



**James Daybell and Andrew Gordon, eds., *Women and Epistolary Agency in Early Modern Culture, 1450–1690* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016). Print, 258 pp., £110.00, ISBN: 9781472478269.**

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*Review*

The study of early modern women's correspondence has been positively revolutionised over the past two decades, and the field shows no signs of slowing down. In recent years, as James Daybell and Andrew Gordon note in their authoritative introduction to this volume, scholarly attention has been directed, in particular, towards the material, linguistic, and regional aspects of correspondence, as well as the possibilities offered by the digital humanities. The editors, with good reason, position this collection at the 'forefront' of these developments: their introduction does an excellent job of unifying the twelve essays, written from a range of disciplinary perspectives, around a shared interest in employing innovative approaches to examine the 'complex categories' of gender and agency in early modern letters.

Despite the expansive focus suggested by the title, the contributions concentrate primarily on England, with occasional forays into Ireland and, in one instance, across the Atlantic. They are evenly spread across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though only Barbara Harris' brief but masterful survey of 423 letters written by early Tudor aristocratic women deals in any depth with the initial decades of this period. Nevertheless, the volume covers an impressive amount of ground. It is divided into three parts: the first considers letters as 'objects', exploring some of the methodologies scholars can bring to bear on their study; the second examines letters as vehicles for the transmission of knowledge and authority; while the final section focuses on letter networks and the 'social relations of correspondence'.

Two of the most noteworthy contributions are located in Part I. James Daybell's essay situates itself within the burgeoning body of research on the 'materiality' of early modern letter-writing, examining the ways in which the physical features of women's letters were 'inflected by a range of factors such as social status, cultural convention and social practice, as well as by gender' (p. 56). It deftly explores the gendered dimensions of five areas of 'material meaning': scribal status, handwriting, paper, manuscript space, and signatures; in doing so, it demonstrates that a sensitivity to the physicality of letters is essential if we wish to understand the full complexity of the socio-political meanings and epistolary strategies of women's correspondence.

Despite its much narrower focus, Melanie Evans' contribution is similarly methodologically fruitful. Using two scribal letters of Elizabeth I as a case study, Evans sets forth a socio-linguistic methodology which has the potential to help scholars uncover individual 'voices' in collaborative correspondence. By comparing the orthography, epistolary conventions, and linguistic features of these two letters with Elizabeth's autograph correspondence, Evans discerns the presence of Elizabeth's individual voice (or idiolect) in the scribal texts, thus opening the way for a more complex understanding of the Queen's epistolary agency, and, indeed, of collaborative authorship more broadly.

A number of essays elsewhere in the volume do much to enlarge our understanding of the epistolary strategies women used to exercise agency in inherently politicised arenas. Gemma Allen draws our attention to the genre of women's letters of counsel, and to the ways in which Ladies Anne Bacon and Elizabeth Russell were able to use their humanist learning to circumvent contemporary strictures on women's advice. Johanna Harris' excellent contribution similarly deals with the subject of counsel, analysing a little-studied advice letter

written by Lady Brilliana Harley to her son. Harris shows that Harley made skillful use of both textual and *material* strategies — including the omission of the gendered terminology typical of mother's advice literature — in order to intervene in wider debates about spiritual and civic conduct. Michelle DiMeo, meanwhile, explores how Katherine, Lady Ranelagh, 'manipulated' epistolary conventions in order to navigate another conventionally male domain: medicine, and to establish her authority as a medical practitioner.

While these contributions centre upon on elite and (as their authors acknowledge) exceptional individuals, others expand the focus. Marie-Louise Coolahan makes a welcome foray into Ireland, examining the diverse ways in which Irish women used letter-writing as a 'mode of action' during the Confederate and Cromwellian wars (1641–1653). Andrew Gordon's contribution uses the 'epistolary traffic' of Frances Devereux, Countess of Essex, and her sometime gentlewoman Jane Daniell to examine the 'competing uses of correspondence between two women of different status and situation' (p. 201). Particularly welcome are the three essays which look beyond women letter-writers to the function of women in correspondence networks more broadly. Of these, Rachel McGregor's astute analysis of the ways in which Roger Ascham and his correspondents exchanged descriptions of learned women (including Elizabeth Tudor) as a means of safely negotiating the formation of *amicitia* (friendship), is particularly stimulating. Marjon Ames' persuasive discussion of the crucial role of letters in the early Quaker movement — a 'web of communication' (p. 208) fundamentally created and sustained by Margaret Fell — and Cedric C. Brown's examination of the place of letters in the 'pious friendship' of John Evelyn and Elizabeth Carey, are also intriguing, though (given the volume's focus) some assessment of the gendered dimensions of these epistolary relationships would have been welcome.

The volume concludes with a postscript written by Daybell and Kim McLean-Fiander, joint directors of the British Academy/Leverhulme funded Women's Early Modern Letters Online (WEMLO), which, in outlining the 'challenges and possibilities' of the project, 'looks to the future' of the field. While still a work in progress, WEMLO promises to be an invaluable resource, providing 'a digital union catalogue and editorial interface for early modern women's correspondence' (p. 234). It is already possible, through the project's partnership with Early Modern Letters Online (EMLO), to search the full EMLO catalogue by gender, and to browse an expanding list of female-only correspondents; in the months since the publication of this volume, for instance, a catalogue of the correspondence of Elizabeth Stuart has been launched, consisting (at present) of an immense 1210 letters.

*Women and Epistolary Agency* is a welcome contribution to the flourishing literature on early modern letter-writing. It sheds new light on the gendered dimensions of correspondence, and presents some novel paths for further exploration. The collection will be valuable reading for any scholar working on early modern women or letter-writing: scholars who will, no doubt, observe the continuing development of the WEMLO project with keen interest.

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