

THOMAS SOKOLL

Writing for relief: Rhetoric in English pauper letters, 1800–1834

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the social history of poverty has moved from the study of poor law administration to the study of the experiences, attitudes and beliefs of the labouring poor themselves. This shift of focus has been accompanied by a shift in the use of sources, with particular attention now paid to those types of evidence which take us as closely as possible to the 'voices' of ordinary people, such as autobiographies, memoirs, letters and court records of various kinds. Taken together, these records provide the basis for a new kind of history from below, reconstructed from the collective archives of ordinary people's personal testimonies.¹

Pauper letters are among the most valuable testimonies of this kind. Unlike autobiographies and other personal documents, they survive in great numbers, though by no means to the extent of court records. However, whereas court records carry only to a very limited extent verbatim transcripts of what people actually said, pauper letters record the words of the poor as expressed by themselves. More than that, they often document the words of the poor in their own hands. Pauper letters may thus be counted among the most authentic records of popular voices.

Previous research on pauper letters has mainly been concerned with their substance, exploiting them as a quarry of information by looking at what these records reveal in terms of particular themes such as women's work, household arrangements, family life or old age.² By contrast, the guiding question of the present chapter is not so much *what* pauper letters tell us as *how* they convey their message. Drawing

on selected examples from the large corpus of some 750 pauper letters surviving from Essex (mainly from the early nineteenth century), it looks at the way in which pauper narratives were structured, at the rhetorical figures the poor used in positing their claims, and, not least, at the linguistic peculiarities occurring when ordinary people put their spoken word into writing.³

In addressing these questions, a complex bundle of different influences need considering, including the formal characteristics of pauper letters, the institutional context from which they emerged, and the cultural setting of literacy within the poor's everyday life. At the same time, a careful approach to the records themselves is required. This is because the rhetorical elements as encountered in any particular pauper letter, however topical and outworn they may be, are nevertheless the integral and most specific part of an individual narrative of a particular case. They need to be appreciated in that specific form, that is within the text of the individual letter and within context of the particular case. It is only after considering them in this way that we may then cut out the rhetorical figures from their original context, isolate them for analytical purposes and compare them across a larger sample of narratives. For this reason, the chapter is organised in three parts. The first part is descriptive. It is based on three pauper letters given in full transcription and interpreted step-by-step, with all information either derived from the close reading of these exemplary pieces or supplied as part of explaining the historical context of the individual case. The following parts are systematic. They single out a number of rhetorical features that are discussed in a wider comparative perspective, irrespective of the original context of the individual case. The second part looks at rhetoric in pauper letters against the literary background of epistolary conventions. The third part deals with the question of what pauper letters reveal about the role of rhetoric in the actual encounters between paupers and the overseers of the poor.

Three exemplary pauper letters: a guided tour

London Jan^y 5th 1826

Hon^d Sir

I am sorry to trouble you so soon but being ill and not able to work myself & Family are badly off, and should esteem it a great favor if you would send the trifle that is due for my Wifes Child, by M^r French on Saturday Morning, as we have not wherewith to help ourselves, and my wife shall be there to receive it, as I am not able to go out of Doors myself, I believe you will find from the 12th of November [when] I received the last Payment to the 7th of January 1826 is 8 Weeks Due I should not have Troubled you so soon, but under a case of real Necessity, as I am scarcely able to write this to you for it

I remain Your Humble St

Arthur Tabrum

Figure 4.1: Letter of Arthur Tabrum.

Source: Sokoll (ed.), *Essex Pauper Letters*, no. 179.

This pauper letter (figure 4.1) hardly differs from a letter that could have been written today. It is composed like a modern letter, carrying all elements which are essential for the letter as a particular form of written expression. We find the place of sender and the date; the salutation of the recipient, set off from the main body of the text; the closing of the letter with the valediction and the name of the sender, given at the bottom.⁴ In that standard order, these formal elements constitute in themselves a rhetorical sequence. Apart from that, the use of rhetorical devices is restricted to simple apologetic gambits at the beginning ('I am sorry to trouble you') and end of the letter ('I should not have Troubled you so soon') and to modest emphasis ('as we have not wherewith to help ourselves', 'under a case of real Necessity'). The narrative of the case is told in plain style: the prose is simple, the wording unpretentious. The rhetorical and stylistic restriction underlines the clear substantive message of the letter.⁵

So much for a brief description. The institutional context of the case requires a more detailed explanation. Arthur Tabrum and his family lived in the London parish of Christchurch, but drew their relief from the parish of Chelmsford. This is why the letter is addressed to James Read, the vestry clerk of Chelmsford. The al-

lowance was delivered by a coachman (Mr French, mentioned in the letter) who acted as a contact between Chelmsford and several London parishes with paupers from Chelmsford. From the overseers' accounts of Chelmsford and other evidence it appears that the family received the sum of 1s. 6d. per week for Arthur Good, who was Ann Tabrum's illegitimate son from the time before she was married to Arthur Tabrum. These payments are in evidence from early 1824 till 1829 when the records break off (179).

