to mid-third century, people expected a husband away on business to write home fairly

[28] For examples, see C. B. Welles, *Royal Correspondence in the Hellenistic Period* (London 1934).
[29] For examples of family letters, see *Select Papyri*, trans. A. S. Hunt and C. C. Edgar (Cambridge MA 1932), vol. 1, 269–394.

frequently to his wife. In this period, we also find letters written by a wide range of people: women to their absent husbands, masters abroad writing to their slaves, soldiers on campaign to their families, parents and children, and private citizens announcing marriages, births, and deaths. Letters were written by writers of both high and low social classes, and by hired scribes of varying skill, during prolonged separations caused by various conditions, and in emergency situations not unlike that of Achillodorus of the Berezan letter some four centuries earlier. The backgrounds and situations of the writers vary as much as the material and intentions that the letters themselves convey: consoling, expressing thanks, praising someone, giving orders, reporting events, mediating a quarrel or a lawsuit, giving or requesting advice, maintaining a friendship, to name a few.[30] These epistolary habits continued uninterrupted into Roman and then Christian times. The popularity of letter writing was limited only by the pace of the spread of literacy, and the materials and means available for writing and sending letters. The means, of course, depended heavily on some form of education, where the letter writer, whether professional scribe or stumbling schoolboy, could learn the basics of epistolary composition.

There is good evidence that, for an "average" literate person in the Hellenistic period, letter writing was learned in the classroom. Schoolboys copied model letters along with their Homer and Plato, although perhaps with a more practical goal in mind. Because of our incomplete knowledge of the school systems in place in diverse regions of the Hellenized world, however, we cannot know for certain the extent to which letter writing was taught at the lower levels of schooling, or whether such training was reserved for more advanced students of rhetoric.[31] It is likely that basic epistolary composition was taught in some schools at an early stage, perhaps with the help of rudimentary collections of model letters, and presumably concentrating on grammar and

[30] Stowers (1986) 15–16, offers a list of examples of "things people could do with letters."

[31] For a convincing argument against the unquestioning acceptance of a three-tier model of schooling, in which a student progresses from primary to secondary school and then on to rhetorical training, see R. A. Kaster, "Notes on 'Primary' and 'Secondary' Schools in Late Antiquity," *TAPA* 113 (1983) 323–46, who argues tentatively for a socially segmented two-track pattern, in which the "school of letters" taught basic literacy to the lower classes, while the "liberal schools" offered the élite a more sophisticated education.

form rather than on niceties of style.[32] The main reason for this assumption is the uniformity of epistolary conventions (e.g. opening and closing formulas, wishes for the addressee's good health, requests for responses, etc.) in papyrus letters, written frequently by people of a low educational level; the formulas, unchanged over centuries, suggest a common influence from school instruction based on a limited number of handbooks.[33] An example of the low level of skill attained by someone receiving only a rudimentary education in epistolary form is the ungrammatical and awkward letter on papyrus of the schoolboy Theon to his father (*P Oxy.* 119), summarized by Deissmann as "a specimen of the most uncultivated form of popular speech," and dated to the second or third centuries CE.[34] This letter has been quoted by every scholar working on Hellenistic education since its publication over a century ago.

Theon to his father Theon, greetings.
You did a fine thing. You didn't take me with you into town. If you don't want to take me with you to Alexandria, then I won't write you a letter, and I won't speak one word to you or wish you good health. And if you go to Alexandria [without me], from now on I won't take your hand and I won't greet you. So if you won't take me along, these things [will] happen. Even my mother said to Archelaus [my brother] "he is driving me mad – take him away." You did a fine thing. You sent me fine gifts: locust beans! They deceived us there on the twelfth day, when you sailed. Finally, send for me, please, please. If you don't send for me, I won't eat and I won't drink. So there.
Farewell, I pray you. [dated] the 18th of Tybi [January].

The letter is written in a schoolboy's uncial hand, so presumably by Theon himself. It must have reached his father somewhere between their local town and Alexandria, when the traveller stopped long enough to pick up his mail at a prearranged spot. The writer's spelling, grammar, and language all testify to his youth and limited education. It appears that his father has tricked him, with a distracting bribe of delicious locust-beans, out of a trip to

[32] For this position, see A. J. Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary Theorists* (Atlanta GA 1988) 6–7, and White (1986) 189–92. For further information on the shape of the school system, see now T. Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* (Cambridge 1998).

[33] On the conservative nature of epistolary conventions, particularly the opening address, see Koskenniemi (1956) 14–15.

[34] Deissmann (1927) 201. I base my translation on B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* vol. 1 (London 1898) 185–86.

the big city, and his response is an epistolary tantrum, as it were, complete with threats of never speaking to his father again, and suicide by starvation. He rejects all the nice manners his parents have been trying to teach him: shaking hands, saying hello politely, wishing people good health, and writing letters. If his father proceeds on the trip without him, threatens Theon, he will never receive a letter from his son again.

Most commentators focus on the childish usages and bumpy syntax of Theon's Greek, and imagine the letter as a document of "popular speech," a transcription of a conversation. But even in this basic message, a piece of epistolary blackmail, the young Theon shows a startling familiarity with epistolary convention. He alludes to epistolary formulas by threatening to undermine them: it is customary to wish one's addressee good health, but Theon insists from the start that he won't wish his father good health; his father will expect a letter from his family while he is away in Alexandria, but Theon threatens angrily not to write. As peeved as he is, the child still knows the value of epistolary closing convention: thus the letter ends with a proper "farewell, I pray you," and on the verso the address states "deliver to Theon from his son Theonas," using a pet form of his own name that he may expect will elicit his father's affection.[35] The letter of this "uncultivated" child actually tells us a great deal about good epistolary manners in Hellenistic Egypt.

If Theon grew up and continued his education under a secondary school teacher (γραμματικός) or a teacher of rhetoric, he probably was assigned elementary exercises of literary composition (προγυμνάσματα), in particular the προσωποποιία, exercises in characterization or impersonation. By practicing to write in the voice of a certain mythical or historical person, and by representing a situation or opinion fitting for that person, the student learned to develop facility in adopting various literary styles; along the way he presumably also lost his ability to express himself as freely and imaginatively as young Theon did.[36] This practice was meant to train students in rhetoric, but it may also have offered inspiration for the forging of "letters from famous people," a topic which we will discuss in detail in a later chapter.

In presenting these details of "real" letters from Greek antiq-

[35] Deissmann (1927) 203, note 5. [36] Malherbe (1988) 7 and White (1986) 189–90.

uity, I have attempted to lay the groundwork for the main focus of the remaining chapters, namely the use of letters as a literary device in almost every genre of ancient Greek literature. While each author will be shown to incorporate epistolarity in a way unique to his genre and period, all the letter fictions do share certain unchanging elements: an awareness of the stylistic conventions of "real" epistolary exchange; an appreciation of the tension between the first private reading and a secondary wider audience; and a concern with sustaining epistolary verisimilitude in the context of the fictional narrative. Now let us turn to the narratives themselves.