Choose Your Own Adventure?:

Readers and Their Role(s) in Epistolary Fiction

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of the reader in epistolary fiction. It will ultimately show the indispensable role of the reader in realizing a text. Historically, reader response theorists have focused on the ways in which readers generate meaning in texts; here, I explore the ways in which readers generate the text itself. That is to say, this thesis asks in what ways you *Choose Your Own Adventure*™ as a reader.

It must first be established definitively that reader response is possible within the text. The first chapter seeks to do this through a discussion of the epistolary character. The epistolary character plays multiple roles, both within the story and within the narrative structure itself. One of these roles is that of an internal reader. In their role as readers, the characters parallel the external reader to a certain degree. The internal readers carve out a textual space in which a reader *can* respond to the text. Thus, reader response *is* possible. Ultimately, I will show how the external reader has even greater latitude for response than the internal reader because of his/her position outside of the text.

The second chapter pursues a very specific type of reader response. The epistolary genre is characterized by multiple textual gaps. Some of these indeterminacies, such as plot and setting, are seemingly indispensable to a narrative. I explore the ways in which it is the reader who resolves those textual ambiguities and thereby actually completes the text by creating that which the text itself excludes. The text, by being incomplete, allows for reader response. I begin to examine how much of one's own adventure one determines as a reader and how much of one's adventure is ultimately guided by the text.

The concluding chapter further explores the interplay between reader and text, as well as challenging the limits of reader response. This portion of the study focuses on a novel that employs an innovative technique unique to it in which the reader actually orders the text. The author presents three potential sequences for the novel depending on the type of reader one classifies oneself as. The reader quite literally chooses his own adventure, as each of the potential paths results in a strikingly different narrative. More than simply completing the epistolary novel, reader response is shown to be necessary prior to encountering the text.

I conclude by summarizing the manners in which reader response is possible, though situating that response in relation to the text. Reader response is not independent from, but rather symbiotic with the text. I also explore briefly the implication that reader response is a necessarily subjective activity in that it does, both figuratively and literally, allow the reader to choose his/her own adventure that may or may not parallel that of other readers. Since the reader is completing the text and not merely responding to what is immanent to it, subjectivity and variability among readers are inevitable.

The three chapters each rely on citations from a different epistolary source: Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*; Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*; and Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, respectively.

CONTENTS

Short Titles

ML: Castillo, Ana. The Mixquiahuala Letters. New York: Doubleday, 1986.

S&D: Chatman, Seymour. Story and Discourse. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978.

LLD: Laclos, Pierre Choderlos de. Les Liaisons Dangereuses. Ed. René Pomeau. Paris: Flammarion, 1996.

Cl.: Richardson, Samuel. Clarissa. Ed. E. S. Dallas. Vol. 1. London: Tinsley Brothers, 1868.

Cl.: Richardson, Samuel. Clarissa. Ed. George Sherburn. Abr. ed. Boston: Riverside, 1962.[1]

RK: Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics. London: Metheun, 1983.

[1] The citations from *Clarissa* are also indicated in the text by the date of the letter from which they were drawn. Since I consulted multiple versions of the text, I found that the date of the letter, rather than the page number, made referencing the text itself easier and it also permits the use of other editions, as well as comparison among multiple versions.

Figures

Introduction

As a child, I had a number of mystery books from the *Choose Your Own Adventure*™ series.[1] When the protagonist in each of the novels faces a decision that is plot-altering, the reader selects which of multiple choices the character should settle upon. Each of the multiple choices offers a designated page to proceed to in order for the protagonist to implement that option. The resulting story thus depends on each reader's degree of adventure; rarely did I choose the option in which the protagonist actually opens the door behind which I suspected the villain lurked. My goals as a reader were to avoid giving myself nightmares and to preserve the protagonist. I wanted happy endings, and the textual format allowed me to realize that goal. As a reader, I tailored the text to realize my own ends.

As a reader of this thesis or any other work, one comes to the project with certain expectations for the piece and the role that the piece will play in the life of the reader. In what way do these preconceived goals and practices allow us—even force us, however unwittingly—as readers, to choose our own adventures? Furthermore, in a slightly less provocative manner than the stories I read in my childhood, how does the text control that selection process? Primarily within the past fifty years, reader response theorists have emerged in critical circles and essentially destroyed the notion of textual objectivity with their analyses of how reader attribute meaning to texts. Reader response scholars introduced a connection between the reader and the realization of a text, suggesting that the reader does affect the text in some way.[2] What has not been adequately resolved is

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[1] The *Choose Your Own Adventure* series is a trademark of Bantam Books, Inc. (New York).
[2] Summary of reader response theory is taken from the introduction to *Reader-Response Criticism*. Please see Works Cited for a complete citation.

exactly what role it is that the reader plays in the creation of the text itself, and not just the meaning attributed to it.

This paper further explores the nature and extent of the role of the reader in a specific type of text, the epistolary novel. Originally, letters published for large-scale distribution were used as a strong rhetorical device to disseminate ideas often of a political nature. As a fictional format, letters appeared in the sixteenth century with Lyly's *Euphues*. Richardson really popularized the genre with his two major epistolary novels, *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. The epistolary novel's appeal to both authors and readers peaked in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Examples of twentieth-century epistolary fiction are rare; perhaps C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* (1942) is the only well-known sample, although this paper includes a more obscure and recent one, Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986). Because this specific category of literature emphasizes writing and reading, both as a narrative strategy in which to present the story and as important elements within the story line itself, it is particularly applicable and interesting in discussing reader response, especially since it includes readers within its very structure. It is thus perhaps useful to consider the epistolary genre as a representative specimen encompassing the larger critical debate on the reading process generally.

In order to discuss the role of the reader in realizing a text, as was so evident in the *Choose Your Own Adventure*™ novels, this paper must first establish that the reader actually directly responds at all. If so, how does the reader respond and how do those responses subsequently shape the text? Furthermore, what degree of uniformity characterizes that response among multiple readers? In pursuing those questions, we will

explore three epistolary works in three separate chapters, moving successively from the establishment of reader response to the manner in which it occurs. The respective novels were selected not only for the elements of epistolarity that they highlight, but also because they span the ancestry of the genre through the newest additions to it, providing the reader with a nice survey of epistolary fiction.

The first chapter discusses the epistolary character and draws on textual examples from Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. It focuses on the ways in which epistolary characterization upsets the conventional consideration of character. The epistolary character also replicates, to some degree, the external reader, in that the epistolary characters are themselves readers within the novel. The inclusion of readers in the story itself carves out a space for reader response within the text. In the novel, Clarissa is greatly influenced by the responses of the readers to her letters. It is shown how those responses impact not only Clarissa the character, but *Clarissa* the story as well.

Having established that there *is* reader response, the second chapter will go on to explore the manner in which the reader responds and begin to address the relative subjectivity and/or objectivity of those responses. The epistolary genre is characterized by necessarily partial presentation on the part of the narrator(s). Due to the polyphonic narrative voice that emerges in epistolary narratives with multiple letter-writers, the reader must decipher accurate narration from inaccurate narration, as well as determine certain textual elements that the letter-format creates in the narrative structure. For our discussion of this very specific type of reader response that characterizes the epistolary genre, we will focus on Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Because of the high level of deception that the characters employ with one another in addition to the lack of one

harmonious voice presenting the tale, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* allows for extensive reader involvement in resolving textual gaps and ambiguous presentations of characters and events. That is to say, the reader's response fleshes out uncertainties created by the epistolary text.

Our final inquiry will be to determine if the reader's role goes beyond merely extrapolating from what the text provides. Is it possible that reader response is anterior to the actual act of reading? Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* is a unique epistolary novel that challenges the reader and forces his/her acknowledgement of the role that he/she plays in realizing the text. In Castillo's novel, the reader chooses his/her own adventure based on a labeling system established before the reader encounters the actual text.

It is with the same direction that the *Choose Your Own Adventure*™ stories used to guide me that I conclude this portion of the thesis: TO CONTINUE READING THIS STUDY OF THE ROLE OF THE READER IN EPISTOLARY FICTION, TURN TO PAGE 5.

CHAPTER ONE: THE EPISTOLARY CHARACTER

Epistolary fiction requires a re-definition of "character." In his *Poetics*, Aristotle outlines a formulation of character wherein character is relegated to nothing more than an agent that makes possible the plot's progression. The story's events not only advance the problem and subsequent resolution, but also create the characters of that story. In his book *Story and Discourse*, Seymour Chatman presents a theory of narratology (the study of narrative structure) that challenges the rather archaic Aristotelian theory of character (in light of modern "characters" such as Joyce's Bloom). Chatman proposes that there is no reason "to argue the primacy of action as a source of traits..." (112). "One could equally argue that character is supreme and plot derivative...that is, the events themselves do not form an independent source of interest..." (S&D 113). Though characterization as constitutive of plot was largely unidentified as a narrative form until the twentieth century and the emergence of the modernist tradition, epistolary novels, such as Richardson's *Clarissa* from the mid-eighteenth century, challenge the traditional conception of plot dominance over character development in the hierarchy of narrative elements. The epistolary character arguably dominates the epistolary plot, as well as fulfills multiple roles indispensable to a coherent narrative. Some of those functions can be extended to the epistolary audience, drawing a larger parallel between this specific genre and the reading experience in general. Narrative distinctions between character and narrator and internal and external reader blur. We will examine each of these roles, extending the relationship between the epistolary character and the external reader to make claims about the role of the external reader in epistolary fiction.

I. Within the Narrative Structure

An emphasis on character is not to say that plot is absent or unimportant in either the characters' or the novel's development; Richardson's *Clarissa*, for example, most certainly has a plot and concludes with a resolution (an argument that is more difficult to make with certain modern narratives). Clarissa finds herself mired in a patriarchal society from which she tries to escape, only to flee to another male-dominated environment where she dies. The plot summary reads much like any penny novelette from Richardson's time or a modern-day romance novel. It is the manner through which the *Clarissa* plot unravels that is unique. The plot advances strictly through subjective letters written by and to various personages relating various events that occur outside of the text; it is the characters who advance the plot, not vice versa. The only "actions" within the text are the composition and perusal of letters. The fact that all substantial action about which we read occurs outside of the text places a symbolic emphasis on character. Shilomith Rimmon-Kenan, another post-modern narratology scholar, actually negotiates a space in which character and action are situated on a continuum. Epistolary fiction demonstrates the idea of character/action "interdependence" (RK 33)—the act of writing the letters, one of only two actions actually situated within the text, is the process by which the characters are created and conveyed, both for the internal and external readers. Because reading is such a central function of epistolary characters, it is both convenient and useful to draw parallels between the internal and external readerships. In epistolary fiction, character is conveyed less as a textual agent through which the action of the plot is forwarded and more as an illustration of various traits that form (an image

of) a person existing within and transmitted through the text. Epistolary fiction is the first genre in which the notion of "character" conveys more a study of each individual's attributes and traits as distinct from those of others than a portrayal of the physical aspects of one fictional person used to forward the plot of a novel.

Epistolary fiction conveys that unique type of "character" in a non-traditional manner. Due to the lack of an omniscient (and therefore authoritative) narrator in epistolary fiction, all characterization is necessarily indirect (versus direct) presentation of characteristics.[3] In epistolary fiction, indirect representation can be further broken down into two subcategories: indirect representation through the writing of others and indirect representation through the writing of oneself. This latter category can again be divided into the writings of a character him/herself, prior to any internal reader interpretation versus internal reader reactions to a character's writing. All types of indirect presentation can be classified as either textually supported or textually unfounded.

Indirect representation through the writing of others most closely parallels the traditional narrator/narratee relationship in which the narrator recounts details of another person largely, if not wholly, unknown to the narratee, from which the narratee draws conclusions about that character. After reading about Lovelace in one of Clarissa's letters, Anna Howe responds, "And, by your account of his behavior in the interview between you I own I have some hope of him" (*Cl.*, letter dated March 22). Anna derives an idea of Lovelace's character through Clarissa's letter. Clarissa later rescinds the

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[3] Compare the following. Rimmon-Kenan provides this excerpt from James' *The Portrait of a Lady* as an example of direct presentation/definition of character: "Isabel Archer was a young person of many theories; her imagination was remarkably active....Her thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines..." (Rimmon-Kenan 60) versus this example of indirect presentation from Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* in revealing

comments that prompted Miss Howe's approval of Lovelace, saying, "A wretch! How naturally did he fall into the character, although I was so much out of mine!" (*Cl.*, from letter dated Wednesday, April 12).[4] Clarissa writes of events and interactions that occurred in her reality, by which her reader(s—internal and external) form an opinion of the other characters (here, Lovelace) in the novel.

