Im/Proper, Un/Real and False/True Letters

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Appendix

1. Letters, proper and real - Harriet Townsend, Jane Austen and others

1.1 In a discussion following a seminar paper I gave, someone commented that the letters I'd talked about – from the early 1840s and between the Eastern Cape business-woman Harriet Townsend and the Cape Town merchant WJ Smith – were not 'proper letters'. Yes, they had dates, a personal address from one person to another, were written to bridge absence and separation, had communicative dialogical content, and so on. But… But they were, well, business-like and impersonal, and it seems that for some people 'proper letters' cannot be like this, and if

they are then they somehow exceed or underachieve the properties of what a proper letter is like.

1.2 So what are ‘proper' letters like? After some email exchanges with my interlocutor, the suggestion was made that one well-known ‘proper' letter starts and then ends in the following way: “…I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach. You pierce my soul… …A word, a look, will be enough to decide whether I enter your father’s house this evening or never.” Although the names of the addressee and the writer/signatory here are not stated, it is clear that this letter has personal address, communicative intent, and was penned in complicated circumstances of separation and absence. However, what it has that the Townsend and Smith letters do not is the expression of a high degree of affect and considerable competence of expression. The Townsend/Smith letters are a correspondence over time concerned with expediting ongoing practical and largely mundane matters. The letter quoted from is by Frederick Wentworth and was written to Anne Elliott in an *in extremis* situation. It was a one-off, for there was subsequent talk, presence and togetherness as a consequence of it having been written, and then read; and these things replaced writing, absence and separation. And also, and crucially, the letter is written and read and acted upon by two characters in Jane Austen’s novel, *Persuasion*. It is a fictional letter, or rather it is a letter in a work of fiction, and not a 'real' letter.

1.3 For some people, including my interlocutor, this example has important hallmarks of what a proper letter should be like – and even though it is not a ‘real’ one. It is a fictional letter, indeed, one of the most famous letters in fiction. But for some folks, it and others with similar features have come to stand for what proper real letters *should* be like, contra the millions of improper but very real ones, like the busy but

often routine and dull letters between Harriet Townsend and WJ Smith I had discussed and which sparked off this conversation. However, while the 'business' involved can be many and varied, 'real letters' are considerably more often like the practical Townsend/Smith ones and rarely emotionally molten or well-written. But it is the others, the 'proper' letters most like such fictional ones, that are the draw for much scholarly and popular attention, with knock-on effects for mis/understanding the genre of letter-writing as a whole, by treating what is an interesting but relatively small part as though it is, or should be, the far larger totality.

