

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Distributed Selves: Epistolary Form and Identity Across Distance

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Abstract

Studies of epistolary fiction often emphasize voice or interiority without fully explaining how circulation, custody, and delay organize the identities those documents appear to express. This article asks how epistolary form distributes selfhood and ethical responsibility across distance. It compares Samuel Richardson's "Pamela," Frances Burney's "Evelina," Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," and Bram Stoker's "Dracula" through close analysis of letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation. The method tracks who produces, transmits, withholds, receives, and later reinterprets each relevant document. The readings argue that the self emerges through circulation rather than preceding it as a complete interior essence, that document custody influences whose uncertainty becomes credible evidence, and that delay creates obligations because recipients must act before information is complete. By testing these relations across four historically distinct novels, the article contributes an account of epistolary identity as a distributed formal process. It does not claim to establish authorial intention, reader response, or the prevalence of these patterns beyond the selected works.

Keywords: epistolary fiction; identity; documents; mediation; narrative

1 Introduction

The textual interpretation developed here explores how epistolary fiction distributes personal identity across documents, recipients, and unequal channels of transmission. Its corpus comprises Samuel Richardson's "Pamela," Frances Burney's "Evelina," Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," and Bram Stoker's "Dracula". The central claim is that the self emerges through circulation rather than preceding it as a complete interior essence. That proposition carries weight because epistolary form offers an early model of mediated identity relevant to contemporary communication cultures. Attention therefore falls on letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation.

The inquiry is more specific than a general history of distributed identity. Within these texts, epistolary identity is assessed through letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation. Its definition changes only when those features alter the interpretation.

The evidence is synthesized in three findings. First, the self emerges through circulation rather than preceding it as a complete interior essence. Second, document custody determines whose uncertainty becomes credible evidence. Third, delay creates ethical obligations because

recipients must act before information is complete. Together they show that distributed identity is neither a decorative effect nor a label attached after interpretation. The argument remains proportionate to the textual selection.

The central difficulty for Distributed Selves is inferential distance. Letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation are observable in the consulted sources, whereas the account of epistolary identity interprets how those observations connect. The article closes that distance in stages: it identifies a feature, locates its structural neighbors, describes the change it produces, and only then names its historical or aesthetic result. A claim fails when any link in that chain depends on information absent from the cited edition, score, image, film, interface, or performance document.

Terminological precision is necessary for Distributed Selves. Epistolary identity is distinguished from recurrence, theme, and context. Recurrence identifies repetition; theme identifies a field of concern; context situates the work historically. The present argument instead asks how letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation acquire a role through their connection to neighboring events. The distinction does not rank one form of criticism above another. It specifies the task

of this article and prevents evidence gathered for one question from being used as automatic proof of another.

The research question is how circulation, custody, and delay distribute identity and responsibility across epistolary documents. The objective is to compare these operations without reducing documentary form to a vehicle for pre-existing interiority. The article next establishes its critical context and method, develops three findings, discusses their combined implications, and ends with limitations and a conclusion.

Studies of epistolary form clarify how identity is distributed across documents, delays, and addressees. Altman defines epistolarity through the reciprocal relations created by letter exchange [1]. Bray shows how the epistolary novel formalizes consciousness through discontinuous and differently situated acts of writing [2].

2 Epistolary Time, Authority, and Mediation

Narrative temporality explains how delay and later receipt can change the force of an earlier document [3]. Critiques of cultural authority make document custody and credibility historically consequential [4]. Interpretive communities clarify why readers and fictional recipients evaluate incomplete records through shared conventions [5]. Work on scale dis-

tinguishes local documentary sequences from broad claims about the epistolary tradition [6]. Accounts of material cognition support treating copied, carried, and compiled documents as active components of narrative reasoning [7].

3 Documents, Circulation, and Delay

Primary analysis centers on Samuel Richardson's "Pamela" [8], Frances Burney's "Evelina" [9], Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" [10], and Bram Stoker's "Dracula" [11]. Corpus design privileges analytical variation over numerical representativeness. Each item offers a distinct configuration of distributed identity and permits comparison through letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation.

The chosen method combines document-network close reading that maps sender, recipient, delay, custody, copying, and narrative effect.

The evidentiary scale of Distributed Selves is deliberately local: letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation. The method records position, recurrence, interruption, and consequence before assigning interpretive weight. That order matters because a repeated feature may retain its appearance while changing function, whereas a single delayed document may redirect the whole sequence. Claims about intention, reception, or prevalence are withheld because the present method does not supply that evidence.

