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Letter writing in Renaissance England: 2000-2011 A review of the most important studies published since 2000

Abstract

The aim of this review essay is to investigate the most influential studies published in the last decade concerning letter writing in Renaissance England. This field emerged in the last few decades of the 20th century, but in recent years scholars have significantly broadened and deepened established issues, while pushing the field in new directions. The studies reviewed hereafter chronicle the energy and variety of the latest critical debates on the English Renaissance and focus on three groups of issues: the historical and cultural phenomena giving rise to a proper culture of epistolarity in Renaissance England, the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of early modern epistolary practices, and early modern women's letter writing. This review does not follow a chronological order but rather a thematic one.

The historical and cultural aspects of early modern English letter writing appear to have been more widely explored than the linguistic and rhetorical ones. There are at least five works that deserve comment here: Gary Schneider's *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500-1700*¹, the Folger Shakespeare Library's *Letterwriting in Renaissance England*², James How's *Epistolary Spaces: English Letter-Writing from the Foundation of the Post Office to Richardson's 'Clarissa'*³, Peter Mack's *Elizabethan*

¹ Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500–1700*, University of Delaware Press, Newark, 2005.

² Alan Stewart, Heather Wolfe (eds.), *Letterwriting in Renaissance England*, Folger Shakespeare Library, University of Washington Press, Washington, 2005.

³ J. S. How, *Epistolary Spaces: English Letter-Writing from the Foundation of the Post Office to Richardson's 'Clarissa'*, Ashgate, Aldershot, Burlington, VT, 2003.

*Rhetoric. Theory and Practice*⁴ and Susan Whyman's *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660-1800*⁵.

Gary Schneider's *The Culture of Epistolarity* was published in 2005 and gives insight into the historical and social developments that led to the spread of letter writing in Renaissance England. According to Schneider, the primary factor encouraging early modern epistolary practices was the centralization of the state during the reign of Henry VIII. The centralized Tudor court made physical presence crucial for politicians and courtiers to conduct business, gather information and maintain connections and positions. The monarch was surrounded by a small group of advisors and councillors of the Privy Council who had a great influence on him. Straying away from this administrative core could mean losing political power and social links with the noblest and richest sphere of English society. However, when people could not guarantee their own physical presence, they used letters to maintain connections with the centre of power. Correspondence thus functioned as the best means of self-representation, halfway between total absence and obtrusive presence.

As Schneider recalls, during the reign of Henry VIII letters also became an administrative instrument used to organize the government and the state: thanks to Thomas Cromwell, who served the king as Principal Secretary during most of the 1530s, the centralized Tudor court began to be administered through circular letters written in English, whose primary functions were to maintain contacts and to gather intelligence from ambassadors and agents placed within and beyond the reign. Another important phenomenon was «The revitalization of the familiar letter»⁶. In the Renaissance, humanists rediscovered the

⁴ Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric. Theory and Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

⁵ Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660-1800*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009.

⁶ Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity*, p. 41.

familiar letter and started using it as the primary communicative instrument to discuss religious, intellectual and pedagogical issues, deeply influencing letter writing in the course of the following centuries. According to Schneider, this rediscovery was a crucial step in the development of early modern letter writing, since it was responsible for shift away from the strict medieval rules of the *ars dictaminis* – which implied highly formalized language and artificial politeness – in favour of a plainer style and a rhetoric of affection and intimacy. Such a revolution occurred because humanists did not limit the use of the familiar letter to scholarly *milieux*, but they attempted to influence the administration of the state as well, so that this new way of conceiving letters also expanded to include public policy. The link created between the familiar letter and public affairs generated an epistolary rhetoric of love and intimacy which became deeply intertwined with political negotiations, especially during the reign of Elizabeth I, whose propensity to privilege expressions of affection in her correspondence is widely analyzed by Schneider.

The author also investigates the importance of the rise of print in the development of the early modern culture of epistolarity in England. Whilst in the 14th century classical and humanist letters were produced in manuscript contexts and published by scribes, during the second half of the 15th century they began to be printed and many collections of familiar letters, both classical and modern, started spreading all across Europe. Interwoven with cultural and historical phenomena are Schneider's acute observations about the different linguistic features of early modern English letter writing. In Renaissance England, letters were socio-texts, in the sense that they were collective compositions purposely conceived to circulate among groups of people whom Schneider defines «epistolary communities»⁷. Letters addressed to more than one recipient, read aloud to wide audiences, explained oral-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

ly by messengers, given to friends, copied and finally preserved, were but a few examples of the collective nature of letter writing practices. Multiple parties had access to the composition, transmission and reception of letters, which then became a sort of glue that linked together not only society as a whole but also a wide range of apprentices, such as scribes, messengers and postmen. As a result, even though secrecy was a privilege eagerly sought by correspondents, letters were frequently disseminated out of these epistolary communities: letters were often copied and preserved as objects of prestige, evidence of access to higher social circles, or pieces of news or history. They circulated in manuscript collections or were assembled in miscellanies as models to be imitated.