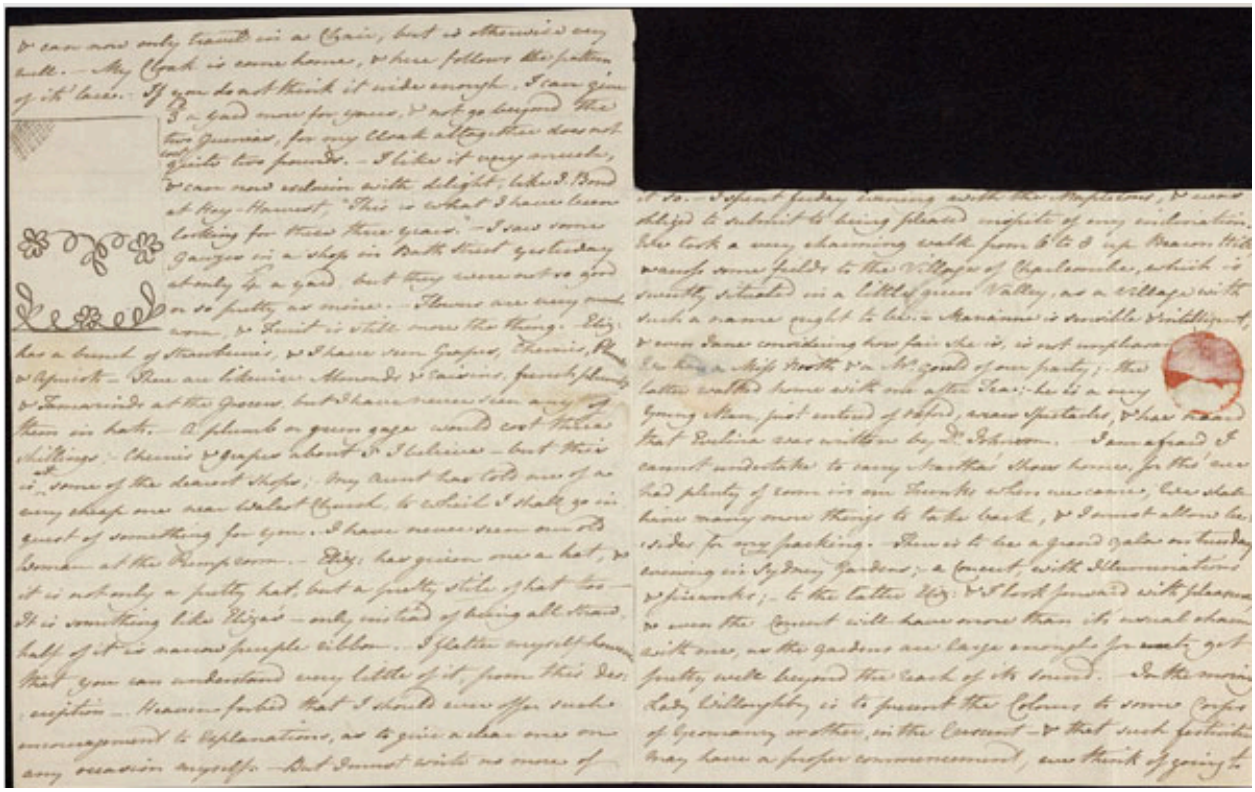
1.4 There is more to it than this, of course, when considering something so complexly multifaceted as letter-writing.

2. Letters, real (but not ordinary) - by Jane Austen herself

2.1 What a 'proper letter' is deemed to be has been considerably influenced by fictional and literary variants, like the above Jane Austen example, with the frame of reference these provide sometimes being taken as though definitional of 'the letter', although the large majority of 'real letters' are business-like in sense of expediting dialogical and material exchanges between people. Most letters, ordinary letters, are humdrum and purposive rather than studied, but which is not to disclaim that they might also be artful.

2.2 How does this artfulness shape up in relation to the 'real' letters written by the same person who wrote the 'proper' but fictional letter from Frederick Wentworth to Anne Elliott? Most of Jane Austen's extant letters were written to her close family, mainly but not exclusively her much loved sister Cassandra, whenever they were apart. Often they are long and detailed and filled with what in the letter

extracted at the end of this working paper, of 9 December 1808, Austen calls ‘little matters’ – although clearly with tongue in her epistolary cheek about this. In this letter, for instance, such matters include a letter from Cassandra to her and accompanied by a letter by a Mr Deedes, and remarks about a Miss Curling being in Portsmouth, the delivery of some bracelets, a visit by two friends, her sending up the match-making designs of a family connection (Mrs Knight), events at a recent dance, a letter arriving for Cassandra, and the ‘weightier’ matter (last in the line, with a sense of leading up to this) that their brother James, a curate, was to receive an extra £100 a year (worth now about an extra £12,000 or more) from relatives.



Jane Austen (1775-1817), Autograph letter signed, with a drawing of the lace pattern of her cloak: Bath, to Cassandra Austen, 2 June 1799, Purchased by J. P. Morgan, Jr., 1920; MA 977.4, Photography by Schecter Lee, 2009.