The preceding example proves how determinations drawn from information can be misleading. Clarissa herself did not intentionally deceive her audience; she, too, was duped by Lovelace. At other points, inaccurate indirect narration can prove more revelatory about the character that speaks it than the character that he/she speaks about. To Belford Lovelace writes, "(Miss Howe is as *sly* as the devil, and as *busy* to the full)" (*Cl.*, from letter dated Thursday, April 20). This is textually unfounded indirect representation. The readers, both Belford and us, the external audience, doubt this claim. Miss Howe has proven to be nothing but a loyal friend to Clarissa, a morally upright young girl. Lovelace, himself the sly plotter of the novel, is judging Miss Howe as she is a foil in his own plans, not on her true merit as a character.

Furthermore, the writer's own commentary and style can be very illuminating about his/her own character (in the sense of moral attributes) to the other characters (in the sense of players within an artistic work) in the novel. Responding to Clarissa's unquestioning faith in her family to make the right decision for her, Anna writes, "This is generously said. It is in character" (*Cl.*, from letter dated February 27). She goes on to say, "Your native generosity and greatness of mind endanger you...." From what

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Jason's bigotry: "I give every man his due, regardless of religion or anything else. I have nothing against Jews as an individual,' I says, 'It's just the race" (Rimmon-Kenan 63).

[4] Please note the distinction between the word "character" as used here by Clarissa and other personages within the novel and the manner in which it is employed in the general discussion of this chapter. In the

Clarissa has written (coupled, presumably, with personal knowledge of Clarissa's temperament and behavior not included in the text), Anna has noted certain personality traits of Clarissa. We, the external audience, learn from this indirect representation, and find it subsequently to be textually supported.

Just as the writers can draw false conclusions, so can the readers misinterpret what a character writes about him/herself. Clarissa's sister, Arabella, writes to Clarissa,

> In your proposals, and letter to your brother, you have shown yourself so silly, and so wise; so young, and so old; so gentle, and so obstinate; so meek, and so violent; that never was there so mixed a character. (*Cl.*, from letter dated Friday night, March 24)

In fact, however, Clarissa's behavior has been rather consistent throughout the novel to that point, and it is Arabella's own temperament which has proven less constant. Again, the reader is left to negotiate any inferences that he/she may draw from the information given or conclusions drawn by the other characters about one another. Indirect representation in epistolary fiction is not necessarily accurate characterization.

Finally, there are instances where the writing of characters (their action, as Rimmon-Kenan would classify it) reveals character. In one of Clarissa's letters to Anna, Clarissa reveals her honest, trusting and faithful nature, by relating an action that she performed towards her mother:

> I begged her pardon; and besought her to take the key of the private drawer in my escritoire, where [the letters from Lovelace] lay, that she

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former instance, "character" desginates those traits and moral attributes idiosyncratic to an individual; in the latter, "character" implies any player in an artistic work, such as a play or an epistolary novel.

> herself might see, that I had no reserves in my mother. (*Cl.*, from letter dated Friday, March 3)

The first letter from Mr. Lovelace, by its writing alone—and not any action that the writing describes—proves to be very enlightening to his real nature. He writes,

> ...Well says the poet:
>
> He who seems virtuous does but act a part;
>
> And shows not his own nature, but his art.
>
> Well, but it seems that I must practise for this art, if I would succeed with this truly admirable creature!...Thou knowest my heart, if any living man does. As far as I know it myself, thou knowest it. But 'tis a cursed deceiver. (*Cl.*, from letter dated Monday, March 13)

The external reader of this letter can derive a few important facts about this character, Lovelace. First of all, his writing style is very formal and arranged, as his inclusion of the couplet proves; thereby showing Lovelace's letters to be a space in which spontaneous emotional outpourings are unlikely to appear, and should be cause for skepticism on the part of the reader should they appear. Lovelace admits that he will be "practising," causing us to question the genuineness of any of his words or actions throughout the novel. We become aware that Belford is a close confidant of Lovelace's, and that the letters to Belford will probably contain the most truthful account of Lovelace's own feelings and doings and that Belford, the internal reader, is aware of Lovelace's character and general dealings with people. Finally, the last line, in as much as the heart can be said to reflect the man, Lovelace admits to being a "cursed deceiver," as will be shown before the novel's conclusion.

II. Within the story

Beyond entangling the ways in which character is conveyed to its readership, epistolary fiction employs character in such a way that other categories of narratology are integrated into it. Just as characters play multiple roles within the world of the novel (Clarissa refers to Anna as "*[s]weet and ever-amiable friend—companion—sister—lover!*)" (*Cl.*, excerpt from Belford's letter to Lovelace, dated Wednesday, September 6), the characters play multiple roles within the narrative structure of the novel itself—they are simultaneously character, narrator and author. The role that each of these units plays in a novel is easily recognizable. The author writes the story, the narrator relates the story, the character(s) fulfills scripted roles within the story; it is with the latter two to which our discussion now turns. Chatman claims that "*narrating* can never be a character's central function without his thereby becoming a narrator, hence leaving the story..." (S&D 165). Epistolary fiction directly challenges this contention. By condensing these requisite elements of a text into one central element, other issues surrounding narratology are implicitly answered—or rendered unanswerable.

Chatman recognizes these components (character, narrator) of a story. He, however, feels that there is an inherent distinction between the categories:

> The speech acts of characters differ logically from those of narrators. Even when a character is telling a story within the main story, his speech acts always inhabit the story, rather then the primary discourse. Like his

> other acts, they directly interact with other characters, not with the narratee and/or implied reader. (S&D 165)

This claim breaks down when applied to epistolary fiction in two important ways. First of all, the speech acts of characters *cannot* differ logically from those of narrators, as the characters also serve *as* the narrators. They can, however, present a cacophonous self-voice, shifting from first to third person. In Clarissa's letter to Anna Howe on March 3, she relates the following:

> [My mother] was attending to my pleas; for that she found I had rather not marry at all....She told me, that to this my father angrily said, Let her take care—let her take care—that she give me not ground to suspect her of a preference somewhere else. But if it be to ease her heart, and not to dispute my will, you may hear her out. (*Cl.*)

The third person singular "she" used in the latter half of the quotation refers to Clarissa, the character, as told by Clarissa, the narrator. Chatman fails to account for the fact that these characters are narrating *themselves*. There is no superior level (or *primary discourse*, as Chatman calls it) within which commentary by characters can be situated. The characters' "speech acts" both inhabit and comprise the story. Furthermore, epistolary fiction renders direct intertextual interaction between the characters impossible because of the separation that renders the use of letters necessary. In the text as presented, the only character-character interactions are between the sender (narrator, in Chatman's terms) and the recipient (narratee and/or implied reader per Chatman).

Rimmon-Kenan presents a model for understanding this blurring between character and narrator in order to develop both, in what he terms a distinction between the

act of *speaking* versus that of *seeing*. The former he terms narration, the latter, focalization. The characters in an epistolary novel who also function as the narrators of the novel are not acting as mere reporters of a scene that is witnessed, but rather as involved participants in that scene. That is to say, they are not merely speaking what they observe, but speaking it as they see it, under the influence of their own vested interests and preconceived biases. We can then speak of a narrative voice in an epistolary novel as a character/focalizer,[5] instead of a character/narrator. Focalization presupposes a certain degree of bias specific to each character. Chatman suggests that point of view is complicated in narrative because it is not based on a single presence, "but two—character and narrator" (S&D 151-152). This distinction collapses in epistolary fiction where character and narrator, world view and interest vantage, are all inevitably intertwined. This analysis of narrative structure includes a study of "point of view" without accounting for the important narrator-focalizer distinction that Rimmon-Kenan outlines. Chatman's lack of a narrative distinction between speaking and seeing becomes problematic for the external audience who must determine the reliability of characters in epistolary fiction, requiring a distinction between narration (speaking) and focalization (seeing). The conflicting presences in epistolary fiction are complicated not because they pit narrator against character, but character/focalizer against character/focalizer in determining reliability and loyalty to the text-internal reality.[6]

The blurring of lines between the narrative components of character and narrator is more complex yet. In addition to the already entangled role of character/focalizer, the

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[5] Throughout the remainder of this paper, I will simply use "focalizer" to indicate the character/focalizer role in epistolary novels.

[6] Please see Figure 1 at the end of this chapter. It provides a diagram of the multiple roles of characters in epistolary fiction.

focalizers in epistolary fiction assume the role of an internal reader that parallels the role of the external readership. Both the internal and the external readers demonstrate certain presumptions that indicate a mutual underlying value system and situate the external reader to an epistolary work in an interesting and unique position.

In order to justify the act of reading, both as a character within an epistolary novel and as an external audience to one, there needs to be a certain belief in the viability of the written word. The internal reader needs to believe in the integrity of the letter, while the external reader requires a believable realm in which to situate the story. Or, as Ruth Perry states in her book *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, "it takes a fairly high degree of literacy for the temptations of pen and paper to mean anything" (107). Clarissa herself writes, "...I love writing; and those who do are fond, you know, of occasions to use the pen" (*Cl.*, from her letter to Miss Howe, dated January 13). Letters are such an effective tool precisely because they are so familiar to the external audience. We may never believe that the correspondents are anything but fictional, but the framework for the correspondence "appear[s] to have a true-to-life reason for being written in the first place" (Perry 84). Martha Koehler captures the effectiveness, or "naturalness" of the narrative technique of epistolarity:

> *Clarissa* is emblematic of the epistolary genre as a whole, for instance, in projecting a "natural" narrative situation: a compilation of actual letters that, having no central narrator, begin themselves to "tell a story." (23)

It is precisely its anti-identification as a story, i.e. its formulation as an actual correspondence that legitimates the epistolary tale for the external reader.

Within this framework of letters as legitimate is a presupposed absence. That is to say, if the internal reader were with the internal writer, the letter would not be written; or, for the external audience, the text would have no reason for existing. The external reader, by definition, is removed from the text, just as the internal reader is also necessarily distanced from the reality that the letter seeks to convey.[7] Near *Clarissa's* conclusion (and the character Clarissa's own conclusion), Miss Howe writes, "Why have I thus long delayed to attend you!...I, as well as everybody else, to desert and abandon my dear creature to strangers!" (*Cl.*, from her letter dated Tuesday, September 5). Miss Howe has "thus long delayed" in order to provide the appropriate conditions for an epistolary novel to exist. Near the opening of the book, Clarissa does pay a visit to Anna. Clarissa writes of her imminent departure on January 13th, and the next letter we have in the novel is dated February 20th, with the notation "*After we return from [Miss Howe]*" (*Cl.*). The characters' physical presence to one another precludes the presence of an epistolary correspondence. The function of letters is to create a link between two (or more) separated persons, whose reunion will terminate the epistolary relationship.[8] Similarly, a text unites its readers with a fictional world, the cessation of which severs contact between the reader and that textual world.

The letter format not only justifies the existence of the story (separation of two people who wish to communicate with one another), but also provides a valid medium through which to convey that story to both the internal and external readers. The struggle

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[7] Please see Figure 2 at the end of this chapter for a clear outline of the multiple meanings the word "reality" has in this paper, depending on the subject of discussion.

[8] In fact, the climax or resolution invariably occurs when the multiple correspondents and subjects of the letters "are physically together, rather than writing letters" (Perry 86). It is noteworthy that this element of the epistolary plot necessarily alienates the external audience from the resolution or climactic event. This contrast between the possibility of inclusion in the story's resolution for the internal reader versus the

for the reader then becomes negotiating reality and positioning the characters in the story being read within the reality as defined text-internally. During the act of reading, the world that is being read is always and forever separate from the reality in which the reader—both internal and external—actually reads. Where, then, are the characters about whom one reads situated? Chatman's theory of narratology personifies characters: "Of course Hamlet and Macbeth are not 'living people'; but that does not mean that as constructed imitations they are in any way limited to the words on the printed page" (S&D 117). Do they exist simply on the page, or do they become psychological creations within the mind's eye of the reader? Both the internal and external reader must filter the reality of the text-internal world from the multiple focalizations of that world.

