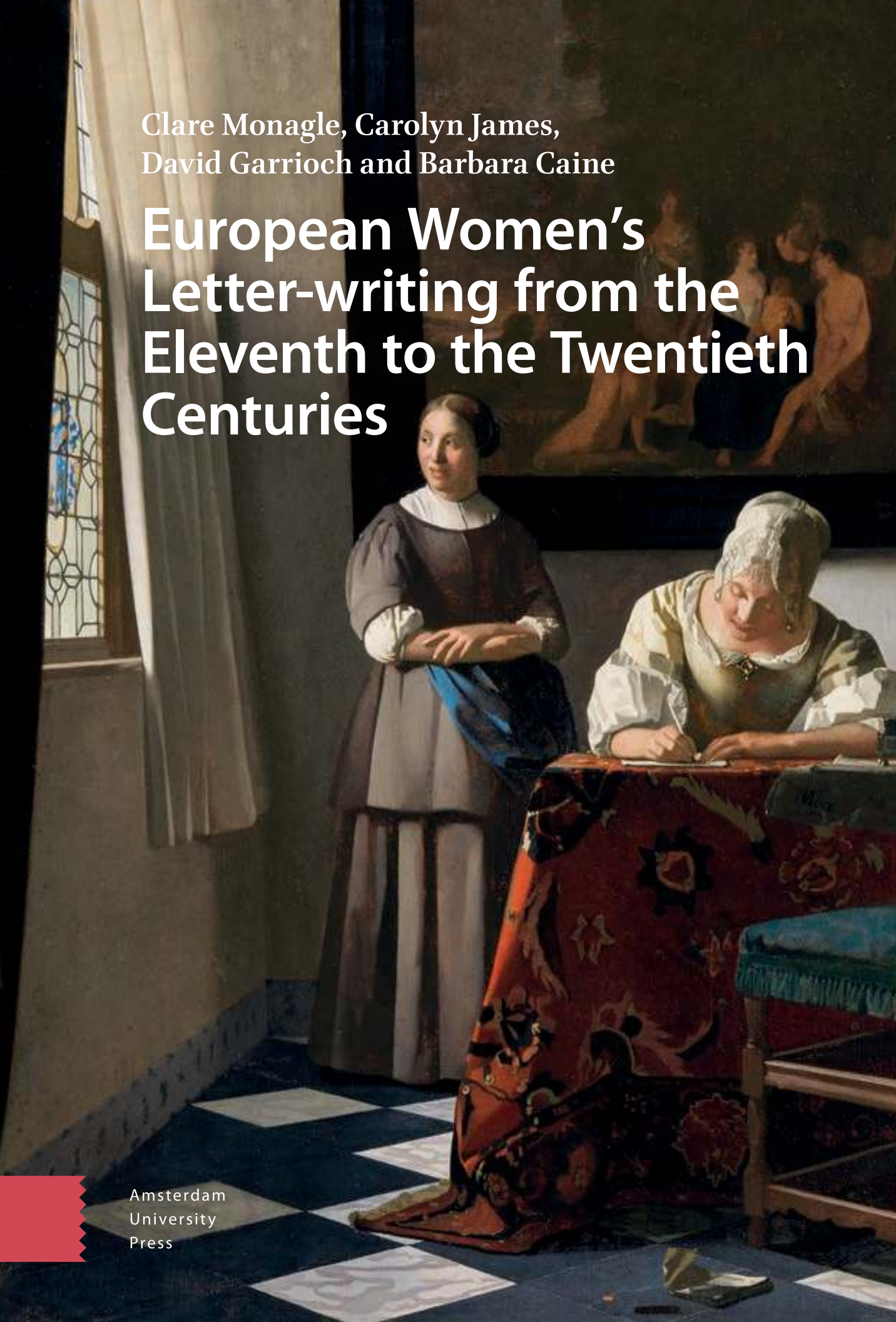


Clare Monagle, Carolyn James,  
David Garrioch and Barbara Caine

# European Women's Letter-writing from the Eleventh to the Twentieth Centuries



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# Introduction

European women have been sending personal letters for centuries. Yet the nature of those letters, their style, the language they employed and their content, has changed beyond recognition. The correspondence of royal or religious women in the medieval period obeyed strict rules and was dependent on the authority of their rank. A letter was a special form of communication, used only in specific circumstances, and was carefully crafted. Its safe arrival was often uncertain. This was worlds away from the intimate and informal exchanges between friends and family members in the nineteenth century, often written with ease and at frequent intervals. Until quite recent times, letter-writing was largely restricted to small numbers of privileged women, and they were often conscious of engaging in an activity usually available only to men. By the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century, not only were far larger numbers of women able to write letters, but they were seen as having a distinctive talent for doing so, which men could not emulate.

In exploring European women's letters across 1,000 years, we seek to identify and explain these long-term shifts in the context and practice of letter-writing, by women from across the social spectrum, with varying levels of formal training. We look particularly at the opportunities that this form of communication opened up for individuals in different eras. Just as women's lives changed from one period to another, so did their access to and their uses of letters. To understand these changes, we need to consider letters as material objects, whose nature has also changed over time, as well as to be attentive to the words, ideas, feelings and representations that they contain. Hence, in this book, we describe how letters were written, despatched, received and read by recipients, and the changing technologies used in producing them in each period. We discuss, too, the changing content of letters and the ways in which it reflects the circumstances of women's lives and their need or desire to express themselves, whether as a way to exercise agency, to maintain family relationships and friendships, or to debate ideas.

Philosophers and literary scholars have argued that through writing, people develop a sense of themselves. Writing implies an audience, and



the act of writing necessarily involves an authorial voice. Any author is therefore in some sense impelled to invent a self. At the same time, writing requires reflection. It encourages an author to interpret and explain, and in the process to work out what she thinks. Those who have studied letters have gone further, suggesting that correspondence represents a very special form of writing. Roger Smith describes the letter in the seventeenth century as 'a route to self-discovery' that 'enhanced a person's capacity to become self-absorbed and self-aware, that is, to become individual'.<sup>1</sup> A number of scholars have argued that this was particularly important for women, who for most of Europe's history were largely excluded from other forms of writing. The letter, writes Marie-Claire Grassi, 'is the only type of text that spontaneously lends itself to self-affirmation'.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, women's letters have been perceived as an enlightening form of self-reflection, a liberating expression of autonomy. For Brigitte Diaz, 'the letter presents itself to women as a privileged means of access to the self, offering the possibility of a real "culture of the self"'.<sup>3</sup>

Personal letters are a special form of 'self-fashioning', to adopt the term employed by Stephen Greenblatt to describe the way that particular writers in sixteenth-century England were able to create their own identity and sense of self within (and to some degree against) the constraints imposed by the social norms of their day.<sup>4</sup> A skilful letter-writer constructs an image of herself, a form of self, in the way that she writes about what she has done, what she thinks, and how she relates to those around her. She also imagines the recipient of her letter and positions herself in relation to that person. Brigitte Diaz expressively describes the letter-writer as an artisan in an 'epistolary workshop ... a field of experimentation where one can *try oneself out*'.<sup>5</sup> This is generally an unconscious process rather than a deliberate one, although some writers were well aware of what they were doing. Charlotte Brontë confessed to her serious friend Ellen Nussey that she had written her a frivolous letter that was better suited to another of her

1 Roger Smith, 'Self-reflection and the self', in Roy Porter (ed.), *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 49–57 (pp. 54, 55).

2 Marie-Claire Grassi, *L'Art de la lettre au temps de la Nouvelle Héloïse et du Romantisme* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1994), p. 220. All translations are ours, unless otherwise indicated.

3 Brigitte Diaz, 'Avant-propos', in Brigitte Diaz and Jürgen Siess (dir), *L'épistolaire au féminin. Correspondances de femmes, XVIIIe–XXe siècle* (Caen: Presses universitaires de Caen, 2006), pp. 7–12 (p. 9). See the stimulating discussion in Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), pp. 2–5.

4 Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

5 Diaz, 'Avant-propos', p. 9.

correspondents, 'so I determined to concoct some production more fit for the inspection of common-sense'.<sup>6</sup> The persona created within a letter is, as Brontë admits, concocted. For this reason, some historians and literary scholars have described letters as 'performances of the self'. The image a writer offers to different people to whom she writes may vary: the self is always, in some sense, present in a letter, yet it is malleable, and the writer adopts different voices and different personas when addressing different audiences. This may seem obvious, but it is important, because it means that a letter is never a 'window onto the soul', as many readers of letters written by people in the past have imagined.<sup>7</sup>

This is magnificently demonstrated by Kelsey Rubin-Detlev in her recent study of the letters of Catherine the Great of Russia. She stresses their intellectual complexity and their importance in establishing and maintaining Catherine's place in the Enlightenment and insists that the letters were her literary masterpiece. Within them, she points out, Catherine consistently constructed herself as an absolute monarch, adopting a persona that was always in some sense a public one. Even in her love letters, she was always the Empress. In writing to different people, Catherine played with gender norms, apparent intimacy, emotion and artful forms of persuasion, all of which were consistent with her sense of her own dignity and power.<sup>8</sup>

While Catherine's letters show how important they were for women seeking to establish and maintain their own authority, in other correspondences where there was greater equality between the writers, more negotiation was involved. Elizabeth MacArthur illustrates this point in her literary reading of the exchanges between Madame du Deffand and Horace Walpole, a man whom she had met in Paris and loved dearly and with whom she sought to continue a relationship when he returned to England:

In her efforts to write herself into an epistolary story, du Deffand must consider not only what role(s) she would like to play and what sort of relationship she would like to have with Walpole, but also whether Walpole will be willing to participate in the plots she attempts to set up.<sup>9</sup>

6 Quoted in Pauline Nestor, 'New opportunities for self-reflection and self-fashioning: Women, letters and the novel in mid-Victorian England', *Literature & History*, 19 (2010), 18–35 (p. 20).

7 Nestor, 'New opportunities', pp. 23–4. Peter Burke, 'The self from Petrarch to Descartes', in Porter (ed.), *Rewriting the Self*, pp. 17–28 (esp. pp. 18–24).

8 Kelsey Rubin-Detlev, *The Epistolary Art of Catherine the Great*, Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019).

9 Elizabeth J. MacArthur, *Extravagant Narratives: Closure and Dynamics in the Epistolary Form* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 126.

These two correspondents were very much aware of the way that they were using letters, both to continue a relationship and to tell a story about it, and they referred explicitly within their correspondence to how it was created and what it meant.

In this book, we build on these insights. We understand letters as performative acts, as forms of self-fashioning, and we are interested in the ways in which some women were able to use letters to take charge of their own lives. The term 'author' comes from the Latin *auctor*, which also gives us the word *auctoritas*, meaning 'authority'. Writing letters gave the women who wrote them the authority to create a space for themselves, to influence their own fate. This, nevertheless, always had to be done with an eye to social and gender norms. The personas that they created had to be believable and were therefore limited by wider factors such as family, race, sex and status. This means, in turn, that the possibilities opened up by letters varied over time and from place to place, and it is that historical process we are seeking to understand. Our overarching argument is that letters did indeed play a significant role in shaping women's gendered self-awareness and identities (the plural is important), but in varying ways at different times. We propose that the history of European women's letters is not linear but has taken many detours and winding paths, even while clear long-term changes are visible.

The book combines extensive primary research with a concern to synthesise much of the recent scholarship in the field and to explore the history of women's letters over many centuries. It includes social and intellectual history, the history of gender and changing concepts of femininity in its analysis of letters, but it does so in an informal way, looking at a number of particular examples and anecdotes and linking them with broader themes and significant historical patterns and developments. While hoping that it will have something to say to specialists about this longer history, the book is primarily addressed to students and to a wider audience of general readers interested in women's history and in the history of letters.

Our story opens in the Middle Ages and ends in the twentieth century, though we do not claim that women's letter-writing began or ended at these particular times. The twentieth century is an obvious place to stop, because that was when letters were superseded, as the primary form of personal communication and area of experimentation, by other media. We begin in medieval Europe around 1000 CE, the period in which letter-writing across the continent was becoming more commonplace as a means of conducting business and governance. This is not to say that women in early medieval Europe had not written letters, and there is certainly some evidence of their correspondence found in surviving letters and in the extant replies

written to them by ecclesiastical and monastic luminaries, such as Anselm of Canterbury. It was not, however, until the so-called high Middle Ages, as Chapter 1 explains, that conditions allowed some women to maintain very significant correspondences and for these to be preserved. Letters had become a political and social instrument that, thanks to the nature of inheritance systems, structures of political loyalty and new institutional frameworks, were open for use by a restricted number of powerful and educated women. That provides a convenient point of departure for exploration of the many ways in which, over the intervening centuries, women have used letters to express their ideas and their desires, even to command authority and to achieve their goals.

There is, of course, a huge literature on women's letters. Nearly all of it, however, focuses on relatively short periods. Literary scholars, who have done some of the best work in the field, concentrate overwhelmingly on individual writers or sets of correspondence, or on the relationship between letters and other literary genres, generally at a particular moment.<sup>10</sup> Historians working on letters also tend to be specialists on a given place and time. This has led to claims being made about the specificity of certain periods. For example, Marie-Claire Grassi has argued that the late eighteenth century witnessed the appearance of epistolary intimacy. That suggestion has been challenged by early modern historians, who have traced similar expressions in earlier sets of women's correspondence. James Daybell, for instance, argues that married women's letters of the Tudor period made increasing use of the language of love and emotion.<sup>11</sup>

Much larger claims have been made by some scholars working on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who have seen women's letter-writing as a privileged gateway to modernity and to an autonomous female self. Dena Goodman sees the eighteenth century as the time when, through

10 Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus OH: Ohio State University Press, 1982); Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980); MacArthur, *Extravagant Narratives*; and James How, *Epistolary Spaces: English Letter-writing from the Foundation of the Post Office to Richardson's Clarissa* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

11 Marie-Claire Grassi, 'Naissance de l'intimité épistolaire (1780–1830)', in Benoît Melançon (ed.), *L'invention de l'intimité au siècle des lumières. Littérales*, 17 (1995), 67–76. James Daybell, *Women Letter-writers in Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 25, 181, and chapter 8. See also M. O'Connor, 'Representations of intimacy in the life-writing of Anne Clifford and Anne Dormer', in P. Coleman, J. Lewis and J. Kowalik (eds), *Representations of the Self from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 79–96. Sara Crangle comments on 'the intimate style and tone' of Osborne's letters: 'Epistolarity, audience, selfhood: the letters of Dorothy Osborne to William Temple', *Women's Writing*, 12 (2005), 433–52 (p. 434).

letter-writing and a new consumer culture, the 'modern woman' came into being. Carolyn Steedman, however, has drawn attention to the risk present in 'the way in which the woman writing a letter has come into being ... as an account of modern subjectivity, modern gender identity, modern political structures of public and private'. This can easily become a female version of the myth of the 'discovery of the self' in the modern West, linked to a narrative of rising individualism.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, scholars working on earlier periods have been quick to offer examples of women who wrote letters that enacted a sense of self. For James Daybell, letters of any period are a 'technology of the self', and he observes that sixteenth-century women's letters 'led to vivid expressions of self' while also reflecting their writers' interiority: 'letter-writing performed an increasing range of functions that led to a degree of inwardness'.<sup>13</sup> Some authors have suggested that, rather than producing a new sense of self at a particular moment, women's letters enabled the construction, in each historical period, of a kind of selfhood that was shaped by the social context of the time.

Taking a longer-term perspective, as we do in this book, makes it easier to identify the particularities of different periods. But it also raises questions about the value of letters in any quest for an 'authentic' female historical self. Our argument in this book is that, in each period, women used letters to fashion themselves discursively, variously as queens, penitents or supplicants, holy women, obedient wives, good mothers, dutiful daughters, confidants, lovers or intimate friends. Yet they did this within the framework of their relationships with other people and according to the social and gender norms of their time. Women of high birth, used to being obeyed, performed authority, even while on occasion acknowledging that they belonged to 'the weaker sex'. Highly educated women displayed the confidence of their intellect while employing conventional expressions of modesty. In certain instances, we have evidence that the persona a particular woman constructed in her letters did not match the face-to-face relationship she had with her correspondent, which was perhaps less harmonious or more intimate. On occasion, women acknowledged that they could not have expressed themselves in the same way had they been in the physical presence of the person to whom they were writing. Epistolary spaces, to use James How's term, were a little like today's virtual spaces, allowing

12 Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*. Carolyn Steedman, 'A woman writing a letter', in Rebecca Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-writers, 1600–1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 111–33 (p. 126). See also the essays in Porter (ed.), *Rewriting the Self*.

13 Daybell, *Women Letter-writers in Tudor England*, p. 7.

experimentation with imaginative possibilities that could not always be expressed in everyday life. Were they any more or any less authentic?

Understanding letters in this way, as bounded discursive performances, enables us to see how women in the past managed and sometimes overcame the constraints placed upon them. Covering a long period allows us to observe how the possibilities created by access to letter-writing shifted over time. In each of the following chapters, we discuss four major factors that shaped the ways women were able to use letters. The first is the material nature of the letters themselves, together with the technologies of writing and sending them, and the degree of access that women had to these technologies. The second is the gender norms of the period, which also heavily determined women's access to letter-writing. The third is the purposes that letters served, and the fourth is the conventions of the letter as a form of writing.

The technologies of letter production have changed considerably over the centuries. At first glance, a letter is a simple thing. It is a material object, words inscribed on a portable surface and delivered to a recipient. It requires the ability to write (oneself or by proxy), something to write with and on, and a means of carriage. It also has one or more recipients. Yet over time, each of these components of the letter has changed, and so have the opportunities for women to engage in letter-writing.

For much of the past 1,000 years, the first obstacle that most women faced was simply their inability to write. In the Middle Ages, even elite women were rarely fully literate. Across most of the European world, it was only in the eighteenth century that female literacy rates – measured by women's ability to sign their names – reached significant levels, and only in the nineteenth century could a large proportion of the female population write. Even then, there were major regional differences.<sup>14</sup>

Indication of literacy is usually taken to be the ability of a person to sign her name rather than to use a mark. But those who could do this were not necessarily able to write anything more challenging. For much of the period that we cover, writing a letter required proficiency with a quill, which in turn meant that a person was trained and had a lot of practice in honing fine motor skills. Using a quill also required knowledge of how to cut it properly,

14 Martyn Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 90, 154, 171–9; Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 424; David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 119–21, 176–7; and Roger Schofield, 'Dimensions of illiteracy, 1750–1850', *Explorations in Economic History*, 10 (1973), 437–54 (p. 446).

and how to trim and recut it as the edge wore down, otherwise it produced scratches and ink blots. For centuries, too, many writers used homemade ink and needed to know how to prepare it. And only in the past 300 years or so has most paper had a consistently even surface – parchment was only for very special letters and was very costly. Letter-writing, therefore, meant a considerable investment of time, but also of money. For a long time, even ordinary writing materials were quite expensive, and that represented a greater challenge for women than for men, since they usually had fewer financial resources. Only with the arrival of new technologies – the cheap commercial ink, better paper and metal nibs that became widely available in the nineteenth century, followed by fountain pens, and finally ballpoint pens and typewriters in the twentieth century – did writing become much easier.

Of course, not being able to write herself did not prevent a woman from dictating her letter, but that created an obstacle that she needed to overcome. She needed a literate friend, or else to have the resources to employ a scribe or a public letter-writer. As we shall see, women in a surprisingly wide range of social groups did this, right into the early modern period, and sometimes even women who could write chose, for strategic reasons, to dictate letters to a scribe. Nevertheless, the mediation of another person (generally a man) had implications for what could be said, how it was said, and how it was received by the person to whom it was sent.

To produce a letter, however, it is not enough to be able to form words on the page. The process also involves what Susan Whyman has termed 'epistolary literacy'.<sup>15</sup> Letters are organised in very specific ways, and these too have changed over the centuries. As we shall see in Chapter 1, for a long time formal letters were structured according to the so-called *ars dictaminis*, which required a certain type of opening, then moved from greeting to compliment, to the main subject of the letter, and the closing salutation. Even in later centuries, when these rules were largely abandoned, there were still strong conventions surrounding, for example, forms of address ('My Lady' or 'Dear so-and-so') and of closing ('Your humble servant' or 'Your faithful friend'). These reflected the relationship between writer and recipient and, in very simplified form, remain in use today. There was also an etiquette involved in the physical presentation of a letter. The kind of paper chosen (its quality and the size of the sheet) was an expression of the sender's status but was also adapted to the recipient. The spacing on

15 Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 9.

the page similarly reflected the relationship between the writer and the intended reader, since leaving lots of blank space at the top and bottom was a sign of respect. This remained the case from the Middle Ages through to, in some cases, the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

Epistolary literacy also meant knowing how to send a letter. It had to be properly addressed, beginning with the correct title for the recipient. Once postal systems replaced private messengers, the address had to be written in a way that the post-boy could interpret, especially before house numbers were in common use (generally in the nineteenth century). Ideally, the writer would use a separate line for each element of the address. In 1760 an official French almanac alerted the public that, when sending letters to less-well-known towns and villages, it was important to include the province, so the post would know where to take it.<sup>17</sup>

Before envelopes came into frequent use in the nineteenth century, letters were simply folded and the join was sealed with wax. The name and address were written on the outside, so the writer had to be sure to leave sufficient space. She also had to know that when the wax seal was broken, it would often leave a hole, so anything on the back might become illegible. Knowledge of the days and even the hours at which the post left could be important, particularly if the destination was served only once or twice a week. For those without servants, it was important to know where to take the letter, to a post office or box. Even receiving letters involved a passing familiarity with postal practice. An eagerly expected letter would see people awaiting the post-boy on the day and approximate hour of his passage. They needed to have cash to pay for the postage, since until postage stamps were introduced in the mid-nineteenth century, it was usually the recipient who paid. Until relatively recent times, therefore, the technologies of writing and sending letters put them beyond the reach of most of the population.

The second factor that shaped access to letter-writing was gender norms. For a long time, letters were considered a male monopoly. Educating girls was widely seen to be, at best, a waste of time, and at worst, dangerous. Women did not need to be able to write in order to perform domestic tasks and do suitable agricultural or artisanal work. Male intellectual leaders long subscribed to the view that women were not suited to education. ‘I do not know the reason’, wrote Erasmus of Rotterdam, one of the leading

16 Cécile Dauphin, ‘Letter-writing manuals in the nineteenth century’, in Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau and Cécile Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 112–57 (pp. 143–5).

17 *Almanach royal* (Paris: Le Breton, 1760), p. 440.



sixteenth-century humanists, in his *Colloquia*, 'but just as a saddle is not suitable for an ox, so learning is unsuitable for a woman'.<sup>18</sup> There were numerous exceptions, nevertheless, particularly for merchant women who needed to be literate in order to keep accounts, and gentry women who might manage an estate, at least in their husbands' absence. Some even wrote business letters. Religious women, too, might learn to read, so that they could have access to pious works.

Some humanists did see female education as desirable, and in the sixteenth century, certain theologians began to argue that women would be more devout if they could read sacred works. However, for a long time, women who were taught to read were not taught to write, and a woman who wrote letters risked being perceived as a freak or as unfeminine. This changed when the need grew for elite women to write letters, and when male authorities decided that writing was a useful moral discipline and would equip women to assist with their children's education. In the seventeenth century, letter-writing even became a pedagogical tool in schools for upper-class and middle-class girls, and some elite women began to be praised for their letters. Yet even then, gender norms still restricted their choice of correspondents. It was highly suspect for a woman to write to a man other than her husband or a close male relative, because women were widely seen as easily seduced or excessively lustful. The first public postal services provoked concerns that women would use them to arrange assignations with lovers.

Gender norms also had a huge impact on what women wrote. As many scholars have pointed out, women's letters often differed from those produced by men. Women routinely apologised for their poor style, their spelling or their handwriting, and they multiplied conventional expressions of modesty, especially when offering opinions, and even more so when writing to a man. Intellectual and philosophical topics were long considered unsuitable, even in correspondence with other women. Gendered conceptions of appropriate behaviour shifted over time, but they played an important role in shaping women's letter-writing practices.

The third general factor discussed in each chapter is the purpose for which letters were written. The political and social conditions of each historical moment dictated women's need and desire to send letters. For much of European history, friends and family generally lived within visiting distance, and few people travelled frequently. Letters were necessary for dynastic purposes; for example, where a princess married into the royal family of another kingdom, or when a daughter from a great noble lineage went to

18 Quoted in Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing*, p. 18.

live with her husband in another county. As trade networks expanded and universities were established in major centres across Europe, merchants and students joined diplomats on the roads. Letters became important for family business purposes and to keep in touch, offering greater incentives for women to write or dictate letters. Correspondence was also important within the Church, for communication between convents, for building alliances, and in the case of nuns, to stay in contact with the world outside. Later, within the so-called 'Republic of Letters' of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, women intellectuals sent personal letters to both male and female peers in other parts of Europe. Across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both temporary and permanent migration took far larger numbers of people both to the growing cities of Europe and to colonies across the sea, prompting more and more women to put quill to paper.

The fourth key factor determining the possibilities that access to letter-writing opened up for women, in each period, was the conventions governing style, content and how the writer presented herself. Letters are a literary form, and like other types of literature they are written in accordance with particular norms. These included the formal rules already mentioned – the *ars dictaminis* – that dictated the structure and, to a degree, the content of most medieval and post-medieval letters. But even after those rules were abandoned, mercantile correspondence adopted quite similar forms in different places. In personal letters, the degree of formality varied widely but specific modes of address remained conventional, not only in terms such as 'My Lady' at the head of a letter, but even in the choice of 'you' or 'thou' (*vous/tu* in French, *Sie/Du* in German, and so on). It was unusual, before the eighteenth century, for a noblewoman to use the informal pronoun in writing to her husband, but it would have been almost unthinkable, by the early twentieth century, for a middle-class woman not to do so. Another powerful convention, taken from Cicero and Seneca, was that personal letters should be conversations. For a long time, however, polite conversation was considered an 'art', and etiquette books set out its rules. For Baldassare Castiglione, in his 1528 work *The Courtier*, 'a noble and friendly manner' was indispensable, while Giovanni della Casa, thirty years later, insisted that it meant avoiding talking about one's children, one's wealth or status, or one's dreams. Late seventeenth-century recommendations ruled out discussion of politics, and Madeleine de Scudéry advised sticking to 'everyday and frivolous things'.<sup>19</sup> These constraints were similarly applied to polite letters: in the seventeenth

19 Peter Burke, *The Art of Conversation* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 101, 107–8.

century it was poor form, in aristocratic circles, to talk about oneself. Girls were taught that letters were intended to give pleasure to their recipients, and this implied focusing on them, not on the author. There are many letters from these periods broadly conforming to such advice. By the nineteenth century, by contrast, a personal letter was understood as a place where people expressed their innermost thoughts, and women often claimed to be doing this, and to demand the same from their correspondent. In reality, of course, they did not necessarily do so, for it might be hurtful or cause offence. Charlotte Brontë was just one woman who was well aware that she wrote quite differently to different correspondents, adapting each letter to its intended reader.

Here again, gender norms remained powerful. They influenced what women discussed with other women and what they could write to men, often prescribing or ruling out particular topics. There were also certain types of letter that had their own, more specific conventions, such as merchants' letters of the early modern period. Among personal letters, the love letter and the maternal advice letter are also obvious examples. After the invention of printing, both were strongly influenced by published literature that offered numerous models.

When we read women's letters from past centuries, therefore, we must keep these conventions in mind. Letters cannot be read as offering a direct insight into the thinking and subjectivity of women in the past. This does not mean, though, that there was no room for individuality or creativity. On the contrary, as Elizabeth MacArthur has pointed out:

Letters are as much fictional constructions as they are transparent reflections. Letter writers do not merely reproduce the sentiments they feel and the events they observe; they transform them, whether consciously or unconsciously, into written texts whose organization, style, vocabulary, and point of view generate particular meanings.<sup>20</sup>

When we take into account the epistolary conventions in play when a given letter was written, we can better understand the way that women operated within them, employed language creatively and artfully, and even used letters to express opinions and to make claims. When we remember what it was, and was not, possible to say and do at that moment, we realise the power that letters could have. To take just one example, religion in general was a subject considered entirely appropriate for women. But religion and politics were often tightly connected, so commentary on the one was often an intervention

20 MacArthur, *Extravagant Narratives*, p. 118.

in the other. In some cases, too, Church teachings about spiritual equality could lead women to reflect on gender inequalities in their lived experience.

When we consider all the factors that shaped women's letter-writing, then, their correspondence can offer insights into the multiple ways that they could negotiate their own horizon of possibility, within often bounded worlds. The opportunities opened up by letters, moreover, have changed over time. Women's surviving letters offer witness to the creative strategies they employed, in each historical period, to protect their interests and to ensure their futures, whether it was a royal mistress cultivating patronage in the court, or a woman setting out for a suitor what she expected from marriage. Much feminist scholarship has lamented the difficulty of tracking the ingenious and canny ways in which women have managed their own lives, particularly in the premodern era, and their letters offer a still under-utilised way of finding out.

Taking a long view, across centuries, while also trying to understand what is typical and what is new in each period, creates some significant methodological challenges. Our sample size varies enormously across the years covered. Only small numbers of letters were produced in the Middle Ages, when they were the domain of the elites and writing and sending them required considerable resources. By the end of our period, systems such as the Penny Post and mass literacy had enabled a proliferation of women letter-writers. But the collections we possess do not always reflect the balance of letters actually written. Women's letters were far less likely to be preserved than those of men, and those that have been preserved sometimes exist because they were written by exceptional women, such as queens and saints. In other cases, they survived because they were archived by royal bureaucracies or in the family repositories of aristocratic lineages. In more recent times, libraries have collected the letters of women who corresponded with famous men, or who were themselves well known, often as literary figures or scientists. Access to surviving women's letters can also be difficult, as few have been published in reliable editions. James Daybell, Susan Whyman, Marie-Claire Grassi and Cécile Dauphin and her colleagues, among others, have discovered an unsuspected wealth of women's letters in widely dispersed local archives and family collections.<sup>21</sup> It would take an enormous team to survey and collect them for each part of Europe. And once Latin ceased to be the primary language of letter-writing, the variety of vernacular languages in which

21 Daybell, *Women Letter-writers in Tudor England*; Whyman, *The Pen and the People*; Grassi, *L'Art de la lettre*; and Cécile Dauphin, Pierrette Lebrun-Pézerat and Danièle Poublan, *Ces bonnes lettres: Une correspondance familiale au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).

women wrote posed a further challenge. Yet the kind of close analysis that our questions necessitate is often difficult if we depend on translations.

We have, of course, relied on the vast literature on women's letter-writing that has appeared, much of it over the past thirty years. But alongside this, each chapter chooses individual sets of letters and particular correspondents for close analysis. Sometimes the writers were unusual, like Héloïse and Madame de Sévigné, whose letters demonstrate the possibilities open to exceptional women at a given moment. In other cases, we have chosen letters that were more typical of each period, in order to show how specific changes were becoming widespread and to explore their implications.

We have not attempted to be exhaustive in our coverage and have not examined every kind of letter written by women in the past. We have set aside formal petitions, for example, and letters that were purely routine and impersonal, such as those exclusively concerned with business, or polite notes conveying condolences or thanks. We have not considered fictional letters, on which a huge amount has been written, although we acknowledge their importance in legitimising and shaping the form, content and subjectivity of women's letters.

We have paid particular attention to the letters that were new or distinctive in particular periods: those written by the wives of merchants in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; women's correspondence with family members and with friends in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the letters of migrants, on the one hand, and of sisters and intimate friends, on the other, in the nineteenth century. This has also meant that, where specific categories of letter continued to be written and used in similar ways for centuries, we have usually introduced them in the context in which they appeared and were most important, and have simply noted that they continued to be produced in later periods. An example is the letters of early modern religious women, which are discussed in Chapter 2. Many of them used letters very effectively to get around increasing isolation from the secular world, as well as to defend their convents, their orders or their faith. They continued to do this in the following centuries, but in those later periods new forms of women's letters warrant our attention.

For similar reasons, the geographical focus of our study remains limited. We are concerned with the European world, initially the Latin West of the medieval period, subsequently the wider European continent, and in the age of overseas expansion we have taken some examples from the colonies. Again, this is partly a pragmatic decision. The sources for these areas, over 1,000 years, are already vast. But we are also concerned with change over time rather than with comparisons between societies, and the European world,

in this respect, possesses a cultural unity that enables us to make viable generalisations. At the same time, at particular moments and in dealing with certain themes, we focus more on some parts of Europe than on others, either because of the availability of case studies or because the changes that we are tracing occurred earlier, or more conspicuously, in those places.

The chronological sweep of the book exceeded the expertise of any of us as individual historians, and hence ours is very much a collaborative endeavour. We have worked together closely over several years on the approach, on how the chapters would be framed, and on the key issues we would discuss. Each of us took primary responsibility for the chapter that fitted most obviously within our area of expertise: Clare Monagle for the first chapter on medieval women; Carolyn James for the second chapter on the vernacular letter; David Garrioch for the third chapter on familiar letters; and Barbara Caine for the fourth chapter on the intimate letter. But once each chapter was written, we all read it closely and commented in detail to ensure its close fit with those that preceded or followed it. As a result, our collective and collaborative input is evident throughout the book. We have all used sources in different languages and we should note that all the translations are ours, unless otherwise indicated.

Our overall structure is chronological. This structure allows us to trace the growing assurance with which women wrote letters from the medieval to the modern period as letters themselves, once seen as the province of men, came to be seen as a form of writing at which women excelled. The chronological framework also shows how women worked with and moulded the rules that governed letter-writing in the medieval and early modern periods to express their own wishes, desires and personalities and how in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they moved away from these formal rules to create familiar and then intimate letters.

The opening chapter, therefore, covers the medieval period, from about 1000 CE to the fourteenth century. Only small numbers of women's letters survive from these centuries, mainly those of queens, powerful noblewomen and religious women. They generally used scribes, and their correspondence was strongly shaped by the context of 'feudal' relationships of loyalty and subordination. Operating within the conventional rules governing the form of letters, powerful women used them to claim the authority that their office and rank legitimately gave them. Some also used letters to exercise patronage or to demand respect for their persons, their intellect and for their standing as mothers or wives.

Our second chapter takes up the story in the mid-fourteenth century, when new opportunities for women to write letters opened up with the

increasingly widespread use of vernacular languages. Merchant women in the developing urban centres of Europe, and particularly in the north of Italy, lived in an environment where letter-writing was indispensable, and the needs of family businesses drew them into the practice. They then used letters for purposes of their own, shaping mercantile letters to include personal claims and requests, especially from wives to husbands. The same is true of gentry women, particularly from the late fifteenth century onwards as women sought to manage families and to maintain close relationships with absent family members. As noted earlier, nuns and other religious women also made frequent use of letters right across the early modern period. As convents were forced to cut themselves off more and more from the secular world, nuns found in letters a way of reducing their increasing social isolation and of defending their interests.

Chapter 3 moves on, chronologically, to examine the heyday of what came to be called the 'familiar letter', and one at which women excelled. This involved a more informal way of writing and was used by growing numbers of women in the late seventeenth century and across the eighteenth century. This form of letter, combined with the greater ease of sending letters, thanks to expanding public postal services, enabled some women to counter the limitations that social and gender norms placed on their movements and on their communication with others. Women were writing to a wider range of people and shaping letters, often in innovative ways, to develop and maintain those relationships.

The fourth chapter focuses on the development of a new conception of epistolary intimacy in women's letters that is evident from the late eighteenth century onwards. In that period, personal letters, written by women without the intervention of scribes, were increasingly understood as private and intended only for the recipient. Further important developments in the technology of letter-writing and postal services supported this development and enabled a vast expansion in both the numbers and range of letters written by women, including those in Europe's colonies. The intimacy of nineteenth-century letters also allowed women new opportunities for articulating and recasting their sense of self.

This book concludes with some reflections on the changes brought by the twentieth century with, on the one hand, mass literacy, and, on the other hand, the advent of the telegraph and the telephone. The function of letters in the lives of many European women changed as their access to education, paid employment and political rights meant that letters ceased to provide the only way for them to negotiate power or influence.

# 1 Authority and the Self: the Letters of Medieval Women<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This chapter investigates the letter as a privileged source of authority for elite medieval women, for whom, given the myriad restrictions on their mobility and institutional access, letter-writing often afforded their best means to demonstrate authority, transact business and advocate for their families, natal or spiritual. The chapter argues that, consequently, women writers deployed the genre to articulate claims for prestige and acuity in gendered terms. Letters enabled religious women to disseminate their theology, as well as claims for independence from local ecclesiastical oversight; and noblewomen to practise patronage, build alliances and communicate with menfolk away at war or conducting business. For most, letter-writing was the only form of writing open to them, and so it became fundamental to the making of women's authority in the Middle Ages.

**Keywords:** mysticism, monasticism, rhetoric, Latin language, authority, nobility

Medieval Europeans were, for the most part, unlettered. The written word generally, and the epistle particularly, tended to be utilised for formal purposes, and produced by the few who had had access to a formal education, either their own or that of someone in their service.<sup>2</sup> Letter-writing was governed by strict rhetorical formula, and the genre demanded proficiency in

<sup>1</sup> Dr Kathleen Neal contributed research support and intellectual engagement in the early stages of this project. For her work on the epistolarity of medieval women, see 'From letters to loyalty: Aline la Despenser and the meaning(s) of a noblewoman's correspondence in thirteenth-century England', in Susan Broomhall (ed.), *Authority, Gender and Emotions in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 18–33.

<sup>2</sup> Elisabetta Bartoli and Christian Høgel (eds), *Medieval Letters: Between Fiction and Document* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015).



and compliance with epistolary norms. In following and flourishing within these rhetorical norms, the sender was able to display privilege and assert legitimacy. To be able to send a letter, and to be able to do so properly, was to signal one's own superior status in a continent in which very few could do so. Compared to the chapters that follow, therefore, the extant corpus of medieval letters from which we draw is very small, as is the proportion of medieval letters that were sent under the name of a woman. In addition, any study of medieval epistolarity must be mindful of the degree to which evidence from that period has been lost. Institutions that housed letter collections, such as monasteries and aristocratic domains, have obviously themselves been transformed or destroyed in the centuries subsequent to the Middle Ages. It is impossible to gauge, for example, the scale of documentary loss afforded by events such as the dissolution of the monasteries in sixteenth-century England and Ireland, or in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Much of what does remain is now found in national libraries and archives, institutions mostly established in the nineteenth century to serve the image and functions of the emerging form of the nation state. Extant letters by medieval women, then, have survived by virtue of their elite nature, through historical serendipity, as well as in being assessed as bearing a patrimonial or political significance at some moment in modernity.

These disclaimers notwithstanding, in what follows, we will see that medieval women writers deployed the form of the letter with disproportionate acuity and skill, and gendered the form to their own ends. In particular, the most significant of medieval women's letters subverted metaphors of feminine frailty and maternal abjection to insist on a distinct form of gendered spiritual and emotional privilege. The lives of medieval women, even the most privileged among them, were governed by structures of restraint that were particular to their gender. The letter was one of the few available technologies that enabled them to negotiate worlds to which they had limited access, and to express their authority and legitimacy as women on the page.

Around 987 CE, for example, a woman called Emma wrote to her sister-in-law Theophanu, beseeching her for help and support. Emma had once been exalted as Queen of the Franks through her marriage, and, as the daughter of the king and queen of Italy, she was connected to a number of Europe's leading families. Her marriage to Lothar, King of the Franks, had apparently been a long and stable one. After he died, however, she was accused of having committed adultery with a prominent cleric and was imprisoned in Laon. She began a long campaign to clear her name

and leaned on her prominent connections to gain her release. She wrote to Theophanu:

May the piety of your name assist the afflicted captive from her predators.  
I once had family and rank and the name of kings. Now, as if without  
family or rank, I am afflicted with all kinds of abuses, made the captive  
handmaid of most cruel enemies.<sup>3</sup>

In few words, Emma described the degradation and indignity of her changed circumstances, her reduction in rank to that of handmaiden at the hands of her 'predators'. The story she offered was one of violation of her womanly noble dignity. She pleaded with Theophanu to act in a manner appropriate to her piety, and to intervene on her behalf. Constricted and confined, Emma deployed the only mode of communication across distance available to her: that of the epistle. Emma was imprisoned physically, but the letter enabled her to negotiate with her networks and to represent her rightful authority, as she saw it. As a woman in the Middle Ages, even as an elite woman, there were a great many forms of constraint placed on her power, her movement and her legitimacy. As such, Emma's letter is a salient place to begin this examination of women's letters in the Middle Ages. However limited the epistolary record of women writers was in this period, for the most part it consisted of letters written by elite women to flex familial and social networks, those who were hoping to transcend the forms of clausturation that pertained to all women, both spiritual and secular.<sup>4</sup>

Emma's letter was unusual for its time, at least in terms of the extant sources available to us.<sup>5</sup> The vast majority of the communication on the European continent in 1000 CE was spoken rather than written and took place in small communities. The written word was a precious and rare thing, deployed by elites for elite purposes. Most of the population was illiterate, including the nobility. Writing was a skill almost entirely exclusive to clergy, monks and some nuns. The Bible was the *sacra pagina* – the sacred page – and

3 'A letter from Emma, Queen of the Franks', trans. by Joan Ferrante, *Epistolae*, <<https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/13.html>> (accessed 9 July 2020).

4 On the lives and situations of European medieval women, see Judith Bennett and Ruth Karras (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

5 For excellent general introductions to medieval letters and letter collections, as well as to the limitations of the archival record, see Christian Kuhn 'Letters', pp. 1881–97, and Walter Ysebaert, 'Letter Collections (Latin West and Byzantium)', pp. 1898–904, both found in Albrecht Classen (ed.), *A Handbook of Medieval Studies: Terms, Methods, Trends*, vol. 3, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010).

its apprehension required literacy. Literacy, as a skill, was tethered to the need to read and interpret the Bible. This monopoly of literacy gave the clergy enormous authority, and it was to them that secular authorities turned when they needed written documentation. It seems that most conversations, most transactions, most oaths, most storytelling, most teaching – in short, most communication – took place face to face. Memory, collective and individual, was the dominant archive of the early Middle Ages. It was through oral communication that people shared stories, recited poetry, recalled feuds and transactions, and constituted themselves as members of their communities.<sup>6</sup>

The centrality of oral communication means that there are very few extant letters from the period we call the early Middle Ages, c. 600–1000. For the most part, on the European continent, populations clustered in small communities and experienced governance at a local level. This was the period within which monasteries and fortified manors provided security and protection. It was not a world that required extensive written communication networks, at least in terms of daily functioning. Of course, it is highly possible that there were a great many more letters prepared in the early Middle Ages than have survived. A great deal of resources were required to produce a letter in the Middle Ages, and many factors influenced their survival into the present day. What we do have was preserved in the scriptoria or chanceries of the senders. That is, when the sender was someone of reputation, they tended to keep records of their communications. So, our extant records from the early Middle Ages, and the Middle Ages generally, necessarily privilege the correspondence of religious elites, who had the resources to produce their letters, to copy them and to archive them.<sup>7</sup>

The letters that do survive were written and retained by high-ranking clerics. Some of them concern matters of episcopal management, issuing injunctions to mandate certain practices or evangelise certain communities. Other letters were written for secular leaders, by clerics, in the service of governance. We also begin to see, after about 900, that clerics write letters of spiritual advice to monarchs and nobles, male and female. These letters are more rhetorically sophisticated, and more personal, than those of previous centuries.

The eleventh-century theologian and archbishop Anselm of Bec was especially prolific in this genre, following the patristic example of St Jerome,

6 M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

7 R. McKitterick (ed.), *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

who had famously written to a number of elite Christian Roman women in the fourth and fifth centuries. As Jerome had done, Anselm exhorted noblewomen to lead chaste lives of charity. For example, he wrote to a woman called Ermengard about a rumour he had heard that her husband wished to become a monk, and that Ermengard was refusing him permission to do so. In his letter, Anselm admits that he has never met Ermengard, but that he heard of her situation and felt moved to advise her on the correct path. He asks her regarding her husband:

for what reason can you demand of him that he consider the eternal goods of his soul of secondary importance to the temporal goods of your body, if you prefer the goods of your body to the goods of his soul?<sup>8</sup>

Anselm's corpus of letters, sent to women and men, testify to the capacity of the letter to do work across distance, and alert us to the possibility of a greater flourishing of epistolarity than previously supposed. But since there is little evidence of mainstream or regular epistolarity during Anselm's period, his letters remain exceptional in the extant record for his period.

In the period covered by this chapter, roughly 1000 to 1350, the letter for the most part maintained this rarefied status as an elite object. There was, however, a marked rise in written communication over this period, concomitant to economic growth and the emergence of religious and secular stable institutions of governance. This communication was still generated by and for elites, and was in the Latin language rather than in the vernaculars through which the population conducted quotidian life. The majority of letters were still composed by male clerics, even if they were sent under the name of a woman, and were highly formal missives. But the proliferation of epistolarity, the rigour of the genre notwithstanding, meant that letters became more crucial to the business of political and religious elites. Factors such as the emergence of trade networks and market towns, the development of pilgrimage routes, the consolidation of kingdoms, the growth of universities, and the rise of monastic franchises and new religious orders, necessitated and enabled the writing and the carriage of letters. Letters were more necessary because parts of the population were more mobile, and because larger territories of governance or influence required structures of communication and surveillance. For example, during this period the papacy began to conduct itself more systematically

8 Walter Frohlich (trans.), *The Letters of Saint Anselm of Canterbury*, vol. 3 (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990–4), pp. 310–12.

as a pan-European institution, and monarchs increasingly consolidated their holdings at a scale that demanded a similar consolidation of revenue collection and the administration of justice. Letters were enabled because greater movement of peoples enabled greater safety of passage for humans and goods, and because demand ensured more readily available training in the art of correspondence. Letters were still elite and formal, but they could do a great deal more work for the correspondent and her community in 1200 than they could in 1000, because a great deal more business was performed by epistolary means.

Letters were written under the format prescribed by the *ars dictaminis*, the subsection of rhetorical training particular to epistolarity, and often reproduced in manuals for would-be scribes. These manuals outlined the structure that should govern the composition of a letter, and were adapted from Cicero's accounts of the art of oratory. The *ars dictaminis* offered a five-fold taxonomy of epistolary parts to describe how any letter should ordinarily be structured in order to achieve its ends. A letter should contain *salutatio* (greeting), *exordium* (statement of ethos encouraging a positive reception), *narratio* (background or rationale), *petitio* (core request or command) and *conclusio* (farewell), normally in that order. Correspondents were encouraged to pay close attention to the order of names and the vocabulary of the *salutatio*, which had to reflect the respective status of sender and recipient in finely honed and strategic ways.<sup>9</sup> The relatively rapid spread of the *ars dictaminis* as a genre of writing in itself testifies to the increased necessity for competency in letter-writing. Alberic of Monte Cassino, the central Italian monk generally acknowledged as the first medieval author of a recognisable *ars dictaminis* text, produced his work c. 1087; by 1152, the dictaminal text of Bernard of Bologna was known in France, and by 1167 it had certainly reached Cologne. In England in the 1180s, Peter of Blois composed a theoretical text to preface a collection of his own letters, and copies of earlier treatises had almost certainly already entered English libraries.<sup>10</sup> These manuals offered institutions and households a guide to

9 Giles Constable, 'The structure of medieval society according to the dictatores of the twelfth century', in Kenneth Pennington and Robert Somerville (eds), *Law, Church, and Society: Essays in Honor of Stephan Kuttner* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), pp. 253–67; and Carol Dana Lanham, *Salutatio Formulas in Latin Letters to 1200: Syntax, Style, and Theory* (Munich: Bei der Arbeo-Gesellschaft, 1975).

10 See James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1984); and N. Denholm-Young, 'The *Cursus* in England', in Maurice Powicke (ed.), *Oxford Essays in Medieval History Presented to Herbert Edward Salter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), pp. 68–103.

epistolary legitimacy, enabling the correspondent to assume the manners and style appropriate to their rank, and to express their message by the most persuasive means possible.<sup>11</sup>

Medieval letters, as we have already seen in Emma's tenth-century missive, negotiated status explicitly. For women authors, the salutation offered a particularly mobile tool to explain their place in the world. In the salutation, the sender articulated their own authority in relation to that of the letter's recipient. Ideas of authorship, of being a writer, were interwoven semantically with ideas of authority, of having a legitimate place from which to speak.<sup>12</sup> In the strictest sense, one used by medieval theologians, the word 'author' referred to their revered sources, such as the Christian Bible and patristic writers. The word did not denote creative textual expression, but rather referred to the authorities that prevailed in the history of Christian doctrine, and it could be used in theological training. Authority was sanctioned through tradition. The idea of the author, then, was one that was encoded in reverence for the past, and in the hierarchies that generate legitimacy. Our commonplace idea of authorship, in which a piece of text is produced by an individual actor, does not work for the Middle Ages. Textual production in this period was a collaborative exercise, in both intellectual and logistical terms. Authority was understood relationally and historically to represent divinely sanctioned forms of hierarchy and divinely gifted doctrines. To express oneself as a writer, then, depended on an articulation of one's place in the traditional order of things. Hence, the need to declare status at the beginning of the letter was the basis on which the sender asserted the authority that enabled their writing.

The necessity of the salutation obtained for all letter-writers in the Middle Ages, male and female. But for medieval European women, for whom other forms of writerly authority were mostly off limits, the letter was the genre to which they had access, and offered an opportunity to locate their familial, spiritual and intellectual status. Take, for example, Agnes of Poitiers's letter of 1056 to Abbot Hugh of Cluny. Agnes had been married to the recently deceased Henry III, Holy Roman Emperor, and bore the title 'Empress'. Hugh was head of the most powerful monastic franchise in Christendom and had a long history of enmity with the emperor. As her son ascended to power,

11 Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau and Cécile Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

12 Jennifer Summit, 'Women and authorship', in Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 91–108.

Agnes wrote to Hugh to attempt to mollify the abbot and build goodwill for the new emperor. She begins the letter:

To her beloved father, worthy of all respect, abbot Hugo, Agnes, greeting and devoted service, in whatever way God commands. Since my lute has turned to grief [Job 30: 31], I give back sighs for joy, lamentable mourning for the exultation your letters brought me.<sup>13</sup>

In the salutation, in which Agnes might be expected to claim her own eminent status, she defers to Hugh as father, and refers to herself only by her Christian name. This deference broadcasts her intentions to begin anew with Hugh, and her preparedness to register his authority. She notes also that his letters have given her exultation, a form of spiritual delight and elevation. Agnes's letter performs savvy obeisance in order to draw a line between past and present, and to broker a new political rapprochement. She authorises herself as a spiritual daughter, and in so doing attempts to inaugurate a new alliance, replacing sighs with joy.

For elite women, who were denied participation in episcopal leadership and the universities on the basis of gender, the letter offered a way into those male-only spaces, as well as into those merely dominated by men. Queens and abbesses, for example, petitioned popes and bishops in order to secure support for their families or their foundations. The letter also afforded women writers the opportunity to shore up their internal familial concerns, writing to absent husbands or to fellow nuns in order to consolidate relationships and solve problems. And more abstractly, the letter offered women who were attempting to establish legitimate authority a means to mediate their presence to the wider community by putting in writing their deeds and transactions. As long as a woman had the means to produce and send a letter, she had entry into worlds from which she was otherwise barred, and a location from which to assert her authority. And very often, women correspondents asserted their authority in dynamically gendered ways. As elite women, they could draw on status and rank, in the same way as male writers – and they did so. They claimed the authority appropriate to them as an abbess or a queen, or through their prestigious kin, as in the case of the aforementioned Emma. But very often, they took pains to declare privilege from their feminine disadvantage. They staked claims on the humility and servile status granted to them as women, or on the fury available to them in

13 'A letter from Agnes of Poitiers, empress (10/05/1056)', trans. by Joan Ferrante, *Epistolae*, <<https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/126.html>> (accessed 9 July 2020).

maternal rage. In the process of constructing the generic authority required to author a letter, they enlisted gendered imaginaries of feminine frailty in novel ways. Medieval letters were overwhelmingly the province of men, as was structural power itself, but women writers were disproportionately creative and innovative with the form and the work of the letter.

This chapter argues for the letter as constitutive in the making of elite women's authority in the Middle Ages. That is, in what follows, we will show that it was through the particular form of legitimacy afforded by the written letter that women were able to articulate their status within economies of power, define their authority and intervene in the world around them. In that sense, the letter is a technology of authority for these women, one that permits forms of consolidation and transgression otherwise unavailable to them.

The epistolary genre was governed by formal conventions, but this did not mean that letters were formulaic. Rather, as Agnes's example shows, it was in letter-writing's very conventionality that its rules could be used and subverted to authorise the self in all manner of creative ways. Medieval women letter-writers, for the most part, were either noblewomen seeking to manage the affairs of themselves and their families, or eminent religious women, themselves noble, who were responsible for the governance and prestige of their convents. Kimberly LoPrete has described the former as 'lordly' women, because their roles as wives and consorts necessitated their participation in both quotidian and strategic management of 'feudal' domains, and allowed them to act as lords when occasion demanded.<sup>14</sup> These women wrote letters in order to conduct the business of noble governance, sometimes on behalf of their noble households, and sometimes to transact their own arrangements in their own names. These letters varied widely in style and purpose. There are extant letters from minor noblewomen, negotiating with other noble families about ordinary issues such as minor debts, and border skirmishes. And there are highly rhetorical letters from duchesses and queens, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine and Eleanor of Provence, written to equally high-profile recipients such as popes and fellow monarchs. These letters often dealt with what we might call, anachronistically, matters of state, and they required the resources of a kingdom in their composition and carriage across the continent. What these diverse, lordly women's letters have in common, however, is that they required the sender to establish her

14 Kimberly A. LoPrete, 'The gender of lordly women: the case of Adela of Blois', in C. E. Meek and C. Lawless (eds), *Studies on Medieval and Early Modern Women: Pawns or Players?* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), pp. 90–110.



noble authority within the privatised webs of allegiance that constituted 'feudal' society. In so doing, the author was then able to flex her authority to transact business, and to affirm, nurture or repudiate the 'feudal' relationships that surrounded her. In style, these letters were sometimes similar to those written by their male counterparts, but they revealed the gendered possibilities of women's work in 'feudal' governance, where lines of command were often unclear, and where sovereignty was always contested and shifting. These letters also enabled noblewomen to deploy the authority granted to them as mothers and wives, to invoke the righteousness of their proximity and necessity to spouses and heirs.

Elite religious women were also noblewomen, and they also performed lordly duties through the letter. Not only did an abbess provide spiritual leadership to her sisters, she was also responsible for the management of the 'feudal' domain that constituted her convent, which would likely encompass landholdings and serfs. A great many of the letters issued under the names of abbesses differed little from those of their secular counterparts, being concerned with estate management. During the Middle Ages, however, a distinctively gendered voice emerged in the letters of some women religious such as Hildegard, Héloïse and Clare of Assisi who wrote in an explicitly poetic spiritual register and asserted a self-consciously feminine religious acuity. Clare of Assisi, for example, described herself in a 1234 letter as an 'unworthy servant of Jesus Christ, and useless handmaid',<sup>15</sup> following an affective trope that had developed over preceding centuries in which powerful religious women used the language of abasement to prove the power of their gendered humility.<sup>16</sup>

Whether they used the letter to transact business, broker vast distance, or cultivate spiritual celebrity, all women letter writers in this period had in common access to the significant resources required to participate in letter-writing in the Middle Ages, as well as to geographical networks that necessitated correspondence. The sender needed to be literate, or literate-adjacent with access to readers and writers, and they needed to be able to

15 Joan Mueller (ed.), *A Companion to Clare of Assisi: Life, Writings and Spirituality* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), p. 261.

16 There is a vast literature on the emergence of gendered affective piety in the high Middle Ages, inaugurated by Carolyn Walker Bynum's *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1982); and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1987). For an excellent recent overview of the topic, see Damien Boquet, Piroska Nagy and Robert Shaw, *Medieval Sensibilities: A History of Emotions in the Middle Ages* (Newark: Polity Press, 2019), pp. 181–214.

write or have access to a scribe who was trained in the epistolary arts.<sup>17</sup> Letter-writing was a professional skill that required training in rhetoric and practice through copying model letters. This training was not ubiquitous but increased in number and locations during the Middle Ages. The sender needed to access implements, ink, parchment or paper, and a stylus. They needed a seal, not only to close the letter but to confer authenticity to the receiver. They needed to have a means of carriage for the letter. This meant people, horses and security. Or it meant boats. There was no postal service, with the exception of private postal networks between monastic foundations, and what remained of the Roman roads system was often in disrepair, perilous and subject to attack. None of these resources was available to a non-elite person, and they were not always available to aristocratic elites either.

There is some evidence of the use of more informal letter-writing practices such as wax tablets, for example, to send more local and more casual missives. The sender would write a message on the tablet. The receiver would then erase the message and write the reply on the same tablet. Baudri of Bourgeuil, Abbot of Dol, writing in the eleventh century, composed letter-poems dedicated to his wax tablets, and lamenting a broken stylus, ordinarily used to make impressions in the wax.<sup>18</sup> In her reply, one of Baudri's female correspondents, Constance of Ronceray, playfully mentioned committing her amorous thoughts to wax because it feels no shame.<sup>19</sup> But it is impossible to speculate as to how pervasive this epistolary practice was because the evidence for the use of wax tablets is scant, and because they were recycled by erasing the text. The types of letters that survive and that constitute our sample were retained for legal reasons, and because they were kept in the records of eminent individuals and institutions. They were written under the name of an individual, but they were the product of many hands.

The collaborative nature of medieval letter-making, meaning the myriad hands and minds that went into the production of a letter, invariably invites questions as to whether medieval women actually authored their letters, with 'author' here being understood in the modern sense. A number of Eleanor of Aquitaine's most significant letters are not found in her archives but were

17 Malcolm Beckwith Parkes, *Scribes, Scripts and Readers: Studies in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemination of Medieval Texts* (London: Hambledon Press, 1991).

18 Katherine Kong, *Lettering the Self in Medieval and Early Modern France* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), p. 32.

19 *Ibid.*

preserved by her scribe, Peter of Blois.<sup>20</sup> Peter of Blois was one of the most sought-after scribes of his day, and in his own collection he compiled the significant letters that he had composed, mostly in the names of others. Who is the author here? Is it the woman who organised the letter's production in order to manifest her interests, or the prose-stylist who put pen to the page? In the twelfth century, the Benedictine nun Hildegard of Bingen's scribe Guibert Gembloux described the texts on which they collaborated as 'carrying her meaning but written by my pen'.<sup>21</sup> The relationship between a female spiritual luminary, such as Hildegard, and her scribe and/or confessor was characterised by intimate collaboration. They worked in tandem to generate and express the woman's ideas, and to promote her profile. It could be argued that the scribe's evocation in language of the mystic's revelations was constitutive to the making of her reputation, and that he was indeed a co-author. These fraught questions of authorship, then, persist in relation to religious women as well, and lie at the heart of the problem of agency and intention. But this question of authorship is one that should obtain for most medieval textual production, regardless of the gender of the putative author, and it is a complex one. At the same time, if a letter was sent under the name of an individual, it was issued and received on the basis of their identity in the world, and intended to do explicit work on their behalf. Were we investigating the literary and poetic qualities of medieval women's letters, it would be necessary to think about authorship in the more modern sense.<sup>22</sup> In this chapter, however, we will deploy the idea of the author to denote the person under whose authority the letter was produced and sent.

We do not deploy this notion of authorship to undermine the skill or acuity of the scribe, or to deny that letters were often the product of generative collaboration between the official sender and the composer. And, when it comes to the most polished, creative and/or provocative letters of the Middle Ages, there is no doubt that their quality owed as much to the writer as the official author. In particular, in the case of the writings of mystical women, there is a great deal of evidence that many of these women worked symbiotically with their confessors to generate spiritual prestige and reputation. As Janette Dillon has described it, 'woman and confessor/scribe are bound

20 John Cotts, *The Clerical Dilemma: Peter of Blois and Literate Culture in the Twelfth Century* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

21 John Coakley, *Women, Men and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 61.

22 See Wim Verbaal, 'Epistolary Voices and the Fiction of History', in Bartoli and Høgel (eds), *Medieval Letters*, pp. 9–31; and Wim Verbaal, 'Voicing your Voice: The Fiction of a Life', *Interfaces*, 4 (2017), 103–24.

together by the secrecy and exclusiveness of their spiritual relationship as well as by their common project'.<sup>23</sup> The 'common project', as Dillon has it, was that of spreading the message and the name of the holy woman, of establishing her spiritual *bona fides* to propagate her visionary capacities to an audience. The confessor/scribe was certainly instrumental to that process, but it was under the name of the woman that the letters were sent, and it was in order to manifest and amplify her authority that it was done. For medieval letters were not private, they were produced by many hands and minds. And they were also usually received by a given community after having been transported by couriers. As quasi-public documents, understood to be the work of multitudes, letters were not expected to relay the intimate personhood of the sender by idiosyncratic or elegant turns of phrase. As Babette Hellemans has argued, the 'underlying notion of letters belonging to a public corpus is the reason why we cannot take the notion of an individual self in them'.<sup>24</sup> Rather, the job of a letter was to convey the imperatives of the sender, their intervention, their authority.

### The Letters of Noblewomen

Lordly letters were written by women whose social and political authority were embedded in their familial networks, as well as in the positions that they held, which they joined to those of other aristocratic families through practices of marriage and alliance. These women wrote letters in order to guarantee these relationships, to insist on their saliency during fraught periods of conflict, and to broker new networks where possible. Elite families of medieval Europe were joined together in extremely complicated systems of allegiance and hierarchy. Letters were one of the means through which these relationships were recorded, reiterated and occasionally troubled. And because women were so often the intermediary between their natal

23 Janette Dillon, 'Holy Women and their Confessors and their Holy Women? Margery Kempe and Continental Tradition', in Rosalynn Voaden (ed.) *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996), p. 116. On the relationship between holy women and their confessors, see Catherine Mooney (ed.), *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); and Coakley, *Women, Men and Spiritual Power*.

24 Babette Hellemans, 'Heloise's Echo: The Anthropology of a Twelfth-Century Horizontal Knowledge Landscape', in Micol Long, Tjamke Snijders and Steven Vanderputten (eds), *Horizontal Learning in the High Middle Ages: Peer-to-Peer Knowledge Transfer in Religious Communities* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), pp. 185–205, p. 187.

and marital families, they were often the custodians and managers of these relationships.

Take, for example, the familial connections of Eleanor of Provence (c. 1223–91), whose letters we will consider later in this chapter. Eleanor became queen consort of England in 1236 on the occasion of her marriage to Henry III. She was the daughter of Ramon Berenguer, Count of Provence, and Beatrice of Savoy.<sup>25</sup> Eleanor had three sisters, each of whom was married to a European monarch, including the king of France. Through birth and marriage, Eleanor was related to a great many of the leading families of Europe, and she managed these networks in order to bolster the power and resources of her husband, both in the service of war and in the service of peace-making. At the same time, her natal connections and her reliance on them were a source of controversy in England. Eleanor and Henry favoured, or at least were alleged to have done so, Eleanor's Savoyard relatives by offering them favourable positions at court, as well as installing them in lucrative domains in various parts of England. Through her marriage, Eleanor was able to extend the political reach of her kin, while offering her husband access to expertise and support from outside of his realm. Eleanor's familial webs, while exceptional in their reach and status across the continent, were not structurally atypical for noblewomen. When they made their marriages, they did not jettison one identity in order to emerge with another. Rather, their marriages were an instrument of authority that could, and often did, generate new political formations.

This type of authority, which we might be quick to understand as familial and therefore consign to the private sphere, was a crucial dimension of lordly power. Aristocratic power was bound to explicit notions of genealogical and dynastic legitimacy. In this 'feudal' society, there was no separation between the household and the ostensible public. Power was disseminated through privatised systems of land grants and privileges, resulting in complicated jurisdictional overlaps and shifting physical borders. Monarchs claimed various forms of sovereignty, sacralised with religious ceremony, but this sovereignty was not that which we associate with the sovereign state of modernity. Instead, it was a form of licence that elevated the monarch above the claims of proximate noble families. These families were subdued and managed through individual arrangements in which military service and loyalty were offered by the vassal to his lord, in exchange for the *foedum*, the land grant. Eventually, payment became a substitute for military service,

25 Margaret Howell, *Eleanor of Provence: Queenship in Thirteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

resulting in a system that resembled but was not strictly taxation. This is why the term 'feudal' is placed here in quotation marks, following contemporary historiographical practice, to indicate that it was not so much a system as a practice. The idea of a feudal system implies a concrete and regularised cross-continental structure, which is not what occurred. Rather, 'feudal' practice varied enormously across time and place, and was the result of myriad particular agreements between lords and vassals.<sup>26</sup>

Lordly power, then, was constituted in households and protected through individual arrangements. This power was neither private nor public. What did this mean for aristocratic women's capacity to wield authority in this context?<sup>27</sup> The answer is as variable as the variations in 'feudal' arrangements that obtained across Europe. In some instances, women could inherit land and titles, and take on the forms of vassalage attached to that land. In those situations, they could operate as lords in their own right, managing their estates and negotiating their privileges with their monarch or liege lord. In more usual circumstances, where the head of an aristocratic household was a male lord, their wives, mothers and daughters were still able to perform lordly duties, acting in the lord's stead when necessary or appropriate. And since aristocratic marriage was invariably strategic and political, married women brought particular capacity to the complicated negotiations that took place between noble families. In a world where finely held ideas of status variegation, patronage and intercession were crucial mechanisms for the maintenance of peace, as well as in the jostling for preferment, married women were well placed, as brokers between families, to consolidate or repudiate alliances.

## Queens and Family

For Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122–1204), the letter was a key political weapon, one which she wielded with precision. Eleanor's status was the result of birth, as she was the daughter and heir of the Duke of Aquitaine, the wealthiest and most powerful landowner in France.<sup>28</sup> When her father died in 1137, Eleanor became Duchess of Aquitaine in her own right, a title that she would hold until her death in 1204. She also drew on the authority granted

26 Richard Abels, 'The historiography of a construct: "Feudalism" and the medieval historian', *History Compass* 7(3) (2009), 1008–31.

27 Constance Berman, 'Gender at the Medieval Millennium', in Bennett and Karras (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, pp. 545–60.

28 Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons (eds), *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

to her in marriage: she was married first to the French king, and then to the king of England. And, as a mother of eight, she drew on the complicated knots of 'feudal' allegiances that occurred as her offspring married. Her children became kings and queens themselves, which accorded Eleanor further legitimacy, but also resulted in complicated enmities and fraught contestation over issues of succession and patronage.

A large amount of Eleanor's extant correspondence deals with precisely these concerns. She wrote to confer lands, to shore up loyalties and to implicate the receiver in a relationship of patronage. And a great many eminent figures wrote to her, hoping to be the beneficiaries of her favour and resources. Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, the most influential churchman of his generation, wrote to her between 1144 and 1147 on behalf of Guiscard, a man who had been a member of her household, but whom she had exiled and deprived of his possessions for reasons unknown. Bernard deferred to her at the outset, writing, 'having no trust that our insignificance holds any notice or familiarity before your dignity, but rather in your most famous generosity and kindness, do we offer you our petitions'.<sup>29</sup> After detailing the nature of the request, he reminded Eleanor that the letter had been delivered by the Abbot of Beaulieu, who had served as courier, writing, 'see to it that he has not been tired out in vain'.<sup>30</sup> Bernard's letter acknowledged Eleanor's authority over her own household, and himself, in that he conceded to her completely. In making his case, he did not challenge Eleanor's judgement in her treatment of Guiscard; he merely informed her that the exiled man had now devoted his life to God and this warranted the return of his possessions as an act of her mercy. Bernard, however, did make clear that the stakes were significant and that Eleanor ought to follow his request. Bernard's quick mention of the courier's labours, named as an eminent churchman himself, reminded Eleanor of the efforts involved in sending a letter and conveyed the seriousness of his petition. This short letter reveals beautifully how the letter in this period, although replete with formal language of deference, so often enabled complicated jostling for authority.

About twenty years later, Eleanor wrote to the cardinal-deacon Jacinto, asking him to intercede on behalf of her 'dearest brother', who seemed to have been removed from his position as abbot of a monastery.<sup>31</sup> In this instance,

29 'A letter from Bernard of Clairvaux, abbot (1144–1147)', trans. by Maurus Bryan Mount, *Epistolae*, <<https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/1294.html>> (accessed 9 July 2020).