2.3 Jane Austen's letters are also – as the business-like exchanges of ordinary letters typically are – immensely elliptical. Cassandra's knowledge of who people are, what prior events had happened, and that slight shifts of tone and turns of phrase in the letter could signify sarcasm, humour, distain and so on, is of the essence in fully understanding Austen's letters to her. As a consequence, those who now read what were written as private communications between these two people do so as through a glass, darkly, because lacking such knowledge. These letters are recipient-designed and recipient-oriented ones, then, and their dialogical aspects are clear in other ways too, above all in Austen informing her sister of little matters as of large and doing so in terms that Cassandra would appreciate. One instance of the many possible shows their dialogical character very well. The sharpness of the humour about Mrs Knight in Austen's 9 December 1808 letter extracted below is notable; the comment Austen writes is funny, but not cuddly (as reading the whole paragraph in the letter will show); and it owes much to a ironically disposed sense of humour shared by Cassandra and Jane.

2.4 Certainly Austen's 9 December 1808 letter is in its way an artful one, with its way including both structure (the 'little matters' leading to the communication of 'some weight') and content (the things written about are carefully tailored to Cassandra's interests and tastes). However, while it is writerly in its command over the medium of expression, this also resulted from pressing practical concerns, not just those of art. As another letter a few weeks after, also to Cassandra, puts it, in writing her expected letter to her sister there was a practical matter that Austen had to grapple with. This was that "we are doing nothing ourselves to write about, and I am therefore quite dependent upon the communications of our friends, or my own wits." (10 January 1809).

Both these other letters and her 'own wits' come into play and are traceable in the unfolding of the letter, being deployed to give herself something to write about.

2.5 What is begged here is the question of whether real and fictional letters can be told apart and if so how, and also why this matters.

3. Telling the real and fictional apart: Captain Wentworth and Lady Susan

3.1 Part 1 of this discussion (Letters, proper and real) introduced some ways in which the prevailing idea of what a 'proper letter' is like has been influenced by fictional or otherwise highly literary letters. It counterposed this with the humdrum, elliptical and business-like character of 'real' letters. Part 2 (Letters real (but not ordinary)) continued the discussion around Jane Austin's 'real letters', having referred earlier to her famous fictional letter by Captain Frederick Wentwood to Anne Elliott. Here in Part III, the role of elliptical references that are made or not made in letters is drawn into the discussion of the im/proper and the un/real.

3.2 Captain Wentworth's letter – or rather Austen's – concerns a momentous and life-changing matter and is highly polished and filled with affect and consequence. Austen's 'real letters', however, and as many critics have complained over the years, are replete with everyday and humdrum 'little things', as she refers to them, as well as the artfulness that what she calls 'my wits' provide her with. This is because little matters and her wits are generally all the grist for the epistolary mill she has available, because the occurrence of 'weightier things' to write about were rare in her life.

3.3 But if, as Austen suggests, 'real letters' too can be, and often for humdrum reasons need to be, artful and involve the writer's wits, then wherein lies the difference from the artfulness of 'fictional letters'? Indeed, can't a stronger argument be made, that the epistolary is 'by nature' a representational realm, and so notions of the real and of referentiality have to be given up? Yes to the first part of this question, but no to the second.

3.4 Writing is of course a representational medium, as is talk (and painting, photography, etcetera) and letters, particularly in correspondences, have strong heterotopic features produced in common by the contributors. But – and as Austen's letter of 9 December 1808 discussed in Part 2 and extracted in the Appendix below points up – these representations are of *something*. They are representations of people, of events, of communications in letters, as well as of anything else Austen's wits went to work on. Even if the fictional letter by Captain Wentworth is thought to be 'pure representation', it nonetheless relies on there really being persuadable people, lovers parted, misunderstandings, anxious moments, happy resolutions, and also that letters are written about all these things. No social life, no events, no people and relationships = no letters. The stubborn referentialities of the epistolary form require respectful attention and their combinations of factional and fictional aspects to be fully analytically recognised.

3.5 My own first engagement with fictional letters brought me up face-to-face with Austen's early but posthumously published epistolary novel, *Lady Susan*. A Women's Studies friend and colleague was retiring. For her retrial event, because of her long-standing interest in the work of Jane Austen, I decided to write for her an account of the foibles of then-contemporary Women's Studies/academic feminism through producing a spoof of *Lady Susan*. I did so, and enjoyed writing it as well

as ruffling some feathers when presenting it, because, like its originator text, it made some amusingly critical points as well as seriously celebratory ones. In doing so, an issue arose I had not anticipated.

