

Spying on Correspondence in Magical Britain (A QVT Update)



Some time back I blogged about Margaret Mitchell, author of *Gone With the Wind*, and the fact that [she wrote the ending of that book before she did the rest of it](#). Taking a page from her right now, I'm working on the ending to [Queen Victoria's Transmogrifier](#) (QVT). I will feel much more comfortable about other parts of the plotting once I have a definitive picture of what my end-point looks like.

While I don't have my ending nailed yet, one thing this process is doing for me is making clear some facts that must be established in order for my desired end point to transpire.

SPOILER ALERT: While I won't be getting into specifics, I am going to be talking around some spoilerish facts here. Probably you will have forgotten these things by time the book is done (which I hope will be near the end of 2013). But if you are reading this post and plan to read the book shortly thereafter, you may want to just skip down to the "Rules of Magick" subhead below.

So, onwards.

One of these plot back-trails has led me into the land of brain-drain and inventive exercises, for the following reason. Some critical story events depend upon the Queen receiving a gift from a friend. Except, you see, it isn't really her friend who sends the gift. She is duped by virtue of receiving a forged letter that paves the way for Bad Things to happen. And here is where I am forced to put story plotting on hold until I work out the details about the means by which said letter is forged. And more importantly, *why*, in a world where we have magic, a forgery like this is not detected.

Rules of Magick in My Alt-Historical Victorian Setting

Victorian London (and the greater world) where this book is set is a place where magic does in fact exist. In its most commonly practiced form (which, N.B., is not the only form), it is the legacy of Sir John Dee, Leonardo da Vinci and other late-Renaissance philosophers. However, it is not a hey-presto common ability at all. To truly work, magic requires a particular talent closely linked to psychic abilities and sensitivities. The people who are in touch with this capacity and

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functioning at a high level constitute a small minority of the population. So although this world has magic, it is not "commonplace" in the sense that it is in so many fantasy novels. We do not have wizards in every town, schools full of Hogwartian children, or enchanted widgets easing every aspect of modern life in 1871. Magic here is "Magick": a specialized arcane discipline that requires unique Talent, concentrated practice and metaphysical insights to master at a high level of ability.

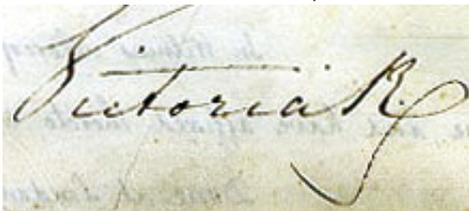
Even here I am talking around the actual rules of magick in this setting, which I'll document in more detail at a later date. Right now, for brief context let me just say that arcane skills in QVT are modeled after some of our own real-world understandings of magickal and metaphysical principles and practices. For instance, "like attracts like" is not just a saying, but a practical magickal "law of (meta)physics", if you will, that has a concrete outworking in how magick functions and is performed.

That said, here is what is challenging my inventive powers right now.

I have the general framework for magick here and much of the details worked out--but not yet 100%. Now, let's consider my plot need for letter-from-friend that dupes Queen Victoria. This needs to be a forgery. But in a world where elites have magick to draw upon, it should not be possible to foist off forgeries upon the Queen herself. There must be a way to authenticate correspondence.

How Do I Know That Letter's From You?

Historically this was done in a few ways: a trusted messenger from the sender's household might hand-deliver a missive, in which case there was no question about the provenance of a document. In addition, documents and letters from someone important were not



merely sealed with an adhesive wafer or simple blob of sealing wax, but would be imprinted with a signet or seal that bore the sender's coat of arms or other personal symbol. This added another layer of certification that a document did actually come from the very hand of the individual who purported to send it. Too, the creation of distinctive signatures with elaborate flourishes added a bit of insurance that one's handwriting would be difficult to forge.

When the security of communications was seriously in question, nobility might send things in diplomatic pouches or in the care of a diplomat or other trusted messenger (as Queen Victoria's daughter Vicky sometimes did, when as Crown Princess of Prussia her activities were regarded with suspicion and spies had been placed in her household[1]). Or they might write letters in code (whether casual or sophisticated depended on their need and inventiveness).

OK, That Letter's From You. What If I Want to Sneak a Peek at It?

No matter what precautions were taken, even coded, signet-sealed letters in a diplomatic pouch could be (and sometimes were) intercepted by spies of a foreign power. The clandestine reading of a notable person's private correspondence has certainly gone on now and then as long as letters have been written, but once postal services began to deliver quantities of mail, this task became much easier. Agents of Bismarck's secret police seem to have gotten some great mileage out of intercepting selected pieces of mail in Germany in the mid- and late 19th century. The use of household spies added another layer of possible interception or at least clandestine reading of correspondence meant for only one person's eyes. Early spy tricks included ways to remove wax seals from letters without breaking them and later replacing them so a letter appeared unread.