30 *Ibid.*

31 'A letter from Eleanor of Aquitaine', trans. by Joan Ferrante, *Epistolae*, <<https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/138.html>> (accessed 9 July 2020).

a neat reversal of the previous letter, Eleanor asks Jacinto to intercede with Pope Alexander III as to the fate of her blood relative 'P', as he is named in the letter, and about whom nothing is known. Eleanor also uses the language of favour, as Bernard has with her:

The favour of your excellence is neither new nor doubtful; always habitual, always exhibited, it does not admit of diminution or interruption. I rejoice that I have and have had such a friend in such a person, by whose sole authority and with my diligence, whatever and however much business can be happily transacted by his coming.<sup>32</sup>

Here, she praises Jacinto for his constancy and his reliability, and reminds him that their relationship has been fruitful in the past. In particular, she recognises that Jacinto has long been her worthy supporter, one of her people, and that he has amplified her reputation by epistolary means. She writes, 'for your letters and my knowledge of those letters testify that by intention you strive for my honour and my magnificence'.<sup>33</sup> Eleanor makes clear to Jacinto that she is grateful for his support, but she also reminds him via the phrase 'knowledge of those letters' that letters are public performances, and that she is watchful of his myriad communications. In this ostensible letter of plea, normative in its deployment of flattery, she offers a hint of warning that should he not be as faithful to her as he appears, she will indeed find this out. Finally, at the end of the letter, she makes the request that 'because of my confidence in you and your benevolence towards me, may your dignity obtain from the lord pope the use of his orders and free power of administering'.<sup>34</sup> Eleanor may have had a great deal of her own authority, but it pertained to the temporal realm, and on matters of Church governance the pope was of course sovereign. Her recourse, then, was to practices of patronage and the tightening of devotional ties.

Bernard's letter to Eleanor and Eleanor's letter to Jacinto both offer striking examples of how the letter enabled negotiations between the porous jurisdictional situations that often transpired in 'feudal' societies. It is hard to argue that the authority given to Eleanor by Bernard, and the authority taken by Eleanor in her own letter, offers a particularly gendered example of epistolary language. By the 1190s, however, in the period after Eleanor spent a great deal of time imprisoned by her husband, Henry II of England,

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*



as punishment for her support of her sons' rebellion against their father, she was writing letters that offered virtuosic accounts of the grief and the lament that was peculiar to the role of mother. Working with the aforementioned Peter of Blois, she fired off missives to Pope Celestine, expressing fury that he had not done enough to aid in the release of her son Richard, who had been held hostage by the Holy Roman Emperor. In these letters, Eleanor was part imperious queen, part devastated mother, part sibyl, warning the pope of the consequences of his inaction. These letters were written to be heard and to be read, across Christendom.

In one of them, Eleanor addresses her missing son – 'Who may allow me to die for you, my son?'<sup>35</sup> – offering to take on his suffering in order that he be spared. She beseeches the Virgin Mary and Christ to consider her pain and liberate her with death, on the basis that she as a sinner is more deserving of punishment than her son:

Mother of mercy, look upon a mother so wretched, or else if your Son, an unexhausted source of mercy, requires from the son the sins of the mother, then let him exact complete vengeance on me, for I am the only one to offend, and let him punish me, for I am the irreverent one – do not let him smile over the punishment of an innocent person.<sup>36</sup>

Her language is paradoxically humble and hubristic. She describes herself as a sinner and as impious, but this is in contrast to her blameless son Richard, in whom she invests perfection, and so valorises herself as his mother. And she challenges Mary and her son, no less, questioning their judgement in allowing her son to suffer the punishment of his imprisonment at the hand of the emperor. Lest the reader, or listener, be in any doubt as to the scale of the humiliation that has befallen her, she exclaims:

I am pitiable, yet pitied by no-one, why have I, the Lady of two kingdoms reached the disgrace of this abominable old age. I am the mother of two kings. My insides have been torn out of me, my family has been carried off.<sup>37</sup>

This is a soliloquy, explicitly performative, in which Eleanor not only groans and sighs, but also reprises her history for the benefit of her audience. They

35 'Eleanor, Queen of England, widow to Henry II, to Pope Celestine III, 1193', in Anne Crawford (trans. and ed.), *Letters of the Queens of England 1100–1547* (Bath: Alan Sutton, 1994), p. 40.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

are to know that she is a queen, but also that she is prepared to sacrifice it all to ensure the safety of her son. She deploys the authority of her rank, but she does so to argue that the emotional claims of the mother warrant a transcendental legitimacy.

In a different letter, she warns the pope of the consequences of inaction, deploying portentous examples from the Bible and Church history to do so:

If the Church of Rome keeps its hands tightly clasped and keeps quiet about great injuries to the Lord's Anointed, may God rise up and judge over our plea, may He look upon the face of His own anointed one.<sup>38</sup>

She invokes the power and might of God over that of the pope, cautioning him that he has transgressed God's will and will have his reckoning. Eleanor's words here have none of the polite threats of her earlier letter to Jacinto, where demands were couched within the language of patronage and preferment. This letter is a clear provocation that challenges the righteousness of the pope himself. She asks Celestine, 'Where is the passion of Eli against Achab? The passion of John against Herod? The passion of Ambrose against Valentinian?'<sup>39</sup> Step by step, she walks the pope through moments of resistance to secular authorities. She reminds him that Elijah confronted King Ahab over an unjust execution, that John the Baptist spoke the truth to Herod about his unlawful marriage, and that St Ambrose had repudiated Valentinian to restore Roman religious practices. And then she asks Celestine where is 'The passion of Pope Alexander III, who solemnly and terribly excommunicated Frederick, father of this current prince, with the full authority of the Apostolic See?'<sup>40</sup> Her final example reminds Celestine of recent history and denigrates him in relation to his predecessor.

The queen, broken and wretched, deploys her maternal despair as a pulpit from which to threaten the pope. Her authority is natal, regal and maternal. She claims it firmly, expresses it flamboyantly, and the form of the letter is what enables her to sit in these multiple identities, and to insist on her pre-eminent authority by refusing that of the pope. Eleanor's correspondence to Celestine may have been penned by Peter of Blois. His words are rhetorically artful – they betray his mastery in their rhythm, their erudition and their extraordinarily potent flourish. But the power play is Eleanor's. The determination and risk-taking illuminated by her provocation is hers alone.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

The letters of the aforementioned Eleanor of Provence, Queen of England between 1236 and 1272, offer rich insights into the machinations of womanly 'feudal' authority, played out on an enormous scale. She was separated by great distance from her parents and her extremely well-married sisters. As queen, she also suffered the absence of her husband on many occasions, and over long periods. Henry III was often away, fighting to reclaim territories in France that had been lost by his father, King John, and also defending himself from insurgent barons in his own kingdom. Eleanor served as official regent on occasions of his absence, as well as performing the role unofficially throughout his reign. In 1264, Henry was captured and imprisoned after defeat by rebels, and he was not released until the following year. Letters survive from these marital separations, in which the problems of state were explored and negotiated. And Eleanor was embedded in webs of patronage, often controversial. Her support for her relatives from her mother's side – the Savoyards – was unpopular in England and required careful management, which was not always successful. Finally, as part of her dower, Eleanor had been granted territories by her husband which generated significant revenues. She inherited additional domains in her own right from her natal family over the course of her life. While it remains unclear the degree to which these revenues were hers alone, or whether they were consolidated into the king's accounts, Eleanor was nominally responsible for these lands and was the recipient of their fruits. This business was also, often, transacted through the letter. What is striking about Eleanor of Provence's letters is that, unlike those of Eleanor of Aquitaine, they tell us something about her marriage. To manage herself within 'feudal' systems of authority, Eleanor needed to manage herself as wife and consort, and protect the work that she and Henry sought to do together.<sup>41</sup>

In 1244, Eleanor wrote to her husband about matters pertaining to the appointment of the bishop of Chichester. In this letter, Eleanor kept Henry abreast of the machinations in his realm and explained to him how she had managed them on his behalf. Eleanor and Henry had installed Eleanor's uncle Boniface of Savoy as archbishop of Canterbury. Boniface incurred his patrons' wrath, however, when he rejected Henry's appointment in Chichester and instead installed his own candidate. Eleanor wrote to Henry to apprise him of the situation, and to inform him of her strategy for its negotiation. She begins, however, by reassuring him that 'we inform your lordship that by grace of God we and our children are safe and well, which we

41 Anaïs Waag, 'Gender and the language of politics in thirteenth-century queen's letters', *Historical Research*, 92(256) (2019), 288–304.

lovingly hope you are also with all our heart and soul'.<sup>42</sup> This greeting might not seem particularly unusual, but when read alongside the remainder of the letter, which is chatty and urgently communicative, these loving greetings register as intimate. She then updates Henry on the news about Boniface's treachery, reporting to him that she has received a delivery of letters from the archbishop's messengers. The letters themselves seem to have been of little importance. It seems the salient information was delivered orally by the couriers, as:

through them he informed us that he had learned by the reports of some people, that we were angry with him because of what he had done in the matter of the diocese of Chichester; he begged that we would not be upset in this matter nor be turned against him.<sup>43</sup>

Eleanor narrates these events quickly; the Latin is relatively casual in order to expedite the transmission of key information. Tellingly, it was the messengers who were charged with conveying these delicate sentiments, as some matters were considered too fraught to commit to writing. Eleanor then reassures Henry that she has the matter in hand and that she stands firm with him. She reports to Henry her response to Boniface, noting that she too conveyed the harsher message to the couriers in spoken form, rather than place the charged admonition in writing:

We in turn informed him through messengers carrying a letter from us that it was not surprising if we were turned against him, since he offended you in this matter, and he could in no way have our good wishes while he incurred your wrath.<sup>44</sup>

Eleanor shifts here between the 'we' that constitutes herself as queen and the 'you' that refers to Henry. She makes clear that she has acted decisively, but that she does so to represent Henry as sovereign. In a moment of strife between her uncle, a Savoyard to whom Henry has offered patronage, and Henry himself, Eleanor asserts the primacy of her loyalty to her husband. She can commit in writing to her husband the sentiments that are too delicate to be sent to Boniface in written form, and this distinction registers their

42 'Eleanor, Queen of England, to Henry III, between April 1244 and January 1245', in Crawford (trans. and ed.), *Letters of the Queens of England 1100–1547*, p. 59.

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*

relative intimacy and solidarity. She continues her narration, explaining that Boniface rushed to her in person having received her communications. Eleanor again moves between the 'we' and the 'you':

We advised him that if he wanted to assuage our indignation, then he would fulfil your wishes. For while you and he remained in discord, there was no way we would forego our own anger and indignation.<sup>45</sup>

Eleanor and Henry's patronage of her Savoyard relatives was controversial in the kingdom and resulted in accusations of excessive feminine and foreign influence in the realm. Henry carried great reputational risk as a result of their appointments into high positions, and Eleanor's snappy response to Boniface's insubordination suggests her sensitivity to these stakes. Eleanor's response to Boniface, at least as she conveys it to her husband, is to remind Boniface that his privileges are granted by her husband, and that if Boniface repudiates the king, he invariably imperils his access to Eleanor. Eleanor's letter, so quick-fire and responsive, illuminates the complexity of the identities carried by a noblewoman, who bore the responsibility of bringing together, and continuing the flourishing, of both natal and marital families.

Ten years later, Eleanor wrote again to Henry, who was away in Gascony embroiled in a battle to regain lost lands. This letter was co-authored with Richard of Cornwall, Henry's brother, who was serving as co-regent with Eleanor during Henry's absence. They wrote to Henry to apprise him of domestic unrest, and of their difficulties in gathering financial and military support for Henry's campaign. In this letter, they recount various meetings they have held with clerical elites and barons to shore up military and financial support for Henry's war. They explain to Henry that while he might be able to count on some support from elites, both the clerics and the barons whom they have consulted conveyed the fury of low-ranking populations about the king's unfair practices of taxation, as well as his failure to observe the liberties of the Magna Carta. For example, they explain to Henry that while he has the support of the episcopacy, 'they do not believe that the clergy can be induced to supply any help at all',<sup>46</sup> unless the king should relax the extra tithes that he has recently imposed. They report a similar response from his noblemen, telling him that 'all the counts and powerful barons of your kingdom will cross the sea to you in Gascony with

45 *Ibid.*

46 'A letter from Eleanor of Provence and Richard of Cornwall (1254)', trans. by Joan Ferrante, *Epistolae*, <<https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/898.html>> (accessed 9 July 2020).

all their force; but we do not believe that any aid in your endeavour can be obtained from the other laymen',<sup>47</sup> until the king endorses the terms of the Magna Carta that pertain to the administration of justice. In the remainder of the letter, they assure Henry that they are working hard to negotiate with all parties on his behalf, but they also request that he reply with more instructions as soon as possible:

We supplicate your lordship that you will write to us your good pleasure concerning these affairs with the utmost possible haste. For you will find us prepared and devoted, according to our power, to solicit the aforesaid aid for your use, and to do and procure all other things.<sup>48</sup>

The authors figure themselves as devoted, but they also make their labour and the urgency of the matter very clear. They determinedly outline the very real obstacles that the king faces in this matter and imply the concessions that might be necessary on his part to move forward. Their authority here is conveyed through their pithily expressed mastery of the issues, as well as in their insistence that the king respond to these pressures.

We do not know whether Richard or Eleanor was responsible for the letter, or how genuinely they collaborated as co-regents. We do know, however, that Richard was married to Eleanor's sister Sanchia, a marriage that had been brokered by Eleanor. In arranging this marriage, Eleanor had stabilised her own position by further aligning her natal and marital families. These dynastic ties fortified her capacity to perform roles such as that of the regent or co-regent, as she surrounded herself with filiation that protected her legitimacy. As a lordly woman, her authority was embedded in the legitimacy and rank afforded by marriage. But as her example attests, this authority was not static or merely honorific. Rather, it was maintained through the negotiations of relationships particularly necessary to the 'feudal' society, which were always a work in progress and always contested.

### 'Feudal' Negotiations

The life and letters of Alix de Vergy (1182–1252), Duchess of Burgundy, offer a different account to those offered by the two Eleanors as to how a woman could exercise her authority within her complex familial and 'feudal'

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

situation.<sup>49</sup> Alix was not a queen and was herself of relatively lowly birth. She figures little in the historiography pertaining to medieval women, and when she does it is in the frame of her relationship to much more famous or controversial noblewomen. But even a so-called 'unexceptional' noblewoman needed to exercise authority in particular and strategic ways, with every 'feudal' domain held together by customs and oaths that could only be sustained and developed with local expertise.

Alix was the daughter of Hugh of Vergy, seigneur of a significant holding known for its impregnable fortress. Hugh's overlord was Odo, Duke of Burgundy, with whom he was often in conflict. Alix was married to Odo in 1199, in order to broker peace. As a dowry, Alix brought with her land and her father's castle, which would stay with her marital family should she bear a son but return to her brother if she did not. As part of the deal-making, her father received additional lands from the duke's holding. Alix's hand in marriage was one part, but a particularly important one, of a peace-making process that was accompanied by the exchange of resources and the negotiation of a new set of behaviours. Her physical body, and the children that would hopefully eventuate from the union, functioned as material and symbolic containers of political allegiance and good faith. Indeed, Alix bore one son to the duke, and three daughters. Her husband was a crusader and was often away from his holdings. During those periods, we can assume that Alix took on household management and developed the particular expertise required to organise various domains. Her husband died in 1218, *en route* to the Holy Land. It was subsequent to his death that her role became more formal, and it was almost entirely from that period that she issued letters in her own name. As her son was only five years old when his father died, Alix was elevated to regent of the duchy of Burgundy, a role in which she continued until 1234. During her regency, she performed homage to Philip Augustus of France, negotiated a number of disputes, and, most importantly, gained significant territories for the duchy. As part of her homage to the French crown, she promised not to remarry without the consent of the monarch, her marital status and physical body once again a mode to the negotiation of political reality.

Alix's example is typical and yet particular to her situation. To do her job as regent, she needed the deep political memory of the various 'feudal' arrangements on which the domain operated. She needed to know who owed what to whom, and why those terms had been agreed on. She needed

49 Joan Ferrante, 'What really matters in medieval women's correspondence', in Bartoli and Høgel (eds), *Medieval Letters*, pp. 179–99.

to develop a strategic awareness of when it was possible to repudiate or ignore previous agreements, and when it was of the utmost importance that they be honoured. Letters offered a means not only to get tasks done but to perform this competency, to demonstrate this capacity.

In 1218, Alix issued a letter to all under her care and reported the commitment that she had made to Philip Augustus regarding remarriage, and that she had done so by swearing on sacred objects:

A[lice] duchess of Burgundy to all her friends and faithful, barons, knights, townsmen, servants, to whom the present letters will come, greetings and love. You should know that I have sworn on the sacred objects to my dearest lord Philip, by the grace of God illustrious king of France, that I would do good and faithful service to him against all men and women who might live and die, and that I would contract matrimony with noone except with his consent and will. Therefore I command you and require by the faith you owe me that to that lord king or to the bearer of the presents at his command, you swear on sacred relics that if I should renege from the said agreements, that you will support the lord king against me with all your lands and fiefs which you hold or should hold from us, with all your power, until that has been fully emended to that king at his pleasure.<sup>50</sup>

She enjoined the recipients of the letter to swear also on sacred relics that should she renege on her promise, they would support the king in his penalties against her and transfer their allegiance to him until he was satisfied that restitution had occurred. In so doing, she implicated her people in the chain of homage and patronage that she had established in her own name with the king. She performed her abjection, publicising her capitulation to the will of the king and authorising her people to act against her should she renege. On the other hand, she offered her friends and faithful to the king as a form of collateral to secure her homage to him.

As the regent of a large duchy, Alix was not only charged with managing her relationship with overlords, but she also needed to navigate the new types of wealth emerging in the region. Neighbouring Champagne was known for the 'Champagne Fairs', the moving markets that drew traders from across Europe to ply their wares. These markets enabled the free citizens of those towns, places such as Troyes and Provins, to build liquid wealth derived from hospitality, as well as from merchant activity. The fairs brought together, for

50 'A letter from Alix of Vergy (1218, September)', trans. by Joan Ferrante, *Epistolae*, <<https://epistolae.columbia.edu/letter/1351.html>> (accessed 9 July 2020).



example, wool traders from the Low Countries, financial services from Italy, and fur traders from both Scandinavia and North Africa. For an aristocratic ruler such as Alix, these complex and lucrative markets offered possibilities and problems. She was able to borrow money from merchants, which enabled her to pay off her husband's debts and secure his posthumous good name and crusading obligations. But she also had to contend with a new strata of wealthy freemen who understood their identity to be that of urban citizen, rather than that of serf or vassal, and who might exercise considerable leverage as a result of lending money to nobles.

One of these men was Ponce of Chaponnay, a merchant from Lyons, whose name features in a number of Alix's letters. In 1219 she wrote to Blanche of Navarre, Countess of Champagne, to ask her to act as debtor and pledge in securing a loan from Ponce. Having presumably received assent from Blanche, Alix wrote her a second letter formalising the arrangement:

You should know that Ponce of Chaponnay lent us a thousand silver marks to be repaid on these terms: a quarter in the coming fairs of Bar-sur-Aube, a quarter in the next coming fairs of Bar-sur-Aube, another quarter in the fairs of Bar-sur-Aube after that, and another quarter in the fairs following that. We have made you both principal debtors and pledges in the hand of said Ponce, trusting in you for this. We therefore ask you, and asking require that you give said Ponce your letters patent (sealed) on this, since if any harm or injury should come to you, we will indemnify you, such that if we do not, we wish and grant that you can hold us pledge without guilt until we do indemnify you.<sup>51</sup>

This letter seems a world away from the passionate invective of Eleanor of Aquitaine as it is so quotidian by comparison. But in its ordinariness it opens up the world of complications and trade-offs that constituted local management, and reveals how women could use the letter to administer complexity, even when their mobility was greatly limited in comparison to men. And it is important that Alix transacted this relation with Blanche, who was herself a regent: her husband died in 1201 when she was pregnant with her son Theobald.<sup>52</sup> She served in this capacity until 1222, when Theobald reached his majority. Blanche seems, like Alix, to have been a strategic

51 'A letter from Alix of Vergy, Duchess of Burgundy', trans. by Joan Ferrante, *Epistolae*, <<https://epistolae.columbia.edu/letter/25836.html>> (accessed 9 July 2020).

52 Theodore Evergates, *The Aristocracy in the County of Champagne, 1100–1300* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

and effective regent. As a measure of her administrative capacities, she organised for her letters to be collected in a cartulary under her own name, a relative rarity for the time. It is, in fact, in Blanche's cartulary that Alix's letters survive.

In the 1219 letter to Blanche, Alix outlined her debt to Ponce and told the countess that she and her son had been named debtors and pledges in this matter. That is, Alix asked that they secure the loan, but she also pledged her resources to them should she fail to pay it back. Alix then requested that Blanche issue a sealed letter patent to Ponce, in which she confirms the arrangement and her own part in it. She wrote to Blanche again in the same year, acknowledging that Blanche had received Ponce in her good graces, and assuring Blanche that she would manage the situation should any harm come to Blanche as a result of the association.

These types of letters were not unusual across northern France at this time. A number of nobles were borrowing cash from merchants, and the fairs were very often the location for the negotiation of loans and their repayment. New and old forms of value were mixing as nobles drew on the value of their land, the honour of their name and their social capital. Merchants, however, had access to liquid wealth that was increasingly necessary in the changing economy. Alix's appeal to Blanche registered these changes, because it is through Blanche's patronage that Alix was able to increase the quantum of her value as a noble. Blanche could offer much more than surety for Alix's debts; her support might elevate Alix's good name and increase her reputational prestige. As we have seen, in securing the support of both the French king as well as those in her holdings, Alix pledged her own good name and obedience as the basis of her commitments and her oaths. Alix recognised that her good name was a form of value, and that this value could be expanded with epistolary work.

Alix wrote again to Blanche, revealing that her contract with Ponce had become more complicated, but also alerting Blanche to her manner of resolution. She explained that she had resolved the issues between herself and Ponce in this manner, 'namely that I received Ponce of Chaponnay as my man'.<sup>53</sup> Alix noted that Ponce had sworn his fidelity to her, and that she had granted him income in perpetuity from one of her tolls. She also described how she:

swore to the said Ponce that I would not seize his person nor his wife or sons or daughters or anything of his, nor would anyone by my order,

53 'A Letter from Alix of Vergy, Duchess of Burgundy'.

while that Ponce wished to be under my justice as my faithful in what he will owe.<sup>54</sup>

We do not know the nature of the trouble that had occurred between Alix and Ponce, but the resolution that Alix describes is telling. Alix reported to Blanche that she had solved the conflict by allowing Ponce to become her man, to swear homage to her. Ponce became her vassal and was given rights to land and tolls in perpetuity. Ponce may have remained her creditor, but by being implicated in vassalage, he was both elevated and domesticated as her subject, as well as being afforded the protection of Blanche. 'Feudal' authority was flexible, in as much as it relied on individual arrangements such as those between Alix and Ponce, and between Alix and Blanche. As a lordly woman, Alix was able to use the resources of her household to communicate these tensions and resolutions in writing, through the medium of the letter.

The women that we have discussed as lordly women were far more constrained than their male counterparts. Their menfolk waged war and crusaded, and were often separated from the day-to-day management of their households and their domains. These women suffered separation too, but it was of a more primal nature than that of their men, in that their marriages necessitated a rupture from the households of their childhoods, as they moved to join their new husbands. They were emissaries of their natal family, expected to bring to the marriage connections and resources from their home, but they were also expected to jettison their primary identification with their natal family and to recognise the primacy of their husband's family. They were also expected to govern in their husband's stead when he was away. Very often, then, the duties of household and domain management fell to these women. These responsibilities increased at times when women were widowed, often left saddled with debts and the task of acting as regent until their sons came into their majority. Lordly women had complicated identity work to do, needing to declare their devotion to the men of their marital family, whether that be to their husband or their sons. And they also had managerial and financial work to do, securing their family's holdings and revenue streams in the absence of those men to whom they had pledged devotion. They did much of this work through the technology of the letter, which enabled them to broadcast their authority to the wider world, even when constrained geographically.

54 *Ibid.*

## Spiritual Letters

Medieval religious women also wrote lordly letters. They managed their domains, and they negotiated with neighbouring nobles and ecclesiastical authorities in order to secure the affairs of their convents. The most illustrious among them, however, also created and deployed the particular spiritual authority available to them as religious women.

Around 1146, Hildegard of Bingen (c. 1098–1179) wrote to Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux from her convent in Disibodenberg. At that time, Bernard was one of the most significant religious figures in the Latin West. Famously, he had led the charges and papal procedures against the theologian Abelard c. 1141, and in 1146 he was vigorously engaged in preaching in favour of the second crusade. Hildegard was a luminary in her own right. She had been declared *magistra* ('female master') by her fellow nuns, who recognised her intellectual and spiritual acuity.<sup>55</sup> Hildegard had received, and reported, vibrant visions since her childhood, and by the time she wrote to Bernard she was developing a reputation as a spiritual authority – the 'Sibyl of the Rhine', as she would come to be known. Hildegard did not have at her disposal the resources upon which a figure such as Bernard had built his reputation. Bernard was able to preach, to attend and agitate at papal councils, and to travel across Europe to meet with popes and kings. Women religious, although not strictly enclosed as many nuns would come to be after the counter-reformation, were constrained by geography and their rigid exclusion from the Church's governance structures. They did govern, but it was at a more local level as convents were endowed with lands and serfs and were run as 'feudal' domains. An abbess needed to manage workers, income and resources as did any lord. Convents drew revenue from tenants, as well as from produce and occasionally manufacturing. Their spiritual power, too, came from their relationships with the population in their vicinity, to whom nuns might offer counsel and perform prayers and devotions on their behalf. In those capacities, their authority came from their place in the order of things: they were lordly and they were pastoral. But this was not the sum of their authority. Over the course of the Middle Ages, some religious women created and claimed a novel form of womanly authority that constituted their gender as a spiritual virtue that permitted them privileged access to the divine. This authority could be somewhat rogue,

55 Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen, 1098–1179: A Visionary Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989); and Barbara Newman (ed.), *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1998).

often achieved through celebrity rather than conferred through hierarchy, but it was authority nonetheless and it was cultivated through the letter.

Hildegard wrote to Bernard, describing herself as a handmaiden, and declaring that she was 'wretched, and indeed more than wretched in my womanly condition'.<sup>56</sup> She beseeched him to console her in the pain and anxiety that she felt as a consequence of her visionary powers, as well as to release her of the burden of keeping them secret. She requested authorisation from him to relate her mystical life, doing so by insisting that only a man of his constancy and integrity could release her from the wages of her suffering:

Through this vision which touches my heart and soul like a burning flame, teaching me profundities of meaning, I have an inward understanding of the Psalter, the Gospels, and other volumes. Nevertheless, I do not receive this knowledge in German. Indeed, I have no formal training at all, for I know how to read only on the most elementary level, certainly with no deep analysis. But please give me your opinion in this matter, because I am untaught and untrained in exterior material, but am only taught inwardly, in my spirit. Hence my halting, unsure speech.<sup>57</sup>

Hildegard's tone was provocatively naive and knowing at the same time. She asserted that her visions provided her with an unmediated intimacy with scripture, a comprehension that transcended language. She evinced absolute assurance as to the veracity of this knowledge. But since she had not obtained this knowledge by formal means, she described her language as 'halting' and 'unsure' and sought Bernard's interpretation and endorsement. In Hildegard's letter, there was an implicit opposition between theological knowledge acquired through textual study and the revelations available to the heart, between the exegetical and the mystical. She made no claims to the former; instead, she insisted on the integrity of the wisdom she apprehended by other means. She may have deferred to Bernard throughout the letter as a wretched woman, but she was steadfast and unbending in her claim to have accessed the truth of scripture.

In this letter, Hildegard articulated a speaking position that would be deployed by many other religious women who followed in her stead. Normative Christian accounts of women as essentially subordinate and abject could be subverted by arguing that these very qualities enabled women's proximity

<sup>56</sup> 'Hildegard to Bernard of Clairvaux 1146–47', in Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman (trans. and ed.), *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 27.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

to the divine. Where men could access truth through formal knowledge, women could experience the spirit in their bodies. Where men could access formal authority as priests and bishops, women could be especially devoted handmaidens to Christ. Christianity, however hierarchical and patriarchal its operations, also exalted the broken and the humble, and always cautioned against the danger of life in the world. Women, posited as especially sinful and contaminated by the fall, could and did argue for the spiritual capacity offered by their place in this economy.

This is not to say that medieval religious women were in fact unlettered and had no stakes in formal theological thinking or interest in exercising formal and informal power. As attested to by the careers of women such as Hildegard, Héloïse and Clare of Assisi, who will constitute the sample discussed below, medieval women religious were often highly intellectual and engaged in debate at very high levels. They sought and managed relationships with interlocutors of both genders, through which they developed sophisticated and rigorous accounts of theology and of their worlds. They protected their intellectual and physical independence, working astutely to maintain the autonomy of their convents, as well as to fight for their own devotional practices and identities. To say that they deployed particular gendered categories of feminine subjection to build their authority is not to say that they accepted the implications of subordination that came with these categories. It is to say that they creatively found a discursive space that enabled them to do the work they needed to do.

Convents were, for the most part, wealthy and well-resourced institutions, founded with land grants from nobles and monarchs. Many convents accepted only aristocratic girls and women as oblates and postulants, who brought with them the equivalent of a dowry upon entry. A canny abbess would work hard to generate further wealth for her foundation by building strong relationships with local elites in order to secure donations and enhance landholdings. Convents conducted building programmes and commissioned artworks – the abbess did not only need to acquire wealth, she also needed to display it. Convents were also in constant communication with religious men. At the most basic level, they needed priests to perform mass and administer the sacraments for the nuns, but also for the lay population for whom the convent was responsible. They also cooperated with clerics and monks in the education of the sisters, and in the production of correspondence and record keeping. The evidence suggests that levels of Latin literacy among religious women varied enormously. The extraordinary proficiency of Héloïse was the exception rather than the rule, and most convents relied on male scribes

to aid in composition. Abbesses and nuns composed and manufactured their texts in-house. The very wealthy foundations contained scriptoria that were a hive of literary production, as well as achieving excellence in the copying of manuscripts. The presence of male scribes was often necessary in order to achieve precision in prose, especially when it came to the performance of dictaminal norms, but these men were not considered the authors of the texts to which they contributed. The authority was claimed by the convent itself, and the abbess more particularly. Some medieval religious women may have deployed their subordinate gender status for tactical or spiritual reasons, but their discourse should not occlude the structural power and privilege that enabled them to speak, write and govern in the first place.

### **Hildegard's Prophetic Authority**

Although Hildegard of Bingen was exceptional in her range of creative, intellectual and political capacities, her life testifies to the diversity of tasks and responsibilities that were possible in the convent. She was committed to the monastery of Disibodenberg as a child, between the ages of eight and twelve, joining a community of nuns who lived alongside the monastic community of men. She was professed with Jutta, an older woman who was herself a visionary of local fame, and who received many visitors who had heard about her gifts. Under Jutta's care, Hildegard began a type of apprenticeship in female mysticism, invariably absorbing lessons in the power of visionary speech, as well as in the utility of spiritual celebrity for a foundation. This type of celebrity added to the fame and reputation of a monastery and convent, which in turn encouraged donations and gifts from visitors and patrons. In addition to her relationship with Jutta, the nature of religious community meant that Hildegard was able to engage with scholars in the monastery and receive informal instruction in sacred text and doctrine. She also had access to scribes who could aid her in the production of letters, as well as in the composition of her many works. Hildegard of Bingen would go on to write original treatises on musicology, cosmology, natural philosophy and spiritual advice.

In 1136, the abbot of the monastery asked Hildegard to take on the role of prioress. She would have responsibility for overseeing the community of female religious and would be under the authority of the abbot. This was an important role, because Jutta and Hildegard's reputations brought not only wealth and prestige to the monastery, they also ensured a steady stream

of prospective young noblewomen who were keen to join religious life and needed guidance. Hildegard took on the role of prioress, and she spent the next fifteen years agitating for more independence and autonomy for her community. Eventually, after facing down strong opposition from the abbot, Hildegard and her sisters founded their own house at Rupertsberg, where Hildegard would remain until her death. In the same period, she worked decisively to establish her credentials, eventually securing an endorsement from the pope that authorised her visions and her communications of them to the wider world. Her brand, so to speak, was that of a prophetess. To be able to perform that role, however, demanded a savvy grasp of aristocratic governance, complicated financial management, and the capacity to negotiate complicated issues of jurisdiction between secular and religious authorities. For example, one among many, in moving her sisters to Rupertsberg, Hildegard had to fight to secure the dowries that her sisters had brought with them to Disibodenberg. To do this, she recruited high-profile supporters to her cause in order to force the abbot's hand. Hildegard may have described herself in 1148 as 'poor little woman though I am' in a letter to Pope Eugenius, but her rhetorical self-deprecation served only to illuminate her exceptionality and her capacity.<sup>58</sup>

The lives of female religious were geographically bounded, even for a figure as illustrious as Hildegard. They lived in literal cloisters and, however lavish the buildings and comfortable the situation, physical immobility was a reality. The letter was the form in which they could meet the world, and invite the world to come to them. Hence Hildegard's letter to Bernard of Clairvaux, quoted above, which she wrote to him to place herself in his view, at least in virtual form. Her claim to have the power of prophecy, and to have a direct mystical relationship with divine truth, was fraught and courted danger. She risked scandal and, more seriously, charges of error and heresy. To manage this risk, Hildegard needed to be recognised as legitimate and to have her capacities endorsed by the male hierarchy of the Church. Her 1148 letter to Pope Eugenius was part of this legitimacy project.

Eugenius, the first Cistercian pope and a protégé of Bernard, had been informed of Hildegard's gifts at a synod held in Trier, and had sent envoys to Disibodenberg to acquire her writings so that they could be evaluated. The pope had been moved by her words and excerpts and had granted her apostolic licence to continue with her writing. Hildegard wrote to the pope

58 'Hildegard to Pope Eugenius 1148', in Baird and Ehrman (trans. and ed.), *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, p. 32.



to thank him for his support, and to encourage him to continue to hear and defend her words:

I send this letter to you now, as God has instructed me. And my spirit desires that the Light of Light shine in you and purify your eyes and arouse your spirit to your duty concerning my writings, so that your soul may be crowned which will be pleasing to God. In their instability, many people, those wise in worldly things, disparage these writings of mine, criticising me, a poor creature formed from a rib, ignorant of philosophical matters.<sup>59</sup>

Hildegard, an ostensibly poor creature, declares to the pope that he will be edified and illuminated by her writings and that this will be pleasing to God. She suggests that her spiritual gifts enable her to reveal God's desires to the pope, and that God's desire is very much that Eugenius be dutiful to Hildegard. And she reminds him to be distrustful of those who question her veracity and her prophetic powers – her critics might be learned, but they are unstable in their worldliness. Hildegard's spatial enclosure in the convent, a consequence of her womanhood, is implicitly offered as a freedom rather than a limitation. Those who are wise in worldly things, those who have access to the world, are constrained by its precarity and delights. Hildegard, however, is liberated and purified by her ignorance and confinement.

As Hildegard's reputation grew, and after having received the endorsement of the pope, her letters became more forceful and relied less on the trope of her womanly frailty. Her most famous letter, addressed to the prelates of Mainz, was written in 1178, near the end of her life, and offered a blistering account of her rectitude, with her prophetic powers on full display. The letter concerned a dispute between Hildegard and local episcopal authorities. Hildegard had permitted the body of a young nobleman to be buried in the grounds of her convent. As far as she was concerned, this was perfectly appropriate, as the young man had received the last rites and the burial was conducted as was proper. The prelates of Mainz, however, received information that at some point in his life the deceased had been excommunicated, and they commanded Hildegard exhume the body and remove it from the holy grounds of the convent. When Hildegard refused to do this, the prelates imposed an interdict on Hildegard's foundation Rupertsberg, which meant that the community was denied liturgy and the sacraments. This was a severe punishment, one that imperilled the possibility of salvation for the

59 *Ibid.*

community by depriving them of the sacraments' saving work. Hildegard wrote to the prelates to defend herself and her community, insisting that the young man had been reconciled to the Church prior to his death. But she was not only concerned with due process. In the letter she also declared that it was the information and instruction that she received from God in visions that held the highest authority for her. She could not, in conscience, obey the commands of mortal men when they contradicted the commands given to her to by God. She recounted that when she received the order to exhume the body she was:

Seized by no small terror as a result, I looked as usual to the True Light, and with wakeful eyes, I saw in my spirit that if this man were disinterred in accordance with their commands, a terrible and lamentable danger would come upon us like a dark cloud before a threatening thunderstorm.<sup>60</sup>

And so, in the letter, Hildegard juxtaposes the procedural order of clerical men with the cosmic order of God, and insists that the latter provides a higher account of the truth. This is not to say that she rejects Church hierarchy or the meaning of obedience in any absolute sense, as she takes pains to make clear:

Not, certainly, that we take the counsel of upright men or the orders of our superiors lightly, but we would not have it appear that, out of feminine harshness we did injustice to the sacraments of Christ, with which this man had been fortified while he was still alive.<sup>61</sup>

Her point is that it is her profound respect and devotion to the sacraments that have forced her disobedient action. To disinter the young man would be to deny the saving sacramental work that she was sure had already transpired. Should she have followed the commands of the prelates, she and her sisters would be guilty of 'feminine harshness', of committing an even greater sin than that of disobedience. By harshness, here, Hildegard is referring to the particularity of the penalty visited upon women after the fall, the *acerbitas* to which women were prone as punishment. In order to signal, however, that she also understands the sin of disobedience, she reassures the prelates that her community has observed the conditions

60 'Letter 72 to the Prelates at Mainz', in Joseph L. Baird (trans. and ed.), *The Personal Correspondence of Hildegard of Bingen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 156.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

of the interdict, although 'as a result, my sisters and I have been greatly distressed and saddened'.<sup>62</sup>

Hildegard concedes some mistake on her part:

In the same vision I also heard that I had erred in not going humbly and devoutly to my superiors for permission to participate in the communion, especially since [we] were not at fault in receiving that dead man into our ceremony.<sup>63</sup>

But nonetheless, it is only the authority of the vision to which she defers. Her error was one of posture and decorum, as the vision told her, but it was no more than that. Her letter to the prelates gives no other inch. She repeatedly asserts the primacy of her visionary mode as a mode of the truth and as the basis of her inviolable authority. The authority of the men, to whom she ostensibly defers in following the rules of the interdict, is presented as much murkier and more troubled than her own. She issues a warning to the prelates that they must be certain that 'they act out of a zeal for God's justice, rather than out of indignation, unjust emotions, or a desire for revenge'.<sup>64</sup> Where Hildegard presents herself as a woman of inviolable integrity, fortified and protected by her access to the True Light, she imputes to the prelates a susceptibility to dangerous feelings and cloudy judgement. She tells them, 'you must always be on your guard not to be circumvented in your decisions by Satan, who drove man from celestial harmony and the delights of paradise'.<sup>65</sup> Her inference is clear: the prelates may be under Satan's command already.

It is an extraordinary letter, made all the more provocative when we think about it in context as a document that would never have been, or intended to be, private. Hildegard's letter was not only meant for the eyes of the prelates; it would pass through too many hands in composition, carriage and reception for its contents to be kept under wraps. Her letter was an escalation, designed to gain sympathy and to embarrass her putative superiors into urgent action. It is breathtaking in the confidence Hildegard displays in her righteousness, but anyone can claim to be righteous. The question is whether those claims will be taken seriously, and Hildegard's letter demonstrated her confidence that her authority

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

65 *Ibid.*

had traction, and that the prelates would be brought to heel, in spite of her attacks against their judgement and their constancy. She finished the letter to the prelates with a final salvo against them, saying, 'this time is a womanish time, because the dispensation of God's justice is weak'.<sup>66</sup> She emasculated the prelates, suggesting that they had failed in the rigours of governance thought to be the province of men. Just as Eve succumbed to the seductions of the serpent before Adam, and thus initiated the fall, so too have the prelates invited Satan into their world. And Hildegard then reminds the prelates that she will exert God's justice where they have failed to do so, describing herself as a 'female warrior', a Bellatrix. Hildegard militarises herself, making herself manly in order to wage war in 'womanish time'.<sup>67</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the prelates did not reply to Hildegard's letter. She subsequently sought support from the archbishop of Mainz, who had been in Rome during the period of the controversy and absent from local duties. He replied to her and swiftly ordered that the interdict be lifted. His words to her attest to the accuracy of her confidence in her own authority, as well as her faith in the power of reputation: 'Dearest Lady in Christ, these obvious signs of your holy life and such amazing testimonies to the truth oblige us to obey your commands and pay especial heed to your entreaties'.<sup>68</sup> The archbishop did offer mild caution to Hildegard, suggesting that her escalation of the issue and the ensuing scandal was harmful and unnecessary. But at the same time, he assured her that he recognised her as a living saint and completely accepted her account of her proximity to the divine, describing himself as 'having the greatest confidence in your sanctity (next only to that we owe God)'.<sup>69</sup> Hildegard had transcended ecclesiastical hierarchy and achieved an authority that stood outside its framework, and, to some degree, above it. She did this by many means. Her extraordinary record of writings reveals the depth of her intellect and the creativity of her visionary life. But it was through the letter that she was able to transcend the spatial boundaries that governed the lives of religious women, and to build the networks and the reputation that secured her authority and, to some degree, her autonomy.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 161.

67 *Ibid.*

68 'Letter 74 from Christian, Archbishop of Mainz', in Baird (trans. and ed.), *The Personal Correspondence of Hildegard of Bingen*, p. 165.

69 *Ibid.*

## Héloïse and Monastic Life

Héloïse (c. 1094–1164) was, like Hildegard, the head of a religious community. She was abbess of the Paraclete, a convent in Champagne that was established for her by her ex-lover Abelard, who had himself become a monk after their affair and its aftermath.<sup>70</sup> She lived at the Paraclete from c. 1129 until her death in 1164. The extant letters of Abelard and Héloïse, in which they speak about the history of their scandalous relationship and negotiate their later situations as religious, are without doubt the most well-known correspondence that survives from the European Middle Ages. When they first met in Paris, Abelard was a young and somewhat controversial theologian and teacher, who delighted in drawing large crowds of students to his lectures and conquering older and more established figures in public debates. Héloïse was the niece of Fulbert, a canon at Notre Dame, and she had achieved her own reputation for learning in Paris, extremely unusual for a young woman. Little is known about her early years, but it is assumed that Héloïse gained her capacity in Latin in Argenteuil, in France, where she was born and lived until she came to Paris at around the age of twenty-one to further her studies under the care of her well-connected uncle.

In his account of their affair, the *Historia Calamitatum*, Abelard mentions that Héloïse's scholarly capacities had 'won renown throughout the realm'.<sup>71</sup> He tells us that he set out to seduce Héloïse, and that he inveigled his way into lodgings at Fulbert's residence by offering to teach Héloïse as part of his rental payments. As is well known, Abelard and Héloïse began a relationship that resulted in Héloïse becoming pregnant and leaving Paris to have the baby. Abelard offered to marry Héloïse to appease Fulbert, against the wishes of Héloïse, who had declared the prospect of marriage humiliating to both of them, and insisted that it would be devastating to Abelard's career. She finally agreed, on the proviso that the marriage should remain a secret. This news, however, travelled quickly, and Abelard reports that when Héloïse confronted her uncle about his indiscretion in sharing information about her marriage, she suffered such significant abuse from him that Abelard

<sup>70</sup> See Constant J. Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Abelard and Héloïse: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999) for an excellent discussion of scholarly debates concerning the authenticity of the letters discussed above, as well as Mews's controversial identification of an additional collection of letters by Abelard and Héloïse. See also, Bonnie Wheeler (ed.), *Listening to Héloïse: The Voice of a Twelfth-Century Woman* (London: MacMillan, 2000).<

<sup>71</sup> Peter Abelard, 'Historia Calamitatum', in Betty Radice (trans.), *The Letters of Abelard and Héloïse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 67.

helped Héloïse to flee to the convent at Argenteuil. As a result of Héloïse's flight, Abelard was accused by her uncle of forcing her into religious life as a means to avoid his matrimonial duties. Fulbert's vengeance, as narrated by Abelard, was brutal. One night, as Abelard slept, Fulbert's men invaded his room and castrated him. After that event, Abelard explains that he had little choice but to become a monk, for sanctuary as much as for religious reasons. Héloïse joined Abelard in the religious life, eventually joining the Paraclete, a house for religious women founded by Abelard.

The first extant letter that Héloïse writes to Abelard from the Paraclete is in response to Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum*, which he had written to an unknown friend as a letter of consolation, and a copy of which had fallen into Héloïse's hands. She begins the letter with her most famous of salutations, in which she plays with the multiple identities that they have each occupied in relation to the other: 'To her master, or rather her father, husband, or rather brother; his handmaid, or rather his daughter, wife or rather sister; to Abelard, Héloïse.'<sup>72</sup> Héloïse evinces a striking economy here: where most salutations tend to the obsequious, she merely registers the myriad roles that they have played in each other's lives. The salutation accords with the overall argument of her letter, in which she upbraids Abelard for writing the intimate account of their life for the purpose of consoling his friend, while failing to offer her any of the same. The salutation is a reminder of what they have shared in the past as lovers, and their continued relationship as brother and sister in religious orders. That she conceives of Abelard's failings towards her as a breach of obligation is clear in what follows:

You have done your duty to a friend and comrade, discharged your debt to friendship and comradeship, but it is a greater debt which binds you in obligation to us who can properly not be called friends so much as dearest friends, not comrades but daughters, or any other conceivable name more tender than holy.<sup>73</sup>

Héloïse explains to Abelard that since he established her foundation at the Paraclete, he is responsible for its care and maintenance. The Paraclete, she says, is a plantation of his creation and he must tend the plants under his care, by which she refers to herself and her sisters. As a new foundation, Héloïse says, the community requires extra guidance, as 'it is sown with

<sup>72</sup> 'Letter 1 Héloïse to Abelard', in Radice (trans.), *The Letters of Abelard and Héloïse*, p. 109.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

plants which are still very tender and in need of watering'.<sup>74</sup> She exhorts him to accept his duty of care, not only to the members of the Paraclete but to the woman to whom he pledged himself in marriage, writing, 'you must know that you are bound to me by an obligation which is all the greater for the further close tie of the marriage sacrament uniting us'.<sup>75</sup> Read in this light, her salutation makes all the more sense. Héloïse claims the title 'wife', despite her current situation, because it remains salient to her claims against and for Abelard. At the end of the first letter, Héloïse accepts that Abelard is unable to offer her the solace and support that she is owed, but she reminds him that he is able to offer the substitution of himself through the form of the letter and demands that he writes to her.

In 2005, Constant J. Mews published the monograph *Abelard and Héloïse* in the Oxford University Press series *Great Medieval Thinkers*.<sup>76</sup> To date, this is the only volume in the series devoted to a pair of thinkers, and the only volume that includes the thoughts of a woman. That Héloïse stands alone in this series as the sole female thinker, albeit included alongside her partner, is not a testament to her unusual genius, but rather conveys just how rare it was for medieval women to access the scholarly world in the Middle Ages in Europe. Héloïse's exceptionality, then, means that the correspondence that follows between herself and Abelard is extraordinarily rich and expressive, and is unique in the history of European medieval epistolarity. Their letters are profoundly erudite and draw on their mastery of both classical and Christian texts. But their erudition is transcended by the coherence and emotionality that they bring to the page. They deploy allusion and references from other texts in order to conduct a rigorous and thoughtful dialogue that articulates their robust feelings about the history that they shared, as well as their reckoning with their current situations. There has already been a great deal of scholarship that responds to the enormous challenges posed by these letters, reading them in their philological, religious and literary contexts.

But the question remains: what are we to make of such an exceptional corpus, one that seems to permit much greater access to personality and history than almost all other medieval letters? The answer is not that Héloïse and Abelard were simply cleverer than their contemporaries, or more emotionally sensitive or self-aware. Rather, it was the peculiarity of their well-known history and profiles, Héloïse's exceptional education,

74 *Ibid.*

75 *Ibid.*, pp. 112–13.

76 Constant J. Mews, *Abelard and Héloïse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

and the physical separation that they experienced, that enabled them to write as they did. They did not need to hide their previous intimacy, as it was well known and, as they had already suffered its consequences, they did not need to fear disclosure. Héloïse's education was unmatched, as far as we know, by any other woman of her age. More crucially, Héloïse had been partially educated by Abelard, and so they shared an intellectual formation and vocabulary that permitted great complexity in their written communication. Finally, they were separated geographically but remained in a structural relationship, as Abelard had founded the convent where Héloïse resided. As such, they were able to write to each other in their own words, without reliance on scribes, drawing on a complicated shared history. It is these conditions that engender the exceptionality of their correspondence, and this exceptionality in turn casts light on normative medieval letters, which could rarely perform the same intimacy or shared context. Having made a claim, however, for the singularity of these letters, it is also important to recognise that they are as formal and as public as any other medieval letter. They were not written to be intimate, even if they deploy the language of intimacy. Héloïse is repeatedly clear throughout her side of the correspondence that she seeks strategic, logistical and liturgical support from Abelard in her efforts to legitimise and govern the Paraclete.

Héloïse's thinking, as expressed in her last extant letter to Abelard, was particularly concerned with theorising the status and practices of women religious, and insisting that the particularity of their situation be taken into account in the management of monastic life. She writes to Abelard to ask him to write a new rule for the Paraclete, one that will speak explicitly to the structural and spiritual conditions of enclosure. She addresses him with the request that 'you will teach us how the order of nuns began, and what authority there is for our profession'.<sup>77</sup> She seeks an account of the history and the legitimacy of female monastic life, implicitly pointing out its subordinate and under-theorised status within the religious hierarchies. She explains to him that *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, which ostensibly applies to both genders, was written for men and contains precepts that it is impossible for women to obey.<sup>78</sup> She describes a number of examples, such as the rule that monasteries should offer hospitality to pilgrims. Héloïse explains that supplying such hospitality might lead nuns into sin, as they would be exposed to temptation, conviviality and flattery. She asks Abelard about the problem of the night office, the pre-dawn prayers that take place in the

77 'Letter 5 Héloïse to Abelard', in Radice (trans.), *The Letters of Abelard and Héloïse* p. 159.

78 St Benedict, *The Rule of Benedict*, trans. by Carolinne White (London: Penguin, 2008).



monastery at which the Gospel is read. Should Héloïse and her nuns practise their vigil, they require the attendance of a priest to read the scripture for them. Héloïse suggests that receiving a man into the convent at this delicate hour also threatens decorum and temptation.

The problem for women religious, as Héloïse has it, is that they are not at liberty to govern their communities in a manner that protects them from the sin of disobedience, as they are bound by a rule that is impossible for women to obey without risking other forms of sin. She asks Abelard for a remedy:

Do you then also, I beg you, who seek to imitate not only Christ, but also this apostle [Peter], in discrimination as in name, modify your instructions for works to suit our weak nature, so that we can be free to devote ourselves to the offices of praising God.<sup>79</sup>

As we saw in Hildegard's letters, Héloïse invokes the weakness of women as a claim for privilege. Women are different, both physically and as constituted by theology, and they thereby deserve recognition and accommodation in their frailty. And importantly, in suggesting that women need particular protection from their sinful nature, she asserts the power and risk of their libidinal drives. Women do not need protection because of the sexual predations of men; they need shelter from their own temptation. Héloïse admits women's extra imperfection, but she does so in order to achieve a perverse form of autonomy for her foundation. She explains to Abelard that:

Certainly those who laid down rules for monks were not only completely silent about women but also prescribed regulations which they knew to be quite unsuitable for them, and this showed plainly enough that the necks of bullock and heifer should in no sense be brought under the same yoke of a common rule, since those whom nature created unequal cannot properly be made equal in labour.<sup>80</sup>

Héloïse understands that she and her community must be ruled, but she demands ownership of the process of assigning the rules under which she will submit.

Héloïse also corresponded with Peter the Venerable, who was the abbot of Cluny, the most prestigious and influential monastery in France at the time. She wrote to him in 1143 to thank him for visiting her foundation and

79 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

for permitting Abelard's burial at the Paraclete. Abelard had died at Cluny in 1142, and Peter the Venerable had previously written to Héloïse to reassure her about the holy manner of his death. Subsequent to that letter, Peter the Venerable had made the journey to the Paraclete, accompanied by Abelard's body. He had conducted mass and prayers for the community. Héloïse's letter of gratitude to Peter the Venerable is a great deal more formulaic than her letters to Abelard, and she offers him a standard, albeit very eloquent, performance of devotion:

You gave us the body of our master and so yielded up the privilege which belonged to Cluny. To me too (unworthy as I am to be called your servant) your sublime humility has not disdained to address as sister in writing and speech, you granted a rare privilege in token of your love and sincerity; a trental of masses to be said on my behalf by the abbey of Cluny after my death.<sup>81</sup>

This letter serves to express esteem, and also to lock Peter into the promise he has made regarding commemorative masses for Héloïse after her death. She asks him to record the pledge to her in writing, and to send the document to her in a letter under seal. She seeks further records from the abbot, asking him to provide a document confirming Abelard's absolution from sin. Finally, she asks Peter to aid her son Astrolabe in securing a suitable prebend; that is, a stipend granted to a cleric attached to a cathedral. As with so many medieval letters, this letter by Héloïse requests patronage and support. She offers the recipient recognition of his greatness, and acknowledges his 'sublimity' to which she claims to be inadequate. In exchange for her humility, she asks for patronage for her son and the protection for her convent that will come with the endorsement offered by Peter the Venerable.

For all her fame, for all her erudition, Héloïse remained a religious woman charged with the administration of her foundation and the survival of her sisters. Her letters to both Peters reveal her aptitude for this necessary work, and the degree to which it bound her in place and in duty. Her authorship of her letters was one of the means by which she negotiated the authority to do this work.

Hildegard and Héloïse both expressed dissatisfaction with the imposition of external masculine governance on their foundations and used letter-writing to manage their relationships with the Church hierarchy. By the

81 'Héloïse: letter (167) to Peter the Venerable', in Radice (trans.), *The Letters of Abelard and Héloïse*, p. 285.

time our third correspondent, Clare of Assisi (c. 1194–1253), was negotiating autonomy for her religious community, the parameters of what was and was not possible were beginning to change.<sup>82</sup>

### The Privilege of Poverty

Clare was born a noblewoman in Umbria. Her natal family, the Offreduccio, held castles and land from which they drew revenues that enabled the maintenance of their palazzo in Assisi. As a very young woman, Clare became an early follower of Francis of Assisi, attracted to his vision of mendicancy as a form of spiritual devotion. Francis elevated poverty as a spiritual practice, and this was not the landed 'feudal' poverty practised by monasteries. Rather, he insisted on living in radical communities in towns, dependent on begging for alms and preaching his message of apostolic imitation to town-dwellers of mixed status and means. Francis had famously stripped off his clothing in Assisi's town square, returning the garments to his merchant father as a gesture of rebirth and his rejection of the mercantile economy from which he had come. Similarly, Clare repudiated the normative expectations of an aristocratic marriage that would have applied to a girl of her birth, a determination dramatised by accounts of her life that describe how she had her head shorn as a gesture of refusal of feminine ideals. Clare shared Francis's ambition for a life of poverty, lived in the *Imitatio Christi* (the 'Imitation of Christ').

Francis received papal ratification of his order, the Friars Minor, as they were then called, in 1210. With Francis, Clare founded the Order of Poor Ladies, which would later be called the Poor Clares, in honour of their founder. Clare sought permission to live under the same strict rules of poverty as her male counterparts. The question of the poverty of women, however, was considered to be a much more vexed one. Successive popes evinced concern at the risks posed by poverty to women, in particular, who may live without stable means and fortified accommodation. Although Clare shared her spiritual project with Francis and his male followers, her fight to gain the privilege of poverty for herself and her sisters was necessarily a gendered one. This was a struggle to which Clare devoted most of her life, and was only completed when Clare secured the ratification of her rule on her deathbed in 1253.

82 Bert Roest, *Order and Disorder: The Poor Clares Between Order and Reform* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

In order to advocate for the privilege, Clare conducted a sustained correspondence with Agnes of Prague, the daughter of King Ottokar of Bohemia, between 1234 and 1253. Agnes was a high-profile convert to the Franciscan cause, having encountered Franciscan missionaries in Bohemia. As a result of her conversion, she had famously rejected the hand in marriage of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa. Since the pope was, at that time, engaged in a bitter struggle with that same emperor over territories in Italy, Clare had every reason to hope that Agnes's rejection of Frederick might be used as leverage with the pope in their shared quest for spiritual and economic autonomy. Clare wrote to Agnes offering her own spiritual patronage to the princess, in so doing yoking her own struggle for the 'privilege of poverty' to Agnes's radical act of refusal; she did so as a noblewoman who had herself made the same decision to spurn marriage. Although they both eschewed their aristocratic contexts, it was in their nobility that they had been commodified as potential brides, and it was in their nobility that their turn to poverty was in any sense meaningful or provocative. This was the shared context that Clare used to forge the alliance with Agnes, noting that marriage to Christ was a far 'nobler' act than that of marriage to the emperor:

I rejoice because you, more than others, could have enjoyed public ostentation, honors and worldly status having had the opportunity to become, with eminent glory, legitimately married to the illustrious emperor, as would befit you and his preeminence. Spurning all these things with your whole heart and mind you have chosen instead holiest poverty and physical want, accepting a nobler spouse the Lord Jesus Christ, who will keep your virginity always immaculate and inviolate.<sup>83</sup>

Throughout the letters, Clare posited herself as spiritual kin to Agnes, suggesting herself as a mother who could guide Agnes in her new life. The letters are replete with Franciscan devotional language, and consequently they have most often been read in the context of the new forms of affective piety emerging across Europe during the thirteenth century. These readings make good sense. In the letters, Clare celebrated poverty as the ultimate form of wealth, as yielding ineffable pleasures. She offered Agnes instructions for prayer and meditation, imploring her to explore the libidinal spiritual possibilities available through identification with Christ and reflection

83 'Clare's first letter to Agnes', in Joan Mueller (ed.), *A Companion to Clare of Assisi: Life, Writings and Spirituality* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), p. 261.

on his carnality. The letters exhorted Agnes to hold her commitment to poverty and to Franciscan life, and promised in return profound somatic and sacred pleasure. But these letters were also performances of spiritual motherhood. Clare figured herself as Agnes's mother, intimately interested in the welfare of her daughter. She declared to Agnes:

O blessed daughter, since my bodily tongue cannot express more fully the love that I have for you, that which I have written is certainly inadequate. I beg you to receive these words with kindness and devotion, seeing in them at least the motherly affection, by which every day I am stirred by the fire of love for you and your daughters.<sup>84</sup>

And lest Agnes failed to understand the depth of Clare's maternal feelings, Clare insisted that 'do not for a moment wonder or in any way believe that the fire of my love for you burns any less sweetly in the deepest heart of your mother'.<sup>85</sup>

In the period covered by these letters, both women deployed their networks to lobby the pope for the freedom to refuse landed endowment. Agnes's brother King Wenceslas eventually vowed support to the pope in his battles against the emperor, and noted that his oath 'will be particularly true' if the pope agreed to meet with Agnes to discuss her demands.<sup>86</sup> Clare and Agnes would never meet, and yet by means of correspondence they found solidarity, worked towards the same end and lobbied the same people. Clare's letters engendered this sense of a common purpose, grounded in the shared spiritual and structural ambition to resist male clerical authority that sought to bind them in the ownership of land, which would invariably imply oversight by episcopal authorities. Clare wrote to Agnes:

I see, too, that you are embracing with humility, the virtue of faith, and the arms of poverty, the incomparable treasure that lies hidden in the field of the world and the hearts of human beings, where it is purchased by the One by whom all things were made by nothing.<sup>87</sup>

And here she turned ideas of virtue and value upside down. Poverty was construed as a weapon, and the only true exchange was the purchase that

84 'Clare's fourth letter to Agnes', Mueller, *A Companion to Clare of Assisi*, p. 273.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 271.

86 Mueller, *A Companion to Clare of Assisi*, p. 82.

87 'Clare's third letter to Agnes', Mueller, *A Companion to Clare of Assisi*, p. 267.<

God made on the hearts of the faithful by offering them the real treasures of penury and humility. Clare reached out, to a woman she would never meet, to enfold her in a shared project, one that was maternal, sisterly and deeply political. Clare's efforts were ultimately successful, and her achievement of the Privilege of Poverty set a crucial precedent for the practices and possibilities of religious women who followed in her wake. Clare received a sealed papal letter legalising her order on her deathbed, dying the day after it arrived. The hagiography records that she sealed the seal with a kiss. The struggle for the Privilege of Poverty was conducted through the letter and completed with the arrival of a letter.

Clare's path was groundbreaking. Following her experiment in poverty, and until the period of the counter-reformation, women across Europe were inspired to create innovative and flexible forms of religious life, which were often based in urban centres and were untethered to the formality of religious orders and the imposition of vows. These new forms of devotional practice and novel forms of spiritual community created the possibility of feminine spiritual celebrity that could be played out in the piazza and disseminated in the vernacular. These women, such as Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich, had no need for the Latinity of their predecessors. But they followed Hildegard, Héloïse and Clare in using their creaturely language that offered power through abjection and status in weakness.

## Conclusion

The women writers surveyed in this chapter inaugurated novel expressions of feminine selfhood, which claimed particular forms of womanly privilege. They took for themselves discourses of gendered difference, such as maternal or wretched femininity, and insisted that these categories of limitation and weakness could be a source of strength and insight. They made status out of being secondary to men, and argued that it enabled an acuity of vision and feeling that was not subordinate to masculine knowledge, but an alternative to it. Their letters claimed a right to intervene in the world, not on the basis of equality, but on the basis of the privileged difference granted to them by God, which enabled them to perform their roles as wives, mothers and religious leaders. They performed this privilege by many means, in the conduct of their duties and the management of their communities. The letter was crucial, however, in the dissemination of this new language of authority, as it allowed women to deploy it in the world, and be seen to do so. The significance of the epistolary innovations made by the women of

this chapter becomes clear in subsequent centuries. Catherine of Siena, for example, deployed and amplified the tropes of feminine power and abjection that had been carved out by her predecessors.

By the end of the thirteenth century, Latin's dominance as the language of formal communication was being challenged by the vernacular. Eleanor of Provence, who eventually became queen dowager when Henry III died in 1272, began to author letters in French around 1279. Eventually she would take the veil, in 1284, and from her convent at Amesbury, which was a daughter house of the great abbey at Fontevrault in France, she continued her practices of correspondence. She wrote letters in order to transact the affairs of Amesbury, but also in regard to the status of Fontevrault and its franchises more generally. Even though she was based at one of the abbey's regional outposts, she maintained her work of patronage and governance, flexing her networks to secure its fortunes. She wrote to her son, Edward I of England, in French, to petition him to intervene with the king of Sicily to protect Fontevrault's holdings in the regions over which he had dominion. Displaying her sense of the diplomacy at play, she declared:

And, because we know well that he will do much more for your prayer than for ours, for you have better deserved it, we pray you, good son, that for love of us you will request and especially require this thing from him; and then he would command that the things which the abbess holds in his lordship may be his protection or guard, and that neither she nor hers may be molested or grieved.<sup>88</sup>

Here, she invokes the familial ties that she is owed by her son, as well as recognising the influence he now wields, which is greater than her own. She acknowledges that her petition is in the interests of her abbess, as well as in her own, and situates herself as patron and client in the same instance. That she does so in French rather than Latin is not particularly salient to the meaning or form of the letter; this letter follows dictaminal norms. But the shift to the vernacular is significant for the history of epistolarity more generally in this period. That a letter between two such esteemed figures, which would have been processed at both ends by bureaucrats in chanceries, could be written in the vernacular and still be able to do its high-level work, signifies a transformation in the possibilities offered by epistolarity in the medieval West.

88 'Eleanor, Queen-Dowager of England, to her son, Edward I, between 1286 and 1291', in Crawford (trans. and ed.), *Letters of the Queens of England 1100–1547*, p. 66.

This is not to imply a broad democratisation of the letter. Letters would remain, in subsequent centuries, the province of elites. But the vernacularisation of the letter, concomitant to economic and social changes, would occur alongside the development of novel forms of elite culture, as well as new groups entering their midst. Latin's dominance had been a structural barrier to letter-writing, as it tied epistolarity to clerical culture for most of the Middle Ages. The emergence of vernacular languages for formal communication enabled a great many more players, male and female, to come to the letter-writing table.

The period covered by this chapter is characterised, overarchingly, by the paucity of participation in letter-writing. Letters were used by very few people, and they did very particular types of elite work, as we have seen. But this exclusivity should not occlude recognition of what the letter did avail for elite medieval women. For the women we have sampled in this chapter, elite in status but not in gender, the letter enabled them to transcend and transgress the gendered boundaries, both spatial and ideological, that constrained their capacities. As authors of letters, they were able to be authoritative.





## 2 The Rise of Vernacular Letter-writing

**Abstract:** The use of European vernacular languages in correspondence from around the mid-fourteenth century encouraged women without formal training to compose letters, aided by a literate scribe. In developing urban centres, letter-writing was indispensable to mercantile activity and the needs of family businesses drew the wives of entrepreneurs into epistolary culture. Those women often used letters for their own purposes, expressing emotions and opinions while reporting practical matters. Gentry women managing estates on behalf of absent husbands also maintained a more than utilitarian correspondence with their menfolk. Letter-writing had always been essential for nuns communicating with patrons and family members. However, during the sixteenth century, as the Church's stricter enclosure of convents also threatened their financial viability, letters became the primary means of engaging with the outside world.

**Keywords:** nuns, gentry women, wives of merchants, marital correspondence, female literacy, vernacular letter-writing

Over the course of the fourteenth century, regional vernaculars made significant headway in many parts of Europe in gaining acceptance as appropriate vehicles of epistolary communication. While Latin continued to be the continent's *lingua franca*, especially in ecclesiastical and diplomatic letter-writing, local languages came into their own in commercial, administrative and family correspondence. Even the assumption that to be literate was to be able to read and write in Latin began to give way to the idea that literacy was the ability to write in one's mother tongue. Women benefited profoundly from these changes. Admittedly, throughout the late medieval centuries, there remained a wide gulf between male and female levels of literacy, except in a few elite social contexts where women were expected to play a political role or to lead female religious institutions.

Yet, once vernaculars gained epistolary traction, those with little or no formal training might participate in letter-writing with the help of a literate person willing to act as a scribe. By the second half of the sixteenth century, a greater number of women were being taught to read and to write, and it is in this period that we witness a notable increase in women penning letters in their own hands. It was a change that opened up the possibility of ensuring a measure of privacy for the expression of emotions and the relaying of confidences.

Evidence about the increasing diversity of female letter-writers from around 1350 owes much to the emergence of systematic record-keeping in government chanceries and to mercantile accounting practices. Italy's many small city-states generated a prodigious amount of administrative correspondence, while the entrepreneurial interests of its citizens ensured that all manner of letters, including those that mixed business and household matters, were filed and preserved in commercial archives, along with account books and other fiscal records. In England, a number of archives of gentry families have come down to us, although, as in the case of institutional, family and mercantile archives in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, most of the letters they contain were produced by men. Female voices must therefore be patiently searched for amid vast quantities of male correspondence, a formidable task that is now well underway in some European contexts but remains in its infancy in others.

The analysis in this chapter begins in a mercantile setting and then examines letter-writing among the landed gentry, social categories where it is possible to compare female letter-writing practices over time and to analyse wide variations in epistolary expertise. It then moves on to the correspondence of nuns and lay sisters, before and after the Protestant and Catholic reformations. Letter-writing was fundamental to the efforts of women living in religious communities to elicit charitable patronage and to retain a measure of institutional autonomy, as ecclesiastical and political authorities sought to impose greater control over their lives. Finally, the chapter focuses on examples of letters written by women from the well-educated political elite.

The examples of correspondence examined here suggest that the act of communicating via letters created opportunities for women, including the untutored, to construct images of the self that foregrounded their agency and competence, to broaden their social horizons beyond the confines of the household or the convent, and to negotiate social relationships in new ways.

## The Emergence of Vernacular Letter-writing

The intensely urbanised character of late medieval Italy encouraged a deep penetration down the social scale of male vernacular literacy.<sup>1</sup> In Florence and other Tuscan cities, where an unusually high number of citizens could expect to participate in civic affairs, Italian came to rival Latin in many forms of written communication remarkably early, helped by the great popular success in the early fourteenth century of works such as Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and, in the next generation, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. These ground-breaking writers created a nuanced and flexible literary version of Italian that was based primarily on spoken Tuscan, but which also incorporated some Latinising and Provençal elements, as well as vocabulary from other parts of the Italian peninsula. Alongside this prestigious literary language, there emerged a similarly supra-regional but more pragmatic Italian prose, which gained currency in the chanceries of the peninsula's courts and among merchants who needed to communicate with colleagues and clients far from their own local towns and cities.<sup>2</sup> Yet the move towards linguistic standardisation was slow and uneven. Many Italians struggled to make themselves understood beyond their regional communities. The difficulties posed by the use of Tuscan in mercantile letters for those who spoke northern Italian dialects, for example, is exemplified in a letter of January 1398 from the Milanese merchant Giovannino da Dugano. Writing to the Genoese branch of the firm of the Tuscan merchant Francesco Datini, Giovannino begged his correspondent to think more carefully about his choice of language in future letters: 'because I am not used to your vernacular, I ask you to write them in the most intelligible way that you can for me'.<sup>3</sup>

The widespread use of Anglo-French, as well as Latin, also produced a complex linguistic scene in late medieval England. The earliest evidence of

1 See Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy Literacy and Learning, 1300–1600* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 93–102; and Robert Black, *Education and Society in Florentine Tuscany: Teachers, Pupils and Schools c. 1250–1500* (Leiden and Boston MA: Brill, 2007), pp. 36–42.