In his exploration of the role of the reader, Stanley Fish discusses this uncertainty about the legitimacy of the subjects contained within the text:

> The objectivity of the text is an illusion and, moreover, a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically convincing. The illusion is one of self-sufficiency and completeness. A line of a print or a page is so obviously *there*—it can be handled, photographed, or put away—that it seems to be the sole repository of whatever value and meaning we associate with it....This is of course the unspoken assumption behind the word "content." The line or page or book *contains*—everything. (43)

This devotion to the physical being of the text is manifested in the character/focalizer/reader Clarissa, who painstakingly conceals her correspondence on her physical person. In his letter to Belford dated May 21, Lovelace reveals that he has

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external reader's necessary absence from it will be further addressed later in this chapter, as well as from a more philosophical approach in chapter two.

finally determined where his "charmer" stows her letters: "The vigilant wench [servant Dorcas] was directed to [other letters in the lady's mahogany chest] by seeing her lady [Clarissa] take a letter out of her stays..." (*Cl.*). Clarissa's securing of letters on her person signifies a symbolic attempt to fuse two mutually exclusive realities. For the external reader, every epistolary fiction creates an alternate reality, a fictional world; for the text-internal reader, the physical separation of sender/author and recipient/reader is necessary for the transmission of two different worlds.

Clarissa acknowledges these differing realities: "Indeed I have no delight, as I have often told you, equal to that which I take in conversing with you—*by letter when I cannot in person*" (*Cl.*, letter to Miss Howe, dated January 13). The tension between maintaining one's proper reality while immersing oneself into the story's (or the letter's) reality is a struggle that any reader balances throughout the reading process. These common concerns of both internal and external readers parallel each other in such a way that the internal reader can be said to represent the external one.

This identification between a textual element (the internal readership) and the external audience is furthered through the voice that the internal reader assumes for the concerns of both audiences. Or, as Julia Genster suggests in her article "Belforded Over: The Reader in *Clarissa,*" a letter "aligns external readers with interior audiences who object, ask questions, or whose anticipated questions or objections the speaker answers" (Genster 147). For example, a theme in *Clarissa* is submission of the female in patriarchal societies. The way in which Clarissa's family treats her is outrageous at times (particularly for readers in a post-women's liberation world). Anna Howe often echoes

the same sentiments that I, as an external reader, felt when reading the narrative. Upon learning the unfair manner in which Clarissa's family is treating her, Anna responds:

> Do you think they can use you worse than they do? And is it not your right? And do they not make use of your own generosity to oppress you?...This, dare I say, will make them alter their behavior to you.
>
> Your insolent brother—what has he to do to control you?—Were it me (I wish it were for one month, and no more) I'd show him the difference. (*Cl.*, letter dated Thursday night, March 9)

Whereas the external reader, by virtue of his/her position, can never have a direct voice in the narrative, the internal reader can and does, and often echoes text-internally the same sentiments that the external reader experiences. Epistolary fiction incorporates readers' reactions to the text. The internal representation of a reader response is unique to the epistolary genre because its format allows a space, the letter, in which the readers—both internal and external—can respond.

Beyond merely providing a space in which the text-internal reader *can* respond, epistolary fiction contains instances in which the text-internal writer *invites* reader response, as well as notes the limitations of being relegated to the status of reader not participant in the reality conveyed within the letter. The text is peppered with questions directed to the internal reader, such that he/she is encouraged to respond. "Shall I pity him for you, my dear?" (*Cl.*, letter from Miss Howe to Clarissa Harlowe, dated Thursday, March 30) or "Did not this seem to border upon cruelty, my dear, in so indulgent a mother?" (*Cl.*, letter from Clarissa to Miss Howe, dated Friday, March 3). The reader is invited to pass judgment on a situation known to him/her only through the letter, that is to

say, to generate a response based solely on reading. One writer in *Clarissa* goes so far at one point as to *presume* a certain kind of response, implying that the story, as conveyed, should have a predictable effect on the reader—that being the same one that it had on the focalizer. "By the time you have read to this place, you will have no doubt of what has been the issue of the conference between the *two gentlemen.* I am *equally* shocked, and enraged against them all" (*Cl.*, from Clarissa's letter to Miss Howe, dated Sunday, May 14; latter emphasis mine).

At the same time that epistolary fiction encourages the reader to assume a position in and opinion about the reality contained within the letters, it also emphasizes the inherent limitations of reading. At times, this is due to the writer's own limited knowledge, while at others it is due to a failure on the part of the writer to convey the complete tale to the reader. For instance, in explaining to Anna Howe the predicament that she finds herself in with her family, Clarissa writes, "What my brother and sister have said against me I cannot tell:—but I am in heavy disgrace with my father" (*Cl.*, letter dated February 25). The ignorance that Clarissa here experiences is clarified through subsequent letters as the novel progresses; we learn that Clarissa's brother and sister have personal reasons for blocking her union with Mr. Lovelace (though she herself does not desire it) and promoting hers with Roger Solmes (one she desires even less).[9] At the conclusion of the same letter, however, the reader's knowledge is limited for another reason, one that is not necessarily resolved as the plot progresses. Clarissa's letter concludes, "My heart is too full; —I will lay down my pen" (*Cl.*). The fact that the

[9] Clarissa's letter to Miss Howe written on Wednesday March 1 indicates that Clarissa has now herself become informed of what she is here unaware. She duly relates this to her readership: "Had I known this before, I should the less have wondered at many things I have been unable to account for in my brother's and sister's behaviour to me; and been more on my guard than I imagined there was a necessity to be."

letter closes with this line is suggestive. At this moment, the act of being a character—one with traits, emotions, a heart—dominates the role of focalizer that each character assumes in an epistolary novel. The character chooses no longer to document her focalizations for her audience(s). The readers, both internal and external, can never know conclusively whether the wave of emotions that prompted Clarissa's cessation is ever related.

Despite the somewhat vulnerable position of the reader in terms of access to information, the text's existence can actually be shown to depend on the reader. The genre is based on the premise that a letter is written for its recipient, its reader. In this way, the reader actually serves as inspiration for the text's composition. The correspondence that initiates *Clarissa* results from a reader's plea, "Write to me, therefore, my dear, the whole of your story from the time that Mr. Lovelace was first introduced into your family..." (*Cl.*, opening letter from Anna Howe, dated January 10). In the first letter we have of another correspondence (Lovelace-Belford) that is primary to the novel taken as a whole, Lovelace writes:

> Thus, Jack, as thou desirest, have I written. —Written upon something; upon nothing; upon revenge, which I love; upon love, which I hate, and upon the devil knows what besides: —For, looking back, I am amazed at the length of it. Thou may'st read it: I would not for a king's ransom— But so as I do but write, thou sayest thou will be pleased. (*Cl.*, letter dated Monday, March 13)

Not only is the reader an inspiration for the text, he/she is also a reason for its perpetuation, and can arguably be said to determine certain parts of the narrative as well

as its outcome. In a letter to Clarissa regarding the consequences of her decision to disobey her family's wishes for her marriage, Clarissa's brother writes, "If anything I have written appear severe or harsh, it is still in your power...to remedy it; and that by a single word" (*Cl.*, letter from J. A. Harlowe, dated Monday, March 6). The reader need utter—or write—a single word to render void an entire potential plot line. At another point in the novel, it is implied that had reader response been made available to the focalizer earlier in a particular instance, the outcome would have been different: "Having also declared to him in my letters, *before I had your advice*, that I would not think of marriage till he had passed through a state of probation..."(*Cl.*, letter dated Thursday night, April 13, emphasis mine). As her health declines and the novel draws to a close, Clarissa writes to Anna,

> When I began this letter, I did not think I could have run to such a length. But 'tis to YOU, my dearest friend, and *you*, have a title to the spirits you raise and support; for they are no longer mine, and will subside the moment I cease writing to you. (*Cl.*, from letter dated Saturday, September 2)

The reader's position has shifted from one of authorial inspiration to that of an influential advisor, finally to the author's lifeblood in his capacity as such (as distinct from that of character, focalizer, etc.). Reader response is not only possible in epistolary fiction but actually integral to the text!

Critical reactions to this idea of reader response being pivotal to an epistolary text's success are mixed. Irwin Gopnik contends that because of the intertextual allowance for reader response, the external reader is left without a voice. "It is this

constant interpretation and reinterpretation of the action by the characters themselves which helps to make the reader's interpretations of the plot superfluous" (Gopnik 66). I would argue that it is precisely due to the constant character interpretations and reconfigurations that external reader response becomes necessary. First of all, in his linguistic analysis of *Clarissa*, Gopnik spends surprisingly little time on the semantics of his own project; the word "plot" is a poor word choice. The idea of interpreting "plot" per se has not been a source of discussion among critics, nor is it particularly interesting to discuss. There is little debate over the actual *events* that are related in *Clarissa*: a young girl does not want to marry the husband her family has selected for her, she flees her home to a man with ulterior motives and dies at the novel's conclusion; that less-than-honorable man, of course, also meets with a relatively just fate for his barbarous treatment of such an angel. Beyond that simple plot outline which requires three lines, not the 1,500 pages which comprise Richardson's novel, the conflicting "interpretations and reinterpretations" are left up to the external reader to negotiate an objective reality situated within a very subjective text where these "interpretations" are not narrated, but focalized. The spectrum of viewpoints through which every aspect of the tale passes thus remains for the external reader to resolve.

In contrast, Martha Koehler, building on Ross Chambers' work in *Story and Situation* and N. Katherine Hayles' *Chaos Bound*, explains the necessity of reader response in epistolary fiction. Literature, Chambers argues, is not seen as a medium for conveying absolute knowledge, but rather a dialogue between outside party (reader) and the text. This theory is built simultaneously on alienation of the two parties from each other, as well as what Koehler terms an "exchange value" between them, as opposed to a

"use" for one another (21). Exchange here implies two things. The first is the communication model on which epistolary fiction is based. There is quite literally a letter exchange. Within that exchange, as we saw in our discussion on the conveyance of character in epistolary fiction, is the possibility for multiple interpretations. "Exchange value" is pitted against "use," "or a single limited meaning" (21). Hayles argues from this assumption that "[I]f texts are useful, then they can be used up. Only when they are infinitely equivocal, forever supplementing their original message with noise *supplied by the reader*, are they saved from the capitalistic economy that would consign them to obsolescence" (quoted from Koehler 21). That is to say, there is no (exchange) value to a text until it is read, placing the "power of the situation...theoretically invested in the reader..." (Koehler 21-22).

Although she has laid out the framework for it, Koehler fails to draw a conclusion between her above claim about the necessity of the reader and the next part of her argument. She goes on to discuss the complication of the binary rapport in a communicative exchange (sender-recipient in epistolary fiction) when a third party (external reader) is added. She writes, "The 'narrative function' of a text is defined by a binary relationship between narrator and narratee, the power structure that, we saw earlier defines narrative communication" (29). An epistolary text is a narrative. Narrative communication is founded upon a "binary relationship" within which the text is communicated from one party to another (Koehler 29). It is unfair to assume that the requisite parts of a communicative exchange in a piece of fiction between the text-internal parties (sender/recipient) do not extend to the two parties of the textual exchange (text/external audience) established earlier. That is to say, just as the internal narratee is

necessary, the external one is just as important. Koehler earlier establishes that the text lacks *value* without the reader; by applying this later portion of her argument, she could have proven that the text lacks one aspect of a binary relationship without the reader. A binary system, by definition, cannot be sustained without two components.