Under the English poor law, a pauper had a right to relief only in the parish where he or she was legally settled. People who left their parish and did not gain a new settlement elsewhere were to be removed to their home parish as soon as they applied for relief. There were various ways of gaining a new settlement 'by merit', such as renting property above the yearly value of £10 in another parish. In addition, there were three 'natural' heads of settlement. On marriage, a woman took the settlement of her husband. A child took the settlement of the father. But an illegitimate child was settled in the parish where it was born, on the basis of which the mother could claim relief for the child from that parish, irrespective of her own settlement or that of her husband if she later got married.⁶ Thus, Ann Tabrum had a claim to relief on the parish of Chelmsford because her illegitimate child Arthur Good had been born there. That this claim was then understood as a claim of the Tabrum family and the money in fact paid out to Ann's husband may seem surprising. But it is not, as it conformed to the law. What is surprising, and what did not conform to the law, is the fact that the Tabrums received their allowance in London. Strictly speaking, they should have moved (or rather, ought to have been removed) to Chelmsford in order to be relieved in the parish where Arthur Good was settled. But apparently they always stayed in London, while Chelmsford arranged for the allowance to be sent to them there.

This practice of out-parish relief was fairly widespread by the early nineteenth century, even though it did not conform to the letter, let alone the spirit, of the law. Some 15 per cent of all paupers were officially counted as non-parishioners in England in 1802. The county average for Essex was about the same. By that time, Essex had lost its former cloth industry centred in places like Colchester, Braintree and

Coggeshall and had turned into an agricultural county with high levels of seasonal unemployment and above-average poverty. Communities in the ex-cloth areas had an estimated 20 to 25 per cent of their acknowledged paupers, that is people actually on relief, residing elsewhere.⁷

The manifold reasons why Essex paupers migrated to such a large extent or why their parishes granted them out-parish relief, need not concern us here. The fact itself, however, that is frequent migration along with a strong tendency towards parochial support of migrant paupers, cannot be emphasized too strongly, since virtually all Essex pauper letters came from people who had left their parish and were in receipt of out-parish relief. This also explains why these paupers should have taken the trouble to address their parishes in writing. If they had stayed 'at home' they would simply have called on the overseers in person.

The geographical distribution of the Essex pauper letters by place of sender is important. Some 35 per cent came from parishes in London, 30 per cent from parishes within Essex, and the rest mainly from parishes in the other home counties and in East Anglia. This is very much what one would expect given the radius of labour migration from Essex. It also suggests that the search for (better) employment was probably the single most important reason why people should have left their parishes.⁸ The latter in turn must have reckoned that, on balance, the 'export' of (potential) paupers to places where they were likely to fare better would involve less trouble and expenses than keeping them 'at home'.

The striking feature of our second pauper letter (figure 4.2) is the obvious lack of scriptural and epistolary standards, and this holds in three respects. First, in physical appearance. The piece is written at one go, as it were, without punctuation, in a poor hand, and with little sense of layout, on a sheet of paper without proper format. Second, the lack of all the formal elements characteristic of a letter. There is no date, place of sender, form of salutation, valediction or subscription. The writer does not even give his name but ends with the threat to come 'home' if he is not relieved. Third, the peculiar language. This man writes as if he were speaking. Not just his heavy phonetic spelling, but also the rhythm and the pace of the writing, convey the

sound of the spoken word. Much of the narrative is rather cumbersome, as if the writer was stumbling, and this 'vocal' impression is graphically underlined by clumsy corrections (510).

i have sent to you mister holden that i have no wark to doe and you must send me sum mune*y* i have Bean hout of wark a 11 weaks have not arnt But 1 pound i was at wark wen you sent me that muny at muster pues it was But afue days i have arnt But 2 shilens for three weaks i have pond all my things and i have got my furest and if you doe not send me some mune*y* i shall came home ass possiBle my wife expts to Be put to Beed every day and thear is a procts for me in a few weaks But when i git in to warke prars i may never truble you no more But if you wil not help me thrw one kurtor you must surport my wife and famely all ther lifestme when there is a nesety i nevery will try to make my self a setelmenet aney more

you sent ward that my wife arnt a greate deal of mune*y* sureny she youst to arnt a goudeal But she have arnt nothing latly and she is not likeley to arn aney more for sumtime you sed i might have Bean at mister Clopper At this time But your partner node nothing a But my Busens

you may tel mester rouse to Cole at mester pues then e wil tl you all aBut my Busens

ples to send me sum mune*y* Buy rouse on fridy to pay sum of my deats of if not i shall come over next munday and git ahuse in my houn parshes

Figure 4.2: Letter of Benjamin Brooker.

Source: Sokoll (ed.), *Essex Pauper Letters*, no. 510.

