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The English Pauper Letter, 1790-1830s

The historiography of English literacy has been dominated by a singular myth: the poor had an oral culture that fused slowly and imperfectly into a written culture only by the mid- and late nineteenth-century. While it is certainly true that the English poor had a strong oral culture, it is misleading to point to low literacy levels. My research on pauper letters suggests that the poor could and did write, either as an individual or collective endeavour. They sent letters to potential advocates, magistrates and above all to the officials who controlled the welfare system. These were more than petitions, often embodying sophisticated rhetorical and claims-making processes and fulfilling the intertwining purposes of communicating fact, establishing entitlement and navigating a discretionary welfare system. These letters – examples of oral writing – survive in their hundreds of thousands and in the absence of any organised or recognised class of scribes we can be confident that they approximate to the words, experiences and thoughts of the poor themselves. This article explores the English pauper letter, looking at structure, direction, content, rhetoric and inter-textuality, and with a particular focus on the first half of the nineteenth century. The pauper letter, I argue, both reflects and creates the agency of the poor.

Introduction

The English and Welsh Old Poor Law was codified in 1601 and constituted a national system of welfare in which the deserving poor were enabled to apply for poor relief to an officer of an Anglican parish. Welfare thus dispensed was to be paid for by a tax on local property. At no point did the law guarantee a right to relief, merely an entitlement to apply, and from the 1660s an entitlement to apply only to a single parish of settlement, to which the poor might be removed at the discretion of parish officers.[1] Given massive and sustained migration the central problem of the Old Poor Law is clear: for a discretionary, parochially-based, system of welfare to work host parishes needed not to lose large numbers of residents/workers when temporary need struck, while settlement parishes needed not to receive back 'home' successive waves of paupers ripped from their host communities

when cyclical or demographic crises occurred.[2] This sort of balancing mechanism, however, had no basis in welfare law. It is for this reason that English and Welsh parishes developed an extra-legal out-parish system in which bilateral financing agreements between parishes allowed most of the poor to remain in their host communities at the expense of their settlement parish. Clearly, at the heart of this system lay a tri-partite relationship of trust, negotiation and correspondence: between officials in settlement and host parishes; between paupers and their settlement parishes; and between paupers and those who might advocate for them. The logic of the out-parish system is necessarily for the fact that the deserving poor had to find ways to communicate with (often physically distant) officials in settlement parishes, a need which explains the existence of pauper letter.[3]

Such an observation sits uneasily with literature on literacy levels which has doubted the ability of the lower orders to write in a sustained fashion and pointed to a deeply ingrained oral culture for England and Wales.[4] The central flaw in this argument was exposed by Thomas Sokoll's magisterial reproduction of more than seven hundred pauper letters for the English county of Essex.[5] His work marked the start of sustained interest in the potential of pauper letters for the exploration of themes such as pauper agency, the experience of being poor and the sentiment of the Old Poor Law system. Subsequently, it has become clear that the equivalent of the Essex pauper letters can be found in almost all English and Welsh counties, and that these letters are in turn the tip of a complex iceberg of correspondence between parishes, paupers and advocates. Within this framework, pauper letters exist in small numbers for the early and mid-eighteenth-century but their heyday appears to have run from the 1780s and 1790s. At this point a combination of necessity (heavy migration), possibility (money/credit transmission had improved) and opportunity (the postal system had improved and cheapened) made the investment in writing worthwhile.[6]

Form and Structure

Surveying the whole corpus of English and Welsh pauper letters, it is clear that the vast majority opened and closed in highly structured and formulaic fashion. Considering just one collection, from the Cathedral town of Peterborough in central England, openings include: 'Sir, I hope no offense for takeing the liberty of writeing to you'; 'Sir I take the liberty

to aquaint [sic] you'; 'Gentlemen I am sorry the distress of the times forces me to implore your immediate assistance'; 'Gentlemen, With much concern I again trouble you to beg'; and 'I hope it will not be considered an intrusion to state'.[7] Closing usually involved different permutations of 'Your humble servant' followed by a signature, mark or directions of address. The apologetic opening tone adopted by most of those writing for the first time is consistent with the discretionary nature of welfare under the Old Poor Law and also – particularly through closing phases such as 'humble servant' – with wider Georgian and Hanoverian notions of respect and respectability.[8] This formulaic approach also reveals something of the roots of the pauper letter in petitions to rich families or magistrates.[9]