2 Joshua Brown, 'Language variation in fifteenth century Milan: Evidence of Koineization in the letters 1397–1402 to the Milanese merchant Giovanni da Pessano', *Italian Studies*, 68 (1) (2013), 57–77.

3 'Giovannino da Dugano to Francesco di Marco Datini and Andrea de Bonanno, 30 January 1398, from Milan', in Luciana Frangioni (ed.), *Milano fine trecento. Il carteggio milanese dell'Archivio Datini di Prato*, 2 vols (Florence: Opus libri, 1994), vol. 2, pp. 496–7.

the use of English in correspondence is contained in a letter sent in 1392–3 from Florence by the famous mercenary captain Sir John Hawkwood. It was perhaps Hawkwood's familiarity with the already strong vernacular epistolary culture of Italy that prompted him to write in his native tongue.<sup>4</sup> However, it was not long before others had the same impulse. The next earliest known letter in English dates from less than a decade later. It too had a military connection, but it was written by a woman called Joan Pelham to her husband, Sir John, a Lancastrian retainer, during a separation in 1399 occasioned by his soldiering duties.<sup>5</sup>

Some aristocratic ladies also began to correspond in English. Elizabeth Despenser – or Lady Zouche, as she became known when she married Lord Zouche of Bedfordshire – adopted that language for letters to her servant and trusted agent, John Bore.<sup>6</sup> While records concerning significant debts and bonds had still to be in Latin or French, letters relating to estate or household matters could be in English.<sup>7</sup> For example, in a letter addressed to her 'Ryzt wel be loued frend', Lady Zouche detailed the purchases that John Bore was to obtain on her behalf in London – goods such as a 'ffrette & a ffylet of perles', 'a pipe of Rede wyn' and 'bedes of gold fore my lady my moder'. She also summarised amounts owed and paid to tailors, drapers and other suppliers of commodities, occasionally offering a glimpse of her personality, such as in the ironic aside in a letter of 7 July, probably sent in 1402, that her servant Hoigkyn's proposed trip to London was of dubious value since he usually came back to Eyton (the Zouche manor) with little more than exaggerated requests for reimbursement of his expenses.<sup>8</sup>

The London Brewer's Guild adopted English for official records after 1422, on the grounds that warrants under the Signet Office were now issued in that language, rather than French.<sup>9</sup> Although conservative groups, including nuns, clung to tradition, the ability to speak, and especially to write, French correctly declined sharply. In the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, written in the last decade of the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer gently mocked

4 Helen Suggett, 'The use of French in England in the later Middle Ages: the Alexander Prize Essay', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (1946), 61–83 (p. 68).

5 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

6 Paddy Payne and Caroline Barron, 'The letters and life of Elizabeth Despenser, Lady Zouche (d. 1408)', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 41 (1997), 126–56. See also Jennifer Ward, 'Letter-writing by English noblewomen in the early fifteenth century', in James Daybell (ed.), *Early Modern Women's Letter-writing, 1450–1700* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 29–41.

7 Payne and Barron, 'The letters and life of Elizabeth Despenser', 146–7.

8 *Ibid.* See appendix III, 148–52.

9 Suggett, 'The use of French', p. 62.

the coyly fastidious prioress, Madame Eglantine, who unselfconsciously spoke a strongly anglicised version of Parisian French:

And Frensch, sche spak ful faire and fetysly,  
 Aftur the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,  
 For Frensch of Parys was to hire unknowe.<sup>10</sup>

The popularity of French language formularies around this time suggests that many people in England were increasingly unconfident about their grasp of written French and needed formal guidance in composing letters in that language.<sup>11</sup>

The public and official use of English by the king, the chancery and the law courts, and the gradual emergence, after the early decades of the fifteenth century, of Chancery English as a standardised professional dialect, were powerful forces in English gaining primacy as the language of letter-writing.<sup>12</sup> As in Italy, merchants were quick to use their local vernacular in correspondence and tended to skip the conventional rhetorical formalities and turn immediately to issues of concern after a brief salutation.<sup>13</sup> Plain language was also favoured, especially in the case of English merchants operating in France and the Netherlands, who often needed to rely on translators to communicate with their foreign colleagues.

Northern European merchants adopted Low German to write to those beyond their immediate geographical context, although the degree to which people other than those involved in long-range trade could write in more than one language remains unclear. An early sixteenth-century collection of mercantile letters from Finland, the majority of which are in Low German, contains one letter by a widow who lived in Danzig. It is written in Swedish, probably her native tongue.<sup>14</sup> Although this single example tells us little, it is probable that women were more likely to be monolingual than men of the same social background. Yet despite this and other constraints, as

10 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. by Robert Bell, vol. 1 (London: Parker and Son, 1854), p. 82.

11 Fiona Swabey, 'The letter book of Alice de Bryene and Alice de Sutton's list of debts', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 42 (1998), 121–45 (pp. 135–6).

12 Malcolm Richardson, 'The "Dictamen" and its influence on fifteenth century English prose', *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, 2(3) (1984), 207–26.

13 Jane Thomas, 'Business writing in history: What caused the dictamin's demise?', *The Journal of Business Communications*, 36(1) (1999), 40–54.

14 Mika Kallioinen, 'Medieval merchants' letters in Northern Europe', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 44 (2019), 53–76 (p. 57).

we will see, an increasing number of women across Europe managed to communicate by letter when necessity prompted them to do so. There was a degree of tolerance for their untutored letter-writing efforts, if only because so many men also improvised solutions to the problems that arose in the epistolary free-for-all of vernacular letter-writing.

### The Costs and Social Limits of Letter-writing

The ease with which one could dispatch a letter varied enormously between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries. In the decades after the Black Death of 1348–9, which decimated Europe's urban populations and severely disrupted economies, merchants developed well-articulated and efficient systems linking major trading centres. While the costs of transporting letters were considerable, they could be borne by medium and large firms without undue financial strain. In the last decades of the fourteenth century, mail from Milan to Venice was carried on foot by a courier who left Milan every Sunday morning. From Venice, letters could be sent on to Bruges, while mail going from Lucca and other parts of Tuscany to Paris was gathered in Milan, with banks, such as that operated by the Machiavelli family, serving as holding and distribution centres. However, letters addressed to places off the beaten track could languish for weeks in bank hubs, waiting for sufficient mail to accumulate to make the carrier's trip affordable. The cost of sending a letter was shared by the sender and the recipient.<sup>15</sup>

In 1490, the German Paumgartner Company initiated an express service, charging twice the normal rate for a letter to travel from Venice to Augsburg in four days, instead of five. Although its prices were high, the firm was favoured by wealthy merchants like the Fuggers, who were willing to pay a premium for reliable and prompt delivery. The Fuggers used both the Paumgartner firm and the imperial service run by Thurn and Taxis. Originally from Italy, the Tasso family had established a company of couriers linking Milan with Venice and Rome in the late thirteenth century. Their operations steadily increased from their original base in Bergamo, in northern Italy, to Innsbruck and then Brussels. By the reign of Maximilian I, Thurn and

15 Luciana Frangioni, 'Il carteggio commerciale della fine del XIV secolo: layout e contenuto economico', *Reti Medievali Rivista*, 10 (1) (2009), 123–61; and Luciana Frangioni, 'I costi del servizio postale alla fine del Trecento', in *Aspetti della vita economica medievale: atti del Convegno di studi nel X anniversario della morte di Federigo Melis: Firenze-Pisa-Prato, 10–14 marzo 1984* (Florence: E. Ariani e l'arte della stampa, 1985), pp. 464–74.

Taxis, as they became known, had expanded their network throughout the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>16</sup>

A royal postal service was set up in France by order of Louis XI in 1477. Although it was not opened to general use until the early seventeenth century, roads and bridges along the main routes of travel within France were gradually improved over the course of the sixteenth century, facilitating the sending of letters by private companies and *ad hoc* couriers. The French Wars of Religion (1562–98) substantially put up the price for carrying a letter because of the perils of travel during the conflicts. One contemporary messenger declared that he had received 70 livres, 10 sols – a huge amount – for a trip from Lyon to Tours. The fee for travelling to Paris would have been even more expensive.<sup>17</sup>

By the fifteenth century, it was possible for English gentry families to use the sheriff's post to send letters to London. This was a service granted not by right but by favour, and was therefore dependent on patronage and friendship networks. The Stonor family was able to use the bargemen who plied between London and Henley to carry their mail, while the Pastons relied on servants and local men, or sometimes on travellers going to the great trade fairs in London. However, these too were *ad hoc* solutions to the challenges of sending mail reliably and promptly. Margaret Paston complained on one occasion that she was unable to find a carrier to take a letter to London for three weeks.<sup>18</sup> Over the course of the sixteenth century, a more accessible and national postal system began to develop in England. Towns were required to provide stabling and horses for couriers needing fresh mounts, and to ensure that mail was delivered to local addresses after it was deposited at a central location.<sup>19</sup>

These postal developments required a level of expense that was beyond most people, and impromptu methods of delivery still prevailed long after the establishment of formal postal systems. A letter sent sometime in the 1360s by Cataruza, a Venetian widow, to her brother-in-law Nicoletto da Pesaro, requesting financial assistance, documents the reliance on favours and informal networking as a means of securing a carrier for a letter.

16 See Rolf Walter and Maximilian Kalus, 'Innovation in the age of the Fuggers', in Guido Buenstorf (ed.), *The Two Sides of Innovation: Creation and Destruction in the Evolution of Capitalist Economies* (New York: Springer, 2013), pp. 109–27 (p. 114).

17 Eugene Vaille, *Histoire générale des postes françaises*, vol. 1 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947).

18 Stuart Beale, *A History of the Post in England from the Romans to the Stuarts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 99–101.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 164.



Cataruza excused her failure to thank Nicoletto for a gift of grapes and a side of beef, which had been delivered to her several months before, in the following terms: 'I wrote this letter at once, thinking that the good woman who promised to return to collect it would come, but she hasn't and now I'm at a loss how to send it. I pray that you will excuse me'.<sup>20</sup>

By the sixteenth century, not much had changed for those with limited financial means. The Carmelite nun Teresa of Ávila (1515–82) worried constantly about the cost of sending letters to her network of correspondents in Castile and beyond. Spain had a network of postal houses that could be used by the general public, but it was reliable only for letters directed to major destinations. Communication by letter with out-of-the-way monasteries, such as those at Malagón and Beas, was both difficult and expensive. Muleteers went to places not covered by the ordinary postal service, and they could be entrusted with valuables and with heavy packages, but the costs were high. Teresa fretted about the expense (since the recipient paid the courier). In delicate business matters needing prompt attention, Teresa hired special messengers – or her correspondents did – but the prohibitive prices for such deliveries made this a last resort. Whenever possible, relatives, friends and a variety of clerical contacts were called on to carry letters during their travels.<sup>21</sup>

The price of paper was another consideration for those with limited financial resources. *Carta bambagina*, or Amalfi paper, was introduced to Italy from Syria in the late medieval period. Made from cotton, linen and hemp, it was less durable than the parchment or vellum still used for papal bulls and some diplomatic letters, but far cheaper to produce. For example, a bundle of *carta fioretto dalla corona* was 9 ducats, while *carta fine dal corno* was 14 ducats a bundle in the late fourteenth century. Francesco Datini and his wife Margherita used the best-quality paper made by Fabriano, a firm still in business today.<sup>22</sup> The Datini correspondence has endured the passage of time remarkably well because of the excellence of the material on which the letters were written.

In England, paper was used from around 1300, most of it imported from Normandy and Spain. The last years of the fifteenth century saw the first water-powered paper mill set up in Hertford by John Tate, who employed

20 Cataruza da Pesaro to Nicoletto da Pesaro, middle of July, year unspecified, in Linda Guzzetti, 'Donne e scrittura a Venezia nel tardo Trecento', *Archivio veneto*, 152 (1999), 5–31 (p. 30).

21 Kieran Kavanaugh (trans. and ed.), *The Collected Letters of St Teresa of Ávila*, 2 vols (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 2001), vol. 1, pp. 20–3.

22 Frangioni, 'Il carteggio commerciale', pp. 10–11.

expert Italian workmen. However, despite royal patronage, Tate could not compete with cheaper imports from Italy and Spain, and the mill ceased production in 1507. It was only in Elizabeth I's time that the industry was resurrected in England.<sup>23</sup>

The costs of messengers and writing materials, as well as the availability of a scribe, if a woman was incapable of writing in her own hand, were not the only constraints on female letter-writing. As we will see in the last section of this chapter, even in elite contexts, a woman's ability to send a letter was sometimes restricted by resistance from husbands and other relatives, who could block access to couriers and secretaries, or insist on censoring the content of her letters. Much depended on the extent to which letter-writing served the interests of a woman's kin. However, the letter could be an effective instrument of resistance to patriarchal control, providing a new forum for marital dialogue about the limits of female agency, and a space to argue against the attempts of religious and government institutions to confine women in their socially sanctioned place, under the authority of men.

### Overseeing the Mercantile Household: Letters and Female Accountability

The letters of Margherita Datini (1360–1423) and Dora del Bene (c. 1340–1401), both wives of merchants, represent a considerable contrast in terms of formal literacy.<sup>24</sup> Yet the women's roles as domestic managers shaped in similar ways what and how they wrote to busy husbands, who were themselves deeply immersed in a culture of commercial accountability. The men expected that their wives would extend the traditional female oversight of the household to the workshop or to family estates in the countryside, whenever their absence from home made such supervision necessary. The merchants monitored and guided the women's activities from afar by letter. Their wives replied, providing news and detailed accounts of how they fulfilled the responsibilities that had been delegated to them. Although their correspondence was entirely purpose-driven, once in the habit of

23 Rayne Allison, *A Monarchy of Letters: Royal Correspondence and English Diplomacy in the Reign of Elizabeth I* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 4–5.

24 Margherita Datini, *Letters to Francesco Datini*, trans. by Carolyn James and Antonio Pagliaro (Toronto: Iter/CRRS, 2012); Valeria Rosati (ed.), *Le Lettere di Margherita Datini a Francesco di Marco, 1384–1410* (Prato: Cassa di Risparmi e Depositi, 1977); and Guia Passerini (ed.), 'Dora Guidalotti del Bene: Le lettere (1381–92)', *Letteratura italiana antica*, 4 (2003), 101–59.

correspondence with their husbands, both women began to perceive the possibilities that letters offered as a space in which their efficiency and knowledge could be documented.

We see this development particularly clearly in the exchanges of Margherita Datini with her husband Francesco. He had gone as a young man to seek his fortune in Avignon in Provence, then the seat of the papacy. It was there he met the much younger Margherita, whose family had been exiled from Florence following the execution for treason of her father, Domenico Bandini, in 1360, the year of Margherita's birth. By the time Francesco married at the age of forty, he had accumulated a substantial fortune, and the desire to return to Prato, the town near Florence where he had been born around 1335, became more insistent. The couple left France and travelled over the Alps to Tuscany in late 1383. They established themselves in Prato but, before long, Francesco set up a second dwelling and commercial premises in Florence to expedite and expand his business. Margherita presided over both households, sometimes remaining in Florence while her husband was in Prato, at other times supervising things in Prato when Francesco was detained by work in Florence. Such separations, which usually lasted a few days but occasionally extended over several weeks or even months, were the catalyst for the couple's letter exchanges.<sup>25</sup>

Still in her mid-twenties when the correspondence began in 1384, Margherita had little experience of letter-writing. In her circles, many considered a woman's ability to write a marital disadvantage, since it might render a wife too independent and give her access to financial and political matters regarded as dangerous information for those seen as the weaker sex. Yet it was Francesco himself who insisted that his wife manage and report on his affairs whenever he was away from home. The merchant's business archive of 160,000 letters and account books, which still survives in his palace, now the State Archive of Prato, contains 252 of Margherita's letters to him and a handful of letters she sent to others.<sup>26</sup>

The couple's correspondence was conveyed to its destination by the carters who plied foodstuffs and other goods by donkey or mule between Prato and Florence. For letters that had to travel further afield, Margherita relied on friends to convey them. For example, she refers in a letter to Francesco of 23 February 1385 to having written to her mother, Dianora Gherardini, who still lived in Avignon. She entrusted the letters to Beatrice del Nero, a local woman from Prato who was travelling by ship from Pisa to join her

25 See James's introduction in James and Pagliaro, *Letters to Francesco Datini*, pp. 1–25.

26 Available at <<http://datini.archiviodistato.prato.it>> (accessed 31 March 2023).

husband in Provence. Margherita could have used her husband's mercantile networks to send the letters, but it seems she preferred to give them to someone she knew, who would visit her mother and expand on the content of the letters orally. But there was the possibility that amid the excitement of her friend's journey and the reunion with her husband, the letters would go undelivered. Margherita therefore asked Francesco to remind Beatrice before she embarked to take special care not to lose the letters, because she 'wouldn't feel like doing them again for a year', a phrase that suggests she may have penned them herself.<sup>27</sup>

This statement has mystified scholars, since it has been assumed that Margherita could not write at all in the 1380s, the straitened circumstances of her exiled family accounting for the fact that, unlike her mother and sister, who were both literate, she was not.<sup>28</sup> The letters to Dianora Gherardini do not survive. However, a recently discovered letter to Francesco of 20 February 1388 reveals that Margherita could write to a limited degree. The letter chastises Francesco for neglecting to enquire after her health at a time when she was suffering a serious illness, and scolds him for continuing to oversee the amplification of their house in Prato when Lenten fasting would leave him vulnerable to disease. Although he may have had trouble deciphering certain passages of his wife's letter because of its poor calligraphy, Francesco could have been left in no doubt about Margherita's utter exasperation with him. Yet her concern for his well-being was equally evident. The reference to the fevered delirium that came on her during her illness, and the emotionally charged rebukes directed at her husband, perhaps account for Margherita's unwillingness on this occasion to dictate her letter to a scribe, as she usually did:

I keep imagining you in the courtyard in your cloak when in fact you are not there. Even if you decided to become compassionate, you would make a vow to Saint Anthony and all the saints to make your enemies happy and those who love you sad. You will always be the same Francesco. It is a wretched person who spends a pound to save a penny. This is the sort of person you are. I'm afraid that this house will be the thing that destroys both your body and soul.<sup>29</sup>

27 Margherita Datini to Francesco Datini, 23 February 1385, in James and Pagliaro, *Letters to Francesco Datini*, pp. 35–6.

28 Enrico Bensa, 'Margherita Datini', *Archivio Storico Pratese*, 6 (1926), 1–14 (p. 14).

29 Margherita Datini to Francesco Datini, 20 February 1388, in James and Pagliaro, *Letters to Francesco Datini*, pp. 59–61.

Despite the impediments posed by her lack of facility with the pen, Margherita had worked out how to communicate via the epistolary medium. While unsophisticated, the letter conveys a strong sense of its author's forceful personality and characteristic way of speaking.

We can follow Margherita's struggle to master the skill of dictation in the years after she began corresponding with Francesco following the couple's return to Italy. In the first letters, sent between January 1384 and the end of 1385, the opening salutations are in the third person, usually beginning with 'Monna Margherita commends herself to you'. The pronouns then shift to the first person, suggesting that Margherita expected her amanuensis to take down her exact words, but she had not yet worked out how to deal with the conventions of the opening.<sup>30</sup> From mid-January 1386, the scribe no longer advertised his presence in the salutation. Instead, Margherita began confidently with the first-person pronoun: 'In the last few days I received two of your letters and, because I was unwell, I didn't reply. I do so here.'<sup>31</sup> By acknowledging receipt of the mail to which she was responding, Margherita followed mercantile practice.

Francesco does not seem to have noted the emerging strength of Margherita's authorial voice until he received a letter from her that puzzled him to such an extent that he replied tactlessly, seeking to probe the division of work between herself and the scribe.<sup>32</sup> Margherita replied forcefully in the following terms:

You told me in your two letters, and the one you wrote to Piero, that I cannot have composed those letters myself, but that Piero di Filippo must have composed them. Excuse me, but he never composes my letters, neither he nor anyone else. You very much underestimate me in thinking that I would get him to compose my letters.<sup>33</sup>

She also admitted that the novelty of communicating in writing had encouraged her to be much franker than she would have been face to face:

30 Margherita Datini to Francesco Datini, 23 January 1384, in James and Pagliaro, *Letters to Francesco Datini*, pp. 30–2.

31 Margherita Datini to Francesco Datini, 16 January 1386, in James and Pagliaro, *Letters to Francesco Datini*, pp. 44–6.

32 Francesco Datini to Margherita Datini, 19 January 1386, in Elena Cecchi (ed.), *Le lettere di Francesco Datini alla moglie Margherita (1385–1410)* (Prato: Società pratese di storia patria, 1990), pp. 40–1.

33 Margherita Datini to Francesco Datini, 23 January 1386, in James and Pagliaro, *Letters to Francesco Datini*, pp. 49–52.

Francesco, I acknowledge that I have written to you too freely and have demonstrated too much independence from you in telling you the truth. If you were here beside me, I would not have spoken so boldly.<sup>34</sup>

The merchant had not anticipated that Margherita, who was unable to read, would learn how to compose and dictate a coherent letter by listening to correspondence from him and others. Indeed, he admitted that her new skill filled him with both pride and fear: 'And because this letter is so unlike that of a young woman such as you, who was never educated, I worry that you are performing miracles just before your death'.<sup>35</sup> Although it is difficult to gauge the tone of Francesco's response and establish if he was merely teasing his wife by suggesting she would pay dearly for her unusual epistolary abilities, Margherita's insistence on using her scribe as a passive amanuensis certainly seems to have had a disruptive effect on his assumptions about her relationship with letter-writing.

By the mid-1390s, frustrated by having to rely on others to pen and read letters for her, Margherita went further. She learned to read simple religious texts, improved her calligraphy and spaced the text of her letters more regularly. Her new skills astonished friends and relatives.<sup>36</sup> However, Margherita had insufficient leisure to acquire more than a basic dexterity with a quill and she continued to dictate letters, using her own hand only occasionally, when no scribe was available. A letter of 12 September 1402, written when she was ill in bed and reluctant, out of decorum, to seek male help, is testament to the challenges that writing represented for someone who had not received adequate early training and who had few opportunities for regular practice.<sup>37</sup> Even sharpening the quill correctly was a daunting obstacle for the uninitiated. Nonetheless, with the help of a scribe, Margherita efficiently committed her distinctive voice to the page in a local version of Italian that was so colloquial, a number of words that appear in her letters have never been recorded in dictionaries.<sup>38</sup>

Dora del Bene was around twenty years older than Margherita Datini, but whether it was her birth before the chaos of the Black Death that accounts for

34 *Ibid.*

35 Francesco Datini to Margherita Datini, 22 January 1386, in Cecchi, *Le lettere di Francesco Datini*, pp. 41–5.

36 Carolyn James, 'A woman's work in a man's world: the letters of Margherita Datini (1384–1410)', in Giampiero Nigro (ed.), *Francesco di Marco Datini: The Man the Merchant* (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2010), pp. 53–72 (pp. 58–9).

37 Margherita Datini to Francesco Datini, 12 September 1402, in James and Pagliaro, *Letters to Francesco Datini*, pp. 366–67.

38 See James and Pagliaro, *Letters to Francesco Datini*, pp. 26–8.

the fact that she learned to read and write, perhaps in a Florentine convent school, or through lessons from her mother, we have no way of knowing. Born into the wealthy Guidalotti family, Dora married Francesco di Jacopo del Bene, a successful entrepreneur who imported wool from England and produced cloth. When the Florentine republic appointed Francesco to an administrative position as *vicario* of Val di Nievole, a small town in the vicinity of Pistoia, Dora remained at the family villa about 150 kilometres south in Petriolo, near Siena, the original nucleus of the del Bene's territorial expansion and the centre of the family's domestic economy.<sup>39</sup> The couple kept in touch by letter. Twenty-one of Dora's letters to Francesco survive, all but one of which were written during his absence from home between April and June 1381. They provide a detailed account of the responsibilities that occupied her time: directing the agricultural workers and tenants on the family's estate, assessing the ripening crops, and provisioning the household. Dora often described herself writing in places where Francesco could readily picture her and feel reassured that his wife was attending to her duties. On 30 March 1381, for example, she reported that she was writing under the villa's loggia and struggling to secure her sheet of paper in a blustery wind. On 21 April, she told her husband she was penning her letter indoors in the late afternoon. Another letter, sent in June, was composed in the garden in the early hours of the evening.<sup>40</sup>

Like Margherita Datini, Dora occasionally exploited the opportunities that physical distance from her husband permitted in order to write combatively and ironically. When del Bene complained about the isolation of Val di Nievole, his wife responded by chiding her husband not to pretend that he remained awake at night from worry about their daughter Antonia's future, since she had heard that 'he had other company that didn't allow him to sleep'. She signed this letter 'thy enemy Dora'.<sup>41</sup> On 5 June 1381, Dora reported the murder of a female acquaintance, writing cryptically: 'It seems to me that it is very dangerous to be your friend, because all your friends are dying'.<sup>42</sup> Such teasing remarks hint at the emotional complexity of the pair's relationship, and suggest that conventional notions of husbandly dominance and wifely submissiveness were interpreted with flexibility and perhaps even a dash of humour. The use of irony is a common feature of letters written by wives to their absent spouses. It was perhaps a means

39 Passerini (ed.), 'Dora Guidalotti del Bene', pp. 101–41.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 143–54.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 148–9.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

to air marital frustrations and complaints without directly challenging gendered codes of female obedience and submission.

Margherita and Dora's letters were the product of temporary separations from their husbands, both of whom remained in Tuscany – in the case of Francesco Datini, usually only about 15 kilometres away. Letters could be exchanged so rapidly that we are able to glimpse everyday domestic concerns and routines, as well as the petty misunderstandings and grievances that accumulated when marital partners were apart. Correspondence provided a more private forum for communication than households crowded with servants and family members, who would be quick to gossip about spousal tensions. Margherita Datini's determination to dictate to someone she trusted was prompted by the desire to ensure a measure of confidentiality.<sup>43</sup>

Both Margherita and Dora occasionally expressed strong emotions in letters to their husbands, something that was regarded as unconventional by their contemporaries. However, by the late sixteenth century, improved levels of female literacy encouraged some couples to keep marital love alive by writing intimately to each other during periods of separation. Hints of these developments emerge in the letters of the Nuremberg couple Magdalena Behaim (1555–1642) and Balthasar Paumgartner (1551–1600), both of whom came from well-established families at the forefront of their city's political and commercial life. During their betrothal, and in the years following their marriage, the couple corresponded when Balthasar was on the road pursuing his mercantile interests, sometimes as far afield as Lucca in Tuscany.

During her husband's absences, Magdalena collected debts, saw to the distribution of goods and maintained accounts. However, she did not confine herself to such matters in letters to Balthasar.<sup>44</sup> On Christmas Day 1582, not long after their marriage, Magdalena thanked him for sending a long-sleeved vest to protect her from the cold, 'which I wear on your behalf and think of you'. She enclosed in this letter a winter flower from the garden, to remind her husband of home, and a cord to wear around his wrist as a symbol of their love. Endearments and the sharing of amusing anecdotes suggest that Magdalena saw letter-writing as an appropriate medium to express and preserve marital love:

43 Margherita Datini to Francesco Datini, 23 January 1386, in James and Pagliaro, *Letters to Francesco Datini*, pp. 49–52.

44 Steven E. Ozment, *Magdalena and Balthasar: An Intimate Portrait of Life in 16th-Century Europe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), pp. 72–6. The couple's letters were preserved by the Behaim family and are now in the archives of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg.



I cannot let go unreported to you, kind, dear bridegroom, what [the recently widowed] Frau Flexner said to me when I consoled her with the hope that God would now compensate her suffering in another husband. The sentiment brought instant laughter rather than tears. She immediately smiled and said jokingly to me that if you were not already a bridegroom, she would never let me have you. I quickly said that I thanked God that you had become mine before she had become a widow!<sup>45</sup>

Magdalena also wrote frankly to Balthasar about her secret worries. In July 1584, when she was four months pregnant, she described an outing to the Saint Peter-Paul Day festival in a nearby town. In a postscript, she confided that at the end of the visit she had suffered an unsettling attack of anxiety:

My dear, I am getting more and more anxious. I don't know whether it is the result of the journey to Altdorf, or what, that disturbs me so. But I often think that God and time will tell. I am so very frightened when this mood descends upon me. My heart's treasure, do not let this letter lie around for others to see: I would be embarrassed.<sup>46</sup>

Although her fears about the welfare of her unborn baby proved groundless, the child died later, at the age of seven, in February 1592. The merchant was again far from home when this tragedy occurred, and Magdalena wrote to him sombrely about their only son's last hours and burial, in stark contrast to the many other letters where the couple had joyfully entertained each other with fond descriptions of little Balthasar's antics.<sup>47</sup>

In the first years of marriage, Magdalena had expected her husband to write once a week when he was away for long periods. She wrote assiduously, but, while Balthasar kept abreast of his commercial correspondence, he often set aside his wife's letters until he had the leisure to reply, or goods to send from Italy to Nuremberg for sale.<sup>48</sup> The difficulty of remaining in regular contact by mail was a recurring theme in the couple's exchanges. Although it was Balthasar Paumgartner's ancestors who had set up a profitable postal service in the preceding century for those needing to send letters across Europe quickly and secretly, as a man of middling means, he probably could not himself afford the substantial fees for this elite express post.<sup>49</sup>

45 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–43.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 100–1.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

49 Walter and Kalus, 'Innovation in the age of the Fuggers', p. 114.

In France, the wives of merchants and civic administrators also corresponded with their itinerant husbands, although the remaining evidence is thin and remains largely unpublished. Guyot de Masso, an inspector of Lyon's grain supplies, and his wife Marie Teste, exchanged letters while he was detained in Paris on business in the mid-1560s. Two of Marie's replies survive in the Archives Municipales de Lyon.<sup>50</sup> One, dated 1 April 1565, may be in her hand, its prose style and calligraphy being rudimentary, while that of 29 April 1565 is more fluent, probably because Marie dictated it to her brother-in-law, and then added only her signature.<sup>51</sup> The earlier letter documents her keen desire to stay in contact with her husband, despite the frustrations caused by the slow arrival of mail from Paris:

My lord my husband, I only just received your letter this Thursday and, from what I can tell, it was very much delayed along its way, but it made me so happy to hear some news from you, because I waited eleven days without hearing anything, and I assure you that I waited for so long that I did not know what to think [had happened], given the promise you made on your departure.<sup>52</sup>

During Guyot's absences, Marie managed his businesses in Lyon and negotiated with local merchants. Despite the expense and the inconvenience of erratic deliveries, she had to keep up a regular correspondence with her husband for practical reasons. However, like Magdalena, Marie also strived to maintain a degree of personal dialogue with her busy and distracted husband for emotional reassurance. While acknowledging Guyot's disappointment that he had been unable to find a certain Fontdedroict in Paris 'to drink with him and to discuss a deal', Marie complained in her letter of 29 April that she preferred to know he was healthy, a comment that recalls the preoccupation of earlier merchant wives who worried that a bout of illness might mean the end of their husbands' ability to remain financially afloat.<sup>53</sup>

In these mercantile examples from various parts of Europe, we see a similar contrast in the way wives and husbands communicated with each other by letter. Merchants tended to focus on news that they encountered during their travels, and the practical problems they faced on the road. Confined to their normal domestic routines, and prey to anxiety about what

50 Extracts of the letters are published in Evelyne Berriot-Salvadore, *Les femmes dans la société française de la Renaissance* (Geneva: Droz, 1990), pp. 503–6.

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 504–5.

52 Marie Teste to Guyot de Masso, 1 April 1565, in Berriot-Salvadore, *Les femmes*, pp. 503–4.

53 Marie Teste to Guyot de Masso, 29 April 1565, in Berriot-Salvadore, *Les femmes*, pp. 504–5.

might be happening to husbands far from home, wives sought reassurance that their menfolk were safe and keen to see their family again. They sent local news, evoked the everyday routines of domestic life, and chided and cajoled their husbands. In seeking to stimulate memories of home and a more intimate epistolary rapport, women sometimes departed from conventional notions about what they should say to their spouses and how emotions should be expressed. Possessing only a partial grasp of epistolary rules, women were more likely to improvise.

### **'God Governance and Profite': Women's Oversight of Landed Estates**

The archives of English gentry families such as the Pastons, Stonors, Plumpton and Lisles document the emerging dominance of English as the primary language of non-ecclesiastical correspondence.<sup>54</sup> All these collections contain significant numbers of letters by women. Here, the focus will be on those by Margaret Mauteby Paston (1423–84) and Elizabeth Crocke Stonor (1444–79), since these individuals were particularly adept at communicating through the epistolary medium and exploited letter-writing in innovative ways.

Margaret Paston's correspondence with her husband was prompted in the first instance by the same imperatives of socio-economic accountability that drew merchant wives into writing letters. Like them, she wished to satisfy her husband's expectation that she would devote herself to 'god governance' and 'profite', both of which required punctilious and frequent reporting. John Paston I, a prominent and successful lawyer, took it for granted that Margaret could read well, understand accounts and grasp complex financial and legal procedures. He delivered instructions to his wife in the imperative, while Margaret responded with deferential conditional phrases such as 'yf it lek you' ('if it is pleasing to you') as conventional gendered expectations required.

Margaret dictated her correspondence to an array of scribes. The Paston sons each served their mother in this way, as did various estate servants and

54 Christine Carpenter (ed.), *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Joan W. Kirby, *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, vol. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Norman Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971–6); and Muriel St Clare Byrne, *The Lisle Letters*, 6 vols (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

the family chaplain, so that, in all, there are twenty-nine different hands in just over 100 letters sent by Margaret to her husband and sons.<sup>55</sup> Her use of scribes was probably not voluntary, since although she could read, there is no evidence that Margaret could write. Nonetheless, she certainly regarded herself as the principal author of her letters and used her own paper seal, decorated with a fleur-de-lis.<sup>56</sup>

The Paston family endured a string of legal battles and assaults on their estates, promulgated by the dukes of Suffolk and Norfolk. These litigious and powerful political figures repeatedly contested the family's rights to property that John Paston I had inherited from Sir John Falstaff, a wealthy Norfolk knight who had entrusted his affairs to Paston before dying in late 1459. During the 1460s, John Paston I was often detained in London, either attending to the legal affairs of others or defending his inheritance from Falstaff. His enemies prevailed on several occasions, to the extent that he found himself imprisoned in the Fleet Prison, which sat beside a tributary of the Thames.<sup>57</sup> During these periods, Margaret was forced to act on her own initiative and then write to her husband explaining that his isolation as a prisoner meant that she had a better understanding of the family's situation and could not always follow his orders.

Margaret appears to have had a sound familiarity with many of the dictaminal conventions that were used in English letters of the time. Such knowledge is suggested by her detailed instructions to her son John Paston II about how he should couch a letter to apologise to his father about his extravagant and disordered lifestyle:

I wold ye shuld not spare to write to hym ageyn as lowly as ye cane, besecheyng hym to be your good fader, and send hym suche tydyngys as bethe in þe contré ther ye bethe in [in the country that you are both in], and that ye be ware of your expence bettyr and ye have be before thys tyme, and be your owne purse-berere.<sup>58</sup>

The advice to observe fiscal restraint came from a woman who herself took a careful and rational approach to financial matters. Like Lady Zouche, Margaret maintained her own account books. She recorded everyday

55 Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers*, p. xxxvii.

56 See *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 226–39.

57 Davis's introduction in *Paston Letters and Papers* provides a chronological table of the family's legal battles; see pp. xliv–xlv.

58 Margaret Paston to John Paston II, 15 November 1463, in Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 287–8.

household provisioning and what was produced on the family's estates and then used these entries to keep her husband informed by letter of her role as domestic manager.<sup>59</sup> In this sense, her correspondence is similar to that of the Italian women already discussed.

What sets Margaret's letters apart is the evidence they provide of her involvement in the family's legal battles to preserve and amplify its status and wealth, as well as her strong belief in the value of written testimony, especially if it convincingly recorded events and conversations that could later be produced in court. She advised John Paston II to preserve his 'wrytyngys that ben of charge', reminding him that his father had 'set more by hys wrytyngys and evydens than he dede by any of his moveabell godys'.<sup>60</sup>

While on the one hand cautious about what she consigned to paper and what she left to a trusted messenger to add orally, Margaret proved adept at capturing in writing the verbal exchanges of everyday life that might serve in the future to set the evidentiary record straight. In a number of letters, she recorded exactly when events occurred and strove to give an impression of objectivity. For example, in April 1448, she set down in a detailed letter to John I a conversation with Lady Morley, a disgruntled client of her husband who had threatened to sue him. She first summarised the aggrieved statements of Lady Morley, 'And sche seyde ... And sche told me', then followed this with her own arguments to the upset woman for the latter's calm reflection: 'Pan I prayde here a3yn þat sche wuld teryn tyl 3e kom hom' ('Then I prayed her again that she would tarry until you came home').<sup>61</sup> The text foregrounds Margaret's tenacity in oral negotiation and the vigour with which she defended John Paston's honour and financial interests. Her forcefulness emerges, too, in a letter of 20 May 1465 in which she described her efforts to resist the duke of Suffolk, who claimed ownership of one of the Paston estates and had sent his bailiff to demand the return of seventy-two head of cattle.<sup>62</sup>

For Margaret, epistolary self-presentation had little or nothing to do with intimate disclosure, but served, rather, to project her as a dynamic actor in

59 On these themes, see Valerie Creelman, 'Household words: the rhetoricity of fifteenth-century gentlewomen's household letters' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Waterloo, 2004), pp. 109–29.

60 Margaret Paston to John Paston II, 29 October 1466, in Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 333–4. See Rebecca Krug, *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 18.

61 Margaret Paston to John Paston I, April 1448, in Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 220–3.

62 Margaret Paston to John Paston I, 20 May 1465, in Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 301–2.

the domestic and local world she inhabited. Such a portrayal is evident in a letter to John Paston I of 7 August 1365, in which Margaret described her interventions to persuade local judges to release Thomas Bond, a Paston employee who had been arrested while endeavouring to defend the family's interests. She emphasised to her husband the favourable reception of her defence of Bond by 'juges [judges] ryght gentell and forberable [forbearing] to me in my matres [matters]', and pointed out that she was largely responsible for the 'passyng gret rebuke' that was issued to the bailiff responsible for the arrest.<sup>63</sup>

Other English gentrywomen also present themselves in letters as efficient, skilful and influential. The archive of the Stonors from Oxfordshire preserves thirty-one female-authored letters, the earliest of which is a short note, written in French by Margaret, Countess of Devon, to Edmund de Stonor.<sup>64</sup> The most noteworthy letters from the collection were written in English by Elizabeth Stonor. Unlike the other Stonor wives, she was not of gentry stock. Her father was John Crocke, a well-to-do London grocer, while her grandfather was William Gregory, compiler and part author of *Skinners' Chronicle*, one of the most significant records of urban life in fifteenth-century London.<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth was raised in the very milieu that this chronicle documented, her first marriage to a successful wool merchant, Thomas Riche, further consolidating her familiarity with London and its commercial networks. After the death of Riche, Elizabeth's inherited wealth and entrepreneurial connections made her an enticing marital prospect for the slightly younger William Stonor, whose own prosperity came from producing wool on his country estates.<sup>66</sup>

Nothing is known of Elizabeth's education, but the evidence suggests it was modest. On the basis of a thorough palaeographical analysis of Elizabeth's thirteen extant letters, Veronica O'Mara concluded that all of them were dictated to clerks.<sup>67</sup> There are, however, brief postscripts in an amateurish hand that is probably hers, and a number of letters bear Elizabeth's signature,

63 Margaret Paston to John Paston I, 7 August 1465, in Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers*, vol. 1, letter 189, pp. 311–14.

64 Margaret, widow of Hugh Courtney, to Edmund de Stonor, c. 1380, in Carpenter (ed.), *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers*, pp. 29–30.

65 Malcolm Richardson, 'A masterful woman': Elizabeth Stonor and English women's letters, 1399–c. 1530', in Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb (eds), *Women's Letters across Europe, 1400–1700: Form and Persuasion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 43–62 (pp. 45–7).

66 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

67 Veronica O'Mara, 'Female scribal ability and scribal activity in late medieval England: the evidence?', *Leeds Studies in English*, 27 (1996), 87–130.

which suggests she could write, but not well. Even in a family such as the Crookes that evidently valued literacy, girls were left to acquire the skills that they might require as wives of entrepreneurs and townsmen by learning through doing. It seems that Elizabeth was thoroughly successful in this regard. She was numerate and well versed in business practice, knowledge that continued to be honed by her operation as a mercer in her own right after the death of Riche. She communicated confidently by letter, using scribes, just as many of her male contemporaries did.

Much of what Elizabeth reported to her husband was mundane, requiring little confidentiality. She informed him about the provisioning of the Stonor household, and the sale and export of goods that were sent by barge down the Thames to London from the family's country estates. As Valerie Creelman points out, such details are provided in short, business-like sentences similar to the entries in Elizabeth's own household account books.<sup>68</sup> It may even be the case that she dictated straight from such notes, just as Margaret Paston appears to have done. Other passages are more discursive. News from the royal court, and commercial information that Elizabeth had learned about in London, are presented in a narrative style, the news items linked simply by means of the ubiquitous 'and', a conjunction that came readily to those who dictated in a hurry and without regard for literary artifice.<sup>69</sup>

Malcolm Richardson has observed that Elizabeth's letters, like those of her Stonor relatives, are more heavily stamped with dictatorial rhetoric than Continental correspondence from the same period and social context.<sup>70</sup> Gentry families, such as the Pastons and Stonors, followed the conventions of the royal missive, rather than the increasingly flexible style of English merchants, who had begun to follow Italian precedents in favouring colloquial language and simplified epistolary formulae, as some of the correspondence of the Cely family, London-based wool merchants, shows.<sup>71</sup> However, Elizabeth's social origins and her continuing involvement in trade also left their mark on her approach to letter-writing. While the contribution of the various scribes is evident in the salutations and exordiums, characterised by the conventionally polite and solemn language of chancery traditions, lighter, more colloquial elements in the body of the text probably reflect Elizabeth's own dictated phrases.

68 Creelman, 'Household words', pp. 119–25.

69 *Ibid.*, pp. 125–6.

70 Richardson, 'A masterful woman', p. 53.

71 Alison Hanham, *The Cely Letters, 1472–1488* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. xxi–xxvi.

In September 1476, worried that an illness of her brother-in-law Thomas Stonor would pass to William, only recently recovered from an ailment of his own, she wrote to her husband about her concerns:

I understonde that my brother and yowris is sore seke of the poxes: wherfore I am right hevvy and sory of your beyng there, ffor the eyre of poxe is fful contagious and namely to them than ben nye of blode. Wherfore I wolde praye you, gentyll Cosyn, that þe wolde come hedyr, and yif hit wolde plesse you so to doo, &c. And yif that hit lyke you not so to doo, Gentyll Cosyn, lettith me have hedyr some horsis I pray you, and that I may come to you, ffor in good faith I can fynde hit in my herte to put myself in jubardy there as ye be, and shall do whilst my lyffe endureth to the plesure of God and yours.<sup>72</sup>

The alternation of ‘ye’ and ‘you’ in this passage was probably not the result of careful choice, but rather reflected the flow of Elizabeth’s dictation and her colloquial mixing of new lexical developments with older grammatical elements.<sup>73</sup>

Elizabeth faced considerable rhetorical challenges in writing through an amanuensis to a second husband, who was better educated and her social superior, about issues that, in some cases, she understood better than he did. Stonor’s provincial lifestyle blunted his sensitivity to emerging urban trends, and it was Elizabeth who alerted him to what might be achieved through visibility at court and the mobilisation of patronage networks in the city. She had to do so gently, but also firmly. In a letter of 22 October 1476, she urged her husband to be more generous to his sisters, since their dowdy clothing presented such an embarrassing spectacle at court that the duchess of Suffolk regarded them as too poorly dressed to stay with her. In that same letter, she described to William her vigorous networking at court on his behalf:

Also Sire, I spake with my cosyn Fowler at my lady the Kyngis Modyr; and I thankyde hyme as hertely as I cowde for his gret kyndnese that he schewid to you and to me at all tymys, prayeng hyme of his good

72 Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, 12 September 1476, in Carpenter (ed.), *Kingsford’s Stonor Letters and Papers*, pp. 266–7.

73 See Alison Truelove, ‘Commanding communications: the fifteenth-century letters of the Stonor women’, in Daybell, *Early Modern Women’s Letter-writing*, pp. 42–58.



contynuans: and he askyde me when you wyld cum hydyr. And I tellyd hym that I supposyd that you wyld be her as this weke.<sup>74</sup>

Elizabeth spent lavishly on fashion on the grounds that a fine appearance was a sound investment. It impressed those she wished to charm and gave her entree to powerful people.

Reports of her activities as her husband's advocate could be dictated to a scribe and presented within the formulaic apparatus of a conventional letter. More private, personal matters could not. Elizabeth, therefore, sometimes added postscripts that only her husband would understand. On 7 November 1476, for example, she complained about Thomas Stonor's attack on her as a spendthrift in the dictated body of the letter, then added in her own hand, 'My owne good [husb]ond I se well ye [re]membre þe puttyng at ... out off þe bed whan you and I lay last togedyr', surely a sexual reference, and perhaps a joking one, that was designed to make William more receptive to redressing her grievance.<sup>75</sup> Several months later, Elizabeth had reason to be offended again, this time by Thomas's sneering comments about her inferior social origins and the 'meany of boys' ('slew of children') from her first marriage. She wrote to William complaining about his brother's disrespectful slurs, and added an even more mysterious postscript: 'My good Cosen, I am crassed in my baket: you wat what I men'.<sup>76</sup> This cryptic phrase, written in her own hand after the scribe had concluded his work, and perhaps hinting that she was pregnant, suggests Elizabeth was determined to prevent family speculation about that possibility. If Elizabeth thought she was with child in March 1477, she must have subsequently suffered a miscarriage, since no children were born of her marriage to William.<sup>77</sup>

Over the course of the sixteenth century, letters of English aristocratic and gentry couples refer to a fuller range of emotions and, as in the case of merchants separated temporarily from their wives, there was a greater expectation that letters between spouses would be used to communicate and bolster marital love. With both partners increasingly able to write in their own hand, the choice to take up the pen oneself acquired new significance.

74 Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, 22 October [1476], in Carpenter (ed.), *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers*, pp. 269–71.

75 Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, 7 November 1476, in Carpenter (ed.), *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers*, pp. 273–4.

76 Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, 7 March 1477, in Carpenter (ed.), *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers*, pp. 278–9.

77 On the possible meaning of 'baket', see Carpenter (ed.), *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers*, p. 507, note 13.

James Daybell has concluded from his studies of English female correspondence that, by the end of the sixteenth century, the ability of a woman to write in holograph was regarded as a valuable, even an everyday, skill for those destined to become mistresses of households and landed estates. As well as the obvious benefits that holograph writing brought in preserving confidentiality, it permitted a woman to have complete personal control over language and self-expression, over the timing of her correspondence, and over the degree to which she might articulate intimate thoughts and feelings.<sup>78</sup>

The correspondence of Joan Thynne (1558–1612) and her daughter-in-law Maria Thynne (1578–1611) reveals how important intergenerational and class differences were in these two women's approaches to writing to their husbands. The daughter of a wealthy mercer, alderman and lord mayor of London, Joan married John Thynne of Longleat in Wiltshire, in 1576. In agreeing to this union, John's parents had sought to augment the family's landed wealth with a large mercantile dowry, following a pattern established in the previous generation by John's father, who had also married the daughter of a London merchant and former lord mayor.<sup>79</sup>

In the case of John's son Thomas, however, things took a very different turn. He made a secret marriage at the age of just sixteen to Maria Touchet, also sixteen, on the day that he met her. The meeting and subsequent marriage was engineered with the collusion of Maria's mother, Lady Audrey, the daughter of the Thynnes' archenemy, Sir James Marvin. The clandestine union was bitterly resented by Joan and John Thynne, who only discovered its existence in 1596, a year after the marriage had taken place. They contested the legality of the union until 1601, when they were forced to concede defeat and allow the couple to cohabit. Although Maria was of higher birth than Thomas, and enjoyed considerable status as an attendant on Queen Elizabeth until her marriage became public, the fact that she brought no dowry remained a cause for continuing rancour between the Marvins and Thynnes.<sup>80</sup> Yet the correspondence between Thomas and Maria suggests the match was successful from the perspective of the

78 James Daybell, *Women Letter-writers in Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 91–126, 200–28.

79 Alison Wall (ed.), *Two Elizabethan Women: Correspondence of Joan and Maria Thynne 1575–1611* (Devizes: Wiltshire Record Society, 1983), p. xix.

80 Alison Wall, 'For love, money, or politics? A clandestine marriage and the Elizabethan Court of Arches', *The Historical Journal*, 38(3) (1995), 511–33; and, by the same author, 'Deference and defiance in women's letters of the Thynne family: the rhetoric of relationships', in Daybell, *Early Modern Women's Letter-writing*, pp. 77–93.

couple themselves. Maria's letters to Thomas contrast notably with those that Joan wrote to John for their greater mastery of written prose and easy conjugal familiarity.

Joan could write, but Alison Wall notes in the introduction to her edition of Joan and Maria's letters that the hand of Joan is unsophisticated and her spelling phonetic and often idiosyncratic.<sup>81</sup> Although the letters communicate a loving concern for her husband, they do so in rhetorically muted ways. Joan opened her letters with 'Mr Thynne' or 'My good Mr Thynne', and continued in a similarly formal register. John was more openly affectionate, saluting his wife in his two surviving letters to Joan as 'My good Pug'. Daybell suggests that John's readiness to express emotions explicitly and Joan's more indirect expressions of affection were replicated in other contemporary marital exchanges, where there was a disparity in the couple's levels of education and mastery of the norms of letter-writing.<sup>82</sup> While Joan's mercantile family background meant that she was comfortable with the functionality of letters in reporting news and the details of household and estate management, she did not have as ready an epistolary vocabulary to articulate emotion as John did, and was wary of challenging the expectation that she would remain deferential to her husband.

Yet, by 1600, when Joan was about forty, more assertive passages appeared in her letters in response to the recriminations of a husband who could be bad-tempered and over-exacting in the demands that he made of her. In September of that year, she wrote in the following terms:

But seeing that I never have nor shall content you, I am and will be content to do my best endeavours if it please you to esteem of them, praying God you may never do worse than I have wished you, which I protest before God was never worse than to my own soul.<sup>83</sup>

This dignified response to John's carping, with its manipulation of past and future tense, suggests that Joan became more rhetorically dexterous as time went by, and more willing to vent feelings of annoyance and disappointment. Her reply, in September 1601, to John's promises to return home soon, appears to be explicitly ironic. She assured her husband that she was not as credulous as he seemed to believe: 'I can hardly believe it to be so.

81 Wall (ed.), *Two Elizabethan Women*, pp. xxxii, xxxiv.

82 Daybell, *Women Letter-writers in Tudor England*, p. 210.

83 Joan Thynne to John Thynne, 30 September 1600, in Wall (ed.), *Two Elizabethan Women*, p. 15.

But fools and children may be made to believe anything'.<sup>84</sup> Several months later, still in London, as Joan had predicted he would be, John had to admit that his wife was justified in disbelieving his assurances: 'My good Pug. I must confess I have been long absent and much longer than my desire'. He ended on a loving note: 'And ever live to love thee more and more, I protest that I now only desire to live and be with thee'. In receiving this response, Joan must surely have concluded that she had won the day.

Although Maria used some of the same epistolary tactics, an unusually privileged education and the self-assurance that came from her aristocratic bloodline, gave her the confidence and the rhetorical tools to surpass her mother-in-law in using letter-writing as a means to negotiate the power dynamic within her marriage, and to communicate a razor-sharp wit and a wide range of moods. Yet, even at her most teasing, Maria made sure to express affection for her husband Thomas, inviting him in a letter of August 1604 to 'make haste home and make much of thy Mall when thou dost come home. I will not be melancholy'. Maria actually wrote 'mallenchollye', which was standardised by the editor in the modern edition of her letters, obscuring how Maria punned on her nickname.<sup>85</sup>

However, this joke and the loving salutation were ballasted by an extraordinary *tour de force* of mock invective about Thomas's frequent absences, and his assumption that the dull rustic routines of the family estate at Longleat should satisfy her. In a previous letter, Maria had accused Thomas of treating her as an 'innocent fool' who could not be relied on to perform the complex roles of estate manager.<sup>86</sup> She threatened radical revenge by making sure the household dogs defecated in his bed in readiness for his return:

Mine own sweet Thomken, I have no longer ago than the very last night written such a large volume in praise of thy kindness to me, thy dogs, thy hawks, the hare and the foxes, and also in commendation of thy great care of thy businesses in the country, that I think I need not amplify any more on that text, for I have crowned thee for an admirable good husband with poetical laural, and admired the inexpressible singularity of thy

84 John Thynne to Joan Thynne, 26 July 1601, and Joan Thynne to John Thynne, 6 May 1601, in Wall (ed.), *Two Elizabethan Women*, pp. 17–18.

85 Alison Wall draws the reader's attention to the pun in an editorial note; see Wall (ed.), *Two Elizabethan Women*, p. 33. On Maria's epistolary style, see Graham Williams, "'Trobled wth a tedious discours": Sincerity, sarcasm and seriousness in the letters of Maria Thynne, c. 1601–1610', *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, 11(2) (2010), 169–92.

86 Maria Thynne to Thomas Thynne, undated but between 1604 and 1606, in Wall (ed.), *Two Elizabethan Women*, pp. 31–2.

love in the cogitations of *piamater*, I can say no more but that in way of gratuity the dogs shall without interruption expel their excremental corruption in the best room (which is thy bed) whensoever full feeding makes their bellies ache.<sup>87</sup>

The combination in this passage of endearments and rudeness, marital intimacy and sharp critique of her relationship with Thomas, constitutes a vivid performance of Maria's forceful personality and talent as a writer that was designed to command her husband's undivided attention. Her assumption that she was Thomas's intellectual equal, and that he would tolerate her unfettered sarcasm and provocations, seems to be unusual for this time – although, just a generation later, we witness a similarly unconventional dialogue between a man and woman in the courtship correspondence of Dorothy Osborne, examined in Chapter 3. The ability of a well-educated woman to hold her own rhetorically in the epistolary space seems to have been conducive to an increasing acceptance that letters were an appropriate medium to conduct an intimate and witty conversation between marital partners.

Although at the level of prescription, patriarchal attitudes remained firmly in place throughout the period examined in this chapter, women's letters provide evidence of how the rules governing gendered behaviours were evaded and subverted by individuals. We have seen that, for uneducated or partially literate women, dictated vernacular letter-writing provided a novel forum for communicating with their husbands. While the colloquial register of such letters may have captured elements of the oral interactions of everyday marital life, the physical distance between correspondents opened up opportunities for women to express emotions and articulate subjectivities that could not be spoken face to face without a loss of honour. Aristocratic and highly literate women flouted some of the conventions of the *ars dictaminis*, not out of ignorance, but because they had the social and intellectual confidence and the linguistic tools self-consciously to bend, or to ignore, formal epistolary prescriptions. They too communicated their personalities, intellect and distinctive individual voices, but did so through literary strategies and verbal inventiveness, almost always in local languages rather than Latin. Thus, we witness the importance of vernacularity in stimulating improvisation and creativity in women's letter-writing across the spectrum of literacy.

87 Maria Thynne to Thomas Thynne, undated but after 1604, in Wall (ed.), *Two Elizabethan Women*, pp. 32–3.

## Letter-writing and the Religious Life

Girls who were expected to enter a convent, rather than marry, were often taught to read and write in preparation for that future, families no doubt hoping that their daughters would remain in contact via the letter once they had made their professions. However, the Church officially discouraged, and sometimes explicitly banned, nuns from communicating by letter, on the grounds that it was a dangerous source of worldly engagement and external influence. Yet, as Gabriella Zarri has shown, rules preventing nuns from corresponding with family members, benefactors and civic authorities were regularly flouted.<sup>88</sup> Pious laywomen who lived together in informal religious communities and devoted themselves to charitable work were also reliant on letter-writing to sustain their way of life. Referred to as ‘tertiaries’ because they followed the rules of the third order, which did not require institutional enclosure, these women were a particular source of anxiety for the Church because they resisted clerical control. Their movement had originated in the late medieval period as part of a lay response to the perceived corruption of the papacy and the abuses of the clergy.

The letters of Caterina Benincasa, a Dominican tertiary who became known as Saint Catherine of Siena (1347–80), provide a compelling example of the power of letter-writing to raise a charismatic but unlettered woman to prominence amid the social and political dislocations that followed the Black Death of 1348–9, and the crises that rocked the Church during the papacy’s long stay in Avignon. Debates about Catherine’s competence and significance as a letter-writer began in her own day and have continued ever since. Her spiritual mentor and first hagiographer, Raymond of Capua, portrayed Catherine in his *Legenda maior* as a holy illiterate who could read but not write. Tommaso Caffarini, a Dominican disciple who promoted Catherine’s sanctity and cult in the years after her death, claimed in his *Legenda minor* and *Libellus de supplemento* – a simplified abridgement of Raymond’s work, with some of his own additions – that not only did she learn miraculously to read, but that one day, much to her own amazement, she took up a sheet of paper and a pen and began to write in her native Tuscan dialect, thanks to divine intervention.<sup>89</sup>

88 Gabriella Zarri, ‘La lettera monastica tra uso e abuso: tipologie ed esempi (Secoli XV–XVII)’, in Antonio Castillo Gomez and Veronica Sierra Blas (eds), *Cartas–Lettres–Lettere: Discursos, prácticas y representaciones epistolares (siglos XIV–XX)* (Alcalá de Henares: Universidad de Alcalá, 2014), pp. 259–73.

89 On the question of Catherine of Siena’s degree of literacy, see Susanne Noffke (trans. and ed.), *The Letters of Catherine of Siena* (Tempe AZ: Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance

Caffarini based this story on a letter purportedly written by Catherine to Raymond of Capua in October 1377, when she was isolated and without her usual scribes at Isola della Rocca, a rocky country stronghold of the Salimbeni family of Siena:

[For] this letter and another I already sent you I wrote in my own hand on the Isola della Rocca, filled with so many sighs and tears that even when seeing, I couldn't see. But I was full of wonder at myself and at God's goodness when I considered his mercy towards those of his creatures he has endowed with reason and his overflowing providence toward me that provided me refreshment in the aptitude for writing, a consolation I've never known thanks to my ignoranceso that when I descended from the heights I might have a little something with which I could vent my heart, lest it burst.<sup>90</sup>

However, there are no extant letters in Catherine's own hand. The one from Isola della Rocca survives as a copy produced by Caffarini. Robert Fawtier, a scholar of the early twentieth century who devoted much of his life to the study of Catherine's writings, suspected that it was Caffarini who inserted the reference to the letter being holograph into the original dictated text to bolster Catherine's saintly reputation during the campaign to secure her canonisation.<sup>91</sup>

More recently, Giovanna Murano has argued that Catherine was more literate than previous scholarship has suggested, having been associated from the age of six with the lay sisters of San Domenico, who taught their charges to read and even to write in a basic way.<sup>92</sup> If, as Murano suggests, Catherine could write, but only to a limited degree, the account in the letter of October 1377 of the arduous physical labour of penning the letter slowly in her own hand, during a period of complete isolation when no scribe was available, has the ring of verisimilitude. So, too, does the comment that the

Studies, 2000), vol. 1, pp. xxi–xxvii; Eugenio Dupré Theseider, 'Caterina da Siena', in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 22 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1979), pp. 361–79; Jane Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature and the Signs of Others* (Chicago IL: Chicago University Press, 2009), pp. 53–110; and Giovanna Murano, "'Ò scritte di mia mano in su l'Isola della Rocca". Alfabetizzazione e cultura di Caterina da Siena', *Reti medievali*, 18(1) (2017), 139–76.

90 Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena*, pp. 11–12.

91 Robert Fawtier, *Sainte Catherine de Sienne: Essai de critique des sources*, vol. 1, Sources hagiographies (Paris: Boccard, 1921).

92 Murano, "'Ò scritte di mia mano'", pp. 150–60.

process was the catalyst for a more acute awareness of her surprising aptitude for a skill that was traditionally seen as male. Catherine's reflection on how bottled-up emotions could be released through the process of letter-writing anticipates a similar theme in Margherita Datini's correspondence. Yet, as in the case of the merchant's wife, lack of facility with a pen meant that she inevitably relied on scribes to produce her letters. Indeed, according to Raymond of Capua's *Legenda maior*, Catherine dictated so quickly, often in a trance-like state of spiritual exhilaration, that she required more than one scribe to take down her fast-flowing words.

Despite the uncertainties surrounding the authenticity of certain passages in Catherine's letters, the 380 that survive – which still lack a critical edition that might establish a definitive chronology of the mostly undated letters and identify the various hands of her scribes – provide a fascinating window into the epistolary practices and culture of letter-writing in Catherine's circle. Her early scribes were laywomen from her Dominican community in Siena, who were probably not as expert at taking dictation as the men who performed this task later in Catherine's life. Thus, it seems they relieved each other, or took dictation simultaneously, so that their separate versions could be compared later to ensure nothing was lost. These female scribes embedded their own centrality in the creation of Catherine's letters by sending greetings to the addressee in postscripts such as 'Alessa, Caterina and I, crazy Cecca, send you our greetings', or, on an even more personal note, 'I Cecca, am close to being a nun, because I am beginning to sing the office with all my might, along with these servants of Jesus Christ'.<sup>93</sup> These messages suggest a strong sense of community and relaxed familiarity among those who produced Catherine's letters, which in many cases were addressed to local figures such as Catherine's confessor, Fra Bartolomeo Dominici, whom the women knew well.

Catherine's usual opening salutation, 'Io Caterina scrivo a voi' ('I Caterina write to you'), leaves no doubt about her authorial status. Moreover, even though there are minor variations in letters where more than one copy is extant, the Siennese dialect that Catherine and her scribes spoke left such strong traces in the texts, that it was edited out in the printed edition of Catherine's correspondence, produced by the prestigious Venetian press of Aldus Manutius in 1500. By replacing Siennese words with standard Tuscan, Manutius perhaps aimed to make the letters more literary and sophisticated. The large-format Venetian edition marked a significant linguistic and literary watershed. Not only was it the first time Manutius published letters by a

93 Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena*, p. 126.



woman, but the edition was part of a new concern with Italian writing, which now stood respectably alongside the Latin classics that the press had previously focused on.

In Catherine's own day, the words and idioms of her birthplace that appeared throughout her letters probably helped to convince urban audiences that she was an authentic advocate of reform, someone who understood the concerns of ordinary Christians because she was one of them. Appalled by the corruption of the institutional Church, which of course operated in Latin, Catherine's supporters perhaps saw the localised vernacular of her oral homilies and letters as unpolluted by clerical influence, and therefore worthier of their attention. About a third of Catherine's extant letters are addressed to women. The effect of her rhetorically powerful and authoritative voice also proved to be profound in authorising other women to emulate her example, especially after printed editions of her letters began to circulate in the late fifteenth century.

Although Catherine never herself withdrew from society, and indeed travelled and preached extensively in Italy and Provence, she endorsed the enclosure of female religious communities as a means of reforming lax conventual regimes. Chiara Gambacorta (d. 1420) met Catherine when the Sieneese tertiary visited Pisa in 1375. The daughter of Pietro Gambacorta, Lord of Pisa, Vittoria, or Tora, as she was then known, was only twelve but already betrothed and possibly even married.<sup>94</sup> Three years later, she was widowed. Preferring not to make a new match, as her father wished, Tora attempted to enter the Franciscan monastery of San Martino, but was prevented by her family from doing so. In despair, she wrote to Catherine for counsel. The response she apparently received gave Tora the courage to resist her father, who eventually agreed to help his daughter set up the first female monastery of the Dominican Observance. Taking the name Chiara, inspired by the fact that the Poor Clares in Florence had given her refuge when she had fled her father's home to avoid remarriage, the young noblewoman petitioned Pope Urban VI for a special constitution that would endorse complete enclosure for the new institution. Papal approval was granted in 1387. After this date, only the general master of the Dominicans, or his representative, could enter the convent, and no one, not even relatives, could see a nun's face once she had taken her final vows.<sup>95</sup>

94 *Ibid.*, pp. 132–4.

95 Chiara Gambacorta's convent came to be paradigmatic of the Strict Observance order in Italy. See Sylvie Duval, '*Mulieres religiosae* and *sorores clausae*: the Dominican Observant movement and the diffusion of strict enclosure in Italy from the thirteenth century to the sixteenth century',

Chiara became a much-admired figure and many turned to her for religious guidance, including Francesco and Margherita Datini. Fourteen letters from Chiara survive in the merchant's archive, along with correspondence from other leading religious figures with whom Francesco was in contact, such as the hermit Giovanni delle Celle, another staunch supporter of Catherine of Siena.<sup>96</sup> In the late 1390s, Chiara pleaded with Datini to lend her convent the substantial sum of 30 florins for the purchase of paper to make prayer books for the community.<sup>97</sup> The merchant was reluctant to oblige, probably because he doubted the ability of the nuns to repay such a large amount. Chiara's initial letter to Datini took an oblique approach, dwelling on Christian virtue and charity before turning to practical matters in the conclusion: 'Please! Lend us the sum of 30 florins!'<sup>98</sup> A month later, Chiara wrote far more directly, and this time in her own hand, a gesture designed to put extra pressure on the merchant by personalising her request. She also tapped shrewdly into the merchant's calculating mentality:<sup>99</sup>

Having made you aware of our needs in a previous letter and having the most confidence in your charity, I must tell you: although you will do us a great favour lending us the aforementioned thirty florins, it will be even better for you, because Jesus Christ will recall how much you look after his wives!<sup>100</sup>

The appeal to the eventual fate of Datini's soul proved effective, since Chiara's third letter acknowledges receipt of the loan.<sup>101</sup> Such requests for charity

in Veerle Fraeters and Imke de Gier (eds), *Mulieres religiosae: Shaping Female Spiritual Authority in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 193–218 (pp. 198–200); and Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, Daniel Ethan Bornstein and E. Ann Matter (eds), *Dominican Penitent Women* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), p. 281.

96 For Chiara Gambacorta's letters, see Simona Brambilla (ed.), *Padre mio dolce: lettere di religiosi a Francesco Datini: Antologia* (Rome: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, 2010).

97 Chiara raised the issue of paper in earlier correspondence: 'We are bereft of books and have a great need, and so we will write them ourselves.' Chiara Gambacorta to Francesco and Margherita Datini, between 1397 and 1400, in Brambilla (ed.), *Padre mio dolce*, pp. 100–1.

98 Chiara Gambacorta to Francesco Datini, 21 June 1410, in Brambilla (ed.), *Padre mio dolce*, p. 106.

99 See Carolyn James, 'Mercantile and other friendships in Renaissance Tuscany', in Cecilia Hewlett and Peter Howard (eds), *Studies on Florence and the Italian Renaissance in Honour of F.W. Kent* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), pp. 151–67.

100 Chiara Gambacorta to Francesco Datini, 17 July 1410, in Brambilla (ed.), *Padre mio dolce*, p. 107.

101 Chiara Gambacorta to Francesco Datini, 20 January, year unknown, in Brambilla (ed.), *Padre mio dolce*, p. 108.

were fundamental to the ability of her convent to survive financially and, despite Chiara's desire to turn away from worldly concerns, she had to take pragmatic advantage of her social networks and epistolary skills to garner financial support for the institution she had established.

In the next century, another woman who masterfully exploited her patrician contacts to gain patronage was Madonna Scolastica Rondinelli, abbess for more than thirty-six years of the strictly enclosed Florentine convent of Le Murate.<sup>102</sup> She wrote frequently to members of the Medici family from the 1460s until her death in 1475 on a wide-ranging number of topics.<sup>103</sup> Although in a letter to Lorenzo de' Medici, Madonna Scolastica claimed, 'I get involved unwillingly with matters outside the monastery', scholars have shown that the well-connected abbess was a significant broker in Florentine politics.<sup>104</sup> Her ability to mediate between factional enemies meant that she came to occupy a unique position of power, one which was made possible largely through writing letters. In 1471, Scolastica's convent, Le Murate, suffered a fire and required funding, not only to rebuild what had been damaged, but also to renovate other parts of the convent that had fallen into disrepair.<sup>105</sup> Scolastica's successful solicitation of Lorenzo de' Medici's financial support, which resulted in an extensive building and refurbishment campaign, was carried out entirely by letter.