Schneider also examines the language of early modern English letter writing. First of all, the author points out that letters used a rhetoric of physical presence and orality which aimed to make the addressee present despite his/her necessary absence in the epistolary exchange. This feature has already been widely analyzed by different 20th century letter-writing manuals, such as Janet Gurkin Altman's *Epistolarity. Approaches to a Form*⁸. Accordingly, Schneider simply uses this topic to introduce what he considers to be the primary theme of early modern English epistolary communication, that is a longing to maintain the continuity of exchange. Many strategies were employed by writers in order to preserve their correspondence, even in spite of addressees' possible attempts to end all contact. Evidence of this desire for exchange can be found in the use of a wide range of set phrases and expressions to justify epistolary delays, such as references to the bearer's negligence or protestations of sickness and bodily indisposition. Schneider accurately describes and provides examples for such linguistic strategies, aimed at maintaining social connections and showing obligation to the addressee by honouring him with the gift of a letter. One

⁸ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity; Approaches to a Form*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1982.

valuable feature of Schneider's book is that it examines the role of letters carrying subversive messages and linguistic strategies of deception. In early modern England, the mechanism of the postal system was often manoeuvred in order to intercept treacherous letters conspiring against the monarchy and the government. The author persuasively explains how correspondents often used skilful means to preserve secrecy and evade condemnation, such as invisible ink, ciphering and allegories requiring interpretation. In the last chapters, Schneider delves deeper into his analysis of the relationship between epistolarity and print culture, identifying and discussing important collections of personal, didactic and state letters originally intended for print or published posthumously, whose authors range from John Donne to Thomas Forde. His study finally investigates the importance of multiple-author collections of vernacular letters, the publication of which increased over the 17th century.

Letterwriting in Renaissance England is a study of enormous proportions, published by the Folger Shakespeare Library and edited by Alan Stewart and Heather Wolfe in 2005. This extraordinary volume was published in conjunction with the exhibition 'Letterwriting in Renaissance England' presented at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C., from November 2004 through April 2005, and it describes the «myriad *processes* of letter writing: the penning, sending, receiving, reading, the circulating, coping and saving of letters»⁹. Entire chapters are devoted to a wide range of interesting topics, such as writing tools, classical and modern letter-writing manuals, the letter's social signals, the key role of secretaries and letter carriers, the history of the postal system and, last but not least, the preservation of letters in manuscript and print collections. This study is therefore extremely interesting since it illuminates our understanding of both the material processes and the actors of early modern English letter writing, providing the

⁹ Alan Stewart, Heather Wolfe (eds.), *Letterwriting in Renaissance England*, cit., p. 10.

reader with examples from 16th- and 17th- century manuals, treatises and letters and illustrations of extremely rare manuscripts.

The book opens with an interesting description of Renaissance writing tools. In early modern England, in order to pen a letter, a writer had to assemble and sometimes even produce a great deal of raw materials. Explicitly referring to Jehan de Beau-Chesne and John Baildon's *A Booke containing Divers sortes of handes* (ca. 1570), the Folger study describes all the actions one needed to perform to write a letter: transforming goose feathers into quill pens, obtaining black ink from gull nuts, treating paper so that the ink would not be absorbed too quickly, and so on. Paper was very expensive and it generally came from the Continent. The huge number of entries for paper expenses contained in most account books of the period allow us to estimate the importance that households accorded to writing as an intimate as well as a social activity. The book also focuses on the various hands which could be used in Renaissance England. It especially examines social differences in the choice of the secretary hand or the italic hand. The first was a stiff late medieval script mostly used for business and administrative purposes; the second was developed in the 15th century in Italy thanks to the early humanists' desire to abandon the secretary hand and revitalize the Carolingian miniscule, which was considered to be more classical and elegant. Humanists decided to combine the latter with Roman capitals copied from monuments. As a result, a quicker hand surrounded by a set of flourishes developed. This new script was first used in England at the beginning of the 16th century by university scholars. Later, in Tudor England, italic was accordingly associated with education and with aristocracy, since writing masters taught it to aristocratic children, such as Elizabeth and her half-brother Edward. As the 16th century went on, italic had not succeeded in replacing secretary in business dealings and public administration, and since it continued to be used mainly in the universities, it became strictly associated with writing masters and scholars rather than with pragmatic pur-

poses. A detailed history of Renaissance handwriting can be also found in David Cressy's *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England*¹⁰, published in 1980.