But there is also a clear voice: 'you must send *my* some mune*y*', it says right in the beginning. From what the man proclaims about his case, the following points stand out more or less clearly. He is currently unemployed ('no wark to doe', 'hout of wark') and has earned very little over the last two or three months. When he did have work it seems to have been no more than irregular jobs. But he also hopes to find employment soon. He has pawned goods and chattels, presumably clothes and household items ('pond all my things').

Other circumstances remain vague. There seems to have been some argument with his parish concerning the earnings of his wife. Certain people are mentioned (Mr Pues, Mr Clopper) whose role is not clear, though we may of course assume that Robert Alden, the overseer of the parish of St Peter in Colchester who is personally addressed at the beginning of the letter ('mister holden'), knew whom

the sender had in mind. From the bearer of the letter, a certain Mr Rouse who is mentioned at the end of the letter, Alden must also have known that the letter came from Benjamin Brooker in St Nicholas parish in Ipswich.⁹ Perhaps he also knew what Brooker was really after. At any rate, the letter itself is curiously evasive in this respect. Brooker says he needs some further relief during the current quarter, on the understanding that this would render sufficient means for him never again to be forced to apply to his parish. But his real concern seems to relate not so much to current relief as to his gaining a new settlement. The somewhat obscure references to his business ('Busens') might also relate to this. In fact, in another letter, written in April 1826, that is four or five months later, Brooker put it precisely to this effect: 'i shold like to make my self a setelment whar i ham But it would not Be in my pour to doe it without your help' (521). It looks as though he was trying to gain a settlement in Ipswich by renting a tenement for his business, whatever that was, to the yearly rent of £10 or more. Whether this interpretation is correct, remains unknown. At any rate, it seems unlikely that he ever succeeded in gaining a new settlement. The last trace of him is a short anonymous note from July 1828 asking for relief (377).

Our third pauper letter (figure 4.3) is a petition. Hence the peculiar design. The petition is a special type of letter. It is a written plea for assistance addressed to a higher authority and therefore distinguished by obeying strict formal rules. Again, these rules are essentially rhetorical gestures.

To the Churchwardens & Committee of the Parish of Chelmsford
This Humble Petition of M^{rs} Ann Marsh of Sugarloaf Court Long Alley Moorfield Sheweth

That your poor Petitioner is a Parishioner of Chelmsf^d and is left a Widow with 7 Children 6 of whom are dependent on the poor pittance; which the kindness of a few neighbours supply her with, by sending her a few Cloathes to Mangle for them which at present is so trifling that they are now literally half starving; and in winter time she knows from past experience her supply will be near wholly cut of, as her few employers do not Mangle in the Winter season as in Summer So that she has now a long dreary Winter to look forward to with numerous infants whom she fears will be crying to her for Bread; which it will not be in her power to provide. She therefore is impelled humbly to beg your pity & humanity to assist her utmost endeavour; this

Winter, to provide for her numerous infant charge, (without which) She never can keep them from Starving,) 4 of them being under 9 years of age which She hopes will claim your kindest Sympathy, which She will ever acknowledge with grateful thanks to her kind benefactors

Your very Humble Suppliant
Ann Marsh

Figure 4.3: Letter of Anne Marsh.

Source: Sokoll (ed.), *Essex Pauper Letters*, no. 133.

— Indeed, it might be said that a petition is in itself an act of rhetorical subjection in writing. It begins by formally addressing (and, by implication, greeting) the authority with its correct title and by naming the petitioner. This is followed by a report of the particular circumstances of the petitioner's case ('This Humble Petition [...] Sheweth That [...]') which have led her to turn to the addressee ('She therefore is impell'd humbly to beg [...]'). The plea for help is accompanied by appeals to the addressee's goodwill ('your pity & humanity', 'your kindest Sympathy') and ends with a solemn promise of gratitude ('She will ever acknowledge with grateful thanks [...]').

The entire text, although clearly related to the person of the petitioner, is rhetorically detached from her in that it is presented as the narrative of a third party. It is only in the valediction, with the underwritten name, that Ann Marsh speaks in her own name. The substantive information that pinpoints the particular circumstances of her case are also rhetorically staged. They evoke certain topical images: the plight of the widow, the starving children, the economy of makeshifts and the neighbourly assistance, all of which belong to the classic motifs in the rhetoric of poverty (133).

However, although this petition was submitted in the name of Ann Marsh and ostensibly even signed by her, it seems hard to believe that she should have produced it all by herself. Rather, its design, shape and composition, the wording and style, and not least the model copperplate handwriting, all these highly sophisticated formal characteristics suggest that it was drawn up by an experienced writer with some knowledge of legal terminology. In fact, when we look at the piece in its entirety (it consists of four pages), it appears that this petition was written by a certain Charles Loosey of Long Alley,

Spitalfields, London. He heads the list of 'respectable inhabitants' of the parish of St Leonhard Shoreditch whose signatures and addresses are given on the front page, underneath a declaration according to which 'the truth of the Statement of this petition is ascertain'd and verified'. Charles Loosey's name and address are in the same hand as Ann Marsh's petition. It was delivered by a bearer and received at Chelmsford on 11 October 1824 (133).