The evidentiary chain for Distributed Selves runs from source identification to description and only then to interpretation. A page, measure, frame, accession record, or production document is not decorative citation detail; it lets another reader locate the event on which the claim about epistolary identity depends. Missing locators therefore mark a limit in the current draft. They should be resolved against the exact versions actually consulted, never supplied by approximation.

4 The self emerges through circulation rather than preceding it as a complete interior essence

The self emerges through circulation rather than preceding it as a complete interior essence. This temporal dimension is essential. The finding therefore concerns organization, not inventory.

The resulting form is recursive. Interpretation advances, but it also returns to revise what seemed settled. This recursive quality explains why distributed

identity can remain coherent without becoming predictable.

Distributed Selves treats the claim that the self emerges through circulation rather than preceding it as a complete interior essence as an account of organizational pressure. The question is not simply where letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation can be found, but how neighboring events make them expectable, delayed, displaced, or newly prominent. The proposition gains force when a local change reorganizes the reader's, listener's, or viewer's grasp of the larger text. If no such result can be described, the evidence remains an inventory item rather than an argument about epistolary identity.

The textual selection is first approached through Samuel Richardson's Pamela. The reading tests the proposition that the self emerges through circulation rather than preceding it as a complete interior essence by restricting attention to letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation. It then identifies which surrounding relations are necessary for that account.

In Samuel Richardson's Pamela, the proposition that the self emerges through circulation rather than preceding it as a complete interior essence is evaluated through placement, not keyword recurrence. The reading asks what prepares each occurrence of letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation, which agent or compositional layer controls it, and what effect follows. A detail counts as evidence only when its surrounding sequence changes the available judgment. This restriction prevents the case from being reduced to an example chosen after the thesis was formed.

A close reading of Samuel Richardson's Pamela must therefore document the first relevant occurrence of letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation, the expectation active at that moment, and the result that distinguishes it from background recurrence. The case supports Distributed Selves only if those three points can be located in the consulted version. A general resemblance to the other cases is not enough; the instance must show why the proposition about epistolary identity is needed to explain its organization.

The second case, Frances Burney's Evelina, tests the distributive dimension of the argument. Here the governing question is whether document custody determines whose uncertainty becomes credible evidence. This is not treated as

a defect in reliability.

Frances Burney's Evelina changes the scale of comparison. Here epistolary identity is read through the distribution of access, emphasis, and response among texts. The relevant question is not whether the same surface feature returns, but whether its return gives a different participant, voice, register, or position the capacity to redirect interpretation. That distributive test supplies the pressure behind the claim that document custody determines whose uncertainty becomes credible evidence.

For Frances Burney's Evelina, the principal counter-reading treats the observed distribution as a genre convention with no special bearing on epistolary identity. The article answers only at the level of letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation: it asks whether a transfer of access or emphasis produces a following effect that convention alone leaves unexplained. If it does not, the second proposition contracts. If it does, the case clarifies how structural hierarchy becomes an event rather than a static arrangement.

The third comparison centers on Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and gives priority to revision over initial recognition. The interpretive test is whether delay creates ethical obligations because recipients must act before information is complete.

The value of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is retrospective. Following passages are reread against the first account of letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation, allowing the article to distinguish repetition from revision. If the following event merely restates the initial one, the proposition that delay creates ethical obligations because recipients must act before information is complete receives little support. If it changes the status of what the reader, listener, or viewer already encountered, the case reveals how epistolary identity acquires structural memory.

Verification in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein requires two locators: one for the initial treatment of letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation and one for the moment that alters its status. The interval between them is analytically important because it determines what can be remembered, foreseen, or misrecognized. Recording both locations prevents the subsequent reading from being projected backward as if it had been available from the start, and it gives the claim about epistolary identity a visible temporal basis.

The closing comparative test, Bram

Stoker's *Dracula*, functions as a resistant comparison.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* remains in the selection because it resists easy synthesis. Its treatment of letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation tests how far the claim that the self emerges through circulation rather than preceding it as a complete interior essence can travel before medium, genre, or historical circumstance requires qualification. The comparison does not convert resistance into confirmation. It records which part of the proposition holds, which part contracts, and which additional source would be necessary to distinguish between rival explanations.

The resistant role of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* also limits the article's vocabulary. If medium or genre changes the operation of letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation, the comparison names that difference before proposing an analogy. The case may therefore support only part of the claim that the self emerges through circulation rather than preceding it as a complete interior essence. Such partial support is informative: it identifies the condition under which epistolary identity ceases to explain the evidence and marks the point where another historical or compositional account should take over.