The Folger study also provides the reader with an account of the most popular 16th- and 17th-century letter-writing manuals. The spreading of epistolary practices in the Renaissance gave birth to a huge number of theoretical works in Latin prescribing rules and instructions on how to write letters. The most influential work was Erasmus's *De Conscribendis Epistolis*, on which the German humanist worked for several years until it reached its final form in 1522. This text was still linked to classical models whose application in a vernacular English context might have been difficult, but it established itself as a set text in English schools and universities. The first letter-writing manual written in English was published in 1568 by William Fulwood. It was called *The Enemie of Idleness* and was actually a translation of a French manual, Thibauld's *Le Stile et manière de composer, dicter, et escrire toute sorte d'epistre*. Fulwood gave instructions on how to write different kinds of letters, but he still provided examples from Latin models and from Erasmus's *De Conscribendis*. Several years later, even Abraham Fleming's *A Panoplie of Episteles* recognized its models in classical letters, which were translated from Latin into English. The Folger study then focuses on the most important letter-writing manual published in early modern England, Angel Day's *The English Secretarie* (1586). This manual attempted to be more 'English' than the previous ones, and for this reason the sample letters it offered were invented by the author rather than simply taken from the Latins.

The Folger's ambitious study also contains a chapter on secretaries and scribes and invites us to explore the collective nature of early modern English letter writing. Scribes were frequently employed by correspondents who couldn't write or simply didn't want to. This means

¹⁰ David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980.

that it was not necessary to be able to write to send a letter in Renaissance England: illiterate people could be helped by friends or pay for the services of itinerant scribes, who were also employed to read letters for uneducated addressees who couldn't manage their own correspondence. Monarchs rarely wrote their own official letters. The most important actor in their epistolary exchanges was the 'Secretary of State' or 'Principal Secretary', their right-hand man and the chief of the Privy Council. The Principal Secretary was supposed to be the most loyal of the monarch's councillors and had an extremely intimate relationship with him. His secretarial duties could range from the writing and reading of all official correspondence to assistance in sensitive state matters. As the etymology of the name suggests, a secretary had access to his master's most intimate secrets; in the case of the Secretary of State this power had advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the Principal Secretary had a great influence over the monarch and could use his own persuasive skills to turn crises and problems to his advantage. On the other hand, he was most exposed to the monarch's changing favour and could elicit the envy of other politicians and courtiers, who coveted his position and often conspired to cause his ruin. The degree of influence the Personal Secretary played on the monarch's correspondence partly depended on the latter's personality and authority. Elizabeth I, for example, always maintained great control over her official correspondence. Even though she entrusted her public letters to such faithful secretaries as Lord Burghley, she was usually independent of her councillors and on many occasions forced them to write letters they didn't approve.

The Folger study provides the reader with more evidence of the collective nature of letter writing in Renaissance England, as well as the role of messengers. Posting letters in that period was extremely common but was by no means easy. The book discusses the difficulties which troubled the delivery of the correspondence, from material odds such as the rutted conditions of the roads to the fact that a national

postal system was simply not available. In Renaissance England, mailing a letter involved paying a bearer or asking a friend going to the desired destination to carry your letter for you. On the one hand, bearers were usually responsible for letters getting lost, stolen or misdirected. On the other hand, they were entrusted with the most sensitive information the sender wanted to communicate but would not write down for fear of a letter being intercepted or stolen. Inefficiency in the mailing of letters was due in large part by the lack of a postal system available to the general public, since the Royal Post was solely conceived for the delivery of letters from and to the Court. The centralized Tudor court needed an efficient postal system to send letters all across its realm and this system was known as ‘The Post’, whose name referred to a wide range of factors: the bearer carrying the letters, the horse used for transporting them and the post-houses located along the main Postal Roads emanated out of London. The Folger study asserts that an important change in this system occurred in 1635, when Charles I sent out a proclamation allowing subjects to use the Royal Post to deliver their private letters. In 1661 Henry Bishop, the Postmaster General appointed by Charles II, introduced the first post marker, whose principal function was to monitor delivery delays and reliability.

One of the most valuable features of *Letterwriting in Renaissance England* is that it examines the letter’s social signals in depth. In Renaissance England, the letter was conceived as a material object in which every part had its own meaning: the colour of the seal, the size and quality of the paper, the location of superscriptions and subscriptions and also forms of address. Since epistolarity was considered a goal-oriented activity, letter-writing manuals devoted many pages to explaining how to write letters according to the addressee’s social status. Even the paper acted as an important social factor: since it was an expensive commodity, the use of whole, large sheets showed the sender’s reverence for the addressee as well as his own wealth. Manuals didn’t give much information about what kind of paper should be used

to write letters, nor did they analyze the occasions in which a correspondent had better write in his own hand. However, correspondents were very anxious about the bad impression that cheap paper and poor handwriting could make. In time, bad handwriting became a social embarrassment. The Folger study also focuses on other non-textual indicators, such as seals and enclosures. Seals were generally family crests, greatly valued by their owners, whose colours conveyed feelings and emotions: when the seal was black instead of red the sender was in mourning; if embroidery motifs were included underneath, it could point to an intimate letter. If the seal was not the sender's, the addressee would know that the letter had been approved by someone else who had sealed it with the so-called 'seal of approval'. This conveyed another important information: it meant that the letter had been read by someone other than the writer, and that the addressee couldn't be sure whether it had preserved its original content and expression.