Yet, pauper narratives were *not* petitions. Where individuals sent several letters to their settlement parishes, we witness a clear development of rhetoric but also of form and structure. William Dunkley wrote from Wisbech (Cambridgeshire) to Peterborough on 11 April 1806, the second in a series of eight narratives. He closed his letter much as one would expect from the petitionary tradition, with 'sincere thanks for all past Favours and is greately oblige to you for the same'. By contrast his opening was much more direct – 'Sir, I hope you will be as good as your word in regard of what you told my wife when she was over' –and directly challenged the overseer.[10] Nor did all first-time writers follow a petitionary formula. Elizabeth Dowling sent an undated letter from London to Peterborough which opened 'I have sent you these few lines, to let you know that my mother is a very poor creature, and is not likely of being any better, she has lost the use of one side altogether'.[11] John Horseford, writing from Boston (Lincolnshire) to Peterborough on 20 October 1833, was even more direct, simply asking 'Gentlemen Overseers Will you be so kind as to send the Rent as the landlord as called for it and my wife is verey hill so I cold not rite before.'[12]

These examples give a clear sense of the variety of form in pauper letters. Moreover, between opening and closing address we see little by way of the structural regularity – background, case, remedy – that might be expected from a petition. Paupers variously quoted the law, threatened (to come home, to exercise violence or to revert to magistrates), called on officials to act as a friend, begged, cajoled, made sarcastic comments, apologised and appropriated the voices of others in their support. Their letters exhibit little by way of developmental structure and share much with the letters that might have been exchanged between family members. Indeed, some

collections include letters to relatives alongside those sent to officials. Thomas Sokoll has thus suggested that we should regard pauper narratives as 'familiar letters'.[13] In fact, the typological spectrum – ranging from the short demand or angry note, through apologetic approaches and to the highly formal, almost business-like, letters usually sent by former ratepayers – demands a more complex categorisation.

Authorship

However we categorise them, the utility of pauper letters is intricately entwined with questions of authorship. As I have observed, histories of literacy in England have generally been sceptical of the penetration of reading and writing to the working-classes. Yet I find no evidence of the existence of a class of full-time scribes to match those in France and elsewhere who might write letters to officials for a fee.[14] Few narratives demonstrate the formality and grammatical structure that we might associate with this group. Rather, most approximate to the orthographic form demonstrated in David Clarke's letter from Norwich to Peterborough in February 1801:

> I am sorry the distress of the times forces me to implore your immediate assistance I need not point out the dearness of articles of life flattering myself I write to gentlemen well aquainted with every circumstance of the kind and whome I trust are Gentlemen Ridy to redress your porre parishoners real distresses haveing laboured under depravity of site for several years and my wife under a very bad state of health … In this Distrest situation I am force contrary to my wishes to ask your relief being quite unable to get through life I have no family that can come charge to you but hour selves but the frequent whant of work and the state of health we now labour under forcess your perishoners than to address you.[15]

This lack of punctuation, random use of capitalisation, misspelling and omission helps to explain why Thomas Sokoll has characterised the contents of such letters as 'oral writing'.[16]

Of course, this does not mean that the people who wrote pauper letters were also the purported senders. In the corpus we find evidence of parents writing for children, children writing for parents, midwives writing for female patients, husbands writing for wives (and *vice versa*) and employers writing for employees. Moreover, teachers, clergymen, military-men and others were enjoined to write letters which were then simply signed by the

pauper. The overwhelmingly orthographic nature of the pauper narrative provides a clear sense of the wider standards of literacy in the English and Welsh population because such letters do not stand out on the spectrum of writing quality. More recently, Keith Snell has suggested that the writing of pauper letters might have been a collective endeavour in which a neighbour or friend wrote down a composite of sentences drawn from a group of people rather than a single individual.[17]

These observations notwithstanding, there is considerable evidence to support the view of Sokoll and others that pauper letters were largely written by the people who claimed to send them. An analysis of handwriting in letters versus that employed in addressing the envelope or the outside folds of a letter sealed in other ways, reveals few discrepancies, suggesting that the people who wrote the narratives usually addressed them as well. Within series of letters purportedly from the same person, variation in handwriting over time tends to be minimal. Some of these series might stretch over decades and it is implausible that a pauper would have found the same person to write for them over such a sustained period. Moreover, it is clear that letter series were self-referential, calling the attention of officials to previous correspondence, prior promises and also to personal visits to the settlement parish. Thus, James Tomblin reminded the overseer of Peterborough in October 1833 that 'My circumstances are well known to many of the inhabitants of Peterborough'. Further:

> I applied to the overseers personally a few weeks ago and went away under the hope that something would be done for me as I was not positively refused but promised that my case should be considered and an answer sent. I have received no answer – and to come again to Peterborough involves a loss of time and some expense.[18]

It would seem improbable that Tomblin was not the author of the narratives that were sent in his name. Unsurprisingly, then, most of those who use pauper letters as a source have argued that they provide a window onto the feelings, voices and agency of the dependent poor.

