

Deconstructing the text

We've looked at how to actually read the letter from Andrew Millar to David Hume. We know that this letter was part of an ongoing conversation, and we can enrich our understanding of its content if we use the online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography to research more about people who are mentioned in it.

From a historical point of view, what can we learn from the letter beyond its content?

Let's go back to the beginning again. Millar begins at the top right of his sheet of paper by recording **where he's writing from, and the date**. This isn't just for filing purposes. Millar is also telling Hume, who's in Paris, the circumstances in which his letter was written.

The Seven Years war had ended only 14 months previously. Communication networks between Britain and France were still disrupted, so letters had to travel via Rotterdam, which took longer and cost more.

In the **first sentence of his letter**, Millar confirms that he's received two letters from Paris. He notes both the date of the letters, and the date they reached London. This tells Hume how long his letters have been on the road—in this case, over a month. Millar's reply will take several weeks in return. Noting these dates allowed each correspondent to calculate whether the other was likely to have heard about any changes, in personal, business or political circumstances, which had occurred since the letters were posted.

Millar addresses Hume as **'Dear Sir'**, as he does throughout their correspondence. Like 'Dear Madam', or 'Reverend Sir' for a clergyman, this was a standard form of polite address, but it could also signify a respectful friendliness, especially if the complimentary phrases at the end of the letter were more personal in tone.

On the second page of the letter, Millar writes, **'Sir John Gordon called when I came so far, to desire I would remind you, of what he mentioned to you before you left this place'**. This is another detail which tells Hume about the circumstances in which the letter was written. Sir John has called in person to make sure his request is included in Millar's letter. Millar's note of this strengthens his reminder to Hume. However, Millar is also alerting Hume to the fact that Sir John may have seen all or part of the letter's content. Letters were often treated as semi-public documents, so a letter-writer who wanted to convey private information usually gave a warning, such as 'Read the next page to yourself and by yourself'.

Millar closes his letter by sending **'most affectionate compliments'** from himself and his wife. Sending compliments at the end of a letter—and naming others in these exchanges of courtesy—was an important way of reinforcing family, social, and business relationships. Failure to do so might be read as either bad manners, or an insult.

Finally, Millar subscribes himself as **'Dear Sir, Your most obedient humble servant'**. Like 'Dear Sir' at the beginning of the letter, this is a standard polite phrase, but the longstanding connection between Millar and Hume is indicated by the **'affectionate compliments'** which precede it. In a letter to another correspondent, Millar closes by naming mutual friends who 'frequently join with me in remembering you', and subscribes himself, 'Dear Sir, your ever affectionate servant'.

By making slight changes like these to the standard format, letter-writers conveyed both their familiarity with the forms of polite correspondence, and the nature of their relationship with the recipient.

We know from letter-writing manuals that correspondence was often seen as a way to display the writer's social polish. However, Millar's untidy handwriting and prosaic style suggests a lack of concern with gentlemanly refinement. This is consistent with a description of him by a contemporary, who noted that he wore old, shabby clothes even in fashionable company. Comparing unpublished and published sources in this way allows us to test and enrich our readings of manuscript letters.