3.6 The inevitability of writing my fourth-rate hammed up effort compared with Austen's first-rate one and wincing about this was par for the course, obviously. The unanticipated difficulty was the need to deal with the recalcitrance of the form or genre of the epistolary novel, versus what happens in 'real' epistolarity. To explain.

3.7 The epistolary form as it appears within, or in this case composes, a novel, an epistolary novel, is not ‘the letter’ but something shaped by the genre-needs of novel-writing. That is, everything the reader needs to know and that is required for moving characterisation and plot forward has to be present within such fictional letters. This makes for an unwieldy clunky kind of letter-writing because it leaves no ends untied and nothing unsaid. In particular, it excludes things of that elliptical character which earlier I proposed was one of the hallmarks of ordinary real business-like and other letters, and is key to their emergent and *in media res* aspect. To make ‘a novel’, I concluded, it is necessary to unmake ‘a letter’ in this particular respect.

3.8 Consider again Frederick Wentworth’s letter to Anne Elliott. It contains everything needful, nothing important is left unexplained, it does not exceed what is required, everything pans out. There is also nothing in it that cannot be understood by the third-party reader. How very unlike Jane Austen’s ‘real’ letters! These are filled with the minutiae of other lives in other times and places and to which we third-party readers are always outsiders even when, perhaps especially when, an editor interrupts our readings with footnoted information about this, this, this, also that.

3.9 However, read on their own and without an editorial voice instructing readers about what things purportedly mean, Austen's letters come across very differently. What shines through, captivatingly, is their embeddedness in a small world of people and events, the specificities of time and place, and the crucial importance of the particular relationships and feelings that existed between the letter-writer and her addressees. They have a strongly emergent and dialogical character, for things happen, social life and relationships within it change, and the view given on such matters is strongly shaped by the particular relationship of the parties to such correspondence. The effect is one of uncertainty – readers simply do not know what everything means, and editors are not time-lords who can recover the long past, but they can intrude between a text and a reader in sometimes discomforting ways.

3.10 Also there are things that readers now can know about even the most distant and, in our present-day terms, mysterious aspects of past epistolary writings, for the ellipses speak, even if in terms such that we cannot entirely grasp the references being made. This can be best explained by contemplating, not the absences in the shape of the things that are not told about, but the presences in the form of the inscription of the things taken-for-granted as already known in common and so not needing to be spelled out in letters.

3.11 So what does the presence of absence signified by elliptical references mean, and why are such references so significant in epistolary terms? They signify both a world known in common between writer and addressee, and also that a letter in a correspondence is a part of something ongoing, a relationship that in most cases is not reducible to the letters alone.

3.12 Of course, there are sometimes correspondences between erstwhile strangers. Prisoner letters and those between other pen-friends, for

instance, come under this heading; and in these cases everything needful needs to be explained (while recognising that sometimes the people involved might at some point arrange to meet). One-off business letters too come under this heading, so that when I want to challenge my tax bill, my letter to a tax inspector (hopefully) contains all the information this official will need to reconsider my claim.

3.13 However, regarding both examples, once correspondence is happening then I do not need to explain the same details in every letter I write, but can make elliptical reference to earlier communications. In addition, these examples are both similar to and different from the epistolary fictions discussed earlier. They start without ellipses, but as the exchanges unfold so things which are known in common come into being and such references may then be made. Epistolary fiction, however, remains driven by 'outside' and the requirements of plot, characterisation and dénouement; life ordinarily lacks such clearly propelling externalities and 'real letters' are consequently *ad hoc* and circumstantial in their unfolding.

3.14 These exceptions, then, return to and demonstrate the rule. But what is the rule of ellipsis and how far does its remit run? Succinctly, ellipsis signals the 'interrupted presence' aspects of letter-writing, that each letter and from both 'sides' of corresponding is one 'moment' in a sequence of moments before and those after that of now. Now and the epistolary present is not hermetically sealed off from the epistolary past and also future.

