

The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512-1635

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The art of making and using invisible ink, James Daybell informs us, was both described in printed books of secrets and manuscript recipe books and practised by letter-writers in early modern England (pp. 166–8). Ingredients such as vinegar, urine, and the juice of oranges, lemons and onions were used to write covert messages in letters that could only be revealed through the application of water, heat or a fine powder like coal dust. During his imprisonment in the Tower of London in the late 1590s, the Jesuit priest John Gerard employed orange juice to write – with a quill toothpick – secret messages to friends outside. While acting as a spy in the 1580s, Thomas Rogers regularly used invisible ink in letters to Sir Francis Walsingham and Sir Henry Palavicino. Through these examples and many more, Daybell – as if applying a pinch of coal dust – makes visible the materiality of invisible ink, revealing the physical properties of a substance which concealed its physical presence. Indeed, as a whole *The Material Letter in Early Modern England* might be said to render the invisible visible. Daybell's 'material readings' of the early modern letter in its almost infinite variety of forms draw attention to and elucidate the significance of a wide range of material characteristics that are obscured by both modern printed editions of letters and studies that focus on these documents' 'literariness' rather than their physical features. From the outset, the book urges the importance of letters' material details, including those that cannot be transcribed or categorised as text. Take, for example, the sketch of a gallows on the address leaf of a 1601 letter from Sir Robert Cecil to Sir Francis Darcy, a document which adorns the front cover of Daybell's book and supplies his opening case study. Positioned below the words 'post hast hast hast for life life life lyfe', the drawing was probably intended to communicate the urgency of the letter to a partially literate bearer (p. 6; also see p. 142). While such details

are not always a matter of life and death, they are, Daybell demonstrates, worthy of scholarly attention.

Daybell has produced ‘the first full-length monograph study of manuscript letters and the culture and social practices of letter-writing in early modern England’ (p. 10). He concentrates on a period that begins in 1512, when Sir Brian Tuke became Henry VIII’s Master of the Posts, and ends in 1635, when Charles I issued a proclamation that opened up the royal post service to private correspondence. This period witnessed many important changes in epistolary culture, including ‘a significant extension of letter-writing skills throughout society, an expansion in the range of uses to which letters were put and significant developments in epistolary theory and practices’ (p. 10). Daybell’s material approach aligns him with Alan Stewart, Jonathan Gibson and others whose work highlights the importance of material aspects of letters, as well as bibliographers and other interpreters of texts that have demonstrated the need to consider ‘the material meanings of texts’ in early modern studies more generally (pp. 14–15).⁽¹⁾ Daybell draws extensively on these and many other secondary sources, but also on his own published work, for he has already effectively demonstrated the advantages of attending to letters’ materiality elsewhere.⁽²⁾ Readers of *The Material Letter* are never allowed to forget that the epistle was not just a genre but a thing, an object that generated – and, in the case of extant letters, continues to generate – meanings through complex, variable and interrelated material signs. Having consulted over 10,000 manuscript letters as well as a great variety of other primary sources in both manuscript and print, Daybell transports us into the archive as he examines physical characteristics of letters such as ink, handwriting, watermarks, chain lines, folds and wax seals. His general observations about epistolary culture and practices are always reinforced by references to specific letters, which he analyses through diverse bibliographical techniques, including codicology (the physical description of manuscripts), palaeography (the study of handwriting), sigillography (the study of seals) and diplomatics (the study of documents). And this is not materiality for materiality’s sake. Daybell shows that thorough investigations of letters’ physical features extend our understanding of what he calls the ‘social materiality’ of the letter, that is, ‘the social and cultural practices of manuscript letters and the material conditions and contexts in which they were produced, disseminated and consumed’ (p. 230). It is largely for this reason that Daybell is justified in identifying his interdisciplinary engagement with the materiality of the letter as ‘a mode of analysis that complements traditional historical and literary approaches, as well as more recent linguistic and gender-based analyses’ (p. 229). Whatever their particular focus and methodology, future studies of early modern letters will doubtless be indebted to this groundbreaking work.