To expand the scope of our theoretical examination of the plausibility of reader response, examine Stanley Fish's universal model of reader response. He provides a very concise and tangible example of the ways in which readers respond:

> ...[I]n the category of response I include not only "tears, prickles," and "other psychological symptoms" but all the precise mental operations involved in reading, including the formulation of complete thoughts, the performing (and regretting) of acts of judgment, the following and making of logical sequences. (Fish 43)

Anyone who has read what he/she considers a "good" novel will understand Fish's very basic theoretical claim. He takes a physical effect—"tears, prickles"—and uses it as justification for his claim that reader response happens. Readers *are* affected. Readers *do* react to a text—sometimes with tears, sometimes with prickles, sometimes by extrapolating from the text, sometimes by hoping for a certain outcome. The internal reader is given a textual space within which to respond, and it seems naïve for any reader-turned-critic to deny that external readers also respond to a text.

This is not to say that the internal reader functions as an entire replication of us, the external audience. The reader-characters are unable to secure a vantage point from which to view the story in all of its developments and complexity due to their own position within the narrative. We, the external audience, are granted access to the

complete narrative collection. We are a distinctive entity from the internal reader. We actually exist outside of the text. This planned inclusion of a third party into a normally binary activity (sender-recipient) is frequently termed "triangulation" of the narrative (Chambers, Koehler).

> Reading in the position of the third is, like reading as a narratee, an identificatory reading, but the identification is with both positions (narrator and narratee), rather than with one or the other; this double identification enables the reader to become 'the difference that makes sense of their relationship. (Koehler 31)

The external reader must negotiate the often contradictory or incomplete information that is presented as the focalizer continuously changes from letter to letter in epistolary fiction.

This privileging of the external audience as the only component able to make sense of the epistolary work as a whole actually provides a solution to the conundrum that plagues modern theorists as to whether or not textual interpretations are possible. The favored positioning of the *external* reader makes any further textual interpretation *impossible*. The external reader is always situated outside of the text; it is not up to the text to succeed, since only the reader can truly complete it. In his book *On Deconstruction*, Jonathan Culler writes, "Actual readers will combine the role of authorial, narrative, and even ideal narrative audiences in varying proportions—without embarrassment living in contradiction" (35). External readers as the seat of true knowledge of a fictional epistolary relationship have resolved the shortcoming of texts from a deconsctructionist perspective by removing interpretation and knowledge from the

text itself. The French translation for letter recipient, *destinataire*, stresses emphasis on the importance of the text's *destiny*.

Seymour Chatman also examines the relatively well-informed position that the external audience occupies, but discusses its role in the case of an unreliable focalizer (Chatman, recall, uses the term "narrator" without distinction). "In 'unreliable narration,' the narrator's account is at odds with the implied reader's surmises about the story's real intentions. The story undermines the discourse" (S&D 223). A successful tale, Chatman claims, is one in which the external audience recognizes this unreliability.[10] That is to say, we, the external audience to an epistolary work, are sometimes surprised or confused by information presented to us as a result of earlier letters or our own extrapolations. For instance, Clarissa writes to Anna of the details of her escape from home that we, the external audience, know to be (unintentionally) false, as proven by Lovelace's own account of the same contrived situation. When Clarissa agreed to flee with Lovelace to avoid her impending marriage to Solmes, the couple agreed that Clarissa should deposit a letter in a designated spot if she had a change of heart. She did this, but Lovelace did not pick up the letter. When Clarissa asks him why he has violated the terms of their agreement, Lovelace responds (as quoted from Clarissa's letter to Anna, dated Tuesday, April 10), "I have been watched, my dearest life...I have been watched in every step I took...and dared not to come near your wall" (*Cl.*). In Lovelace's letter to Belford from April 11, we (the external reader) learn the true motive behind Lovelace's failure to retrieve Clarissa's letter:

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[10] The internal reader may suspect unreliability on the part of a character, and may eventually correctly surmise it, as Anna Howe does with the scenario related next. However, the external reader becomes privy to the information more quickly and more directly.

> I told thee my reasons for not going in search of a letter of countermand. I was right; for if I had, I should have found such a one; and had I received it, she would not have met me.

Clarissa never properly learns this fact. Epistolary fiction can be conceived of as each letter comprising what Chatman calls a "discourse" with the compilation of all of the letters ultimately forming the "story." The external reader sorts through the multiple discourses to conjure up the story.

Although the external reader does obtain a more complete knowledge of the story than each individual internal reader, the nature of letter-writing—a selective process in which only certain events are narrated—precludes omniscience for any party, as mentioned earlier. Lovelace's passionate letter to Clarissa includes conjectures as to his intended reader's thoughts: "Can I write all that is in my mind, say you?—Impossible!—Not the hundredth part of what is in my mind, and in my apprehension, can I write!" (included in the note to Anna Howe written on March 26). Lovelace's pen, the only medium through which either the internal or external reader is granted access to his thoughts, is declared inadequate for completing that task. The entirety of Lovelace's emotions is thereby rendered unknowable to any readership. It is to that and similar gaps and ambiguities that characterize the epistolary genre which our attention now turns.

Figure 1. THE MULTIPLE ROLES OF CHARACTERS IN EPISTOLARY FICTION

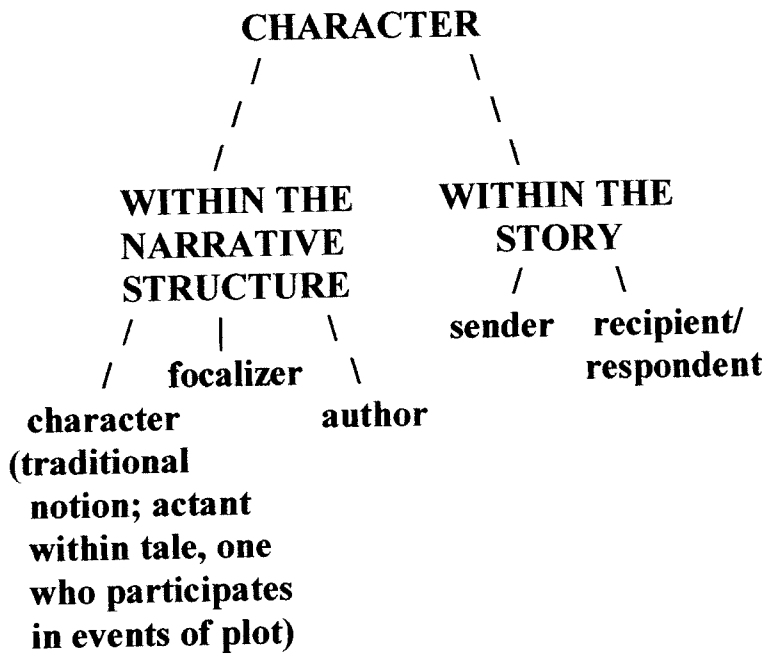

Figure 2. THE PLAYERS AND THEIR WORLDS IN EPISTOLARY FICTION

PLAYER:	EXTERNAL READER	INTERNAL READER	INTERNAL AUTHOR
HIS/HER REALITY:	HIS/HER SPECIFIC PLACE ON THE PLANET EARTH	THE FICTIONAL ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH HE/SHE READS THE LETTERS	THE FICTIONAL SETTING IN WHICH THE EVENTS THAT THE LETTERS RELATE TAKE

			PLACE

CHAPTER 2: AMBIGUITIES OF EPISTOLARY FICTION

Through studying the epistolary character, we have begun to see the importance of the external reader in an epistolary novel. The reader is necessary both to the existence and to the cohesiveness of the text. By definition, this sort of phenomenological theory, whether implicit or expressly stated, underlies much modern-day reader-response theory. "...[O]ne must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text" (Iser, "The Reading Process" 50). Epistolary fiction develops a distinctive consideration of the external reader; instead of focusing strictly on the reader response to the contents of the actual text, a phenomenological approach to this genre often highlights what is *lacking* within a text. The gaps, or, as Wolfgang Iser calls them, the "blanks" within both the textual structure itself and the story related therein actively engage the readers' consciousness. "...[T]he blank in the fictional text induces and guides the reader's constitutive activity. As a suspension of connectability between perspective segments...which, in turn, organize the reader's wandering viewpoint as a referential field" (Iser, *Act of Reading* 202). That is to say, the external reader is found additionally to be the locus of unification of the ambiguous and often incomplete epistolary text.

In fact, as suggested in the previous chapter, the very arrangement that legitimizes the existence of an epistolary novel is one of absence. If the senders and recipients were physically together, there would be no justification for the epistolary exchange that comprises a novel. Missing elements, such as the physical presence of a lover, that exist by nature of the epistolary arrangement are conjured by the epistolary characters. In Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' epistolary novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, a young lover

writes to her friend of a love letter's physical presence replacing that of the absent lover: "Je l'ai emportée [la lettre] dans mon lit, et puis je l'ai baisée comme si... C'est peut-être mal fait de baiser une lettre comme ça, mais je n'ai pas pu m'en empêcher" ("I took the letter to bed with me, and there I kissed it as if...Perhaps it is bad to kiss a letter like that, but I could not help myself"; LLD 110).[11] Cécile transfers absence of the author of her love letter to the presence of the physical form of the letter itself in search of sexual satisfaction. Similarly, it will be shown that the external audience garners more from the text than it actually contains. For Cécile, her unique manner of extending the immanent contents of the letter serves to sustain her relationship and quench her longing; such creation on the part of the external audience is equally indispensable in that it is essential for the creation of a coherent story.

The goal in discussing the various gaps and ambiguities that confront the external audience of an epistolary novel is to explore the implications they have for the reading experience, *not* to resolve them. One can provide textual clues in support of a certain position on an issue within any epistolary text, but, due to the nature of the gaps and ambiguities in this genre, any concrete determination is impossible. To claim that one interpretation (mine) is the correct one would undermine the meaning of "gaps and ambiguities," and would imply that the responses of other readers were invalid. With that said, let us turn to a discussion of those gaps and ambiguities, first in terms of the narrative structure of the novel and, later, to those within the story itself. Issues of interest include setting, plot, and editorial and narrative reliability.[12] Textual examples

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[11] All translations are my own. My thanks to French Professor Jarrod Hayes of the University of Michigan who proofed and edited my translations.

[12] My own schema is loosely based on one that Jane Altman presents in her study *Epistolarity*. Altman subdivides the causes of discontinuity in epistolary narratives as follows: "[d]isruption of the temporal line

will be provided from the previously mentioned *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, a complex epistolary novel replete with conflicting vantage points and uncertain character presentations that traces the undoing of two libertines, Madame de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont.

I. Within the Narrative Structure

Although, as shown in the earlier chapter, the epistolary novel does require external reader interaction with the text, the text borders on not providing adequate information in terms of structural elements even to be considered a story. Ruth Perry writes,

> Reading a series of letters ought to be like entering into a relationship where an empathic effort is required to understand what is going on. As in watching mime, the audience must supply with the imagination what is missing from the stage. (84)

In epistolary fiction, however, the stage itself is not clearly designed. Two seemingly indispensable elements to a story are never clarified for the reader in epistolary fiction: the setting and/or the plot.

The question of where the story occurs depends on the narrative level from which one receives the story. Should the setting be considered the venue in which each letter is written? That about which the letter discusses? Or that in which the letter is read? If a reader chooses to view the epistolary format as a method through which to convey a

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by nonchronological ordering of letters;" "[m]ultiple correspondents, with each writer and addressee giving his characteristic" flavor; "lacunae: the letters punctuate the story rather than constituting the entire action;"

story, the setting in that reader's imagination will likely be the setting of the tales conveyed within the letters. This simple approach quickly becomes problematic with complex novels such as *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. In this epistolary novel, not only do the letters convey a dramatic intrigue, many of them also serve as catalysts for future activities within the story. That is to say, the setting in which the letter is written—and not that within which the events of the letter occur—can be both important in plot development and as illumination of the writer's character. One particularly pronounced (and often cited) incident highlighting setting comes in Letter XLVIII, from Valmont to Tourvel, in which Valmont slyly describes the setting in which he writes: "...la table même sur laquelle je vous écris, consacrée pour la première fois à cet usage, devient pour moi l'autel sacré de l'amour; combien elle va s'embellir à mes yeux! j'aurai tracé sur elle le serment de vous aimer toujours!..." ("...the very table from which I write to you, employed for this task for the first time, signifies for me the sacred altar of love; how this table grows more beautiful in my eyes! On it, I will trace my oath to love you always"; LLD 180). This "pupitre" on which Valmont composes these ironic and feigned sentiments of love for Tourvel is the naked back of another lover. As this letter demonstrates, the setting in epistolary fiction is constantly changing and the emphasis that needs to be accorded it varies. The burden of continuously reassessing the place of the story falls upon the external reader. In certain letters, like that cited above, a specific setting is exaggerated within the letter itself (in Letter XLVII, the emphasis falls on the setting in which the letter is written) such that the external reader would be likely to

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and multiple plots (Altman 170).

qualify the setting as definite, despite the multiple possibilities.[13] More often than not, however, the setting is ambiguous and left to the external reader to resolve in order to create a coherent narrative structure.

