

The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800

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The title of Susan Whyman's *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* suggests two potentialities at once: *The Pen and the People* indicates a comprehensive study of popular letters and letter-writing practices during the long 18th century (1660–1800); yet the subtitle, *English Letter Writers*, implies focused and discrete analyses of specific letter *writers*. In other words, I had to recalibrate my expectations somewhat in reckoning the title of the book because the book is not so much about letter writing as a popular phenomenon during the long 18th century as it is about individual letter writers and the ways in which they acquired and expressed both literacy and literariness. The tension between the focus on the individual case study and the drive toward an expansive scope works sometimes to the study's benefit, sometimes to its detriment.

The book is composed of three parts. Part one, entitled 'Creating a culture of letters', offers an introduction, a chapter on creating the letter, and a chapter on the postal system; part two, 'Creating a culture of literacy,' contains a chapter on rural and laborer letter writers, and one on middle class letter writers; and part three, called 'From letters to literature,' offers a chapter on the relation between letter writing and the epistolary novel, one on letter writing and literary culture, followed by a conclusion.

The study is an important one insofar as Whyman has recovered exemplars of 18th-century middle and underclass epistolary writing. She demonstrates throughout the study 'how people from the lowest strata engaged in mainstream epistolary culture'. (p. 9) Prior scholarship of letters and letter writing during the long 18th century has been dominated by work on aristocratic and literary figures, but Whyman has dug out of the archives collections of letters of non-elite families, focusing her book on 15 of them. The distinctiveness of Whyman's study is indeed that the author 'introduces readers to an unknown group of

ordinary writers' (p. 15). The book is exceedingly well researched; and, of course, as with her prior *Sociability and Power in Late-Stuart England: The Cultural Worlds of the Verneys 1660-1720* (1), the archival work is first rate (demonstrated, for instance, by the details of her archive contained in the appendices). The book uses 'large caches of correspondence' (p. 5), which is vital considering her goal of characterizing an extensive historical swath of a 140 years; it is also commendable since too many studies of epistolary writing are marred by attempting to draw too broad generalizations from too few samples.

The introduction to the book offers a key term around which the remainder of the book will revolve: 'epistolary literacy'. Epistolary literacy includes the material dimensions, linguistic skills, and conceptual abilities of a letter writer, including elements learned through a variety of non-formal training methods; hence, epistolary literacy means far more than simply the ability to write one's name. The term is quite useful, defining the specific ways in which letter writers during the long 18th century learned to engage a culture of letters without any formal education, as well as defining the repertoire of abilities that every letter writer needed.

Chapter one, 'Creating the letter: how to acquire epistolary literacy,' emphasizes how people acquired epistolary literacy through non-formal means: 'we must look for unofficial sites and methods for acquiring literacy' (p. 24), writes Whyman. Such methods include instruction from local scribes, the epistolary literacy parents passed onto children, and what children learned simply by corresponding with family members. The chapter begins with a verbal portrait of a young man preparing to write a letter. It is indeed a colorful way to relate the physical, material, and abstract elements that go into letter composition, although it adds little new insight into the mental or physical conditions of letter writing. Curiously, even as Whyman makes it clear that formal means of instruction in epistolary literacy such as letter-writing manuals were not essential and that her young man has no letter-writing manual at hand, she quotes from letter-writing manuals in her portrait and refers to illustrations from them. The chapter concludes with a comparison of children's correspondence of four families: three merchant families and the elite, educated Evelyn family. However, the purpose of the comparison – to contrast the letter writing of the gentry with that of the middling sort – is not sharp, and one is left with the impression that the letter-writing practices between families of differing social rank differed little.

Chapter two, 'Sending the letter: the Post Office and the politics of the mail,' charts the development of the 18th-century post through 17th-century reforms, discusses alternative delivery methods, and emphasizes the importance of the post to the development of a popular culture of letters. The rather rosy picture of postal efficiency given in the introduction – where Whyman quotes the gushing praise of Jane Fairfax from Jane Austen's *Emma* to the effect that not a letter in a million is lost – is here counter-balanced by a sharp sense of the post's limitations as Whyman examines complaints about the system. In many ways chapter two is a pro forma chapter included to set the stage for the core of the book – chapters three and four – which offers analysis of recovered underclass and middle class letter writers.