James How's *Epistolary Spaces: English Letter-Writing from the Foundation of the Post Office to Richardson's Clarissa* was published in 2003 and reconstructs in meticulous detail the history of the national postal system and its effects on letter writing, from the Renaissance to the 18th century. The author first links the development of the English postal system with the concept of «epistolary spaces»¹¹. According to How, epistolary spaces are public areas providing unbreakable connections between people and places. These spaces have always existed, but with the foundation of a national postal system they become «“public” places within which supposedly “private” writings travel»¹². Epistolary spaces were both real and imaginary: they were real, in that they were constituted by actual postal routes controlled by government officials; they were imaginary, because the imagination of letter writers began to be increasingly influenced by a faster and cheaper postal system. According to How, the new postal system gave more and more people the

¹¹ James S. How, *Epistolary Spaces*, p. 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

chance to experiment with the pragmatic nature of epistolary exchange. The availability, since the 1650s, of a national service allowing letters to circulate widely, made correspondents realize that the illocutionary acts of begging or requesting that were taught by letter-writing manuals really did aim at practical results. How also highlights the role of the new postal system in connecting all the people of England to the capital city of London. In the 17th century, London was not only the most influential metropolis of the time, but it also acted as the core of epistolary space in which all letters, both sent and received, were gathered. Before the establishment of a national postal system, letters were simply sent from one village to another, without necessarily offering such connections to London. How finally examines the notion of ‘epistolary spaces’ as both real and imaginary in various kinds of correspondence, such as the love letters of Dorothy Osborne and the fictional letters in Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*.

Peter Mack’s *Elizabethan Rhetoric. Theory and Practice* is less devoted to letter writing than the study previously discussed, yet it nonetheless contributes in a useful way to our understanding of such crucial cultural issues as education and literacy. This study, published in 2002, examines the role of humanists training in rhetoric and the skills needed to produce different kinds of texts such as letters, novels, sermons and political speeches; it also provides interesting news about what was taught in grammar schools and the key role played by the most influential English-language manuals of rhetoric and dialectic. As Mack points out, humanists such as Erasmus and Roger Ascham believed that education played a crucial role in promoting wisdom, moral virtue and eloquence. These qualities were inextricably linked and could develop solely thanks to an education in classical languages and literature. At Oxford and Cambridge pupils first learned to read, write and speak Latin, as well as imitate easy texts in order to learn Latin grammar. They later started studying Latin literature focusing on set texts, such as Cicero’s *Epistles* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Alongside these Latin texts,

classical letter-writing manuals were also part of the official education. In his chapter on letters, Mack states that letters as well as notebooks and narratives were the products of the frequent contact early modern English people had with writing, and clearly registered their linguistic and rhetorical skills. The author asserts that aphorisms and political sentences found in books and sermons were reused in personal writings, and letters found in manuals were copied out accurately, so that they could serve as models of content and style. The book usefully draws upon an important difference between personal letters of friendship, which implied a high degree of freedom in structure and content, and standard ones such as letters of recommendation or request, which followed a rigid pattern: they should begin by praising the addressee, then state the legitimate reason of the request and conclude with an excessively strong promise of obedience and reverence. Mack asserts that the use of established forms in standard letters conveyed a sense of harmony and coherence, and any innovation or change in these patterns would be perceived as inappropriate and strange; they might even allow the addressee to think that the writer's motivations were uncertain or incongruous. Accordingly, rhetorical skills could be better employed in letters that didn't follow such a rigid pattern, and resulted in the writer's rhetorical abilities in persuading the addressee to do something, giving moral advice or presenting apologies or congratulations.