Determining the temporal aspect of setting in epistolary fiction is even more complex than that of place, as there is a necessary chronological link between the composite elements of the larger story that must be established in order to achieve coherence. Certainly, in all fiction there is the danger of assuming that a sequence of pages correlates directly to a consecutive organization of events, but this danger is even more pronounced in epistolary fiction in that the entire tale is an ordered, but editorially acknowledged incomplete, series of letters and responses. In and of themselves these letters do not indicate a temporality or logical progression of events. By turning the pages sequentially, a reader often loses sight of the given dates of each letter, thereby "...transform[ing] a temporal experience into a spatial one..." (Fish 44). The events within a story are therefore no longer conceived of as distinct events (or letters) within a larger world in which entire days are never documented, but rather a closed system. Jorge Luis Borges comments on this trick of temporality: "Time, if we can intuitively grasp such an identity, is a delusion: the difference and inseparability of one moment belonging to the apparent past from another belonging to its apparent present is sufficient to disintegrate into it" (216). That is to say, just because we have turned a page of a novel, the events there narrated are not inherently in the past; they are only in our past as readers. In this way, external readers alone can determine the ordering of time within any novel, dictated by the rate at which the pages are turned. In *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*

[13] The multiple possibilities for setting include: the setting in which the letter is written, the setting in which the events described in the letter occur, the setting in which the letter is read by the internal reader. Each of

each letter is dated. The letters do not proceed in an orderly manner; there is no guaranteed bi-quotidian pattern, for example, in the letters that comprise this novel. There are 175 letters that span from August 3 through January 17; certain letters are written on the same day, whereas there are also days on which no letter is written. Furthermore, the narration of the events that comprise the novel is presented by multiple focalizers, each functioning in that role unconsciously and independently of one another. No character within the novel has any sort of omniscience regarding temporality, so there is no thread of continuity between letters for the external audience to trace throughout the novel. Generally, a narrator functions to guide the events of a story, and is, by definition, aware of the relationship between the events that he is narrating. There is no such deliberateness on the part of the narrators in epistolary fiction, as each focalizer functions independently of any larger narrative goal of relating a story. Regardless, the temptation for external readers is to conceive of the letters as occurring at some regimented cycle, namely the pace with which we turn the page. "Even when the time interval between letters is abnormally long, the very proximity of the letters on the printed page can nonetheless create a contrapuntal illusion of temporal continuity" (Altman 171). The "present" is a very tenuous moment, one that arguably cannot exist. Each letter has to have already been written in order for the external audience (or any reader) to access it. Epistolary fiction therefore precludes a "present;" yet, at the same time, the moment at which the external audience reads a letter is the only moment during which the events of the story occur for us.

As with the external reader, it can be said that no "present" can exist for the characters within an epistolary novel during the time they are fulfilling their role as a

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these settings exists for every letter within the epistolary novel.

focalizer. It requires time for each focalizer to write the letters; during the narration, the present of the world about which he/she narrates recedes into the past. That is to say, he/she is continuing to exist as a character within the world of the text during the time in which he/she writes the letter as a narrator of that world. Yet the letter as written from this dynamic world is presented as static commentary on an issue and is inevitably in that world's past. As Rimmon-Kenan points out in his discussion of "text-time," narration is not "instantaneous." "Narration thus always lags behind living, and consequently the more [one] writes, the more [one] will have to write about" (RK 91). At the conclusion of Letter LXXI, Valmont highlights the world of the text that has continued to exist during the composition of this particular letter: "Adieu, il y a une heure que mon chassure attend; je ne prends plus que le moment de vous embrasser..." ("Adieu, my attendant has been awaiting me for an hour; I will take only a moment more to send you my affections..."; LLD 233). One hour of the textual world's "present" is no longer available to the narrator, and therefore inaccessible to us, the external audience. Not only is time within the textual reality lost during the act of focalizing a letter, the time required to write about a past event is almost invariably incongruous with the time required to experience the event itself. "The case of mental events is especially interesting. It takes longer to say your thoughts than to think them, and still longer to write them down" (S&D 73).

Interestingly, the opposite argument has also been made. In his study of style in *Clarissa,* Irwin Gopnik argues that epistolary fiction does not separate existence in the real world of the text from the time required to write the letters that comprise the text. He opens his argument with a familiar observation: "The aspect of the ordering of time

which is most striking is the relationship of the time required to actually write the letters and the total elapsed time according to the calendar" (Gopnik 66). His argument then continues, however, saying that the focalizers resolve this inevitable disparity between "liv[ing] the events and...record[ing] the events...by often doing things simultaneously" (Gopnik 66). The weakness in this line of argument, however, is the impossibility of both participating in an action and writing about it. For instance, when Valmont describes his seduction of Cécile, the actual sexual conquest and the subsequent recording of it cannot be simultaneous: "...mais, comme il arrive toujours, ils [ses larmes] ont cessé, dès que je me suis occupé à y donner lieu de nouveau. Enfin de faiblesse en reproche, et de reproche en faiblesse, nous ne nous sommes séparés que satisfaits l'un de l'autre, et également d'accord pour le rendez-vous ce soir" ("but, as is always the case, her tears stopped as soon as I dedicated myself to new exploits. Anyway, from weakness to reproach and from reproach to weakness, we did not separate until mutually satisfied and had arranged a rendez-vous for this evening"; LLD 313-314). In order for Valmont to write this account, he must literally have his hands free from Cécile, and this separation did not (and could not have) come until after they were satisfied, "l'un de l'autre." Gopnik's theory of simultaneity, or "living to the moment," as he borrows from Richardson, clearly does not hold. Gopnik claims that "living to the moment" is considered in terms of its "psychological authenticity," when he really needs to consider the textual (im)plausibility of such an arrangement.

At the same time that the letters may create a dangerous sense of false continuity, they do remain the only basis by which one can create a sense of chronology within the epistolary novel. In her study *Epistolarity*, Jane Altman comments,

> The letter is thus the marker of duration; when there are no letters, there is no experienced time. For the outside reader...the only durational sequence is the letter sequence.... (172)

The reader must always negotiate the need to order events within a narrative such that it is intelligible with the faulty association of sequential pages as indicative of sequential events. "[T]here is no way of measuring text-duration. The only truly temporal measure available is the time of reading and this varies from reader to reader, providing no objective standard" (RK 51). The standard for temporality within epistolary fiction—albeit a subjective one—is determined again by the external reader.

As with setting, the epistolary plot is not immediately evident. By "plot," I return to the Aristotelian notion in which plot is "the combination of the incidents, or things done in the story" (quoted from Aristotle's *Poetics* in Brooks 10). In his study *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks, like Aristotle, argues for the importance of plot in any narrative. Whereas Aristotle argues that plot is the end of the narrative, Brooks contends that it is a necessary means to achieving any other end with or from that narrative, such as a lyric or symbolic discussion of a literary work. Brooks highlights that although "reading for the plot" is a "low form of [interpretive literary] activity,

> one must in good logic argue that plot is somehow prior to those elements [considered of high literary activity], since it is the very organizing line, the thread of design, that makes narrative possible because finite and comprehensible. (4)

To return briefly to the illusory notion of temporality, the plot is contained between the two covers of any narrative and is revealed with the succession of turned pages. If one

accepts that plot is a fundamental element of any narrative, one must then determine it. This is challenging in epistolary fiction for two reasons. First of all, the "events" of an epistolary text do not really forward any plot, in and of themselves. "Thought *is* action, and characters *are* their words" (Perry 124). The only "actions" within the actual epistolary framework are the writing and reading of letters, which prompted our reconsideration of the epistolary character. The world in which these characters exist and where actions other than reading and writing occur is one degree removed from the letters in which they write about it.

The second problem in determining the epistolary plot comes once one has accepted that the actual epistolary plot is without action. Following the logic that plot is a sequence of events that every narrative must contain in order to be comprehensible, the external reader of epistolary fiction can rationalize how the events about which the various letters are written and those which spur the composition of subsequent letters are the constitutive plot elements, even though the events themselves do not actually occur within the text. "Intervals between the letters loom large and contribute to the shape of the narrative" (Altman 170). These events that occur between the letters are what causes letters to be written, which the external reader then reads. Ruth Perry comments on the irony of an epistolary novel ultimately proceeding outside of any written text:

> Thus the climactic events in this supremely verbal form are beyond words. It is one of the peculiarities of epistolary fiction that those events on which the story is centered always happens off-stage, so to speak, beyond the grip of words. (86)

The "plot," then, happens *outside* of the text; an indispensable part of a narrative is no longer within it. For instance, the duel between Valmont and Danceny that leads to much closure and resolution within the novel occurs outside of the text. Danceny challenges Valmont to a duel in Letter CLXII: "J'en serai instruit, si, comme je l'espère, vous voulez bien vous trouver demain, entre huit et neuf heures du matin, à la porte du bois de Vincennes, village de Saint-Mandé" ("I will be informed about it, if, as I hope it will come to pass, you will be, between eight and nine o'clock tomorrow morning, at the gate of Vincennes [one of the 'gates' of Paris] in the village of Saint-Mandé"; LLD 485). The next letter that the external audience has access to informs us of the death of Valmont, a primary focalizer throughout the narrative. Written to his aunt by a previously unknown character, the letter states simply: "Monsieur votre neveu a eu le malheur de succomber dans un combat singulier qu'il a eu ce matin avec M. le chevalier Danceny" ("Your nephew has unfortunately fallen in a duel he had this morning with M. le chevalier Danceny"; LLD 486). This duel, in that it eliminates a primary character and focalizer from the novel, is a significant reason for the novel's cessation shortly thereafter, yet it is not within the text. The plot, though integral to a narrative, is absent from the epistolary structure. In turning our attention to the epistolary story itself, we will see a similar pattern of textual gaps and ambiguities left to the external audience to resolve.

II. Within the Story

Madame de Merteuil writes to Valmont of a letter she has received from Cécile Volange, "Je ne sais pas si vous vous en etes aperçu, mais moi j'en ai la preuve dans la

dernière lettre qu'elle m'a écrite" ("I do not know whether you have noticed, but I have the proof in the last letter that she wrote to me"; LLD 369). As a reader, Madame de Merteuil has gained knowledge concerning a certain element of the drama about which she reads. The reading process is generally associated with such enlightenment; epistolary fiction, however, often reveals as much misleading knowledge as it does reliable information.

In our comparison of the internal reader to the external one, it was noted that the external reader occupies a somewhat privileged position within the epistolary exchange, in that he/she has access to the complete collection of letters, whereas none of the text-internal characters has such omniscience. This privileged position, however, is often more cautionary that it is informative in that it serves to warn the reader of the inaccuracy of that which he/she is reading. For instance, when Merteuil instructs Cécile in the writing of love letters, we realize a truth about Merteuil's own style: "Voyez donc à soigner davantage votre style. Vous écrivez toujours comme un enfant. Je vois bien d'où cela vient; c'est que vous dites tout ce que vous pensez, et rien de ce que vous ne pensez pas" ("Take care to polish your style more. Your letters are those of a child. I do see where that comes from; the problem is that you write everything you think and nothing you do not"; LLD 347). Merteuil's writing, though we as the external audience have access to all of it, is always disguised. Her real thoughts are not included in her letters. Although the external reader knows not to believe what Merteuil writes, he/she is not guided as to what should be held true regarding her character. In her article "Face Value and the Value of Face in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*: The Rhetoric of Form and the Critic's Seduction," Sandra Camargo poses a strong rhetorical inquiry to the fact that

Merteuil deceives her readers: "Since the withholding of information from one character by another is a basic stratagem of the book, why should the [external] reader be exempt?" (233).