Literate nuns from respectable families of modest means, such as the daughters of the Bolognese notary Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti, also participated by letter in contemporary patronage networks. The two eldest girls had entered prestigious convents because their dowries had been provided by wealthy donors, in the case of Angelica by the Duke of Ferrara, Ercole d'Este. During the 1480s and 1490s, Arienti had dedicated several literary works to the duke and to his daughter Isabella d'Este, the marchioness of Mantua. In mid-1505, during a famine, Isabella had repaid this favour by responding to the pleas for help from the impoverished Arienti, giving him six sacks of grain. Angelica and Ursina wrote promptly from their respective

102 Madonna Scolastica Rondinelli entered the convent in 1438 after the death of her husband Piero di Nofri dell'Antella. See Luisa Miglio, 'Lettere dal monastero', in Luisa Miglio (ed.), *Governare l'alfabeto: Donne, scrittura e libri nel medioevo* (Rome: Viella, 2008), pp. 122–6; and Patricia Lee Rubin, *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 209.

103 Francis W. Kent, 'Lorenzo de' Medici, Madonna Scolastica Rondinelli, and the politics of architectural patronage at the Convent of Le Murate (1471–72)', in Carolyn James (ed.), *Princely Citizen: Lorenzo de' Medici and Renaissance Florence* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 105–30.

104 *Ibid.*, pp. 118, 120.

105 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

convents in Gothic book hands – typical of the script used by women who embraced a religious vocation – thanking the marchioness for succouring their father and promising to pray fervently for her.<sup>106</sup>

The ability to write petitionary letters, in appropriately couched language and in a readable hand, to those in a position to support their communities, was a valuable skill for those who had so few other resources. The convent of Corpus Domini in Bologna, a community of Poor Clares founded by Caterina Vigri in 1456, still holds a fifteenth-century handwritten formulary of epistles in its archives.<sup>107</sup> Caterina was trained in the court of Ferrara and used her knowledge to create model letters for the use of the nuns at the convent.<sup>108</sup> This was a socially elite institution, but the battle to keep the nuns clothed and fed was a constant one. The ability of a woman to tap into her aristocratic networks, and to use psychological pressure and well targeted epistolary language to get results, as Chiara Gambacorta did in her letters to Francesco Datini, was decisive in determining who should be elected to serve as prioress, or abbess, of female religious institutions. However, in the sixteenth century, letter-writing became crucial for more than the raising of charity.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries in England between 1536 and 1541, and the systematic passing of laws in German city-states to close convents and force nuns to change their confessional beliefs, following the spread of Protestantism, were traumatic events for those who had lived in religious communities for most of their lives. Nuns were rarely able to prevent the closure of their convents, but sometimes they delayed the inevitable through vigorous political lobbying carried out with the only means at their disposal: their pens. Merry Wiesner-Hanks has noted that nuns in newly Protestant areas in Germany staged significant protests against the reformist changes through letter-writing campaigns and family influence.<sup>109</sup>

The Bavarian abbess Caritas Pirckheimer, sister of the humanist scholar Willibald Pirckheimer, used her learning and a well-coordinated barrage of

106 Ursina Arienti to Isabella d'Este, 24 June 1505, in Carolyn James (ed.), *The Letters of Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti (1481–1510)* (Florence: Olschki and the University of Western Australia, 2001), pp. 219–20.

107 Archivio Generale Arcivescovile di Bologna, *Archivio della Beata Caterina*, 34, *Copia di lettere spirituali da scrivere in diversi casi*, cited in Gabriella Zarri, 'Sixteenth century letters: Typologies and examples from the monastic circuits', in Regina Schulte and Xenia von Tippelskirch (eds), *Reading, Interpreting and Historicizing Letters as Historical Sources* (Florence: European University Institute Working Papers, 2004), pp. 39–52 (p. 44).

108 Zarri, 'La lettera monastica', p. 262.

109 Merry Wiesner-Hanks, 'Women, gender, and sexuality', in Alec Ryrie (ed.), *Palgrave Advances in the European Reformations* (Aldershot: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 253–72 (pp. 256–7).

letters to convince the city officials of Nuremberg to allow the Klarakloster, the convent over which she presided, to remain open until the last nun died.<sup>110</sup> Unusually, her letters are preserved, not in an archive, but in a chronicle, written between 1524 and 1528, which records in sixty-nine chapters her convent's battle with civic authorities.<sup>111</sup> Most scholars agree that Caritas composed the important letters and either dictated, or approved, the narrative portion of the text. She may even have written the editorial remarks that appear in the margins of draft versions of the text in her own hand.<sup>112</sup>

In her youth, Caritas had corresponded in Latin with some of the foremost intellectuals of the day, including her brother Willibald and his friend Conrad Celtis. In these letters, she had relied on conventional tropes of female inferiority to deflect criticism of her boldness in writing to men.<sup>113</sup> In the later battle with city officials over the future of her institution, such humility was abandoned, the abbess relying instead on her theological knowledge, command of religious rhetoric and her elite status to create an authoritative epistolary identity. In one letter, she declared forthrightly to the municipal authorities that her obedience would only be forthcoming in matters that 'we consider appropriate and possible'.<sup>114</sup>

Caritas formed a close relationship with Caspar Nützel, a councilman and superintendent of the Klarakloster. He encouraged Caritas to resist the Nuremberg Council efforts to close the convent, although his own preference was that Catholic convents should become schools and the nuns be employed as teachers. These suggestions met with resistance from his colleagues. No doubt, the idea of the redeployment of nuns as salaried workers shocked contemporaries as a radical and thoroughly unpalatable prospect.<sup>115</sup> Caritas's epistolary ability 'to make things extremely difficult by including many

110 See Paula S. Datsko-Barker, 'Caritas Pirckheimer: a female humanist confronts the Reformation', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 26 (1995), 259–72; and Gwendolyn Bryant, 'The Nuremberg Abbess Caritas Pirckheimer', in Katharine M. Wilson, *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), pp. 287–303.

111 Paul A. MacKenzie (trans.), *Caritas Pirckheimer: A Journal of the Reformation Years 1524–1528* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006).

112 Charlotte Woodford, *Nuns as Historians in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 89.

113 See Stephen L. Wailes, 'The literary relationship of Conrad Celtis and Caritas Pirckheimer', *Daphnis*, 17 (1998), 423–40.

114 Caritas Pirckheimer to the City Council, Advent, 1524, in Mackenzie (trans.), *Caritas Pirckheimer*, pp. 19–20.

115 On Nützel's vision for Bavaria's convents, see Amy Leonard, 'Convents in the Holy Roman Empire', in Christopher Ocker (ed.), *Politics and Reformations: Histories and Reformations. Essays in Honour of Thomas A. Brady, Jr* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 199–240 (p. 214).

supporting arguments', as Nützel put it on one occasion, was likely crucial to the convent remaining open.<sup>116</sup> Yet the superintendent's suggestion that she was too direct in her criticisms of opponents and overly forceful in leading the nuns under her authority prompted an assurance from the abbess that the epistolary campaign to resist closure was a collaborative process:

I read what was in your letter to me and the convent before the entire convent and asked each one individually, both young and old, what she wanted to answer according to her own will. Thus, each told me what she thought as the letter states. Then, with my own hand, I wrote these opinions on the slate and gave them to the scribe to be copied.<sup>117</sup>

By preserving this and the other letters that attempted to resist the zealotry of the Protestant reformers, Caritas documented the final phase of her beloved institution for posterity. Unlike most other abbesses, she had the humanist education required to confront municipal representatives articulately, and so resist the onslaught of change which the Reformation produced. The Klarakloster was the last institution in Bavaria to close, largely on account of its leader's epistolary tenacity.

One of the effects of the Protestant campaign to eliminate convents and monasteries was a resurgence of enthusiasm in Catholic areas for monastic renewal, some of it led by charismatic and forceful women. So, while in Germany Caritas Pirckheimer wrote letters to stave off the demise of the Klarakloster, radical reformers such as Teresa of Ávila relied on letter-writing to implement a vision of religious life that involved a return to punishing levels of austerity, in line with the early ideals of Carmelite rule. Teresa's strict regime was not opposed by the Council of Trent, which met between 1545 and 1563 to promulgate a thoroughgoing Catholic reform agenda. However, her advocacy of a greater role for women in their own spiritual and temporal regulation was abhorrent to conservative Church figures, as was her travelling from town to town to set up nineteen Discalceate ('barefoot') Carmelite convents and friaries, and to reform existing communities.<sup>118</sup>

The final session of the Council of Trent reiterated the need for strict enclosure for all nuns and ruled that lay sisters living in religious communities

116 Caspar Nützel to Caritas Pirckheimer, no date, in Mackenzie (trans.), *Caritas Pirckheimer*, p. 50.

117 Caspar Nützel to Caritas Pirckheimer, no date, in Mackenzie (trans.), *Caritas Pirckheimer*, pp. 57–8.

118 Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Ávila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 1–4, 69–80.

should also be subject to cloistering.<sup>119</sup> However, the papacy's attempts to constrain religious women beyond Italy's borders were dependent on the vacillating support of foreign rulers. The French monarchy never officially endorsed the papal decrees concerning convents, while local Church authorities in France only imposed the reforms after 1615.<sup>120</sup> In Spain, the new rules were imposed quickly, but only superficially. While King Philip II publicly declared his support of the changes, he sent secret despatches to his viceroys and governors throughout his Spanish and Italian territories, declaring that no papal decree would be followed where it impinged on royal authority and privileges.<sup>121</sup> The ambiguous stance of the Spanish Crown was successfully exploited by Teresa of Ávila when the Piacenza chapter of the Carmelites tried to force her into a three-year 'retirement' in a cloistered convent of her choice, for failing to adhere to the requirements of enclosure. She resisted the order for four years – travelling several hundred kilometres from Seville to Toledo and onto Ávila and Valladolid – before she successfully convinced the king, through her intermediary in Madrid, Roque de Huerta, to allow discalced Carmelites to continue their nomadic practices.<sup>122</sup>

Teresa endured a taxing administrative burden, since most matters to do with her leadership of the reformed Carmelites had to be settled through correspondence, despite the toll it took on her mental and physical health. She confessed to her biological sister Juana de Ahumada that 'with so many duties and troubles ... I wonder how I'm able to bear them all. The biggest burden is letter-writing'.<sup>123</sup> Teresa sometimes wrote until well past midnight, despite the very early rising for morning prayers that all sisters were required to observe. In 1577, during an intense period of work, she capitulated to exhaustion. Her doctor mandated the use of a secretary and forbade working long into the night.<sup>124</sup> Yet, after injuring herself during a fall

119 See Elizabeth Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women: Periculos and its Commentators 1298–1545* (Washington DC: Catholic University Press of America, 1997), pp. 126–8; James R. Cain, 'Cloister and the apostolate of religious women', *Review for Religious*, 27(2) (1968), 243–80; and Craig Harline, 'Actives and contemplatives: the female religious of the Low Countries before and after Trent', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 89(4), (1995), 541–67.

120 Marguerite Vacher, *Nuns without Cloister: Sisters of St. Joseph in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. by Patricia Byrne (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 2010), p. xxii.

121 Anthony D. Wright, *The Early Modern Papacy: from the Council of Trent to the French Revolution 1564–1789* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 155.

122 Teresa of Ávila to Roque de Huerta, 26 July 1579, in Kavanaugh (trans. and ed.), *The Collected Letters of St Teresa of Ávila*, vol. 2, p. 218.

123 Teresa of Ávila to Doña Juana de Ahumada, Galinduste, 4 February 1572, in Kavanaugh (trans. and ed.), *The Collected Letters of St Teresa of Ávila*, vol. 1, pp. 113–14.

124 Kavanaugh (trans. and ed.), *The Collected Letters of St Teresa of Ávila*, vol. 1, p. 13.

down a flight of stairs on Christmas Eve 1578, with an arm 'still swollen' and her hand so covered in plaster that it resembled armour, as she admitted to one correspondent, she continued to write long and persuasive epistles to her collaborators.<sup>125</sup>

Only 468 of Teresa's letters are extant, but scholars have speculated that her output may have been somewhere between 10,000 and 25,000 letters.<sup>126</sup> The reason for the poor survival rate is that Teresa often instructed her recipients to destroy her letters, as she did theirs. For example, in a letter sent to her confidante Padre Jerónimo Gracián, she asked that he tear it up as soon as he had read it. She also urged her sisters to be attentive to the dangers of leaving letters unsecured. In a postscript to one of her prioresses, she wrote:

Open this letter to the prioress of Paterna and read it, for I sealed it by mistake. And read the one for the prior of Las Cuevas to whom I have written again although in such a hurry that I don't know what I have said, and seal it.<sup>127</sup>

Teresa would have learned to compose letters according to the norms of her day, thanks to the manuals that proliferated in Castile and other parts of Spain during the sixteenth century. Scholars have noted the influence of such epistolary guides in Teresa's letters to high-ranking clerics and noblemen.<sup>128</sup> Yet she also used new epistolary modes, such as the emerging trend to maximise or minimise the size of the margin, according to the recipient's social standing and degree of influence.<sup>129</sup> When writing informally to friends, relatives and the prioresses under her guidance, Teresa preferred a colloquial and intimate style.

Nonetheless, a mastery of the *ars dictaminis* allowed Teresa to strategically subvert its rigid structures and formulaic rhetoric. In a letter to the Dominican Padre Luis de Granada, she subtly critiqued women's supposed inferiority, and cleverly camouflaged her boldness in writing to him about theological issues by claiming that a mutual acquaintance had 'ordered me

125 Teresa of Ávila to Padre Jerónimo Gracián, 16 February 1578, in Kavanaugh (trans. and ed.), *The Collected Letters of St Teresa of Ávila*, vol. 2, pp. 26–31.

126 Kavanaugh (trans. and ed.), *The Collected Letters of St Teresa of Ávila*, vol. 1, p. 15; and Alison Weber, "Dear daughter": Reform and persuasion in St Teresa's letters to her prioresses', in Couchman and Crabb (eds), *Women's Letters across Europe*, pp. 241–62 (p. 243).

127 Teresa of Ávila to Maria de San José, 9 January 1577, in Kavanaugh (trans. and ed.), *The Collected Letters of St Teresa of Ávila*, vol. 1, pp. 465–9.

128 Weber, 'Dear daughter', pp. 247–8.

129 Kavanaugh (trans. and ed.), *The Collected Letters of St Teresa of Ávila*, vol. 1, p. 16.



to write this letter, something I wouldn't have dared to do on my own'.<sup>130</sup> Here, the rhetoric of humility was deployed to distract from any suspicion that she was transgressing doctrinal boundaries. Similarly, in response to a peremptory demand by a noble patron, Diego Ortiz, to have the Mass sung by the Carmelite nuns in Toledo immediately before the solemn masses that marked the feast days of important saints, Teresa used formulaic modesty to disguise her firm refusal of his demand:

And, so, I'm not thinking of defending myself, but as with those who have a hopeless case, I will shout and cry out and remind you that you are always more obliged to favour orphan daughters and minors over chaplains.<sup>131</sup>

Despite an inquisitorial climate that severely discouraged female agency, Teresa was inventive in exploiting the possibilities that letter-writing offered to protect her cloistered apostolate from the interference of male clerics and to deflect the demands of benefactors who sought to control what their bequests would bring in the way of reward from the nuns.

While the effects of the Council of Trent were gradually, and sometimes only intermittently, felt in various parts of Europe, stricter conventual laws eventually took greater hold. Before the Tridentine reforms, many Italian convents were places of female sociability. Aristocratic laywomen retreated into them for periods of prayer, widows sought their peaceful routines, and young girls were educated within their walls.<sup>132</sup> After the mid-sixteenth century, the Church stepped up its efforts to stop such comings and goings.

The Italian Dominican tertiary Caterina de' Ricci (1522–90) lived during these counter-reformation transformations. Her numerous extant letters reveal the intense spirituality of a woman regarded by many of her contemporaries as a living saint, but also how she fought to sustain the economic viability of the convent of San Vincenzo in Prato, despite vigorous attempts by Church authorities to impose mandatory enclosure on the institution that she eventually headed.<sup>133</sup> Caterina and the other patrician tertiaries never

130 'I am consoled that Señor Don Teutonio has ordered me to write this letter, something I wouldn't have dared to do on my own': Teresa of Ávila to Padre Luis de Granada, May 1575(?), in Kavanaugh (trans. and ed.), *The Collected Letters of St Teresa of Ávila*, vol. 1, pp. 204–5.

131 Teresa of Ávila to Diego Ortiz, 27 May 1571, in Kavanaugh (trans. and ed.), *The Collected Letters of St Teresa of Ávila*, vol. 1, pp. 100–2.

132 Sharon Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), p. 168.

133 Padre Domenico Guglielmo di Agresti (ed.), *Santa Caterina de' Ricci. Epistolario*, 5 vols (Florence: Olschki, 1974–5).

left the confines of the convent, even if, technically speaking, as sisters of the third order of Dominicans, they could do so. They devoted themselves to prayer and meditation, leaving the *converse* (sisters from more humble families), who paid only a modest conventual dowry, to travel about collecting alms. It was these women who were the target of the Church's policing efforts.

Caterina's reputation as a charismatic mystic was established early as a result of her ecstatic visions and the possession of the stigmata, the physical manifestation of the wounds suffered by Christ during the Crucifixion. Caterina herself makes no mention in her letters of miraculous spiritual powers, and only occasionally alludes to her special relationship with the suffering Christ of the Passion. Most of her correspondence is concerned with soliciting financial support from a network of supporters, communicating with her relatives, and, later, with the administration of the convent. But Caterina also proved to be adept at offering spiritual advice and consolation to those whose entrepreneurial activities left them prone to anxiety and spiritual angst, no doubt because her own background as the daughter of a prominent Florentine banker meant that she understood these men's problems and world view.

Well versed in epistolary techniques, Caterina was able to adapt her style to the social situation and linguistic registers of her various correspondents. When writing to the merchant and notary Bonaccorso Bonaccorsi, for example, she used mercantile metaphors to persuade him to follow a spiritual path. In letters to Filippo Salviati, a Florentine scientist and astronomer, with whom she shared a strong personal affinity and spiritual friendship, her tone was more intellectual, but also combative. Caterina's close relationship with Salviati in the early 1560s provoked malicious gossip that she must have become his lover, after the formerly miserly Florentine began to build a substantial church next to San Vincenzo, and to improve the physical fabric of the sisters' quarters. Refusing to be intimidated by the whispers that began to circulate as the walls of Salviati's church rose into public view, the correspondents continued to exchange news and discuss the logistics of the building work. Caterina also addressed Salviati's fears about death. Such wide-ranging epistolary conversations belonged to a secular and male tradition of *amicitia*, which assumed friends were intellectual equals and involved the exchange of political and commercial favours, as well as the cultivation of personal bonds. Thus, Caterina's friendship with a prominent male intellectual, with whom she conversed as a peer and occasionally as his mentor, continued to be controversial.

Despite her reluctance to be constructed as a saint, Caterina's disciples regarded her letters, particularly the few written in her own hand, but

also the many more that were signed by her, as sacred relics.<sup>134</sup> Several letters survive in eighteenth-century reliquaries, presumably as a result of Caterina's canonisation in that century.<sup>135</sup> However, long before this, acolytes such as Ludovico Capponi, a page at the Medici court, had the same instinct. He preserved his entire collection of letters from a woman he regarded as singled out by God for sainthood.<sup>136</sup> Another correspondent, Lorenzo Strozzi, petitioned for letters in Caterina's own hand, apparently for the salutary effects of her physical contact with the paper. On at least two occasions, she acceded to these requests, writing on 23 August 1543 in the following terms:

And to obey your command and also because of the compassion I feel for your serious illness I write to you with some effort these brief lines, as best I can, because of your request in letters to the reverend Mother Prioress and that of the friend of Jesus, Domenico Marvassino, both of whom have requested I pray for you and I assure you that I will not forget you in my prayers to Jesus and his most saintly mother, for the sake of the charity that we must all observe if we are to win and preserve God's favour and also because of the great debt of gratitude we have for your help to the monastery on more than one occasion.<sup>137</sup>

In this passage, Caterina summed up the expectations of those who sought her intervention in petitioning divine favour, and her own sense of how the transaction ought to work.

While she occasionally acquiesced in writing to friends in holograph, Caterina refused the requests of those she did not know, and whom she suspected merely of wanting a letter as a miraculous artefact. When the banker Giovambattista de' Servi asked her to write a letter in her own hand for the infirm son of a man named Covini, she would not agree on the grounds that she knew neither the father nor the son:

My own father, you ask that I write in my hand to that young man from the Covini family who is ill. To which I reply that it doesn't seem right

<sup>134</sup> Anna Scattigno, 'Lettere dal convento', in Gabriella Zarri (ed.), *Per lettera. La scrittura epistolare femminile tra archivio e tipografia (XV–XVII secolo)* (Rome: Viella, 1999), pp. 313–57.

<sup>135</sup> For example, a letter to Marcello Acciaiuoli of 17 May 1573 was preserved in a reliquary in the Florentine convent of Montalve: Agresti, *Santa Caterina de' Ricci*, vol. III, p. 204.

<sup>136</sup> Scattigno, 'Lettere dal convento', p. 317.

<sup>137</sup> Caterina de' Ricci to Lorenzo Strozzi, 23 August 1543, in Agresti, *Santa Caterina de' Ricci*, vol. I, pp. 29–32.

to me to do so, not because I am reluctant to please you, whom in Jesus I love as a son, but I am neither acquainted with, nor have a particular friendship with, the father or the son and it doesn't seem to be appropriate to write, given that he hasn't written directly to me, in which case I would be required to respond.<sup>138</sup>

The Council of Trent's edicts of 1563 concerning the enclosure of all nuns and tertiaries, and Pope Pius V's *Circa Pastoralis* of 1566, which added further measures to enforce their seclusion, were stubbornly ignored at San Vincenzo. The convent's rule neither limited the mobility of its inmates nor restricted visitors, since an open-door policy was essential to the nuns' ability to sustain themselves economically.<sup>139</sup> However, in 1576, the sisters were ordered by Church authorities to cloister themselves immediately, despite ongoing building works that required the gates to the convent to remain open. Caterina had been elected prioress for the sixth time, and it fell to her to respond. In March 1577, she wrote a long letter to the Dominican friar Antonino Branciuti, head of the Roman province, who had ordered the closure of all access to the convent, and the withholding of the sacraments from the nuns to force them into submission. Caterina complained robustly to Branciuti that the bricking up of entrances to San Vincenzo had begun without the permission of the occupants and through subterfuge. She defended the convent's right to observe its original charter, on the grounds that the ability to solicit charity was fundamental to the survival of her community:

I desire nothing else than the will of my reverend fathers and particularly that of your Lordship, who is so devoted to the most blessed God, as He himself knows, and I desire that this monastery be dear to you and not suffer violence because [the nuns] will obey, but they will not consent to enclosure because our constitution allows them to go outside, although we only do so to gather alms, and not without seeking permission from the Vicar and our father the Prior.<sup>140</sup>

138 Caterina de' Ricci to Giovambattista de' Servi, 16 August 1548, in Agresti, *Santa Caterina de' Ricci*, vol. I, pp. 138–9.

139 Other Dominican tertiaries in Tuscany also strenuously resisted enclosure. See Silvia Evangelisti, 'Women, power and convent reform in Florence', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 34(3) (2003), 677–700.

140 Caterina de' Ricci to fra Antonino Branciuti, 6 March 1577, in Agresti, *Santa Caterina de' Ricci*, vol. III, pp. 398–403 (p. 402). Caterina's understanding that Dominican tertiaries were exempt from the obligation to observe monastic enclosure had indeed been reiterated during

Such determinedly assertive passages in Caterina's letters provide evidence of the leadership abilities that propelled her regularly to the position of prioress, often against her will.

In the aftermath of the altercation with Branciuti, Caterina continued to lead the convent's resistance to enclosure. She used her political influence in Florence, writing frequently to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Francesco de' Medici, to persuade him to intervene in the dispute, so that the sisters could leave San Vincenzo to beg for charity in nearby towns, and the visitors who wished to buy the textiles made by the nuns to generate income could be admitted to the convent to inspect and purchase the wares.<sup>141</sup> Given the number of anti-Medicean sympathisers in Prato, as well as the association of the town, and San Vincenzo in particular, with the banned cult of Girolamo Savonarola, who had been executed in Florence for heresy in 1498, Caterina achieved a notable success in staving off the enclosure of her community until Francesco de' Medici's death in 1587 put an end to this source of protection.

Abbesses and prioresses had always needed a sophisticated arsenal of epistolary weaponry to oversee their institutions, and to keep their communities afloat financially. Amid the religious changes that swept Europe in the sixteenth century, they also deployed letters to protest against unwanted changes to their lives and to preserve a measure of autonomy in the face of the Church's determination to impose a standardised vision of female religious life. Sometimes, those in charge of convents wrote authoritatively in their own right, using Europe-wide reputations as mystics to command attention, while others wrote in the collective voice of their communities, in the hope of convincing authorities to take heed of their epistolary protests. Despite concerted attempts by the Church to forbid nuns to communicate via letters, the increasingly hermetic sealing of convent gates doomed such efforts to failure. Indeed, letter-writing became an even more essential means by which nuns secured their livelihoods. Yet it remained a highly contested activity, subject to scrutiny from within the convent, to make sure that individuals were not straying from strict guidelines concerning the content of letters, and from without, as Church authorities sought to limit nuns' contact with their families and to prevent them from engaging with social networks beyond convent walls.

the general Chapter of the order in June 1498. See Tamar Herzig, *Savonarola's Women: Visions and Reform in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago IL and London: Chicago University Press, 2008), p. 87.

141 See Caterina's letters to Francesco de' Medici between 1578 and 1587, in Agresti, *Santa Caterina de' Ricci*, vol. IV.

## The Social Politics of Elite Marriages: Aristocratic Women and Letter-writing

We have seen that the wives of merchants and landed gentlemen who presided over their husband's affairs while the men were away from home were inventive in overcoming the constraints of poor literacy or other impediments to their communicating by letter. It is pertinent that they served the commercial interests of their families by doing so. They encountered little resistance to their epistolary efforts, even if there was some surprise, as in the case of Margherita Datini, that an uneducated woman could learn to compose a letter through listening to male correspondence being read out to her. The usefulness of an aristocratic woman's letter-writing to the dynastic and strategic advancement of her husband seems also to have determined her access to the epistolary space and the degree of surveillance to which her correspondence was subject.

The Bohemian princess Perchta of Rožmberk (c. 1427–76), for example, found herself emotionally and physically marooned following her marriage, in 1449, to John of Lichtenštejn. After the experience of growing up in the Rožmberk's magnificent castle of Český Krumlov, a lively and prominent centre of Czech culture, the isolation of her husband's seat at Mikulov, near what is now the Austrian border, constituted an unwelcome change for Perchta.

The union had been organised to cement an alliance between two similarly ancient noble families with extensive land holdings in Bohemia and Moravia. However, good relations between Ulrich of Rožmberk and his son-in-law were almost immediately compromised when John decided to support the Hussite-Polish party headed by George of Poděbrady, instead of the Catholic-Austrian party led by Ulrich. This unpromising beginning was exacerbated by Rožmberk's ten-year delay in paying his daughter's dowry.<sup>142</sup>

Within months of the wedding, Perchta realised that her husband was indifferent to her, and his mother was actively hostile. It was soon clear to Perchta that she would not be able to perform a useful role as an intermediary, as the two families had hoped she would do when the betrothal was finalised. In February 1450, the newlywed reported to her father: 'that which I wrote you in my first letter, that I am doing well, is unfortunately not so; I would that I was doing well. On the contrary, I am doing very

<sup>142</sup> John Klassen (ed.), *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters: Noblewomen in Fifteenth-Century Bohemia* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), pp. 1–26.

badly'.<sup>143</sup> In May, she emphasised that she was 'very lonely and desperate' and suffering such 'great destitution' that she had no means with which to pay the messenger for carrying her letter to its destination. She begged her father to recompense the courier for his return journey to Český Krumlov.<sup>144</sup>

Although Perchta enjoyed a close and affectionate relationship with her brother and father, both men were dismayed by the failure of her marriage and worried that news of the problems would become public. They urged her to stop writing to them and to try to adjust to her circumstances. By the end of 1450, however, Perchta could not refrain from warning her male relatives by letter that the situation had become so bad that her life was now in danger:

If it were known that you understand the situation, even he would not dare do anything to me. Moreover, please understand that he shows me great hatred, that if he sees me anywhere he flees from me, and this I can readily write as the complete truth, that since Christmas he has spoken with me only once.<sup>145</sup>

Perchta was not entirely without support in her embattled condition. She had a small entourage of female companions who endured a long exile from home so they might continue to serve their unhappy princess. One in particular, the noblewoman Šiermarka, lobbied the Rožmberks by letter to do more for Perchta.<sup>146</sup> There was also Perchta's secretary, Henry, who faithfully remained with her for ten years. While Perchta had 'my Henry', as she called him, she was able to continue communicating by letter, which suggests that she was unable to put pen to paper herself – a possibility strengthened by the fact that, once Henry left her employ, Perchta resorted on one occasion to dictating in Czech to a German secretary whom, she claimed, 'does not speak any Czech'.<sup>147</sup>

In the early years of her marriage, Perchta faced a continual threat that her ladies-in-waiting and servants would be sent home in retaliation for her

143 Perchta of Rožmberk to Ulrich of Rožmberk, 20 February 1450, in Klassen, *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters*, pp. 35–6.

144 Perchta of Rožmberk to Ulrich of Rožmberk, 16 May 1450, from Mikulov, in Klassen, *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters*, p. 37. Many other letters ask for the messenger to be paid.

145 Perchta of Rožmberk to Ulrich of Rožmberk, 22 November 1450, in Klassen, *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters*, pp. 41–2.

146 Šiermarka to Henry of Rožmberk, 13 July 1351, in Klassen, *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters*, pp. 51–2.

147 Perchta of Rožmberk to John of Rožmberk, 1459–60, in Klassen, *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters*, pp. 69–71.

family's failure to finalise the dowry payments.<sup>148</sup> The fear of isolation in an alien, unfriendly environment fuelled her obsession with keeping open the channels of epistolary communication. Perchta dreaded winter because bad conditions on the roads would prevent anyone from carrying mail. Even in milder weather, securing a messenger was difficult when one was isolated behind high castle ramparts. Indeed, in December 1450, Perchta begged her father to offer employment to the man bearing her letter, since he had been dismissed from his post by her mother-in-law as a punishment for previously acting as Perchta's courier.<sup>149</sup>

Kept under almost constant surveillance, Perchta was forced to dictate her letters in secret and to send them by circumvolutions, so that the destination would not be apparent. In July 1464, King George of Kravaň admitted to her youngest brother, John of Rožmberk, that he had often helped Perchta by forwarding her letters on from Strážnice to Český Krumlov, and by paying for their delivery.<sup>150</sup> By then, Perchta had already alerted her brothers that she could no longer tolerate her unhappy marriage and wanted to return to her natal family. After securing the consent of her estranged husband and the support of her brothers, Perchta returned with her daughter to Český Krumlov in late 1464.<sup>151</sup> She became a widow in August 1473, at the age of forty-four.<sup>152</sup> A letter in German of 25 December 1474 from Perchta to her brother-in-law Henry of Lichtenštejn suggests that she spent her widowhood battling to have the financial terms of the separation agreement with John respected by her in-laws.<sup>153</sup>

A hundred years later, Elisabeth of Saxony (1551–90), daughter of the elector of Saxony, experienced similarly unhappy circumstances following her politically motivated marriage in 1570 to Johann Casimir, Count Palatine of Simmern. Relations between the couple seem to have been harmonious in the early phase of the marriage, but confessional differences and financial disagreements soon created difficulties. Elisabeth saw her parents on only three occasions after she married. Her husband was averse to family visits

148 Perchta of Rožmberk to Henry of Rožmberk, December 1450 and 13 July 1451, in Klassen, *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters*, pp. 43–5, 49–51.

149 Perchta of Rožmberk to Ulrich of Rožmberk, 31 December 1450, in Klassen, *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters*, pp. 46–9.

150 George of Kravaň to John of Rožmberk, 3 July 1464, in Klassen, *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters*, pp. 79–80.

151 Klassen, *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters*, p. 114.

152 *Ibid.*, p. 123.

153 Perchta of Rožmberk to Henry of Lichtenštejn, 25 December 1474, from Vienna, in Klassen, *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters*, pp. 95–6.



and, by 1573, Elisabeth had begun smuggling out secret letters to her mother. Previously, the couple had sent joint missives, but an undated letter of August 1573 suggests that this practice was probably not of Elisabeth's choosing. She revealed that her husband would not allow her to send mail without showing it to him first.

I beg your Grace, for the will of God, not to reveal that I have written this to the [my] mother and lady, my lord does not know that I have written it ... I beg your Grace once again that You will not reveal me, if so I will be in difficulties, they find I write too much to Your Grace ... I would have written it to Your Grace sooner but no possibility has transpired, my lord is not here [now] ... or else I could not have written it because my lord seals all my letters.<sup>154</sup>

The news that Elisabeth wished to convey to her mother was that Johann wished to have their unborn baby christened by a Reformed/Zwinglian minister rather than a Lutheran minister, as she and her parents expected. This disagreement was compounded in 1575 by the countess's worry that her husband intended to intervene in the French Wars of Religion, and by tensions arising from a large sum of 6,000 thalers that August of Saxony had sent to his son-in-law on the understanding that, in return, Johann would deed one of his estates to Elisabeth.<sup>155</sup> Johann refused to reassure his wife about these issues. In an increasingly hostile atmosphere, Elisabeth faced challenges in circumventing her husband's scrutiny and obtaining messengers for her mail. Anna of Saxony therefore sent her own courier to Elisabeth. The messenger would deliver two letters: one that could be read by Johann, and a secret missive to her daughter that was to be burned after it was read. The courier could then return to Saxony with confidential letters from Elisabeth.<sup>156</sup>

The plaintive letters of Elisabeth and Perchta reveal the difficulties that the two women had in communicating their marital troubles to natal relatives when they lacked money to send a courier on a long journey, or their mail was interfered with by husbands and mothers-in-law. In more

154 Elisabeth, Countess Palatine to Anna, Electress of Saxony, August 1573, as cited in Pernille Arenfeldt, 'Provenance and embeddedness: the letters from Elisabeth, Countess Palatine (1552–1585) to Anna, Electress of Saxony (1532–1585)', in Regina Schulte and Xenia von Tippelskirch (eds), *Reading, Interpreting and Historicizing Letters as Historical Sources* (Florence: European University Institute Working Papers, 2004), pp. 53–66.

155 Arenfeldt, 'Provenance and embeddedness', p. 65.

156 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

favourable marital circumstances, on the other hand, letter-writing might be a noblewoman's key to maintaining emotional closeness with her birth family and an important tool in exercising significant political and cultural influence.

This was certainly the case for the Italian princess Isabella d'Este (1474–1539). Eldest daughter of the duke and duchess of Ferrara, she became the wife of Francesco Gonzaga, marquis of neighbouring Mantua, in 1490, when she was fifteen. She had been betrothed to Francesco when she was only six and, by then, had already embarked on acquiring the epistolary skills she would exercise so expertly in adulthood. A short letter to her father, in a secretarial hand, was probably an early collaborative exercise between the four-year-old Isabella and a tutor. It documents aspects of how she was taught to dictate and to use the appropriate pronouns and adjectives required in a letter addressed to a parent, who was also a duke:

I would not want Your Excellency to forget his little daughter Isabella for want of writing, as I will hardly forget Your Most Excellent Lordship. On the contrary, I remember you always and have many reasons for doing so. Especially because on one day you left, and on the next day, I was hit as many times as if I were a little dog: Colonna scolded me, Sirvia held me and Madama hit me.<sup>157</sup>

Eleven years later, letter-writing proved to be a crucial means to alleviate the feelings of isolation and disorientation that she experienced in the weeks after her wedding.<sup>158</sup> Isabella dispatched a series of letters to her relatives in Ferrara, dictating them to Benedetto Capiluppo, an experienced chancery employee who had recently been appointed her confidential secretary. He went on to serve Isabella for the next twenty-eight years. Although she expected to receive responses to her mail within a few days, nothing arrived, perhaps because her parents decreed that Isabella should be given time to adapt to her new circumstances. Eventually, she received a letter from one of her mother's ladies-in-waiting, who assured Isabella that Eleonora d'Aragona was so upset by her elder daughter's absence that she could not bear to enter the empty bedroom. Isabella responded at once with grateful

<sup>157</sup> Isabella d'Este, *Selected Letters*, ed. and trans. Deanna Shemek, (Toronto: Iter Press, 2017), p. 23. On Isabella's epistolary training, see Deanna Shemek, "'Ci ci" and "pa pa": Script, mimicry and mediation in Isabella d'Este's letters', *Rinascimento*, 43 (2003), 75–91.

<sup>158</sup> See Carolyn James, *A Renaissance Marriage: The Political and Personal Alliance of Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga, 1490–1519* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 29.

enthusiasm, revealing the intensity of the bond with her mother, and the mental pain she felt at no longer having daily access to her family in Ferrara:

We received your letter, which was so loving that we appreciated it more than we can say, especially for the news that our most excellent lady shows many signs of displeasure at her separation from us. Though we have always been certain of how tenderly she loves us, this was nonetheless the best news we could possibly have heard, for we will live content in this world to the degree that we know we are in her good graces. Though to us it is an agony to be torn from her, we won't expend many words to tell you so, because you know in some measure the passionate and incomparable love and honour we bear her.<sup>159</sup>

Isabella also sent a letter to her half-sister Lucrezia d'Este, but adopted an entirely different tone:

The courier we sent returned with no reply to the letter we wrote you, which would have much amazed us if we had not already anticipated that you would be caught up in so many pleasures that you no longer remembered us. It seems to us that you have confirmed the proverb that says, 'Out of sight, out of mind.' We did not write you in our own hand, since we doubted you would trouble yourself to respond, and we guessed well, because if you did not deign now to send the courier with as much as a tiny little note, much less would you have written it yourself.<sup>160</sup>

Here we see an articulation of the social cues that were embedded in the choice of writing a dictated or holograph letter. Isabella would not have considered it appropriate to write to a lady-in-waiting in her own hand, since such labour was a gesture of deference to an equal or superior. She would normally have apologised to her sister for sending a dictated letter, but, in this case, it served to emphasise her displeasure at her sibling's epistolary neglect. These brief examples show how supple this category of vernacular letter was in the hands of a young woman who could manipulate formal and colloquial language to convey loving emotions, or stage her displeasure, both modes of writing that she had learned as a child.

<sup>159</sup> Isabella d'Este to Diana di Cumani, 4 March 1490, from Mantua, in d'Este, *Selected Letters*, p. 28.

<sup>160</sup> Isabella d'Este to Lucrezia d'Este, 4 March 1490, from Mantua, in d'Este, *Selected Letters*, p. 27.

Letters were the primary means by which Isabella commissioned paintings for her palace apartments, shopped for luxurious commodities, and developed her own client networks in order to have independent sources of news and diplomatic intelligence. She wrote regularly to her Este, Sforza and Gonzaga kin, carefully balancing her obligation to support the dynastic interests of both natal and conjugal relatives. She also corresponded assiduously with her husband. The couple exchanged some 3,000 letters between 1490 and 1519, when Francesco died from the Great Pox (syphilis). The marquis relied on Isabella to assist him in governing his small principality, especially when he was fighting as a mercenary captain, or keeping an attentive eye on state borders by progressing from one Gonzaga country estate to another. This arrangement had worked successfully in previous generations, Francesco's German grandmother, Barbara of Brandenburg, in particular, playing a central role as her husband's political deputy. Such collaborations had much in common with the practice of merchants relying on their wives to ensure that the household and workshop continued to function smoothly while they were away from home. Like those women, Isabella had to seek husbandly authority for the actions she took on his behalf, and then report by letter on what had transpired.

The cooperation between husband and wife was mostly harmonious. However, when marital conflict erupted – as it did in 1513, when Isabella moved to Milan in protest at being replaced as her husband's deputy by his private secretary, Tolomeo Spagnoli, and refused to obey brusque summons home from Francesco – letter-writing became a medium for Isabella to express her grievances and put her point of view:

I don't believe that on this trip to Milan I have misbehaved or done anything to incite people's gossip. I know well that I have gained a thousand friends for Your Lordship and myself, by doing what I must do and what is my custom to do because, thanks to God and to myself, I have never required supervision or advice on how to govern my person. Though indeed I may be of no account in other matters, God has given me this gift, for which Your Lordship is as obliged to me as any husband ever was to a wife. And do not think that even if you loved me as much as any person has ever loved another you could ever repay my loyalty. That is why Your Highness sometimes says I am haughty, because knowing how much you owe me for this, and seeing how badly I am repaid, I sometimes change complexion and seem to be in effect what I am not.<sup>161</sup>

161 Isabella d'Este to Francesco Gonzaga, 12 March 1513, from Piacenza, in d'Este, *Selected Letters*, pp. 361–2. See James, *A Renaissance Marriage*, pp. 165–7.

Although Isabella wrote this letter in her own hand, it was unlikely to have remained confidential because it ended up in chancery files. Prying eyes were taken for granted in a court environment, which swirled with gossip and mischief-making. Misogyny and resistance to her prominent political role had always presented difficulties for Isabella but, while she had her husband's backing, she was able to overcome sporadic challenges to her authority. In the last years of her husband's life, when the couple lived at opposite ends of Mantua's urban fabric, cordial relations became far more difficult.

A few months after Francesco's death in early 1519, Isabella wrote to Baldassare Castiglione, diplomat and author of *Il libro del cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*), one of the most influential literary works of the sixteenth century, about the political eclipse that she had suffered in the preceding years. She blamed the ambitious machinations of Spagnoli:

He kept us so low that whereas in our younger years we had some authority in this state, now we were entirely stripped of it, as is known to you and to the entire city. His Holiness knows that, as a consequence, we spent nine months away from home, four of them in Rome, because we were too embarrassed to remain so abject in Mantua.<sup>162</sup>

There are many other passages in Isabella's letters that reflect on the feelings she experienced as she dealt with political crises, raised her children and travelled to new places. She adapted the formal template of the chancery letter to write in a wide variety of styles and voices, some of which were official and distant, others more intimate. In contrast to her predecessors, who had been content to have their outgoing letters recorded in their husbands' registers, Isabella kept track of her mail by establishing her own copybooks. These bound volumes preserve copies of more than 16,000 of Isabella's letters. Those that were sent to her husband and other relatives, or to bureaucrats connected to the court, were often returned to the chancery for filing. Some of these so-called 'originals' retain the wax impression of the beautifully engraved seal that Isabella commissioned in 1505. Contemporaries were impressed by its ingenious design, which proclaimed the marchioness's royal pedigree as granddaughter of the king of Naples and drew attention to her cultural sophistication.<sup>163</sup>

162 Isabella d'Este to Baldassare Castiglione, 21 July 1519, quoted in Alessandro Luzio, 'Isabella d'Este e Leone X del Congresso di Bologna alla presa di Milano (1515–1521)', *Archivio storico italiano*, 44 (1909), 72–128 (p. 77).

163 James (ed.), *The Letters of Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti*, p. 227.

Isabella also remained alert to the possibilities that new writing technologies offered to bolster her reputation as an innovator. For example, she ordered pen points made from fish teeth from Lorenzo da Pavia, her agent in Venice. These experimental nibs were fragile and had to be fixed to the pen with iron clasps. Yet they eliminated the need to constantly recut quills, a task that required considerable expertise. Lorenzo also carved nibs for the marchioness from other materials, such as bone combined with ebony, that could produce a finer but still robust point. Lorenzo was instructed to keep a keen lookout in Venice for unusual inkwells and stationery containers of fine workmanship.<sup>164</sup> The desire for epistolary implements that were both efficient and outstandingly beautiful, along with her insistence in maintaining her own copybooks, indicate how central letter writing was to Isabella's sense of self.

For her, letter-writing was not recreational, nor was it a self-conscious place for intellectual display, even if the communicative vigour of her style marks her as a particularly skilled epistolary practitioner. Letters that aspired to display an author's erudition and literary talent had still to be in Latin. Although Isabella made several sporadic attempts in the 1490s to improve her meagre knowledge of Latin, it was certainly not to be able to write polished humanist epistles, but rather to read the ancient works of literature that she collected in her library.

A year before Isabella d'Este's death, Italian began to come into its own as a vehicle for the familiar letter. The publication, in 1538, of the first volume of the correspondence of Pietro Aretino, a Venetian who had already gained notoriety for controversial journalistic writings, garnered huge public interest. Aretino's success was fuelled in part by the entertaining variety of his letters, some of which were addressed to important, well-known figures, while others were directed to servants or other socially marginalised individuals and adopted a low, burlesque tone.<sup>165</sup> His anthology contained shocking, amusing, vindictive and blatantly self-promoting epistles that left the boundaries of what could be written in a letter intriguingly, if scandalously, blurred.

A large readership in Venice and elsewhere, eager for the new products of the printing press, but without the ability to understand Latin texts, created a ready market for other published letter collections in vernacular languages, including by a few women willing to risk impropriety by venturing into this

<sup>164</sup> Clifford Brown, with Anna Maria Lorenzoni, Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia, *Documents for the History of Art and Culture in Renaissance Mantua* (Geneva: Droz, 1982), pp. 234–6.

<sup>165</sup> Pietro Aretino, *Lettere*, ed. by Paolo Procaccioli, 7 vols (Rome: Salerno, 1997–2002).

very public genre.<sup>166</sup> The late sixteenth century witnessed the publication, in Italy, of the familiar letters of the Venetian courtesan Veronica Franco, and, in France, of those by the mother and daughter Madeleine Neveu and Catherine Fradonnet. Adopting the quasi-noble name 'des Roches', Madeleine and Catherine maintained a well-patronised early salon until their deaths in 1587.<sup>167</sup> Their letters combined colloquial language with an informal style that wore its literary qualities lightly and gave the reader a sense of gaining entrée to the private emotions of the writer. Curiosity about the inner lives of women even prompted some men to pretend to be female authors, to take commercial advantage of their popularity. The notion that women had a particular affinity for letter-writing that was innate, rather than learned, became a pervasive trope during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

## Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that, before 1600, women wrote letters for practical purposes and, in most cases, with only limited formal training. Gentlewomen on landed estates and women associated with Europe's large mercantile class were drawn into letter-writing, usually with the help of a scribe, by the expectation that they would keep temporarily absent husbands abreast of news from home. In describing the ways in which they had overseen domestic provisioning, directed agricultural work, or contributed to the entrepreneurial activities of their families, women documented their competence, intelligence and agency.

In that process, some individuals gained confidence about their ability to use letters, not just for reporting purposes, but also to express opinions, to convey emotions, and, occasionally, to write in an intimate vein to their spouse. While the wives of merchants such as Margherita Datini, Dora del Bene and Magdalena Behaim sometimes ignored conventional codes of wifely deference in writing to their husbands combatively, lovingly or jokingly, gentry women in England were more conservative, constrained by notions of decorum and by the lack of confidentiality that writing through

166 Meredith Ray, *Writing Gender in Women's Letter Collections of the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 28–35.

167 Veronica Franco, *Lettere*, ed. by Stefano Bianchi (Rome: Salerno, 1998). See Margaret F. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth Century Venice* (London and Chicago IL: Chicago University Press, 1992); and Anne R. Larsen (trans.), *From Mother and Daughter: Poems, Dialogues and Letters of Les Dames des Roches* (Chicago IL: Chicago University Press, 2006).

a scribe imposed. Hastily added postscripts in a semi-literate author's uncertain hand, or cryptic phrases that would be understood only by the addressee, convey the frustrations of those who wished to write intimately to their spouses, but who could not pen their own letters or had an unreadable hand. By the late sixteenth century, there were those like Maria Thynne who could match, or outdo, their husbands in openly expressing marital endearments. But such individuals were still rare, because only a small number of women received an education equal to that of their menfolk.

It is pertinent that Maria Thynne spent much of her adolescence at the Elizabethan court and was thoroughly prepared for her duties as a lady-in-waiting by an education that included mastering letter-writing to an unusually sophisticated degree. In the fifteenth century, some European princesses had received a similarly excellent education to prepare them for the administrative and diplomatic work that they would undertake as duchesses, marchionesses and perhaps queens. In the case of a princess like Isabella d'Este, dictating and writing letters were quotidian activities that overcame many of the restrictions to which even she was subject, especially in relation to mobility, which remained in the gift of her husband. Having learned as a child to dictate letters to a secretary and to write in her own hand, Isabella went on to develop an eloquent and commanding style that was crucial to her success in establishing an authoritative political reputation, and in making her famous as a prominent cultural arbiter, even beyond Italy. The letters exchanged with her husband were also an important means to negotiate a sometimes-volatile marital relationship over almost three decades.

Isabella enjoyed an unusual level of control over her correspondence, although, like her husband, she could count on little epistolary privacy, given that almost all the couple's letters were dictated to and managed by secretaries. But as we have seen, some noblewomen, such as Perchta of Rožmberk and Elisabeth of Saxony, were subject to extreme levels of epistolary oversight and were without independent means to secure a courier for their correspondence. In their situations, the letter proved to be a contested and unsatisfactory means of communication.

Ironically, the Church's efforts to impose claustration on hitherto unenclosed tertiaries, and to enforce more firmly the isolation of convents, reinvigorated the reliance of nuns on letter-writing and honed the skills of abbesses and prioresses as communicators and lobbyists. It was the well-educated who usually came to the fore in using the letter to reach out to benefactors for charity, and to defend the economic viability of their communities. Yet even a semi-literate tertiary like Catherine of Siena could



learn to dictate rhetorically powerful letters that commanded the attention of popes, and were eagerly sought as holy artefacts by devotees attracted by her compelling spiritual message. The possibility of dictating letters in her own Sienese dialect was central to Catherine's ability to transfer her charismatic personality onto the page, and to convince an audience beyond her birthplace of her genuine holiness and authenticity as a radical voice of Christian reform.

Gary Schneider has argued convincingly that, throughout the premodern period, letter-writing was regarded as a poor substitute for the reassurance that bodily presence offered in determining a person's sincerity and truthfulness in interactions with others.<sup>168</sup> However, it may be the case that, while this was the case for literate men, letter-writing was a disinhibiting, and even a liberating, medium for women. The very novelty of communicating by letter stimulated some individuals to articulate viewpoints and emotions that considerations of female decorum and honour discouraged, or entirely suppressed, in face-to-face social encounters.

168 Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500–1700* (Newark DE: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

### 3 The Triumph of the Familiar Letter

**Abstract:** The ‘familiar letter’, relatively informal and often written for pleasure rather than by obligation, became the dominant form of personal letter in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Changes in female education and expanding public postal services opened letter-writing to many more women, and the genre came to be seen as one at which they excelled. The familiar letter, along with the development of the novel and wider changes in behavioural norms, made possible new kinds of epistolary relationship. Some women used their correspondence with family, lovers, friends and acquaintances to shape relationships in ways that were new, and that would not have been possible in face-to-face communication.

**Keywords:** friendship, postal services, female education, family relationships, courtship

Between the mid-1600s and the late 1700s, the dominant form of personal letter written by women was the ‘familiar letter’. It was very different from male-dominated scribal correspondence, which required a Latin education and special training. The familiar letter was written in everyday language and deliberately disregarded the rules governing diplomatic and other formal letters. It enabled many more women to write letters, particularly as new thinking about female education meant that more girls were learning to write with ease. Letter-writing now came to be seen as an activity appropriate for women. In fact, by the end of the seventeenth century, it was understood to be a domain in which women excelled.

This coincided with the progressive opening of public postal services in the middle decades of the seventeenth century, which greatly encouraged letter-writing. Initially, the post linked only major towns, but soon it was offering regular and ever-denser services within many individual European states, and later across their borders. The costs remained too high for most of the population to use these services regularly, but many women of the social elites and even the middle classes began corresponding regularly, almost always in their own hand.

Women's expanding epistolary skills were often used in quite traditional ways. Queens continued to engage in diplomatic and dynastic correspondence, nuns pursued the interests of their convents, and noblewomen wrote to promote their children's careers. Small numbers of highly educated intellectuals, just like the humanist women of the sixteenth century, corresponded with scientists and literary figures. Women of all ranks continued to write letters for immediate practical reasons. Most remained dependent throughout their lives, marriage was rarely a matter of choice, and the autonomy they enjoyed depended greatly on how much leeway they were able to claim from male relatives and how much support they received from female ones. As letter-writing became more common, it emerged as a crucial way of negotiating this sometimes precarious situation, enabling women to maintain vital networks at a distance. Events within the period, such as almost-continuous wars, the growth of European empires and the development of larger centralised states, led to many families being more widely dispersed and less able to communicate face-to-face. This, too, made letters increasingly important.

Yet the ability to write and send letters also offered new opportunities. Across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, growing numbers of women, in an expanding range of social groups, used letters to shape relationships and to get around the constraints imposed by limited mobility and by social and gender norms. They wrote to a wider range of correspondents, and some developed new kinds of epistolary relationships. More and more women were writing simply to keep in touch, and for pleasure rather than (or as well as) business. This was happening both within families, where most exchanges continued to take place, and outside them, particularly between friends. At the same time, letter-writing offered a link to wider worlds, both literally and imaginatively.

This chapter looks first at the nature and spread of the 'familiar' letter, and at the conditions that allowed more women to write regularly. It then focuses on the new possibilities opened up by greater female access to the world of letters. The changes came first, and are most evident in, north-western Europe, and spread from there to other parts of the continent. That region, and particularly England and France, will therefore be the main focus of this chapter.

## The Familiar Letter

The rediscovery of Cicero's *Epistolae ad Familiares* (variously translated as '*Letters to Friends*' or '*Familiar Letters*') led to the appearance, in the early

modern period, of what was termed ‘the familiar letter’. Although some authors trace it to the eighteenth century, in parts of Europe it appeared much earlier. In the sixteenth century, a number of intellectual and literary women published collections of familiar letters that achieved a certain renown.<sup>1</sup> Usually exchanged between people who already knew each other, most often family members, the familiar letter was inspired by Cicero’s and Seneca’s insistence that a personal letter should be informal and spontaneous. Cicero believed that it should be ‘the means by which absent friends converse together’, while Seneca asserted that ‘my letters should be just what my conversation would be, if you and I were sitting in each other’s company or going for a walk together – spontaneous and easy’.<sup>2</sup> Precisely what this meant varied over time, but the familiar letter was always free from the rigid structure and rules imposed by the *ars dictaminis*, and from the elaborate compliments and forms of address used in secretarial letters. It was almost always, by the seventeenth century, written in modern vernacular language, and it was not, theorists insisted, the place for intellectual argument or debate. The familiar letter wandered from topic to topic, just as conversation did, and its main purpose was to give pleasure to the recipient. It was, in principle, candid and personal (‘natural’ was the term most often used, though this too was open to different interpretations), revealing the author’s true thoughts and character.<sup>3</sup>

Since the familiar letter was in theory modelled on conversation, for the educated classes that meant what they called ‘polite discourse’. By today’s standards, their letters often appear formal and even impersonal, yet that was not how they struck seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Europeans. Elite society throughout Europe was structured by hierarchy and ceremony, so to early modern people, the use of ‘Dear Sir’ and ‘Dear Madam’, even between husband and wife, appeared informal, casting aside the elaborate titles that continued to be used in many other contexts. As time went on, more and more writers embraced forms that we consider

1 Meredith Ray, *Writing Gender in Women’s Letter Collections of the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 3–35.

2 *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, trans. by C. D. Yonge (London: George Bell & Sons, 1903), p. 22; and Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Moral letters to Lucilius (Epistulae morales ad Lucilium)*, trans. by Richard Mott Gummere, 3 vols (London: William Heinemann, 1917–25), vol. 2, p. 137, letter 75.

3 Howard Anderson and Irvin Ehrenpreis, ‘The familiar letter in the eighteenth century: Some generalizations’, in Howard Anderson, Philip B. Daghlion and Irvin Ehrenpreis (eds), *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century* (Lawrence KS: University of Kansas Press, 1966), pp. 269–82; and Susan Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia PA: John Benjamins, 2000).

affectionate, such as 'My dearest', or in closing, 'Your loving wife'. Within the family, people also progressively abandoned the deferential spacing on the page that had marked earlier letters.<sup>4</sup>

In practice, the familiar letter took a wide variety of forms, evolving in parallel with shifting norms of sociable conduct. It varied according to the skill of the writer, the relationship between sender and recipient, and the purpose of the letter. In the early eighteenth century, for instance, Mary Wortley Montagu composed informal letters that were sometimes exuberant, sometimes sober and practical, but always carefully tailored to the recipient. Like other skilled correspondents, she used the familiar letter for a wide range of purposes, from courtship to household affairs, as well as to keep in touch with family members and with a wide range of other people.<sup>5</sup> At the quill of a highly educated woman, the familiar letter might involve a high degree of artifice, as we shall see in the case of Madame de Sévigné (1626–96). She was the most famous practitioner of this kind of letter, and her correspondence was to serve as a model for future generations. It was strongly influenced by the style of aristocratic French salons, which appeared in various French cities in the 1620s and remained present throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Defenders of the salons represented them as sites where feminine virtue exercised a civilising influence, teaching men polite and genteel behaviour.<sup>6</sup> Particularly associated with salon sociability were 'gallant letters', supposedly modelled on the conversation that took place there, a coded and often flirtatious form of writing whose key features were 'gaiety of tone, wit, well-turned flattery and irony'.<sup>7</sup> The gallant letter will not be considered here, but it helped to shape the familiar letter.

4 On epistolary conventions in seventeenth-century France, see Roger Duchêne, *Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d'amour*, nouvelle éd. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1992), pp. 67–114. On the physical form of letters, see James Daybell, 'The materiality of early modern women's letters', in James Daybell and Andrew Gordon (eds), *Women and Epistolary Agency in Early Modern Culture, 1450–1690* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 55–77 (pp. 66–70).

5 Cynthia Lowenthal, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994).

6 Carolyn C. Lougee, *Le Paradis des femmes: Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 41–55, 70–84; and Peter Burke, *The Art of Conversation* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 115–16.

7 On 'lettres galantes', see Kelsey Rubin-Detlev, *The Epistolary Art of Catherine the Great*, Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp. 90–109 (quotation p. 91); Linda Timmermans, *L'accès des femmes à la culture (1598–1715)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1993), pp. 191–207; and Duchêne, *Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d'amour*, pp. 49–54. On links between salons and epistolarity in general, see Nicole Pohl, "'Perfect reciprocity": Salon culture and epistolary conversations', *Women's Writing*, 13 (2006), 119–36.

Women's growing adoption of the familiar letter led to an extraordinary change in thinking about letter-writing in general. Whereas in earlier periods letters were seen as a male domain, a growing number of authors now proclaimed women's letter-writing to be exemplary, even better than that of men due to its 'politeness of style and the most delicate way of speaking on all things'.<sup>8</sup> The association of familiar letters with women seems to have originated in Italy, but the idea that salon women possessed particular talents appeared in France in the 1650s and later in other parts of Europe. By 1689, when the philosopher Jean de La Bruyère complimented women for introducing true feeling into the writing of letters, it was a commonplace. 'This sex', he asserted, 'surpasses ours in this form of writing. They find beneath their quill turns of phrase and expressions that for us are often only the result of much work and of tiresome research'.<sup>9</sup> This was not quite the tribute it seems, since for La Bruyère it was only elite women, writing very specific kinds of letters, who excelled.

In 1665, another male theorist and editor of a collection of model letters, the abbé Charles Cotin, was explicit that some high-ranking women, when exchanging 'letters of gallantry', 'write better and more naturally ... than all our modern orators'. It was an ability, he added, that they had picked up 'in frequenting high society'.<sup>10</sup> In other words, since women did not have an education in Latin rhetoric, their letters were not polished and literary, and only aristocratic women whose wit and language were sharpened in salon and court conversation were able to join the pantheon of great letter-writers. Their talent, furthermore, was limited to letters dealing with 'matters of the heart'. Nature, maintained Cotin, had given such women a superior capacity 'to express, without affectation and without artifice, Nature's emotion'.<sup>11</sup>

For their influence in German letter-writing, see Tanja Reinlein, *Der Brief als Medium der Empfindsamkeit: erschriebene Identitäten und Inszenierungspotentiale* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2003), pp. 67–71.

8 La Princesse de Paphlagonie (1659), quoted in Timmermans, *L'accès des femmes à la culture*, p. 195.

9 Jean de La Bruyère, 'Les caractères ou les mœurs de ce siècle', in *Les Caractères de Théophraste, traduits du Grec: avec les caractères ou les mœurs de ce siècle*, 4th edn (Paris: Chez Estienne Michallet, 1689), p. 96; Timmermans, *L'accès des femmes à la culture*, pp. 191–204; and Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, 'Authority, authenticity, and the publication of letters by women', in Elizabeth C. Goldsmith (ed.), *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature* (Boston MA: Northeastern University Press, 1989), pp. 46–59 (pp. 46–7). On Italian associations of the familiar letter with women, see Ray, *Writing Gender in Women's Letter Collections*, pp. 191–2.

10 Charles Cotin, *Œuvres galantes de Mr Cotin, tant en vers qu'en prose*, 2nd edn (Paris: chez Estienne Loyson, 1665), preface, 'Sur les lettres des dames', unpaginated.

11 *Ibid.*, second preface, 'Sur le même sujet', unpaginated.

La Bruyère agreed that whereas men excelled in wit, elegance of phrasing, charm and style, only women 'can express an entire feeling in a single word'.<sup>12</sup> This served to confine women's writing to the sphere of emotion, and in the collections of model letters compiled by men such as Cotin, the small numbers of women's letters presented were mainly love letters.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, this 'feminisation' of the personal letter had important consequences. The recognition of women's expertise, however qualified, legitimised their letter-writing, and by the eighteenth century it had become a required skill for educated women across most of Europe. A second key result was to encourage other forms of female writing that were associated with letters, particularly novels. Novels, like familiar letters, were considered a minor literary genre requiring little talent, and as a new type of literature they were not governed by formal rules. This made them a genre acceptable for female writers, even if many elite women did not wish to brave public ridicule and publish under their real names. It is no coincidence that many novels, from the very beginning, were written as exchanges of letters.<sup>14</sup>

Across the seventeenth century, French forms of letter-writing became influential throughout Europe, although the familiar letter varied in accordance with local norms and vernacular traditions. The English were less formal, the Austrians notoriously traditional. Naturally, the relationship between writer and recipient also influenced the style of letters. Women wrote to other women differently from the way they addressed men.

The familiar letter also changed its character considerably over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One reason for this was its adoption by more social groups. Middle-class norms were generally less formal, less influenced by French aristocratic styles. The familiar letter was also accessible to servants and other working women, provided that they could write and that they understood the basic conventions governing letters. During this period, too, family relationships were in general becoming less

12 La Bruyère, 'Les caractères', p. 96. This was repeated almost word for word in what became a standard letter-writing text for German speakers: Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, *Briefe, nebst einer praktischen Abhandlung von dem guten Geschmacke in Briefen* (Leipzig: Johann Wendler, 1751), pp. 75–6.

13 Janet Gurkin Altman, 'Women's letters in the public sphere', in Elizabeth Goldsmith and Dena Goodman (eds), *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 99–115 (p. 110); and Katharine A. Jensen, 'Male models of female epistolarity; or, how to write like a woman in seventeenth-century France', in Goldsmith (ed.), *Writing the Female Voice*, pp. 25–45 (pp. 28–33).

14 Timmermans, *L'accès des femmes à la culture*, p. 215. On the relationship between novels and letters, see Elizabeth J. MacArthur, *Extravagant Narratives: Closure and Dynamics in the Epistolary Form* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 36–116.

overtly formal, and this was reflected in the way that people wrote. Literary influences pushed in the same direction, particularly eighteenth-century novels with their greater emphasis on sensibility, encouraging expressions of emotion and even of eroticism. Whereas most letters between lovers remained – to our eyes – quite formal in the seventeenth century, rarely using overt expressions of tenderness, increasingly they became love letters in the modern sense.

A further, gradual shift was the growing recognition that certain kinds of letter were not to be shared with others. While passing letters around remained common, with increasing frequency women indicated that particular letters were intended only for the recipient and were secure. This freed correspondents to be more direct in what they wrote.

### The Conditions of Writing

The adoption of the familiar letter by an ever-widening number of upper and middle-class women, and across more of Europe, was a product of improved female education and of new social and political conditions. There was general agreement that girls should be trained in ways appropriate to their sex and rank, but also vigorous debates about what this meant. Few authors suggested that women should study Latin or other intellectual subjects, although there were highly educated women in some princely families and in humanist circles. But whereas many male heads of households had in the past had strong reservations about educating their daughters, in the seventeenth century this was beginning to change. Growing numbers of moralists now advocated teaching women to read and even to write. They followed Erasmus and the early sixteenth-century Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives in arguing that a familiarity with good literature would develop virtue in women, whereas idleness and ignorance threatened it. These authors were not seeking to liberate women but to control them. Like the Jesuit Nicolas Caussin, they argued that the inherent weakness of women's bodies 'can distil flightiness, infirmity, and passion in their souls, which could easily assume the ascendancy if not combatted by piety and by reason'.<sup>15</sup> The ability to read, Caussin and others now suggested, would reinforce morality by giving women access to pious works, while writing would equip them to note down important truths. Protestants, and some

<sup>15</sup> Nicolas Caussin, *La Cour sainte* (1645), quoted in Wendy Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989), p. 261, note 7.



reforming Catholics, emphasised the importance of examining one's own conscience, and they saw writing as a valuable tool. Many moralists also suggested that once women married, modest learning would make them virtuous wives and better companions for their husbands. Proficiency with the quill would assist them to direct a household and to oversee the moral and religious education of their children.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout this period there were also strong social and political reasons why elite women should learn to write letters. European society of the seventeenth century was extremely hierarchical. Patronage networks continued to play a major role both in princely courts and at the local level, where patrician landowning families controlled urban and regional administration. Elite women were expected to cultivate relationships that would maintain and advance the status of their family, and assist the careers of their husbands, children and other relatives. Much of this was done, as it always had been, through face-to-face contact, but written communication became increasingly indispensable. By the second half of the seventeenth century, letters of condolence or of congratulation, and replies to such correspondence – in one's own hand – had become an obligation for the social elites, in the same way as visiting and doing favours had. In town, 'paper visits' – as one early eighteenth-century writer termed them – complemented and might even replace social calls as a vital component of polite conduct, and as a way of developing valuable connections. Providing letters of recommendation for subordinates was also an important mechanism for maintaining status, for elite women as well as men. For people of lower rank, polite letters were key tools for attracting the attention of grand ladies who might offer a place in their household or put in a word with a male patron. In the 1780s, it was vital for a woman like Sophie Silvestre, wife of Bernard de Bonnard, a minor provincial nobleman, to reply to the 'pretty' polite letters that arrived during her husband's absence. His 'good friends' – in other words, patrons, the two mentioned being society ladies – were the key to his future and that of their children, as Bernard remarked pointedly to Sophie.<sup>17</sup>

Growing geographical mobility made correspondence even more important. While Europeans had always moved around, notwithstanding the

16 Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France*, pp. 17–18; and Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 162.

17 Vivienne Larminie, 'Fighting for family in a patronage society: the epistolary armoury of Anne Newdigate (1574–1618)', in James Daybell (ed.), *Early Modern Women's Letter-writing, 1450–1700* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 94–108; Duchêne, *Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d'amour*, pp. 19–24; MacArthur, *Extravagant Narratives*, pp. 36–61; and Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), pp. 136–8, 315.

myth of rural stability, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, more elite families than ever before found themselves divided by war, duty or marriage. Major conflicts such as the Thirty Years' War, the many religious wars, the English Civil War, and the Fronde in France, were accompanied by widespread instability. By the late seventeenth century, the centralisation of power by absolute monarchs required nobles to attend court, and members of the great noble families and even some of the lower nobility now divided their time between the royal court, the town and their rural estates. One English couple was described as 'like buckets in a well; as one goes up the other goes down between town and country'.<sup>18</sup> Husband and wife needed to communicate by letter, with each other but also with other people. The growing centralisation of kingdoms also meant that the sons and daughters of elite families were less likely to marry locally and more often formed alliances across the kingdom. Madame de Sévigné lived mostly in Paris but her daughter married a nobleman from Provence, giving rise to their famous correspondence.

Across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, too, the growth of European empires, colonial wars and the beginnings of mass emigration made both temporary and permanent separation more common. Around a million men employed by the Dutch East India Company left the Netherlands in that period. English letter-writing manuals began to include examples of 'beyond the Sea' letters from a woman to her husband or fiancé in military service somewhere in the growing empire.<sup>19</sup> For those able to write and send them, letters became indispensable for maintaining family cohesion. And families remained the bedrock of early modern society.

For all these reasons, schools for young ladies multiplied in the seventeenth century, often run by nuns in Catholic areas and by secular educationalists elsewhere. In the eighteenth century, there was rising demand for governesses, usually unmarried genteel women who looked after the daughters of wealthy and, increasingly, middle-class families. Letters were considered a valuable pedagogical tool, and teachers encouraged girls to write to their parents, who would often correct the letters and return them. The princely von Harrach family of Austria obliged their daughters, away at convent

18 Quoted in Susan Whyman, "'Paper visits': the post-restoration letter as seen through the Verney family archive', in Rebecca Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-writers, 1600–1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 15–36 (p. 20).