In March 1824, Ann Marsh had received a payment of 10s. from her home parish of Chelmsford. In July 1824, she had sent a letter (from another hand than the above petition) to her brother and sister in Chelmsford, with an enclosed letter to the overseers of Chelmsford in which she asked for assistance ('Something as in Your wisdom [you] may think proper Towards the maintainance of so Large a family'). But that request had not been considered (128). She had then arranged for the above petition to be made out and presented to the parish of Chelmsford, and apparently this proved successful. She received a regular weekly allowance of 5s. from November 1824 till Midsummer 1825, and of 4s. from then until Midsummer 1830 (133).

Epistolary conventions

The three pieces we have been looking at in detail represent three distinct literary types. The first, from Arthur Tabrum, is a short and simple standard letter; the second, from Benjamin Brooker, a heavy-going piece of 'oral writing'; the third, from Ann Marsh, a formal petition. Tabrum and Brooker are likely to have written their letters themselves or to have had them made out by a relative or close acquaintance writing in the same or at least a similar 'voice'. Marsh has definitely used what is literally a second-hand piece of writing in a 'foreign' language.

How do these examples compare in their formal, linguistic and rhetorical characteristics to other pauper letters? Benjamin Brooker's letter is somewhat atypical, though not exceptional. A lot of pauper letters are written in poor hands, abound with phonetic spelling and

give a somewhat confused narrative. However, most of them are not quite so 'heavy' on either of those accounts. By contrast, Ann Marsh's petition is absolutely exceptional. The overall majority of pauper letters are fairly informal, whereas the strict rules of a petition are almost never used. Thus, the examples of Benjamin Brooker and Ann Marsh represent the two extremes at either end of a wide literary spectrum, with the remaining pauper letters lying somewhere in between though towards the more informal end.

In trying to describe the rhetorical potential available within this literary spectrum of pauper letters we must understand the literary conventions of the day. A pauper letter writer in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had access to two standard forms of epistolary expression, the 'familiar letter' on the one hand and the petition on the other. For all their differences, especially with respect to style, both have a common root. This is the classical rhetorical model of the letter (originally, of course, of the speech). According to this model, the writer begins by greeting the recipient (*salutatio*) and appealing to his or her goodwill (*captatio benevolentiae*). The letter then turns to an account of the particular case (*narratio*), which forms the basis for a specific request (*petitio*); and closes by bidding the recipient farewell (*conclusio*). It would be absurd, of course, to imply that the writers of pauper letters should have remembered their Classics when they put pen to paper. But in following contemporary epistolary conventions, people reproduced the classical model. Indeed, it is striking the extent to which many pauper letters retain the elements, if not necessarily the order, of the traditional rhetorical sequence.¹⁰

Contemporary guides to the art of letter-writing relate almost exclusively to private or business correspondence and thus mainly provide examples of the 'plain style' that had become the literary standard of English letter-writing by the eighteenth century, characterized by clarity, brevity and an immediately appealing conversational tone. Some of the later guides contain supplementary material such as model petitions, of which a few are model petitions to lower authorities, including those of the parish. Thus, in the 'Universal Petitioner', the final part of George Brown's *English Letter-writer*, the

following example of a petition 'From a poor Widow, soliciting for a Pension from the Parish' is to be found.¹¹

To the Minister, Church-Wardens and Overseers of the Parish of The humble Petition of A. B. Widow.

Sheweth,

THAT your petitioner's husband was an honest industrious man, and lived many years in credit in the parish, where he served every office, and paid scot and lot; but dying in distressed circumstances, owing to his business having fallen off some years ago, she is left utterly destitute. In this unhappy situation she has presumed to address herself to you; and as she has a little work to do, whether the allowance of two shillings *per* week would not be better than going into the workhouse. Your petitioner humbly hopes that her case will be taken into consideration,

And she, as in duty bound, shall ever pray. A. B.

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It is obvious that the petition from Ann Marsh must have been written along the lines of a model petition of this kind. But then it is all the more striking that, as already said, there are hardly any other pieces among the Essex pauper letters which may be said to come anywhere near that type (175, 406, 408, 657, 743). This not only applies to the composition and literary quality of the letters in general but also to their individual elements. For example, as a closing of the letter, the prototypical petitionary phrase that the writer 'in duty bound shall ever pray' occurs only eleven times within the entire sample (338, 404, 420, 439, 486, 673, 676, 696, 707, 715, 755).

While there can be no doubt, then, that the petition, as a literary model, does not normally bear on the *form* of the pauper letter, it may still be said to lie at the very heart of its *substance*, given that the major intention of the pauper letter is of course a particular request. Hence the frequent use in pauper letters of rhetorical devices, particularly in the opening gambits, which are replete with rather conventional apologetic phrases: 'it was far distant from my wish or thought to Trouble you [...] but Necessity impel me to ask you' (14); 'I trust you will Excuse me writeing to you' (445). Likewise, the request for help, which is often made after the account of the particular personal circumstances of the applicant, is typically tied up with deferential

phrases: 'therefore Gentn [I] hope you will have the goodness to take it into your most serious Consideration' (14).