This paradoxical position of privilege that the external reader occupies is particularly pronounced with the common epistolary tool of an "editor," a character uninvolved in the epistolary exchange who functions as editor of the entire collection of letters (both *Clarissa* and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* include such a character). It is important to note that the editorial comments are always conspicuously separate from the actual letter exchanges within an epistolary novel, despite the fact that they are part of the text that the external reader ultimately reads. Included in the margins, the editorial comments suggest that the epistolary format in and of itself does not provide sufficient information for the external reader's comprehension of the text.

The editor in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* reminds the external audience, though not explicitly, of the novel's ultimate lack of information. For instance, the very last lines of the novel, given in footnote format, state the lack of resolution and the remaining textual gaps:

> **Des raisons particulières et des considérations que nous nous ferons toujours un devoir de respecter nous forcent de nous arrêter ici.*
>
> *Nous ne pouvons, dans ce moment, ni donner au lecteur la suite des aventures de mademoiselle de Volanges, ni lui faire connaître les sinistres événements qui ont comblé les malheurs ou achevé la punition de madame de Merteuil.*

Peut-être quelque jour nous sera-t-il permis de compléter cet ouvrage; mais nous ne pourrons prendre aucun engagement à ce sujet: et quand nous le pourrions, nous croirions encore devoir auparavant consulter le gout du public, qui n'a pas les mêmes raisons que nous de s'intéresser à cette lecture.

Note de l'Editeur. (LLD 513)

**For specific reasons and considerations that we must always make it our duty to respect, we are forced to stop here.*

At this time, we can neither disclose to the reader the following adventures of Mademoiselle de Volanges nor make him aware of the sinister events that completed the misfortune or finished off the punishment of Madame de Merteuil.

Perhaps one day we will be permitted to fill in this letter collection; we can make no promise, however; and when we can, we shall still believe that it is our duty to abide by public standards of tastefulness, as the public has differing vested interests in this reading than we do.

Editor's Note.

Only the external audience will read this qualifying statement that states the incompleteness of the novel and makes blatant the gaps that remain in our knowledge as readers. Editorial commentary often attempts to justify the incompleteness of the letter collection that comprises the novel. The seventh letter of the novel opens with the following editorial footnote: "**Pour ne pas abuser de la patience du lecteur, on supprime beaucoup de lettres de cette correspondance [entre Cécile et son amie, Sophie]...; on ne*

donne que celles qui ont paru nécessaires à l'intelligence des événements de cette société" (So as not to abuse the reader's patience, we have suppressed many of the letters of this correspondence; we have provided only those that seemed necessary to understanding the events of this story"; LLD 93). Later, we are again reminded as to why a majority of epistolary exchanges involving Cécile are not included in the narrative: "**On continue à supprimer les lettres de Cécile Volange...qui sont peu intéressantes et n'annoncent aucun événement*" ("We continue to withhold Cécile's letters as they have little interest and do no introduce any events within the story"; LLD 159). The question then returns, however, to what is an *événement* in an epistolary novel, and whether or not those suppressed letters would not perhaps have provided a somehow more accurate or complete portrait of Cécile. The external reader, though made aware of a textual absence, is nonetheless left with incomplete information and is impotent to expand his knowledge.

The editor also serves the role of providing the external reader with explications of certain elements within the text. Though enlightening, these footnotes again often serve more as reminders of the fact that the text we are reading *is* incomplete than as necessary illuminations for a full understanding of the text. Our position as external readers may be more privileged than the epistolary characters themselves, but we are always at the mercy of the text in order to maintain that informed position. For instance, the editor in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* expounds, "***Pour entendre ce passage, il faut savoir que le comte de Gercourt avait quitté la marquise de Merteuil pour l'Intendante.... Comme cette aventure est fort antérieure aux événements dont il est question dans ces lettres, on a cru devoir en supprimer toute la correspondance*" ("To understand this

passage, the reader must know that the Comte de Gercourt left the Marquise de Merteuil for another, whose name is withheld for privacy. As this intrigue occurred significantly before the events in question in these letters, we found it necessary to exclude the entire correspondence"; LLD 82). That is to say, the text itself does not contain adequate information for the external reader to grasp fully the events and personages related therein. We need the commentary of an "editor" who can provide us with requisite background information.

Certain instances in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* do not contain editorial commentary, although it would be useful for the external reader. The text-internal reality common to all of the characters within an epistolary novel is inaccessible to the external audience. For instance, Madame de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont are ex-lovers; they are familiar with one another's physical presence and have observed each other in social settings. They thus have prior knowledge of each other that the external audience does not have; this knowledge continues throughout the composition and perusal of the letters that comprise the novel. It is therefore superfluous for them to narrate certain details explicitly in their letters to one another. For instance, Valmont writes, "Comme je n'ai point de vanité, je ne m'arrete pas aux détails de la nuit: *mais vous me connaîssez*, et j'ai été content de moi" ("As I am not arrogant, I will not relate the details of the evening: *but you know me*, and I was pleased with myself"; LLD 231, emphasis mine). We, the external audience, can well imagine the exploits of the evening. When Merteuil uses a similar strategy of shortening her letter, however, the deleted content is not so evident: "Je ne vous rendrai donc pas notre conversation que vous suppléerez aisément" ("I will not relate our conversation as you can easily supply it for yourself"; LLD 283). The

external reader has neither engaged in nor observed such a conversation involving Merteuil, so he/she is not able to supply the missing textual information that a specific internal audience is capable of supplementing.

Just as the focalizers occasionally rely on another character's prior knowledge in conveying their messages, there are instances where a focalizer manipulates another character's lack of knowledge. Epistolary fiction is riddled with inconclusive presentations of both characters and events, as a result of the necessarily partial focalization that is inherent in the structure of the epistolary narrative. Rimmon-Kenan distinguishes between permanent and temporary textual gaps; thus far, we have concentrated mostly on the former (plot, setting). We shall now turn briefly to an examination of the role that temporary gaps play in epistolary fiction. Interestingly, these "temporary" gaps in the minds of the external readership have long-range effects that lead to more ambiguity. For example, Valmont contrives a situation such that he can be witnessed acting charitably in order to convince Tourvel of his noble heart: "J'ai chargé mon confident de me trouver, dans les environs, quelque malheureux qui eut besoin de secours. Cette commission n'était pas difficile à remplir." ("I instructed my sevant to find, in the area, some citizens who were in need of assistance. This errand was not difficult for him to fill"; LLD 119). Tourvel has a spy watching Valmont to determine the truth of the rumors of his supposed despicable and manipulative character. After learning of this "charitable" act on the part of Valmont, Tourvel writes to Madame de Volanges (who has warned Tourvel against involvement with him), "Vous serez sans doute bien aise, Madame, de connaître un trait de M. de Valmont, qui contraste beaucoup, ce me semble, avec tous ceux sous lesquels on vous l'a répresenté.... A

présent, dites-moi, ma respectable amie, si M. de Valmont est en effet un libertin sans retour?" ("Without a doubt, you will be well assuaged, Madame, to know of a trait of M. de Valmont that contrasts, it seems to me, with all of those that you described to me.... Tell me now, my respectable friend, if he truly is a libertine beyond all help?"; LLD 121-122). Though the external reader is never duped by Valmont's canniving actions, Tourvel evidently is. She retains this false belief in Valmont's generosity. Her subsequent narrations are built on this false belief of his character, thus tainting all of her narration. When a focalizer's underlying assumptions are known by the external audience to be false, it simply raises the question in the reader's head as to what conclusions this character can accurately draw given the delusions under which he/she is narrating. The ambiguity lies not in the truth of a narrated event, but rather the questionable narration that results from a false interpretation/presentation of that event. Chatman calls this false representation on the part of a narrator "unreliable narration" (S&D 223). In Tourvel's case, her unreliability is unintentional and unknown to her, but nonetheless a source of ambiguity for the external reader. Each character's focalizations are a subjective depiction of the textual world that the external reader must reconcile to the competing, equally subjective, descriptions provided by the other focalizers.

Recall that within the epistolary "plot," many of the actual "events" occur outside of the text. Similarly, many of the developments within the constitutive elements of the story do not occur in the text. Perhaps the most striking of those is Valmont's conversion from desire of sexual conquest to genuine love for the Présidente de Tourvel. Valmont recognizes her purity, and it is this which he wants to corrupt: "Ces sentiments d'une ame pure et tendre, qui redoute le bonheur qu'elle désire, et ne cesses pas de se défendre,

même alors qu'elle cesses de résister....[L]e temps ne viendra que trop tôt, ou degradée par sa chute, elle ne sera plus pour moi qu'une femme ordinaire" ("These sentiments of a pure and tender soul that dread the happiness that she herself desires and continues to defend, at the same time that she ceases to resist [me]. The time shall come too soon where, desgraded by her fall, she will not be anything more to me than an ordinary woman"; LLD 310). Gradually, however, in his lengthy process of seduction, Valmont begins to care genuinely for Tourvel, a phenomenon of whose origin even he is unaware: "Mais quelle fatalité m'attache à cette femme? cent autres ne désirent-elles pas mes soins?...Pourquoi courir après celui qui nous suit, et négliger ceux qui se présentent? Ah! pourquoi?...Je l'ignore, mais je l'éprouve fortement" ("What inevitable fate attaches me to this woman? Do not a hundred others desire my attention? Why run after those who follow us and ignore those who present themselves? Ah! why?...I do not know, but feel it strongly"; LLD 328). If the epistolary character to whom something happens is unaware of the moment of its occurrence, the external reader is also necessarily uninformed. One begins to sense a change in Valmont—indeed, he himself senses this alteration—but cannot place it textually. Merteuil also notices the change in Valmont, writing to him, "Or, est-il vrai, Vicomte, que vous vous faites illusion sur le sentiment qui vous attaché à madame de Tourvel? C'est de l'amour, ou il n'en exista jamais" ("Now, it is not true, Vicomte, that you harbor illusions about the sentiment that draws you to Tourvel? It is love, if ever there was such a thing"; LLD 427). Valmont himself finally admits his love for Tourvel, but his admission is as much to himself as to his readership:

> L'ivresse fut complète et réciproque; et, pour la première fois, la mienne survécut au plaisir. Je ne sortis de ses bras que pour tomber à ses genoux,

> pour lui jurer un amour éternal; et, il faut tout avouer, je pensais ce que je disais. Enfin, même après nous etre séparés, son idée ne me quittait point, et j'ai eu besoin de me travailler pour m'en distraire. (LLD 408)
>
> The ecstasy was complete and reciprocated; and, for the first time, mine survived the pleasure. I did not leave her arms except to fall at her feet, to swear my eternal love; and, I must admit all, I believed what I was saying. Even after we were separated, her image did not leave me, and I had to work at it in order to think of something else.

This final confession from Valmont contradicts his earlier claim that the conquest of Tourvel was his only interest in her. Here, however, at the moment of consummation, Tourvel has not become "une femme ordinaire," but rather the object of Valmont's genuine love. The outcome is different than was expected; something changed within Valmont's character to produce this surprising result. However, that shift in Valmont can be seen nowhere in the text. Though it has happened during the course of the text, Valmont's conversion has not occurred within it. "By the end of the reading process, the reader usually will have reached a 'finalized hypothesis,' an overall meaning which makes sense of the text as a whole. [It is just t]he degree of 'finalization' [that] varies from text to text" (RK 121). The external audience can trace the change, but cannot place it.

The external readership acknowledges this important shift in Valmont's character, even though it does not occur within the text, as accepting it is integral to making sense of the novel as a whole. The characters themselves note the importance of that which is *not* in their letters as well, that which goes unsaid. Merteuil writes to Valmont, "Encore

dans votre denière lettre, si vous ne m'y parlez de cette femme uniquement, c'est que vous ne voulez m'y rien dire *de vos grandes affaires*; elles vous semblent si importantes, que le silence que vous gardez à ce sujet, vous semblez une punition pour moi" ("Again, in your last letter, even though you did not speak to me only of this woman, it is because you did not want to tell me anything of your important affairs; they seem so important to you that you guard them in silence as a punishment for me"; LLD 444). In her own study of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Camargo states that the gaps prove more important than the information provided: "In the long run, what we do *not* know about the characters in the novel proves to be more valuable in determining the motives for their behavior than what we do know" (Camargo 229).