Chapter three, 'Letters and literacy: farmers and workers in northern England,' 'shows how persons with little formal education acquired and used letter-writing in their daily lives' (p. 75). Five case studies of families and individuals constitute the primary evidence of this chapter, all letter writers working in rural areas. Whyman assesses in this chapter how letter writing served to satisfy a variety of social, psychological, and personal needs, especially the extent to which 'rural literacy was needed and valued' (p. 86) by individual correspondents. The author develops rich, detailed portraits of the letter writers, and convincingly assesses how and why those letter writers employed letter writing. Whyman ends the chapter with instructive challenges to scholarship of literacy by reflecting on the specifically *epistolary* literacy of farmers and other manual laborers.

Chapter four, 'Letters of the middling sort: confronting problems of business, religion, gender, and class', serves as an accompaniment to the prior chapter on the letters of farmers and manual laborers, incorporating case studies of the letters of four families. Whyman points out that the possession of epistolary literacy was in many ways a marker of the middling sort, insofar as many more letters of middle-class correspondents survive compared to those of manual laborers. Analysis of specifically female letter writers in chapter four

offers a useful complement to James Daybell's work on 16th- and early 17th-century women letter writers in that the letter-writing practices of Rebekah Bateman – her deferential letter-writing style and use of a specifically 'gendered' rhetoric (p. 138) – resemble those of women writing two centuries before. Analysis of the letters of the Follows family of Suffolk, a Quaker family, shows convincingly how a non-conformist family relied on correspondence in the face of persecution, but Whyman also highlights the spiritual dimension of letter writing: 'A truly Christian letter might ... become a means of grace' (p. 144).

As with chapter three, the contexts and characterizations of the correspondents highlighted in chapter four are rich. (There are a number of black-and-white plates that also help bring the letters and contexts alive.) The 'mini-biographies' (p. 16) Whyman constructs in chapters three and four are in some ways an inevitability, required to set context and clarify relationships among correspondents; yet one sometimes wonders in these two chapters if the mini-biographies are there to aid analysis of letters, letter writing, and epistolary literacy or if the letters are in the service of the mini-biographies: there are stretches in the chapters where the topic is neither letters, epistolary literacy, nor even basic literacy, but consist instead of biographical narrative. Now, this does not make the case studies any less compelling; however, chapters three and four end up being less successful overall as examinations of letter writing than they are as analyses of basic writing skills, general literacy, and 18th-century family dynamics where the primary material on which analysis is based happens to be letters.

Whyman's observation that 'The ordinary act of letter-writing underpinned ... literary pursuits' (p. 163) crystallizes the arguments of chapters five and six, where the author highlights how middle class letter writers explored letter writing as a means to engage and write literature. Chapter five, 'Letter-writing and the rise of the novel: the epistolary literacy of Jane Johnson and Samuel Richardson', concentrates on how Jane Johnson, the uneducated wife of a Buckinghamshire vicar, exercised her epistolary literacy to interact textually with Samuel Richardson's epistolary novels, principally *Clarissa* (1748), and who had chiefly moral concerns at core in doing so: included in Jane Johnson's correspondence is her own 'The History of Miss Clarissa of Buckinghamshire' (p. 180), which is largely autobiographical in nature and, of course, is in imitation of Richardson. Jane Johnson, Whyman argues, had answered the call of Richardson himself, who encouraged his readers to engage his novel by soliciting contributions to his serially published work. Whyman also examines the poetry of Johnson in chapter five. What is unclear in this subsection, however, is the cause-and-effect relationship: clearly having specifically epistolary literacy allows Johnson to engage epistolary novelist Richardson, but how specifically *epistolary* literacy encourages her composition of poetry is far less apparent. Whyman's statement that 'Letter-writing offered Johnson a training ground for composing other types of literature' (p. 188) is simply too vague (and generic) to be compelling.