Susan Whyman's *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660-1800* was published in 2009 and explores the epistolary practices of 18th-century middle and lower class people, eschewing the tendency to view these writers in isolation or as marginal figures. The author addresses a great number of topics, such as the development of the postal system and the rise of literacy and education, and presents collections of rare letters of non-aristocratic families, showing how rank, gender, location and religious beliefs influenced their correspondence. Whyman first examines how uneducated people achieved epistolary literacy through non-formal means. These correspondents obviously did not

have the chance to familiarize with letter-writing manuals and official education: what they knew about epistolary practices usually came from instructions provided by friends or local scribes and the very habit of writing letters to family members. Whyman then shows how manual laborers and farmers acquired and used the skill of letter writing in their ordinary lives and how this activity satisfied both social and personal needs. The author states that many more letters of middle-class correspondents survive compared to those of lower class people, and sheds light on the moment in the second half of the 18th century when the real letters of middle-class women and those of fictional literature met, and became inextricably tangled. The author recounts the story of the many women who wrote letters to Samuel Richardson to give him advice on his novel *Clarissa*: these women improved their epistolary abilities to interact with literary texts. *The Pen and the People* is an original work which clearly debunks the myth that 18th century epistolary literacy was a quality restricted to the nobility and the gentry. It succeeds in proving that large archives of letters written by the middle and lower classes do exist and deserve critical attention.

Linguistic and pragmatic aspects of early modern English epistolary exchange are central to Susan M. Fitzmaurice's *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English: A Pragmatic Approach*¹³, published in 2002. Although this study's approach is mainly linguistic, the method used for the description and interpretation of the familiar letter shares something with literary history. After discussing the importance of letter writing in Renaissance England, Fitzmaurice focuses on the pragmatic meanings constructed in the language of letters in that period. These include, for example, social meanings, which imply respect and obligation expected of one of the correspondents in light of the other's higher social rank, as well as interpersonal meanings, which refer to the degree of intimacy or distance between correspondents and the way in

¹³ Susan M. Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English: A Pragmatic Approach*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, Philadelphia, PA, 2002.

which these relations are linguistically expressed in letters. Other linguistic meanings are discussed, such as the propositional meaning (having to do with the linguistic content of the letter) and the inferential meaning (which refers to what is not explicitly expressed and can only be inferred). Fitzmaurice then concentrates on the pragmatic consequences of adopting the letter as the primary means of written communication in Renaissance England, as far as linguistic strategies and the representation of the correspondents' world are concerned. The necessary condition to start an epistolary exchange is the physical absence of the addressee. In early modern England, letters developed as tangible documents of distance but they usually turned into material gifts for the addressee, who could preserve them to feel closer to the sender. Absence then became presence. Fitzmaurice examines the ways in which correspondents construct epistolary worlds in which physical distance is supplemented by linguistic proximity, inviting us to think about the system of deixis as the most useful means to ensure this closeness. Since deixis provides spatial and temporal coordinates, it locates the correspondents in linguistically constructed epistolary worlds and specifies their relations with places, times and objects. As Fitzmaurice points out, it is in the definition of the spatio-temporal coordinates that the principal difference between oral interaction and epistolary exchange resides: whilst in face-to-face conversation the moment of utterance and the moment of reception are simultaneous, epistolary correspondents share neither the space nor the time of utterance since there is a spatio-temporal gap between the processes of writing, sending, receiving and reading a letter. The author then states that deictic expressions in a letter are but metaphors of the correspondents' engagement, since their concrete meaning is abandoned in favour of the construction of a linguistic world where correspondents fictionally share time and space. They write as if there were no separation, and the denial of such distance aims to fulfil their desire for closeness. Deictic expressions thus translate the desired intimacy as spatio-temporal

proximity.

The author's accurate analysis of epistolary deixis is followed by a re-examination of John L. Austin's theory of speech acts and its revision by John Searle. Fitzmaurice focuses on the way in which illocutionary and perlocutionary acts were involved in the composition of early modern English correspondence, especially in letters of advice or recommendation. Fitzmaurice's linguistic and pragmatic approach seems to pair with an historical and cultural perspective, especially when she illuminates our understanding of the role of the familiar letter in early modern people's life. The author states that the familiar letter was used as the primary instrument to give advice about everything from sensitive matters to hobbies and pastimes, and the letter of advice was one of the samples that were presented in classical and modern letter-writing manuals. One of the most popular kinds of letter of advice concerned health matters: 17th-century correspondents often discussed their illnesses or those of family and friends, and even physicians published their advice in letter form. After comparing early modern letters of advice with Searle's speech act of advising, Fitzmaurice gives different examples of this kind of correspondence, both private and professional.

The author also analyzes another great theme of early modern English epistolarity, the act of seeking and assuring patronage. Renaissance literary patronage was a cultural system that extended to the gentry, the government and the church. Religious ministers and artists seeking patronage and influential people lending financial and spiritual support were part of the same community in which letter writing flourished. Many letters were written in order to persuade wealthy people to give their support or to thank them for their constant assistance. Fitzmaurice states that these acts of epistolary charity seeking may be included in Searle's definition of perlocutionary acts, since they try to persuade the addressee to do something in consequence of a fact. The author then examines the familiar letters addressed to Charles Montagu, Earl

of Halifax, by 18th-century writers such as Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope and Joseph Addison, asking for his patronage. It is clear that, apart from its necessary reflection to the role of the familiar letter in early modern England, Fitzmaurice's study is motivated by a linguistic perspective which focuses on the concrete effect of epistolary communication, and the author's interest in Renaissance English epistolarity serves to reinforce the book's pragmatic focus.