19 R. A. Houston, 'Colonies, enterprises, and wealth: the economies of Europe and the wider world', in Euan Cameron (ed.), *Early Modern Europe: An Oxford History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 137–70 (p. 165); and Eve Taylor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 42.

schools, to write home, both in French and in German, and corrected the style. But many women learned epistolary skills elsewhere. Historians have placed much emphasis on the influence of the published writing manuals that proliferated in the seventeenth century, and even more in the eighteenth century. These offered both advice and model letters to suit a wide variety of purposes. Initially, they assumed an elite male audience, but there is fragmentary evidence of women purchasing them, and at least one late seventeenth-century Italian woman – Angela Mellini – claimed to have learned to write by copying from a letter manual.<sup>20</sup>

Letter collections also offered examples of women's letters. Jacques Du Boscq's 1635 compilation, translated into English three years later, purported to contain real letters by ladies of his own time. In 1650, the Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti published her *Lettere familiari e di complimento* ('*Familiar and Polite Letters*'), which contained 256 letters to a wide range of recipients, many of them revised versions of letters she had really sent. There were also growing numbers of fictional letters purporting to be written by women. In France, a cluster of 'epistolary fictions' appeared in the 1660s, notably the anonymous *Lettres portugaises*, which soon became available in English translation.<sup>21</sup> Epistolary novels written by women – such as Madeleine de Scudéry, Eliza Haywood and many others – became very popular in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Other women were given instruction by friends or family. In 1654, the English gentrywoman Dorothy Osborne tutored her neighbour, Lady Grey de Ruthin, in letter-writing, an example of the thirst for this knowledge among the rural gentry. Family letters themselves provided both models and

20 Timmermans, *L'accès des femmes à la culture*, pp. 55–9; Anthony Fletcher, *Sex, Gender, and Subordination in England 1500–1800* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 364–75; Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*, pp. 67–99; and Beatrix Bastl, 'Un discours entre proximité et distance', in Jean-François Chauvard and Christine Lebeau (eds), *Éloignement géographique et cohésion familiale (xv<sup>e</sup>–xx<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2006), pp. 139–51 (p. 143). The classic study of manuals is Roger Chartier, 'Secrétaires for the people? Model letters of the ancien régime: between court literature and popular chapbooks', in Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau and Cécile Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 59–111. Tiziana Plebani, 'La corrispondenza nell'antico regime: lettere di donne negli archivi di famiglia', in Gabriella Zarri (ed.), *Per lettera. La scrittura epistolare femminile tra archivio e tipografia (XV–XVII secolo)* (Rome: Viella, 1999), pp. 43–78 (p. 61).

21 Jacques Du Boscq, *Nouveau recueil de lettres des dames de ce temps* (Paris, A. Courbé, 1635); Janet Gurkin Altman, 'The letter book as a literary institution, 1539–1789: toward a cultural history of published correspondences in France', *Yale French Studies*, 71 (1986); and Ray, *Writing Gender in Women's Letter Collections*, pp. 188–95. Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*, pp. 143–57, offers a fine analysis of the way educated women learned to write letters on the basis of these various models.

motivation. The young Elizabeth Isham, in 1645, was inspired to write after reading a letter from her sister, while girls like Mary Evelyn kept albums into which they copied letters written by family members.<sup>22</sup> Women's letters were passed around – those of Madame de Sévigné to her cousin were read at court. Many letters, still in the late eighteenth century, were intended to be read aloud to family members or shared with a variety of people. All of these served as models, at the same time legitimising letter-writing by women. So, too, did increasing numbers of seventeenth-century paintings that portrayed women writing letters. Right across Western Europe, the late seventeenth century witnessed the birth of what Susan Whyman terms a 'culture of letters' that made it easier not only for many more women to produce letters, but to imagine themselves doing so.<sup>23</sup>

The familiar letter therefore spread, progressively, to an ever-wider range of social groups. In England in the 1620s, the daughters of prominent land-owning families, such as Mary Cavendish and Lucy Hutchinson (born Apsley) in England, or Marie de Rabutin-Chantal (the future Madame de Sévigné) in France, were educated by tutors and wrote with ease and assurance. In provincial upper-gentry families like the Verneys, by contrast, girls born in the early decades of the seventeenth century wrote phonetically and clumsily, and it was the following generation that gained ready ability with the pen. By the early eighteenth century, the Verney women were producing elegant epistles of the kind praised by the letter manuals. In France, Britain and Germany, after the middle years of the seventeenth century, more and more girls from professional and wealthy merchant families were attending school or being taught at home. Lydia DuGard, the daughter of a London schoolmaster, grew up in an environment where education was prized and where girls were expected to write, and her letters to her cousin demonstrate ease with the quill, with language and with epistolary conventions. In the larger cities, especially, even servant girls, quick to adopt many of the cultural practices of their employers, wrote letters.<sup>24</sup>

22 Dorothy Osborne, in Kenneth Parker (ed.), *Letters to Sir William Temple* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), letter 54, 14 January 1654; Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 31–2; and Linda Pollock, *A Lasting Relationship: Parents and Children over Three Centuries* (Hanover NH and London: University Press of New England, 1987), pp. 224–5.

23 Roger Duchêne, 'Mme de Sévigné: une nouvelle épistolarité', *Bulletin de la Société des professeurs de français en Amérique* (1989–90), 41–57 (pp. 42–3); Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*, pp. 19–59; and Whyman, 'Paper visits', p. 15.

24 Pollock, *A Lasting Relationship*, pp. 206, 222; Whyman, 'Paper visits', p. 20; Nancy Taylor (ed.), *Cousins in Love: The Letters of Lydia DuGard, 1665–1672, with a new edition of The Marriages of Cousin Germans by Samuel DuGard* (Tempe AZ: Arizona Center for Med and Ren Studies,

This epistolary revolution was uneven across Europe. In Italy, even in the eighteenth century, some noblewomen received little education, and letter-writing does not seem to have spread as rapidly as in north-western Europe. The same appears to be true of many parts of Central and Eastern Europe, although well-educated noblewomen certainly did correspond with family members – sometimes, like the women of the Działyński family in Poland, in several languages. In Sweden, frequent letter-writing seems to have spread among the upper-middle classes only in the late eighteenth century.<sup>25</sup> It is likely, nevertheless, that many more such letters will be located as scholars turn their attention to neglected regions and periods. In the German states, for instance, the major focus has been on the late eighteenth century, when vernacular German literature began to flourish. In Italy, historians have been far more interested in letters of the Renaissance era, but Elisa Novi Chavarria has recently uncovered, hidden among court records, thirty-four letters of courtship written by a lower-middle-class Neapolitan widow, Antonia Battimiello, in August 1694. Given that female literacy rates in Naples were very low, this find is quite surprising.<sup>26</sup>

Women's entry into the world of letter-writing was hugely facilitated by new postal services. As we saw in earlier chapters, private courier services had long existed, but the seventeenth century witnessed their progressive opening to a wider public. This happened first in the Habsburg lands, in the sixteenth century, then in France in 1627, and in England after 1635. Because of the relatively urbanised nature of Western Europe, there was soon a dense network in that region. By the 1670s, in response to growing demand, there were three deliveries a week between London and the major county towns, and similar services in France. In the mid-eighteenth century, the

in conjunction with Renaissance English Text Society, 2003), p. 7; Susan Whyman, 'Gentle companions: Single women and their letters in late Stuart England', in Daybell (ed.), *Early Modern Women's Letter-writing*, pp. 177–93 (p. 179); and Whyman, *The Pen and the People*, pp. 31–4 and p. 134.

<sup>25</sup> Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France*, p. 37, note 134; Ray, *Writing Gender in Women's Letter Collections*, pp. 219–20; Agnieszka Jakuboszczak, 'Sortir de l'ombre: le cercle des correspondants des femmes de la famille Działyński au XVIIIe siècle', in François Cadillon, Michel Figeac and Caroline Le Mao (eds), *La Correspondance et la construction des identités en Europe Centrale (1648–1848)* (Paris: Champion, 2013), pp. 301–9; and Tilda Maria Forselius, 'The body and the decent inner self: Letters by Julie Björckegren, wife of a Swedish mayor, 1789–91', *Women's Writing*, 13(1) (2006), 103–18 (p. 123). See also, on a family of Bohemian noblewomen, Ivo Cerman, 'Sidi et Louise: Correspondance de trois générations de femmes nobles à la fin du XVIIIe siècle', *Women's Writing*, 13(1) (2006), 311–16.

<sup>26</sup> Elisa Novi Chavarria, *Sacro, pubblico e privato: donne nei secoli XV–XVIII* (Napoli: Guida, 2009), pp. 188–202.

mail left Paris six days a week for major centres such as Lyon, Geneva and Rouen, serving smaller places along each route, and by 1788 more than 1,300 French towns had regular postal services. In England, more than 200 towns had post offices by the 1750s, and nearly 900 by 1800. As roads improved, again particularly in Western Europe, so did delivery speeds. The service from Paris to Strasbourg took six days in the mid-eighteenth century, but half that long by 1789. International services followed the same pattern. A service between Paris and London was in place by 1630, and regular mail delivery to America by 1693. Precise departure times were published so that people knew when they had to hand in their letters.<sup>27</sup>

Users often complained about letters being lost or delayed, and some made copies of letters or even sent the same letter by different routes. Yet, by the late seventeenth century, complaints about the post had become a convention of letter-writing, and the little hard evidence we have suggests that in reality, services steadily became more reliable. Roger Duchêne has estimated that of some 900 letters sent by Madame de Sévigné to her daughter in the 1670s and 1680s, around ten were mislaid by the post.<sup>28</sup>

Admittedly, the cost remained high enough to discourage most working women from sending frequent letters, even if they were educated and found time to write. In France in 1704, a basic letter between Paris and Lyon cost 6 sous, just under a day's pay for a female labourer. The fee was similar in England, but the German post was more expensive: in 1760, a letter from Frankfurt to Berlin cost 6 Groschen, perhaps a week's earnings for a female cook.<sup>29</sup> It was usually the recipient who paid for the letter, so people requested permission to begin a correspondence. In 1694, the Huguenot Suzanne Berthe, a refugee in the Netherlands, apologised for imposing the expense of a letter on her son in Paris, since 'when one has nothing necessary to say, the carriage of letters is very costly'. But not having heard from him,

27 Jay Caplan, *Postal Culture in Europe, 1500–1800* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2016), pp. 28–43; *Almanach royal* (Paris: Le Breton, 1755), pp. 395–410; *Almanach royal* (Paris: Le Breton, 1788), pp. 663–87; Jean-Marc Offner, 'Les bureaux de poste en France', *Flux*, 38 (1999), 79–83 (p. 79); Whyman, *The Pen and the People*, pp. 46–58; and Bannet, *Empire of Letters*, p. 9.

28 Roger Duchêne, 'Poste et création littéraire: le cas des lettres de Mme de Sévigné', *Actes du 120e Congrès national des sociétés historiques et scientifiques, Section histoire moderne et contemporaine* (Paris: Editions du CTHS, 1997), pp. 111–20 (p. 113).

29 Leon Bernard, *The Emerging City: Paris in the Age of Louis XIV* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1970), p. 73; and Robert Vellusig, *Schriftliche Gespräche. Briefkultur im 18. Jahrhundert* (Vienna, Cologne and Weimar: Böhlau, 2000), p. 56 note 1. On costs in general, see Caplan, *Postal Culture*, pp. 64–72.

she feared he had caught smallpox.<sup>30</sup> The wealthy and the middle classes, however, could easily afford postage, and while the cost remained stable through the eighteenth century, the incomes of many of the social elites and of the 'middling sort' rose.

A further significant development was the introduction of cheap, flat-rate postal systems within the larger cities, anticipating the national systems of the nineteenth century. A short-lived service began in Paris in 1653, but London's Penny Post was far more successful, beginning in 1683 and covering most towns and villages within 10 miles (16 kilometres) of the city. With up to ten deliveries a day, it became possible to write to someone and get a reply the same day. A flat-rate internal post was reintroduced in Paris in 1759.<sup>31</sup> These systems were imitated by many other European towns in the second half of the eighteenth century. They were cheap, easy to use and anonymous, since letters could be dropped directly into the postboxes. Postage was paid by the sender, so letters could be sent without prior permission. These services could be used by a wider range of women than even the ordinary post.

Mail services made it easier to send letters, but they also helped to change the nature of letters. In a sense, as a number of scholars have argued, they made the informal personal letter possible. Regular correspondence meant that each letter became less of a special production, less of an event, and this encouraged more informal writing styles. One wrote, as Madame de Sévigné put it, 'without making a deal of it'.<sup>32</sup> This potentially affected the content of letters, too, since infrequent, formal letters were likely to focus on major events, and were often written to inform people of a birth, a marriage or a death. Frequently exchanged letters, on the other hand, were filled with everyday news, gossip and fleeting thoughts. Joan DeJean has shown how, in Paris, the introduction of the cheap intra-city post in 1653 led the writer Madeleine de Scudéry and her circle to engage in a series of playful writing experiments. She also notes the way that the precise schedule of the post led writers to cut their letters short, producing 'speed-driven' letters,

30 Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris, MS 10500, fol. 120 recto.

31 Whyman, *The Pen and the People*, p. 4; and Alexis Belloc, *Les Postes françaises: recherches historiques sur leur origine, leur développement, leur législation* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1886), pp. 197–200.

32 'Sans en faire une affaire': quoted in Roger Duchêne, 'La lettre: genre masculin et pratique féminine', in Christine Planté (ed.), *L'épistolaire, un genre féminin?* (Paris: Champion, 1998), pp. 27–50 (p. 36); Duchêne, 'Poste et création littéraire'; James How, *Epistolary Spaces: English Letter-writing from the Foundation of the Post Office to Richardson's Clarissa* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 1–7; Roland Racevskis, *Time and Ways of Knowing under Louis XIV: Molière, Sévigné, Lafayette* (Lewisburg PA and London: Bucknell University Press, 2003), pp. 115–17; and Anderson and Ehrenpreis, 'The familiar letter', pp. 269–70.

less carefully drafted.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the simple fact of correspondence, of regular exchange, was itself important in reshaping the meaning of personal letters. It indicated that the sender was thinking of the recipient and wished to stay in touch, while also creating an obligation of reciprocity. Regular exchanges enabled a relationship to develop through the correspondence, even to assume a form that was different from the face-to-face one between the writers. Long correspondence in itself encouraged an impression of familiarity.

For women, the post offered far easier access to a world of letters that was hitherto considered male, a world where men made the rules, and where women were for the most part occasional intruders. For those who took up letter-writing, more frequent communication in turn increased familiarity with the pen and with the letter form, giving women greater confidence.

### Family Letters: Mothers and Children

Family letters were the form of familiar letter most commonly sent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is hardly surprising, since kinship networks were at the heart of European social, economic and political organisation. They determined individual identities and reputations, and were vital for the maintenance of family fortunes. Women were particularly dependent on family ties, since in most places they had limited inheritance rights, and very few had opportunities to earn their own living. They were also less mobile than men, and this could lead to greater social isolation, since they were less likely to be engaged in business or in public life. Growing access to letter-writing therefore provided opportunities to keep in touch with family members whom women could not easily visit, to remind better-off relatives of their existence, and on occasion to seek advice, solace or money. Susan Whyman has shown the way that single women, particularly in their older years, used letters to cultivate family contacts in order to survive.<sup>34</sup>

For mothers, heavily invested as they were in the future of their children, keeping in touch with adult sons and daughters was of vital importance. Most young men left home to pursue careers, sometimes at quite an early age, and those in military or administrative professions were required to be mobile. Later, they formed their own households. Most daughters, too, left

33 Joan DeJean, '(Love) Letters: Madeleine de Scudéry and the Epistolary Impulse', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 22(3) (2010), 399–414.

34 Whyman, 'Gentle companions'.



their parents when they married, again often very young. As noted earlier, new political and social conditions often took them far away, making regular visits difficult. Yet they remained part of the dynasty, and their advancement was a central concern. Their success advantaged the entire kinship network, while failure – and even worse, dishonour – reflected badly on the whole family, even when they were independent adults. So, whatever the nature of a woman's personal relationship with her children – some were close and others more distant – she therefore tried to guide them, and even to maintain a degree of control. Until postal services were readily available and female literacy became widespread, only the most privileged women had been able to keep in touch by letter, but this now became feasible for many mothers. While a lot of letters were driven by these practical necessities, access to letter-writing offered not only a new way to maintain contact, but an opportunity to develop relationships through the creation of epistolary personas that were sometimes different from face-to-face ones.

Like other family letters, those between mothers and adult children were very diverse in form, content and style. Some were overtly affectionate, like the Countess of Downe's 1679 letter to her daughter Lady Frances North, studied by Diana Barnes:

Dear harte,

I cannot expres how glead I am that you fonde [found] my Deere childe so well, and came safle [safely] to yo<sup>r</sup> owne hows, my affectinate services to my sonne I have sent him to cheas [two cheeses] ... my cousen Anne Penpiston was marred Upon thousday last to the man that yo<sup>r</sup> sister Bett Lafte [laughed] at, and M<sup>r</sup> Cheverell is to have his mistres w<sup>th</sup> 5 thousand pounce I am like to haue a fine nabour, I wesh shee may be as good as his frest wife was, Deare now I haue tould you of ~~your~~ ouer wednige [wedding], I must ende w<sup>th</sup> asad relacion, of poore Sr Edward Doole how dide [who died] sudenly as he was ridige abroad [ink blot] carried dead to his owne hous, w<sup>ch</sup> was [ink blot] afflektion to his Lady and his poore [ink blot] [children] pray god prepare ous all for what shall [f]ale us and bles you and your[s] w<sup>th</sup> all health and hapines w<sup>ch</sup>/

is the Dayly prayers of her that is unfanedly  
yo<sup>r</sup> moste affectinate  
mother, whiles I breath  
Downe

my services  
to yo<sup>r</sup> good  
Compiny my Neis and her

Brothers, ffinny sendes her affecttinate services to my sonn and you,<sup>and</sup>  
 her services to my Neis swete hart pray send mee a whit [white] Burssy  
 whod [hood] w<sup>th</sup> black spots if thay be woren, I will sende ~~you~~ you the  
 mony.<sup>35</sup>

This letter was written quickly, almost carelessly, as the ink blots and crossings-out testify. The opening and closing formulae are affectionate, the tone chatty. It contains no urgent news or requests, and Downe's purpose is simply to keep in touch with her daughter. This was a key function of the familiar letter. We must remember, though, that the extreme informality of this letter was authorised by maternal status: in all social relationships of this period, the person of higher standing was permitted to be more familiar than the one of lower rank, and daughters wrote to their mothers in a more respectful vein.

Many maternal letters from this period assert authority more directly than does this one. They 'perform motherhood' according to the conventions of their day, offering advice and employing various gendered rhetorical devices designed to win compliance. Mothers generally could not demand submission in the way that fathers could, and the seventeenth-century women studied by Jennifer Heller often combined expressions of maternal love with an emphasis on the religiously sanctioned duty of obedience owed by children. The letters of Brilliana Harley to her son, often mentioned by historians of this period, are restrained and controlled in language and tone, the maternal voice rooted in age, experience and family status.<sup>36</sup>

The most famous maternal letters from this period are those of Madame de Sévigné. Like the letters of Downe and Harley, they were made possible by the new norms of aristocratic women's education, but they particularly illustrate the impact of a reliable and regular postal service. Widowed at the age of twenty-five, Sévigné lived mainly in Paris. She managed her own

35 Diana G. Barnes, 'Emotional debris in early modern letters', in Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway and Sarah Randles (eds), *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 114–32 (p. 120). The letter is reproduced at pp. 120–1, but the transcription is ours.

36 Jennifer Heller, *The Mother's Legacy in Early Modern England* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2011), p. 47. Examples from the 1620s–40s are in Gemma Allen, 'Women as counsellors in sixteenth-century England', in Daybell and Gordon (eds), *Women and Epistolary Agency*, pp. 81–95 (pp. 89–90); Raymond Anselment, 'Katherine Paston and Brilliana Harley: Maternal letters and the genre of mother's advice', *Studies in Philology*, 101(4) (2004), 431–54; and Johanna Harris, "'Be plyeabell to all good counsell": Lady Brilliana Harley's advice letter to her son', in Daybell and Gordon (eds), *Women and Epistolary Agency*, pp. 149–69.

finances and enjoyed the sociable life of a French aristocratic woman, centred on mutual visits and promenades, polite letters, and philanthropy. She arranged a good marriage for her daughter Françoise-Marguerite, but soon after the wedding her new son-in-law was appointed lieutenant-governor of Provence and moved his household to the south of France. For much of the next decade Sévigné wrote twice a week, either from Paris or from Brittany. Françoise-Marguerite replied almost as frequently, although her letters have not survived.

Sévigné used the correspondence to recast her relationship with her daughter and, in the process, to reshape her own life and her sense of self. Her letters are famous as expressions of a maternal tenderness that is more overt than in most similar early modern writing. Although to modern readers they appear quite formal, since Sévigné addresses her daughter as 'Madame' and '*vous*' (rather than using the informal '*tu*'), they are carefully constructed so as to appear spontaneous and 'natural', explicitly rejecting the conventions of scribal production and the literary pretensions to which only male authors could aspire: 'My letters are very careless, but that is my style.' This, however, she presented as a virtue: 'My style is so careless that one must have a natural and cultivated wit in order to comprehend it', she wrote, succinctly combining a claim of spontaneity with feminine self-deprecation, while offering an elegant compliment to Françoise-Marguerite, who of course was able to appreciate her letters.<sup>37</sup> The explicit rejection of artificiality served to emphasise the sincerity of her writing and to reinforce the bond with her daughter.<sup>38</sup>

Sévigné, like many writers, referred repeatedly to the classical ideal of the personal letter as a conversation: 'Your letters are conversations; I speak to you, and you reply to me'.<sup>39</sup> In a postscript addressed to her grandchildren, in 1679, she explains: 'You should write to me and tell me a thousand things, but naturally, and without making a fuss about it, and tell me how your dear step-mother is; that will accustom you to write easily, as we do'.<sup>40</sup> This is how Sévigné's own letters appear. While many do begin conventionally, by referring to a letter received, others open without preamble: 'My poor aunt received the last sacraments yesterday; never did you see such a

37 Madame de Sévigné, *Correspondance*, ed. by Roger Duchêne, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1972–8), letter 204, 27 September [1671], 2: 355. Letter 228, 23 December 1671, 1: 398. All quotations are from this edition, unless otherwise indicated.

38 Michèle Longino Farrell, *Performing Motherhood: The Sévigné Correspondence* (Hanover NH and London: University Press of New England, 1991), p. 15.

39 Letter 410, 5 August 1675, 2: 39.

40 Letter 696, 6 October 1679, 2: 698.

sad spectacle'. Another begins simply: 'I slept badly'.<sup>41</sup> The letters contain rhetorical questions and exclamations like '*Eh bien!*' ('Ah well!'), literary devices designed to create the so-called 'naturalness' of conversation, but also to foster a relationship of familiarity, sincerity and mutual openness with her daughter.

Sévigné's letters, particularly those written soon after her daughter's departure, go well beyond the conventions of the familiar letter in their expressions of maternal love. The first one begins:

My pain would be very unremarkable if I could describe it to you; I will therefore not even attempt to do so. Search as I may for my beloved daughter, I can no longer find her, and every step she takes removes her still farther from me.<sup>42</sup>

Some time later, after returning to her estate in Brittany, she writes:

I have not ceased thinking of you since I arrived, I cannot contain my feelings ... But good God, where have I not seen you here. There is nowhere, no place, not in the house, nor in the church, nor in the countryside, nor in the garden, where I have not seen you ... I can see you; you are there for me. I think and rethink everything. My head and my spirit grow hollow, but wander as I might, search as I might, that dear child whom I love with such passion is two hundred leagues from me, I no longer have her. On that, I cry without being able to stop myself.<sup>43</sup>

Some early eighteenth-century readers of Sévigné's letters found them too effusive: for one writer, in 1735, they 'so much resemble passion that one thinks it is a lover writing to his Mistress'.<sup>44</sup> 'It is not against the rules', deemed another reader, 'but against modern usage'.<sup>45</sup> Yet it was partly for this reason that the letters became so popular later in that century, when overt sentimentality became fashionable.

Nonetheless, the limited evidence we have about the face-to-face relationship between the two women reveals the carefully constructed nature of the epistolary exchange. Sévigné almost certainly spent little time with her

41 Letter 287, 27 June [1672], 1: 542; Letter 681, [spring–summer 1679], 2: 665.

42 Letter 131, 6 February [1671], 1: 149.

43 Letter 149, 24 March [1671], 1: 199.

44 Quoted in Roger Duchêne, 'Introduction', in Sévigné, *Correspondance*, 1: viii.

45 See Duchêne, *Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d'amour*, p. 251, for this and further examples.

daughter, whose childhood – as was conventional in French noble families – was largely lived among servants and in convents. When together, the two seem to have had an intermittently conflictual relationship, with little overt affection.<sup>46</sup> While none of this means that love was absent, it makes the effusive expressions in the letters somewhat surprising. Françoise-Marguerite herself apparently commented on this. In February 1671, her mother sent her a diamond ‘to remind you of me and of the excessive tenderness that I have for you, and of the many ways in which I would like to show it to you on every occasion, *whatever you might think on that subject*’ (emphasis added).<sup>47</sup> The following month, Sévigné responds to a further reproach, without denying its validity:

You say that you are much comforted that I am persuaded of your love, and that this is a happiness that you did not have when we were together. Alas! my dear, without wishing to reproach you in turn, the fault lay not on my side alone. What inestimable value have I not always placed on the slightest indication of your affection! Have I ever let one pass without being delighted? But equally, how often have I not been inconsolable when I sensed just the opposite!<sup>48</sup>

The letters also reveal further fallings-out, mainly over Françoise-Marguerite's refusal to spend more time with her mother. In 1671, Sévigné complains that her daughter can't wait to leave her and go home. Two years later, after visiting Provence, she writes: ‘I always hoped to bring you back with me; you know with what arguments and with what abruptness you cut me short’.<sup>49</sup> She is outraged when someone tells her, during her daughter's short visit to Paris in 1677, ‘you are killing each other, the two of you, you must part’.<sup>50</sup>

Nowhere is the difference between the face-to-face and the epistolary relationship clearer than in May 1678, when Sévigné, despite endless protestations that letters are a poor substitute for real conversation, chooses to write to Françoise-Marguerite even when they are together:

46 Frances Mossiker, *Madame de Sévigné: A Life and Letters* (New York: Knopf, 1983), pp. 83, 192.

47 Letter 130 [2 February 1671], 1: 149.

48 Letter 146, 18 March [1671], 1: 187.

49 Letter 127, to Comte de Grignan, 16 January [1671], 1: 145–6. Letter 328, 10 October 1673, 1: 596. For another example, see Letter 357, 28 December 1673, 1: 649. The same issue arises repeatedly across the 1670s: Duchêne, *Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d'amour*, pp. 175–84.

50 ‘Vous vous faites mourir toutes deux, il faut vous séparer’: quoted in Duchêne, *Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d'amour*, p. 188.

My letters are more eloquent than I am; I explain myself poorly in speech, when my heart is so touched ... I fear your anger. I have never been able to suffer it; I am struck dumb. If you believe me a silly woman, you are right; I always am when I am with you, because I am always concerned about you. I beg you, do not reply to all this; say nothing, and simply reflect for a few moments on all that I have just said to you.<sup>51</sup>

But the reason for writing, rather than speaking, is not simply timidity. 'I hold the advantage when I write to you', she says in another letter; 'you do not answer me, and I take my arguments as far as I wish'.<sup>52</sup> Things can be written in a letter that cannot be said, either because of social convention or because they might lead to conflict and be interrupted. But the letter form also permits Sévigné to use her extraordinary literary skills to best effect, as the quotation above, from May 1678, illustrates. She uses self-denigration to take the sting out of her initial accusation that Françoise-Marguerite is to blame because of her bad temper, before moving seamlessly to emotional blackmail: this pitiable mother cares only for her daughter, and that is why she is daring to offer such unwelcome counsel.

There is no reason to doubt Sévigné's expressions of maternal love. At the same time, her letters were very clearly a way of exerting control. Both her desire to feel needed and her maternal authority – and hence her very sense of who she was – were challenged by Françoise-Marguerite's refusal to go along with her wishes. The younger woman's departure from Paris provoked a crisis for Sévigné. She had invested a great deal in procuring a good marriage for her daughter, one that would cement her own position in a society where she found herself to some degree marginalised. All of Sévigné's biographers agree that she loved being at the centre of things. While she had access to the royal court and was on visiting terms with many leading aristocratic women, her income was modest by their standards, and her social origins in the minor nobility kept her on the fringes of this world. Her own cousin wrote that 'she loves flattery, she loves to be loved, and to this end she sows in order to reap, she bestows praise in order to receive it'.<sup>53</sup> Her daughter's marriage to a high-ranking nobleman seemed to offer Sévigné new occasions to shine, and she had even found a large townhouse for the

51 Letter 642 [May 1678], 2: 607. She again writes to her daughter while in the same house in 1679: Letters 681–2, 2: 665–9 [n.d., spring or summer 1679].

52 Letter 579, 14 June [1677], 2: 464. For slightly divergent readings of this letter, see Farrell, *Performing Motherhood*, p. 101; and Duchêne, *Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d'amour*, pp. 170–3.

53 Quoted in Duchêne, *Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d'amour*, p. 131. See also pp. 140–54 on her milieu.

three of them to share. But the couple's departure for Provence ruined her plans. Furthermore, with Françoise-Marguerite creating her own household elsewhere, and taking on a new persona independent of her mother, Sévigné risked losing her role as patron and mentor to this young woman, who up until then had been dependent on her. She complained, indeed, that her daughter was casting her aside: 'your leaving me so much to myself wounds my heart'.<sup>54</sup> She insists on the injustice of this by emphasising the depth of her own love for her daughter, a strategy repeated endlessly throughout the correspondence.

Sévigné's immense investment in her letters can thus be understood as an effort to maintain a central role in her daughter's life, one that added meaning to her own existence. Françoise-Marguerite, for her part – to judge from the refracted reflection we glimpse in her mother's correspondence – seems to have undertaken a similar exercise of self-representation that was aligned with contemporary ideals of the dutiful daughter and faithful wife. For her, the exchange was no doubt important at the outset because she found herself in provincial exile, moving in very different social circles, with a new baby and a husband some fourteen years her senior. Roger Duchêne believes that, in the end, this epistolary pact, the endlessly repeated mutual expressions of love, succeeded in transforming the two women's real relationship.<sup>55</sup> Sévigné's later letters, certainly, have a different tone: more positive and less narcissistic. Arguably, the epistolary persona she adopted influenced her own self-perception, persuading herself (as well as her daughter) that she was the tender mother she so frequently wrote about.

Sévigné's letters reveal much about the new possibilities raised by the familiar letter. In presenting them as written conversation, she drew on the wittiness, the elegance and the politeness of salon exchanges to create epistles that were entertaining and lively. Her exceptional control of language and tone enabled her to reproach without giving offence, and to conceal the artifices she was employing. She exploited the familiar letter's convention of carefully constructed informality in order to reshape her relationship with her daughter, establishing an emotional bond that maintained her maternal position and gave greater meaning to her own life. In the process, she went well beyond late seventeenth-century norms in her construction of sentimental motherhood and her effusive expressions of love.

Sévigné's letters – 'this precious collection' Madame Necker called them in the 1780s – offered a model to later generations of women letter-writers.

54 Quoted and analysed in Duchêne, *Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d'amour*, pp. 190–1.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 259–64.

When the first of them were published in 1725, they were widely commended for their wit and their familiar yet polished style, although, ironically, they were 'corrected' by their male editor, to make them better conform to eighteenth-century taste.<sup>56</sup> They remained popular with generations of European women. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu read them as soon as they came out, and they greatly influenced the letter-writing of the future empress Catherine the Great of Russia. The salon hostess Madame du Deffand attempted to imitate Sévigné's letters, while Marie-Jeanne Phlipon (the future Madame Roland) devoured them, and in her memoirs claimed that they 'would fix my taste' for the rest of her life. In 1783, the German writer Sophie von La Roche suggested to her female readers that letter collections were more wholesome than fiction, especially that of Sévigné, 'whom we all enjoy reading so much'.<sup>57</sup> Sévigné's letters may also have appealed to some women because her separation from her daughter was a very common situation. Without the capacity to send frequent letters, the lives of mothers and children diverged, perhaps irrevocably.

Of course, as a woman with independent means, Sévigné had no economic motive for corresponding with her daughter. That was not the case for a great many other mothers, who found themselves alone as they grew older, or who might become dependent on their adult children. The letters written by Sarah Farrer (born c. 1738) to her son offer a late eighteenth-century example of the way a mother's letters, even when far less accomplished than those of Sévigné, nevertheless functioned to maintain family ties, provide support and advice, and pursue the economic interests of mother and son alike.<sup>58</sup> Sarah was an English gentrywoman whose only surviving child, Josias, left home at the age of eighteen, in 1787, to join an army regiment in Germany. When the letters began, Sarah was forty-nine and living in central London. She later moved to Boulogne on the French coast, apparently to be closer to her son, and was still there when the surviving letters end in May of 1791. She lived alone, her estranged husband, also named Josias

56 Mme Necker, quoted in Marie-France Silver and Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski (eds), *Femmes en toutes lettres: les épistolaires du XVIIIe siècle*, in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000), p. 2. Duchêne, 'La lettre', p. 36.

57 Lowenthal, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, p. 2; and Rubin-Detlev, *The Epistolary Art of Catherine the Great*, p. 36. For Deffand, see Joan Hinde Stewart, *The Enlightenment of Age: Women, Letters and Growing Old in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010), pp. 131–2. Charles Aimé Dauban (ed.), *Mémoires de Madame Roland* (Paris: H. Plon, 1864), p. 51. Von La Roche, quoted in Katherine Astbury, 'Recommended Reading for Women in Germany, France and England 1782–84', in David Bickerton and Judith Proud (eds), *The Transmission of Culture in Western Europe, 1750–1850* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 21–36 (p. 25).

58 The manuscript letters are in Archives Nationales, Paris, T740.



Farrer, having moved to Paris where he had various business ventures and a mistress; their son later went to live with him there. Sarah's husband was a prominent member of the gentry in Kent but a notorious spendthrift, so their circumstances were reduced. He allocated her an allowance of 50 pounds a year, which she described as a 'pittance', but which enabled her to lead a leisured if secluded life.

The relationship between mother and son, especially the eldest, was psychologically complicated. The boy owed his mother filial obedience, but in later years was expected to develop a manly independence and eventually assume patriarchal responsibility for the family.<sup>59</sup> Sarah Farrer was therefore negotiating a shifting relationship with her son. As an abandoned wife, she had no property and could offer her son no material support, but she tried to guide him and at the same time to ensure her own economic future. Of course, we cannot reduce family relationships to property or see potential conflict as inevitable. Love, continuing respect and loyalty could remove or mitigate any tensions, and in this case letters played a crucial role in sustaining their relationship.

Sarah's letters were intended to persuade, to amuse and to inform, and were carefully crafted with an eye to her son's likely reaction. When he was living with his father in Paris, she was aware that they might be read by her estranged husband, and she occasionally admitted to leaving things out for that reason. She wrote to Josias roughly once a month, occasionally more often. Although his letters have not survived, he clearly wrote far less frequently, and she repeatedly asked him to reply, generally resorting to emotional blackmail. His letters, she complains frequently, 'are my only consolation'. His silence led her to 'a thousand disagreeable conjectures', and 'caused me much pain'. She occasionally appealed to his sense of duty as a son, though only once openly accused him of failing to display 'that respect and attention I merit from you as an affectionate mother' (7 October 1788).

For Josias, letters to his mother were clearly a low priority. Perhaps he really was too busy soldiering, although he found time to court and marry a French girl. He appears, from the questions she asked repeatedly, to have confided in his mother very little, and there is no evidence he took any of her advice. Yet he did maintain the correspondence and occasionally wrote quite fulsome letters. Since Sarah had no property, he was not doing this for any material gain, and there are signs of genuine attachment to his mother. In 1789, when his young wife Josephine was pregnant with their

59 See Barbara J. Harris, 'Property, power, and personal relations: Elite mothers and sons in Yorkist and early Tudor England', *Signs*, 15 (1990), 606–32.

first child, he brought her to stay with Sarah for several months, and the baby was born there. Later, he mailed Sarah a lock of the child's hair, and on another occasion sent his mother a present of buttons for her coat. Her letters were among his few possessions when he was arrested in Paris during the French Revolution.

It nevertheless seems clear that Sarah, like Sévigné, had a vastly greater investment in the epistolary relationship than her child did. Every letter reiterated, in various ways, her affection for Josias, reminding him how much she missed him. She usually opened with a reference to his last letter, or more often to the absence of one, expressing either joy or consternation. His advancement is a core concern of the letters, many of which contain career advice, almost always a suggestion that he write to or visit someone who might be useful to him, now or in the future: 'Believe me, my dear Jos, good connections ought to be a young man's first care in setting out in life' (29 February 1788). She several times urged him to return to England, where she believed he would find it easier to find a place, and referred him repeatedly to people who might help him. One man, for instance, had a brother who was close to the Prince of Wales and could find Josias a place in government (14 May 1790; 20 June 1790). She clearly had connections, knew how things worked, and kept her ear to the ground.

In other respects, however, Sarah was sparing with advice, often the core stuff of letters from parents to children. She offered Josias no strictures on his duties as husband and father, except when he and his pregnant wife travelled to England, and Sarah urged him not to leave the journey too late and to plan rest-stops along the way. A year after the birth of the child, she hoped he and his wife had been 'sage' and had avoided a second pregnancy. She twice suggested that the baby should be weaned, as prolonged feeding would be bad for Josephine's health (20 June 1790; 9 July 1790), but that was the only baby-care advice she offered. Otherwise, she once expressed concern about his debts, but in the entire surviving correspondence extended only two pieces of moral advice: when he mentioned he had won at gambling, she urged him to avoid such a dangerous pastime; and after a visitor told her that her son had borrowed money, she wrote that she was sure this could not be true and counselled him to 'always act as becomes a gentleman' (25 July 1788). Yet she quickly added that she needed to say no more because she had confidence in his good sense. It is striking that, unlike sixteenth and seventeenth-century mothers' letters, and indeed many eighteenth-century ones, Sarah's contain no reference to religious precepts and express no concerns about Josias's religious practice, even though he was a Protestant living in a predominantly Catholic country.

Compared with many eighteenth-century letters, Sarah Farrer's are limited in their range of subjects. She rarely mentioned her own health or that of others, and said little about her everyday life. There is nothing about her reading, even though her flowing hand and extensive vocabulary reflect a good education. There is little gossip and no discussion of politics, even though she clearly kept herself informed since she complained, when in Boulogne, that she never saw a paper, implying that she would normally read the English press (20 June 1790). Although the correspondence took place between 1787 and 1791, and Josias was in France, the revolution there was alluded to only twice: once indirectly, when Sarah commented on the 'most curious sight' of women mounting guard in Saint-Omer (18 November [1790]); and once when she asked her son, in mid-1790, if the disturbances in France had now ceased. English and other international politics are equally absent, except when they might directly affect Josias: rumours of war with Spain disturbed her because he, as a soldier, might become involved; and she told him about a general election in England because candidates soliciting votes might promise him a position (20 June 1790). But there is no gossip about the court or the king, and surprisingly little news about family or neighbours. A regular theme is the will of his great-uncle, 'your only expectation', and she urged Josias to be attentive to his rich relative. Friends were mentioned primarily when she felt they could be of service to him. One, referred to only as 'N.', 'is hurt you have not wrote to him' (9 July 1790).

These letters reveal a woman struggling to deal with her difficult material and emotional situation. Her husband had deserted her, and the only other relative with whom she mentions having direct, friendly contact was her sister-in-law. She had lost her status as a Kent gentrywoman, no longer had a household, and was forced to accept rigid financial constraints. She was probably lonely, and responded by creating an epistolary relationship with her geographically distant son, one that offered her hope and comfort. He was, she wrote, her 'only consolation, and hope, of happiness' (5 September [1790]). Her future economic well-being also depended partly on him. This is quite explicit after her husband's uncle died and she believed some of the money might come to her. She asked Josias to 'pray sacrifice an hour to your mothers [*sic*] future interest – you are all happy – I bless God – but consider me not so comfortable. I wish to form an Idea on my future Expectations' (1 December [1790]).

In her epistolary relationship with her son, Sarah presented herself as an eighteenth-century 'good mother'. She wanted a son 'who will ever prove affectionate and dutiful' (9 December 1787), and her letters are endlessly sentimental, always beginning with phrases like 'My dearest boy' and ending

with 'Your loving Mother' or 'Your affectionate Mother'. His absence made her, she wrote, 'very melancholy' – 'On you I fix all my remaining Part of felicity in this world' (14 May 1790). She repeatedly asked for his portrait, wrote on his nineteenth and twenty-first birthdays, and after his marriage always sent love and kisses to his wife and children. She presented herself as the self-sacrificing servant of her child, doing everything she could to advance his prospects, even at the expense of her own comfort and health. She was not well, she wrote late in 1790, but that didn't matter now he was provided for (18 November [1790]). 'I would rather suffer alone than make you a Partaker' (5 September [1790]).

While thus constructing herself as a good mother, Sarah was also the wronged wife, railing against her husband's injustice and brutality. Later, she more often fell into self-pity, as on 29 September 1790 when, on learning that Josias is to live with his father in Paris, she wrote, 'I'm the only unhappy one', 'extremely melancholy ... as I am quite alone'. There is no reason to doubt her feelings, but she could have concealed them. Instead, she referred to them repeatedly, consciously or unconsciously seeking to engage his sympathy.

Like all letters, these were performances, enactments of self, intended for a particular correspondent. They no doubt reflect at least some part of the way Sarah saw herself, drawing heavily on the social and literary model of the good eighteenth-century mother and wife. Her letters are nevertheless artful, resembling conversation in the way they move suddenly from one topic to another, though they have a clear underlying structure, since the most important things are always placed early in the letter, and are often repeated at the end.

As Sévigné and Farrer's letters both show, a century apart, maternal letters to adult children served to maintain and reconstruct relationships that were being transformed by distance and by social change. The younger generations of noble and middle-class families were likely to move farther from home than in earlier centuries, but women's greater access to letters, along with the new postal systems, enabled mothers to keep in touch more readily, and to adjust progressively to the growing independence of married daughters and of sons who were making their own way in the world. In the seventeenth century, when the demands of lineage required elite children to conform to dynastic strategies of advancement, the letters generally remained formal and attempted to maintain authority by emphasising duty and obedience, although this did not preclude expressions of affection. Increasingly, across the eighteenth century, such letters relied explicitly on emotional attachment. This was particularly important for widows and abandoned wives, who risked social isolation and poverty as they aged. The

nature of the familiar letter, with its relative informality and, increasingly, its overt expressions of sentiment, made it easier to maintain bonds of mutual affection, even where mother and child may not previously have been particularly close.

### Husbands, Brothers and Family Networks

The same evolution appears in letters between husbands and wives, where typically it was the man who was away on business and the woman who was left to look after the home. In the first half of the seventeenth century, this sort of correspondence remained relatively formal, in line with the gender expectations and the epistolary conventions of the day. Most elite women observed the norm of wifely subservience, and their letters tend to be very instrumental. Lady Conway, for instance, in the early 1650s, wrote long letters to other people, but those to her husband are short and are primarily concerned with household matters. She addresses him formulaically (since almost every letter uses precisely the same phrases) as 'Dearest Deare' and concludes 'I am eternally and entirely Yours'.<sup>60</sup>

The English gentrywoman Lady Brilliana Harley observed the same norms in writing to her husband from Herefordshire while he was attending Parliament in London in 1626, and again in the early 1640s. Like Margaret Paston in the fifteenth century, and many other gentrywomen across the early modern period, she was left to manage their estate and to protect their local family and political interests, but she rarely took any significant action without seeking her husband's instructions. Knowing that he was unaware of the local situation, she did offer counsel, while being careful not to appear presumptuous: 'I hope you will not be displeased if I tell you what I thinke'. The persona of the obedient wife was not confined to the letters, since Jacqueline Eales has noted that Lady Harley very rarely took action independently. She was capable of doing so, though, as clearly demonstrated by her defence of their house when it was besieged by royalist forces during the Civil War, and in the context of the war she sometimes gave her husband quite direct advice. Nor did her deference to him, or the twenty-year age difference between them, prevent her from reflecting, in a letter of 1626, that:

60 Sarah Hutton and Marjorie Hope Nicolson (eds), *The Conway Letters: The Correspondence of Anne, Viscountess Conway, Henry More, and their Friends 1642–1684*, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

I am so much pleased with this silent discoursing with you that as I spent part of the morning in this kinde of being with you, so nowe I begine the night with it, and in theas lines reseae the remembrance of my love of which you have not a part but all.

Years later she reminded him that ‘you are the comfort of my life’.<sup>61</sup>

Similar statements are to be found in some other seventeenth-century women’s letters to husbands, reminding us that their apparent formality did not preclude expressions of love, or make the exchanges less important in providing emotional support. Very occasionally, some women abandoned formality and wifely subordination altogether. As we saw in Chapter 2, Maria Thynne addressed her husband Thomas as ‘Mine own sweet Thomken’, and filled her letters with similarly cheeky phrases.<sup>62</sup> This was highly unusual, and would remain so even in the following century, but the example reminds us of the wide variety of the familiar letter within individual relationships.

By the mid-1700s, new epistolary conventions and changes in thinking about families were influencing the way women wrote. Expressing deference continued to be important when writing to fathers, husbands and family patriarchs, yet it coexisted with more frequent and overt expressions of affection. This does not mean that mutual affection was always present, just as formality did not exclude love, but as in other sorts of letters, growing informality offered women new rhetorical tools.

We can see this in the letters of Victoire Goyon de Matignon, Duchess of Fitz-James (1722–77), written to her soldier husband Charles, who was away on campaign in 1757. Unfortunately, his replies do not seem to have survived. The couple both belonged to very high-ranking, extremely wealthy French noble families, and the alliance was certainly an arranged one. Victoire was nineteen, Charles twenty-nine and already engaged in a military career. She was an heiress, and as one of the twelve ladies of honour of the French queen, had both employment and an independent income. Their children were raised, as was customary among the high nobility, by servants and tutors.<sup>63</sup>

Victoire, now aged thirty-five, masters the epistolary form and writes fluently. Her letters are mostly short and in their transmission of news

61 Jacqueline Eales, ‘Patriarchy, puritanism and politics: the letters of Lady Brilliana Harley (1598–1643)’, in Daybell (ed.), *Early Modern Women’s Letter-writing*, pp. 143–58 (pp. 150, 154, quotations pp. 149–50).

62 Alison Wall, ‘Deference and defiance in women’s letters of the Thynne family: the rhetoric of relationships’, in Daybell (ed.), *Early Modern Women’s Letter-writing*, p. 80.

63 Simon Surreaux, ‘Postface’, in Simon Surreaux (ed.), *Aimez-moi autant que je vous aime. Correspondances de la duchesse de Fitz-James, 1757–1771* (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2013), pp. 217–31.

are direct and matter of fact. They recount no witty anecdotes and do not strive for stylish elegance. She addresses her husband with the formal '*vous*'. Almost every letter reports succinctly on the health of some relative and on new appointments at court or in the Church. She tells Charles, again very briefly, what she has been doing, and conveys greetings from mutual friends. The children are rarely mentioned. She updates him, in a line or two, on the payment or collection of a debt, on legal matters, and on what action she has taken. A significant part of her correspondence is devoted to the Seven Years' War (1756–63) and to speculation on when Charles might be required to fight.

The short, rapidly written letters, and the frequency with which Victoire wrote – every two days on average – reflect her easy familiarity with the genre. She could take up her pen at odd moments, and had no trouble formulating her thoughts on paper. Once written, even daily letters could be sent immediately, thanks to frequent postal services. Yet for the most part, Victoire had no pressing business or political reason for writing. She was a capable manager of her and Charles's household and finances, and rarely sought advice. Her main purpose, in the letters, was to express her love for her husband, to console herself for his absence, and to solicit reassurance that he was safe. 'I have just arrived here', she wrote from Versailles in mid-1757, 'and know of nothing more agreeable to do here than to write to you. As I have not yet seen anyone, I have no news to send you' (4 June).

At the same time, these letters reveal Victoire adopting an epistolary persona that was, if not entirely unprecedented, becoming more common in the late eighteenth century: as her husband's intellectual equal. She unapologetically and confidently expresses her opinions, both aesthetic and political. An obituary, she tells him, is particularly good. She repeatedly expresses her scepticism about news she has heard or has read in the international press, and she is critical of the government for concealing news from the public (3 June). She even comments on military strategy, though she defers to his judgement as a soldier. She is never self-deprecating, and never suggests that she is moving beyond what a woman should say. On rare occasions, she apologises for things she has written: once for having rebuked her husband for failing to write immediately on his return from battle to tell her he was safe; although immediately after saying this, she again scolds him: 'If you had thought of me, you would have spared yourself a little more' (5 August). In another letter, she begs him to forgive her for expressing anxiety about the health of her father, whom she is obliged to leave in order to resume her duties at court: 'It is yet another thing increasing the torment I feel, that I could well do without' (3 June). These apologies

gesture towards the older epistolary convention of not discussing one's own feelings, yet the fact that she does share them with Charles is a reflection of the increasingly common idea of marriage as a partnership: 'It is a relief that I sometimes find necessary and that I can find only with you' (3 June). Writing to her husband as an equal is facilitated by her high rank, but it is also authorised by the new epistolary conventions of spontaneity and sentimentality.

Equally striking are the explicit and endlessly varied statements of love that end every letter: 'Adieu, keep well, beloved, but write to me, that is the only thing that can give me pleasure since I am unable to see you'; 'Adieu, I kiss you a thousand times with all my heart and love you I believe each day more and more'; 'love me as much as I love you' (16 May; 22 May; 1 June). These expressions seem at odds with the decorous and formal relationships maintained by the court nobility, but in the letters Victoire presents herself as a loving wife and casts her relationship with Charles as one founded on shared affection and mutual esteem. This persona, adopted by other women of the period, in turn permits her to offer support and advice. We have no way of knowing the actual behaviour of the couple when they were face to face, but such expressions of love, sometimes clearly influenced by novels, become common in husband–wife correspondence of the late eighteenth century.

The nature of gender roles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries meant that, as in nearly all the examples already discussed, elite women were better correspondents than the men they wrote to. This was partly because they often had more time, but also because, within families, letter-writing became largely a female role, internalised by many girls. In the middle-class professional Lamothe family of Bordeaux, in the 1750s and 1760s, much of the burden of letter-writing fell on the two daughters, Marie and Marianne. 'My brothers are very busy', replied Marie when her absent brother reproached the family for not writing to him more often.<sup>64</sup> Their mother was not good with the pen: she belonged, in this social milieu, to the first generation that possessed basic epistolary literacy, whereas the daughters wrote with ease. It was they, therefore, who ensured regular contact through gossip and

64 Library of Congress, Lamothe Family Letters, MMC-0793, 11 August 1760. On the Lamothe family, see Christine Adams, *A Taste for Comfort and Status: A Bourgeois Family in Eighteenth-Century France* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); and Christine Adams, 'Devoted companions or surrogate spouses? Sibling relations in eighteenth-century France', in Christine Adams, Jack R. Censer and Lisa Jane Graham (eds), *Visions and Revisions of Eighteenth-Century France* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 59–76.



affectionate letters when, at different moments, their four brothers went to study in Paris or Montpellier. Although their father could have written more frequently, the girls repeatedly acted as proxies for their parents, enabling him to maintain distance and patriarchal authority. In their letters, they construct him as an eighteenth-century 'good father', affectionate and wise, if occasionally severe. 'Always accept his advice most obediently, you know that it is good,' wrote Marie (1 December 1756). It also fell to the sisters to keep the peace, particularly with their mildly rebellious brother Victor.

The Lamothe sisters' letters to their brothers employ typical female strategies of self-deprecation and subordination. They repeatedly apologised for their poor writing and offered advice with caution: 'I always seek your permission to tell you what I think', wrote Marie in an early letter to Victor, 'receive my counsel as coming from a heart that loves you tenderly' (28 May 1757). The letters are absolutely conventional, too, in their self-representation as a perfect provincial bourgeois family: the parents are loving and wise, with equally loving and respectful children; they are thrifty and pious, the women appropriately modest in their behaviour and taste. Yet Marie's letters are fascinating for the way she slips between different feminine identities. When acting as an intermediary, she writes as a loving older sister. At other moments, despite her frequent self-deprecation, she adopts a confident phrasing more often found in maternal advice letters, offering firm counsel, particularly to her youngest brother, on financial and moral matters and on social niceties. In a letter of 11 August 1760, she assures Victor that:

Your action in going to Beaucaire seems to me entirely appropriate ... all the more so since your suspension of work while in this countryside will enable you to resume it with greater vigour. One must always be economical in one's spending, yet also not deprive oneself of honest and useful pleasures on the grounds that they are expensive.

At certain moments, she becomes overtly maternal. 'You occupy the place of beloved children in my heart', she assured her two younger brothers, Victor and Alexandre. 'I think of you in the same way as if I had brought you into the world. Look on me in the same way as a tender mother' (7 September 1762). At the same time, as Christine Adams points out, the sisters acted, in terms of practical and emotional support, and sometimes even rhetorically, as wives to their unmarried brothers. In 1763, Marie recounts a visit to Muscadet with her older brother, whom she refers to as 'my faithful husband' (*fidel époux*) (11 January 1763). She also uses the language of friendship, as was common

between married couples, frequently addressing Victor as 'my dear friend'. Like a good wife and mother, she presents herself as always putting the welfare of the other family members first. In return, as Adams observes, she and her sister demanded – and seem to have received – affection and respect from their brothers.<sup>65</sup> The letters served a vital role both in constructing family identity and in negotiating and reaffirming their relationships.

The Lamothe family was unusual in that only one of the seven siblings married, and he did so at an advanced age. Yet the roles they described in their letters are typical of many middle-class French and English families, including in their adoption of affectionate and informal relationships. The siblings used the familiar 'tu', as well as jocular forms of address: for example, Marie wrote to Victor as 'my dear doctor' (*mon cher médecin*), a term that reflects her pride in his professional standing, but also an easy familiarity. Their letters reflect the general shift in family correspondence, across the eighteenth century, towards growing informality and intensified sentimentality.

Like maternal letters, then, those between husbands and wives, between siblings, and in wider family networks, served to hold the family unit together, preventing members who were temporarily or permanently absent from losing touch. They conveyed news, offered advice and support, and sometimes helped to relieve the anguish of separation, expressing love more openly as epistolary conventions shifted. As in other contexts, they allowed women to say things that they might not otherwise have felt able to, particularly in expressing firm opinions and offering advice. Even in very conventional families like the Lamothe household, the letter form and the physical distance it bridged allowed women to define collective and personal identities, and sometimes to renegotiate relationships.

## Letters of Courtship

Nowhere are the new possibilities opened up by women's access to letter-writing clearer than in exchanges between couples who hoped to marry. In a world where families arranged alliances without necessarily consulting their daughters, letters gave some girls a chance to influence their future marriages and lives. Dorothy Osborne's correspondence with William Temple provides a wonderful example. Dorothy (1627–95) benefited from the improved education open to young women of the gentry class, and she used letters to circumvent her family's opposition to her choice of partner.

65 Adams, 'Devoted companions'; and Adams, *A Taste for Comfort and Status*, pp. 44–5.

Having met by chance, she and William began corresponding secretly at the end of 1652. Neither family supported the courtship, hers hoping for a wealthier alliance to help restore their finances, which were in a dire state after they had supported the royalist side in the English Civil War. William's family, for their part, saw no interest in a connection with the disgraced and impecunious Osbornes.<sup>66</sup> The couple therefore confided their letters to trusted friends and servants. Dorothy was then looking after her father, who was very ill, on his estate about 40 miles (64 kilometres) from London. Her brother Henry and his family also lived there, and when Henry proposed various suitors that he considered more suitable, she refused them all.

Only her side of the correspondence has survived, but it reveals the development of the relationship from initial attraction to complete devotion. The early letters are relatively formal, but within a few months Dorothy was signing herself 'Your faithful freind [*sic*] and Servant' (29 or 30 January 1653), a conventional but ambiguous phrase, since 'friend' could have a range of meanings. Indeed, in the body of the letter, she hints at something deeper. 'It is not kinde of you to desyre an increase of my freindship', she wrote:

that is to doubt it is not as great already as it can bee ... 'tis my misfortune indeed that it lyes not in my power to give you better Testimony's on't then words, otherwise I should soone convince you, that 'tis the best quality I have, and that when I owne a freindship, I meane soe perfect a one, as time can neither lessen nor increase.

Dorothy was soon overtly expressing her affection for William, and in March 1653 she even obliquely offers to marry him: 'if my name can doe you any service, I shall not scruple to trust you with that, since I make none to trust you with my heart' (17 or 18 March 1653). Occasionally, there is even a veiled eroticism. Having received a lock of William's hair, she tells him, 'I am combing and Curling and kissing this Lock all day, and dreaming ont all night' (18 or 19 February 1654). Such explicit statements were only possible because their relationship was above all an epistolary one, since even if her family had allowed him to visit, the requirements of politeness and decorum, especially with other people present, would have made such confidences impossible.<sup>67</sup>

66 Kenneth Parker, 'Introduction', in Kenneth Parker (ed.), *Letters to Sir William Temple* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987). References to her letters are from this edition.

67 Robbie Glen, 'Lines of affection: Dorothy Osborne and women's letter writing in the seventeenth century' (PhD, University of Pennsylvania, 2007), p. 59. On Osborne's rhetorical creation of intimacy, see pp. 56–68.

Dorothy created a close relationship with William by exploiting the full possibilities of the familiar letter. She deliberately rejected what she called 'Ceremony': 'Noe, for god sake, let there bee noe such thing between us' (14 April 1653). Her letters are consistently informal in tone and content: 'scribbled' is the term she uses to describe uncrafted prose. 'Scribble how you please soe you make your Letters longe enough You see I give you good Example', she writes at the end of one lengthy and chatty epistle (8 or 9 October 1653). Her letters often include asides and parentheses, frequently jump from one subject to another, and many end abruptly as she realises that she has filled the page. They are full of humour, offering entertaining pen-portraits of people she knows, and the couple share jokes that they return to later.

The informality appears spontaneous, yet Dorothy's prose is carefully crafted. The openings of the letters are often abrupt, deliberately without 'Ceremony', yet elegant and often amusing. Having had the flu, which had led her to suffer 'fitts', she begins her next letter: 'Sir, I doe not know that any body has frighted mee or beaten mee, or putt mee into more Passion then [than] what I usually carry aboute mee, but yesterday I missed my fitt, & am not without hope I shall heare noe more on't' (7 or 8 May 1653). Such openings deliberately reject formal salutations, but they also depart from conventions such as making reference to the last letter received. Dorothy often returned, without preamble, to a topic touched on in some previous letter, as if resuming a conversation, deliberately conforming to the personal letter form recommended by Cicero and Seneca: 'All Letters mee thinks should be free and Easy as ones discourse, not studdyed, as an Oration, nor made up of hard words like a Charme' (24 or 25 September 1653).

Dorothy deliberately used her letters to make clear to William the terms of their relationship.<sup>68</sup> She quite explicitly insisted that it should be a friendship, which she defined as 'consisting ... in a mutuel confidence' (8 or 9 January 1653), and

wholy Governde by Equality, and can there bee such a thing in it, as a distinction of Power. Noe sure, if wee are friends wee must both comande & both obay alike. Indeed a Mistresse and a Servant, soundes otherwise, but that is Ceremony and this is truth. (2 or 3 July 1653)

68 Diana Barnes, 'Gender, genre and canonicity: Dorothy Osborne's letters to Sir William Temple', in Paul Salzman (ed.), *Expanding the Canon of Early Modern Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 49–65.

Once again, she rejects 'Ceremony', mere appearances. True friendship, as indeed the theorists of her day insisted, was based on both equality and complete honesty: 'if you doe not take the same liberty of telling mee of all my faults, I shall not think you are my friend' (2 or 3 July 1653).

Not coincidentally, she insists that friendship is also the appropriate basis for marriage. Many of the letters discuss marriage, both giving examples of what she considers good or bad alliances by people she knows, and in more abstract terms. She is contemptuous of those who marry for money, yet espouses the view of her day that love is not an adequate basis for marriage, either: 'To marry for Love were noe reproachfull thing if wee did not see that of ten thousand couples that doe it, hardly one can be brought for an Example that it may bee done & not repented afterwards' (4 or 5 February 1654). 'For my part I think it were very convenient that all such as intend to marrye should be together in the same house some year's of probation and if in all that time they never disagreed they should then bee permitted to marry' (8 or 9 October 1653).

These radical reflections were a way of working through her own situation, caught as she was between her family's desire for her to marry someone wealthy and well connected, and her growing love for William Temple. She felt a strong responsibility to make a profitable alliance, and accepted that 'passion' was no basis for marriage. 'I could suffer', she confessed, 'that they should say I married where I had noe inclination, because my friends thought it fitt rather then I had run willfully to my owne Ruine in a persuit of a fond passion of my owne' (4 or 5 February 1654). Nevertheless, she asserted, 'sure the whole worlde could never perswade mee (unless a Parent comanded it) to marry one that I had noe Esteem for' (2 or 3 July 1653).

The letters reflect her internal conflict, and they also offer a space in which to discuss what to do. But they did more than that. When Dorothy and William finally agreed to marry, her repeated insistence that friendship was the only basis for a good marriage allowed her to set the terms. This too was radical. Describing a good relationship between husband and wife as 'friendship' was to become conventional in the later eighteenth century, but in the seventeenth, friendship was generally viewed (by theorists, at least) as male. Indeed, many writers denied the possibility of true friendship between men and women. However, a couple of years after Dorothy's correspondence with William, the cleric Jeremy Taylor, whose work she greatly admired, was to describe marriage as 'the Queen of friendships, in which there is a communication of all that can be communicated by friendship'.<sup>69</sup> Exactly

69 Jeremy Taylor, *A Discourse of the Nature, Offices and Measures of Friendship, with Rules of Concluding It* (London: R. Royston, 1657), p. 83. Osborne refers to Taylor in Letter 60, 4 or

how far Taylor saw that as going is not certain, but Dorothy quite clearly draws on a Ciceronian definition of male friendship in order to suggest a radical equality between husband and wife. She reconciles this with the wedding vows and with social convention by citing Taylor, who

say's there is a great advantage to be gained in resigning up on's will to the comande of another, because the same Action which in it selfe is wholly indifferent if done upon our owne Choice, becom's an Act of Duty and Religion if don in Obedience to the comande of any Person whome Nature the Law's or our selv's have given a power over us ... Let me practise this towards you as well as preach it to you, and I'le lay a wager you'le approve on't ... What is contentment must bee left to every perticuler person to Judge for themself's ... only you and I agree tis to been found by us in a True friend, a moderat fortune, and a retired life. (4 or 5 March 1654)

Dorothy Osborne's wonderful correspondence with William Temple, then, illustrates the new possibilities created by the informal personal letter. It allowed her to bypass family constraints and to develop her relationship with William to the point where she decided he was the person she wished to marry. The physical process of exchanging letters reassured her that she was not alone, but that she was supported both by him and by the female friends who assisted by passing on the letters. Without this outside support, her family's arguments would undoubtedly have swayed her. The letters also gave her a forum in which to express her doubts and opinions, without the constraints imposed by polite conversation, and they enabled William to argue back. In the end, they enabled her to choose her own marriage partner. At the same time, they permitted her to achieve a meeting of minds with William that the normal courtship process rendered well-nigh impossible. 'You cannot imagin', she confided to him, 'how often I have bin told that I had too much franchise in my humor and that 'twas a point of good breeding to disguise handsomly' (letter 44, 8 or 9 October 1653, p. 137). In the letters, by contrast, she was able to lay out clearly her views on what a marriage should be, how she was prepared to behave, and what she expected from him. He was undoubtedly an unusual man in accepting these terms, but without the equal voice that 'conversation at a distance' permitted, even she would not have found it easy to express them.

Dorothy Osborne was unusual, but she was not alone. Between 1665 and 1671, Lydia DuGard (1650–75), though initially in her teens, similarly used

<sup>5</sup> March 1654, p. 182.

letters to take control of her own life, actively courting her older cousin whom she eventually married. So too, from 1710–12, did Mary Pierrepont (1689–1762), better known by her married name of Wortley Montagu, who maintained a two-year epistolary courtship that she kept secret from her father. She too reflected on her own straight-talking character, using the correspondence to indicate the things on which she would not compromise, even if she presented them, in accordance with norms of female self-deprecation, as character flaws. But her forthrightness, she insisted, was something her future husband must learn to live with.<sup>70</sup>

Another highly educated eighteenth-century woman who did something similar, though in a less outspoken manner, was Luise Kulmus (1713–62), the highly educated daughter of a Danzig physician. Her very intellectual correspondence with the Leipzig professor Johann Christoph Gottsched gradually became one of courtship and she married him four years later. She, too, was an unconventional letter-writer, for the early 1730s, very informal in her style and unusually open about her emotions, yet her letters are carefully crafted, combining self-assertion and deference. She was only seventeen when the correspondence began, while Gottsched was thirteen years older and already had a reputation as a scholar.<sup>71</sup> She nevertheless regularly expressed her own opinions in her letters, and while she deferred to his views when he disagreed, it was often with a hint of irony. After reading Plutarch's biographies of the ancient Greek and Roman heroes, at Gottsched's suggestion, Luise wrote to say which of the figures she most admired. When he told her she was mistaken, she thanked him politely, adding that 'you have thereby brought me back from a false track that my youthful curiosity had taken me down' (19 July 1732). On another occasion he criticised her very informal style, to which she replied that, while she wished to be guided by him, she was writing a personal letter, not a work of literature, and had simply written from the fullness of her heart (20 March 1734). The persona she consistently retreated to, when challenged, was the unassailable one of feminine virtue and sincerity: these, she explained more than once, were her guiding principles. They justified both her deference to Gottsched's superior knowledge and her claims to

70 Taylor (ed.), *Cousins in Love*; Robert Halsband, 'Lady Mary Wortley Montagu as letter-writer', in Anderson, Daghlian and Ehrenpreis (eds), *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 51–4; and Lowenthal, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, pp. 35–51.

71 Inka Kording (ed.), *Luise Gottsched. 'Mit der Feder in der Hand': Briefe aus dem Jahren 1730–1762* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999), introduction (pp. 5–10). References in parentheses are to this edition.

think and write what she wanted.<sup>72</sup> If this was, in a sense, role-playing, she also used the letters for real self-examination, and to define the values to which she wanted to conform. Epistolary discussions of many ancient and modern literary and philosophical works, with her future husband, offered her many opportunities to reflect on social norms and on her own emotions.

Like Dorothy Osborne and others, once she had made up her mind about Gottsched, Luise began to use the language of friendship, addressing him as 'Dearest Friend' and 'My true friend' in place of 'Highly honoured Sir' (*Hochzuehrender Herr*), which she had used initially. 'I wish ever as your truest Friend to live and die', she wrote a little later (17 February 1734). As in much other correspondence of this period, overt expressions of love were rare, the metaphor of friendship providing a way of getting round the negative connotations of passion. Yet, as for Osborne, it allowed Luise to claim a degree of equality and mutuality within the relationship.

The strategies used by Luise were common ones. Susan Whyman has analysed the courtship letters between Elizabeth Woollat, an English domestic servant, and the wheelwright Jedediah Strutt, who corresponded for seven years before they could marry in 1755. Although Woollat was the dominant partner in the epistolary relationship, like Luise Kulmus, she took a deferential role, apologising for her own poor writing and thanking Strutt for his 'Goodness not to expose my Nonsense'. Like Kulmus and Gottsched, this couple included no overt expressions of love in their letters, using literary references as a proxy for their own sentiments. Woollat described one of Strutt's letters as 'a little romantick, (tho there is not a Juba, a portius, [or] a Marcus, yt [stir] ye passions in a more elagant manner)'. On another occasion, she referred to a literary lover who 'with all his puissant power [and] force pierc'd every tender & sympathetick nerve'. At the same time, like Kulmus and Mary Wortley Montagu, she used these courtship letters to paint a word portrait of herself, warning Strutt of 'some Peculiarities in my temper, which if unknown ... might have been the foundation of some uneasiness'. She frankly laid out her weaknesses and strengths, and confessed 'that indignities fire my resentment'.<sup>73</sup> We cannot know how accurate these portraits were, but once again the correspondence made it possible for a woman to speak her mind, and to present herself with a frankness that might

72 Detlef Döring, Franziska Menzel, Rüdiger Otto and Michael Schlott (eds), *Johann Christoph Gottsched: Briefwechsel*, 9 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007–15), vol. 1, p. 228 (12 July 1729), pp. 431–2 (20 September 1730).