In chapter six, 'Letter-writing, reading, and literary culture: the Johnson family and Anna Miller,' Whyman continues her appraisal of letters and literature. The first sections of the chapter concern Anna Miller and her Bath literary salon. Miller used letters 'to become a published author and to rise socially' (p. 196) by printing her *Letters from Italy* (1776). Whyman then discusses in the last sections of the chapter Jane Johnson's children, Barbara and Robert. Barbara's epistolary literacy allowed her to engage literary criticism and compose private poetry, while Robert 'used epistolary literacy to evaluate literature' (p. 209), evident in the critical commentary contained in his letters, written in response to his reading.

As with chapters three and four, chapters five and six contain considerable biographical and contextual data; indeed, chapters five and six are almost overtaxed with detail. One also wishes Anna Miller's surviving correspondence were thoroughly compared to her epistolary fiction: it would have been instructive to see if a cause-and-effect relationship could be discerned – the cause-and-effect relationship absent from analysis of Jane Johnson's poetry – that one's epistolary literacy determines or enhances one's participation in literary culture; or, in Whyman's words, that 'letter-writing was ... a crucial training ground for entering the mainstream world of letters' (p. 163). The critical point of chapters five and six seems to be that letter writing is related to 'higher' literary endeavors. Again, it is a generic conclusion. The significance of chapters five and six is rather in the recovery of letter writers such as Jane Johnson and her children, who were by no means important literary figures, who existed on the margins of literary culture, but who nevertheless demonstrate a sincere and abiding engagement with literature through the practice of letter

writing, and who do indeed represent participation in a popular culture of letters. Recognition of Jane Jonson's semi-autobiographical 'The History of Miss Clarissa of Buckinghamshire' is alone enough to recommend chapter five as an illuminating chapter.

The book ends with a conclusion, which consists essentially of summary of the preceding chapters. There are no links forged to tie her scholarship to other scholarship of the letters and letter writing of the long 18th century (or with epistolary studies of earlier or later periods), and Whyman seldom looks forward to how the remarkable cache of letters she has recovered may be subject to further analysis – at least the future directions analysis of 18th-century underclass and middle class letter writers might take, since the letters she has recovered are extraordinary documents clearly worthy of further investigation. Indeed, it might have been productive to look forward to the development of popular epistolary literacy in the 19th century, and to indicate what the letter writers she has analyzed can tell us about the continued expansion of a popular culture of letters.

Whyman has also bookended her study with references to the period under investigation as the 'golden age of letters' (pp. 5, 228). This old saw is still regularly employed in literary and historical criticism, yet the phrase 'golden age of letters' is neither critically useful nor even accurately descriptive: the 'golden age of letters' suggests a qualitative measure – that the letters of this period were superior (although how they are superior is never addressed in the book) – when the phrase at best rather signifies a quantitative measure: that more letters were written (and printed) than ever before due to increases in literacy along with other social, economic and cultural phenomena. 'Golden age', moreover, suggests a teleology, implying that earlier epochs of (presumably) iron- or bronze-age letter writing were somehow aesthetically or otherwise deficient. Hence, the phrase 'golden age of letters' becomes bleached of real analytical value since it contains little critical meaning; it becomes instead a rhetorical flourish and convenient shorthand to mark off the historical territory under investigation.

But this is not to focus on the essence of Whyman's book and to recognize her study as a valuable one when it comes to the recovery and analysis of the epistolary literacy of a specific group of letter writers.

Whyman's aim, in fact, is to 'harness letter-writing practices to the service of studying literacy' (p. 9) in investigating the correspondence of several popular letter writers. This is the strength of the book. Indeed, the book might have incorporated the term 'popular epistolary literacy' in the title: even though 'popular epistolary literacy' as a title lacks the punch of *The Pen and the People* (as well as its revolutionary implications), this is the most accurate description of what this book is finally about.

Notes

1. Susan Whyman, *Sociability and Power in Late-Stuart England: The Cultural Worlds of the Verneys 1660–1720* (Oxford, 1999). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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