III. Conclusion

We have now explored various ambiguities and gaps within the epistolary genre. As promised, no conclusive answers to those textual incompletions have been provided. The aim of this study was to highlight, not to resolve the various uncertainties that the external audience encounters when reading an epistolary novel. This chapter has even gone so far as to call into question whether or not an epistolary novel can even qualify as a narrative work due to its unclear, even dubious, presentation of requisite narrative elements such as plot and setting.

What has been shown, however, is the importance of the external reader's role in negotiating and resolving the textual ambiguities of the genre. The power to establish the narrative elements requisite to a tale is solely the external readership's; access to letters

intended for another is limited to the external reader. Certainly, the epistolary genre, and particularly *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, is characterized by fragmentation and limited information. "...[B]ut there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is...the reader;...the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination" (Barthes 12). The reader not only resolves textual ambiguities, but in so doing, unifies the text into a coherent entity. What is not clear is the motivation behind an incomplete text. Is it solely to provide a space for reader-reponse?

Among reader response theorists, a popular explanation for textual gaps and ambiguities is one that presents a symbiotic relationship between reader and text. The premise of the theory is that the text in some way moderates the readers' behavior. In his study on *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Iser writes, "...the guiding [textual] devices operative in the reading process have to initiate communication" (167). Of this textually-exerted control, Iser contends: "Although exercised *by* the text, it is not *in* the text" (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 168), which is precisely the pattern that has been shown in our examination of one specific epistolary novel, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. The text certainly encourages thinking about, but does not contain, certain narrative and story elements. "Whenever the reader bridges the gaps [in the text] communication begins. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves. Hence the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text" (Iser, *Act of Reading* 169).

An interesting inquiry building from Iser's proposition that textual blanks facilitate communication between the text and reader is whether or not there are existing, as opposed to absent, textual components that encourage interaction in the form of

response between reader and text. The final chapter will focus on the nature of the interplay between the actual text and the reader's response to that text in light of a modern-day epistolary novel.

CHAPTER 3: The Reader and the Text of *The Mixquiahuala Letters*

To evaluate further a reader's role not only in completing textual gaps and ambiguities, but also in realizing the textual whole and to conclude our epistolary study, we will examine a modern-day epistolary work, Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters.* Castillo's novel actually exaggerates the role of the reader with an ingenuous modification of a very traditional literary component, such that the text cannot be read until the reader gives order to it. The reader is required not only to elucidate the ambiguities, but more fundamentally to order the text itself. Interestingly, in controlling the textual whole, the reader both resolves and creates gaps.

The epigraph to the novel reads: "I stopped loving my father a long time ago. What remained was the slavery to a pattern." (from Anais Nin's *Under a Glass Bell*). Although the epigraph generally outlines a theme within the story, this one functions as much as commentary on the reading process as on the tale itself. The table of contents begins on the following page with the address "Dear Reader," bringing the external reader into the world of the text. It contains a reminder of readers' slavery to a pattern, that of reading the pages of a novel in sequential order: "[T]his is not a book to be read in the usual sequence." Castillo then generates three different patterns to follow throughout the book, one "FOR THE CONFORMIST;" another "FOR THE CYNIC;" and the final "FOR THE QUIXOTIC." The table of contents, rather than indicating a previously established textual order, outlines three potential sequences for the reader to follow. These reading patterns require that the external reader discard his/her previous notions of novelistic sequence, as he/she will only read a selected part of the text that will not be sequentially paginated. Furthermore, each reader must categorize what type of person

he/she is and, consequently, what type of role he/she will play as a reader. That classification dictates the novel each reader will subsequently experience. The resulting novel is thus dependent on the category in which each individual places him/herself. By forcing the reader to make a choice regarding the novelistic sequence in order to have a novel *at all*, the novel places heavy emphasis on the indispensable role of the reader in a text. The implications this self-directed chronology has for the novel and the reader's role within it are impressive.

In the previous chapter, we examined how the ultimate determination for a novel's duration was dependent upon the rate at which the reader turns the page. Castillo's unique table of contents places further burden on the external reader to determine temporality for two reasons. Most obviously, the ordering of events and their relative moments of occurrence is subject to the reader's self-determination as either conformist, cynic, or quixotic. Furthermore, Castillo's epistolary system involves not dated, but numbered, letters. There is no internal chronology to the story. In the majority of epistolary novels, the dates of composition are provided as a structure for the reader to order the elements spatially. Here, the external reader loses not only the textual marker of time—dated letters—but also the linear one—sequential pagination, previously presumed to be inherent to a narrative.

Letter 10 situates the novel in a real time frame: "Ignorance / didn't scare me in 1976 / Year of the Bicentennial" (ML 43). In addition to orienting the reader to the moment of this particular letter, Letter 10 goes on to articulate the chronology on which the rest of the novel depends:

> Observers,

never invited to participate sensing ours

was to record not immerse in time

TIME IS FLUID

We call it by name: ... 1974, '76, a moment of Southwestern

influence, our Aztlán period

TIME IS FLUID (ML 44)

Time *is* fluid in this novel where a collection of letters is re-ordered according to the preferences of each reader. Letter 10 occurs in the middle of each of the three letter sequences and serves as a reminder of the subjective temporality of this novel, as determined by each individual reader.

At the same time that the reader's selection of a reading trajectory resolves the novel's chronology, that selection also creates other textual gaps. Throughout this paper, another continual subject of inquiry has been the completeness of an epistolary text and the reader's role in generating that. The unique table of contents of *The Mixquiahuala Letters* suggests that completeness within an epistolary novel is not desirable. By directing the readership to selected entries within a larger sequence as part of one of three given, even the allusion of wholeness vanishes. The story is edited and reconfigured in light of the choice each reader makes, invariably including certain letters and excluding others that are included within the text, defined as that which falls between the covers of the novel that is entitled *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. Each designated path is characterized by a degree of intelligibility that would not be evident if the text were taken as a whole. That is to say, blatant neglect of certain portions of the text, which thereby creates gaps in one's knowledge of the text as a whole (in the sense of bound together between two

covers), is actually necessary to comprehension. In order for the reader to follow a specific route through the text and read a coherent story, alternate portions must be excluded. Gaps, counterintuitively, actually assist in a reader's comprehension of this specific text. If a quixotic reader continued reading from Letter 33 to Letter 34, the latter of which is not included in this reader's trajectory, he/she would read the paragraph that begins, "My son is sleeping," (ML 125) and wonder when and how a child was born to the focalizer; Teresa does not become a mother along the path of the quixotic reader. That is to say, if one were to read the entire text of *The Mixquiahuala Letters,* the resulting sequence would be neither complete nor coherent.

As demonstrated in the above example, the choice each reader makes regarding what sequence he/she would like to trace throughout the book thus profoundly affects the characters that reader encounters therein. Although a majority of the letters contained within the covers of the book appear in all three of the proposed sequences, each also has multiple letters exclusive to it. Notably, each of the suggested series (conformist, cynic, quixotic) concludes with a letter that is exclusive to that particular trajectory. In these proportionally minor inclusions and exclusions, the reader's experiences and interactions with the characters—and the characters themselves—are drastically altered, as the respective titles indicate. When the reader fills in the chronological gap that the table of contents in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* creates, the resulting story also shifts.

The reading arrangement for the first proposed reading sequence, that for the conformist, opens with Letter #2, a poem for Alicia on her thirtieth birthday and proceeds through a nostalgic retracing of how and where the friends met and their subsequent travelling adventures. The reading path for the conformist concludes with a

dramatic alteration in the lives of both protagonists; Alicia's live-in lover, Abdel, kills himself and Teresa has a son, Vittorio. The final letter in the sequence is Teresa's response to Alicia's "first one woman [art] show" (ML 123), and it details the paths the respective women's lives will follow next. Alicia is going back to Mexico to live with her son; Alicia, it is revealed, is also leaving the country: "i hope your upcoming trip to Europe will lead you to a place you'll want to go back to and call home too" (ML 125).[14]

This particular conclusion is classified as that of a conformist, I contend, because of the high degree of closure within it, both expressly in the narrative style and more abstractly in the closure regarding the characters. Teresa writes, "God bless you and keep you, Alicia," (ML 125), a rather formal conclusion that implies separation and cessation of the current arrangement; the two protagonists are departing from this correspondence that sustains the novel. The path of the conformist, the reader who desires traditional narrative elements, stops with a degree of finality generally absent from the epistolary genre. Furthermore, the reader has a sense that Teresa is going to a home, and is no longer the wandering, listless spiritual and geographical traveler traced throughout the novel. The conditions under which the novel was written no longer exist. Following the trajectory for the conformist, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* conforms to the traditional plot development of a problem within the story leading to a resolution, which then concludes the text. This conformity is, of course, ultimately an illusion, since the very format of the

[14] Castillo employs the lowercase "i" throughout her novel. Castillo explains her reason for using the lowercase first-person nominative pronoun: "In Teresa's other language, Spanish, the personal pronoun is not capitalized. However, the abbreviated formal 'you,' *Ud.*, is. You,—Ud.—are important, i—yo—am no one..." (Bower 149). Interestingly, Castillo does not translate certain lines within her novel, although her inclusion of "i" is an application of a system of signification across languages. Castillo also notes that "...the use of the lower case 'i' for poets was at [the] time [that the novel is set] a trademark of protest poetry. Teresa saw herself as a political activist and hoped to become a poet" (Bower 149).

novel precludes the primary conformist action of most readers, that of reading the pages of a book in consecutive order.

The second potential reading trajectory is that for the cynic. The label for this reading pattern could not be more appropriate. Though the nostalgic travel letters (Letters 19-27) are the same in this collection as in the other two, it is the topics of the letters that flank them that ultimately leave the reader with a rather pessimistic view of our protagonists. The second letter in the collection describes Teresa's disillusionment with religion: "The last time i went to CHURCH, genuflecting my way to the confessional, i was eighteen years old....i ran out of the booth in tears and in a rage, left the CHURCH without waiting to hear my penance for absolution of my unforgivable sins" (ML 30-31). Teresa's embittered tone in this letter sets the tone for her young adulthood, and the path of the cynical reader as well.

Later in the sequence, one reads first of Alicia's abortion when she was a seventeen-year-old (significantly anterior to this novel being written) which left her sterile. One letter later, the cynic reads the gory details of Teresa's abortion that she experiences over the course of the composition of the letters that comprise this novel:

> Something like a motor started up, and the most terrifying sensation my body has ever known began.
>
> i erupted, a volcano of hot wine, soft membrane, tissue, undefined nerves, sightless eyes, a miniscule, pounding heart, sunless flesh, all sucked out in torn, mutilated pieces. How long does death take? (ML 114)

As a reader, I left this particular letter feeling rather dejected. What is interesting, is that all three sequences include both letters that detail the respective women's abortions. Only

the order in which a reader receives them is altered. Only in the reading pattern of the conformist does Teresa have a child, indirectly from this earlier abortion. In Letter 39, exclusive to the conformist series, Teresa writes, "i'd made a vow once as my womb was attacked, and i kept it. / i worked until the week Vittorio was born (ML 133). In the final reading sequence that has not yet been discussed—the quixotic—the painful description of Teresa's abortion and her present suffering is offset by the subsequent narration of Alicia's abortion. Since Alicia's was so anterior to the time of this narrative, one witnesses the ability of a character to recover from the ordeal in the character of Alicia. The implication in the path of the quixotic is that Teresa, too, will survive emotionally. No such optimism is offered in the reading path of the cynic, where the description of Teresa's abortion remains in the reader's mind without other letters to temper it.

