

Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England

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It is a truth universally acknowledged and documented many years ago by David Cressy, that women in early modern England had far lower rates of literacy than men. James Daybell does not overturn this truth, but his book alerts us to the survival of a far larger body of correspondence by Tudor women than we had imagined, and urges us to think again about the level of female literacy in the period. Cressy suggested that the proportion of women able to write their own names rose from about 1 per cent in 1500 to 8 per cent by 1600, deriving his figures from a scrutiny of ecclesiastical court depositions. But as Daybell notes, women from the upper levels of society rarely gave evidence in these courts, and the figures may seriously underestimate literacy rates among these groups. Daybell believes that most elite women were literate, to varying degrees, by the later 16th century, though the spelling of even aristocratic ladies could be bewilderingly idiosyncratic. His study is based on an impressive body of some 3,000 surviving letters, written by over 650 different individuals, and he shows how they can give us an invaluable insight into women's lives. He is also at pains, however, to stress that these letters must be read as texts, rather than transparent statements of fact or feeling, for they were 'subject to generic and linguistic conventions; texts that were socially and culturally coded' (p. 46). Daybell provides an assured and reliable guide to the conventions that shaped composition, page-layout, forms of address and closing salutation, and so on. His book is a fine analytical survey and, at the same time, an invaluable manual for the historian using and interpreting this material.

Daybell has published extensively in the field over the last decade, and the present book represents the culmination of extensive research and careful reflection. It will become at once the standard work. My only quibble is that, despite the title, his study begins effectively in 1540 when the Tudor period was already halfway through. Clearly the number of surviving letters increased considerably in the second half of the

century, especially from the 1570s, but Daybell acknowledges in passing that many letters survive from the earlier period, especially the 1530s, and he sometimes draws upon the rich correspondence of Lady Lisle from those years. Some explanation of the authorial decision would have been welcome.

Such quibbles aside, what do we learn from this study? As we would expect, the surviving material increases quite dramatically over the course of the period. From the 1540s Daybell has found 80 letters by about 30 writers; from the 1590s there are over 800 by over 230 writers (p. 39). Again, as we would expect, the material is heavily weighted towards the elite. Some 90 per cent of the surviving letters are from women belonging to the aristocracy or gentry, with the other 10 per cent mainly from professional and mercantile groups. Letters written by 'middling sort' and plebeian women, relatively common as we go through the 17th century, are very rare in the Tudor period. Daybell notes that men's and women's letter-writing display more similarities than differences, and in many respects social status weighed more heavily than gender. The great majority of letters were functional in character, dealing with practical matters. Even letters sent by wives to absent husbands were generally concerned primarily with the smooth running of the household and its affairs, rather than expressing personal emotions. A very substantial number - roughly a thousand, by 350 different women - were letters of petition, many sent to courtiers and officials and seeking favours for the writer, family members, or her associates. Here gender did play a significant part in shaping the text. Most petitioners quite consciously chose to emphasise their feminine 'weakness' and 'frailty', judging correctly that the language of submission and humility was most likely to elicit a favourable response from male grandees. Other letters were social, written to keep the writer in touch with family and friends, reinforce social bonds and pass on news that was often domestic or local, but might also include political, court and military news - subjects often regarded as essentially male.

As subjects, 'women letter-writers' might sound unproblematic. In reality, as much of the book explores in depth, they present numerous problems. Did they pen their own letters, dictate to an amanuensis, or write a draft from which a male secretary would work up a polished final version? Daybell shows us that women employed all three methods, reflecting both varying levels of writing facility and also the nature of the letter and its intended recipient. Even highly literate women might seek help and guidance in writing letters concerning business and law. A letter of petition, especially to the queen or some high-ranking minister, was very likely to be penned by an amanuensis. In the case of 23 per cent of all letter-writers, only scribal letters survive (p. 93). The same woman might thus employ different methods according to circumstance - though not, as far as we know, at the same time, unlike the 17th-century lawyer, politician and ambassador Bulstrode Whitelocke, who was understandably proud of his ability to write one letter while simultaneously dictating two others to his secretaries. (1) Many women's letters, Daybell shows, were collaborative efforts, partly their own composition, partly written by a secretary, sometimes modified on the advice of a male family-member who had read through a draft. That presents one problem for the modern scholar trying to identify the 'true voice' of the woman whose signature appears at the end. Equally problematic is the role of convention in the construction and language of letters. Some elite women may have had access to published guides by Erasmus and Angel Day, and many more followed carefully the style and conventions they had seen in other letters, sometimes copying out admired letters to serve as models. Many letters were thus in part formulaic, and in each case the modern reader has to disentangle the formulaic from the genuinely personal. Respecting convention was by no means a trivial matter, for the writer was well aware that the recipient would interpret a letter according to its form and language as well as its substance. Any significant deviation from established convention might well be interpreted as evidence of ill breeding or as a deliberate slight, both potentially disastrous. Daybell shows us how to 'read' the layout and the blank spaces of a letter, as well as its text. Thus leaving a wide gap between the opening greeting and the main text served as a mark of respect, while text tightly crammed signified the opposite. A large space left empty at the end was a sign of conspicuous consumption (paper being very expensive), while a beautifully written letter might not only accompany a gift but constitute a gift in its own right.