Deferential rhetoric, however, is by no means the only form of expression. On the contrary, many letter writers show a pretty self-confident attitude and address the overseers with surprising bluntness. The opening words by Benjamin Brooker are a good case in point: 'ihave sent to you mister holden that i have no wark to doe and you must send me sum muney' (510). Other examples include phrases such as 'I now make bold to write being your your poor yet humble Petitioner' (281); 'ihave taken the LeBety of riten to you' (300). Moreover, deferential rhetoric and offensive gestures do not exclude each other. For example, nearly all of the 17 letters from Arthur Tabrum are written in similar style. They come as friendly reminders, requesting the outstanding allowance for his step-son and using more or less the same phrase ('I should be much obligd to you if you would send the Money Due for Arthur Good', 204). But occasionally, the tone is changed. Thus, in one letter Tabrum reminds the parish of its duty to relieve his stepson and threatens to take legal action:

and whilst I Keep him I shall expect to be Paid for it, and if I do not receive any remuneration, I shall take him before the Lord Mayor [...] it was the agreement of the Parish to allow the 1s6d [per week] if I took him therefore I have a right to it [...] and if the Parish Does not Pay me I shall put it into Court (171).

In another letter, he threatens to arrange for the removal of his step-son to Chelmsford: 'if nothing is done I shall get him Passd Home to his Parish' (260).

A simliar voice is that of Mary Taylor, a widow with children in Hadleigh, Suffolk, who was settled in the parish of St Botolph in Colchester and has left two letters behind. One is a brief request for her outstanding allowance (of 4 or 5s. per week) which ends with a simple but clear statement: 'sir i think i have a riath to my pay i can stop no longer without it' (396). The other (from a different hand), is a long protest against her constant trouble with the parish officers about 'the money which is my due'. In this she threatens 'to come home into the House' (the poorhouse in St Botolph), announces that she has sought legal advice and even refers to a similar court case at Bury assizes some years ago ('and the parish lost the cause'). But all this is

embedded within the personal appeal to James Cole, the overseer of St Botolph parish:

Sir I really when I was at Colchester thought you weare my friend by your behaver to me when theire but indeed Sir I find you are not or you would not distress a poor helpless widow with such a family as I have got [...] you Sir when I was at Colchester promised me I should have the money sent regular every fortnight now it will be three weeks to morrow you promised me Sir to send me a piece of cloth to make my children some shirts and a trifal to buy them some shoese as They have none to theire feet but yet Sir you did not perform your promise [...] I dont lay all the blame on you Sir as I think by what I saw of you that you was inclined to do me justice (322).

In sum, then, it cannot be emphasised too strongly that in stylistic terms and from their scriptural gesture, most pauper letters do *not* normally follow the contemporary model of the formal petition. Rather, they are distinguished by a surprisingly informal, almost 'personal' tone. Moreover, we have seen that pauper letters are characterised not only by their personal tone, but also 'speak' through their non-standardised, highly individual physical appearance, such as a particular stroke of the pen. To the extent that this peculiar physical touch reflects a particular bodily expression, it seems appropriate to speak of the scriptural 'gesture' witnessed in these documents. This is in sharp contrast to the experience of the labouring classes in other countries. For example, in nineteenth-century Prussia, the strict formal requirements of petitions were obeyed to an extent which suggests that not even minor local authorities would ever have accepted, let alone considered, informal pauper letters of the English type.¹²

In order to explain the extraordinarily personal use of the letter by the English poor, we ought to remember that the letter was simply a ubiquitous feature of eighteenth and nineteenth century culture. Typically enough, the very first modern English novel, Richardson's *Pamela*, was an epistolary novel, and it is a neat coincidence that it was written in that form because the author was bored at the prospect of composing yet another letter-writer he had been commissioned to produce.¹³ People would also encounter letters in the political literature of the day (Arthur Young's *Farmer's Letters*, or Burke's *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol*), in periodicals and magazines where the individual contributions were often in the form of letters (from the *Tatler*

and the *Spectator* to the *Annals of Agriculture*), and in newspapers, where the reports from other countries also came from 'correspondents'. Thus, by the end of the eighteenth century at the latest, even ordinary people must have been accustomed to the letter as a virtually universal type of literary expression.