Table One: Instigatory Rhetoric

Instigatory Rhetoric	Form
Contribution	Previous payment of rates; previous employment; kin and friends in the parish; contribution to host parish; wise use of past parochial relief.
Prospect of Burden	Threats to 'come home'; impending death; threat of job loss; sending children 'home' unaccompanied; threat of spreading disease if forced to return.
Independence/Sharing	Promises of independence; assurances that the person has done all they can before writing; prior selling of possessions; support of families now exhausted; neighbours and others willing to complement parish resources.
Threshold Rhetoric	Agedness; disability; sickness; family burdens; lunacy; widow(er) hood; unemployment.
Yardsticks of Need	Nakedness; starvation; homelessness; unpleasant disease; lost goods; inability to play the role of mother/father; inability to attend church.
Exogeny	Trade downturn; expensive provisions; unemployment or looming unemployment; want of family; demographic crisis; war.

Table Two: Devolopment Rhetoric

Development Rhetoric	Form
Right	Reference to analogous cases; disappointment that parishes had not acted; appropriation of the voices of others; statements of right and associated parochial responsibility.
Law	Quotation of the law; implication that the law has been breached; threat to go to the Magistrate; quoting precedent.
Support/Advocacy	Statements of support from doctors, officials etc; handing case over to epistolary advocates; implication or statement of current and prior support from neighbours; religious imperative.
Parochial Reputation	Officials or parishes will not be trusted subsequently; current reputation is compromised in the eyes of a host community; Reputation will be enhanced by acting.
Time Running	Fundamental consequences to not acting quickly.

Rhetoric and Strategy

Yet pauper letters are complex documents, entangling the reporting of fact, embellishment, appropriation of the voices of others, rhetorical flourishes, half-truths, and a strong emotional backbone. Outright lies were rare. It was perfectly possible for settlement parishes to send representatives to assess

letter writers or ask others in the host parish to do so. Epistolary advocates – those writing on behalf of the poor – also usually confirmed the details of abject need contained in pauper letters where the two forms of narrative coincide. Nonetheless, we should not lose sight of the central purpose of pauper letters: to obtain, maintain or extend relief payments in what was a discretionary system of welfare and in which every payment made had an opportunity cost – higher local taxes – for communities.

Against this backdrop, the evolution of custom, cumulative precedent and the intervention of magistrates to overturn local decisions, created a presumption of relief for sub-groups of the poor. I have argued elsewhere, for instance, that sickness posed officials with complex moral and practical *conundra*, giving the sick poor a *de facto* case for relief.[19] In turn, paupers themselves rapidly came to understand such 'rights' and for this reason we see some actual and rhetorical presumption in the letters themselves. Mary Colderwood's letter from Brocklehurst (Hertfordshire) to Peterborough on 6 December 1833 asked the parish not to reduce her existing allowance because:

> I am in great distress, having four of my children still at home. My eldest daughter has been obliged to leave her place in consequence of being suddenly seized with villent fits, four persons cannot hold her during their continuance. One of my little boys has also met with an accident from the kick of a horse. My troubles are indeed very great and I trust you will have compassion on me.[20]

Colderwood's presumption that the parish would recognise the necessity of supporting a woman burdened with four children, one of whom was subject to epilepsy, is clear.

Not all pauper appeals were successful of course, and in any case parochial policy could be subject to violent swings. Most paupers would have been turned down or had their allowances modified at some point. The failure of parishes to meet requests, late payment or the granting of only partial relief would necessarily have melded with the ever-present threat of removal to create uncertainty over eligibility in the minds of paupers. Thus, as well as reporting fact, pauper letters employed rhetorical devices to reinforce deservingness in the eyes of the officials receiving them. Thomas Sokoll's analysis of rhetoric in Essex pauper letters provides a starting point for understanding this issue.[21] However, drawing on the wider corpus of narratives now available suggests that we should think

in terms of two broad rhetorical envelopes: one associated with initial approaches to parishes in order to obtain or maintain relief (an 'instigatory' rhetoric), and one associated with ongoing debates between paupers and officials where eligibility for relief was not recognised or at least not fully so (a 'developmental' rhetoric). Tables one and two suggest some of the detailed rhetorical infrastructure employed by paupers within the two envelopes.