3.15 So far I have written about epistolary sequence, but of course there is life and its one damn thing after another sequences outside of letter-writing, including in other letters, but also in the rest of life and the persons, situations, events and relationships that exist in it. In this 'rest of it', actual presence can and often does exist between correspondents.

Some hundreds of letters from Jane to Cassandra Austen, but tens of thousands of hours over a forty-two year period of sharing the face-to-face together. And similarly so with most of the letters and letter-writers in the Forbes, Findlay, Pringle, Schreiner-Hemming, Moffat, White-Godlington and other collections discussed elsewhere on the Whites Writing Whiteness website.

3.16 Thus the rule. How it runs is unevenly and with complexities and counter-tendencies. Unevenly: even epistolarly communications to complete strangers can contain elliptical references, although these will not be known in common. Complexities: what is and is not elliptical in a matter of context and time, and readers now may not appreciate that then some wider reference and shared knowledge was being indicated. Counter-tendencies: by no means all letters or other epistolarly communications made to our familiars contain such references, it is not just epistolary novels that lack them.

3.17 Can ‘real letters’ and ‘fictional letters’ be told apart, then, and if so by what means? Yes. No. Maybe. Sometimes. With difficulty. And the elliptical references made in them helps in thinking about this. As does another interesting distinction.

4. False letters - South Africa, the Guptas and the 'Oakbay employees' letter

4.1 Letters are in the news! True and false letters especially. Those following South African news will be aware of the high profile scandals and debates that have for a number of years been surfacing and rocking public life, scandals which are hydra-like in having many nodes of activity, seemingly centred on President Zuma, but actually concerning more deep-seated structures indicative of widespread venality and

corruption. One of these features a debate about what a 'proper' letter is and how to tell it apart from a false one.

4.2 The scandal in question concerns some particularly powerful business-men, the Guptas, and 'state capture', an analytical term developed by Joel Hellman and others. In February and March 2016 there was much reporting of the network connections - indeed, adding up to a figuration in Norbert Elias's terms - existing between the Gupta brothers and many of those in the Zuma inner group. The indications are that this operates across companies in media, communications, construction, finance, infrastructure development, a wide range of other economic ventures, and also encompasses the highest echelons of political life. The bottom-line here is that the Guptas have been able, not only to exert undue economic influence, but also to directly offer

political placements and to influence if not dictate changes even at the ministerial level, a contention backed by concrete evidence from people who had been either on the receiving end or were otherwise directly affected.

4.3 As the scandals surfaced into the public domain, in April 2016, the country's leading accounting firm followed by the big four top banks ended their business associations with Gupta-owned companies. Dramatically, the Guptas were subsequently seen departing for Dubai on one of their private jets, amidst rumours that earlier Zuma himself had taken vast amounts of money to Dubai for them in his diplomatic luggage. This exit was perhaps because of the scandals, perhaps for a family wedding, rumours have abounded and returns promised and rescinded. However, their business ventures continued unabated, including some multi-billion Rand deals.

4.4 But what of the letter in all this?

4.5 Oakbay Investments is a top-level company owned by the Guptas and acts as a mechanism through which many of their other interests are funded or channelled. On Wednesday 20 April 2016 an 'open letter' was widely distributed, via one of the Gupta communications companies, to the effect that thousands of ordinary South Africans were being adversely affected by the closure by the four top banks (FNB, Standard, ABSA and Nedbank) of the company's accounts, with the result that they could not be paid. This was wrong, it proclaimed, because hurting the innocent. The letter included:

> 'We are not rich people. We are not politically connected. We have not captured the state. We have never offered any politician a job. We do not know if any of the allegations against the Gupta family or Oakbay's management are true. We do not care. All we care

about is providing for our families. If you do not open Oakbay's bank accounts we cannot be paid and Oakbay cannot pay its bills.'

4.6 The letter was ostensibly from the employees of Oakbay and its message was clear, that many people would lose their jobs and go hungry. Its frequent reiterations of 'we' are insistent in conveying the sense of a particular group of people who are being adversely affected by activities they have never been engaged in themselves, and accusations that they neither know nor care about, because they are concerned with providing for their families.