73 Whyman, *The Pen and the People*, pp. 97–9.



not have been possible face to face. In writing about herself, furthermore, Woollat was stimulated to engage in a degree of self-scrutiny, but despite her verbal deference, she expected Strutt to accept her as she was.

The major change in letters of courtship from the seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, alongside far greater informality, was growing sentimentality. Whereas many earlier writers felt awkward about direct expressions of love, literary models of sensibility legitimised them. 'I kiss you a thousand times', wrote the young French noblewoman Rose Lalande de Luc to her cousin Pierre, around 1785. 'Good night, enjoy pleasant dreams. If, in them, you see how I love you, I hope you will know that it is true'. Rose dwelt at length on the pain of separation and filled her letters with tender entreaties, occasional reproaches, rhetorical questions and expostulations. 'I wager you have not thought of me. Oh! I am sure you have not', reads one letter, continued the very next day with pleas for forgiveness for doubting him.<sup>74</sup> And in this case of forbidden love – her father wanted a good match for his youngest daughter, while Pierre's financial position was fragile and his taste for drink well known – they clearly enjoyed the thrill of clandestinity, discussing the risks of discovery and devising means (including a simple code) to avoid it. The risks were real, but rehearsing them in the letters was part of acting out a romantic sensibility closely based on the plots of novels. The same literary influences offered models for occasional overt expressions of erotic longing, though here again hedged with the language of friendship. 'Allow me, my dear friend', wrote Rose on one occasion, 'to repeat to you a million times that the expressions in your letter have had a delicious effect on [my heart] ... I cannot say in how many different places the sensation caused by your letter passed, one after the other, leaving everywhere their tender impression'.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, references to the letter itself as a precious object, to be kissed and embraced, show it becoming a physical proxy for the loved one.

Courtship correspondence, more and more widespread across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, thus permitted some young women to influence the terms of the discussion and to negotiate elements of their future relationship. This was possible because letters allowed young women, normally required to be modest and subservient in face-to-face conversation, to express themselves without interruption. It gave them a way of stating preferences and, at the same time, of judging the personality of a

74 Isabelle Foucher (ed.), *Ecris-moi si tu m'aimes encore. Une correspondance amoureuse au XVIIIe siècle* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2010), p. 203. Most of these letters are not dated.

75 *Ibid.*, pp. 206–7.

potential husband who, in other circumstances, they might hardly meet before the marriage was decided. Of course, there were still constraints. Gender relationships were powerfully shaped by social expectations. The conventions of letter-writing to some degree dictated what could be said and how it could be expressed. Yet some women, as we have seen, used these letters to imagine something different. Over time, too, literary models and published examples of real love letters offered new ways of thinking about relationships, and of constructing them discursively. And as women from a wider range of social groups entered the world of letter-writing, these new possibilities extended beyond the social elites.

### Letters of Friendship

Today, 'friends' are primarily people to whom we are not related, and the relationship is a voluntary one, but in the early modern period the term primarily referred to close family members. It was also used of patrons and supporters, those who had one's interests and honour at heart but who were not necessarily emotionally close. In England, women of all social groups also often spoke of near neighbours as 'friends'. These usages testify to the geographically and socially circumscribed nature of women's everyday world in the early modern period.<sup>76</sup> They sought emotional support and disinterested advice, all that we associate with friends, primarily from people in their immediate vicinity.

Letters, often a response to growing mobility, transformed this situation. As writing and sending them became easier, more and more friendships were maintained at a distance. Initially, this continued to be most common between sisters and cousins, who now wrote more frequently and with less formality. But the ability to write letters widened the range of people to whom women could turn for material and emotional support, expanding the

<sup>76</sup> Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship and Patronage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); David Garrioch, 'From Christian friendship to secular sentimentality: Enlightenment re-evaluations', in Barbara Caine (ed.), *Friendship: A History* (London and Oakville CN: Equinox, 2009), pp. 165–214; Sara Mendelson, 'Neighbourhood as female community in the life of Anne Dormer', in Stephanie Tarbin and Susan Broomhall (eds), *Women, Identities and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 153–64 (p. 155); Amanda E. Herbert, *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity, and Friendship in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2014), esp. pp. 21–51; and Laura Gowing, 'The politics of women's friendships in early modern England', in Laura Gowing, Michael Hunter and Miri Rubin (eds), *Love, Friendship and Faith in Europe, 1300–1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 131–49.

circle well beyond family and neighbours. Many letters of friendship were in a sense a luxury, and the most intense and long-lasting correspondences of the eighteenth century typically involved single or widowed elite women with time on their hands. Madame du Deffand, for instance, began her long correspondence with man of letters Horace Walpole when she was sixty-eight: although she lived in Paris and had extensive social networks and plenty to occupy her time, her blindness and recurrent depression made her particularly keen to maintain contact with witty kindred spirits.<sup>77</sup> The fact that Walpole lived in London, combined with his avid interest in her intellectual and political world, provided her with the opportunity to dictate frequent long letters.

Like other types of letter, those between friends were extremely diverse in both style and content. The majority were quite conventional, influenced by the idea of the letter as conversation, and filled with society gossip and news about family and acquaintances, less frequently containing discussions of literature, theatre or politics. They generally had a pragmatic dimension, containing requests for favours and offering emotional support and companionship at a distance. Yet whatever their content, these exchanges operated, as Cynthia Lowenthal suggests, as 'a way of maintaining their community, cementing their solidarity, and subtly redefining their values'.<sup>78</sup> Letters of friendship facilitated discussion of topics that often could not be broached with other kinds of people, and that once again might not have been possible had the writers been face to face. They could, moreover, be easily discontinued, unlike family letters. For all these reasons, it was in extended correspondence with friends that women could experiment most freely, floating ideas, indulging fantasies and testing out new personas.

At the most basic level, letters permitted the maintenance of friendships between family members and neighbours who found themselves geographically separated, and who in earlier times would likely have lost touch or seen each other rarely. Anne Dormer was typical of provincial English gentry-woman in her limited social horizons, rarely venturing more than 10 miles (16 kilometres) from her country estate. Even this radius was reduced in the 1690s when she found herself all but imprisoned by her sometimes violent husband. She took solace in 'pationate kind letters' from a former neighbour who had moved away, but particularly in correspondence with her sister and

77 Nicole Mallet, 'Temps et contretemps dans la correspondance de Mme du Deffand avec Horace Walpole', in Silver and Swiderski (eds), *Femmes en toutes lettres*, pp. 59–61. MacArthur, *Extravagant Narratives*, pp. 117–85. Stewart, *The Enlightenment of Age*, p. 149.

78 Lowenthal, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, p. 3.

best friend Elizabeth Trumbull, married to an ambassador and living first in France and then in Constantinople. Letter-writing offered an outlet for her grief and frustration, and reduced her isolation. Trumbull's expressions of love and concern about her health made her feel that someone cared. Sharing thoughts on their reading provided comfort and a substitute for the affection Dormer was denied at home. 'When you read them my deare heart', she wrote, referring to theological works they both knew, 'think of me as I do of thee with more tenderness then [*sic*] is good for either of us at this distance to taulk of'. The letters – which she had to conceal from her husband – enabled her to unburden herself and tell someone about his outrageous behaviour, but also, remarkably, to try to explain it. As Leonie Hannan observes, Dormer turned misogynistic writing on its head by suggesting that 'when ever his reason stirrs he finds it so troublesome that his first care is to stifle it'.<sup>79</sup>

Gender norms made isolation a problem for many women, of different ages and social conditions. The French novelist Françoise de Graffigny (1695–1758) was rarely alone but often lonely after she left her native Lorraine in 1738. Despite her noble birth, she had few resources and moved between various households while seeking a suitable position. She ended up in Paris, where in due course she became a successful writer and society hostess, but before that often felt lost. Her long correspondence with her old friend François-Antoine Devaux was a lifeline. They exchanged, as we shall see, letters packed with gossip, mutual confidences and advice.

Correspondence helped young women of the social elites and middle classes to deal with a different kind of social isolation. Before marriage, they had little freedom of movement. Geneviève de Malboissière and her friend Adélaïde Méliand, for example, both lived in central Paris, but as noble girls in their late teens, they rarely spoke to anyone outside their immediate family. Geneviève went regularly to mass and occasionally to the theatre, heavily chaperoned. Although Adélaïde lived no more than a few streets away, only on Sunday morning were the two girls able to spend time together. For part of the year, they were completely separated when they went to their families' country estates. They therefore corresponded frequently, mostly using the city's newly created internal postal service, from 1761 until Geneviève's premature death from measles five years later,

79 Mendelson, 'Neighbourhood as female community', p. 156 and *passim*; Sara Mendelson and Mary O'Connor, "'Thy passionately loving sister and faithfull friend': Anne Dormer's letters to her sister Lady Trumbull", in N. J. Miller and N. Yavneh, *Sibling Relations and Gender in the Early Modern World* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), pp. 206–15; and Leonie Hannan, 'Women, letter-writing and the life of the mind in England, c. 1650–1750', *Literature and History*, 22(2) (2013), 1–19 (p. 9).

at the age of twenty. More than 300 of her letters survive, written during the many hours she spent alone in her room. As for Graffigny, letter-writing served to fill empty time with imagined companionship.<sup>80</sup>

Such isolation might also be a problem for middle-class girls. Marie-Jeanne (Manon) Phlipon (1754–93), the daughter of a prosperous engraver and an only child, lived in central Paris and rarely went out alone. She occupied her leisure time with embroidery, reading and writing, but spent one year in a convent school, where she met the Cannet sisters. After their return to Amiens, regular letters enabled the continuation of girlish conversation. This was an increasingly common pattern, as the schools that were now proliferating across Europe fostered close relationships. The young French noblewoman Marie Jacinthe de Botidoux attempted to initiate a correspondence with Martha Jefferson, whom she had met at school in Paris in the mid-1780s, but Martha did not reply.<sup>81</sup> Such youthful exchanges often ended when the women married and had a household to run or children to raise. Until then, letters broke down their isolation.

At the same time, they often functioned in a similar way to diaries. As Marie-Jeanne Phlipon told Sophie Cannet, 'It is not for you that I write, even though it is to you I am writing'.<sup>82</sup> She and other women used letters to their friends to exorcise anger or grief, and to share feelings and excitement that they could not express to the people around them. Sometimes their letters helped them to think through troubling issues and to analyse their own experiences. Marie-Jeanne shared her growing religious doubts with the Cannet sisters, confident that even though they were deeply disturbed by what she wrote, they would not betray her confidences.<sup>83</sup>

Even so, letters of this kind had a big advantage over a diary. 'I sometimes find a sort of relief in writing about the things that are preoccupying me',

80 [Albert] de Luppé (ed.), *Lettres de Geneviève de Malboissière à Adélaïde Méliand, 1761–1766: une jeune fille au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Edouard Champion, 1925). These letters have been studied by Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*, pp. 251–62. English Showalter (ed.), *Correspondance de Madame de Graffigny*, 15 vols (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1985–2016), p. 310. For another example, see Nicole Pohl (ed.), *The Letters of Sarah Scott*, 2 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2014), pp. xvii, 18, 14 October 1741.

81 On Phlipon, see Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*, pp. 262–73; and Siân Reynolds, *Marriage and Revolution: Monsieur and Madame Roland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). For de Botidoux's letters, see <<http://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/2078>> (accessed 1 April 2023).

82 Charles Aimé Dauban (ed.), *Lettres de Madame Roland aux demoiselles Cannet*, 2 vols (Paris: Plon, 1867), 1: 204 (19 September 1774).

83 Anne Régent, 'Du Dieu de Pascal au Dieu de Jean-Jacques, itinéraire d'une âme féminine à la veille de la Révolution: Madame Roland par elle-même, dans ses Mémoires et dans ses Lettres', in Bruno Tribout and Ruth Whelan (eds), *Narrating the Self in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 261–75.

Marie-Jeanne confided, 'nevertheless I feel less than satisfied when I write only for myself. I have to know that I am explaining and opening my heart to a friend'.<sup>84</sup> Like Anne Dormer in the 1690s, she found real emotional support in these letters. They gave her, for example, someone to turn to when her mother died. As Carol Sherman aptly puts it, Sophie Cannet was 'midwife to Manon's grief', since her letter of sympathy enabled Marie-Jeanne to shed the tears that she had until then repressed.<sup>85</sup>

One of the most significant developments of the eighteenth century was the appearance of numerous close epistolary friendships between women and men, outside kinship and patronage networks. This was quite surprising. Strict notions of respectability made face-to-face friendships between the sexes difficult, and even exchanges of letters might be suspect. One of the early objections to the new postal services was that they would make it easy for women to send letters to their lovers without being discovered.<sup>86</sup> Even married women often had to be careful who they wrote to, and elite and middle-class families kept a close eye on unmarried girls. Marie-Jeanne Phlipon was forbidden to continue writing to an older man, a family friend, after her mother discovered one of his letters. Where women did maintain long and close epistolary friendships with men, it was often in circumstances where the risk was low. Françoise de Graffigny was a widow. Louise d'Épinay, who for twelve years exchanged regular letters with the abbé Galiani, lived in Paris, he in Naples. Some women nevertheless disregarded the risk, and even enjoyed it. The twenty-year-old Dutch noblewoman Belle van Zuylen (1740–1805; better known by her later married name, Isabelle de Charrière) revelled in her secret correspondence with the libertine (and married) military officer David-Louis Constant d'Hermenches, which would have caused a scandal if it had become known.<sup>87</sup>

84 Letter dated only 1764, quoted in Brigitte Diaz, 'De la lettre aux "mémoires": les fonctions autobiographiques de la lettre dans la correspondance de jeunesse de Mme Roland, 1767–1780', in Silver and Swiderski (eds), *Femmes en toutes lettres*, pp. 211–27 (p. 222).

85 Carol Sherman, "'C'est l'insuffisance de notre être qui fait naître l'amitié": Women's friendships in the Enlightenment', *Women in French Studies*, 7 (1999), 57–65 (pp. 62–3).

86 Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980), pp. 72, 83.

87 On this correspondence, see Janet and Malcolm Whatley's introduction to Isabelle de Charrière, *There Are No Letters Like Yours: The Correspondence of Isabelle de Charrière and Constant d'Hermenches*, trans. with an introduction and annotations by Janet Whatley and Malcolm Whatley (Lincoln NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), pp. ix–xxviii. Quotations translated from Isabelle de Charrière/Belle de Zuylen, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Jean-Daniel Candaux, C. P. Courtney, Pierre H. Dubois, Simone Dubois-De Bruyn, Patrice Thompson, Jeroom Vercruysse and Dennis M. Wood, 10 vols (Amsterdam: G. A. Van Oorschot, and Geneva: Slatkine, 1979–84).

These epistolary friendships represented a new kind of relationship. While there are earlier examples of close friendships between men and women who were related, or who had a patron–client or mentoring relationship, these eighteenth-century correspondences were between people with no such connections, not linked by social or family obligations.<sup>88</sup> They were entered into voluntarily, because of shared interests and mutual attraction, and the writers treated each other as equals. The model of the familiar letter, written spontaneously and ‘naturally’, encouraged friendships of this sort, because it lent itself to self-expression and exploration. This was particularly true when the correspondents rarely met face to face. Graffigny and Devaux had been friends before she left Lorraine, but they had only a few encounters during their twenty-five years of correspondence. Van Zuylen and Constant d’Hermenches also met rarely during their fourteen years of writing, and even then were never alone except on the dance floor. After one such meeting, Van Zuylen confessed to being tongue-tied: ‘I don’t know how to talk to you the way I know how to write to you. It’s a man I see before me – a man I haven’t spoken to ten times in my life’ (27 December 1764). She had created her own image of him, and that was the person she wrote to. Because the relationship existed almost entirely within the letters themselves, each correspondent was free to imagine the other as they wished, without the real person getting in the way of their imagination. This encouraged frankness, since they could write things that they might never have found a way to say in person. Although the youthful Van Zuylen was lost for words when she met d’Hermenches, in her letters she chattered and flirted openly. She indulged her curiosity about male ambition and desire, asking boldly about his sexual conquests and confessing to having her own hidden desires that she never spoke of to anyone. She openly confided her unorthodox religious views: ‘I do not believe in your Hell’ (3–6 November 1764).

The frequency of correspondence, and the long duration of certain epistolary friendships, as with some family letters, facilitated the creation of what Marie-Claire Grassi has termed an ‘affective pact’.<sup>89</sup> Confidences, experiences and memories that were shared in the letters served to build the relationship, making the exchanges more personal, and indeed often incomprehensible to anyone else. The use of a private language, references

88 The seventeenth-century exchange between John Evelyn and Margaret Blagge began as a mentoring relationship, though it developed into a kind of friendship: Frances Harris, *Transformations of Love: The Friendship of John Evelyn and Margaret Godolphin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

89 Cited in Heidi Bostic, ‘Graffigny’s self, Graffigny’s friend: Intimate sharing in the correspondence, 1750–52’, *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 42 (2013), 215–36 (p. 218).

to previous anecdotes, and the tacit understandings that resulted from long familiarity were all key elements of the new letters of friendship.

All of this can be seen clearly in Françoise de Graffigny's correspondence with Devaux, nicknamed 'Panpan'.<sup>90</sup> Graffigny wrote to him three times a week, with few interruptions, for two-and-a-half decades. She recounted her daily activities, joys and sorrows, hopes and fears. The correspondence is extraordinarily informal, frank and intimate, though unequal in that she uses the familiar 'tu', while he replies with 'vous' – perhaps an element of gallantry, but more likely because she was nearly twenty years his senior. Graffigny and Devaux use a highly developed private language, with nicknames for different people and coded references. After she recounted making love in a carriage while going across one of the bridges in central Paris, 'crossing the Pont-Neuf' became shorthand for sex. Graffigny writes with apparent spontaneity, and apparently never re-read her letters before sending them. Her language moves seamlessly from literary formulations to quaint description, and occasionally to vulgarity. No topic or sentiment seems taboo: she tells Devaux of her happiness when she begins sleeping with a new lover in December 1743, and contrasts the way her heart leaps for joy in his presence with the distaste that her former lover, Desmarest, now inspires in her (15 December 1743). Ten days later, she nevertheless confides her 'torments' and her humiliation when she learns that Desmarest has been deceiving her for months and is engaged to marry her landlady (25 December 1743). Her reaction is to throw herself even more ardently into the arms of her new lover. She spares Devaux the precise details of the comforts he gave her, but only, she says, because 'one should not dance before legless amputees', a reference to the erectile dysfunction that Devaux had earlier described to her in some detail (29 December 1743). It is hard to imagine a relationship in which less is left unsaid.

Their correspondence provided a link to Graffigny's past in Lorraine, where Devaux still lived. Yet, more importantly, the letters offered a daily respite from the formality, reserve and repartee that Graffigny was obliged to maintain among her noble patrons and acquaintances. Time and again, too, she used her letters to exorcise the humiliations she experienced as a young widow dependent on protectors who were often fickle: 'Why aren't you here, Panpan? It seems to me that you would greatly ease the torments I am made to suffer' (July 1735).

90 Showalter (ed.), *Correspondance de Madame de Graffigny*. References are to this edition. On these letters, see English Showalter, *Françoise de Graffigny: Her Life and Works* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2004); and Stewart, *The Enlightenment of Age*, pp. 69–91.



If Graffigny often casts herself as victim and seeks consolation, the long correspondence between Belle van Zuylen and Constant d'Hermenches, mentioned earlier, demonstrates the new possibilities for self-exploration and expression created by the eighteenth-century familiar letter. Van Zuylen, too, sees personal letters as conversations, and writes of 'talking' to d'Hermenches, although the letters are far more forthright than real conversation between them could have been. His prose remains slightly formal, as befits the persona of an older married man writing to a young woman, and he calls her by her given name, 'Agnès'. He uses some of the stylistic conventions of gallant letters, banteringly calling her 'sublime Agnès' (4 August 1765), whereas from the outset she is less conventional, addressing him as a male friend would: 'my dear d'Hermenches'. In the early years of their correspondence, she occasionally writes as if to a lover, and some scholars have described these as love letters. After the rare meeting mentioned earlier, when she did not know what to say to him, she wrote of how, that night, 'my imagination sought you, my desires caressed you until I fell asleep' (25–27 December 1764). This was a rehearsal of her fantasies, particularly as much of their correspondence at this time was taken up with the possibility of her marrying one of his friends.

The apparent spontaneity of this and similar correspondence does not mean that all rules were abandoned. As we have seen, Van Zuylen and d'Hermenches obeyed the convention that letters of friendship should be conversational. Yet as the prolific English letter-writer Mary Delany noted in 1770, to a female friend, 'what will pass off tolerably well in talk, is dull and tedious on paper'.<sup>91</sup> Writers therefore abandoned elaborate forms of address, used nicknames and endearments, and imitated speech by using rhetorical questions and exclamations: '*Ah mon Dieu*', wrote Graffigny to Devaux, 'it is a great evil to love in friendship as other people love in love!' (30 June 1751). They inserted verbal fillers like '*Eh bien*' ('Ah well') that imitated speech by breaking up otherwise flowing prose. Writers shifted subject suddenly, as in conversation; they interrupted themselves or referred to someone else interrupting them, as if they had forgotten their train of thought.<sup>92</sup>

By the mid-eighteenth century, a further convention of letters of friendship was complete sincerity, the sharing of innermost thoughts and feelings.

91 Quoted in Alain Kerhervé, *Une épistolaire anglaise du XVIIIe siècle: Mary Delany (1700–1788)* (Paris: Harmattan, 2004), p. 132.

92 Heidi Bostic, 'Graffigny's self'. For the same phenomenon in German letters, see Reinhard M. G. Nickisch, *Die Stilprinzipien in den deutschen Briefstellern des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969), pp. 120, 220; and Vellusig, *Schriftliche Gespräche*, pp. 22–31, 47.

'I make you the confidant, or rather the witness, of all the movements of my soul', declared Belle van Zuylen to d'Hermenches (8–11 September 1764). A French noblewoman, Madame Belinay de la Rouerie, wrote more prosaically to a male friend in 1756: 'I wish, Monsieur, and I say it to you frankly, that you should always have sentiments for me that are as true as my friendship for you is sincere ... Have I not confided to you all my little secrets, since I promised to hide nothing from you'.<sup>93</sup> Yet the more reflective letter-writers recognised the artifice in such claims, and even played with it. 'I say you know me', wrote Van Zuylen to d'Hermenches in July 1764, 'But is that really true, really certain? I have never dressed myself up, in my letters, in false virtue, but I have revealed to you only the best of my thought' (26 July 1764). Of course, the frankness of this admission served, on another level, to increase the confessional character of her writing.

Van Zuylen was an exceptionally self-conscious writer, but a feature of many letters of friendship is repeated reflection on the relationship. It was not enough to *be* friends: overt assurances of friendship and what it meant were indispensable. Françoise de Graffigny wrote to Devaux of 'this pure pleasure that I only taste with you ... It is this confidence that equates to the intimate connection of love, and that makes our friendship unique' (27 September 1742). 'There has never been, and never will be, a friendship like ours' (25 October 1742). Even as their relationship deteriorated in later years, she continued to reflect explicitly on the subject: 'I believe that the perfection of friendship is to love someone even when their faults are obvious, and yours are blindingly so' (14–15 June 1754). In 1766, Madame du Deffand confided to Walpole: 'I can thus say to myself, when I cannot sleep at night and at all moments of the day, that I have a sincere and faithful friend, who will never change because I cannot change; he knows my faults, my irritating ways'.<sup>94</sup> 'No testimony of friendship is so strong as that of confidence and unreserve', wrote Mary Delany to Mary Howard, 'Nor can any friend you honour with that distinction set a higher value on it than I do'.<sup>95</sup> In letters from women to male friends, friendship was frequently contrasted with love. For Graffigny, 'in truth, it is crazy to imagine that friendship should have greater longevity than love'.<sup>96</sup> Van Zuylen, too, insisted that love and friendship were quite different, but in a way that suggested they were not:

93 Quoted in Marie-Claire Grassi, *L'Art de la lettre au temps de la Nouvelle Héloïse et du Romantisme* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1994), p. 75.

94 10 May 1766, Lewis 3: 34. For further examples, see Van Zuylen to Constant d'Hermenches, 7 September 1768, 2: 110.

95 Quoted in Kerhervé, *Une épistolaire anglaise*, p. 132.

96 Quoted in Showalter, *Françoise de Graffigny*, p. 306.

'There are not the same suspicions, the same anxieties, but the effects are similar' (25–27 December 1764).

Self-conscious discussions of the nature of friendship, of its relationship to love, and often of its superiority to other relationships, are so frequent in eighteenth-century women's letters that it is tempting to see them as a response – conscious or not – to accusations that women could not know true friendship. That view rested on the immense authority of Cicero, but it was given renewed vigour by later writers, in particular Michel Montaigne, read widely across Europe, who asserted that women's unstable and emotional nature suited them for love but made friendship impossible. The leading female authors on the topic, the Marquise de Lambert and Marie Geneviève Charlotte Thiroux d'Arconville, agreed that few women could know friendship.<sup>97</sup> The growing emphasis on sentiment as a crucial component of friendship, however, undermined such arguments. For if women, thanks to their emotional nature, were more sensitive than men, then they must be better at friendship. This perhaps explains the extraordinarily emotive language found in many eighteenth-century letters (and already in some seventeenth-century ones), between female friends. 'My angel', wrote Germaine de Staël to Juliette Récamier. 'At the end of your letter say to me: *I love you*. The emotion I will feel at these words will make me believe that I am holding you to my heart'.<sup>98</sup> Luise Kulmus used 'love' and 'friendship' synonymously in her letters to Dorothea Runckel, to whom she dedicated her 'most fiery embrace' and pledged 'love eternal'. Women exchanged locks of hair and miniature portraits of each other that – according to their letters – they kissed fervently. All these effusions seem designed to demonstrate the superior capacity of women to feel, which in an age of sentimentality became central to claims to be truly civilised. For Luise Kulmus, 'men rarely know the exquisiteness of friendship'.<sup>99</sup>

Here, the influence of novels was yet again important. Some of the sentimental language of real letters appears to have been inspired by fictional examples. But more importantly, fictional representations legitimated

97 Henri Motheau and Damase Jouaust (eds), *Les Essais de Montaigne*, 4 vols (Paris: Librairie des bibliophiles, 1873–5), vol. 1, p. 180. Julie Candler Hayes, 'Friendship and the female moralist', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 39 (2010), 171–89.

98 De Staël, quoted in Maurice Levaillant, *The Passionate Exiles* (Freeport NY: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) (first pub. Paris: 1956), p. 184.

99 Dorothea von Runckel (ed.), *Briefe der Frau Louise Adelgunde Victorie Gottsched geborne Kulmus*, 2 vols (Dresden: no pub., 1771), vol. 2, p. 289, 29 May 1755. See the discussion in Suzanne T. Kord, 'Eternal love or sentimental discourse', in Alice A. Kuzniar, *Outing Goethe and His Age* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 228–49 (pp. 238–9).

sentimental female friendships. Ironically, one of the most influential representations of female friendship, expressed through letters, appeared in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's bestselling epistolary novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). His depiction of the deep friendship between Julie and her cousin Claire undercut the contention, shared by Rousseau himself, that women were incapable of true friendship. When combined with the shortage of convincing portrayals of male friendships in eighteenth-century novels, it opened the way for claims like that of Kulmus.<sup>100</sup>

Fiction offers a space for experimenting with new possibilities and relationships, and scholars have pointed out that letters offered women similar opportunities to think differently about themselves and about society.<sup>101</sup> Letters of friendship, particularly when exchanged over a long period, were particularly suited to this, since they were free of many of the social constraints that continued to weigh on other types of correspondence. In her memoirs, Marie-Jeanne Phlipon reflected that, through her correspondence with the Cannet sisters, 'I learned to reflect more, in communicating my reflections; I studied harder, because I took pleasure in sharing what I had learned, and I observed more attentively, because I enjoyed describing'.<sup>102</sup>

When women reflected on the nature of friendship, as writing these letters encouraged them to do, many concluded that women's friendships were at least the equal of men's, and possibly, as Luise Kulmus suggested, superior. Not many stated this explicitly, but some women also insisted that virtue was central to these relationships. The young Marie-Jeanne Phlipon referred, in a letter to Sophie Cannet of 1770, to the 'enlightened virtue' that formed the basis of their friendship, and a year later to 'this close friendship that since our youth has given us the greatest joy of our days, uniting us with the sacred bonds of virtue and feeling'.<sup>103</sup> 'I believed', wrote Belle van Zuylen somewhat more succinctly, 'that we would become better friends if we spoke the language of virtue' (25 July 1764). This was not the conventional use of 'virtue' to mean female chastity, but the wider, moral sense of the term. It was drawing on the classical notion of 'civic virtue', a combination of individual morality and patriotism that, according to Cicero, was the essential basis of an ideal political community. The idea was taken up by writers as diverse as 1st Viscount of Bolingbroke Henry St

100 Garrioch, 'From Christian friendship to secular sentimentality', pp. 174–5, 179–82.

101 Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*, summarises this, pp. 2–4. Rebecca Earle, 'Introduction', in Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves*, pp. 1–12 (p. 2).

102 Dauban, *Mémoires de Madame Roland*, p. 69.

103 Jeanne-Marie Roland de La Platière, *Lettres de Madame Roland: 1767–1780*, 2 vols (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1913–15), p. 14 (24 September 1770).

John, Montesquieu, Voltaire and Adam Smith, each of whom interpreted it in his own way. But as Marisa Linton points out, nearly all the political theorists agreed with Cicero that this sort of virtue was a quality possessed only by males (etymologically, it derived from the Latin *'vir'*, meaning 'man'). A 'virtuous woman', in this sense, was almost an oxymoron.<sup>104</sup> That was partly because, for Cicero and his later disciples, civic virtue was grounded particularly in male friendship.

This view was expounded in Cicero's treatise on friendship, *De Amicitia*, one of the most widely read classical texts of the eighteenth century. The ideal polity therefore excluded women. And this was what made women's claim to superiority in friendship so radical. For if women, too, could experience virtuous friendship, and even more if their friendships were superior to those of men, then they were worthy of full citizenship. Before the French Revolution, this referred in some vague sense to an intellectual and moral citizenship, not a literal one, yet it was far-reaching in its implications. Women letter-writers did not explore the political dimensions of their claims to civic virtue, but some of them certainly did, as individuals, believe that in the domain of epistolary friendship, they were on a par with men.<sup>105</sup>

## The Life of the Mind

Only a small number of women were widely recognised as scholars, writers, scientists and mathematicians. Yet Leonie Hannan has shown that, between 1650 and 1750, a great many English women were actively engaged in what she terms 'the life of the mind'. This included politics, literature and intellectual engagement of all kinds, as well as women's reflection on their own lives and society.<sup>106</sup> Given that, as Mary Wortley Montagu phrased it in 1710, 'there is hardly a character in the World more Despicable or more liable to universal ridicule

104 Constant J. Mews, 'Cicero on Friendship', in Caine (ed.), *Friendship*, pp. 65–72; Louis-Silvestre de Sacy, *A Discourse of Friendship* (Paris: Gale ECCO, 2018), p. 23; Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique* [1764], ed. by Christopher Todd (London: Grant and Cutler, 1980); Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759], ed. by D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 224–5; Marisa Linton, 'Virtue rewarded? Women and the politics of virtue in eighteenth-century France', *History of European Ideas*, 26 (2000), 35–49, 51–65. See also Hayes, 'Friendship and the female moralist', 174, 181.

105 On women's contributions to these debates in other contexts, see Lisa Curtis-Wendlandt, Paul Gibbard and Karen Green (eds), *Political Ideas of Enlightenment Women: Virtue and Citizenship* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

106 Hannan, 'Women, letter-writing and the life of the mind', pp. 1–19. See also Leonie Hannan, 'Women's letters: Eighteenth-century letter-writing and the life of the mind', in H. Greig, J.

than that of a Learned Woman', it is not surprising that it is in personal letters, rather than in print, that we can observe the full extent of this intellectual activity.<sup>107</sup> Hannan argues that many now-forgotten women used letters to reflect on their reading, to discuss and engage critically with a wide range of issues, including current affairs, and to satisfy their thirst for intellectual fulfilment.

By the late eighteenth century, if not earlier, this was happening right across Europe. Familiar letters made it possible for women to exchange and refine ideas. As conversations at a distance, they transcended the barriers imposed by geographical and social isolation, by restrictions on physical mobility, and in many cases by limited educational opportunities and career options. Women from an ever-widening social range made claims to hold and express opinions – if only within their own circle – including on issues that were often considered to be a male monopoly. Occasionally they went further and used letters, now a legitimate form of female activity, to intervene more directly and even publicly.

Such uses of letters, as we have seen in earlier chapters, were not unprecedented, but were confined to very small groups of highly privileged women. In the sixteenth century, humanist women had forged themselves a place in the so-called 'Republic of Letters'. Their seventeenth-century equivalents were accepted by many male scholars within the Europe-wide society of intellectuals, although erudite women continued to be challenged and to defend themselves vigorously.<sup>108</sup> The Dutch polymath Anna-Maria van Schurman (1607–78) wrote a treatise defending women's access to learning. For decades, she maintained a wide correspondence with leading intellectuals around Europe, sometimes in Latin, sometimes in modern languages. She both sought and later offered mentoring, communicating with both men and women, Protestants and Catholics. Based in The Hague, Schurman gathered around her what Carol Pal has termed a 'female working group' of scholars. Her female correspondents included the long-lived sixteenth-century feminist Marie de Gournay, the Palatine Princess Elisabeth, and the educator Marie du Moulin.<sup>109</sup>

Hamlett and Leonie Hannan (eds), *Gender and Material Culture in Britain since 1600* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 32–48.

107 Mary Wortley Montagu, 'To the Bishop of Salisbury', 20 July 1710, in James Wharnclyffe (ed.), *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 3rd edn, 3 vols (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1861), vol. 2, p. 2.

108 Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green, *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

109 Carol Pal, *Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 66–147 (p. 111).

Schurman and her correspondence were important in offering a model of female learning and in encouraging other women. One of them was the Irishwoman Dorothy Moore, born King (1612–64), who spent her adult life in the Netherlands and in England. She came from a wealthy family and was well educated enough to be admitted to the group in The Hague. In the 1640s, she also became an activist in the Protestant cause in Europe, largely through her correspondence. She energetically supported attempts by Elizabeth Stuart, Queen of Bohemia, to reclaim her kingdom from her Catholic opponents. Moore's letters were written in a religious idiom that interpreted every event, public or personal, as an expression of a divine plan. Hence, she saw the queen of Bohemia's absence of allies in Europe as God's way of offering the English Parliament an opportunity to do his will, and at the same time to save Elizabeth from bad advisers.<sup>110</sup> Acting on this firm conviction, she lobbied members of Parliament and attempted to mobilise her friends to do the same. She used similar arguments to justify other actions that went beyond what women conventionally did, notably in promoting the education of girls. After the death of her first husband, she asserted to her niece Katherine Jones that women should either marry 'or find out some employment which will give them this Christian excersise & that proportionat to that Tallents bestowed on them'. Given this choice, she continued, 'I must choose the last, vntill the Lord present mee with such a Companion to whom being united my Conscience is convinced I may more then [than] in an Ordinary way obtaine meanes and helpe of fullfilling this my Aime [of serving the Lord Christ]'. Although in the same letter she expressed her 'mistrust of my owne wayes', she was clearly convinced that, in remaining single and devoting herself to public advocacy, she was doing God's work.

Yet it seems that Moore ultimately wished to become a preacher. Her religious self-doubt nevertheless led her, in 1643, to initiate a correspondence with a leading Calvinist theologian, André Rivet.<sup>111</sup> She asked him firstly, in general terms, whether Christian women could play a role in glorifying God; and secondly, 'by which path the female sex can or should pursue this goal'. Suspicious that she was seeking his approbation to move beyond proper female roles, Rivet affirmed the spiritual equality of women but categorically ruled out their playing a leadership role within the Church. She then wrote again, spelling out her questions more clearly: how could women 'achieve

110 Moore to Samuel Hartlib, 17 March 1643, in Lynette Hunter (ed.), *The Letters of Dorothy Moore, 1612–64* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 15.

111 On Rivet, see Pal, *Republic of Women*, pp. 68–70.

the effect of a truly public service and nevertheless proportionate to our sex', and 'be of greater use ... in this matter than the men can?' Again, his reply did not satisfy her. She dissected it carefully, expressing puzzlement that he on the one hand denied women any particular role, and on the other asserted that they should fulfil their Christian duty in the sphere allocated to them. Her letters are outwardly deferential, yet she firmly corrects 'what you had misunderstood in my discourse'. In Moore's third letter, a postscript points out that Rivet is interpreting the word 'public' in quite a different way from her. Despite continuing to assume the role of supplicant, she in fact writes as his intellectual equal. It is not certain that she could have expressed herself so strongly had she engaged Rivet face to face, for her tone is assertive and makes abundant use of the first-person pronoun: 'I acknowledge', 'I believe', even 'I insist'. For all that she remained outwardly respectful of male authority, Moore's letters reveal a woman asserting her right to participate in religious activity and debate.

Few women were as bold as Moore, but across the seventeenth century, religious faith – a sphere where, as Rivet and other theologians admitted, women had a place – repeatedly drew them into political discussion in their letters, both with men and with other women. The 1688 Glorious Revolution in England stimulated many English gentlewomen to express firm opinions, and it seems once again that the religious issues involved made them feel entitled to comment. Francis Harris has analysed the letters of the fiercely anti-Catholic Elizabeth Packer, whose thinking was strongly shaped by her reading, and reinforced by discussion and probably also correspondence with her cousin Elizabeth Berkeley. Packer's letters to Mary Evelyn, a friend of her parents, enabled her to rehearse arguments about the validity of the 1688 revolution. In 1689, she suggested that the exclusion of James II's son from the English crown was justified by the fact that he had been raised in Catholic France. But Packer later went further, advancing arguments founded on ideas of English liberty. She could not, she wrote in February 1696:

see any reason to persuade me millions of people were made to be subject to the will of one & that a King may destroy his subjects at pleasure & subvert fundamental constitutions & they have no right to prevent it & provide for the observation of those laws upon which his right to govern no less than their liberties stands founded.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Frances Harris, 'A revolution correspondence: Elizabeth Packer Geddes and Elizabeth Burnet', in Tarbin and Broomhall (eds), *Women, Identities and Communities*, pp. 165–77 (p. 172).



Packer well knew that Evelyn did not share her views, and while the replies have not survived, their dialogue stimulated her to refine her thinking.<sup>113</sup>

A similar process of politicisation is observable in the letters of women who lived through the tumultuous events in North America in the 1760s and 1770s. Anne Hulton accompanied her brother to Boston when he was appointed commissioner of customs there in 1767. She corresponded with a friend in Bristol, Mrs Lightbody, expressing in no uncertain terms her low opinion of the Sons of Liberty and their supporters. In 1770, she went beyond local issues to comment on the wider political dilemma faced by the British government: 'If Great Britain leaves Boston to itself, though its own honour will not be maintain'd thereby, it will certainly be the greatest punishment that can be inflicted on the place and people, but a cruelty to some individuals, who have shewn themselves friends to Government'. She acknowledged, however, that she was being indiscreet:

I've wrote more freely to you than I shou'd have done; but as I have that confidence in my friend that my letter will not be exposed. I would not have my name or my Brother mentioned in a Sea Port Town as sending any news from hence, you may not know, though I do the risque of [it]; therefore I give you the hint.<sup>114</sup>

Another woman who moved to America, Esther de Berdt Reed, took a very different view. In a series of letters to her brother in England, between 1771 and 1775, she moved from wide-eyed observation of American behaviour, first to sympathy, then to overt support. 'This country wishes for nothing so much as dependency on the Mother State on proper terms, and to be secure of their liberties', she wrote in March 1775, while by October she placed herself among the American patriots, sending her brother news of 'our last Petition from the Congress to the King'.<sup>115</sup>

Moments of political crisis stimulated such reflections, but at any time many women held strong political views, were active in political movements and discussed their ideas with like-minded people. Familiar letters offered women a further space in which to do this, one where they could not be interrupted or immediately silenced. Even where they did not express

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> 25 July 1770, in Klaus Stierstorfer (general ed.), *Women Writing Home, 1700–1920: Female Correspondence across the British Empire*, 6 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), vol. 6, USA, ed. by Susan Clair Imbarrato, pp. 124–5.

<sup>115</sup> 14 March 1775 and 28 October 1775, in Stierstorfer (general ed.), *Women Writing Home*, vol. 6, pp. 179, 184.

forceful opinions, the mere fact of sharing political, military or literary news, particularly with a male correspondent, as Marie-Claire Grassi points out in the case of the French noblewoman Madame d'Hervilly, implied a claim to enter the masculine world that believed itself to hold a monopoly on those topics.<sup>116</sup>

The literary sphere was another context where letters consolidated relationships and alliances, and allowed women to claim a place. For thirty years, from the 1760s through the 1780s, the Prussian poet Anna Louisa Karsch (1722–91) maintained an extraordinary correspondence with Johann Gleim, secretary to the cathedral chapter in Halberstadt, in central Germany. She was the self-taught daughter of a brewer and an innkeeper, and seems to have learned to read while working as a maid. She began writing poetry and gradually became known after publishing in a local Silesian newspaper. Her work caught the eye of a Prussian aristocrat, who took her and her family to Berlin, where she became something of a salon celebrity. Gleim, a well-known literary figure, initiated the correspondence in 1761, when she was thirty-nine, he forty-two.<sup>117</sup>

Their relationship has been variously described as friendship, collegiality and platonic love, and the letters contain elements of all three. Karsch and Gleim adopt pen-names drawn from classical literature. He calls her 'the German Sappho', while she terms him 'my brother in Apollo'. She also describes him as 'Thyrsis', the name of a shepherd in Virgil's *Eclogues*, herself taking the part of Lalage, a female name used by Horace and Martial. They use similar classical names for various mutual friends. The letters move constantly between banter, role-playing and serious discussion, sometimes disagreement. She seeks his advice on how to get royal patronage, and is angry when he advises her instead to open a school, a more conventional female occupation. She is also offended by his critiques of some of her poetry.<sup>118</sup>

Gleim makes it clear from the outset that he wishes Karsch to see him as a friend, but he is uncomfortable with the ambiguity of this term. It was

116 Grassi, *L'Art de la lettre*, p. 195.

117 On her life, see Ernst Josef Krzywon, 'Tradition und Wandel. Die Karschin in Schlesien (1722–1761)', in Anke Bennholdt-Thomsen and Anita Runge (eds), *Anna Louisa Karsch (1722–1791): Von schlesischer Kunst und Berliner 'Natur'* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1992), pp. 12–56. Quotations from the letters are from 'Mein Bruder in Apoll'. *Briefwechsel zwischen Anna Louisa Karsch und Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim*, ed. by Regina Nörtemann and Ute Pott, 2 vols (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1996).

118 Ute Pott, 'Berlin – Halberstadt – Berlin. Anna Louisa Karsch und Caroline Luise von Klencke als Autorinnen im Briefwechsel mit Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim', in Bennholdt-Thomsen and Runge (eds), *Anna Louisa Karsch*, pp. 94–109 (p. 100).

conventional for letters between male friends, in late eighteenth-century Germany, to express effusive mutual love, but between a man and a woman that was inappropriate. The term '*Freundin*' ('female friend'), furthermore, could refer either to a friend or a mistress, and he suggests that he will regard her as a 'sisterly friend' ('*schwesterliche Freundin*'). She recognises his discomfort and replies that she would rather regard him as a brother, 'still sweeter than the name "friend" and more significant' (28 April 1761). Yet not long after, she deliberately plays on the ambiguities of love and friendship in a poem entitled 'The Song of Lalage', in which the singer is happily in love with a shepherd called Tyrssis. Gleim is not amused.<sup>119</sup>

Nor is he comfortable when Karsch uses language reminiscent of love letters. Shortly before he leaves Berlin after their first face-to-face meeting, she writes, 'To my best friend Gleim. My heart is full, and I am holding back my tears so as not to cause you pain' (17 November 1761). Two days later she writes again, promising 'only let me see you one more time, I will not weep, and I will only beg you to write to me often, if possible every day, I do not need to tell you what your letters mean to me, for you know'. Nevertheless, these are apparently not genuine expressions of love. Less than a year later she tells him not to misinterpret her letters, that she has no intention of marrying a third time, since she values her peace, her freedom and her happiness far too much (3 September 1762). Recent scholars have argued that these repeated references to love and friendship should not be taken literally but rather be seen as a literary code. In a sense, they made the letters possible. Friendships between men and women, even epistolary ones, were likely to be misinterpreted, and one way of dealing with this was the tradition of gallant letters, in which flirtation was a trope. The classical characters that Gleim and Karsch adopted also helped make clear that this was a game, distancing the real individuals from the sentiments expressed in their letters.

For the literary critic Regina Nörtemann, Karsch's use of the language of love anticipates the Romantic idea of the author as a creative individual driven by anguished emotion. It was, she argues, central to the poet's self-image.<sup>120</sup> And indeed, Karsch repeatedly defines herself in these terms: 'My heart ... is all feeling, all friendship, as befits poets' (14 May 1761). She signs some of the letters as 'Sappho', yet unlike Sappho, she confesses to Gleim,

119 Regina Nörtemann, 'Verehrung, Freundschaft, Liebe. Zur Erotik im Briefwechsel zwischen Anna Louisa Karsch und Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim', in Bennholdt-Thomsen and Runge (eds), *Anna Louisa Karsch*, pp. 81–93 (pp. 84–5). Reinlein, *Der Brief als Medium der Empfindsamkeit*, p. 149

120 Nörtemann, 'Verehrung, Freundschaft, Liebe', p. 83.

she has never known true love. At the same time, we can also see her use of this language as a claim to complete acceptance as a friend and fellow poet, on the same terms as his male friends. She was incensed to discover, when Gleim's correspondence with a male friend, Johann Jacobi, was published in 1767, that the two men's letters were full of kisses and embraces, whereas in writing to her Gleim was more restrained. It was entirely conventional for men to exchange passionate and tender expressions of love, but she seemed to regard this as a sign that he saw her as less truly a friend.

Above all, for Karsch, a woman from a very humble background, the correspondence with Gleim provided desperately needed evidence that she was accepted in literary circles. He was connected to almost all the German vernacular authors of his day and acted as a kind of patron. As Nörtemann argues, his addressing Karsch as his 'sister in Apollo' was a vital sign of acceptance, recognising her as a fellow poet. His critiques of her work, while they annoyed her, nevertheless showed that he was taking her seriously.<sup>121</sup>

These letters, like those of seventeenth-century literary women such as Katherine Philips in England and Madeleine de Scudéry in France, and of the bluestockings in eighteenth-century England, enabled women to claim full membership of the Republic of Letters. The correspondence of all these individuals has been much studied. But there were a great many other women, as Leonie Hannan has shown, who did not themselves compose fiction or poetry, and for whom letters provided a place to reflect on books they read and on issues close to their hearts. Hannan has examined closely the correspondence between Jemima Campbell, Mary Grey and Catherine Talbot.<sup>122</sup> Grey was Campbell's aunt but was only three years older, and they were raised together. Talbot was known as a bluestocking, and after meeting the other two girls as neighbours, while they were all in their teens, she maintained a long epistolary friendship with them. Their letters discussed classical literature, history, popular novels and politics, and they clearly took pleasure in knowing that the others were reading the same works at the same time. They often expressed firm opinions. All of them having admired Clarendon's moderate royalist history of the English Civil War, in 1743 Jemima sent her correspondents some anti-royalist writing, observing that:

some Remarks might possible be drawn from them upon my Lord Clarendon's Partiality for not mentioning them ... Now Ladies, what do you

<sup>121</sup> Nörtemann, 'Verehrung, Freundschaft, Liebe', p. 82.

<sup>122</sup> Hannan, 'Women', pp. 9–19. For other examples, see her *Gender, Writing and the Life of the Mind in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016)

say? Are not you at all stagger'd in your Opinion of your Heroe? or don't you believe any of these Facts? One or Other must be the Case.<sup>123</sup>

As Hannan points out, not only did this betray an empirical approach to knowledge, but it involved history that was closely connected to eighteenth-century political debates.<sup>124</sup>

Familiar letters like these enabled exchanges on intellectual topics for women who could not attend university or join formal institutions of learning, and whose physical movement was constrained, their opportunities for direct discussion therefore limited. In some instances, it was a way of raising and thinking through issues that were affecting them personally, while also providing intellectual stimulation that was sorely missing in the daily round of middle and upper-class women's lives. Since a reputation for learning was generally undesirable for a woman, and frank expressions of opinion were considered inappropriate in public, letters exchanged with female friends offered a safe place for discussion.

An entirely different domain, in which many women made extensive use of letters, was business. Elite women had long used letters to oversee family finances, generally during the temporary absence of a husband or after his death. In merchant and artisanal circles, married women often played a key role in running family shops, and some, particularly widows, owned their own businesses, sometimes quite large ones. They, too, frequently wrote letters. Most of these were not personal letters, but in some revealing cases, unusually talented women used familiar letters to further their business interests.

One was Marie-Catherine-Renée Darcel (1737–1822), who for twenty-two years managed the financial affairs of what became, under her stewardship, one of the largest businesses in France: the printed cotton factory at Jouy, near Paris, which was founded around 1760 by German-born Christophe-Philippe Oberkampf. Darcel's lawyer husband, Alexandre Sarrasin de Maraise, was an investor partner, playing little direct role, but after marrying him in 1767, aged thirty, she took over the books. Oberkampf's biographer thinks the marriage might even have been arranged with this in mind. As the daughter of a wealthy merchant in the French provincial town of Rouen, Darcel was trained in double-entry bookkeeping and modern business practice. Even though cotton printing was a new industry, she was familiar with the textile sector, since Rouen specialised in woollen cloth.<sup>125</sup>

123 Quoted in Hannan, 'Women', p. 14.

124 *Ibid.*

125 Serge Chassagne, 'Présentation', in *Une Femme d'affaires au XVIIIe siècle. La correspondance de Madame de Maraise, collaboratrice d'Oberkampf* (Paris: Privat, 1981), pp. 8–45. Serge Chassagne,

Since Oberkampf lived in the factory, just outside Paris, and Darcel was based in the city, she wrote to him regularly. She not only kept the books but actively pursued the firm's debtors, sometimes negotiated contracts, and astutely invested surplus funds. She advised on contracts and foreign exchange dealings, lobbied government ministers, and sometimes represented Oberkampf at official ceremonies. These activities took her well beyond normative female roles, and she needed to persuade Oberkampf to accept her and to take her advice. He was the founder, running the manufacturing side and making the key decisions, and she was acutely aware that she could be replaced at any time (Oberkampf did eventually end the partnership in 1787). For two decades, she used her letters not only for immediate business purposes but to build personal and emotional bonds between her family and Oberkampf's. Even though he was Lutheran and she was Catholic, she persuaded him to become godfather to her eldest daughter. After this, she consistently addressed him in her letters as 'my dear *compère*' (referring to the relationship of godparenthood), where earlier she had always written 'my dear partner'. He reciprocated a few years later, when her husband became godfather to his daughter and Darcel godmother to his son. She may have hoped to marry one of her own daughters to the same son.

Alongside business matters, Darcel's letters are full of news about her own children and anxious enquiries about Oberkampf's. When they are sick, she offers motherly advice and puts him in touch with the best doctors. Certainly, it was not uncommon for commercial partnerships to be consummated by marriage alliances: eighteenth-century bourgeois marriages were unions between families, not individuals, and building on existing relationships was a sensible strategy where both property and the future of the next generation were at stake. Such marriages strengthened the interest that both parties had in the business, and Darcel seems to have been trying to make herself doubly indispensable to Oberkampf.<sup>126</sup>

Perhaps for the same reason, in her letters she flatters him extravagantly, going far beyond the Parisian norm of flowery compliments. When he is away, she always says how much she and her husband are missing him, and she stresses that they think of him all the time, frequently drinking his health with friends and clients. Her letters are full of references to their friendship. She repeatedly expresses concern for his health, although she rarely mentions her own. On the one occasion when he rather clumsily

*Oberkampf. Un entrepreneur capitaliste au Siècle des Lumières* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1980), pp. 75–81.

<sup>126</sup> Chassagne, 'Présentation', pp. 25–6.

attempts to return a compliment by wishing he could write as well as she does, she responds that he is doing her too great an honour in even comparing her with himself, and that if she could swap her entire being for just a third of his qualities she would be making a profit on the exchange.<sup>127</sup> This was clearly a deliberate choice of writing style on her part, since when dealing with business matters she is concise, even terse, and in her other commercial letters she does not waste words.

Like many eighteenth-century women, Darcel faced the problem of how to offer advice – which she often did quite forcefully – without appearing to be taking charge. On more than one occasion, therefore, after telling Oberkampf what course of action he should follow, she concludes by asking for his opinion.<sup>128</sup> On such occasions, too, she frequently replaces 'I' with the plural 'we', implicitly including her husband, although not always: this was tricky, because her lawyer husband had no business qualifications, and she perhaps realised that his views, other than on legal matters, were not likely to be taken very seriously by Oberkampf.

Another writing strategy of Darcel's, which may or may not have been deliberate, was to intersperse direct expressions of her opinions with reminders of her affection for Oberkampf, and with references to his children or hers. In 1771, for example, she gives a concise and pessimistic evaluation of the business environment, advising, 'I think it is appropriate to steer the ship as close to the shore as possible' – in other words, take no risks. In this passage, she confidently uses first-person pronouns: 'I wished to share my reflections with you, sad as they may be.' She then softens the possible impact of her negativity by continuing, 'however that may be, nothing can diminish my attachment to my dear partner, or my gratitude for his affection towards our little Nicolas'. The tone of the letter then changes completely, as she expresses optimism about a law case that the business is involved in, then uses a reference to one of Jean de La Fontaine's fables to draw the moral that one can triumph by remaining united. The letter concludes with more news of friends and family, and with regret that she and her husband have not seen more of Oberkampf.<sup>129</sup>

Two years later, Darcel uses a very similar device when instructing Oberkampf on how to draw money while he was visiting London. This letter even includes a direct imperative, 'Draw [the funds], or have them drawn, if possible, in a single transaction', before going on to give him what

127 Chassagne, *Une Femme d'affaires*, p. 82 (2 January 1774).

128 *Ibid.*, p. 59 (9 December 1769); p. 90 (9 November 1775).

129 *Ibid.*, pp. 61–2 (23 January 1771).

is almost a lesson on international finance. But then, perhaps feeling she has been too direct, she moves quickly to defuse any offence. Again the tone changes completely as she recounts how her aunt had asked after Oberkampf and expressed concern for his safety: 'Is it possible that a man so indispensable to everyone should take risks on the sea? For myself [the aunt had said], I will not sleep well until I know he has reached Holland safely'. This is exactly her own feeling, Darcel adds: 'it would be better to pay more for the cloth, or accept lower quality, and have Monsieur Oberkampf remain on our continent'.<sup>130</sup>

Darcel was operating in a man's world, and she risked being condemned for undertaking a role unbecoming for a woman. She had strong opinions and a forceful personality, without which she could not have done what she did, yet these were not generally seen as positive qualities in a woman. They caused no difficulties with her husband, who appears to have wanted an easy life and to have been perfectly content to let her take the lead. Oberkampf was quite a different character. He knew, of course, that Darcel was extremely capable, and he relied on her advice. At the same time, he was proud, sometimes suspicious, and could be irascible. She therefore kept him on side with a combination of personal and rhetorical devices.

Overall, Darcel adopts three different personas in the letters, which suggest how she wished to appear to the world, and no doubt how she saw herself. The first is that of financial and practical adviser. When she adopts this role, the sentences are shorter and the prose concise, with few metaphors, literary references or digressions. The second persona is that of concerned business partner, characterised by flowery expressions of flattery, and anecdotes demonstrating how highly she and others regard Oberkampf. The third is that of good mother. Not only are the letters full of references to her own children, but she reflects at length on child-rearing, and gives abundant advice both to Oberkampf and to his wife, especially on medical matters. Here again, the writing is confident and direct, the language straightforward, the sentences shorter, for she is in safe female territory. Having borne eight children and raised five to adulthood, she was an experienced mother, and she used this to establish authority and to build personal and emotional ties between the two families.

Another eighteenth-century French businesswoman who used letters in similar ways was Madame Blakey, born Marguerite Elisabeth Aumerle (b. 1727). She was the daughter of a wigmaker, and ran the 'Magasin Anglais' in Paris in the 1760s and 1770s, at one point employing thirty people. After

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66 (1 December 1773).



separating from her husband, Guillaume Blakey, she survived by winning support from an international range of clients and suppliers. Here, too, the discourse of friendship was an important tool. She addresses Madame Fillion, based in Geneva, as 'My dear good friend', and Fillion replies with expressions of affection: 'I will close [this letter] by beseeching you to give me, and my family, the pleasure of embracing you.' Madame Blakey's correspondence with one Joanin, a merchant in Lyon, of which only fragments survive, contains references to the man's wife, daughter and son-in-law, indicating some personal knowledge. He, in return, sends greetings to her husband and to her cousin.<sup>131</sup> While some of her letters are purely commercial, it seems clear that with certain clients and creditors she used letters to build trust, as Darcel did, by developing more personal relationships.

Business letters are less likely to survive than those held in family archives. Yet, taken together with other kinds of correspondence, they demonstrate that familiar letters facilitated women's access to a range of areas of life beyond the family. In these domains, as in others, they allowed women to support each other: in intellectual pursuits, to develop connections and skills, and to reflect on key issues of their day. A small number of women used letters to move into realms that were more conventionally male.

## Conclusion

The second half of the seventeenth century was a key turning point in the long history of women's letters in Europe. The appearance of the familiar letter, which required less specialised training than formal correspondence, allowed letter-writing to be accepted as a female talent. With ever greater opportunities to acquire epistolary skills, thanks to improved education and the growing availability of models of female letters, over the following century more and more women picked up the quill. Extended correspondence, as opposed to one-off or occasional letters, now became possible for those of the 'middling sort', and even for some plebeian women, thanks to the new postal systems put in place by European states. Those developing states also guaranteed the security of the roads and waterways on which the post travelled.

The opportunity to communicate regularly was hugely important for women because of the constraints on female mobility and social interaction.

<sup>131</sup> Camille Dejardin, *Madame Blakey: Une femme entrepreneure au XVIIIe siècle* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2019), pp. 55, 105, 136, 138, 166.

Provided that they could pay the postage for letters they received, and could find time to write, a growing range of women could now maintain ties with people they might never or rarely see, even beyond the circle of those to whom they had obligations. Epistolary friendships, both within and outside kinship networks, became far more common, linking individuals and groups who previously would have had infrequent direct contact. Friendships with unrelated men, which always provoked suspicion and innuendo, were far easier when conducted in writing, at a distance, and some of the most interesting correspondences of the period are of this kind.

The nature of the familiar letter was itself transformational. It was a democratic form, open to anyone who could wield a pen and understand the basic norms of letter-writing. The absence of firm rules gave the familiar letter immense flexibility, and the most skilled writers used it in a range of new ways. It became a space where topics could be broached, and emotions expressed, that were difficult or unacceptable in face-to-face conversation. Thanks to this possibility, some women were able to shape or reshape relationships with suitors, husbands and other family members. They were better able to present themselves as they wished to be seen, and to set out their own desires and expectations. Their authorial 'I' became stronger, permitted by new understandings of what a letter was.

Despite this, the familiar letter was not a window onto the soul. It had its own conventions: one should not talk too much about oneself, for example, but praise one's interlocutor, the letter's purpose being to give pleasure. The idea that it would resemble conversation was universal, but what this meant varied over time, from one social group to another, and across Europe. These expectations make seventeenth-century letters appear formal by later standards. In that period, but in some cases later as well, familiar letters might borrow from gallant letters, including flirtatious language that sender and recipient understood as a social code. By the late eighteenth century, by contrast, personal reflection and expressions of emotion had become legitimate and, in certain relationships, expected. Here, the two-way connection with the epistolary novel is striking. Fiction offered models both of letters and of female correspondents, and life imitated art as women reflected on their reading and drew inspiration from it. We must read their letters with this in mind, as literary performances for a particular audience.

We must also be careful not to see growing access to letters as a step in a linear story of steady progress. It is true that, for a small number of women, letters enabled participation in domains in which men claimed a monopoly. Again, literature offers the best example, as women's recognised excellence in letter-writing opened the way to authorship of novels. There were other

fields, too, where individual women used the letter form to enter public debate, as Mary Wortley Montagu did in her anonymous interventions in support of smallpox inoculation. Some, like Darcel, used personal letters to enable them to participate fully in business, while others again ventured into scientific circles. Yet many of the examples examined here, although they may prefigure later developments, are exceptional letters written by unusual women. The vast majority of women's letters were more conventional.

Nor was the expression of emotion necessarily liberating: romantic love, for instance, could be just as constraining as the rhetorical formality of older epistolary (and face-to-face) relationships. Very few women had the education, the time and the literary skill needed to produce letters like those of Françoise de Graffigny or Belle van Zuylen, and the conventions of the genre continued to exert a powerful influence on the way even these women wrote and presented themselves. A further irony is that letter-writing quickly came to be classified, by male theorists, as a minor literary genre. It was therefore dismissed as a secondary sphere of achievement, like novels, another domain in which women could excel. Most male and female commentators, furthermore, quickly linked the ability to produce superior letters to women's emotional nature, reinforcing gender stereotypes that defined rationality as male.

Even so, the familiar personal letter did open up important new possibilities. Its flexibility made it a privileged tool for individual self-shaping and development. Precisely because letters are performative, letter-writing provided a space in which some women were able to reflect on their own lives and to imagine and create new identities for themselves, new 'scripts for the self'. Sometimes we have evidence, as for Dorothy Osborne, that this enabled them to make real changes in their lives. At the same time, personal letters, particularly correspondence with friends, enabled discussion of a great many other issues. Through such exchanges, as Joan Hinde Stewart puts it, 'collectively, these women were carving out personal and social space by commenting in thousands of letters on institutions and traditions that closely affected them'.<sup>132</sup> She was referring specifically to the correspondence of older women and their personal challenges to the social prejudices they faced, but the observation applies to a great many other areas of life, from love and friendship to marriage, literature and politics.

<sup>132</sup> Stewart, *The Enlightenment of Age*, p. 4.

## 4 Intimate Letters

**Abstract:** It is their intimacy that characterises women's letters in the nineteenth century. This chapter will discuss the meaning of intimacy in these letters and the new technologies that made it possible by enabling women to write their own letters and pay for them to be sent by post, assured that they would be read only by the addressee. Included here are letters to husbands, children, siblings, friends and lovers, showing how the range of women's letters expanded across the nineteenth century, and how letters enabled women to express their feelings and to negotiate relationships in new ways. The chapter also discusses the letters that show greater continuity with the past, especially immigrant letters, often written to a family as a whole at irregular intervals.

**Keywords:** intimacy, sisters, friendship, penny-post, migrant

The capacity of women to write letters was transformed in the nineteenth century as increasing rates of literacy and new technologies allowed more and more women to write letters themselves. From the 1840s, moreover, new postal services enabled women to send their letters to friends and loved ones, secure in the knowledge that they would receive them regularly and not be required to pay for them. Although many letters continued to be shared with family or read aloud, the new urban postal services also made it possible for women to write letters to family members or friends that were intended only to be read by the addressee.

All these things contributed to the increasing intimacy of women's letters, a quality that many historians agree served to differentiate nineteenth-century women's letters from their seventeenth and eighteenth-century counterparts. Intimacy is not easily defined and, as we will see, it had a number of rather different meanings in the nineteenth century, all of which are reflected in women's letters. But while there were marked changes in women's letters and letter-writing in that century, there was also a great deal of continuity, as one can see particularly in the letters of those who

emigrated from Europe. Their letters to family back home continued the long tradition of writing letters as a way to keep far-flung family members connected and to enable them to maintain family narratives and a sense of belonging.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the meaning of intimacy in the nineteenth century, with particular reference to women's letters. It will then move on to discuss the new technologies that transformed letter-writing and delivery, enabling women to write their own letters and pay for them to be sent by post. The chapter discusses a range of different kinds of letter in order to show how both continuity and change are reflected in women's letters. Immigrant letters, often written to a family as a whole at very irregular intervals, point to continuities, and we will look at them first, before turning to the letters that women wrote to individuals, assuming that they would not be read by others. Included here are letters to husbands, children, siblings, friends and lovers, as a way to show both how the range of women's letters expanded across the nineteenth century, and how in many cases the letter enabled them to express their feelings and to negotiate relationships in new ways. As this chapter covers 'the long nineteenth century', it ends with a discussion of letters from World War I. One can see here, for the first time, an expansion of the intimacy previously confined to middle and upper-class letters to the broader population. One can also begin to see a shift in the meaning of letters for women, as some who were active in the war effort used their letters not to enable their new freedom or activities, but rather to announce this freedom to families back home.

## Intimacy

The intimacy of nineteenth-century women's letters is widely regarded as one of their defining characteristics. Some literary scholars see intimacy as a quality that is evident in nineteenth-century French literature and culture more broadly.<sup>1</sup> In regard to women's letters, it is applied by different historians to the content of their letters, to their mode of writing, and to the ways in which letters were directed to and read by particular readers. In France, where the question of intimacy has been most extensively discussed, this development is often described in terms of the move away from the familiar letter discussed in the previous chapter, and associated so closely

1 Philippa Lewis, *Intimacy and Distance: Conflicting Cultures in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017).

with the seventeenth-century correspondence of Madame de Sévigné, and towards the rather more revealing *lettre intime* associated with the writer George Sand.<sup>2</sup> In Britain and Germany, neither of which country had an earlier model as dominant as Sévigné was in France, historians have seen aspects of intimacy in the letters of many women writers to their close women friends, in which they explore their work, their ideas, their daily trials, and often also their sense of themselves.<sup>3</sup>

While there might be much agreement on its importance in nineteenth-century women's letters, there is much less agreement about what the term 'intimacy' actually means. Clearly it is a very complex term, and one that can be understood in very different ways. Some historians see it as involving a new kind of frankness and self-disclosure, often much greater than that possible in conversation. This kind of intimacy is only possible when the writer of a letter knows that the addressee is the only person who will read it. But others see intimacy as something that distinguishes the private from the public, and as a quality that thus serves to differentiate familial letters, which may be read by many members of a family, from those intended for a more public arena.

Cécile Dauphin, who has written extensively on this question, insists in her important work, 'Écriture de l'intime dans une correspondance familiale du XIXe siècle', on the need to recognise that from the start, intimacy was 'not an already formed, stable, simple, object we can grasp immediately', but rather something that was created within the body of nineteenth-century correspondence.<sup>4</sup> The new forms of intimacy that could be seen in correspondence reflected the changing meanings of the word in general use and were usefully registered in dictionaries. In the Historical Dictionary of the French language, Dauphin points out, 'intimacy' was first used as a term to designate a person who was closely connected with another.<sup>5</sup> By the sixteenth century, it had come also to refer to the inner life of a person, which was usually secret. In the eighteenth century, the term was applied to certain kinds of writing, especially ones not intended for publication.

2 A. E. McCall, 'Of textual demise and literary renewal: George Sand and the problematics of epistolary autobiography', *Auto/biography Studies*, 9(2) (1994), 212–30. McCall herself disputes this development, seeing it as based only on a very elite form of correspondence.

3 M. Kyoto and Suzanne Romaine, "'My dearest Minnykins': Style, gender and affect in 19th century English letters", in G. Watson (ed.), *The State of Stylistics* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 229–64.

4 Cécile Dauphin, 'Écriture de l'intime dans une correspondance familiale du XIXe siècle', *Le Divan Familial*, 11 (2003), 63–73.

5 *Ibid.*, 66–7.

Finally, in the nineteenth century, the term 'intimate' was used in a variety of new ways: to describe an atmosphere that creates or evokes the comfort of a place where one feels isolated from the outside world; to the idea of a private, individual secret; or to something that is strictly personal and generally kept hidden from others. In France, as in England, this personal secret came to include the notion of intimate feeling, and of physical and sexual desire or contact. The different meanings of 'intimate', Dauphin suggests, highlight its 'semantic lability' and the way it can qualify or describe a person, a relationship, writings, gestures or space.<sup>6</sup>

When applied to letters, this new sense of intimacy was underlined by the increasing informality of language, and by a new openness in the expression of feeling that accompanied romanticism. In France, Marie-Claire Grassi suggests, one can see this growing informality in the use of 'tu' rather than 'vous' in familial letters, and the use of first names rather than surnames or titles among friends.<sup>7</sup> It is evident also in the 'verbal excesses' and the tendency of those writing letters to declare their deep and tender love for the addressee. This was a Europe-wide phenomenon, as recent work on letters in Germany and Russia make clear. The use of 'inflectional superlatives' such as 'dearest' as a greeting, and as a way of addressing family members or friends, is also noted in the extensive collection of letters of nineteenth-century British writers retained in the Corpus of Nineteenth-Century English, held jointly between the University of Tampere in Finland and Uppsala University in Sweden.<sup>8</sup> Intimacy was also gendered. Thus, Merja Kyto and Suzanne Romaine, who looked at the question of how gender impacted on expressions of emotion and affect in this collection of letters, suggest that women use the term 'dearest' as a form of address more than twice as often as men. Women's letters also include far more 'emphatics and private verbs', such as 'feel', 'love' and 'think', alongside constant suggestions that the letters are like intimate conversations in which the recipient can hear the voice of their correspondent.<sup>9</sup> This sense of immediacy between writer and addressee underlines the sense of the letter as an extremely intimate communication.