5 Document custody determines whose uncertainty becomes credible evidence

Document custody determines whose uncertainty becomes credible evidence. This pattern shifts analysis from isolated form toward distribution. The textual selection repeatedly makes such allocation perceptible.

Distribution gives the second result its precision. The claim that document custody determines whose uncertainty becomes credible evidence calls for more than a contrast between dominant and subordinate positions. It calls for evidence that the contrast changes what can be known, heard, seen, said, or answered. In *Distributed Selves*, letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation make that change traceable. A transfer has force when it reallocates initiative or credibility; otherwise it remains a surface variation. This threshold protects the argument about epistolary identity from turning every difference into hierarchy.

6 Delay creates ethical obligations because recipients must act before information is complete

Evidence finally indicates that delay creates ethical obligations because recipients must act before information is complete. Return, correction, reframing, and delayed outcome are therefore analytical events. They reveal how a work stores difference and activates it ensuing.

Considered as a group, the findings form a sequence of their own. The first identifies a process that directs attention. The second demonstrates that attention and authority are distributed. The third explains how ensuing events revise that distribution. This sequence supports the central thesis that distributed identity is historically variable and formally organized.

The test for the third claim is counterfactual: if the later event were removed, would the earlier reading of letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation remain unchanged? A negative answer supports the proposition that delay creates ethical obligations because recipients must act before information is complete; a positive answer weakens it. *Distributed Selves* uses this test to distinguish memory built by form from similarity noticed by the critic. The distinction becomes consequential for epistolary identity, because retrospective force belongs to the organized sequence and not simply to the reader's ability to place examples side by side.

7 Discussion: What Epistolary Identity Changes

Read as a sequence, the results move from form to allocation and then to revision. The first establishes that the self emerges through circulation rather than preceding it as a complete interior essence; the second, that document custody determines whose uncertainty becomes credible evidence; the third, that delay creates ethical obligations because recipients must act before information is complete. This order prevents epistolary identity from becoming a label applied after interpretation. It names a chain of decisions whose consequences can be checked against the primary texts and their editorial contexts.

Cross-case analysis additionally implies that epistolary form offers an early model of mediated identity relevant to contemporary communication cultures. This consequence does not depend on universal agreement about every example.

The argument is deliberately vulner-

able to revision. If the self emerges through circulation rather than preceding it as a complete interior essence appears only after examples are removed from sequence, the first claim weakens. If document custody determines whose uncertainty becomes credible evidence cannot be tied to a visible allocation of access, emphasis, or agency, the second becomes thematic summary. If delay creates ethical obligations because recipients must act before information is complete depends on knowledge unavailable at the relevant moment, the third becomes retrospective overreach. These failure conditions define what would count against *Distributed Selves*, not only what appears to support it.

The article contributes a distinction between appearance, function, and consequence. Appearance concerns what can be described in letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation; function concerns the connection established by its placement; consequence concerns the judgment made possible by what follows. *Distributed Selves* uses this distinction to prevent epistolary identity from collapsing into a synonym for theme, mood, or context. The three levels may converge, but the argument does not assume that they do so in every work.

The procedure also separates comparison from equivalence. Cases are comparable because each poses a problem involving epistolary identity, not because their historical conditions or formal resources are interchangeable. *Distributed Selves* preserves those differences by defining the shared question at the level of function and the answers at the level of letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation. This arrangement permits synthesis without claiming that one vocabulary exhausts the work of every text, score, image, film, or performance.

The comparative reading's main limitation is that the textual selection concentrates on British prose fiction and treats publication editions as stable analytical objects. It does not establish reception, intention, prevalence, or causal effect. The absence of those methods is acknowledged rather than disguised.

The argument remains accountable because each inference can be challenged at the scale of letters, journals, copied documents, delayed messages, and acts of compilation. A counter-reading must explain the same placement and sequence, not merely supply a different label. This standard neither turns interpretation into measurement nor treats judgment as pri-

vate response. It makes disagreement about epistolary identity specific enough to revise.

8 Conclusion

The research addressed how epistolary fiction distributes personal identity across documents, recipients, and unequal channels of transmission. Through document-network close reading that maps sender, recipient, delay, custody, copying, and narrative consequence, it argued that the self emerges through circulation rather than preceding it as a complete interior essence; that document custody determines whose uncertainty becomes credible evidence; and that delay creates ethical obligations because recipi-

ents must act before information is complete. These claims converge on a relational account of distributed identity.

The broader conclusion is that epistolary form offers an early model of mediated identity relevant to contemporary communication cultures.

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