If someone was truly intent on reading your mail, and if they had access to your mail at some point in its transit, then it was a pretty sure bet that it would be read. Was this *likely* to happen? No. But if you were for some reason a target of interest, it was possible to do this.



When mail is intercepted and read, what was private information between two is now known by a third party. Thus the spy has gained intelligence. After perusal, the letter would be returned to its original sealed condition and delivered normally, so the recipient would not become suspicious of interference.

If more gamesmanship was afoot, though, the interceptors could take other actions as well.

After reading correspondence, the next most common action would be to **copy** the correspondence they found most interesting. This would happen when they thought they were dealing with a code and wanted to break it, or if the information contained in the letter was sensitive and necessary to preserve it verbatim. Copies would be passed on to the spymasters and added to the files on their subjects of interest.

In some instances, the next steps might be to alter correspondence in some manner or even replace it with a forgery. Such risky actions were not done on a whim, but were part of a hidden game of manipulation or deception that served some spycraft ploy or political maneuver.

Adding Magick to the Mix

Those modes of intercepting personal communications are all things that have transpired in our own, non-magical timeline. What happens when we add magic to the mix? Things change.

Right now I'm working out two batches of "things". One is how the existence of magick changes or ensures privacy in communications. The other is how protective magics meant to insure that correspondence is inviolate, can be bypassed.

I'll get into my solutions in a future post, after I've worked out the kinks. For now, some quick observations.

1. I am skirting the edge of that great quagmire of All The Consequences of Magic in a Fictional World. That is a huge boggy ground. I think the only safe paths through it are to be crystal clear on the actual, applied, practical rules of magic in the world in question, and to adhere to those closely. Then one will not lose one's way through the trackless wilderness of "anything's possible with magic."

2. I feel like I'm programming in BASIC again. Working out logical consequences of magic is largely an IF/THEN exercise. The challenge is to think outside the box created by living (and thinking) in our own non-magical world, and stretching into the perception-space that would feel natural if magick were a given as I have framed it in QVT.

3. My chain of logic right now is running along these lines:

- If there is a type of magick that will allow for it, power elites will discover a way to easily and quickly copy (reproduce) sensitive correspondence. Magical "photocopying", if you will.
- If things can be easily copied by magic, then there is no way to tell what's original, what's a copy, and what is authentic or not.
- Therefore, some magical way of authenticating a document will evolve. Just as we have evolved electronic signatures in our digital era, there will be some kind of arcane marker that certifies a document is an unaltered original.
- If there are ways to certify authenticity, bad guys will try to get around it. Forgers, spies, blackmailers, jealous lovers stirring sh*t, whathaveyou: no security system will go unchallenged. Behind the scenes there will be rounds of improved safeguards, and improved ways to get past them, just as there is in today's world of electronic security.

The big question I must answer is, how is a forgery passed off as real? What magical safeguards are in place to ensure authenticity, and how are these safeguards surmounted?

I'm getting glimpses of the answers to these things, and may share more when I have a better handle on it, unless doing so gets into too many spoilers.

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It's good I'm seeing my way through this underbrush, because a major plot point hinges upon this question, and it is one I must resolve without the feebleness of vaguely hand-wavy "it's magic!" explanation. I mean, it may happen because of magic after all, but that needs to be well set up, plausible, and make solid sense in the context of this magickal Victorian London.

More soon!

1 The odd plight of Vicky, wife of Frederick the Crown Prince of Prussia, makes for interesting and nearly tragic reading. Queen Victoria's daughter was the brilliant one in the family, able to grasp political realities on a large scale. She was a thwarted visionary for democratic reform in Germany. Alas, she and her husband were completely stifled by their strict and overbearing elders and superiors in the Prussian, later Imperial, court in Germany. Long distrusted for her English ways and foreign notions about governance, "the Englishwoman" spent a great deal of her life with spies constantly in her household, and upon the death of her husband even felt it necessary to take extraordinary precautions to get her personal papers smuggled out of Germany and into the safekeeping of her mother Queen Victoria in England--all this just barely one step ahead of her rather hateful son who had just become Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany. For more on this extraordinary woman and her life, see this most excellent biography of her: ["An Uncommon Woman: The Empress Frederick, daughter of Queen victoria, wife of the Crown Prince of Prussia, Mother of Kaiser Wilhelm," by Hannah Pakula, Widenfeld & Nicolson, 1995.](#)

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