Intimacy was not only a changing concept but one that operated in complex and paradoxical ways. Within the correspondence of the nineteenth-century

6 *Ibid.*, 65.

7 Marie-Claire Grassi, 'Friends and lovers (or the codification of intimacy)', *Yale French Studies*, 71 (1986), 77–92.

8 Kyto and Romaine, 'My dearest Minnykins' pp. 230–1.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 257–8.

French bourgeoisie, Cécile Dauphin argues, the concept of intimacy served to distinguish the family itself as a private realm, with its own rituals, beliefs and values, from the more public one largely inhabited by men. Thus, letters written within families could be read aloud or passed from one hand to another, but they were expected not to be shown to outsiders.<sup>10</sup>

One can see something slightly different in the intimate letters that women wrote to husbands, children, friends and lovers when they were sure the letter would be read only by the addressee, or at least by a very limited number of others. Rather than maintaining a family identity, these letters enable women to negotiate relationships, especially complex ones. Many women used letters rather than face-to-face contact, not only to make clear to an absent husband how much he was loved, but also to articulate views that might be different from those he held, or to suggest ways in which a husband might behave – in regard to their children, for example. The informality and intimacy of nineteenth-century letters permitted the discussion of these matters, while the very fact that the communication was written helped to distance the partners, allowing for particular care with expression, and for thoughtful suggestions and careful responses couched in ways most likely to be acceptable and to avoid conflict. Letters also provided women with ways to negotiate some new familial relationships that were developing in the nineteenth century – as daughters went to college, for example, or became independent as writers, or sought the independence of a philanthropic life, and wished to be able to live in a way that was freer of family constraints than usual for young women of their class. Here, too, letters allow for a careful and thoughtful statement of a situation that would be very hard to bring up in a face-to-face conversation.

This emphasis on the family unit and on kinship networks, however, limited the capacity of individual family members to express their own immediate, and sometimes strongest, feelings. The multiple addressees of family letters – letters written by children to their ‘dear parents’, for example – suggest a recognition that these letters would be read by many people, and hence this limited the extent to which they could deal with personal matters of deep concern. Even letters between married couples sometimes seem to have undergone wider perusal by the family group, limiting the kinds of things that could be said in them. In the view of Cécile Dauphin, nineteenth-century family letters serve to emphasise the extent to which ‘intimate’ refers to that which happens within the family and is

10 Cécile Dauphin, ‘De l’amour et du mariage: Une correspondance familiale au xix<sup>e</sup> siècle’, *Clio*, 34 (2011), 125–36.



protected and kept away from the outside world, rather than to the more individualised sense of intimacy of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes, however, there was a marked tension between the emphasis on family and the needs and desires of the individuals within it for a greater sense of privacy. The familial framework of the nineteenth century, usually dominated by a male head of household, who assumed the right to read and to oversee all letters written and read within the home, meant that relatively few women could stake an absolute claim to the privacy of their correspondence. The letters of young women to friends and suitors were frequently subject to parental surveillance, while those of married women could be overseen by their husbands. Some women clearly found this patriarchal control irksome.

The novelist Elizabeth Gaskell indicated to her sister-in-law how much she preferred writing letters when her husband was away:

When I had finished my last letter, Willm [*sic*] looked at it, and said it was '*slip-shod*' – and seemed to wish me not to send it ... But I was feeling languid and anxious and tired, and have not been over-well this last week, and moreover the sort of consciousness that Wm may any time and does generally see my letters makes me not write so naturally and heartily as I think I should do ... Still I chuckled when I got your letter today for I thought I can answer it with so much more comfort to myself when Wm is away which you know he is at Buxton.<sup>12</sup>

One does get the sense from some of Gaskell's later letters that her husband gave up reading them, as she commented quite freely on him when writing to his sisters. It is also suggested in a comment that she made about her anxiety in writing to congratulate her friend, the novelist Charlotte Brontë, on the news of her engagement. She hesitated before writing to her, for, as she explained to a mutual friend, 'I've a panic about the husband seeing my letters. Bridegrooms are always curious; husbands are not'.<sup>13</sup>

But while husbands and fathers could be the censors, they could also be the recipients of women's most intimate letters. This was certainly the case in some close and companionate marriages in which women made

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell to Lizzie Gaskell, 19 August 1838, in J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (eds), *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell to Geraldine Jewsbury, 12 July 1854, in Chapple and Pollard (eds), *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 303.

clear that they felt freer communicating with their husbands than with anyone else. As we will see, the letters from Jane Strachey to her husband Richard, in the periods when he was in India while she remained at home, are a case in point. In France, too, where there was greater need to negotiate epistolary convention than was the case in Britain, one can see new kinds of intimacy in some of the letters that women wrote to their husbands. French epistolary conventions, Grassi suggests, made it necessary to convey love without actually using the word, although references to the body could help to convey it. She offers one particularly poignant example in a letter of 1828. 'I embrace you', wrote the wife to her husband:

so do I always end my letters, but for me, what a difference there is! For I only express, here, my desire to embrace you, but do you remember the pleasure I took in that embrace's reality? Well, it's not forever that we are 200 leagues from one another; adieu my dear friend.<sup>14</sup>

This letter, like those of Jane Strachey, was presumably read only by the addressee, and served to underline the sexual intimacy of the marital bond.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the ability to send private letters, combined with the frequency and regularity of postal services, which meant that letters could be delivered several times a day, served also to encourage a new kind of intimacy in letters between lovers. The correspondence of the French republican leader Léon Gambetta and his mistress, the courtesan Léonie Léon, is a case in point. Susan Foley and Charles Sowerwine have recently examined the crucial part that the pair's letters – often written while they were together, and to be delivered as soon as they parted – played in the development of their intense relationship. The interlinking of political and erotic passion in their letters, as in their lives, makes these letters particularly intimate and revealing.<sup>15</sup>

Léon and Gambetta were independent adults when they met in the 1870s. Thus, their letters were not subject to any form of familial oversight, and they were free to express their feelings as they chose. While this freedom allowed them to articulate their passion, it did not mean that they eschewed epistolary convention. On the contrary, as Foley argues, their letters drew on and utilised contemporary conventions of love letters in their effusive expressions of feeling, in the care that they took with following accepted

<sup>14</sup> Marie-Claire Grassi, 'Des lettres qui parlent d'amour', *Romantisme*, 68 (1990), 26.

<sup>15</sup> S. Foley and C. Sowerwine, *A Political Romance: Léon Gambetta, Léonie Léon and the Making of the French Republic, 1872–82* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

'social grammar' in their greetings and salutations, and in the ways they evoked the body to express desire. Léon was particularly inventive in this regard, describing her lover on occasion as her 'Sun king', her 'divinity', her 'divine beloved', her 'dear great orator' and her 'illustrious love', alongside the more common 'beloved' or 'adored one'. The letters also express Léon's recognition of the gender hierarchy that framed their lives: she always used the formal and respectful '*vous*' in writing to Gambetta, while he used '*tu*' in writing to her.<sup>16</sup> Gambetta and Léon wrote to each other constantly, usually daily, so that the letters served to continue both conversations and erotic exchange. Their letters offer an unparalleled insight into a distinctively modern kind of relationship, in the independence of both partners, in the integral role that their shared political interests played in their personal lives – and in their dependence on a regular mail service. They were also embedded in epistolary convention and in a shared knowledge of French literary culture, making the form their own by adhering to some of its rules while seeking, as Léon suggested, to invent a language 'that we alone understand, to describe the intoxications that we alone can feel'.

From the start of their relationship, for Léon especially, letters were integral to it. As Foley and Sowerwine point out, they let her make clear that, even if theirs was not an exclusive relationship, and she continued to have other clients, its importance and centrality in her life could not be questioned. 'Whatever happens', she wrote in her first surviving letter to him, written after their sexual relationship had begun,

I will never retract the unreserved, complete gift I made to you of my entire person, and when my head rests on your heart, it is with unlimited confidence, knowing fully that it is the heart of an honest man in the fullest sense of the word; the noblest of all hearts, the only one worth being adored.<sup>17</sup>

Her letters enabled Léon also both to flatter and to pay tribute to Gambetta in a way that could not have been done in person – and, as this next letter shows, to link their relationship and their letters with the highest points of nineteenth-century French culture:

Those who have written on love were indeed poorly favoured by destiny, because none of them has managed to convey a sense that nearly

16 Susan Foley, "I felt such a need to be loved [...] in a letter": Reading the correspondence of Léonie Léon and Léon Gambetta', *French History and Civilization*, 1 (2005), 254–64.

17 Foley and Sowerwine, *A Political Romance*, p. 33.

accurately conveys the extremely varied and infinite nuances of this feeling, the extent of which it is indeed impossible even to suspect when the soul has not been brought into contact with a soul endowed, like yours, with every greatness and every seduction! Balzac himself, my ex-divinity, sprinkles his amorous accounts with theories which reveal a profound ignorance of the delicious emotions that fill my memory at this moment.<sup>18</sup>

New forms of intimacy were evident also in letters between women friends. By the early nineteenth century, as Norma Clarke has argued, passionate epistolary friendships between women were ‘a recognized genre with a literary as well as a social history’.<sup>19</sup> The intensely emotional language that was increasingly being employed to describe friendships in the late eighteenth century was given a distinctively female and feminine cast in literature, most notably perhaps in Rousseau’s epistolary novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. The intimate relationship between Julie and her cousin Claire, which was both developed and depicted in their letters, became a model that influenced many women in their approach both to friendship and to its epistolary expression. In her study of the codification of intimacy in nineteenth-century France, Grassi notes ways in which expressions of deep affection enter into the letters exchanged between women friends. In place of a formal language of attachments, the term ‘friendship’, once reserved for men, came to be used by women who, ‘when the rapport permits’, also included expressions like ‘dearest’ along with ‘I love you’ or ‘I embrace you’ in their letters.<sup>20</sup> Letters between women chart the development whereby friendship, once seen as the prerogative of men, came in the course of the nineteenth century to be seen as a relationship at which women excelled. ‘The blessed power of a woman to make true friendships’, the British feminist Frances Cobbe insisted in the 1860s, was something that ‘not one man’s heart in a hundred can even imagine’.<sup>21</sup>

The expressions of affection, the way women use intimate and affectionate forms of address in letters, and their emphasis on them as a particularly intimate form of conversation, point to the ways in which they were reworking the conventions of letter-writing, reshaping them to meet their own wishes. In some cases, it seems clear that the women

18 Undated letter from Léonie Léon to Léon Gambetta, cited in *ibid.*, p. 259.

19 N. Clarke, *Ambitious Heights: Writing, Friendship, Love – the Jewsbury Sisters, Felicia Hemans and Jane Welsh Carlyle* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 147.

20 Grassi, ‘Friends and lovers’, 82–4.

21 Frances Power Cobbe, ‘Celibacy vs Marriage’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 65 (1862), 228–35 (p. 233). See also Caine (ed.), *Friendship*, pp. 220–45.

have no idea about, and no interest in, the traditions and conventions of letter-writing, and are working freely in the ways that enable them to express their wishes and ideas. But in other cases, as we have seen in regard to Léonie Léon, for example, one can see women with a knowledge of these conventions reworking them to allow for, and even emphasise, the intimacy that they are seeking in their letters. One other aspect of this intimacy that becomes more and more evident across the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century is the new freedom to discuss bodily matters. Although questions of health had long been discussed in letters, one now begins to see more detailed discussions of physical love and longing, not only in sexual terms but in the embodied feelings of mothers for their children. By the end of this period, painful and difficult bodily experiences, including detailed depictions of childbirth, occur in letters for the first time.

The intimacy of women's letters in the nineteenth century, whether these were letters to parents or to a family group that might read them aloud, or to husbands, lovers or friends who would read them privately and not share or divulge their contents, involved new approaches to their composition and new technologies for their production and transmission. They continued the pattern, already evident in familiar letters, of drawing on a new sensibility and a new approach to how letters should be composed, one that stressed spontaneity and feeling rather than rules. They were necessarily written by a woman herself, rather than by a skilled professional scribe. Hence, they depended not only on women having the requisite literacy, but also on their being easily able to wield a pen, something made easier by technological change and industrialisation, and on their being able to send their letters cheaply, which was made possible by postal reforms.

There was considerable novelty in the informality of nineteenth-century women's letters, and in the ways in which feelings and ideas were expressed in them. They drew on a new use of language that took their authors into uncharted epistolary territory. There were no models for these kinds of letters in any existing or indeed new letter-writing manuals. On the contrary, while such manuals proliferated in the nineteenth century, as did composition books that included sections on the writing of letters, these works tended to draw on much older models of letter-writing, and generally did not address women as letter-writers. In her study of nineteenth-century French letter-writing manuals, Cécile Dauphin analysed the illustrations that many of them contained, and found that 'the typical letter writer was a man, seated at writing desk, surrounded by specific items: 2 quills, one in hand the other

in inkpot, books and bookcase, mantelpiece with mirror and clock'.<sup>22</sup> The masculine portrayal of letter-writing, Dauphin argues, was offset by the essentially feminine portrayal of the recipient. The actual content of these manuals is equally unhelpful when thinking about women's letters. They had a normative purpose, Dauphin argues, and were intended to suggest epistolary rules that maintained the idea of an ordered and hierarchical society from a bygone age. The proliferation of these books clearly indicates a market for them, and Dauphin suggests that they were the kind of book that every middle-class home was expected to have. But, she adds, 'just as recipe books do not reveal much about the everyday diet of the French, letter-writing manuals do not disclose the content of the real letters that were actually penned'. Ironically, these manuals, which expanded in number with the spread of primary education, and were often designed to instruct the newly literate in how to write letters, were completely unsuited to the needs and living conditions of working people, and seem to have had little impact on them.<sup>23</sup>

Dauphin's conclusions about France seem equally to have been the case elsewhere. Letter-writing manuals proliferated in nineteenth-century England too. But the model letters that they offered were overwhelmingly written by and to men, and although some dealt with filial duty, far more dealt with questions of tertiary education or work or religious issues that had little place in women's letters. John Gage suggests that the same thing is true of the approach to letter-writing in the composition textbooks that proliferated in the Anglo-American world. These works, Gage suggests, were concerned to offer students a 'way to master rudimentary writing skills and expression', but it often seems that the one thing that letter-writing lessons in the composition classroom were not intended to accomplish was to enable a student to write better letters in the real world.<sup>24</sup> While this growing distance of letter-writing manuals from the actual writing of letters does seem to become part of what Van der Wahl and Rutten describe as 'the shared epistolary tradition of Western Europe', it was not universal.<sup>25</sup>

22 Cécile Dauphin, 'Letter-writing manuals in the nineteenth century', in Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau and Cécile Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 111.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 112–57.

24 John T. Gage, 'Vestiges of letter writing in composition textbooks, 1850–1914', in Carol Poster and Linda C. Mitchell (eds), *Letter-writing Manuals and Instructions from Antiquity to the Present* (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 200–29.

25 Marijke van der Wal and Gijsbert Rutten, 'The practice of letter writing: Skills, models, and early modern Dutch manuals', *Language and History*, 56(1) (2013), 18–32.

## Writing and Sending Letters

The writing of letters, generally confined to elite women prior to the nineteenth century, became much more widespread with increasing rates of literacy, on the one hand, and technological innovation in the production of letters, on the other. By the mid-nineteenth century, Martin Lyons suggests, it was taken for granted in most European countries that not only upper-class women, but also their middle and even lower-middle-class counterparts, read and wrote their own letters as a matter of course. By the end of the century, this ability was almost universal.<sup>26</sup> Rising literacy rates bear out the extent to which this was the case. Literacy rates were of course variable both in individual countries and across Europe. They were much higher in urban centres in northern Europe – in the Scandinavian countries, Germany, Britain, France and the Netherlands – than they were in Portugal, Italy or Spain. By 1850, about 55 per cent of British women were literate, a slightly higher percentage than was the case in France, but slightly lower than Germany. Expanding employment opportunities for women in some countries, combined with the increased provision of primary education, served to raise literacy rates. The spread of daily newspapers and the massive increase in cheap fiction evident by mid-century both assumed and assisted rising rates of literacy, and by the 1890s, Lyons suggests, the overwhelming majority of women in Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries were counted as literate.<sup>27</sup> Literacy figures are usually based on the evidence provided by finding signatures on wills or marriage documents, and hence involve only the most rudimentary capacity to write. But it would seem that more and more women were also able to read the growing number of novels, domestic and cookery books, and periodicals being produced specifically for them – and to write letters. Christa Hämmerle was struck by the extent to which poor Austrian women of very limited education wrote their own petitioning letters when seeking financial support from a range of different authorities and officials, suggesting that gaining the skill to write letters was deemed a very important one across German society.<sup>28</sup>

Those nineteenth-century women who sought to write letters found an increasing array of writing implements available to them. While some women

26 M. Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1860–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 3–15.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

28 Christa Hämmerle, 'Requests, complaints, demands: Preliminary thoughts on the petitioning letters of lower-class Austrian women, 1865–1918', in Maire Cross and Caroline Bland (eds), *Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter Writing, 1750–2000* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 115–34.

acquired the ability to make, mend and write with quill pens across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the use of such pens unquestionably required special skills. For the vast majority of women, as for men, however, the capacity to write became much easier in the nineteenth century with the advent of new kinds of pens with metal nibs; the development of new types and colours of ink, made possible with aniline dyes; and with mass-produced, better-quality and cheaper paper. While women were the beneficiaries of the new kinds of pen, paper and ink, the driving force in making these improvements was of course the massive documentation and the constant exchange of letters required by the expansion of trade and commerce.

From the late eighteenth century onwards, there was something of a race to design the best and most efficient kind of pen, one that did not require constant shaping and mending. Patents were taken out in several European countries for different kinds of metal nib, and indeed for rudimentary fountain pens that combined these nibs with a mechanism for holding a supply of ink. The more important point in the history of women's letters was the emergence of the large-scale manufacture of metal nibs and dipping pens, which could be obtained easily and cheaply. The pen-making industry developed in Birmingham in the 1820s and remained centred there until around the 1880s. The two earliest large firms – Mitchell & Co., and Joseph Gillott and Sons – turned out hundreds of thousands of pens every year, which sold at a wholesale price of 4 pence per gross by the 1830s. They were soon joined by many other pen-makers as Birmingham came to dominate pen-making globally. Initially, metal nibs were brittle and less pleasant to write with than the much softer quill pen. But technological improvement continued across the nineteenth century with the shift to platinum, before the use of newly discovered elements like osmium and iridium allowed for a softer nib and a pen that was more comfortable to use. Gold was also used to make nibs for luxury pens. While dipping pens remained in use, the challenge of designing a fountain pen continued. Models of fountain pens were around from the start of the eighteenth century, and many improvements both in the nib and in the mechanism for storing ink were made across the nineteenth. But it was not until Lewis Edson Waterman patented a fountain pen that ensured a regular flow of ink from reservoir to nib, in 1884, and then proceeded to mass-produce them, that this new kind of pen became the dominant one.<sup>29</sup>

29 See Dragoni Giorgio and Giuseppe Fichera (eds), *Fountain Pens: History and Design* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors Club, 1997); Jow Nickell, *Pen, Ink & Evidence: A Study of Writing Materials for the Penman, Collector and Document Detective* (Lexington KY: University



It was not only the writing of letters that became much easier for women, but also sending them to the designated recipient. Women benefited greatly from the introduction of a new postal system that involved not only cheap postage, but also the prepayment of letters by the sender. Britain led the way with the introduction of a national Penny Post in 1840. In place of the earlier complex system of charging according to both the number of pages sent and the precise distances travelled, the Penny Post provided an inexpensive and uniform cost for sending letters via the purchase of stamps. The stamp, and therefore the prepayment of letters, was adopted in France in 1849 and in the second half of the century also in Italy, Germany and Russia. Prepayment of mail allowed for a faster and more efficient system of mail delivery. The speed of delivery was further increased with the development of improved roads and by the extensive use of railways rather than horses and coaches for anything travelling substantial distances. Rowland Hill, the man largely responsible for the introduction of the Penny Post in Britain, recognised from the start that the need for a simplified and more efficient national mail system was also important internationally. It was desirable, he wrote in his influential pamphlet *Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability*, 'that foreign and colonial letters should be subjected to as nearly as practicable the same regulation as inland letters'. Here, too, the principle of prepayment was important – all payment was made in the country from which the mail originated, so that it was effectively delivered free in the country to which it was being sent. This approach was accepted and enshrined in the Universal Postal Union (UPU), which was established in 1874 and to which all European countries became signatories. The UPU accepted that there should be a uniform flat rate to mail a letter anywhere in the world, that each country would retain all the money it collected from international postage, and that postal authorities should give equal treatment to foreign and domestic mail.

Both the low cost of postage and the introduction of prepayment through postage stamps were particularly important for women. In arguing for a cheap, prepaid mail system, Rowland Hill often cited incidents that he had seen in which impoverished and distraught women were unable to pay the charge that was required before they were given a letter from an absent child or loved one, suggesting that the cost of paying for letters weighed particularly heavily on poor mothers. The role of a cheap post in holding distant families together was an important issue for him, as it was for the writer Harriet Martineau, who wrote in a public letter:

of Kentucky Press, 1990); and Michael Findlay, *Western Writing Implements in the Age of the Quill Pen* (Carlisle: Plains Books, 1990).

While testimonies to the effect of Post Office reform on the interests of Commerce, Sciences and Literature etc., abound, the benefits it confers on social and domestic interests exceeds in my opinion, the whole sum of the rest. We hear less of this class of results than of others – partly because they are of a delicate nature, involving feelings which individuals shrink from laying open, and partly because they are so universal.<sup>30</sup>

While Hill and Martineau focused on the poor and their need for cheap prepaid mail, the innovation was also warmly welcomed by the many middle-class women who were dependent on their husbands for money, and who were chary of placing their women kin or friends in a difficult situation if they needed to ask for money before receiving a letter. The Penny Post offered many of these women an immense new sense of freedom. It was eagerly anticipated and welcomed by women. ‘After the first of January’, wrote Jane Welsh Carlyle to her cousin Helen Welsh, in September 1839, ‘when the penny-post bill comes into action, I shall surely send “Sibylline leaves” all over the world, and you shall get your share of them’.<sup>31</sup> The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning saw it as revolutionary:

and how we ‘flash a thought’ instead of ‘wafting’ it from our extreme south to our extreme north, paying a penny for our thought, and for the electricity included. I recommend you our penny postage as the most successful revolution since the ‘glorious three days’ of Paris.<sup>32</sup>

## Emigrant Letters

One can see both continuity and change in the reasons for women writing personal letters in the nineteenth century, in the underlying familial and social frameworks in which they were produced, and in how the letters worked and what they did. As in earlier times, the vast majority of women’s letters were family ones, written to parents, husbands, children or siblings who were away from home. But in place of the temporary absences that occurred

30 Letter from Harriet Martineau to Sir Thomas Wilde, 15 May 1843, in Pearson Hill and Rowland Hill, *The Post Office of Fifty Years Ago* (New York: Cassell & Company, 1887). p. 27.

31 Jane Welsh Carlyle to Helen Welsh, 22 September 1839, Carlyle Correspondence, <DOI: 10.1215/lt-18390922-JWC-HW-01> (accessed 20 June 2019); CL 11: 187–9.

32 Elizabeth Barrett to Cornelius Mathews, 28 April 1843, in Frederick G. Kenyon (ed.), *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, vol. I (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1898), <www.gutenberg.org/files/13018/13018-h/13018-h.htm> (accessed 15 May 2020).

as family members pursued an education, or travelled for work or some other specific purpose, or left permanently on marriage, in the nineteenth century more and more letters were written to or by family members who had migrated in search of work, political freedom or a new and better life. These letters enabled women to maintain some familial links, rehearse or create familial stories, and maintain a sense of familial identity, while engaging in new activities or settling in new and distant places. The migration of millions of people from Ireland and from many parts of Europe primarily to the 'new world' of the United States, but also to the settler colonies, especially Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand, produced vast numbers of letters both from those who left Europe and were writing 'home', and from those who remained, sometimes assuming that they, too, would depart as soon as provision had been made or circumstances allowed them to do so.<sup>33</sup>

It is in the letters of women migrants that one probably finds the greatest continuity with the past in terms of both the form of the letter and the approach to correspondence. Although only a very small fraction of the millions of letters written by and to immigrants remain, these letters have been the subject of much interest and discussion recently.<sup>34</sup> They are seen as sources that offer not only information about migrants and their lives, but also show the importance to migrants of their ties to family back at home and to maintaining their sense of identity. Although in some communities, women seem to have been the major correspondents, their letters make up only a small part of the extant immigrant letters. This is a reflection both of men's greater literacy and of patterns of migration in which single men (or married men travelling alone) made up the largest number of emigrants. Women made up only 40 per cent of German immigrants to the United States in the nineteenth century, for example.<sup>35</sup> This was not always the case: as David Fitzpatrick has pointed out, almost 50 per cent of Irish immigrants to Australia in the nineteenth century were women, and there were other situations, too, in which the demands for domestic servants or textile workers led families to encourage daughters rather than sons to migrate.<sup>36</sup>

33 David Gerber, 'Epistolary ethics', *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 19(4) (2000), 3–23.

34 It is impossible to get accurate numbers, but just as one example, Martin Ford suggests that half of the 60 million letters sent from the United States to the United Kingdom between 1845 and 1874 were letters home written by young Irish women.

35 Walter D. Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Helbich and Ulrike Sommer (eds), *News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home*, trans. by Susan Carter Vogel (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 15.

36 David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

The continuity that is evident in letters from emigrants comes primarily from the ways in which they were generally written back to a family, including parents, siblings and sometimes also extended kin, and in how they were intended to be passed around or read aloud. These letters often allowed for the telling or retelling of family stories in ways that kept alive the links between dispersed family members. Often, however, these were letters from social groups not well represented in the family letters of earlier periods. The poverty and lack of opportunity in their home country that led most emigrants to seek a new life also meant that many of them had limited education or literacy. This is a group whom, as Martin Lyons has shown, constantly apologised for and expressed concern about their bad writing. Some emigrants, and the families to whom they wrote, sought assistance in writing letters, either paying someone to write for them or seeking help from a more educated relative or neighbour. Thus, at a time when increasing numbers of middle and upper-middle-class women were writing letters themselves with great informality and ease, secure in the knowledge that only the addressee would read their letters, many humbler women lacked either the capacity to write their letters themselves or the certainty that those to whom they were addressed could read them. Their correspondence continued to be a social and collaborative activity for most of the nineteenth century.

In some cases, the letters written home from those who had left Europe were of immense importance to others who were thinking about or planning to migrate. The peopling of North America, Martin Ford argues, 'owed more than a little to a letter, specifically, what was called *the American letter*, written – sometimes dictated – by millions of immigrants to their families and friends at home'. The majority of these letters were written by young Irish women, whose letters home:

delivered news to loved ones, afforded an outlet for emotions, encouraged new migration through descriptions of the good life in America, and offered instruction on how intending immigrants might join those who had gone ahead. *The American letter* was the voice of experience from a strange but enticing land.<sup>37</sup>

As Irish women found it easier to get work than did their male counterparts, their letters also often contained money, which was needed by those at home

37 Martin Ford, 'The Irish girl and the American letter: Irish immigrants in 19th century America', *The Irish Story (Irish History Online)* (2018), <[www.theirishstory.com/tag/martin-ford/#.Y-BlxOxBzm8](http://www.theirishstory.com/tag/martin-ford/#.Y-BlxOxBzm8)> (accessed 3 April 2023).

but also played an integral part in encouraging others to follow their example and to migrate, in a system that came to be known as chain migration.

Letters were written infrequently, sometimes with a gap of years between them, and their scarcity was often a subject of complaint. 'What on earth is the matter with ye all, that none of you would think of writing to me?', wrote Cathy Greene from Brooklyn, New York to her mother in Ballylarkin, County Kilkenny:

The fact is I am heart-sick, fretting. I cannot sleep the night and if I chance to sleep I wake with the most frightful dreams. To think it's now going and gone into the third month since ye wrote me. I feel as if I'm dead to the world. I've left the place I was employed. They failed in business. I was out of place all summer and the devil knows how long. This is a world of troubles. I would battle with the world and would never feel dissatisfied if I would hear often from ye. And know candidly things are going on but what to think of how ye are forgetting me. I know if I don't hear from ye prior to the arrival of this letter at Ballylarkin I will be almost dead.<sup>38</sup>

A similar point was often made in the letters sent home to Ireland from those who migrated to Australia, although the gaps between their letters were often more than a few months. 'I often think if our friends in dear old Ireland knew the excitement and delight letters and papers caused when we received them here, the [sic] would write much oftener than the [sic] do', wrote Isabella Wylie to her sister-in-law in Dublin in 1857. But this letter, only the second Isabella had sent home, was written eight years after she arrived in Adelaide and, as she made clear, corresponding was not an easy thing:

It is as I might say a painful pleasure to me to begin to write a letter home for I seem to have so much to say that it would take volumes to write all at once, but I hope now we have commenced to correspond I hope we shall continue to do so until perhaps we shall meet someday.<sup>39</sup>

Several studies of immigrants' letters have stressed the extent to which they incorporate a range of particular, even formulaic expressions of duty, devotion and concern. In some cases, the formulae centred on religion. In researching the letters of late nineteenth-century Lithuanian immigrants

38 1 August 1884, in Matt Keough, 'Inspiring emigrant letters home to Ireland from America in the famine era', *Irish Central* (16 March 2015), <[www.irishcentral.com/roots/history/inspiring-emigrant-letters-home-to-ireland-from-america-in-the-famine-era](http://www.irishcentral.com/roots/history/inspiring-emigrant-letters-home-to-ireland-from-america-in-the-famine-era)> (accessed 24 January 2019).

39 Isabella Wylie to Maria Wylie, 6 March 1857, in Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation*, pp. 114–15.

to the United States, Daiva Markelis interviewed a number of the women from that community who became nuns in the first half of the twentieth century. Their early schooling made them more literate than their parents, and often they were the ones called on to write letters home. When told by her mother to write a letter, Sister Cyril Krasauskas recalled that she would ask:

What should I tell them? I don't know what to tell them. 'Praised be Jesus Christ,' that's the first thing you write. 'I kiss your dear hands.' Then I would say, 'What should I write about now?' 'Write about the farm, how we live here, that we have animals'.<sup>40</sup>

Between the formal and ritualised greeting and the news about the farm, Krasauskas would also have included a line or two about the family's health.

The fixed form of these letters was similar to that of the letters of the Polish peasants in the nineteenth century studied by Thomas and Znaniecki. Here, the greeting, a variation of 'Praised be Jesus Christ', would usually be followed by the information that the writer, with God's help, was in good health and was succeeding, and wished the same for the recipient, her family.<sup>41</sup> These introductions could be lengthy because family members were often mentioned by name, and their health and happiness frequently enquired about individually. Thomas and Znaniecki have termed such letters 'bowing letters' because of their emphasis on deference and politeness. The letters of Dutch immigrant women writing home from America were more secular in tone, but also usually began with a formulaic statement: 'We are in good health and hope the same is true for you', introducing the topic of health, which was a significant theme throughout most of their letters.<sup>42</sup>

One of the consequences of following these requirements was a sameness of tone in the letters. William Wolkovich-Valkavicius remembers that they 'all sounded alike', an impression echoed by Sister Anita Petrosus:

We would always write the same way: I, your sister Elena, greet you with the words 'Praised be Jesus Christ'. We used to write the same things

40 Daiva Markelis, "Every person like a letter": the importance of correspondence in Lithuanian immigrant life', in Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber and Suzanne M. Sinke (eds), *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 107–23.

41 William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, 2nd edn, vol. I (New York: Dover, 1958).

42 Suzanne M. Sinke, *Dutch Immigrant Women in the United States, 1880–1920* (Urbana IL and Chicago IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 131.

over and over again ... [I, Elena, am in good health. My family is doing well.] And, of course, when they wrote back, they would write more or less the same thing.<sup>43</sup>

Some now argue that the news contained in a letter was less important than its capacity to reinforce the notion of connection. David Fitzpatrick, however, sees the matter differently.<sup>44</sup> In his view, the formulaic greetings and expressions of affection and respect to parents or older relatives often underline the kind of support and consolation that letters offered, and that made them so crucial for the sense of self and well-being of migrants. But this ritual did not prevent the letters from conveying immense amounts of significant information. Indeed, Fitzpatrick argues that these formulaic expressions are often ignored – or deleted in edited collections of letters – because they seem of less interest than the rich and fresh information often contained in the letters.

Migration in the nineteenth century was often a family process, and many sets of migrant letters contain detailed discussion about which family members should follow those who had already migrated, and when and how they should do so. Their goal was often to reassemble at least part of their family in a new place. Hence, many of the extant immigrant letters come from sets of family letters in which those of women are firmly placed within a wider family correspondence. Sometimes this is evident in each letter, as a woman's letter may be written alongside, or appended to, one from her husband or siblings, and they may participate in discussions carried on in these other letters as well.

The letters of the Klinger family, written from the United States back to Germany across the period 1849–83, are one such example. The first immigrant, Anna Maria, the oldest daughter, left Württemberg in 1849, in the midst of a terrible agricultural depression, and settled in New York. Anna Maria came alone and suffered severe hardship on the difficult and long voyage. But she was an energetic and enterprising woman, finding work as a domestic servant on the day she arrived, and marrying soon after. Written shortly after she arrived in New York, her first letter home makes clear both the difficulties she faced and her positive approach to her new life:

Beloved parents and brothers and sisters,  
Out of filial and sisterly love I feel obliged to inform you about my well-being in America. After a long and trying journey I arrived in New York

43 Markelis, 'Every person like a letter', p. 113.

44 Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation*, p. 10.

[sic] safe and sound, and until now I have been quite well ... Now I want to tell you about my situation, that is on the same day I arrived in New York, I went into service for a German Family. I am content with my wages for now, compared to Germany, I make 4 dollars a month in our money (10 Guilders). If you can speak English then it's considerably better, since the English pay a good wage, a servant gets 7 dollars to 10 dollars a month, but if you can't speak or understand English you cant ask for so much pay. But I hope that things will get better, for it's always like that, no one really likes it at first, and especially if you are so lonely and forlorn in a foreign land like I am, no friends or relatives around.<sup>45</sup>

Her parents should not worry, she added: 'The dear Lord is my shield and refuge.' Even in this first letter she raised questions about her siblings migrating, saying the boys should come too, and pointing out that America is 'very good for girls who have to work in service' and so her sisters also should come.

Anna Maria's first few letters were written entirely alone, but from the moment she married, her regular but infrequent letters home were interspersed with those of her husband, Franz Schano. Anna Maria had some basic education and wrote her own letters using a simple structure and a limited vocabulary 'with a good deal of spelling and punctuation errors but largely acceptable grammar'. Her husband evidently looked upon her family as his own and worked very hard for their well-being. Anna Maria's second extant letter, written at least a year after the first, notes that she has saved 40 dollars since her marriage. The next letter, which is undated, also raises the question of immigration for others in her family, indicating strongly Anna Maria's own sense that others too should migrate – but that they must make up their own minds on the matter. Several of her siblings followed her to America and they joined in the letter-writing circle, including comments on her letters, or adding hers to their own. Ceremonial expressions of filial duty and devotion, and enquiries about the health and well-being of her parents, were an important and recurrent element of her letters, but they also included extensive discussion of the merits and problems of migration, and a very clear depiction of her own life in America:

Dear parents and brothers and sisters, I certainly don't want to tell you what to do, do what you want for some like it here and some don't, but the only ones who don't like it here had it good in Germany, but I also think

45 Anna Maria Klinger to her family, 18 March 1849, in Kamphoefner, Helbich and Sommer (eds), *News from the Land of Freedom*, p. 536.



you would like it here since you never had anything good in Germany. I'm certainly glad not to be over there, and only those who don't want to work don't like it here since in America you have to work if you want to amount to anything.<sup>46</sup>

The economic circumstances of the family in Germany were dire and continued to deteriorate, and the letters of Anna Maria, and then of Barbara and the other siblings who joined them, constantly express concern about their parents, regretful that they will not come to America to be with their children. Occasionally, Anna Maria's letters express a little irritation that the siblings still in Germany assume that all the money to look after their parents should come from those in America. 'I must admonish our brothers Eberhart and Jakob not to let our poor parents suffer want', she wrote in one letter:

for example when our mother asks for some skim milk and you first ask for money. I am very sorry to hear that. Aren't they your parents too? Believe me the money we've sent them is hard earned too, I think you must see that we know what's going on better than you.<sup>47</sup>

But the letters were not frequent enough to keep up with family developments and, in 1858, Anna Maria wrote expressing her grief at hearing about the death of her mother, having not even known that she was ill. Had she known:

Then we could have sent her something right away, to take better care of her in her miserable sickbed. Oh I am so sorry that I couldn't see my dear mother again and that I couldn't do her anymore favors, when she did so much for us children, before we were grown up and her life turned sour.<sup>48</sup>

Both the importance of letters and the difficulties in writing them is captured powerfully in the letters between Isabella and Matilda Wyly, written after Isabella's migration from Ireland to Australia around 1850. The long period of time between letters underlines this difficulty. Perhaps the fact that her parents were dead, and that some aunts and uncles had also come

46 Anna Maria Klinger to her family (n.d.), *ibid.*, in Kamphoefner, Helbich and Sommer (eds), *News from the Land of Freedom*, p. 539.

47 Anna Maria Klinger to her parents, 16 August 1857, *ibid.*, p. 541.

48 Anna Maria Klinger to her family, 15 July 1858, *ibid.*, p. 545.

to Australia, made letters seem less like a fundamental resource to Isabella, and she does not seem to have written home for more than seven years after arriving in Australia, writing to her sister-in-law in 1857 to express her sorrow on hearing of the death of her brother. But this letter emphasised her own desire for news. 'After the Silence and separation of seven long years', she wrote, 'I at last take the opportunity of writing to you, for I feel very anxious to hear from you & your dear little ones.' She commented on the whereabouts and well-being of all the other members of the family in Australia, and made clear her continuing interest in the family at home before turning to herself:

I have told you little of my own history as yet. I have great reason to be thankful in fact I have no reason to regret my coming to Australia, for I am much better of [*sic*] than I ever should for been atome [*sic*]. On my first arrival to Adelaide, I felt a stranger in a strange Land ... I knew no one, nor had I a friend to take my hand, but thank God I had Him who never has forsaken me. He be my Father and Friend and I trust he ever will be if we look to Him.<sup>49</sup>

Life was very hard at the beginning, but Isabella was soon joined by a couple of aunts and uncles to whom she remained close. She seems to have been both competent and resourceful, gaining and holding down a good and steady job in a millinery shop, and then in a drapers. For her, life in Adelaide was preferable to life back home – even though they were sometimes 'melted with the heat'. She enjoyed her work in the shop, which had a steady pattern:

We open at 9 in the morning and close at 7 at night. I am alone I might say my own mistress. I have a young person in the shop with me which makes it the more comfortable. It is not like the shops at home. Nothing so stif [*sic*] I do not think I could live in a place of business atome [*sic*] after living here.<sup>50</sup>

As David Fitzpatrick argues, Isabelle Wyly's letters show the importance of letters to a disintegrating family – which this one clearly was, as some members of it went to America while others were in Australia, and a small number struggled to survive in Ireland. Like those of other immigrants, her letters often included or sought likenesses of family members so that she

49 Isabella Wyly to Maria Wyly, 6 March 1857, in Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation*, p. 101.

50 *Ibid.*

could actually see what they looked like, and were sometimes accompanied by newspapers to give a clearer sense of daily life.<sup>51</sup> Her letters always included a comment on how pleased she was to receive the long-looked-for letter, or how it had assuaged her anxiety about the family's well-being, and about whether earlier letters and small gifts had arrived. She was not a relaxed or easy writer of letters, always expressing concern that her 'scribbles' (spelt 'cribble' in the earlier ones) were not sufficiently interesting or well written. 'You must excuse this horrid scribble', she wrote to her nephew, Edward Wyly:

For you will see it is horrid paper to write on and I am in great haste to be in time for the mail. As one of the Children intends writing I shall say no more for I expect the [*sic*] will tell you more news that will interest you than I can.<sup>52</sup>

Isabella's letters make clear the continuing success of her marriage, which produced ten children and gave her great responsibility in the running of a large household. But the letters were intermittent. After the eight-year wait before she wrote home in 1856, Isabella corresponded regularly with her sister-in-law and nephew for a few years, but then there were big gaps until the mid-1860s, and a nine-year gap until her last letter of 1877. As usual, this letter began by saying how delighted she was to receive Matilda's letter:

I must say I had long thought I was forgotten by all whom I loved in the dear old country, that is as far as letter writing. But dear old Uncle John Gratten sends me a Dublin Paper every month for which I am so thankful for Fanny used to write to me but I have not had a line now for 9 years. Just fancy that. I often wondered the cause of such silence between us and ... I could not think what had become of you all.<sup>53</sup>

### Family Letters: Husbands and Children

The writing of letters was a very important activity for middle and upper-middle-class wives. Letters served to keep family members in touch with each other and, often for new wives, they also provided a way of making

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>52</sup> Isabella Wylie to Edward, 29 April 1865, *ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>53</sup> Isabella Wylie to Matilda, 21 October 1877, *ibid.*, pp. 135–6.

contact and establishing ties with in-laws. Women, particularly middle-class women, were usually required to constitute themselves anew when they married and became wives and mothers – and they usually did so, Cécile Dauphin argues, through their letters. It was through letters that they negotiated their new domestic life and affirmed their social position. From the moment they married, women constituted themselves as wives and mothers through describing their new responsibilities and articulating how they saw and understood their new roles and responsibilities as the mistress of a home. Women, Dauphin noted,

find in the epistolary work which is so close to a domestic task, a way to affirm their social place. Thus, from the moment of marriage, they construct themselves as married women, wives and mothers, in describing their new responsibilities in their letters. Immersed in their role, they like to describe their lives, to give their point of view, enjoying simultaneously the position of author and of mistress of the house.<sup>54</sup>

Alongside the letters written to the family as a whole in the nineteenth century, there are also an increasing number written by wives to their husbands, and intended only to be read by those men. The absence of husbands from home as they pursued careers or business activities produced extensive collections of marital letters. Wives sometimes went away too, but this was more unusual. Imperial service was one important cause of marital separation, particularly in Britain. If letters from migrants maintain a continuity with earlier ones, those that were written by wives to husbands in imperial contexts often suggest something new. The frequency of mail services and the relative affluence of many imperial administrators meant that separated husbands and wives, and even children who were away from parents, often expected to receive a letter in every mail delivery, and wrote anxiously when a ship arrived and they did not receive a letter. Many of the letters written in an imperial context are family ones to be read aloud and shared. However, quite early in the century, one begins to see letters that are not for sharing, that are intended to be read only by the addressee. This is particularly so for letters between husbands and wives, and here too one can see how letters enable women to negotiate marriage and to establish a sense of themselves within it.

The letters of Jane Strachey (1840–1928) to her much older husband, Richard, offer a good illustration. As we will see, Jane's intimate letters to

54 Cécile Dauphin and Danièle Pouban, 'De l'amour et du mariage: une correspondance familiale au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Clio*, 34 (2011), 125–36.

her husband make very clear her emotional dependence on him, as she explains both that he is the only person to whom she is able to say what she feels, and the only one she can bear to see her cry. But the letters also allow her to articulate a new sense of herself as she develops new interests and a new self-confidence. As a senior administrator in the British Raj, with a stint as director of public works, Richard Strachey spent long periods of time in India from his marriage in 1860 until his retirement in 1873. His wife, Jane Grant, was the daughter of another imperial administrator, and met and married Richard in India. Jane was scarcely twenty when they married, while Richard was forty-two. In the subsequent years, she spent far more time in England than he, dealing with pregnancies and the care of their young children. The separation was always a source of pain, and she assuaged it by writing to him often and at great length.

'My dearest Richard', she wrote the first time she was away from him for an extended period, during her second pregnancy, as she had remained in Britain until the baby's birth while he had returned to India. 'It is such a comfort to sit down and write to you; I shall tell you everything, however trivling [*sic*] as Mr. Jarrod says, but I know you will like that.' This letter, the first of many written in diary form and over many pages, enabled Jane not only to express her love, but also to explore and develop her plans for reading and intellectual development, in order to become a better and more informed mother:

I went to book sellers' shops yesterday and got a very nice Edgeworth for ... I was not successful about Gil Blas, nor Mill's Pol Econ [*sic*] I am determined to get the latter to read, and to begin steadily to improve my mind, on account of my boy; not of course that I am likely directly to teach him anything recondite whilst he is under my care, but that if my mind is rational it must influence his rationally. This resolution has been much strengthened by reading an essay of Sydney Smith's on Female Education.<sup>55</sup>

Jane noted how thrilled she had been to hear her father had been made KCB (Knight Commander). But it was to Richard that she left the making of the proper response: 'Do tell him how glad you and I are. Of course I will write, but you know I never can say anything that I feel to anyone but you, & I am afraid he might think I don't care'.

55 Jane Strachey to Richard Strachey, 28 January 1862, in Strachey Papers, EUR F/127 125. See also Barbara Caine, *Bombay to Bloomsbury: A Biography of the Strachey Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 55–60.

Jane was miserable at having to deal with a pregnancy without her husband, and confessed she had been crying because ‘mama said if I had a bad confinement I might not be allowed to go to India for two years. So when I came up to bed I cried and cried at the bare idea like any goose’.<sup>56</sup> It was Richard Strachey, rather than Jane, who directly expressed physical longing in his letters, but Jane certainly responded. ‘I am so glad you told me how you thought of me when you were on deck and in the night when you wake’, she wrote in response to one of his letters, ‘and you must think I am thinking of you at the same time you do of me, for I am always thinking of you’.

In general, Jane Strachey’s letters to her husband were long and chatty, and provided him with the details of her daily life. ‘I have just come down from the children and made myself comfortable before the fire & am going to have a good long chat with you’, she wrote in one, underlining the sense of closeness and intimacy that the letters offered.<sup>57</sup> The twenty-page letter that followed was written over a week, starting on 23 November and ending on 2 December, and covered her activities and those of their children every day in-between.

Letters also assisted nineteenth-century mothers to negotiate relationships with, and make their feelings clear to and about, their children. Those of Jane Strachey to her ten children illustrate this point well. To begin with, the greetings reveal much about how she felt about each child: James, her youngest son and favourite child, was the only one addressed as ‘darling’, four of her other children to whom she was close were ‘dearest’, and four who were less favoured simply ‘dear’. Her letters also enabled her to establish very particular relationships with each child. Those to her son Lytton, for example, which often dealt with literary matters, always involved a literary game, as each letter began with a quote from Ben Johnson’s poem ‘Buzz Quoth the Blue-fly’. The quoting of consecutive lines of the poem served both as a private talisman underlining their shared literary interests and as a way to indicate the sequence of the letters.<sup>58</sup> The frequency of letters

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Jane Strachey to Richard Strachey, begun November 23 1866, in Strachey Papers, EUR F127/126.

<sup>58</sup> Buzz quoth the blue-fly,  
Hum quoth the bee,  
Buzz and hum they cry,  
And so do we:  
In his ear, in his nose  
Thus do we see,  
He ate the dormouse,  
Else it was thee.

to the children also indicated their standing in maternal affection. Thus Marjorie, the least favoured of Jane Strachey's children, was excluded entirely from the normal weekly round of letters, and she frequently wrote home to complain about not being informed of important family matters.

The letters of the popular English novelist Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–65) offer another example of how a mother negotiated relationships with, and articulated her understanding of, her daughters. As Gaskell was very anxious lest her letters be seen by strangers, and insisted that her daughters burn her letters, only those written to her eldest daughter Marianne, who ignored this injunction, remain. Gaskell's letters to Marianne are affectionate, chatty and amusing, detailing her daily round, and commenting on the activities she was engaged in and the people that she met. She assumed these letters would not be shown to others: on one occasion, when Marianne showed a letter from her mother to a friend, she was reprimanded for doing so. 'I am sorry dear, that you showed my letter to Miss Brooks', Gaskell wrote, 'I should certainly not have written so, if I had thought it was to be passed on.'<sup>59</sup> Like most Victorian mothers' letters, Gaskell's frequently contained advice: to practise the piano not only often, but well; to read extensively before forming or stating opinions; to make sure that any clothes bought were of good quality. But the advice was usually lightly given and secondary to the warm expressions of affection and concern.

One notable aspect of Gaskell's letters was her expectation that her daughter would have her own views – and that sometimes these would outweigh the opinions of her mother. Thus, on one occasion, Marianne wrote seeking permission to make a visit that her parents didn't wish her to do. Gaskell nonetheless expected her daughter to go:

though I saw many objections to your going to Mrs Fearon's yet as these were all based on matters of taste (not principle) I thought your wish to go quite overbalanced them. And having been applied to for a decision and given it (although I certainly gave my reasons for personally disliking your mixing in any society of which I knew so little), I hoped and expected you would have gone.<sup>60</sup>

Gaskell was clearly devoted to all four of her daughters, and concerned to ensure that each was given the opportunities that she needed to develop

59 Elizabeth Gaskell to Marianne Gaskell, 7 December 1852, in Chapple and Pollard (eds), *The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell*, p. 216.

60 *Ibid.*

her own potential and treated in the way that was most appropriate for her. She often feared for them, especially lest something happen to prevent her overseeing their development until they were adults, and she wrote a long letter to one of her sisters-in-law laying out her sense of the daughters and of their personalities as a way to ensure that someone else shared her understanding of them. Gaskell's letters, as Pauline Nestor has argued, allow one to see how one Victorian woman understood motherhood and the anxieties she always felt about the vulnerability of her children.<sup>61</sup> Gaskell read a range of contemporary psychological literature and this informed her sense of motherhood, and particularly her sense of her own responsibility in moulding the characters of her children. It was important, she wrote to her sister-in-law, to know the girls 'as they are: not their mere outsides':

[Marianne] is such a 'law unto herself' now, such a sense of duty, and *obeys* her sense. For instance she invariably gave the little ones 2 hours of patient steady teaching in the holidays. If there was to be any long excursion for the day she got up earlier, that was all; & *they* did too, influenced by her example ... Now to turn to Meta, who is a great darling in another way. MA looks at nothing from an intellectual point of view; & will never care for reading – teaching music, & domestic activity, especially about children will be her forte. Meta is untidy, dreamy, and absent; but so brimfull of I don't know what to call it, for it is something deeper, & less showy than talent ... She talks very little except to people she knows well; is inclined to be *over-critical* & fastidious with everybody and everything, so that I have to clutch up her drawings before she burns them, & she *would be angry* if she could read this note, praising her. Then she loses time terribly – and *wants* MA's sense of duty, for she gets so absorbed in her own thoughts &c that she forgets everything. Florence has no talents under the sun; and is very nervous. Julia is witty, & wild, & clever and droll, the pet of the house; and I often admire Florence's utter absence of jealousy & pride in Julia's doings and sayings.<sup>62</sup>

Gaskell's letters stand in marked contrast to those of another nineteenth-century woman novelist, George Sand (1804–76). Sand was known throughout

61 Pauline Nestor, 'A conscientious and well-informed Victorian mother: Elizabeth Gaskell's letters to her daughters', in *Women's History Review*, special issue on *Letters between Mothers and Daughters*, 24(4), 2015, 109–20.

62 Elizabeth Gaskell to Anne Robson, 1851, in Chapple and Pollard (eds), *The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell*, pp. 160–1.



Europe as a novelist and journalist. Her stories of rural life and of women's search for love and recognition were widely admired and influenced generations of young people seeking a new approach to marriage and family life. Sand's letters to her children, however, offer little hint of the radicalism of some of her ideas or of her own rejection of social convention.<sup>63</sup> They were far heavier than Gaskell's and more tutelary in tone as she commented on the conduct of her children and laid out ways for improvement. At the same time, it is clear that the letters she wrote to her son, Maurice Dudevant, served in her view as a way to establish a special and secret relationship with him through which she could influence his views and bind him closely to her. It is impossible not to be struck by the coldness of her letters to her daughter Solange in contrast to the warmth of those to her son. Sand's letters to Maurice always stressed her concern that he apply himself, as she felt he ought, to reading seriously, thinking through issues and expressing himself clearly. But the letters were always affectionate and approving. 'I received your letter, my darling child', she wrote in one letter in 1836, when he was about thirteen:

And see that you very well understood mine. Your comparison is very good, and, since you make use of such fine metaphors, we will again try to ascend together the mountain where virtue abides. It is indeed very hard to climb it; for at every step we meet with objects of seduction which endeavour to mislead us. It is of these things I wish to speak to you, and of all defects that which you must most fear is too great love of self.

She used her letters to create a private, even secret shared world with Maurice, hoping always that he would accept her views and values in preference to the more conservative ones of his father:

You will understand that our correspondence must remain secret and that you must neither show it nor speak about it. I also desire you not to make any mention of it to your father. You are aware that his opinions differ from mine. You must respectfully listen to all he may tell you; but your conscience is free and you will choose between his ideas and mine, those which you may think the best.<sup>64</sup>

63 Belinda Jack, *George Sand* (New York: Random House, 2010).

64 George Sand to Maurice Dudevant, 3 January 1836, in Raphael Ledos de Beaufort (trans. and ed.), *Letters of George Sand* (London: Ward and Downey, 1886), vol. 1, pp. 228–9.

The letters to Maurice differ markedly in tone, in content and in expressed affection from those Sand sent to her daughter Solange. Maurice, as Katherine Jensen argues, accepted Sand's views and her demands for obedience and self-denial.<sup>65</sup> By contrast, Solange resisted her mother's demands, and hence was cast out and rejected. She was sent to boarding school while very young and left there for long periods without a maternal visit. When Solange, at the age of thirteen, wrote to her mother complaining of boredom and asking her to visit and to bring some new clothes, she received a cold response:

You've written me a rather stupid letter. I don't believe in this great boredom that burdens you and you don't believe a word of it either. I recognize this kind of pensionnaire. At my convent, we used to say the same thing, but when I had outings, I was even more bored by doing nothing. Moreover, since one can always escape boredom by working, I advise you to become unbored yourself. As for me, I'm not moved by any of this, and since bored people are always boring, when you want me to come see you, you'll do well not to use such means as these. You ask me for outfits that are perfectly useless at the pensione. When you've lost your coquetry, I'll let you do as you like.<sup>66</sup>

It was not only mothers who negotiated family relationships through letters in the nineteenth century, but daughters too. In the course of that century, increasing numbers of women began to leave home to attend a school or university, to work as governesses or nurses, or to take up certain kinds of philanthropic work. A small number became financially independent, mainly as writers. This independence changed the tenor of some mother-daughter letters in quite notable ways, as daughters began to be able to set some of the terms of their relationship with their mother. Familial duty was rarely ignored, but it could be redefined and interpreted in new ways.

It was this redefinition that the writer Harriet Martineau insisted on in a letter to her mother. Martineau had never been happy in her familial home, and greatly enjoyed the freedom that she experienced when the success of her essays in political economy enabled her to move to London alone in the early 1830s. Shortly after she had settled there, however, her mother, who was living in somewhat straitened circumstances, decided that she

65 Katharine Ann Jensen, 'The Chopin affair: George Sand's rivalry with her daughter', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 35(1) (2013), 41–64.

66 George Sand to Solange Dudevant, n.d. *Letters of George Sand*, vol. 5, pp. 305–6 (emphasis in original). See also Jensen, 'The Chopin affair'.

and her sister would go to live with Harriet. Martineau's response to this news makes it very clear that, while unable to reject or refuse her mother's decision, it was not one that filled her with glee. In a carefully worded letter to her mother, she lays out her sense of how their sharing a home will work. The household had to begin modestly, Harriet Martineau insisted: she was earning well currently, but her income was not guaranteed. While prepared to live with and support her mother, she had to be allowed to live the life she chose. 'I have no doubt we shall make one another happy,' she wrote:

if we at once begin with the change of habits which our change of position renders necessary. I fully expect that both you and I shall occasionally feel as if I did not discharge a daughter's duty, but we shall both remind ourselves that I am now as much a citizen of the world as any professional *son* of yours could be. You shall be most welcome to my confidence, as ever, and to any comfort that may be derived from living in the same house, and meeting at the same table, and taking frequent walks, and having many mutual friends. My hours of solitary work and visiting will leave you much to yourself; this you know and do not fear; so now the whole case is before you, and you know exactly under what feelings I say 'Come'.<sup>67</sup>

### Letters to Sisters

Although they did not begin in the nineteenth century, letters between siblings, and especially between sisters, became increasingly intimate and important in that century. In her portraits of Jane and Elizabeth Bennett, the two oldest sisters in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen depicts a new kind of sisterly relationship. In it, the closeness, love and sharing of values between the sisters is their main support, greatly exceeding what either of these daughters shares with her mother. Jane Austen herself, or so her own letters suggest, enjoyed an even closer relationship with her sister Cassandra, with whom she lived in intimate companionship throughout her life. Jane was 'such a friend as can never be surpassed ... the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow', wrote Cassandra to their niece after Jane's death.<sup>68</sup> The letters that Jane and Cassandra

67 Harriet Martineau to Elizabeth Martineau, 8 July 1833, in Karen Payne, *Between Ourselves: Letters between Mothers and Daughters 1750–1982* (London: Michael Joseph, 1983), p. 90.

68 Cassandra Austen to Fanny Knight, 20 July 1817, in Deirdre le Fay (ed.), *Jane Austen's Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 344.

wrote to each other when separated for a few days or weeks, as they were when one or the other was called on to travel with their parents, or to visit other family members, provided the opportunity for an almost continuous conversation. Jane Austen's letters to Cassandra were often written like a diary, enabling her to provide a detailed, and often humorous and ironic, commentary on her own daily activities and those of her companions, and to comment similarly on the daily activities about which Cassandra wrote:

I take the first sheet of this fine striped paper to thank you for your letter from Weymouth, & to express my hopes of your being at Ibthorp before this time. I expect to hear that you reached it yesterday Evening, being able to get as far as Blandford on Wednesday. Your account of Weymouth contains nothing that strikes me so forcibly as there being no Ice in the Town; for every other vexation I was in some measure prepared:& particularly for your disappointment in not seeing the Royal Family go on board on Tuesday, having already heard from Mr. Crawford that he had already seen you in the very act of being too late. But for there being no Ice, what could prepare me?<sup>69</sup>

This quotidian intimacy and the focus on daily activities, rather than any discussion of more private or emotional issues, also meant that the letters could easily be read by, or to, other members of the family, without in any way disrupting the conversational flow or the close, constant and affectionate communication of the sisters. But the importance of this correspondence to Jane herself is made very clear by her frequent comments on whether or not she has received a letter from her sister – and her ostensibly comic statements of distress if someone else received a letter from Cassandra rather than her. 'I expected to have heard from you this morning', she wrote on one occasion:

But no letter is come. I shall not take the trouble of announcing any more of Mary's children, if, instead of thanking me for the intelligence, you always sit down and write to James. I am sure nobody can desire your letters so much as I do, and I don't think anybody deserves them so well.<sup>70</sup>

This close sisterly communication is evident in many other sets of nineteenth-century letters across Europe, such as those of the sisters of

69 Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 14 September 1804, *ibid.*, p. 96.

70 Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 25 November 1798, *ibid.*, p. 21.

the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin in Russia, for example, or of the suffragist Pippa Strachey and her sibling Pernel Strachey in Britain, or of the popular Swedish author Frederika Bremer and her sister Charlotte. Bremer's letters also suggest that the closeness of the relationship between sisters eclipsed that of mother and daughter. In her 'Preface' to Frederika's letters, which she had edited for publication, Charlotte Bremer explained why she included letters addressed to herself rather than keeping them secure for the public gaze. She did so, she insisted, because they showed 'the full breadth of sisterly love'. Frederika Bremer's letters, she insisted:

resemble, in many respects, the well known letters of Madame de Sevigne to her beloved daughter, Madame de Grignan – the same ease and grace of style, the same exclusive feeling for the person to whom the letters are written. The letters of the former reflect motherly love, those of the latter sisterly love, which sees everything belonging to its object in a beautifying and poetical light.<sup>71</sup>

The letters themselves bear out this description. In letter after letter, especially in the years before Frederika Bremer was able to leave a very unhappy familial home and devote herself to writing, and to her feminist and philanthropic interests, she insisted that Charlotte and Charlotte's happiness were the main sustaining force in her life. 'That you are well is to me a necessity', she wrote in one, 'and this knowledge throws a light upon my path, like a friendly little star, so that complete darkness never surrounds me ... On you alone rests the responsibility and duty to take care, above all for your own happiness, for the sake of mine'.<sup>72</sup> Frederika's intense love of Charlotte made her very anxious when Charlotte became engaged, as she feared this marriage would eclipse her relationship with her sister:

Since we parted from one another I have been like unripe fruit. I was tolerably calm when you left; but the agony began soon after. Yesterday, all the afternoon and evening, I felt a dreadful longing to see you once more, to embrace you, weep and bless you, and to pray you to forgive every little unkindness of which I may have been guilty towards you. My tears are flowing while I am writing this. Charlotte, my dearest Charlotte! will you perhaps one day forget how warmly, how long, how sincerely we have

71 Frederika Bremer (ed.), *Life, Letters and Posthumous Work of Frederika Bremer* (London: 1868).

72 Frederika Bremer to Charlotte Bremer, 14 January 1828, *ibid.*, p. 117.

been united? Will the novel scenes and new relations into which you enter, the novel sensations which gradually fill your soul, ever let old memories wane? I dread it sometimes. But above all, may you be happy – feel yourself happy. That is all I want. I have no heart for brothers-in-law; I feel that they take from me what I hold dearest – my sisters. But may [he] perhaps one day be able to convert me. If he makes his wife happy, he shall find me an affectionate and grateful sister.<sup>73</sup>

Charlotte's biographical sketch of her sister suggests that her marriage did not seriously disrupt the sisterly love and communication. Frederika spent a considerable amount of time with her and her husband, and was an integral part of their life, so that the closeness between the sisters continued throughout her life.

### Letters between Friends and Lovers

Just as letters between sisters assumed an increasingly important place in the nineteenth century, so too did letters between women friends. The nature and importance of women's friendships was a frequent theme in nineteenth-century women's writing, not only in fiction but also in essays and periodical literature, especially some of that associated with the emerging women's movements of the mid and late century. Friendship itself had ceased to be understood predominantly as a relationship between men and had not only become one in which women were engaged, but even one for which they had a special predilection and talent. Many people accepted both the importance of women's friendships to their general health and well-being and the importance of letters as a way to maintain and facilitate these friendships, when women friends were separated either temporarily or on a long-term basis. But what is also notable here is a growing self-consciousness among some women of the ways in which they constructed themselves in writing letters, and constructed a different sense or version of themselves in letters to different correspondents. This was always a feature of letters, but the new sensibility of the nineteenth century, and an increasing awareness of a sense of self and of one's own subjectivity, made it more pronounced.

The letters of women novelists offer a particularly rich source for exploring both the nature of women's friendships and the importance of letters in their development and analysis. The letters of Charlotte Brontë (1816–55), ones that

73 Frederika Bremer to Charlotte Bremer, 19 November 1830, *ibid.*, p. 158.

have become the subject of extensive discussion in recent years, are particularly interesting here because of her strong sense of the importance of letters to women and her consciousness of the ways that letters allowed and encouraged different forms of self-creation. Brontë had two close women friends: Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor. She had met them both in 1831, at Roe Head School, and remained friends with them for the rest of her life. The two women were very different: Ellen Nussey was 'a quiet conventional and pious girl from nearby Birstall', while Mary was 'a Radical, intellectual and totally unconventional girl from Gomersal' who subsequently migrated to New Zealand, where she opened a shop. Unfortunately, most of Brontë's letters to Mary Taylor were destroyed so that one cannot contrast them. But she was well aware of the differences and commented occasionally on them in her letters to her two friends. In a 'sentimental humour', she noted in one letter to Ellen Nussey:

I sat down and wrote to you such a note as I ought to have written to none but M.Taylor who is nearly as mad as myself; to-day when I glanced it over it occurred to me that Ellen's calm eye would look at this with scorn, so I determined to concoct some production more fit for the inspection of common-sense.

Brontë was particularly conscious of this self-construction, perhaps because her correspondence was so concentrated on two very different women. But one can see a similar kind of self-creation in many other sets of nineteenth-century letters between women friends. That between the invalid poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the older and then more prominent writer Mary Russell Mitford is one of these. The two women were introduced to each other by one of Barrett Browning's cousins in 1836, when the Barrett family was living in London. Mitford was a well-established writer at the time, forced to keep up a high rate of publications to support herself and her father, whose extravagance had destroyed both her mother's fortune and a substantial lottery that she had won. The letters between the two women are extremely affectionate. They addressed each other as 'beloved friend', asked tenderly after the other's health and well-being, and ended in a similarly loving vein. What was most important about the letters, especially for Barrett Browning, is the way in which they connected her to the literary world, and to current and recent books and writers and the world in which they were produced. A letter of March 1842, devoted to Fanny Burney's recently published diary, serves as a good illustration. Mitford had only read the first volume – and didn't care for the portrait of Burney herself that emerged. 'As to the little Burney', she wrote, 'I don't like her at

all, and that's the truth. A girl of the world – a woman of the world, for she was twenty-seven or there about – thought clearly and evidently of nothing on this earth but herself and [her novel] *Evelina*.' But she was greatly taken with the world that Burney depicted.

Discussions of the literary world led the way to more personal ones. Mitford's enthusiasm and support for the diarist Hester Thrale's marriage to the young Italian singer Gabriel Piozzi, which caused Samuel Johnson and others to totally shun her, probably encouraged Barrett to hope that there would be similar support from her friend when, fearing that her father would prevent her marrying him, she decided to leave her home and elope with Robert Browning. The letter that Mitford sent on receiving the news no longer exists, but Barrett's response makes Mitford's support very clear:

I began to write to you, my beloved friend, earlier, that I might follow your kindest wishes literally, and also to thank you at once for your goodness to me, for which may God bless you. But the fatigue and agitation have been very great, and I was forced to break off – as now I dare not revert to what is behind. I will tell you more another day ... But oh, the anguish I have gone through! You are good, you are kind. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for saying to me that you would have gone to the church with me. *Yes, I know you would.* And for that very reason I forbore involving you in such a responsibility and drawing you into such a net.<sup>74</sup>

While Elizabeth Barrett Browning sought to include her husband in her friendships and was able to maintain a completely independent correspondence when married to him, not all women writers were quite so fortunate. Charlotte Brontë, for example, did not have this freedom when she married. Elizabeth Gaskell's concern about her letter having to bear the scrutiny of her fiancé when she wrote to congratulate Charlotte Brontë on her engagement was prescient, for Brontë's correspondence was indeed overseen by Arthur Nicholls both as fiancé and as husband, and he disapproved of it very strongly. 'Men don't seem to understand making letters a vehicle for communication', Brontë wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey:

they always seem to think us incautious. I'm sure I don't think I have said anything rash; however, you must BURN it when read. Arthur says

74 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, Moulins, 2 October 1846, in Kenyon, *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, <[www.gutenberg.org/files/13018/13018-h/13018-h.htm#Footnote\\_149\\_149](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13018/13018-h/13018-h.htm#Footnote_149_149)> (accessed 10 May 2020).



such letters as mine never ought to be kept, they are dangerous as Lucifer matches, so be sure to follow a recommendation he has just given.<sup>75</sup>

There was perhaps some justice in Nicholls's view, as Brontë's letters to Nussey describe in some detail the development of her relationship with Nicholls, including some frank and unflattering comments that would have appalled him. On 15 December 1853, she wrote to describe his first declaration of affection. She had sometimes had a vague thought that he had strong feelings for her, she noted, but 'restrained my own misgivings'. One Monday evening, however, she felt she understood 'the meaning of his constant looks and strange feverish restraint':

After tea I withdrew to the dining-room as usual. As usual Mr N sat with Papa till between eight & nine o'clock. I then heard him open the parlour door as if going. I expected the clash of the front door. He stopped in the passage: he tapped: like lightning it flashed on me what was coming. He entered – he stood before me. What his words were you can guess, his manner – you can hardly realize – nor can I forget it. Shaking from head to foot, looking deadly pale, speaking low, vehemently yet with difficulty – he made me for the first time feel what it costs a man to declare affection where he doubts the response.<sup>76</sup>

Brontë's subsequent letters detail her father's hostility to the match, Nicholls's distress and erratic behaviour, his leaving of his curacy with her father and finding of another, and finally her own and her father's acceptance of the idea of her marrying him, which both thought of as something of a *mésalliance*. Her letters combine some sympathy for Nicholls with impatience at his behaviour and uncertainty as to what life with him might be like. 'Papa has a perfect antipathy to him', she wrote on 6 April 1853:

and he – I fear – to Papa – and Martha hates him – I think he could almost be dying and they would not speak a friendly word to him. How much of all this he deserves I can't tell – certainly he never was agreeable or amiable – and is less so now ever – and alas! I do not know him well enough to be sure that there is truth and true affection – or only rancour and corroding disappointment at the bottom of his chagrin.<sup>77</sup>

75 Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 18 January 1847, in Juliet Barker (ed.), *The Brontës: A Life in Letters* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1994).

