

CHAPTER 3

The Familiar Letter and Social Refinement in America, 1750–1800

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Around the middle of the eighteenth century, the reading public in England and America began to embrace new cultural ideals of letter writing. These new ideals revolved around what was called the “familiar letter”, a mode of letter writing devoted to the expression of affection and duty among kin, family and friends. The emergence of the “familiar letter” into the Anglo-American cultural imagination can be seen in the dynamism of the transatlantic book trade for letter manuals, books meant to guide people in how to write proper letters.¹ These books tended to proliferate whenever letter writing blossomed as a kind of transgression — as a tentative new social practice for an amorphous new social group struggling to sharpen an identity and to stake out a respectable position in society.² In the eighteenth century, one leading edge of such transgression and struggle was represented by the “middling sort.” While the “middling sort” was becoming increasingly socially active and culturally visible in England and America, its group identity and place in the social order were much less sharply defined than that of the “better sort” or the “lower sort.”³ By demystifying the rules and conventions of letter writing, a social practice traditionally symbolic of power, authors of familiar letter manuals helped middling families pursue their claims to social refinement and upward mobility.

Of course, the rules and conventions of letter writing had been formulated for social groups more entrenched in power than middling families. Several modes of letter writing were current in Anglo-American culture in the mid eighteenth century, although some were fading traditions, some prevailed in popularity, and some were emerging innovations. Fading were ideals of letter writing for an intellectual community of men involved in the “republic of letters”, and ideals for a polite community of aristocrats and gentry beholden to

the royal court. While these modes of letter writing endured into the eighteenth century, they no longer attracted the creative energy of authors, the entrepreneurial energy of publishers, or the marketing energy of booksellers. Ascendant since the late seventeenth century were ideals of letter writing for the flourishing business community, which captured the most attention in the form of fresh titles, frequent editions, and widespread printings. Emergent in the 1740s, however, were new books that focused on the "familiar letter", which rapidly became the dominant mode of letter writing for the remainder of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century. On a superficial level, the notion of the "familiar letter" was not new. Authors of business letter manuals, for instance, treated familiar letters as a preliminary exercise for men to practice their writing style before embarking on serious business letters. Yet familiar letters would be propelled into the foreground of a new breed of letter manuals that trumpeted their social novelty as well as their cultural significance.

The ascendancy of the familiar letter was sparked by the influence of a book published in 1741 by Samuel Richardson. *Letters Written to and for Particular Friends, on the Most Important Occasions*.⁴ Richardson's innovation was to depict the familiar letter as a mode of letter writing suitable for all occasions in life and for all people in society. Once the exclusive province of elite white men, letter writing was now urged upon anyone aspiring to social refinement. In the ensuing decades, the seemingly boundless social world in Richardson's book was echoed by many imitators, so that the reading public in England and America could choose among a burgeoning number of familiar letter manuals.⁵ Most popular in America among Richardson's many imitators was W. H. Dilworth, whose *The Complete Letter-Writer* was liberally imported for sale by American booksellers, reprinted by American publishers, and plagiarised by American authors. Equally vital to the expansion of writing skills in general and epistolary skills in particular were related genres of pedagogical literature: penmanship manuals, spelling books, grammar books, and dictionaries. Between 1750 and 1800, nearly 400 such imprints were produced in America, a dazzling increase from the 32 comparable imprints produced in the first half of the century.⁶ Linguistic refinement had clearly become faddish as an instrument and symbol of upward mobility.

In championing the familiar letter, Richardson, Dilworth and other authors threw open the social boundaries around letter writing in terms of class, gender, and life cycle. These authors depicted the social practice of letter writing as becoming ubiquitous, and they anticipated growing popular demand for guidance. "Nothing is so common as writing of letters", one author declared, "The necessity of conversing one with another so long as we live, causes every one to

meddle with it. For ignorant men as well as literate, have frequent occasion to communicate by letters with their absent friends."⁷ The expansion of letter writing reflected an unprecedented unleashing of aspiration for upward mobility in the eighteenth century, and it also reflected the attendant need for measures of social respectability that might be readily legible to others as well as affirming for oneself. Dilworth purloined John Locke's injunction about the importance of letter writing for the social reputation of gentlemen, the men who stood near the top of the social hierarchy in the seventeenth century. "The writing letters (says this great genius) enters so much into all the occasions of life, that no gentleman can avoid showing himself in compositions of this kind. Occurrences will daily force him to make this use of his pen, which lays open his breeding, his sense, and his abilities, to a severer examination than any oral discourse." Yet Dilworth and other new authors applied this injunction to a rather different social world. Deeming the eighteenth century a "more refined age" than the seventeenth century, they addressed a much broader swath of the social spectrum. Mastering epistolary skills now became a "just reflection upon any man", whether affluent or not.⁸ Authors of familiar letter manuals strove most concertedly to rouse the middling sort — the vanguard of social refinement in the eighteenth century.