Rhetorical practices

When looking at the rhetorical elements associated with traditional epistolary conventions, we followed the literary or textual meaning of rhetoric. Rhetoric in this sense is understood to refer to the way in which an argument is posed in writing, or more specifically to certain rhetorical figures whereby a statement or a narrative is made more powerful or more pleasing to the reader. Rhetoric in its original sense, however, is first and foremost associated with *oral performance*, with 'speech acts' which require the physical presence of the speaker before his or her audience. In this sense, rhetoric refers to public utterances.¹⁴ It is worth remembering this 'vocal' background of rhetoric as the art of persuasion, since pauper letters display the features of orality, personal appearance and public utterances in a number of ways. First, the heavy phonetic spelling in some of these letters may be regarded as witnessing the spoken language of ordinary people as closely as we may ever encounter it in written documents. The term 'oral writing' has been suggested to capture the nature of such pauper scripts.¹⁵ It is not, however, the phonetic spelling alone which is of interest here. It is rather the fact that the entire text in such letters, in its wording and style as well as in the structure of the narrative, also follows the characteristics of oral as opposed to written communication. The utterances are additive, situational and associative, some are evasive, some are redundant, others are clumsy.¹⁶

Second, pauper letters often record more than just one individual voice. In fact, the narrator may change within one and the same letter, as in the case of Ann Thudgett, who lived in the London parish of St Giles and was looked after by her niece. She had received a weekly

allowance of 3s. 6d. from her home parish, Steeple Bumpstead, for some time, which was handed over to her (or to her niece?) by a contact, a certain Mr Earl. But apparently the allowance had then been reduced, because when she wrote to her parish she asked for Mr Earl to be instructed to hand her the full amount of 3s. 6d. as before. This, she said, was what she needed,

for I canot live hear and Starve as I am a Poor Offlic[t]ed woman and Cannot work for my Living and likewise that my Nece has to dress and un dress me and has had for years gentelmen Mary Ann Page I am Ann Trudgett[']s] Nese I have don for my poor offlic[t]ed old a[u]nt for years with your assistance I have Boarded lodg wash and Every other thing that Laid in my Pour for 6d per day (85).

The letter begins by speaking in the person of Ann Thudgett. But then, all of a sudden, the narrative-subject changes, and this precisely at that point where the text turns to her niece, Mary Ann Page. Reading the letter, one is tempted to imagine that in writing it, Mary Ann Page first drew up what Ann Thudgett told her, or perhaps dictated to her, but then explicitly continued in her own words. But it would be no less plausible to imagine that the first part of the text is only a 'fictional' record of what Mary Ann Page invoked her aunt to be saying where in fact she wrote the entire letter all by herself.

Other cases include those in which series of letters survive from married couples where both husband and wife 'speak' alternately (108, 112, 129, 131, 142, 153, 169, 185, 202, 208), or where the widowed wife takes up her former husband's voice (28, 34). In fact, we almost never know who precisely was the actual 'speaker', that is to say who actually wrote the letter. But then, who should be called the 'writer'? The 'author' who is responsible for the 'text', or the scribe who actually put pen to paper? In encountering pauper letters, we need to be aware that all these scriptural functions may have been fulfilled by one and the same individual, but may also, as indeed they often did, have involved several people. It is not least in this respect, therefore, that a pauper letter may represent several 'voices'.¹⁷

Third, communication between the poor and their overseers was not restricted to correspondence. There were also personal encounters. These may have been less frequent than the exchange of letters,

especially when people lived further away from their parish of settlement. But such personal encounters did take place. In fact, they are mentioned in pauper letters time and again, even though they were hardly ever recorded as such. Mary Taylor refers to her personal meeting with James Cole, the overseer of St Botolph in Colchester, in her letter. Other paupers address the overseer as their personal 'friend', though in some of these cases this might be more of a rhetorical gesture (309, 318, 349, 355, 391, 397, 663, 737). But there are other examples, where not only good personal knowledge of the overseer, but even an affectionate relationship, based on frequent encounters over longer periods of time, may be assumed. Such was the case of William James at Chelmsford in his almost intimate letters to James Allen, overseer of St Botolph in Colchester (419, 439, 445, 453, 454, 462).

But personal friendship between some paupers and their overseers is not the issue here. It is rather the rhetorical practices involved when people appeared in person before the overseers or, more specifically, before the vestry meeting. Pauper letters never give us more than a brief allusion to such public encounters: 'you will remember the request I made, to the Gentlemen of the parish, when I was at Colchester, for something of an Allowance' (422). However, what they do reflect is the awareness of the poor that instead of writing and sending a letter they could always turn up and speak out in person in order to present their case.

In fact, to some extent people must have felt that personal appearance before the local authorities was more credible than a piece of writing. After all, might not a letter be regarded as 'mere rhetoric', whereas an applicant before the vestry would be available for personal interrogation? This would explain why people felt the desire or need to point out that they would have preferred to appear in person but were unable to do so: 'I should have Come but am poorly and low' (369); 'i humbly beg pardon for taking this liberty of writing these few lines to you but i have not the conveniency of coming to state it to you by word of mouth' (577); 'I Should have come over and Stated the Case to the Gentlemen but I have not Got Shoes that will bring me so far' (3); 'I would of call on you but have been veri Lame with a Swelld food' (336). Illness (including accidents) and pregnancy were

common excuses (26, 80, 86, 482, 709). People would also cite distance (428, 643), travel costs (454, 732) and the prospect of work they did not want to lose (222). Or they would simply suggest general indisposition: 'was desired to attend this meeting, but not being able myself to attend, I have made bold to write these few lines' (301).