Fitzmaurice often refers to an interesting study, *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*¹⁴, edited by David Barton and Niger Hall in 2009. This is a wide-ranging collection of essays examining letter writing as «a social practice in its own rights»¹⁵. It is a cross-disciplinary and comparative study assembling different disciplines such as linguistics, anthropology and history, each of which deals with letter writing from its own critical perspective. Some essays are more focused than others on historical and cultural issues. For example, Charles Bazerman's essay explores the history of different forms of writing and persuasively argues that letters are the root of many written genres, such as scientific articles and official documents. Other essays are cross-cultural studies that deepen our picture of letter writing in other countries than England. In a fine essay on the role of letter writing in America from 1750 until 1800, Konstantin Dierks explores the particular period in which traditional epistolary practices were giving way to the more intimate forms of address of the familiar letter, highlighting the importance of this shift for the upward mobility of middle-class people. Other contributions focus on such topics as the materiality of letter writing, children's letter writing and the future of letters in the culture of the media. It is clear, however, that this book is driven by an interdisciplinary perspective that connects traditional ideas on letter writing to larger national and transnational issues, and it mainly investigates the role of letter

¹⁴ David Barton, Niger Hall (eds.), *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2009.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

writing in literate human societies rather than focusing on a particular historical period, as do the other studies in this review.

Women's letter writing in Renaissance England has been widely explored by James Daybell's *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing, 1450-1700*¹⁶ and *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*¹⁷. This topic has also been the focus of an interesting collection edited by Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb, *Women's Letters Across Europe, 1400-1700: form and persuasion*¹⁸.

Early Modern Women's Letter Writing, edited by Daybell in 2001, is a wide-ranging collection of essays which use different critical perspectives to study women's letter writing during the late medieval and early modern periods as a phenomenon extending from aristocratic to middle-class female correspondents. The book opens with an impressive introduction in which Daybell asserts that women's letters are of priceless importance as ways to gain insight into the degree of their literacy, their familial and social relationships and their key role in a wide range of religious, literary and political activities. They also allow us to look at women's self-expression and observe the ways in which they conveyed their emotions and experiences. The book adds much to our picture of early modern women's education, inviting us to explore how variations in the levels of their literacy deeply influenced their correspondence.

Renaissance England's female population included uneducated women, who were not familiar with the activity of letter writing and could only scratch a rude signature, and highly literate women, usually belonging to the upper classes, who could write in various hands and styles. Most women were excluded from grammar schools and univer-

¹⁶ James Daybell (ed.), *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing, 1450-1700*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2001.

¹⁷ James Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006.

¹⁸ Jane Couchman, Ann Crabb (eds.), *Women's Letters Across Europe, 1400-1700: Form and Persuasion*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005.

sities, and were taught within the household. The quality of educational provision was thus irregular, since it mainly depended on parental attitudes towards the idea of female literacy. Accordingly, for most women education consisted only of religious precepts and household duties. Towards the end of the 15th century, some women could read and write letters, but most of them were forced to rely on the services of scribes and secretaries. However, women might also employ an amanuensis because they simply chose not to write themselves. The reluctance of some of them to write could also be caused by their own feelings of shame at their poor handwriting and inability to spell correctly, which were seen as social handicaps. Some of the contributions in this collection provide accounts of the ways in which women, encouraged by pride and self-esteem, started improving their literacy skills in order to be able to produce autograph letters without being haunted by the possibility of social embarrassment. From the 16th century onwards, women began to gain access to improved education and they increasingly started writing letters in their own hand. Alongside the social motivation, other reasons may be put forth to explain women's acquisition of full literacy, such as their need to conduct intimate correspondence without the interference of a scribe and their desire to monitor their own personal and business letters. The more personal the relationship with the addressee, the more important it became for the sender to write a letter personally. Business correspondence, by contrast, was considered as a routine, technical and impersonal activity, and it was usually delegated to a secretary. A number of contributions persuasively argue that the degree of intimacy of women's letters strictly depended on the gender of the recipients, and it seems that gender had the same impact on their epistolary practices as the consideration of the addressee's rank and role in the family.