The concluding portion of the cynical route through *The Mixquiahuala Letters* describes a growing distance between the two friends whose correspondence is requisite to the continuation of the novel. Letter 36, exclusive to this collection, opens "When we / were twenty-seven, we saw each other twice, both occasions indirectly associated with a member of the opposite sex" (ML 127). Teresa then goes to visit Alicia on vacation, "want[ing] more than anything to / abandon / [her]self to laughter / as never before, not even as a child" (ML 128). The vacation that results is far from realizing that dream. Teresa laments, "i had driven sixteen and a half hours just to ask you to *dance* with me—but what I found was the carrion of what vultures in Mexico had discarded" (ML 128). On her final night of the disappointing vacation, Teresa encourages relations between a male acquaintance and Alicia: "i left out the banal details and put all that was wonderful about you in a small velvet bag like a magic charm so that finally he insisted that you join

us" (ML 131). Have these banal details also been omitted from the letters that Teresa writes? In the final letter of this collection, does the narrator reveal to us that one of our protagonists is nothing more than a bag of magic charms created by the narrator's pen? The cynicism that results from this path of reading is manifold. The friendship forming the basis for this epistolary novel is disintegrating, creating in the reader a sense of demoralization and disillusionment. From the perspective of the narrative structure, the characters that the reader has followed throughout the book are suddenly called into question in this final entry. Alicia's entire person may have never been anything more than the creation of another woman's pen. The reading process concludes with a dubious conception of the characters about whom the reader has just read.

The final path presented in the table of contents is that for the quixotic. One single letter really divides this reading pattern from the others in the book. Listed as the last letter that one should read in the sequence, it is printed as the first letter in the book. In it, Alicia and Teresa are organizing their return trip to Mexico, where they will stay with Teresa's family.

Ultimately, the characters in this sequence are left open-ended for the quixotic reader to idealize and to continue them. The protagonists are reuniting with the potential to create new memories that will comprise a subsequent novel. The final words of the postscript suggest a challenge to the internal reader to increase the memories and renew the idealism that has been lost since the correspondence began; in essence, to erase the cynical path that their epistolary correspondence has the potential to trace. The final lines read:

> Alicia, i don't know why so many of our ideals were stamped out like cigarette butts when we believed in them so furiously. Perhaps we were not furious enough. (ML 22)

As has been shown, each of the three paths presented to the reader results in a different story with different characters and leaves the reader with a different experience of what is, seemingly, the same text—or at least that which is presented under the same title and within the same covers. However, without the reader selecting one of these trajectories, the text as a whole remains incomprehensible. The text itself, not to mention the resolution of the ambiguities and gaps that characterize the epistolary genre, is dependent on reader response and participation.[15]

In response to critical inquiry about her book, Castillo wrote a brilliant "letter" about her epistolary novel. She entitled it "Yes, dear critic, there really is an Alicia." In it, she describes the person Alicia, a real person, her intimate friend, in detail, both to corroborate and to extend the descriptions provided within *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. Interestingly, Castillo acknowledges the reliable representation of Alicia that her novel offers to the reader: "But Alicia, to my knowledge, is not a chameleon. You, above all the readers of *The Mixquiahuala Letters* I think, would agree to that" (Bower 147). Castillo, however, cautions against drawing too strong a parallel between her novel and

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[15] *The Mixquiahuala Letters* only includes one focalizer, a break from other epistolary novels that we have studied. It is important for the reader of this thesis to note that this is a fairly common epistolary technique, although previous epistolary works in this study have included multiple focalizers. The use of a single focalizer precludes certain ambiguities that were discussed in light of an epistolary novel with multiple focalizers at the same that that it creates others. For instance, Teresa alludes to Alicia's acts of communication through a variety of media, although these are not (and sometimes cannot be) included in the text. At one point, Teresa opens, "Forgive me for not having returned your call" (ML 114); at another, she scolds, "I received only one letter for the three sent last year" (ML 129). Though we have no competing viewpoint to challenge the singular focalizer's and are therefore obligated to recognize her writings as authentic, we also know that the focalizer is *not* omniscient. There is another side to this epistolary correspondence to which the external readers do not have access.

her life: "...[A]pproximately forty per cent of the novel is based on actual occurences *(sic)*; however, it is up to the reader to decide for her/himself what in the novel comprises autobiography and what is only and always possibility" (Bower 149). This letter collection is but a series of possibilities, as the table of contents reveals. The idea of the text being a series of possibilities continues within the story as well. Teresa writes to Alicia, "(There are a dozen proverbs we could interject here...)" (ML 48). The text itself could have been completed with a multitude of phrases and proverbs, just as it can be traced along three separate trajectories. The inclusion of any phrase into a text or any letter into a sequence is totally discretionary, but becomes the determining factor in the impression with which the reader is left.

The discretion that the focalizer uses also impacts the impression made on the reader. A radical break not only from the other epistolary works that we have studied, but from traditional epistolary focalization in general is the manner in which the focalizer, Teresa, exercises her artistic license in assuming various voices and perspectives throughout the novel. She writes as a first-person omniscient narrator, a third-person narrator, and a first-person narrator from the perspective of another character. At one point, Teresa recounts her observation of a sexual experience of Alicia's. Teresa assumes the voice of an omniscient narrator, not that of the inherently partial and limited epistolary focalizer. Italicized, Teresa's story reads:

for the circling patterns of

his expert fingers

first against the temples to erase fear

instill trust

you relaxed...

oil burning into your melted flesh electrified

fingers undid the bra

for a moment you were aware of yourself...

across the room

i closed my eyes

went on

with my nap. (ML 45-46)

Through the open eyes of a narrator, Teresa comments on the movement of another character's fingers and the degree of tension in yet another's body, as though she, the focalizer, could somehow enter into their mental processes. In a separate letter in which Teresa recalls a memory from the friends' time in Mexico together, Teresa writes, "This isn't a tale of our experiences, but of two women who" (ML 53). This letter *is*, however, a tale of the focalizer and the internal reader's experience, and should thus be related in first-person format, as is characteristic of the epistolary genre. Even though Teresa neglects first-person narration of her own experiences, she assumes it for the experiences of others. After five years of separation, Teresa encounters a former boyfriend, Alexis, at a nightclub. In relating the event to Alicia in a letter, Teresa assumes the voice of Alexis. She is both the author of the letter, as well as the female referenced by the third-person feminine pronoun within it: "...and I had / sent her away all the while wanting / her / but a man doesn't plead he doesn't ask / he does not apologize" (ML 122).[16] These twists on

[16] Compare this inclusion of the third-person pronoun as reflexive to the focalizer with the example taken from *Clarissa*: [My mother] was attending to my pleas; for that she found I had rather not marry at all....She told me, that to this my father angrily said, Let her take care—let her take care—that she give me

the narration of an epistolary focalizer work such that *The Mixquiahuala Letters* becomes almost *not* epistolary at moments, while maintaining and exaggerating the role that a reader plays in realizing an epistolary text through its unique table of contents. In this sense, Castillo's novel provides a bridge between the epistolary subset of all works of fiction and the various other modalities in which fictional pieces can be situated.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to evaluate the role of the reader in response to the actual text, not simply the gaps in the text created by the epistolary format. At the same time that the external reader has played an integral role in realizing *The Mixquiahuala Letters* as a text, that role has been executed within the parameters set by the text itself. For instance, the table of contents only outlines three potential reading routes; there is a limited set of textual possibilities for the reader to pursue. Although each reader chooses the textual path that he/she will follow, the text still provides the guide for that path. That is to say, neither reader nor text is functioning independently, but rather in a sort of symbiotic interchange. Reading is thus a "controlled subjectivity" (Fish 47); a product of the different determinations made by each independent reader as he/she resolves textual gaps and even realizes the text itself, as is the case with *The Mixquiahuala Letters.*

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not ground to suspect her of a preference somewhere else. But if it be to ease her heart, and not to dispute my will, you may hear her out. (*Cl.*, from Clarissa's letter to Anna, dated March 3)

Conclusion

We have now discussed a number of ways in which the reader responds to an epistolary work. The external reader, both in so far as he/she was represented by the internal reader and in his own right as an audience, was shown to be indispensable to the realization of an epistolary work. Chapter One used the epistolary character to prove that the reader *does* respond to a text, not simply to generate meaning, but to perpetuate the text itself. Reader response is therefore possible. Chapter Two then discussed the ways in which the reader's responses resolve the text's gaps and ambiguities, specifically those that characterize the epistolary genre. This is a very specific type of response; the role of the reader is to provide the information requisite to the story such as plot and setting that the text does not include. Chapter Three challenged the limits of reader response through an examination of one epistolary novel that requires that a reader decide what the text will consist of with a novel that literally calls upon one to choose his/her own adventure. Here, the reader responds *before* encountering the text and, in fact, must respond in order to have a text to respond to. That is to say, the reader determines what the text will consist of. The text's existence, the text's completeness and the text's contents are all dependent upon the reader.

Though the importance of the role of the reader has repeatedly been emphasized, it has been done so within a very specific context. Always, our discussion of the role of the reader has been situated within an epistolary work. The reader, though important, is not functioning in isolation. Just as the text needs the reader, the reader needs the text. Reading is a phenomenological symbiotic activity between reader and text. "[T]he hollow form of the text is filled by the mental images of the reader. In this way, text and

reader begin to converge..." (Iser, *Act of Reading* 225). Sometimes, this hollow form is a series of limited possibilities, as with Castillo's table of contents, while at other times, the speculation on the part of the reader is bound only by the reader's own extrapolation and/or imagination.

To what extent do our discoveries regarding the role of the reader in the epistolary text hold true for other categories of fiction? Certainly, certain traits of the epistolary genre make it a convenient sample for study of the role of the reader. As noted throughout the paper, reading is a primary component of the epistolary novel, whereas it is either wholly absent or peripheral at best in a majority of other fictional formats. Other characteristics of the genre, however, are true among all narrative formats. The polyphonic narrative voice (or, as in Castillo's novel, the limited perspective) that characterizes the epistolary genre precludes any omniscient authority to relate the text objectively. This allows for re-thinking and re-evaluating the textual world on the part of the external reader. However, unreliable narration is not exclusive to the epistolary genre, as evidenced by the slight changes in narration in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* that shifted the text's style and presentation from epistolary focalization to a falsely assumed omniscient narration that can be found in many non-epistolary narratives. The external reader in all novels must resolve gaps and ambiguities surrounding the textual world that arise from incomplete or unreliable narration. The importance of a reader is not limited to the epistolary genre.

The implication in this study of reader response strays from the common pursuit of reader response theorists in establishing that readers simply create meaning. Reader response theorists first took up the claim that readers create meaning largely in response

to Wimsatt and Beardsley's Affective Fallacy, which states "that when affective responses are taken into account 'the [text] itself, as an object...tends to disappear" (Tompkins 223). Reader response scholars seek to prove that the text "*is* what it does [to the reader]" (Tompkins 224). Even more fundamentally than readers creating textual meaning, readers are necessary to realize the text as an understandable and complete narrative; readers are actually necessary to the creation of the text. Reader response is possible within the text, necessary to the cohesion of it and integral to accessing it. Whether or not a text has meaning or value without a reader is necessarily secondary to that text existing.

Perhaps one of the most powerful implications of this study is the inherent subjectivity in all facets of the reading experience. Reader response is always happening, often to lacunae created by the text. Many reader response theorists promote the notion of a perfect reader for a text, presented under multiple labels from "ideal" to "model." Neither the gaps in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* nor the table of contents in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* in any way suggest that one potential setting or one reading pattern, for instance, is better than another. There is no "model" choice for the reader to make. Each choice is preferable only according to each reader's personal goals or reading techniques. We have discussed the manner in which focalization on the part of the characters in epistolary fiction is necessarily a reflection of their own world view. As readers, we are not passing value judgments on these focalizations, just observing the inherent partiality of their narration and attempting to draw a cohesive whole from the contrasting or limited viewpoints. Similarly, when we resolve textual ambiguities or order the text according to our own classifications, we do not do so based on a hierarchy

of options. As readers, we too become focalizers in the resulting text; we are not acting from an omniscient standpoint as mere observers, but rather as involved, imperfectly informed parties in a dynamic process. The choices that we make as readers, though equally acceptable as options, once made, do affect the resulting text. This was shown most explicitly in the table of contents in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* where each reading sequence produced drastically different characters. The text itself, then, is the subjective result of each reader's responses and textual insertions.

Do we as readers choose our own adventures? My personal response is in the affirmative. But that probably reflects a hope that I brought into this project, as both a reader and now an author. My adventure has taken me through a number of epistolary works and even more critical perspectives, and I have now arrived at the goal at which I aimed. Do you, as a reader, *Choose Your Own Adventure*™? That is for you to decide.

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