Some of these statements, such as lacking shoes for the long journey, may be read as (purely?) rhetorical excuses. Moreover, as the last two examples suggest, writing was also seen as a justifiable alternative to personal appearance. Other people apparently saw it as a perfectly sufficient equivalent: 'i hope you will be so kind as to send me some thing in stid of my coming over to see you for it as it is a good way to come but if you do not send me something gentlemen i must come and see you' (582). And it was not just the poor who felt this, but also the parishes themselves. The parish officers of St Peter in Colchester seem to have been particularly keen to prevent people from attending without invitation, something evident in some of the letters they received. Thus, James Howell wrote from Ely: 'the Larst time I was at Colchester for it [the allowance] the oversears *told* me that it was much better for to rite for it than to Come So many miles afterit' (446). William James in Chelmsford was advised to the same effect: 'When I was last at Colchester [...] to make personal Application, the Gentlemen told me, when I had any to make, to do it by Letter, and spare Trouble, and Expençe in coming' (484).

There are two reasons why parishes might see no need for their non-resident paupers to turn up in person. First, it might involve additional costs, as in the case of Mary Rabey. She appeared before the select vestry of St Botolph in Colchester in May 1822, along with her son 'in order to obtain some weekly allowance for him'. The vestry granted her 2s. a week, along with 7s. 'for her expenses to return to London with her son' (289). Or take Edward Orwell in Leeds, who had received a weekly allowance of 5s. from Braintree since October 1831 but still came down all the way to his home parish to apply for additional support. In his letter of December 1832, he reported that 'the money that you gave me when I was over I have paid where I owed it' and that he was currently unemployed 'for that all Kinds of work has been very dead every since the Chorlera commenced in Leeds'. In March 1833, he turned up before the select

vestry again and was granted no less than £5 'with the understanding that he would not apply again unless he should be in very great distress' (58).

The second reason why parishes might prefer their out-parish paupers to address them in writing is that this was often much easier and quicker. Overseers did then not normally run the danger of falling victim to the 'mere rhetoric' of pauper letters, given that they had various means of obtaining independent evidence concerning the circumstances of their senders. Thus, in October 1831, Joseph Garrett, overseer of Braintree, had made a journey to inquire into the condition of all Braintree paupers in Yorkshire. An inspection of that type was exceptional. The normal way was to write to the host parish and ask the overseer for information. Indeed, correspondence between overseers concerning out-parish or non-resident paupers was the norm. Another source of information were those people whom they had authorized to pay out the allowances, such as Mr French and Mr Rouse in the above letters by Arthur Tabrum and Benjamin Brooker. Thus, the non-resident poor were subject to close scrutiny and control both within their host parish and from their home parish. This helps to explain why pauper letters, as far as we can tell, are on whole highly credible, and why there is little reason to suspect that their substance should have been 'mere rhetoric'.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this chapter can be stated as briefly as categorically. Pauper letters are highly credible first-hand narratives of the living conditions and experiences of the labouring poor of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England. As any form of written evidence, they display rhetorical elements. But these rhetorical elements must not be regarded as in any way interfering with their 'true' substantive message. Rather, they need to be seen as an integral and inseparable part of the narrative. Moreover, the rhetoric in pauper letters, as a form of rhetoric in writing, is firmly rooted in the oral

rhetoric of people's everyday life. Thus, what might be called the rhetorical habitus¹⁸ which is expressed in pauper letters is in effect the outcome of two forms of rhetorical performance, of 'scriptural' and 'vocal' expertise. The historian working with pauper letters should always read them aloud, since they record the 'voices' of the poor.

Notes

- 1 T. Hitchcock, 'A New History from Below', *History Workshop Journal* (forthcoming); <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>.
- 2 P. Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism. Working Women in the English Economy, 1700–1850* (Basingstoke, 1996); T. Sokoll, 'Old age in poverty. The record of Essex pauper letters, 1780–1834', in T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe (eds.), *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640–1840* (London, 1997), pp. 127–54; T. Sokoll, 'Negotiating a living: Essex pauper letters from London, 1800–1834', *International Review of Social History*, Supplement 8 (2000), 19–46; S. A. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850. A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000). Other studies include T. Sokoll, 'Selbstverständliche Armut. Armenbriefe in England, 1750–1834', in W. Schulze (ed.) *Ego-Dokumente. Annäherungen an den Menschen in der Geschichte* (Berlin, 1996), pp. 227–71; J. S. Taylor, *Poverty, Migration, and Settlement in the Industrial Revolution: Sojourners' Narratives* (Palo Alto, 1989); J. S. Taylor, 'Voices in the crowd: the Kirkby Lonsdale township letters, 1809–36', in Hitchcock, King and Sharpe, *Chronicling Poverty*, pp. 109–26; L. H. Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: the English Poor Laws and the People 1700–1948* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 166–76.
- 3 T. Sokoll (ed.), *Essex Pauper Letters 1731–1837* (Oxford, 2001).
- 4 The only difference from a present-day letter is that it carries the postal address of the recipient on the same piece of paper.
- 5 For the sake of simplicity, all references to pauper letters from Essex are given in parentheses within the main text, quoting the number of the letter in the edition (Sokoll, *Essex*). The same is true of all material from other Essex parish records such as overseers' accounts, vestry minute books or correspondence between parish officers, where that material is provided in the historical apparatus of the edition under the letter in question.
- 6 The best account of the practical implications of the settlement laws is still J. S. Taylor, 'The impact of pauper settlement 1691–1834', *Past and Present*, 73 (1976).
- 7 Sokoll, *Essex*, pp. 15–17, 29 (Table 3.2).