In many respects women's correspondence confirms evidence we have from other sources on issues of gender. For example, elite girls were usually taught the italic hand, judged the easiest to learn and read and hence the most appropriate for a sex believed to have only limited intellectual stamina and capacity; by

contrast boys from the same social milieu would be taught the secretary hand, the dominant script for business, law and government. A few women could write in Latin, and significantly more knew French; some used letters to mention or discuss the books they had read. It is striking to find that most avoided religious matters, and their letters were predominantly secular in spirit. This contrasts sharply with women's poetry of the Tudor-Stuart period, and probably reflects both the functional character of most correspondence and well-founded concerns over confidentiality. Women addressing their husbands generally did so in respectful, deferential language, especially among the aristocracy. Their style was more intimate and affectionate among the gentry and merchants, and increasingly so in the later decades. This may reflect changes in the emotional climate of family life, though equally, as Daybell notes, it may simply reflect a natural change in tone as more family letters were penned by women themselves rather than dictated to an amanuensis. Certainly we have some letters, especially in the Thynne correspondence, where wives felt able to express warm affection, and even erotic thoughts, to their partners. Maria Thynne, already well known through the work of Alison Wall, (2) emerges as perhaps the most frank and forceful of all the Tudor women writers, sometimes playful, sometimes biting sarcasm at the expense of her mother-in-law or husband. Some of the warmest and most informal letters occur among those written by women to women, of which about 250 survive.

In other respects Daybell's findings encourage us to modify traditional views. If female correspondents were often conventionally modest and self-deprecating, they felt at liberty to adopt a very different tone when writing to male social inferiors (tradesmen or servants), or reproaching a neglectful son or even husband. Status was at least as important as gender. The duchess of Suffolk felt able to use playfully familiar language in addressing William Cecil, newly appointed Secretary in 1550, clearly feeling that his recent elevation did not outweigh their old familiarity and her vast superiority of rank. Also important, as mentioned, is the discovery that many female correspondents were writing about matters of high politics and public affairs, traditionally viewed as male preserves. Women's letters, like men's, often moved freely between personal and public matters, and the boundaries between private and public spheres were fluid. Indeed, women could play a variety of political roles, not only writing petitions to the queen or senior officials, but delivering and supporting the petitions of others, and sometimes supplying advice to friends and family on timing and tactics. Women at court were thus far more than mere 'points of contact'; they could play an active role guiding as well as serving their families in the provinces. In some cases substantial numbers of letters have survived written by a single woman - over 70 each by Bess of Hardwick, Arbella Stuart, and Elizabeth Bourne, for example - and here we can use them to explore women's engagement with the political world more fully. The most significant finding, perhaps, is the fluidity of patronage networks: suitors did not rely on a single patron, but turned to several, in the hope of achieving a cumulative effect. Elsewhere Daybell explores the significance of letter-writing in encouraging a growing sense of the self. Although the majority of letters were functional rather than introspective, the very act of writing prompted the writer to think of herself as an individual, with her own distinct voice and identity, however much that voice had to be modified by epistolary convention.

Daybell has explicitly chosen to write on 'women letter-writers' rather than 'women's letter-writing'. The two subjects overlap heavily, of course, and he notes several times the fact that many more letters have undoubtedly perished than have survived. There certainly remains scope for further work on female literacy and letter-writing drawing on other, indirect sources. Shakespeare's Mrs Page and Mrs Ford, the 'Merry Wives of Windsor', are at home in the world of letters, as we would expect, for these are gentlewomen (if of modest standing). On receiving a love letter from Falstaff, Mrs Page remarks that she had missed out on such things in her youth (*Merry Wives*, II.i.1-2), an interesting comment in the light of Daybell's observation that very few love letters have survived from the Tudor period. It is perhaps more surprising to find the shepherdess Phebe writing a letter in *As You Like It*, though Rosalind doubts that it could be genuine (*As You Like It*, IV. ii. 8-30); and it is Maria the maid who composes and writes the spoof love letter to Malvolio, which is central to the plot of *Twelfth Night*. Moving away from drama, we find the adulterous Mary Deane communicating with her lover in 1600, and writing in a secret cipher she had learned from her mother. The Bridewell governors, unable to crack the code, contented themselves with ordering Mary to be whipped and deported to Scotland. (3) A generation later, the Lancashire yeoman's daughter Jane Martindale migrated to

London, around 1625, and then wrote home asking her mother to send a goose-pie by the carrier. The letter has long since perished, but it is striking that her brother Adam, who supplies the information, saw nothing unusual in such female correspondence. [\(4\)](#)

Women's correspondence from the 17th century survives in too great an abundance for anyone to undertake the comprehensive study that Daybell has given us for the later Tudor period, reflecting the growth of female literacy as well as better survival-rates. Daybell's work has enriched and transformed our understanding of the literacy, and the lives, of Tudor gentlewomen. Perhaps he, or another scholar, will place these findings in a wider geographical context. In Italy and France we find published guides for women on the conventions of letter-writing long before the first appeared in England (in 1638, translated from a French original). Did elite English women lag behind their continental sisters? None of the Tudor correspondence appears to have the easy warmth and intimacy of the marital correspondence between Magdalena and Balthasar Paumgartner, a Nuremberg merchant and his wife in the later 16th century. [\(5\)](#) Let us hope that Daybell's project will encourage other scholars to extend this fine study both chronologically and geographically.

The author's response is pending.

Notes

1. *The Diary of Bulstrode Whitelocke 1605-75*, ed. R. Spalding (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 344. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Two Elizabethan Women: Correspondence of Joan and Maria Thynne, 1575-1611*, ed. A. Wall, Wiltshire Record Society, 38 (1982). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Guildhall Library, London, MS 33011/4, fos. 184, 194 v. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *The Life of Adam Martindale*, ed. R. Parkinson, Chetham Society, 4 (1845), pp.6-8. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. S. Ozment, *Magdalena and Balthasar. An Intimate Portrait of Life in 16th-Century Europe* (New Haven: Yale, 1989). [Back to \(5\)](#)

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