4.7 But immediately, problems were raised about the 'letter' that states these things.

4.8 Firstly and most importantly, commentators have raised the point that there is no authoritative signature of an individual or accepted organised group either on the letter or the surrounding communications, just a reference to two so-called representatives. It appears thus, apart from the insistent 'we', and has continued to be such even after this issue was raised. In the controversy, it has been insisted that a proper letter must have a signature, but not just any old signature, because the signature must be traceable and identifiable to an authorised person or group. Secondly, one of the organisations that has been closely connected with the state capture activities of the Gupta brothers, the ANC Youth League, almost immediately issued a statement in support of the Oakbay letter, with the speed of its appearance taken by many to indicate that it was actually prepared prior to the 'letter' having been issued, not in fact in response to it. Thirdly, no members of the Gupta family or their senior managers have made public statements since the original claims about their role in state capture were made. This has been taken as a lack of appropriate response, with reactions coming instead from PR companies and the like, rather than those most immediately

involved, and this is seen as adding up almost to an admission of guilt by omission. And fourthly, many of the workers employed both directly and indirectly by Oakbay Investments have disclaimed having been consulted about the letter, and also indicated their disagreement with its contents. Interviews with some of these have shown them protesting vigourously, with the impression given of different groups of employees within the organisation with many having little knowledge about the things done supposedly in their names and any way disagreeing with what this is. The letter has been seen as rather the work of a PR company or other agents acting either for Oakbay Investments and/or the Guptas more directly.

4.9 Fascinatingly, then, debates about the defining characteristics of 'the letter' have become central around this particular political scandal and are worth teasing out.

4.10 (i) Repeatedly, it has been insisted that a 'proper letter' must have a signature which is identifiable in terms of an authorised person or persons or an appropriate organisation acting on behalf of such. A document purporting to be a 'real letter' is suspect without this, for personal, traceable and authorised signature is seen as essential.

4.11 (ii) It has also been commented that a 'proper correspondence' must involve an appropriate temporal gap between one letter having been written and sent, and another being written in response to it. If there is no temporal gap, then what is occurring cannot be correspondence, which is by definition dialogical.

4.12 (iii) In addition, commentators are agreed that there should be an appropriate response outside a 'proper' letter, and this response must be consistent with what is being inscribed in its contents. What is being

advanced here is a basically referential view of the relationship between what is in a letter, and the social context that gives rise to a letter.

4.13 (iv) And commentary also indicates that there needs to be 'real world' agreement with the content of a letter by whoever (a person) or whatever (an organisation, signed for by a representative member or members) has authored it. Therefore, if a constituency being invoked or which is represented as having authorship disagrees with or rejects or more strongly denies the veracity of what is inscribed, then a letter is taken to be not a 'proper' one. More strongly, without this a letter is seen as a false one.

4.14 There is little indication in these controversies and debates that 'the letter' is dead or in decline. Indeed, its ebullient life is rather treated as providing an appropriate yardstick of the truth or otherwise, not only of the letter ostensibly from the 'Oakbay employees', but also more widely concerning the ongoing political scandals and the fabric of lies, half-truths and proliferating rumours surrounding these.

4.15 There is considerable irony here. In spite of the alternative ways now available for communicating and 'doing business' of political and other kinds, when push comes to shove the interpretation of what is going on in these South African political and economic scandals turns on a letter and its veracity or otherwise. And this is seen as demonstrated by whether and to what extent it meets the above four key criteria for what a 'proper letter' should be like, an interestingly conventional and 'old-fashioned' approach.

4.16 The key question, then, is not whether the 'Oakbay employees letter' is an open letter rather than a private one, nor whether it is a fictional letter and so an openly artful performance. It is rather whether it is false, a lie masquerading as truth, and so not an actual letter at all.