- 8 Ibid., pp. 32–43.
- 9 The back of the letter (which the sender had left entirely blank) carries a note, presumably made by the order of Robert Alden, to the effect that Benjamin Brooker was sent the sum of 10s. through Mr Rouse on 2 December 1825 (510).
- 10 See W. G. Müller, 'Brief', in G. Ueding (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* (Tübingen, 1994) ii, cols. 60–76; R. G. M. Nikisch, 'Briefsteller', *ibid.*, cols. 76–86; J. Robertson, *The Art of Letter Writing. An Essay on the Handbooks Published in England during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1943); K. Hornbeak, 'The complete letter-writer in English 1568–1800', *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages*, 15 (1934), pp. i–xii and 1–150; K. Hornbeak, 'Richardson's "Familiar Letters" and the Domestic Conduct Books', *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages*, 19 (1938), pp. 1–29. For the eighteenth-century literary ideal of letter-writing, see H. Anderson and I. Ehrenpreis, 'The familiar letter in the eighteenth century: some generalizations', in H. Anderson, P. D. Daghljan and I. Ehrenpreis (eds.), *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century* (Kansas, 1966), pp. 269–82 and 297.
- 11 G. Brown, *The English Letter-Writer; or, the Whole Art of General correspondence* (6th edn; London, 1800), pp. 218–19. An earlier example is C. Johnson, *The Complete Art of Writing Letters* (London, 1779). Model letters were also provided in more general guides like W. Mather, *The Young Man's Companion* (13th edn; London, 1727), which gives 'Letters upon several Occasions' (pp. 84–106), preceded by instructions on how to write (with specimen alphabets), and on how to make a pen, black ink etc. (pp. 73–83).
- 12 Comparative research into the social history of petitioning is slim and precludes wider comparison. See J. Karweick, "'Tiefgebeugt von Nahrungssorgen und Gram". Schreiben an Behörden', in S. Grosse et al. (eds.), *'Denn das Schreiben gehört nicht zu meiner täglichen Beschäftigung'. Der Alltag Kleiner Leute in Bittschriften, Briefen und Berichten aus dem 19. Jahrhundert. Ein Lesebuch* (Bonn, 1989), pp. 17–87 and 188–89. The example of the applications for poor relief made in 1804–5 to the magistrate of the town of Essen (with a population of less than 4,000 at that time) is particularly instructive (*ibid.*, pp. 32–40). See also O. Ulbricht, 'Supplicationen als Ego-Dokumente. Bittschriften von Leibeigenen aus der ersten Hälfte des 17. Jahrhunderts' and C. Ulbrich, 'Zeuginnen und Bittstellerinnen. Überlegungen zur Bedeutung von Ego-Dokumenten für die Erforschung weiblicher Selbstwahrnehmung in der ländlichen Gesellschaft des 18. Jahrhunderts', both in Schulze, *Ego-Dokumente*, pp. 149–74 and 207–26. In terms of the culture of correspondence among the middle classes of nineteenth-century Germany, see R. Baasner, 'Briefkultur im 19. Jahrhundert. Kommunikation, Konvention, Postpraxis', in R. Baasner (ed.), *Briefkultur im 19. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 1999), pp. 1–36. Work of this kind is lacking for England.

- 13 Richardson did publish his model collection of *Familiar Letters* in 1741. See Hornbeak, 'The complete letter-writer', pp. 100–16.
- 14 S. Fish, 'Rhetoric', in F. Lentricchia and T. McLaughlin (eds.), *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago, 1990), pp. 203–22.
- 15 Sokoll, *Essex*, pl. VIII.
- 16 See the classic exposition by W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982), ch. 3.
- 17 For a systematic discussion, see Sokoll, *Essex*, pp. 62–7.
- 18 The term 'habitus' is used following the suggestions by P. Bourdieu, in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977) and *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge, 1990).

**Andreas Gestrich, Steven King &
Lutz Raphael (eds)**

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PETER LANG

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