The style and structure of *The Material Letter* make it clear, accessible and engaging. Daybell’s writing is direct and purposeful, and the black and white images spread throughout the book strengthen his focus on the materiality of various primary sources. Occasionally the enormous amounts of evidence he provides are overwhelming, but he consistently relates his examples of letters to the bigger picture, clarifying what they collectively tell us about early modern epistolary culture without over-generalising. The myriad example letters that Daybell closely packs into his paragraphs testify to his Herculean labours in British and American archives, but they also reanimate the lives of those who produced and came into contact with the letters (not just letter-writers and letter-readers, but also secretaries, carriers and many others). Especially in his examinations of ‘private’ letters, Daybell gestures towards the compelling human stories behind the richly diverse material signs of letters he is investigating. There is something fascinating, for instance, about ‘the seal of a letter from Maria Thynne to her estranged mother-in-law Joan Thynne, which exhibits a lock of her hair, an intimate gesture to facilitate a rapprochement between the pair after Maria’s clandestine marriage to Thomas Thynne’ (pp. 106-7). And what are we to make of the fact that Robert Dudley, the earl of Leicester, ‘frequently used a personal mark shaped like eyes and eyebrows to sign off letters to Elizabeth, a covert reference to her nickname for him, “Eyes”’ (p. 165)? Such examples cast ‘the material letter’ as a distinctly human and idiosyncratic product.

For many students and scholars, the book will serve as a valuable reference work, and its generous index means it can easily be used as such. But its individual chapters’ full treatment of specific areas of the subject and careful accumulation of evidence encourage readers to experience them – and indeed the whole book – in their entirety from start to finish. Following on from the introduction, chapter two, ‘Materials and tools of letter writing’, considers the production, distribution and use of those things that were necessary to create

letters, including not just paper and ink but also quill pens, penknives, ink horns, pounce pots, sealing wax, seal matrices and writing surfaces. In its explication of the highly complicated material processes of letter-writing, this chapter provides a foundation for the rest of the book.

Chapter three looks at 'Epistolary writing technologies' (in the less obvious sense of 'letter-writing arts'), exploring the significance of pedagogical practices and printed letter-writing manuals ('epistolographies') as well as the methods, modes and practices of letter composition or 'authorship'. Here and elsewhere in the book, Daybell acknowledges that 'theoretical epistolary protocols rarely translated from the printed page or schoolroom to manuscript' (p. 231). Thus his treatment of models presented in epistolographies such as Angel Day's *The English Secretorie* (1586) is modulated by an understanding that, although certain formal genres like the letter of petition followed prescribed conventions, 'everyday' correspondence usually did not.

Chapter four, 'Interpreting materiality and social signs', builds closely on chapter two's work on materials and tools (indeed, the earlier chapter's subheadings 'Paper' and 'Seals and sealing' are used again here), investigating the ways in which letters' physical forms conveyed significant meanings. To give one of many examples, he explains that black seals (with added carbon) were affixed to letters in order to signify mourning; thus in the 1640s Unton Dering sealed her correspondence with black wax following the death of her husband Sir Edward (p. 106). This chapter is where Daybell's use of bibliographical techniques proves most effective: he shows how letters' material signs, codes and cues were related to aspects of identity like social status and gender, and even how these various physical characteristics changed during the period under consideration.

Chapter five is an extensive look at and reconstruction of the 'Postal conditions' in early modern England up until Charles I's postal reforms, which initiated a process of democratisation in the system. Daybell begins by considering the underlying physical structures of the delivery of letters (the conditions of roads and bridges, awareness of geography, etc.), and then explains the overlapping methods of delivery that were used: royal 'standing posts', carriers, foot-posts, the Merchant Strangers' Post, and personal servants. In doing so, he gives a strong sense of the realm's 'connectivity'. But he also makes clear the un-systematised and often makeshift nature of postal arrangements, illustrating how the consequent insecurity of the letter as a medium of communication influenced its material form.