The book also illuminates our understanding of the political nature of most early modern women's correspondence. Although women considered letter writing as the best means to keep in touch with family

and friends and to maintain social connections, it was when letters were involved in women's public activities that these writings became incomparable signs of female power and influence. First of all, women could rely on letters when they had to manage their household affairs in the absence of their husbands. Furthermore, women played a crucial role in marriage arrangements, and many letters show their frequent intervention in organizing, promoting and discouraging matches. If these letters had not survived, it would have been easy to surmise that these negotiations were run entirely by male patriarchs. Other letters demonstrate the important role of women in managing the domestic economy: they discuss the procurement of home supplies, the household's needs and negotiations for fresh provisions, acting as evidence of women's connections with local markets and farms. Many letters allow us to examine the role of women as religious patrons offering support and protection to ministers and clergymen. Many others show women dispensing expert advice, both in the medical and educational sphere. Hosts of letters show their involvement in promoting the education of young relatives placed in their care. Women also wrote letters to request favours for an individual or to act as intermediaries in order to settle disputes over jointure and inheritance. All these kinds of letters constitute an interesting source to examine the involvement of women in social spheres which were considered to be typically male. These writings show a male language of political friendship and reciprocity together with a calculated use of supposedly feminine characteristics such as weakness and dependency, which were used as deferential strategies to manipulate male addressees. Some essays focus on interesting case studies: in a fine essay on the correspondence of single women, Susan Whyman not only examines the way in which letters allowed nuns to act as patrons and participate in religious politics, but she emphasizes how single women's letters have survived in small numbers, since they may have been considered less worthy of being preserved than those written by married women.

James Daybell's *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* was published in 2006 and mainly focuses on the 16th century. This period, as the author clearly states, constitutes a transitional stage in women's literacy as well as their epistolary practices. Whilst at the beginning of the century letters simply acted as a means of communication allowing women to conduct business affairs and maintaining family and social relationships, over the course of the century they began to be increasingly used by women as literary products to express intimate feelings and emotions. Women began to consider letter writing as a way of self-representation, a vehicle to reflect their own inner self, since the activity encouraged confessional self-examination and inward reflection. In this study, Daybell provides a great deal of information about the features and aims of 16th-century female correspondence. First of all, the author states that women's letters survive in far greater numbers than other forms of writings such as diaries and memoirs. He reports that at the beginning of the century upper-class women represented the largest group of letter writers, perhaps because in their social sphere modern ideas on women's education and literacy were more easily accepted. However, by the end of the century the largest category of writers was represented by gentlewomen, because of their larger number and the spread of letter-writing practices below the ranks of aristocracy: according to Daybell, 60% of women writers belonged to the gentry, 30% came from the nobility and 10% were the wives or widows of merchants and clergymen. The author subsequently gives an account of the wide range of recipients of women's letters, either within or beyond the family. Not only did women write to kinship groups beyond the immediate family, but they also sent letters of petition concerning business matters and patronage to government officials and ministers. According to Daybell, these letters constitute the most significant category in women's correspondence. It is for this reason that he strongly emphasizes the political nature of early modern women's letter writing, firmly stating that this activity should not be understood simply as a

domestic and private one: women wrote letters to persuade and influence, to gather information, to seek and offer advice, to dispense patronage and to maintain and extend their social and political connections. In these contexts, it is clear that the separation between public and private became blurred.

As far as the gender of recipients is concerned, the number of letters written to men is far superior to those sent to women, since husbands and fathers could more easily provide help and assistance. Daybell examines the linguistic and rhetorical differences of women's letters in relation to their male recipients. For example, letters from daughters to fathers were characterized by deferential themes of humility and respect and followed a fixed rhetorical pattern, opening with the daughter's enquiries about her father's health and closing with her best wishes for a long life. Among the letters described by Daybell, letters from women challenging men are worth mentioning since they openly face male authorities: women used the letter form as a powerful way to display fury and outrage, either by telling their misadventures to family and friends or by directly addressing and insulting men for their offences. Similarly, very interesting are the letters in which women ridiculed men and their vices. Daybell also examines the characteristics of letters written to daughters and mothers-in-law, highlighting their rhetorical aspects as well as the linguistic reciprocity of a female relationship. Daybell also pays attention to letter writing as a material and physical activity. He explores different issues ranging from the impact of classical and modern manuals on epistolary practices, the processes of writing, posting and receiving letters, and the letter's non-textual indicators, such as seals and enclosures. Daybell also engages with previous studies on early modern handwriting. He reports that during the 16th century italic became increasingly associated not only with erudition but also with women's writing practices. Because of its easiness, italic hand was considered as the most appropriate script for women, who were thought to be intellectually inferior and less patient than men

in learning new things. By the end of the century italic was widely considered in England to be a childish and womanish script to be left behind. However, Daybell argues that the adoption of italic hand by women was gradual and rather irregular. Until the 1570s, this script was still confined to schools and universities, and by 1590 it was becoming increasingly popular amongst men of the nobility and gentry. Therefore, according to the author, until the end of the century italic hand was more the mark of the writer's social status than of his/her gender. However, Daybell also asserts that in the second half of the 16th century in many upper-class families young girls were taught italic hand and boys were taught secretary, and since they received their education separately, italic and secretary ended up becoming gendered hands. As Daybell points out, a few highly literate women, such as Elizabeth I, were able to write both italic and secretary.