76 Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 15 December 1852, *ibid.*, p. 357.

77 Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 6 April 1853, *ibid.*, pp. 369–70.

Charlotte Brontë's intense loneliness after the death of her siblings made her more receptive to Nicholls's devotion, and she was pleased when local parishioners got up a testimonial to him and when her father, despite his injured paternal pride that she should marry a man with so little money and so few connections, finally accepted him as a suitor to his daughter. But even then she was not uncritical. When he came to visit as her fiancé, she wrote to Ellen that he had come to Haworth wasted, strange and nervous, but had been well treated there and had gone away better. He was, wrote Brontë:

Perfectly unreasonable, however, on some points – as his fallible sex are not ashamed to be – groaning over the prospect of a few more weeks of bachelorhood as much as if it were an age of banishment or prison. It is probable he will fret himself thin again in the time – but I certainly shall not pity him if he does – there is not a woman in England but would have more sense – more courage – more sustaining hope than to behave so.<sup>78</sup>

But even without any actual knowledge of Charlotte Brontë's revelations, or of the full intimacy of her correspondence with Ellen Nussey, Nicholls thought she wrote 'too freely' to her friend. He demanded that Nussey promise to burn all the letters that Brontë wrote her. 'He says that women are most rash in letter-writing', Brontë explained to her friend:

They think only of the trustworthiness of their immediate friend and do not look to contingencies – a letter may fall into any hand. You must give the promise – I believe – at least he says so, with his best regards – or else you will get such notes as he writes to Mr Sowden – plain brief statements of facts without the adornment of a single flourish.<sup>79</sup>

Once Ellen Nussey pledged herself to destroy Charlotte Brontë's letters, Nicholls agreed not to read or censor them. It was this fear of letters falling into the wrong hands, Brontë suggested, that explained why 'men's letters are proverbially uninteresting and uncommunicative – I never quite knew before why they made them so'. Fortunately for posterity, Ellen Nussey disregarded her pledge and did not destroy the letters from her friend.

As the letters of both Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell show, one of the things that the letters of married women to their friends did was to enable them to comment on their marriages and husbands and, for a

78 Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 27 May 1854, *ibid.*, pp. 388–9.

79 Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 31 October 1854, *ibid.*, p. 394.

time at least, to feel some freedom from the constraints of their marital relationships. One can see a rather more extreme case, in which an epistolary relationship with a woman friend is set up consciously as an alternative to, and in a sense an escape from, marriage, in the letters of Rahel Varnhagen to her friend Pauline Wiesel.

As a Jewess and an intellectual, the salonnière Rahel Varnhagen (1771–1833) was an outsider in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century German society, a difficult position that she gave up with some relief when, at the age of forty-three, she married the gentile diplomat, civil servant and biographer Karl August Varnhagen von Ense. While this marriage brought a measure of comfort and protection to Varnhagen, it also meant turning away from the intellectual life and freedom, and what she saw as the passionate pursuit of truth, that had dominated her earlier years. In order to protect this sense of herself, and of her own truth, and to retain some sense of her former self, Rahel Varnhagen sought to re-establish a friendship with Pauline Wiesel, who had once been the mistress of Prince Louis Ferdinand and the one that Hannah Arendt describes as ‘the most compromised of the friends of her youth’.<sup>80</sup> The two women did not see each other often, but they established an epistolary friendship that lasted until Varnhagen’s death.

Varnhagen used her letters to Pauline Wiesel to reassure herself that she had not changed her in any fundamental way. ‘Dear heart, Unique Pauline! Who must stay living!’ she wrote in one of these letters, ‘otherwise I will be in my grave, so lonely! There is only one person who knows who I am. You, you, you! Nobody will believe it: I know it’.<sup>81</sup> Wiesel was the only woman that Rahel Varnhagen regarded as her equal – and indeed admired because, unlike Varnhagen herself, she had not married and succumbed to bourgeois propriety in her desire to belong to German society and to overcome her strong sense of being an outcast as a Jewess. Stretching as they did over many years, the letters between Rahel Varnhagen and Pauline Wiesel stress both their constancy and unchanging natures in the midst of dramatic changes in the wider social world, and a sense also of their complementarity:

Such people as you should have had my musings, my circumspection, my rationality. Such people as I your courage, and your beauty. Otherwise

80 Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, ed. by Liliane Weissberg (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957), pp. 240–54.

81 Rahel Varnhagen to Pauline Wiesel, 10 July 1810, in Lorely French, *German Women as Letter Writers, 1750–1850* (Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), p. 177.

we have completely what makes a talented human nature. Sense, senses, intellect, humour, sensitive heart, sense for art and nature.<sup>82</sup>

Again and again, she insisted that she was not in any essential way different from the friend of Pauline's youth:

You love me still and I am still worth it if I was ever worth it because I have not changed at all, only the conditions and environments around me. I think and feel and see as correctly as always. But it does not make an impression on others any more, youth is still only in my interior.<sup>83</sup>

Although he had been instrumental in reconnecting his wife with Pauline Wiesel, Karl Varnhagen disliked and distrusted Wiesel and objected strongly to the relationship. He made his opinion clear – and took his revenge – subsequently. When he published the letters of his wife after her death, he removed not only any letters to Wiesel, but any mention of her. He did, however, publish other very interesting letters in which Rahel Varnhagen explored the importance of letters and letter-writing in the development and articulation of her own subjectivity. Her sense of being an outsider and her early life experiences gave her a sense of self that did not accord with social norms and expectations, and indeed was developed in contrast with them. For Varnhagen, letters offered the possibility of an untrammelled conversation. Where others stressed the importance of letters as a continuation of a conversation, or a form of communication integrally linked to a recipient, Varnhagen sometimes stressed rather the differences between letters and conversations that came from the very fact that the recipient of the letter was not present when the letter was being written. Hence, the responses of the recipient did not have to be taken into account, as they would have had the person been present. In conversation, she adapted her assertions and views according to the reactions of the speaker. 'Only in letters', she insisted, 'is that otherwise. Where my glance does not meet an object, no approaching relationship summons me and claims me, there I only face myself, and always look only into my inner self.'

There are many sets of letters to or between women friends in which what is most striking is the intensity of feeling that is expressed. The question of women's friendships in the nineteenth century, and the meaning of their expressions of intense and even passionate devotion, has been the subject

82 Rahel Varnhagen to Paulien Wiesel, 1818, *ibid.*, p. 178.

83 Rahel Varnhagen to Pauline Wiesel, 11 October 1815, *ibid.*, p. 200.

of much discussion, as many historians have sought to establish whether the strong emotions that they express and the physical descriptions of embracing or kissing actually involved sexual feelings – or served rather to reflect non-sexual feelings and spiritual and other kinds of emotion that were expressed in passionate terms in their correspondence. The letters of the French socialist and feminist writer Flora Tristan to her friend Olympe Chodzko, especially those written while Tristan was in London in 1839–40, are an interesting example, filled as they are with expressions of longing, tenderness and physical affection. ‘Understand clearly, strange woman’, Tristan wrote in one of her letters:

that your letters send shivers of pleasure down my spine. You say that you love me – that I magnetise you, that I send you into ecstasy. You are toying with me perhaps? – But be on your guard – for a long time I have had the desire to be loved passionately by a woman – oh! – how I would love to be a man *so as to be loved by a woman* – I feel, dear Olympe, that I have reached the point where no man’s love could satisfy me – that of a woman perhaps? ... Woman has such a powerful heart, such a powerful imagination, such resourcefulness of spirit.<sup>84</sup>

Hard as it is for contemporary readers not to see this letter as a sexual one, both Stephane Michaud and Susan Grogan, who have worked extensively on Tristan, question the validity of reading this letter as a statement of sexual desire or of explicit sexual feeling. After this letter articulating her passionate love for Olympe, moreover, Tristan made it clear that ‘for me, love, I mean real love, can only exist between two souls – and it is very easy to understand love – two women can experience love – and two men likewise’. Moreover, as Grogan points out, she wrote this letter while she was in London, alone and feeling isolated and miserable.<sup>85</sup> Michaud agrees, suggesting that it was this visit to London that brought the golden age of Tristan’s intimate letters. The importance of this context gains added weight if one compares this letter to earlier ones that Tristan had sent her friend. It is considerably more expressive and passionate than the letters she had sent Olympe in the couple of years prior to this, which dealt with a range of general questions and concerns, although they too made very clear the immense importance of this friendship.

84 Flora Tristan to Olympe Chodzko, 1 August 1839, in Susan Grogan, *Flora Tristan: Life Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 78.

85 *Ibid.*

Tristan's earlier letters to Olympe make very clear how unhappy and lonely she is in England:

Since I have been in this wretched country I have not met a single woman who is conscious of her womanhood. I am leading a dog's life here! I haven't kissed a man's cheek or shaken hands with a woman ... I cannot tell you dear friend how much this cold, colourless life, devoid of all affection irritates me.<sup>86</sup>

A similar point might be made about the letters of the Russian émigré Natalie Herzen. Natalie had accompanied her husband when he left Russia for Western Europe. Alexander Herzen, a prominent member of the Russian radical intelligentsia, had already experienced both imprisonment and exile, and he decided to leave Russia early in March 1847 as Czarist repression was threatening to become more extreme. Natalie, who was also his cousin and some seventeen years his junior, had devoted herself almost entirely to him and their children since their secret marriage in 1837. Although sometimes referring to revolutionary developments in her letters, Natalie was less devoted to political causes than she was to the romantic ideas and stress on the importance of feeling of George Sand. Sand's insistence that sincerity, feelings and especially love were the appropriate bases of action – rather than convention or social rules – appealed strongly to this group of young radicals. In January 1848, Natalie Herzen met and became close friends with the daughter of another émigré family, Natalie Tuchkov. At the time, Herzen was in her early thirties and the other Natalie barely twenty. The two spent most of each day together, writing passionate letters whenever they were separated.

'Since I have come to know you', Herzen wrote to Tuchkov in one of her earliest letters:

your existence is on the same footing as the most intimate and vital objects of my thought. A day rarely passes – indeed I do not know whether there has been a day – on which I have not thought of you as I fell asleep and again as I waked. The feeling of emotion which enters into my love for the children has entered into my love for you. It has become an essential element of my life and will, I think, remain so to my life's end.<sup>87</sup>

86 Stéphane Michaud (ed.), *Flora Tristan, La Paria Et Son Reve* (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2003), p. 112.

87 Natalie Herzen to Natalie Tuchkov, n.d., in E. H. Carr, *The Romantic Exiles: A Nineteenth-Century Portrait Gallery* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 40.

Natalie Herzen's passionate expressions of love invoked George Sand as she sometimes referred to her friend by the name of Sand's fictional heroine Consuelo. 'Consuelo di mi alma, dear child, my beloved Natalie!' she wrote a few months after the Tuchkovs had left the Herzens and their daily meetings had come to an end:

I say it from the depths of my soul, with all my strength, all my fullness, all my passion. Yes, I love you terribly! Your letters illuminate my love for you ... In Italy I was born again. How beautiful was that time, how I would love to live it again ... I would love the sun, the warmth, the mountains around, the distant horizon, the sea: and would press you to me and be born with you far far away.<sup>88</sup>

The writing of intimate letters by women to their women friends was probably easily done and not greatly supervised, even in respectable and conservative middle-class homes. But letters between unmarried women and young men were quite another matter. Women, as Cécile Dauphin points out, 'expected to receive love letters but were rarely able to reply without compromising themselves'.<sup>89</sup> Martin Lyons, too, argues that writing love letters was very difficult for a respectable young woman living in her family home. If a young woman did receive a love letter, her response would be carefully monitored and supervised by parents.<sup>90</sup>

Across the nineteenth century, however, small but increasing numbers of women lived outside this realm of familial respectability and parental control. In aristocratic circles at the start of the century, and in those of radicals, socialists, bohemians and 'new women' later in the century, women experienced a much greater degree of personal freedom, allowing them to establish a range of different relationships. The love letters of women who broke the prevailing social codes and engaged in relationships outside marriage describe intimate feelings with a strength and intensity that had no place in nineteenth-century ideas of female decorum. In these letters, one can see women exploring and expressing their own feelings and desires, and their sense of what is happening in their relationship. Letters enabled women to negotiate these relationships in many different ways: to set them up in the first place, either by initiating or responding to an invitation from someone else, and then often to explain their behaviour and

88 Cited in Carr, *The Romantic Exiles*, p. 41.

89 Dauphin, 'Letter-writing manuals in the nineteenth century'.

90 Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People*, pp. 70–2

feelings. In some cases – that of Rosa Luxemburg, for example, as we will see – the letters enabled her to make clear her desires, wishes and feelings; her disappointment at her lover Leo Jogiches's inadequate responses; and her recognition of how impossible this relationship was.

Some of the most interesting and outspoken love letters were written by women whose distance from conventional ideals of femininity was already evident in their intense political involvement – and whose lovers were usually involved in the same political causes. At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one can see this close linking of political involvement and erotic love particularly clearly in the letters of the writer and political powerbroker Madame de Staël (1766–1817). De Staël was one of the most celebrated women writers and salonnieres of the early nineteenth century, best known across Europe for her novels, especially *Corinne or Italy*. She was well known as an intellectual and a liberal and a prominent opponent of Napoleon, and indeed was famous for her involvement in the great political questions of the day. She was a wealthy woman, accustomed to the sexual freedom that accompanied aristocratic mores. Her marriage was one of convenience and, right from the start, she engaged in relationships with other men.

One of the men Madame de Staël most cared for was Count Louis de Narbonne-Lara, commander of an infantry regiment and then of the National Guard, and for a short time, with her help, minister of war for Louis XVI. He was greatly indebted to the largesse that Madame de Staël was able to provide, but he proved an unreliable partner. In 1792, after the overthrow of the monarchy in August and the subsequent violence, which he escaped with her help, Narbonne fled to England. Madame de Staël wanted to join him, but she was pregnant and so went first to her family home in Coppet, Switzerland. Feeling vulnerable and alone, she wrote him a series of increasingly distressed letters, grieving at his silence and apparent lack of commitment. 'Once again I put pencil to paper to implore you to explain to me your inconceivable silence', she wrote on 19 September 1792:

If you are weary of life with me, at least wait until I have given birth. I am in despair, alone here, unable to talk to anyone. I spend all night and day crying. My God, if I had been told that, after having saved him on 20 August, he would be the one to condemn me to death. I am resolved to that; I have been suffering too long. If I get no news from you, I shall put an end to it. You are the most cruel, the most ungrateful, the most barbarous of men. Those who are killing in Paris are doing less harm than your atrocious unconcern; without any doing on my part, it will



suffice to end my life. In short, I am horribly ill. My poor child, why give birth to a child who will resemble you. But perhaps I am wrong; it is not your fault. I ought to believe everything rather than such a monstrosity. I implore you, force yourself until I have given birth.<sup>91</sup>

The relationship languished for another year or so, finally coming to an end in 1794. In one of her last letters to Narbonne, Madame de Staël again links their relationship and his behaviour with political developments in France:

If I ever see you again, I shall tremble when contemplating you as being in the presence of the man who hurt me most in the world and who destroyed all confidence. You have very badly known, very badly treated a feeling such as mine; you were not created to judge it. A Frenchman, French blood knows no gratitude; it is a memory and they have none of it. I spend my life serving them all and, I have no doubt, each one in his own way will, in the final analysis, have some traits similar to yours.<sup>92</sup>

Histrionic and impassioned letters were part of all Madame de Staël's relationships, but there is a sense of genuine pathos in those to her last lover, the Swiss army officer Albert de Rocca, whom she secretly married after the death of Baron de Staël in 1811. Rocca was more than twenty years younger than her, and her letters to him made clear her anxiety about her own age. She sometimes worried that Rocca, too, was unfaithful to her, although her letters suggest nothing of the anguish evident in the earlier ones to Narbonne. 'I trembled when you spoke to me about those young demoiselles', she wrote to him when they were visiting England in 1812:

Do not leave the old bird for them. Where will you get so much affection and gratitude as in my poor heart, battered by the hurricane, and which has found asylum in your fidelity? ... At every moment of the day I speak of you, and the wind and the flowers and the sun and the clouds know that the thought of you is always present. Dear companion of the rest of my life, do not abandon the old bird.<sup>93</sup>

91 De Staël to Narbonne, 19 September 1892, in Kathleen Jameson-Cemper (ed.), *Madame De Staël: Selected Correspondence* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), p. 36.

92 De Staël to Narbonne, 25 March 1794, *ibid.*, p. 65.

93 De Staël to Albert de Rocca, 7 July 1813, *ibid.*, p. 317.

In the event, Rocca remained faithful, accompanying her back from London to France and then to Coppet, where she died in June 1817. By then his health, too, was in serious decline, and he died some six months later.

Natalie Herzen's letters to the German poet Edward Herwegh, who seems to have replaced Natalie Tuchkov in her affections by 1849, are similarly intimate – although the conflict they deal with is not her sense of being abandoned, but rather the difficulty of maintaining this relationship while both she and Herwegh were married to others. In August 1849, Herzen and Herwegh made an expedition to Montreux in the course of which they became lovers. In diary entries and the many letters that she wrote to Herwegh after this happened, Natalie makes clear her immersion in nineteenth-century romanticism, most particularly in the sense of love as the noblest of the emotions, and hence of loving as being a supreme act of virtue. So much did Natalie Herzen believe in the divinity of love that, as she made clear in this letter, she assumed that her love for Herwegh would convey happiness to all around them:

I transport myself into the future – all, all will be happy, we shall have made everyone happy, harmony and serenity in our circle – the children gay, sympathy even between them – how we shall grow in that atmosphere of tranquillity and perfection – the beauty of nature – and on this azure background *those* moments blaze like stars.<sup>94</sup>

As one who had always been somewhat in awe of her much older and better-educated husband, Natalie Herzen, through her letters, suggests that she found in Herwegh someone whom she could mother and love protectively:

I often take you on my knees, I rock you like a little child, my darling child – and you fall asleep, and I gaze at you, gaze at you a long time – and I put you on the bed, and I fall on my knees beside you – and then I cover you with kisses. Dear, dear, dear! Yes, and then you wake up and we talk and embrace each other.<sup>95</sup>

Inevitably, both Alexander Herzen and Emma Herwegh found out about the affair – and neither saw it, as Natalie had hoped they might, as enhancing their general happiness! On the contrary, as her letters from December 1849

94 Natalie Herzen to Edward Herwegh, n.d., Herzen-Herwegh Papers, vol. I, BL Add Mss 47664. See also Carr, *The Romantic Exiles*, p. 69.

95 Natalie Herzen to Edward Herwegh, n.d., in Carr, *The Romantic Exiles*, p. 70.

show, she was enmeshed in a very complicated situation, with a distraught and jealous husband and, as soon as she reconciled with him, an equally distraught and jealous lover, and the anger and anguish of the wife of the lover who was also her friend. Natalie Herzen did not see Herwegh again, and this sad and complex situation only came to an end tragically with her death in childbirth early in 1852.

Half a century later, the letters of Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919), the Polish revolutionary, socialist theorist and activist, sent to her equally politically engaged Russian lover, Leo Jogiches, offer insight into a rather more complex relationship. Luxemburg, as Tim Mason has shown, sought to establish with Jogiches ‘a full and comprehensive union which would fuse passions, intellect, mutual analysis, child-rearing, caring for aged and sick relatives, and the politics of socialism, a union which would combine a loving home and shared revolutionary struggle’.<sup>96</sup> But Jogiches, while he loved her, could not adequately respond to or accept her love, or the kind of relationship that she wanted. Her letters to him provide a detailed analysis of their relationship, including how she saw many of their unsatisfactory meetings and periods of time together. They were comrades, engaged in the same political struggle, but from the start she bemoaned his total involvement in political activity – and his reluctance to focus attention on personal and emotional matters. ‘My dear! I have been very angry with you’, she wrote when she was in Paris engaged in editorial work in 1894:

and I have a few nasty things to reproach you for. It’s put me in such a melancholy mood that I had the intention of not writing to you any more until my departure. But feelings gained the upper hand. Here, then, what I have to reproach you for. Your letters contain absolutely nothing besides the *Sprawa Robotnicza*, criticism of what I have done, and indications of what I should do. When you indignantly say that, after all, you do send me so many loving words in every letter, my answer to you is that tender little words aren’t enough for me. I’d gladly send them back to you [in exchange] for the tiniest bit of information about your personal life. Not the slightest word! The only thing that connects us is the cause and a leftover tradition of earlier feelings. That’s very painful.<sup>97</sup>

96 Tim Mason, ‘Comrade and lover: Rosa Luxemburg’s letters to Leo Jogiches’, *History Workshop Journal*, 13(1) (1982), 94–109 (p. 96).

97 Rosa Luxemburg to Leo Jogiches, 25 March 1894, in George Adler, Peter Hudis and Annelies Laschitzka (eds), *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 10, emphasis in original.

Almost all her letters to Jogiches contain, alongside party and editorial matters, a discussion of her own feelings and longings, and her sense of the limitations of his emotional response and his focus on political questions:

My one and only, in my imagination I'm holding you close, my head on your shoulder, my eyes closed resting. I'm worn out! And you poor dear, now that you've more time, you've probably started working on your pamphlet. You've so little time! How is your work going? How well I know you. Because of this letter you'll send me a tender one, and when I send you a cold letter, I'll get a cold one in return. You imitate everything I do. You never have a mood of your own unless you're furious and nasty ... Sometimes it really seems you're made of stone.<sup>98</sup>

The content of the letters eventually shift, especially after Luxemburg moves to Berlin in the mid-1890s, when they contain a constant series of questions as to why he will not come and join her there. Her own involvement in the German Social Democratic Party, and the massive amount of writing and editing that she was doing, did not in any way prevent her from thinking about her personal life – or imagining one with him.

In 1899, she wrote in response to a letter from him indicating that he had sent her a birthday present:

My dear, beloved Dyodyo. I felt happiest about the part of your letter in which you wrote that we are both still young and able to arrange our personal life. Oh, Dyodyo, my golden one, if only you keep your promise! ... Our own small apartment, our own nice furniture, our own library; quiet regular work, walks together, an opera from time to time, a very small circle of friends who can sometimes be invited for dinner; every year a vacation in the country, one month with absolutely no work! ... And perhaps even a little, a very little baby? Will this never be allowed? Never? Dyodyo, do you know what possessed me all of a sudden during a walk in Tiergarten? Without exaggeration! All of a sudden, a little child got under my feet, three or four years old, blond in a pretty little dress and staring at me. A compulsion swelled in me to kidnap the child, to dash home and keep it for my own. Oh, Dyodyo, won't I ever have my own baby?<sup>99</sup>

98 Rosa Luxemburg to Leo Jogiches, in Mason, 'Comrade and lover', p. 71

99 Rosa Luxemburg to Leo Jogiches, 6 March 1899, *ibid.*, p. 73.

The wistful optimism of this letter did not last, and as Jogiches still refused to join her in Berlin, Luxemburg had an increasing sense that the relationship could not last. A threat to end their correspondence and their relationship in 1900 brought a more extensive discussion of their personal life:

Dyodyo, my dear ... Yes, you are quite right. We've been living separate spiritual lives for a long time. But it didn't start in Berlin. Even in Zurich we were spiritual strangers, and the frightful loneliness of these last two years is engraved on my mind. But I was not the one who withdrew, who shut myself off. Exactly the opposite. You ask if I've ever asked myself, what's happening inside you? All I can do is smile bitterly. Yes, I did ask. I asked myself thousands of times, and I asked you again and again, loudly, insistently only to get the same answer, always the same – that I don't understand you, that you can't count on me, that I'm incapable of giving. Finally I stopped asking and never showed that I was conscious of or interested in anything. Now you ask how I could ever think you were attracted to another woman, since no woman but me is capable of responding to you, of understanding you. Exactly what I told myself in the past ... so my reaction to the same doubt was different in 1893? Of course it was. I've changed since then. I was a mere child, now I'm an adult, a mature person in perfect control of myself, capable of gritting my teeth in pain, of showing nothing, absolutely nothing.<sup>100</sup>

The ultimatum contained in the correspondence of this year brought Jogiches to visit her in Berlin. But the tenor of the relationship did not change, and it became even more tense in the course of the complicated revolutionary politics of 1905. Two years later, Luxemburg brought it to an end, helped perhaps in doing so by the new relationship that she had begun with Kostya Zetkin, son of her close friend Klara Zetkin and a much younger man, who had moved into her flat as a friend and become a lover. Her letters to him suggest that, in the few years they had together, Luxemburg had found the kind of man that she had described in her letter to Jogiches – and who worshipped her and was happy to live under her domination:

My sweet treasure, today I got your short letter beautifully written in ink. But the first one, scribbled in pencil, also made me very happy – it was after all the first news [from you] after a pause! Dudu beloved, I am so happy that you still love me! I have such a longing to be near you, I miss

100 Rosa Luxemburg to Leo Jogiches, 30 April 1900, in Mason, 'Comrade and lover', p. 97.

you everywhere and in everything; even when you are only sitting near me silently, everything acquires meaning and vitality.<sup>101</sup>

## Wartime Letters

World War I brought an immense expansion in letter-writing. Some 10 billion letters, cards and parcels were sent to and from the Western Front during the war. Germany had the highest volume, with around 7 million letters being sent to or from the front each day. France came next with around 4 million letters, while the British numbers were substantial too: between 1 million and 2 million letters being sent every day. These numbers demonstrate the great increase in literacy across Europe by the early twentieth century. Almost all men and women born after 1880 in Britain, France and Germany were literate, although this was not the case in Southern and Eastern Europe. Many of those who were literate were also proficient at letter-writing. Although some World War I correspondence contains the excuses for bad writing, spelling and expression that Martin Lyons sees as characteristic of the letters of the poor in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the majority of the letters from the front, even from workers and peasants, seem to have been written with an ease that illustrates the way many young men and women had learnt how to write letters as part of their primary education.<sup>102</sup>

Compulsory schooling in France, Martha Hanna argues, ‘impressed on all schoolchildren the importance of letter writing as a social activity that would keep the extended family intact’, and the early Third Republic paid attention to the rules, protocols and cultural significance of family correspondence, emphasising that those who mastered the art of letter-writing became, in the process, fully fledged members of the cultural community that was France.<sup>103</sup> German children also learnt the rudiments of letter-writing as part of their primary education, as did those of their English counterparts who remained in elementary school for the full duration, as letter-writing was taught only in the final year.

World War I is problematic in some ways in terms of women’s letters. Many, probably most, wartime letters were written by women who were under constant pressure to correspond with husbands, sons and lovers,

101 Rosa Luxemburg to Kostya Zetkin, 28 May 1908, in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 259.

102 Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People*. pp. 48–59.

103 Martha Hanna, ‘A republic of letters: the epistolary tradition in France during World War I’, *American Historical Review*, 108(5) (2003), 1338–61 (p. 1343).

often, even daily. But relatively few of their letters survived. The letters written by soldiers to their families were usually kept with great care, but the conditions of war did not allow for letters to be saved in any significant numbers. 'A damp overladen knapsack', as Martha Hanna says, 'was a poor place to preserve letters and postcards.' Soldiers apparently abandoned their letters reluctantly, for most men in uniform lived for the loving reassurance that letters brought, and they would have held on to them if possible. Some women's letters did survive: kept by the recipients, or sent home for safe-keeping, or returned if the recipient was killed before they arrived. There are also a number of letters written by the many women engaged in some kind of active war service as Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) members or nurses or drivers that were sent back to their families and kept for them at home.

It is in France that there has been the most interest in collecting and studying the letters of soldiers' wives. This has been done within the framework of researching how married couples maintained their relationships through letters during the Great War. The first study of the letters of a married couple in wartime, Martha Hanna's *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War*, offers a detailed analysis of the correspondence of a young peasant couple whose frequent letters to each other are held in the French military archives in Vincennes. The Pireauds wrote regularly to each other, sometimes daily, and their letters kept each of them fully informed of the quotidian life and the emotional state of the other. Theirs were very intimate letters, dealing with their innermost anxieties, their abiding love, and their strong sexual desire for each other. What is particularly notable, Hanna argues, is the sense the letters give that the couple inhabited connected rather than separate worlds. Marie wanted to know as much about Paul's daily life and combat experiences as he wanted to know about her daily life on his parent's farm, where she lived and worked, became pregnant, and gave birth to their only child.

Marie visited Paul several times in the course of 1915, hoping each time to be pregnant when she returned – this finally happened at the end of the year. Marie was eager to be pregnant, but as a woman whose health was not robust, she was anxious about the risk to herself of pregnancy and of labour. Paul wanted her to consult a doctor early in the pregnancy and to stop working, but she did not, continuing to work right up until the start of her labour. Shortly after it began, Marie wrote to tell Paul about it:

I can tell you that I'm beginning to suffer a lot and yesterday evening I would have sent for someone I said nothing and this morning I'm suffering

a little less. All morning long my mother has been fretting saying that I worked too much these past days. I know it's true.<sup>104</sup>

Twelve hours later, Marie gave birth. The birth itself was very painful and difficult. Marie lost consciousness and it was feared that she was dead. She suffered a vaginal tear and needed stitches 'to be put back together again'. Marie wrote in some detail about the pain and suffering she experienced, including the amount of blood she lost, her weakness after the birth, and her inability to rid herself of the memory of her pain. She had missed her husband during the birth, but confessed that she was pleased he did not have to see how much she had suffered:

My Paul how happy I am that you are not here because from five o'clock in the evening on the 11th till four o'clock on the 13th, oh how I suffered. It was the midwife from Verteillac who was here she looked after me well and she still hasn't left me. She took good care of me and I needed it because I was in a pretty state ... I don't have a drop of blood left it was a dry birth and it will be three weeks before I will be able to lift my head up, so delay your leave until I am better ... We have a big hungry boy. Marthe is nursing him for me until my milk comes in.<sup>105</sup>

Both Marie's parents and Paul's were present, and they wept at the suffering she underwent.

The physical details these letters contain about pregnancy and birth, as Martha Hanna argues, greatly extend the range of intimate epistolary discussion between wife and husband. Marie 'belonged to the first generation of peasant women who had both the ability and the need to describe in detail the experience of giving birth'. In previous generations, the husband would have been close by or present, and so would have known what was happening. His unavoidable absence at this time made it necessary that all the details of the birthing process and its aftermath be written about clearly in letters. This physical detail continued as Marie told Paul about her slow recovery and the very great difficulties that she had in breastfeeding her son. She attempted to bottle-feed him, but this did not work. Again, waiting until the problem was resolved, Marie wrote to explain to Paul that the baby could not digest the cow's milk and had

104 Martha Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge MA: Harvard university Press, 2006).

105 *Ibid.*, p. 150.



gotten thinner and thinner until she rehired the wet nurse who had fed him for his first few days.

During Marie's pregnancy, there had been disagreements between herself and Paul, on the one hand, and his parents on the other. Paul had not wanted her to work and had wanted her to be attended by a doctor, both suggestions at which his parents looked askance. But Marie took up his view and came to feel it necessary to ignore his parents and to seek medical advice both when the baby was not thriving on cow's milk and even more when he developed conjunctivitis. Paul's parents thought it an unnecessary expense, but Marie insisted on calling the doctor and was sure that it was the treatment he advised that enabled the baby to recover without any damage to his sight. She was angry at those who had told her not to worry and convinced she had done the right thing. 'If it pleases me to call the doctor again I will do so', she wrote to Paul, 'and I bet you will not blame me, on the contrary.' Though longing to see Paul again, Marie made it very clear to him that when he came home, they would have to take precautions to ensure that she did not become pregnant again. To her relief, he did make it home, though the final years of the war were difficult ones for them both. Paul became more and more depressed – and when the letters that they wrote with such regularity were held up in the post, both suffered doubts about the other's ongoing love and fidelity. The letters arrived eventually, and their close relationship survived the harshness of the separation.

There are other sets of wartime marital letters among French peasant and working-class couples that show a similar kind of intimacy, and both a capacity and need to discuss sexual, emotional and other deeply personal issues.<sup>106</sup> Here again, Martha Hanna has argued, thanks to the extensive French education in letter-writing that was part of the elementary school curriculum, one begins to see what had earlier been an elite model of correspondence, emphasising the private and the intimate, becoming much more common. This general question of how married couples coped with the absence and strain of the war, and used letters as a way to maintain marital intimacy in France, has been discussed in several articles and in a book by Clementine Vidal-Naquet: *Couples in the Great War*.<sup>107</sup> Vidal-Naquet, like Bruno Cabanes, has stressed the need to recognise that a new kind of epistolary pact had to be established during the war in order to maintain

106 Constant M. and Gabrielle M., *Des tranchées à l'alcôve: Correspondance amoureuse et érotique pendant la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Imago, 2006).

107 Clémentine Vidal-Naquet, *Couples dans la Grande Guerre: Le tragique et l'ordinaire du lien conjugal, Préface d'Arlette Farge* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014).

marital intimacy. This required making the war experiences of soldiers comprehensible back home, and keeping those on the battlefield integrated and feeling connected to the domestic and familial life that they had left behind. In their letters to wives, soldiers used a language different from the rough and coarse one of their everyday military life. Women, in turn, were expected to adapt their language to the needs of their husbands. One notable feature of this epistolary pact, Vidal-Naquet insists, is the upending of what was once the accepted pattern in terms of expressing emotions. While tears were accepted from women in peacetime, in wartime correspondence they are eschewed. The emphasis here is rather on manly tears and on the need for feminine restraint and courage.

Vidal-Naquet quotes several letters from men describing the tears they shed when coming back to the front after leave, or on receiving letters from home – and also some that insist that women be reasonable and refrain from crying. In some cases, women in turn used their own distress and emotional states as a reason for not writing. In February 1915, Héléne Ferry explained that she had not written for a couple of days because she was not feeling sufficiently brave, courageous or worthy, and did not want through her grief to lessen her husband's *'belle énergie'*.<sup>108</sup> The irregularity of post and the waiting for letters was distressing for both husbands and wives, and expressions of the delight felt on receiving letters was obligatory for all. Vidal-Naquet, like others, comments on the ways in which wartime correspondence, and the heightened emotions that accompanied absence and constant anxiety, encouraged a confessional style around feelings, so that letters often expressed the emotional states of both husbands and wives. Despite the emphasis on manly tears and womanly courage, she argues that by and large the feelings and emotions expressed in letters were not significantly differentiated along gender lines. Both men and women confessed to anxiety and fear, to loneliness and longing for the other.

If the letters of some married couples during the war point to an extension of the intimacy of nineteenth-century letters, there are other women's letters that point in other directions, suggesting how hard it was for some couples to maintain a relationship in wartime – and the stress of wartime letters, when the life of one of those involved was under constant threat. The letters of the English writer Vera Brittain (1893–1970) and her fiancé

108 Clémentine Vidal-Naquet, 'Écrire ses émotions: Le lien conjugal dans la Grande Guerre', *Clio, Femmes, Genre, Histoire*, 47 (2017), 128–37; and Bruno Cabanes, 'Negotiating intimacy in the shadow of war (France, 1914–1920s): New perspectives in the cultural history of World War I', *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 31(1) (2013), 1–23.

Roland Leighton are a case in point. Brittain and Leighton had met while still at school in 1913, and they had hoped to be at university together the following year. This perfectly normal expectation for Leighton, as for his friend and Vera's brother, Edward Brittain, was one for which Vera had to fight bitterly, as her father did not believe that girls required this kind of education. She won a scholarship, but she alone went up to Oxford, as by the beginning of the 1914 university year both Leighton and her brother had enlisted in the army. After a few months, she too decided she wanted to serve the war effort and took up hospital work before becoming a VAD.

Vera Brittain and Leighton met fewer than a dozen times, and so most of their knowledge of each other was gained through letters. Both were aspiring writers and expressed themselves with ease in written form – indeed, they often found letters more satisfactory than meeting. Their early letters were affectionate, energetic and frequent. Brittain accepted that she would write more often as she had more time:

If I have more time to think, I also have more time to write – which just now is better than thinking. And when you tell me my letters help you to live, I mean to write more & more ... I know you think much – even when you can't write & that you do write as often as you are able.<sup>109</sup>

She was very touched when she discovered that Leighton had kept all her letters in a case. 'That adds to the feeling of sweet responsibility which writing to you gives me', she wrote, 'I thought you would be bound to throw them away now.' Leighton's case was now full, however, and he asked if she would keep her letters for him, which she did.

The frequent, easy letters of the early months came to an end in the middle of 1915, as Leighton's officer status meant that he had increasingly time-consuming battlefield duties. 'Whence this long silence, dear?' Brittain wrote in July 1915. 'I know of course that there is some good reason for it – I am almost afraid to know what ... I have been waiting to get a letter before writing again.'<sup>110</sup> Roland returned for a visit the following month, and although the visit was uncomfortable and they found it hard to relax with each other, they became engaged. They discussed the strain that they had felt at their last meeting in their letters, making clear how much easier

109 Vera Brittain to Roland Leighton, 13 May 1915, Alan Bishop and Mark Bostridge (eds), *Letters from a Lost Generation: The First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1998) p. 150

110 Vera Brittain to Roland Leighton 18 July 1915, *ibid.*, p. 60

they felt in writing. 'For my part, I find you still elusive, intangible, and truly in that way it seems to count for so little that you did come back at all', wrote Brittain:

When I get your letters I feel as if I know and understand you much better than when I meet & see the actual you. You always puzzle me. Reverence – reserve – indifference – in their actual manifestation they are so alike, and the more full of emotion you are, the more alike they become. If there weren't a few physical signs to help me, if the expression you resolutely drive away from your mouth didn't sometimes betray itself in your eyes, I should never know you at all.<sup>111</sup>

Brittain was aware that she, too, was awkward in these meetings and more herself in letters:

Yes, we are more like our real selves in letters. I at any rate am so foolishly reserved & 'difficile' when I meet you, that it is a physical let alone mental impossibility to say & do the things I want to say & do. And afterwards, when you have gone away, and I think to myself that I may never get the chances to say & do those things again, I feel so angry with myself and so impatient.<sup>112</sup>

Brittain's mother suggested that she and Leighton knew each other so little that their entire relationship was one based on correspondence, and she certainly had a point. But while Brittain sometimes found it easier to recognise and feel close to Leighton through letters, she was also very much aware of the limitation involved in a wartime correspondence when the life of one participant was constantly in danger. Towards the end of 1915, Leighton wrote to her about his promotion and how he was becoming immersed in the war. He also noted his growing sense of distance from her and his previous world: she seemed to him like a character in a book whom he had dreamt of but never seen. She was very angry at receiving this letter after spending weeks worrying about him, and wanted to write an angry response:

But I cannot do that, One cannot be angry with people at the Front – a fact which I sometimes think they take advantage of – and so when I read

111 Vera Brittain to Roland Leighton, 29 August 1915, *ibid.*, p. 151.

112 Vera Brittain to Roland Leighton, 7 September 1915, *ibid.*, p. 162.

'We go back into the trenches tomorrow' I literally dare not write you the kind of letter you perhaps deserve for thinking that the world might end for you on that discordant note.<sup>113</sup>

Matters improved between them in letters after that and Leighton was supposed to come home over Christmas. But, almost as Brittain forecasts in this last letter, he was killed while inspecting wiring around trenches on 23 December 1915, just six weeks after she had written this letter.

While the letters of soldiers' wives or fiancés are now the subject of much discussion, much less attention has been paid to the other significant group of wartime letters: those written home to parents, especially mothers, by women who were actively engaged in the war as VADs, nurses, doctors, drivers or in other active roles. Often, these letters too were carefully saved by the families who received them, and there are many, particularly in Britain in the Imperial War Museum and various archival and private collections. These letters are very different from those either of soldiers or of their wives. They convey none of the love or intimacy so often noted in soldiers' letters, and very little suggestion of nostalgia or of home or parents being missed. What one has, rather, is a clear depiction of the writers' current lives, and a very strong sense of how much these young women enjoyed their new freedom, even if it required them to undertake domestic chores of a kind they had never done before, and to live in considerable physical discomfort. Having chafed under domestic restrictions and familial protection at home, most of these women seem to relish their new lives – and to enjoy shocking parents by describing with clarity and detail activities that would once have been absolutely forbidden to them.

Naomi Mitchison was one young woman for whom becoming a VAD offered a rare opportunity for independence. Educated at home since puberty, and required to sleep in her mother's bedroom throughout her adolescence, her home life was completely dominated by her mother, Elizabeth Haldane. Haldane was a member of the British Red Cross in Scotland and instrumental in developing the VAD, so there was little opposition to Mitchison becoming involved in it. She began work as a VAD nurse in 1915 and became a probationer at St Thomas' Hospital in London in 1917, before moving to nurse in Oxford. This was the first time that she had lived away from home or been required to undertake any form of housework.

Mitchison's letters home dealt in some detail with her work. She described legs being amputated, pus from infected sores squirting across the room, and

113 Vera Brittain to Roland Leighton, 8 November 1915, *ibid.*, p. 170.

the disgusting smells that she encountered in the wards. 'Rather a horrible morning', she wrote to her mother on one occasion, 'a man with his leg off was simply awfully bad, no temperature, but rather delirious with pain and simply screaming when the wound was dressed.' She described one man with a wound in his leg 'through which one could see to the bone', and another 'with one leg off at the knee and the stump not healed, and the other foot and ankle a mass of swollen and septic wounds.' But she preferred washing and dressing the wounds herself to watching others do it: 'It makes all the difference if you are doing something yourself, even if you are necessarily hurting the man and he is trembling all over with pain, clutching at the bed clothes and gasping out "oh god, oh god, oh god"'. Sometimes she noted her shock after an operation, and once she fainted: 'I'd have been all right if they let me sit still, but as it was May said I was quite white and they made me lie down for a bit and gave me a potent drink ... which bucked me up no end.' In later years, Mitchison conceded that the pain she had seen among the wounded soldiers haunted her for many years, and she had to write about it in her own fiction to get it out of her mind. But the letters back to her mother both make clear how awful what she saw was, and her own absolute insistence that she could manage it all perfectly well and needed neither sympathy nor care.<sup>114</sup>

Vera Brittain, too, wrote in some detail to her mother about the awful things she had to see and deal with. She described, for example, in one of her first letters criticising the war, cases of mustard gas in its early stages that she had to deal with after the Battle of Cambrai at the end of 1917:

I wish those people who write so glibly about this being a Holy War ... could see a case ... of mustard gas in its early stages – could see the poor things burnt and blistered all over with great mustard coloured suppurating blisters, with blinded eyes ... and always fighting for breath ... saying their throats are closing and they will choke.<sup>115</sup>

The only thing that could be said was that the pain didn't last long – mostly the soldiers died, although a few recovered.

One is beginning to see something new in these letters home from the women who were active in the war effort. Although they were confined to female occupations, and often required to live in supervised accommodation

<sup>114</sup> Anna McFarlane, "'Becoming acquainted with all that pain": Nursing as activism in Naomi Mitchison's science fiction', *Literature and Medicine*, 37(2) (2019), 278–97.

<sup>115</sup> Cited in Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life* (London: Virago, 2001), p. 122.

and to behave properly, in accordance with accepted gender norms, their letters do begin to strike a new note. They are writing home to describe their new activities, and indeed their new freedoms, to parents and families. Nor is there any sense here of seeking permission or acceptance of their activities. Rather than enabling them to do things that they were only able to do through letters, as had been the case in the past, their letters now serve to inform their families about the many different things they are doing and the activities in which they are actively engaged. Families, and especially mothers, continue to be needed, but often it is, as for soldiers, to provide money or gift parcels containing food and cigarettes.

One can see this very clearly in the letters of Elinor Rendel to her mother. Ellie was a medical student in her final year when, in 1916, she decided to join the medical contingent being organised by Elsie Inglis and the Scottish Women's Hospital (SWH) to provide assistance to the Serbian army. In September of that year, she embarked on a voyage to Archangel and then on a trip by train to the Eastern Front. Her letters home are addressed to her mother but obviously written for the whole family. They are usually sparse and factual:

We left the ship at 10.30 pm yesterday. There was some doubt as to whether we would get away as the British and the Russians were both trying to get us a train independently of each other. But at last it appeared and we were bundled in. We had a wonderful reception from Russian soldiers and ships band. The train is an extraordinary affair. It is very dirty, has no dining-car, and is lighted most inefficiently by tallow candles. It goes on average 2 miles an hour and we shall be at least 6 days on the road & probably longer.<sup>116</sup>

Although she relished the adventure, Ellie relied on her mother to provide not only news about the family but also money and chocolate. 'If anyone is coming out', she wrote in November of 1916, 'could they bring me 1000 cigarettes, chocolate, and warm vests and if you can a letter of credit for £20.'<sup>117</sup> A week later, she thanked her mother for letters – and a parcel of chocolate. And indeed, chocolate supplies seem to have been frequent throughout the time she was away.

The arrival of the SWH contingent towards the end of 1916 coincided with the collapse and retreat of the Romanian army and of the Serb forces

<sup>116</sup> Ellie Rendel to Elinor Rendel, 13 September 1916, 'The letters of F. E. Rendel', Imperial War Museum, Private Papers, Documents. 20400.

<sup>117</sup> Ellie Rendel to Elinor Rendel, 14 November 1916, Rendel Papers, IWM.

that had been sent to defend them. The Central Powers had also destroyed much of the infrastructure in Transylvania, particularly bridges, making movement difficult. The SWH contingent followed the retreat back towards Russia of the remaining Serbs and Romanians, stopping where they could to deal with casualties and then moving further either as a result of requests for their service or to avoid being shelled. In October, just a week after their arrival, they were ordered to evacuate as the Romanian army and the Dobruja front collapsed, and there was a massive retreat involving not only soldiers but thousands of refugees. In the course of the retreat, they had to set up a field hospital in the abandoned barracks of an unnamed town. The barracks were:

Filthy dirty and had to be cleaned & whitewashed by us and Turkish prisoners ... We made the first floor room into a ward with beds made of sacks in a row. The beds almost touch and there are 100. The upper room is our bedroom and dining room with 75 camp beds in 4 long rows. There are whitewashed walls, but no carpets or rugs. No mattresses or pillows provided ... There is no water supply – all has to be pumped ... Yesterday at two o'clock before anything was ready patients began to be brought in. They came in batches up to 3 a.m. By that time we have 100 patients. They were in a very filthy condition but they had first aid dressings very well done by the Russians. It was rather a nightmare because we had nothing really ready.<sup>118</sup>

A week or so later, they too were forced to retreat. On 23 October, Ellie reported to her mother that they left their camp:

And got into a stream of refugees. The roads were blocked with peasants fleeing with all their worldly good, including cattle, ponies, geese, hens etc., and with soldiers retreating. All kinds of rumours were flying about. During the day we heard that Constanza had fallen. As the day went on the crowds of refugees became more and more disorganized. Roumanian [*sic*] troops dashed down the road in complete confusion. They flogged their horses and shouted and behaved disgustingly.<sup>119</sup>

Although accustomed to a very comfortable upper-middle-class home, Ellie managed many aspects of her new life with apparent ease. 'We have no

118 Ellie Rendel to Elenor Rendel, 5 October 1916, Rendel Papers, IWM.

119 Ellie Rendel to Elinor Rendel, 23 October 1916, Rendel Papers, IWM.



beds, or mattresses, or pillows', she wrote from the camp they had set up in Ismaila at the end of 1916, 'but I am getting quite hardened to sleeping on the floor. We get rations of meat, butter & bread. The bread portion is sometimes meagre as it is difficult to get.'<sup>120</sup> They had few clothes or possessions, she noted, as their kitbags had not been sent with them, and they had ceased to care about appearances. She had taken to wearing her riding breeches, putting on a skirt only if officers were coming to tea. But even when their kitbags turned up, they were short of clothes and 'had to do a good deal of lending and borrowing. I am wearing a vest belonging to Dr C. & a pair of stockings belonging to an orderly. One of the sisters is wearing my only skirt, & one of the orderlies borrows my hat when he walks in town'.<sup>121</sup>

In keeping with the exigencies of her daily life, and to help deal with lice, my hair, which you ask after, is cut quite short. I had it done by the barber on the Huntspill and later Dr Chesney insisted on trimming it. The result is that it stands up in front when I try to part it on the side. I am very glad I had it done as it would have been intolerable during the retreat.<sup>122</sup>

## Conclusion

The intimacy that is characteristic of so many nineteenth-century women's letters drew on increased literacy and new technologies, both of which were accessible mainly to middle-class and privileged women. It was they who received the necessary education to write with ease, and had the means to take advantage of new kinds of writing implements and regular postal services that made letter-writing a pleasurable daily activity. The extent to which the intimacy of letters is a sign of privilege is immediately evident when one contrasts the immigrant letters that have been discussed with many of the others. For the most part, those who migrated from Europe to America or Australia were working-class people living extremely hard lives in Europe and seeking new opportunities and livelihoods in the new world. In some cases, their literacy was limited, and there are apologies for their lack of skill in letter-writing. But even those with reasonable levels of literacy wrote infrequently, addressing letters to families or to someone who would show it to the family. However, even when their letters seemed

<sup>120</sup> Ellie Rendel to Elinor Rendel, 4 November 1916, Rendel Papers, IWM.

<sup>121</sup> Ellie Rendel to Elinor Rendel, 4 November 1916, Rendel Papers, IWM.

<sup>122</sup> Ellie Rendel to Elinor Rendel, 15 November 1916, Rendel Papers, IWM.

more formal, sometimes formulaic, and conveyed general information about family well-being, they also conveyed a great deal about the feelings and personal experiences of those writing or sending the letters, and about their sense of the relationships that they wanted to establish or maintain.

As the letters between couples engaged in imperial life show, intimate letters were written much more frequently than migrant letters, making it clear that writer and recipient knew each other extremely well, understanding the tenor of each other's daily life and anticipating their feelings. Intimacy thus depends on encompassing a new kind of sensibility, a new emphasis on feeling and emotion, and an expectation that such feelings can and should be included in letters. As we have seen, this is the case not just in letters between husbands and wives or lovers, but also between siblings and friends. It is perhaps in the letters between sisters and women friends that one sees most clearly the emergence of new kinds of relationship that are based on feelings of closeness and sympathy in the nineteenth century, as women gain the capacity either to move outside the family or to negotiate the family, often through letters. In some cases, it is the fact of financial independence, usually as writers, that enables women not only to establish the relationships that they want, but also to make clear what they will and will not accept within closer family ones. It is in their letters that both Harriet Martineau and Frederika Bremer make clear both their sense of distance from mothers whom they have always seen as unsympathetic and their intention to limit these relationships.

The letters between women friends also suggest an increase, at least for some women, of independence. Friendship, as a relationship outside of family, in itself required forms of freedom and of independence rarely available to women before the nineteenth century. Friendships, made at school, in the course of social engagements, or through shared political or literary interests, were sometimes unknown to or even disapproved of by families. But they were maintained nonetheless, and the correspondence between women friends sometimes shows a sense of critical distance and even a judgement of family or marital relationships not often evident in other ways. Husbands and fathers sometimes need to be negotiated with in order to allow these correspondences between women friends to continue, but this negotiation in itself points to a new sense of freedom.

There is a similar kind of freedom in some of the letters between 'advanced' women, such as Rosa Luxemburg, and their lovers. Sexual relationships outside the context of marriage were not new. But questions about how to negotiate such relationships in the context of shared political interests, usually involving nationalist or socialist activities, are a distinctive feature

of the nineteenth century. In these letters, one sees women who share public lives and activities with their partners, wanting to comment on the issues and problems that they perceive in their private relationships. Almost for the first time here, one sees women who engage freely in the public world, writing letters about that world and its implications for their private lives. Their letters are not required to give them access to that world, but rather to describe the experiences they have in it.

This can be seen equally clearly in the World War I letters written by the women who were actively engaged in the war effort as VADs, nurses or doctors. Their letters home describe their living conditions and the tenor of their daily lives. Although still circumscribed in what they could do, these women were able to engage directly in the war, and their letters, like those of soldiers, were important because they enabled them to communicate regularly with family at home. While the letters of wives to soldier husbands continue a longer tradition of women's letters in the ways that they enable women to maintain and negotiate marital relationships, these other letters suggest that the distinctive history of women's letters, whereby letters enable women to do things that they could not do without them, is coming to an end.

# Epilogue: Women's Letters come to an End

The writing of letters effectively ceased in the course of the twentieth century. But this does not mean that the history of letters and letter-writing across that century is simply one of decline. On the contrary, the story of letters in the twentieth century is a rather dramatic one.

Early in the century, as we have seen, under the impetus of war, the writing of letters increased dramatically. Mass mobilisation of what was now a largely literate population, and then an extended period of bloody war, brought a new urgency to the writing and sending of letters to and from the battlefield. War also encouraged the development of new ways of writing and sending letters. The aeroplanes that were used for surveillance and bombardment in World War I provided the transport used to start the development of airmail in the interwar period. The widespread use of airmail during World War II led, in turn, to the development of aerograms as the best and easiest way to write and send letters. Letter-writing continued to increase in volume until the 1970s, but by the 1990s it had effectively come to an end. For a couple of decades prior to this, the widespread installation of fixed-line telephones made major inroads into the use of letters. Although the total number of letters sent around Europe continued to increase, the number of telephone calls being made per person increased at a far greater rate, something that led some commentators to suggest that, within a short space of time, 'telephony together with data transmission will eventually displace most mail'.<sup>1</sup> By the mid-1990s, with the advent of email, this had come to pass, and what came, significantly, to be called 'snail mail' had become superfluous as a major form of personal communication.

Even before people had ceased to write letters, however, new technologies, and the emergence of new forms of communication such as the telegraph and the telephone, fundamentally changed the ways that letters were seen

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Pierce, 'The telephone and society in the past 100 years', in Ithiel de Sola Pool (ed.), *The Social Impact of the Telephone* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1977), pp. 159–95.

and used. By the end of the nineteenth century, telegrams were being used to convey urgent information, with letters coming after to provide more details and an extended explanation. Indeed, 'letter following' was a familiar phrase in telegrams. The telephone, too, was introduced in the late nineteenth century, offering both immediacy and the intimacy of speaking directly to someone and hearing a voice in response. Letters continued to be very important, especially for long-distance communication. But here, too, they were sometimes augmented by other forms of technology. Many migrants sent tape-recordings with their letters so that families could actually hear each other's voices and have a more direct sense of speaking across distances than was possible in a letter.

As we have seen, the distinctive and separate history of women's letters comes to an end long before this: in the course of World War I. Many scholars would argue, however, that letters continued to be important for women in several different ways across the twentieth century. As a form of private communication, letters allowed women a frankness and openness in discussing their feelings, and sometimes also their sexuality or bodies, in ways that were not otherwise possible or were much more difficult in conversation. As this suggests, letters and letter-writing were gendered in quite marked ways. Letters provided ways for women to negotiate new kinds of freedom, to describe relationships, and to express both ideas and feelings that are distinctly female. Women's letters also offered a range of new insights into their relationships with each other and with men that were linked to distinctively twentieth-century ideas about individual personality and sexuality. In terms of publication, too, the letter as a form offered a freedom and a distinctive standpoint from which women could critique the dominant culture, one that was not available through other genres. Both Virginia Woolf and Christa Wolf used the letter as the vehicle through which to write their strongest critiques of the dominant masculine cultures in which they lived. It enabled them, Anne Herrmann argues, to offer a critique of that culture as outsiders, but ones who can 'hide their hostility behind a veil of intimacy'.<sup>2</sup> The decision to use letters in this way, however, was an aesthetic choice rather than a necessity: although both these women wrote novels, reviews and essays, they saw the letter as providing a more effective way to present certain kinds of idea than any other.

The letters of many women writers serve to illustrate their importance in enabling these women to deal with their complex and tangled emotional

2 Anne Herrmann, 'Intimate, irreticent and indiscreet in the extreme: Epistolary essays by Virginia Woolf and Christa Wolf', *New German Critique*, 38 (1986), 161–80.

and sexual lives. Those of the novelist and memoirist, Vera Brittain, to her husband, George Catlin, for example, illustrate the difficulties they had in negotiating the 'semi-detached' marriage that Brittain insisted on, as she would not join Catlin when he got a job at Cornell University and become an academic wife – nor could she accept that, in her absence, he might engage in other sexual relationships. The very different letters of Simone de Beauvoir to Jean-Paul Sartre, which shocked many readers when they were published, show the complex ways in which de Beauvoir not only allowed Sartre the sexual freedom that he wanted, but also found young women for him, seducing them herself and then passing them on. The correspondence of Hanna Arendt and Mary McCarthy offers a wonderful picture of the negotiation of a complex friendship between two very different women, who came from different cultures and saw the world in different ways. Their letters incorporate intense discussions of their differing values, approaches and experience of twentieth-century history, as well as revelations about intimate relationships, especially on McCarthy's side, through a range of different social, political and intellectual questions.

It is the letters of the novelist and essayist Virginia Woolf that are particularly interesting here, however. Woolf was one of the great letter-writers of the twentieth century and one with a very great interest in the history of letters, particularly women's letters. In her essays and in her own letters, Woolf reflected on the continuity and changes in letter-writing, and especially in women's letters, and on the ways in which twentieth-century letters differed from their predecessors. She read the great letters of previous ages with interest, and she had a very strong sense both of the history of letter-writing and of the significance of letters for women who had been denied social freedoms and other forms of literary outlet. In some ways, Woolf is herself the last of this tradition of great women letter-writers – and like her predecessors Dorothy Osborne and Madame de Sévigné, she was a woman who came from an elite family – one that denied her any kind of formal education. For the most part, she educated herself with the resources offered by her father's excellent library. At the same time, as a woman writing in a period when it was possible to publish work in any genre, she chose to release two of her very important works in the form of letters, thus underlining a sense of their ongoing importance for women.

Woolf was also someone to whom letter-writing was personally very important. For her, as for some of her fictional characters, such as Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, letter-writing was a regular daily activity. She wrote business letters connected to her own publications and to Hogarth Press, which she ran with her husband; short notes, mainly to make arrangements

with family and friends; but also long letters to her sister Vanessa and to various friends, that were filled not only with discussion of her own activities, and work and gossip about her enormous circle of friends and acquaintances, but also with detailed discussions of her approach to sexuality and her sense of herself. Letters clearly played a key part in Woolf's emotional and intellectual life. She had a telephone and refers to its use quite often in her letters. But generally, telephone calls, which were very expensive at the time, were used for urgent matters, while letters continued to be used both as a way to maintain close contact and as a form of self-expression and creation. It is somehow fitting that she left letters telling her husband and her beloved older sister of her intention to kill herself in 1941.

Woolf's published essays on the letters of Dorothy Osborne and Madame de Sévigné are particularly interesting here. Both women, in her view, were talented writers who would have been novelists, had they lived in the nineteenth century. 'Had she been born in 1827', she says of Dorothy Osborne, she:

would have written novels; had she been born in 1527, she would never have written at all. But she was born in 1627, and at that date though writing books was ridiculous for a woman there was nothing unseemly in writing a letter. And so, by degrees the silence is broken; we begin to hear rustlings in the undergrowth; for the first time in English literature we hear men and women talking together over the fire.<sup>3</sup>

Madame de Sévigné, meanwhile, was a 'robust and fertile letter writer, who in our age would probably have been one of the great novelists'. These literary talents are evident in the skill with which she wrote letters, drawing readers into her world. She creates her own being:

touch by touch, with repetitions, amassing daily trifles, writing down what came into her head as if she were talking ... Thus, we live in her presence, and often fall, as with living people, into unconsciousness. She goes on talking, we half listen. And then something she says rouses us. We add it to her character, so that the character grows and changes, and she seems like a living person, inexhaustible.<sup>4</sup>

3 Virginia Woolf, 'Dorothy Osborne's letters', in Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, Second Series (1935), Etext, Project Gutenberg, <<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebookso3/0301251h.html>> (accessed 15 June 2020).

4 Virginia Woolf, 'Madame de Sévigné', in Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 48.

Woolf stresses the extent to which the sense of living in her presence is created by means of written words. We are rarely aware 'of a disturbing medium between us', she notes:

But now and then with the sound of her voice in our ears and its rhythm rising and falling within us, we become aware, with some sudden phrase, about spring, about a country neighbour, something struck off in a flash, that we are, of course, being addressed by one of the great mistresses of the art of speech.<sup>5</sup>

The letters of Madame de Sévigné were particularly important to Woolf, and she spent some time reading through the fourteen published volumes in preparation for her essay on Sévigné. Juliet Dusinberre suggests that Woolf had a slightly uncomfortable sense of the parallel between Madame de Sévigné's passion for her daughter and her own passion for her sister Vanessa Bell, one of the most frequent recipients of Woolf's letters, and certainly the person to whom she wrote at greatest length.<sup>6</sup> Did it occur to Woolf, as she noted the discomfort that Sévigné's passion and her epistolary expression of it caused her daughter, that sometimes her own passion for Vanessa caused an equal discomfort? It is worth making this comparison, Dusinberre argues, because in both cases, 'While seeming to supplicate, both letter-writers in fact command'. As Madame de Sévigné waits for her daughter's letters, she draws Madame de Grignan into the magnetic circle of a relationship not just of mother and daughter, but of writer and reader: 'I am completely convinced that letters will come for me; I have no doubt that you have written; but I am still waiting for them and they don't appear: I have to comfort and amuse myself by writing to you.' A similar quality can be seen in some of Woolf's letters to Vanessa Bell, which, in their hunger for a response, become 'formidably importunate'. 'Shall you kiss me tomorrow?' she wrote in 1908, 'Yes, Yes, Yes. Ah, I cannot bear being without you. I was thinking today of my greatest happiness, a walk along a cliff by the sea, and you at the end of it' (*Letters*, 1. 355). 'Write an immense long letter', she wrote a week later, 'I pine if they don't come' (*Letters*, 1. 358). A week earlier she had demanded, 'Do you really love me? How often a day do you think of me?' (*Letters*, 2. 157).<sup>7</sup>

5 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

6 Juliet Dusinberre, *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance: Woman Reader or Common Reader?* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997), p. 94.

7 All references from Dusinberre, *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance*, p. 109.



Although more excessive in her demands than many others, Woolf was following a traditional pattern in having a sister as her most frequent correspondent. But her letters to Vanessa Bell were quite unlike earlier ones in the range of personal matters and the kind of gossip they contained, and in their sense of freedom. 'I can't describe to you what an agony this afternoon was to me', she wrote in one letter in 1918. 'You know the horror of buying clothes, especially for one forced as I am to keep my underclothes pinned together by brooches'.<sup>8</sup> Woolf shared the enjoyment evident among many of those connected to the Bloomsbury group of writing about sexual matters in very direct terms. She tried her best always to have new gossip when she wrote to Vanessa but sometimes found it hard. 'In fact, I always think of you and Nessa', she wrote to Bell's partner Duncan Grant, 'like the young women at the telephone exchange, with the wires ringing little bells around them as loves, divorces, copulations and insanities blaze out in London'.<sup>9</sup>

Bell was kept fully informed of Woolf's lesbian relationship with the author Vita Sackville-West, for example, and Woolf noted her inability to understand same-sex attraction in women. 'I told Nessa the story of our passion in a chemist shop the other day', she wrote to Vita Sackville-West shortly after their relationship had begun in 1929. 'But how do you really like going to bed with women she said – taking her change. "And how do you do it?" and so she bought her pills to take abroad, talking as loud as a parrot'.<sup>10</sup> A couple of years later, Woolf wrote to Bell comparing their respective feelings about men and women. She couldn't understand how Bell could go to Rome and enjoy meeting dull American men there: she would much prefer going to Surbiton and meeting dull women there:

I suppose Jimmy, Peter and Angus have some mystic charm as I see that Vita has none in your eyes. I suppose. It's something to do with the illusion of sex: the male sex illudes [*sic*] you; the female me: Thus, I see the Male in its reality; you the female.<sup>11</sup>

Questions about sexuality were of constant interest to Woolf and her friends, and they were the subject of many of her letters. Shortly after she had begun

8 Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 22 April 1918, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978) vol. 2, p. 232.

9 Virginia Woolf to Duncan Grant, 6 March 1917, *ibid.*, p. 145.

10 Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 5 April 1929, *ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 36.

11 Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 23 May 1931, *ibid.*, p. 336.

her relationship with Vita Sackville-West, she wrote about this question to her old friend, the painter Jacques Raverat:

Have you any views on loving one's own sex? All the young men are so inclined, and I can't help finding it mildly foolish; although I have no particular reason. For one thing all the young men tend to the pretty and ladylike, for some reason at the moment. They paint and powder which wasn't the style in our day at Cambridge. I think it does imply some kind of clingingness ... Then the ladies, either in self-protection or imitation or genuinely, are given to their sex too. My aristocrat ... is violently Sapphic and contracted such a passion for a woman cousin that they fled to the Tyrol, or some mountainous retreat together, to be followed in an aeroplane by a brace of husbands ... I'll tell you a secret, I want to incite my lady to elope with me next. Then I'll drop down on you and tell you all about it.<sup>12</sup>

Woolf again took up both this question of same-sex love and the question of her own feelings – or the accusation sometimes levelled at her that she lacked feelings – a few years later in a letter to the composer Ethel Smythe. Smythe was a lesbian and sought both an intimate relationship with Woolf and a clearer statement from Woolf about her own sexuality and feelings. In response, Woolf sought to explain exactly what her feelings were – and how different they were from those of other people. 'Why did I tell you that I had only once felt physical feeling for a man? When he felt nothing for me?' she wrote. 'I suppose in some opium trance of inaccuracy ... my feelings were all of the spiritual, intellectual, emotional kind.' Once or twice she had physical feelings for a man, but then:

he was so obtuse, gallant, foxhunting and dull that I – diverse as I am – could only wheel around and gallop the other way. Perhaps this shows why Clive [Bell] ... always calls me a fish. Vita also calls me a fish. And I reply (I think often while holding their hands and getting exquisite pleasure from contact with either male or female body) 'But what I want of you is illusion – to make the world dance'.<sup>13</sup>

It was to Smythe that Woolf wrote most openly about her history of herself as a writer and its close link with her periods of mental illness:

<sup>12</sup> Virginia Woolf to Jacques Raverat, 24 January 1925, *ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 155–6.

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Woolf to Ethel Smythe, 15 August 1930, *ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 200.

After being ill and suffering every form of nightmare and extravagant intensity of impression – for I used to make up poems, stories, profound and to me inspired phrases all day long as I lay in bed, and thus sketched, I think, all that I now, by the light of reason, try to put into prose ... after all this, when I came to, I was so tremblingly afraid of my own insanity that I wrote *Night and Day* ... mainly to prove to my own satisfaction that I could keep off that dangerous ground.<sup>14</sup>

Woolf, in turn, pushed Ethel Smythe to be more outspoken about her own sexuality and her sexual experiences in her autobiography:

I'm interested that you can't write about masturbation ... What puzzles me is how this reticence co-habits with your ability to talk openly, magnificently, freely about – say H.B. I couldn't do one or the other. But as so much of life is sexual – or so they say – this rather limits autobiography if this is blacked out. It must be, I suspect for many generations of women, for it's like breaking the hymen – if that's the membrane's name – a painful operation and I suppose connected with all sort of subterranean instincts. I still shiver with shame at the memory of my half-brother, standing me on a ledge, aged about 6, and so exploring my private parts. Why should I have felt shame then?<sup>15</sup>

The frankness of her own letters and of those she received from her friends serves to explain why, despite her knowledge of the wonderful letters of the past, Woolf was not prepared simply to accept that the great age of letter-writing had passed. In an ironic short pamphlet, written in the form of a letter to a young man in the early 1930s, she raised the question of whether the art of letter-writing had, as some people had said, been killed by the Penny Post. In place of the carefully considered words of Madame de Sévigné and other great letter-writers, do we now 'commit our half-formed thoughts in ungrammatical phrases to the post card'.<sup>16</sup> The answer was a decided negative, and she argued on the contrary that 'the art of letter-writing has only just come into existence as a child of the penny post'.<sup>17</sup> In

14 Virginia Woolf to Ethel Smythe, 16 October 1930, *ibid.*, p. 230.

15 Virginia Woolf to Ethel Smythe, 9 January 1941, *ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 458. 'H.B.' refers to the author and composer Herbert Bennet Brewster, a very close friend of Smythe's and, some think, also her lover.

16 Virginia Woolf, 'A letter to a young poet' (1932), in Stuart N. Clarke (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Vintage, 2017) vol. 5, p. 5101.

17 *Ibid.*

place of a letter that would be treated seriously as a document, and kept for posterity, one now had letters that 'could afford to be intimate, irreticent [*sic*], indiscreet in the extreme'. They were only to be seen by the recipients and would have to be burnt. 'Posterity', she noted, 'must live upon Walpole and Madame de Sévigné. The great age of letter-writing, which is, of course, the present, will leave no letters behind it.'



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