Chapter six, 'Secret letters', is in many ways the most original, interesting and engaging chapter in the book. From a material perspective, Daybell examines the strategies used in covert correspondence: not just the use of invisible ink but also, for example, codes, ciphers, symbols, secret languages, and hidden methods of delivery. The chapter presents, as Daybell puts it, 'a heightened version of the concerns of this book' because it 'forces attention on the complex meanings generated through material forms and contexts' (p. 148). In fact, we might view the archival work on which the monograph is founded as a kind of deciphering or code-breaking. The subject makes for some entertaining examples (the exploits of the cryptographer Thomas Phelippes, for example, are quite phenomenal (pp. 159–62)), but the chapter's real success lies in the freshness of its research and argument. As Daybell observes, 'little work has focused on the development of secret epistolary writing technologies and their broader social and cultural significance, within an emerging concept of privacy' (p. 148). The chapter convincingly argues that the 16th and early 17th centuries saw significant developments in secret forms of letter-writing, not just in state correspondence but also in letters more generally. Indeed, it is suggested – both here and throughout the book – that personal correspondence became increasingly secretive or 'private' over the course of the period, a point to which I will return at the end of this review.

Chapters seven and eight consider what happened to letters after their initial composition, delivery and reception. In chapter eight, 'Copying, letter-books and the scribal circulation of letters', Daybell considers the complex and evolving genre of letter-books or 'copy-books', which were compiled to preserve outgoing and inward correspondence for various reasons, before going on to explain the ways in which letters were copied and circulated (as manuscript separates, larger bibliographic manuscript compilations or printed collections). Chapter eight is a coda on 'The afterlives of letters'. It investigates how letters were archived in the early modern period, and then turns to modern archival practices, addressing in particular the tension

between preservation techniques and digitisation projects on the one hand and scholars concerned with extant letters' materiality on the other.

The conclusions Daybell reaches are intriguing, often revisionary and even revelatory. He does not aim to be entirely comprehensive, and frequently identifies areas of research that would benefit from further study. Despite the singular 'material letter' of the title, the book demonstrates the incredible diversity of something that was at once a genre, a text and an object. The protean form of the early modern letter is not surprising given that 'letter-writing was in many respects a remarkably ad hoc affair, worked out in relation to localised conditions and inflected by factors such as social status, gender and generation' (p. 26). The misconception Daybell is most keen to dispel is that letter-writing was simply a private two-way exchange between sender and reader fixed to a historically specific moment. The book illustrates that it was rather 'a layered, collaborative, multi-stage process' (p. 230), and that a letter's story did not end once it had been received and read. While Daybell discourages the idea that letters were innately 'private' forms of correspondence, he argues that, largely due to rising literacy levels, '[t]he period saw greater use of personal writing technologies for correspondence, and the emergence of the letter as an increasingly "private" form – a "technology of the self" – utilised for a broadening range of purposes, emotive and affective, spiritual and imaginative, clandestine and covert' (p. 233). This is connected to his suggestion that '[t]he process of writing a letter in many ways forced an individual to compose a self', and even that 'letters were a technology that restructured thought' (p. 60). I for one am curious about how these ideas might be further tested and investigated, and their implications for early modern studies more generally. Could the emergence of epistolary privacy and letters' new forms of independent written expression be related to the 'rise of the Author', which is so often said to be an early modern phenomenon? And how does the concept of 'self-writing' in epistolary culture apply to debates about the changing nature of early modern subjectivity? It is to the book's credit that it provokes such big questions.

As with so many of the letters it examines, the composition of this book has been a sophisticated and layered process. In his acknowledgements, Daybell identifies the work as 'the culmination of more than fifteen years of research' and perhaps 'the book that I should have written first' (p. xiii). Now that it is here, *The Material Letter* deserves to be opened, read and responded to by everyone with an interest in early modern epistolary culture.

Notes

1. For examples of studies that address the materiality of the early modern letter, see Sara Jayne Steen, 'Reading beyond the words: material letters and the process of interpretation', *Quidditas*, 22 (2001), 55–69; Jonathan Gibson, 'Significant space in manuscript letters', *The Seventeenth Century*, 12, 1 (2002), 1–9; Alan Stewart and Heather Wolfe, *Letter-Writing in Renaissance England* (Washington, DC, 2004); and Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters* (Oxford, 2009), especially chapter one. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See, for example, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford, 2006), especially pp. 47–60; and 'Material meanings and the social signs of manuscript letters in early modern England', *Literature Compass*, 6 (2009), 1–21. [Back to \(2\)](#)

The author would like to thank the reviewer for his very generous, thoughtful and perceptive comments on the book.

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