One of the most appealing features of this book is that Daybell does not simply investigate women's writing abilities but also focuses on their reading skills. Most scholars assert that women's level of reading ability was greater than their writing skills. What Daybell believes is that the ability of women to read handwritten documents strictly depended on their familiarity with the different kinds of handwriting: women who practiced and studied certain hands probably read them easily. Since italic was the most common handwriting taught to women, it must have been the easiest to read. Secretary, by contrast, was unfamiliar to most women. Very few literate women could also read Latin, and a greater number could read French. Daybell subsequently describes early modern women's letter writing as an essentially pragmatic activity. Women always wrote to reach a personal or social aim: asking for a favour, seeking mediation, expressing obligation to friends and kinsmen. Letters were often occasioned when they were experiencing love, joy, sorrow, poverty or anger. Daybell then describes four uses of correspondence, each of which is evidence of the pragmatic nature of women's letter writing. Firstly, he examines letters bearing news.

Women wrote letters to exchange news and information about national and European events and played an influential role in their circulation. While they received newsletters that kept them up-to-date with all kinds of political and national events, women also frequently wrote letters to their husbands abroad containing news about the household as well as gossip about local neighbourhoods and parliamentary appointments. Daybell then analyzes women's letters of social courtesy, which were written to thank, console or congratulate and showed a great illocutionary force. He also examines women's letters as gifts, inviting us to consider these writings as both material objects and social forms of obligation. Letters were often used to convey goods, medical recipes and literary texts, but they could also act as carriers of social duty and obligation, which were perceived as social gifts.

Finally, Daybell explores women's letters as autobiographical compositions, since they were written in the first person and showed their feelings, opinions and attitudes. Women constructed their identity mainly in relation to family and religion, which led them more easily to self-examination and questioning. The author especially refers to women's correspondence with clergymen and theologians, in which they expressed religious concerns. At the end of his ambitious study, Daybell focuses on a particular group of early modern women's letters, that is, letters of petition, which are explored as an epistolary sub-genre. Letters of petition account for almost one-third of 16th-century female correspondence and allow us to explore the involvement of women in the system of patronage and politics. Daybell examines the ways in which women presented their requests to politically influential people, the rhetorical strategies they used and the impact of gender on these strategies. Daybell's extremely interesting study is an important contribution to the field, since it thoroughly analyzes the different levels of early modern women's education and literacy as well as the pragmatic nature of their correspondence, shedding light onto a written production which is certainly greater than has been so far assumed.

Couchman and Crabb's *Women's Letters Across Europe, 1400-1700* is a comprehensive collection of essays published in 2005. These essays focus on the epistolary practices of popular women from France, Germany, England, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands and examine a wide range of topics, such as the relationship between manuscript and print culture, Renaissance education and literacy, and the merging of public and private spheres. Letter writers range from the popular Isabella d'Este and Catherine de Medicis to less well-known women such as Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi and Anna Maria Von Schurman, and the letters are analyzed as historical and linguistic documents: they both give insight into these women's lives and show how they were able to manipulate epistolary conventions taught by letter-writing manuals for specific persuasive purposes, using rhetorical techniques to reach individual pragmatic aims.

In conclusion, the studies discussed in this review essay point to a revival, in recent years, of the interest in letter writing in Renaissance England, and broaden the discussion to a variety of topics ranging from the historical and cultural developments that allowed epistolary practices to evolve and expand from the Late Medieval to the early modern period in England, to the literacy skills men and women needed to have in order to write and read both personal and official letters. A number of the works included in this discussion pay considerable attention to writing tools, handwriting, and letters' social signals, highlighting the differences inscribed in linguistic forms of address and non-textual markers such as seals, types of paper and sheet sizes. Other studies add to our understanding of the role of letter writing in early modern England and the collective nature of this activity, which involved not only correspondents but also other actors such as secretaries and messengers; they also take into account the chances and consequences of a letter circulating in and out of epistolary communities, both intentionally and unintentionally. Several studies focus on the linguistic aspects of early modern English letter writing and the pragmatic

uses of epistolary exchange. However, it seems that all the studies reviewed share the assumption that the culture of epistolarity in Renaissance England implied a circulation of information among groups whose members were linked by social ties or mutual interests. In this context, letters were carriers of social connections and intelligence as well as vehicles of feelings and emotions. These factors contribute to an ontology of epistolarity strictly based on the letter as a socio-text, creating strong alliances and relationships as well as expressing duties and obligations inherent in the social bond.

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