The practice of such rhetoric can be exemplified in the letters of Anthony South. His instigating narrative (from Brighton to Peterborough on 5 December 1833) opens with a duality of threshold and independence rhetoric, claiming:

> It was my intention to have address a letter to you for some time past, but I was averse to give you trouble while I had hopes of it being unnecessary – Now however I am sorry to say it becomes an imperious duty, as my wife, who has long been in a declining state but whose recovery, till now, I had flattered myself would have taken place, is so much worse that my hopes and expectation, and those of the doctor who attends her, are almost at an end.

The letter moves on to a rhetoric of contribution – 'I am the son of Anthony South who served his apprenticeship with Dr. Spalding and Mr White know my father well – I was myself at home six years ago last July, but never received any parish relief except about a fortnight of that time' – and prospective burden, with a threat to return home if not relieved. Finally, South applies a yardstick of absolute deservingness, noting that 'My wife is at present in that state that she is totally unable to do anything for herself or her family'. He appended a note from George Butterstock, surgeon, who testified that Mrs. South was suffering from a 'severe inward disease.'[22] Notwithstanding the rhetorical sophistication of this instigatory letter, Peterborough did not respond. On 24 December, South wrote a developmental letter repeating claims about his wife's ill-health, but expressing surprise that the case was not immediately accepted. He pointed to the advocacy contained in his last letter – 'This letter was accompanied by a PS from the Doctor who attends her, a man of great respectability, corroborating my statement' – and an implication that failing to act would bring shame to the official who was 'well acquainted with my father and which you told me when I was last at Peterboro about six years ago.' The letter ends with the rhetoric of running time, noting that the wife was 'every day declining in strength.'[23] While Anthony South may have been unusual in terms of the quality of his writing, he employed the same sophisticated rhetorical and strategic approaches to

officials as most of the other pauper letter writers in the underlying corpus. Like the majority of his peers, he was ultimately successful in getting and keeping poor relief.

Shared Landscapes and Languages of Contestability

We should, however, beware of viewing the language and structure of pauper narratives as merely matters of rhetoric and strategy. Paupers did not form epistolary communities as such, but their underlying stories are no less emotionally charged, no less human, than groups that did.[24] Indeed, one of the flaws of the current historiography of English pauper letter-writing, and perhaps more widely the study of European ego-documents, is that we have simply forgotten the human dilemmas that lie behind the source. Thus, Jos Fox wrote from Woolwich (London) to Peterborough on 14 January, 1800, claiming that 'I have distrest myself greatly so that I am almost Nakid and it is not in the Power of my Sons to pay anything for me and if you cannot Medigate it I must be Obligated to come down for I get verry weak and feeble'.[25] While we can read this passage as pressing all of the right rhetorical buttons for his intended audience, Fox had left his wife chargeable to the parish in order to seek work on the London dockside, agreeing to send remittances to pay for her relief. Here, driven to the very edges of dependence himself, he writes a letter which one could alternatively read as a last throw of the dice from an aged man ripped from his family context in order to keep the family's respectability. There are many more examples like that of Fox in the corpus.

A language of strategy and rhetoric also treats the overseers and ratepayers who received and decided how to act upon pauper letters as essentially instrumental, at their best balancing duties to taxpayers and to paupers and at their worst driven by enduring concerns of economy. This is misleading. While the balance of funding for welfare initiatives had by the 1820s and 1830s shifted decisively in favour of resources from the local state as opposed to organised or informal charity, this transition was not linear or universal. The Old Poor Law had still failed to gain full traction in the English and Welsh peripheries and across the country a residual Christian and philanthropic duty to the poor ensured that the first resort of officials was not always to pay as little as possible or to find a reason not to pay when faced by pauper appeals. Of course, officials were not immune

from the emotional message that pauper appeals carried, as letters which outline a connection of friendship or at least familiarity between overseer and pauper begin to hint. Even without such personal connection, we can read a deep well of emotions into some of the correspondence of officials themselves. George Hind (Surgeon), Laurence Stockdale (Curate) and Thomas Akes (Overseer) wrote from Kirton (Staffordshire) to Peterborough in January 1808 outlining the case of Woolson Smith. Ill for several weeks, in the 'last fortnight he hath been rendered incapable of doing anything towards the support of himself and family'. It was, they assured their fellow parishioners in Peterborough, 'for you to determine how he may receive relief, but support he must have immediately' in order to prevent death.[26] This embellishment of the case from three men of equal social standing to their peers in Peterborough speaks of emotional involvement. The immediate affirmative reply by officials in Peterborough suggests an equal emotional response.