5. In conclusion, that it still matters about the im/proper, un/real, false/true

5.1 In spite of claims about the 'death of the letter', in telling apart letters which are proper or improper, real or unreal and fictional, false or true, from each other there is an underlying frequent reference to genre definitions or expectations. This is done around ideas of what a 'proper' letter is like, how this is constituted, and therefore the criteria which can be used as a yardstick for distinguishing it from its others.

5.2 To an extent, what is seen as a 'proper' letter is a product of the literary end of letter-writing, a stylistic approach to both structure and content lying at one end of a spectrum of letter-writing, with the dull and routine and business-like, and also the functionally-literate and the barely literate at all, also part of the full range. Also to an extent, the markers of the literary end are used as ways of assessing and finding wanting the more ordinary, routine and frankly dull examples of letter-writing. These are things which Jane Austen's 'real' letters did not struggle with, but played with delightfully. But as well as these more literary markers of what a 'proper' letter is or should be like, there are also more grounded characteristics around which letters are considered in terms of their genuineness, appropriateness, veracity and validity. These emphasise signature, response, referentiality and non-contradiction, and can perhaps be seen as forming a baseline.

5.3 Fictional letters, like the Wentworth/Elliott example discussed, are an interesting case for discussing how to distinguish between the proper, the real, the false and so on. They have their own convention or definitional property of having no elliptical aspects because subject to the greater requirements of the fictional genre they are part of. However,

fictional letters do not 'practice to deceive'; their readers know them for what they are and there is no dissembling involved.

5.4 This distinguishes them from false letters, letters which are written specifically in order to deceive, with this being their purpose and rationale. And interestingly in this regard, the baseline characteristics of the 'proper' letter are often drawn on in assessing the false or true character of a letter or letter-like communication, but are in abeyance and placed between metaphorical brackets in relation to fictional letters. The heterotopic world of the novel or other fiction which contains these has its own characteristics and standards of assessment. The world in which the 'Oakbay employees' letter was distributed has other standards and assessment criteria, and in this example have turned on what is a 'proper' letter and how it can be distinguished from a false one.

5.5 But does it matter? Are these distinctions and how they are assessed in relation to each other still relevant or important? The short and correct answer is, yes, a definite yes.

5.6 As the example of the 'Oakbay employees' letter shows, it is not only the distinctions that remain important, but also in circumstances where veracity and import need to be conveyed so is 'the letter' in its standard genre-form. In this example, the political stakes are high and concern the very highest level of the South African state. The many current proxies for 'the letter' including text, email, Twitter and other electronic media it seems lack something crucial in both definitional and political respects. And while it may be difficult to pin down exactly what this lack is, in practice the distinctions are being made readily, albeit with considerable debate about interpretational aspects.

Appendix

Extracts from Austen's 9 December 1808 letter now follow, with … indicating omissions. However, to get the most from it, best read the whole letter (*The Letters of Jane Austen*, ed. Deidre Le Faye, 2014, Oxford University Press).

9 December 1808
Castle Square
Friday

Many thanks, my dear Cassandra, to you and Mr. Deedes for your joint and agreeable composition…

…I am extremely foolish in writing all this unnecessary stuff when I have so many matters to write about that my paper will hardly hold it all. Little matters they are, to be sure, but highly important.

In the first place, Miss Curling is actually at Portsmouth, which I was always in hopes would not happen…

The bracelets are in my possession, and everything I could wish them to be… Soon after I had closed my last letter to you we were visited by Mrs. Dickens and her sister-in-law, Mrs. Bertie…

I am very much obliged to Mrs. Knight for such a proof of the interest she takes in me, and she may depend upon it that I will marry Mr. Papillon, whatever may be his reluctance or my own…

Our ball was rather more amusing than I expected…

You will not expect to hear that I was asked to dance, but I was—by the gentleman whom we met that Sunday…

Yesterday I—or rather, you—had a letter from Nanny Hilliard…

Having now cleared away my smaller articles of news, I come to a communication of some weight; no less than that my uncle and aunt are going to allow James 100l. a year. We hear of it through Steventon…

I have but one thing more to tell you. Mrs. Hill called on my mother yesterday while we were gone to Chiswell…

Yours ever sincerely, J. A.