In short, pauper letters are a complex phenomenon, simultaneously freighted with: reporting of fact, emotional appeals, rhetorical triggers and human stories of actual or impending misery. Above all these letters were documents of negotiation. The smooth operation of the Old Poor Law required an out-parish relief system, which in turn meant that relief decisions had to be contestable. Contestability presupposed that pauper writers, their advocates and the officials receiving the narratives had a common understanding of the landscape of contestability and its limits. It is these limits which explain why paupers were generally persistent rather than angry when they had to write several times on the same subject, why so few paupers took up their right of appeal to magistrates, and why parochial officials so infrequently questioned the veracity of pauper stories. Nor should we forget that contestability necessitated a common linguistic register if paupers and officials were to avoid talking or writing past each other. In this sense, we can detect a remarkable synergy between the language, rhetoric and yardsticks of deservingness referenced by officials in their correspondence with each other, advocates writing on behalf of the poor, and paupers writing their own narratives.

Conclusion

A singe pauper letter is capable of supporting many readings. I consider them

as both a vehicle for and embodiment of pauper agency; a way of engaging a discretionary welfare system in which most things were essentially contestable. Pauper writers were not petitioning their betters but exploring with them a shared understanding of the language, rhetoric and landscape of contestability. It is ultimately this reading which distinguishes English pauper letters from many apparently similar ego-documents in Continental archives. Above all, I share with others such as Thomas Sokoll a sense that these letters ultimately approximate to a 'true' rendering of the material and emotional state of the pauper writer. Understood in this way, the substantial corpus of letters on which I draw provides a mechanism for refiguring our understanding of the experience of being poor in England. And at the heart of this experience, I suggest, is the scope for pauper agency to shape a local state which in its basic inception was supposed to be malleable. Pauper letters do not just provide a rendering of histories; they require us to rewrite those histories.

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1. For a contrary view: Lori Charlesworth, *Welfare's Forgotten Past: A Socio-Legal History of the Poor Law* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 142-44.
2. See: Keith Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). The term 'home' was used extensively by both paupers and officials.
3. On the out-parish system: Steven King, "It is impossible for our vestry to judge his case into perfection from here": Managing the distance dimensions of poor relief, 1800-40," *Rural History* 16 (2005): 161-89.
4. See Adam Fox and Daniel Woolf, eds., *The Spoken Word: Oral Culture in Britain 1500-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).
5. Thomas Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731-1837* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
6. Under the 1834 New Poor Law, paupers continued to write letters of demand, appeal and apology, but directed them to central government departments.
7. Northamptonshire Record Office (hereafter NRO), Peterborough St John Letters (bundle 242), Letters 1, 9, 17; and Peterborough St John Letters (bundle 244), Letters 6 and 26.
8. We have found no evidence of the use of conduct/writing manuals by paupers or their agents.
9. Many broadly equivalent pauper-centred ego documents on the Continent took the form of stylised petitions. See: Andreas Gestrich and Steven King, "Pauper letters and petitions for poor relief in Germany and Great Britain, 1770-1914," *Bulletin of*

the German Historical Institute 35 (2013): 12-25.
10. NRO Peterborough St John Letters (bundle 242), Letter 41.
11. NRO Peterborough St John Letters (bundle 244), Letter 14.
12. Ibid., Letter 38. Capitals in the original.
13. Thomas Sokoll, "Writing for relief: Rhetoric in English pauper letters 1800-1834," in *Being Poor in Modern Europe: Historical Perspectives 1800-1940*, eds. Andreas Gestrich, Steven King and Lutz Raphael (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 91-112, passim.
14. Charles Métayer, *Au Tombeau des Secrets: Les écrivains Publics du Paris Populaire, Cimetière des Saints-Innocents XVIe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Editions Match, 2000).
15. NRO Peterborough St John Letters (bundle 242), Letter 17.
16. Sokoll, *Essex*, 68.
17. Keith Snell, "Belonging and community: understandings of 'home' and 'friends' among the English poor, 1750–1850," *Economic History Review* 65 (2011): 1-25.
18. NRO Peterborough St John Letters (Bundle 244), Letter 40.
19. S. A. King, '"Stop this overwhelming torment of destiny": Negotiating financial aid at times of sickness under the English Old Poor Law, 1800-1840,' *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 79 (2005): 228-60.
20. NRO Peterborough St John Letters (Bundle 244), Letter 6.
21. Sokoll, "Writing for relief".
22. NRO Peterborough St John Letters (Bundle 244), Letter 7.
23. Ibid., Letter 21.
24. See: Jane How, *Epistolary Spaces: English Letter Writing from the Foundation of the Post Office and Richardson's Clarissa* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and David Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).
25. NRO Peterborough St John Letters (Bundle 242), Letter 14.
26. Ibid., Letter 49.