Yet these authors sought to extend their audience to include not only men but also women. Traditionally, men were encouraged to write as a supposedly natural facet of their masculinity, while women were discouraged from writing as a supposedly natural outcome of their femininity. Yet this particular gender division would be overthrown in the eighteenth century. Once categorically ignored, women were now routinely addressed in the new breed of familiar letter manuals as well as in penmanship manuals, grammar books, and other pedagogical literature. Some authors acknowledged the novelty of their female audience by producing books solely for women, such as *The Ladies Complete Letter-Writer*, first published in London in 1763 and imported by American booksellers.⁹ By century's end, other authors had not only come to assume that epistolary skills were necessary for women to master, but they even insisted that women brought a special sensibility to the writing of letters. "Your sex", one male author declared to his female audience, "much excels our own, in the ease and graces of epistolary correspondence."¹⁰ Once a social practice that reinforced traditional gender boundaries between male and female, letter writing was redefined to fortify emerging class boundaries between the middling sort — those who aspired to refinement — and the lower sort — those who were deemed vulgar.

Equally momentous was the welcoming of adolescents and children into the social practice of letter writing. Authors of familiar letter manuals endorsed letter

writing as a new way to inculcate the younger generation in the values, skills, and habits that would determine both personal character and social status upon adulthood.¹¹ Adolescents and children became a special category of cultural concern, and authors began to address younger audiences in their letter manuals.¹² The 1790 Boston edition of *The Complete Letter-Writer*, for instance, was intended to satisfy the learning needs “almost of every individual, from the boy at school to the secretary of state.”¹³ Recognising that the social practice of letter writing was especially new for youngsters, some authors devoted their entire books to such novices. Addressed to “the youth of both sexes”, *The New Universal Letter-Writer* urged secondary school teachers to give their pupils “an early taste for epistolary correspondence.”¹⁴ By century’s end, some authors began to produce letter manuals for children of primary school age. First published in London in 1783, and reprinted in Connecticut in 1791, *Juvenile Correspondence* contained letters “suited to children from four to above ten years of age.”¹⁵ For all the novelty of children writing letters, the author of *Juvenile Correspondence* curtly assumed that what was so recently unimaginable had swiftly become self-evident. “The utility of a book of forms, to encourage children in their first attempts in this pleasing and important art, must be obvious to all”, the author insisted.¹⁶ By the end of the eighteenth century, every member of the middling family — female and male, youngster and adult — was being admitted into the responsibilities and pleasures of letter writing.

In keeping with this family atmosphere, the authors of familiar letter manuals licensed the expression of affection as the leading purpose of letter writing. Central to polite and business letter manuals had been devotion to such formalities as proper titles for social superiors and inferiors, demonstrating a precise awareness of the writer’s and reader’s relative positions within the social hierarchy. One typical author, for instance, provided his readers with an elaborate code of “Distances, Familiarities, Condescensions or Humiliations, according as the Letters refer to Superiors, Equals, or Inferiors.”¹⁷ Paramount in familiar letter manuals, however, was not strict formality, but heartfelt sincerity. “When you write to a friend”, Dilworth directed, “your letter should be a true picture of your heart.”¹⁸ Familiar letters were supposed to be written with conversational warmth rather than oratorical elegance. “When you sit down to write a letter”, another author proclaimed, “remember that this sort of writing should be like conversation.” Authors of familiar letter manuals staked out a set of cultural priorities far different from older epistolary traditions. Whereas intellectual, polite and business letter manuals had focused on the display of reason or wit, familiar letter manuals concentrated instead on the display of emotion and sincerity. Hence, the subject matter of familiar letters could be infinitely more open ended.

“As to subject, you are allowed in writing letters the utmost liberty”, one author proclaimed, “every thing about you, stands ready for a subject.”¹⁹ Every aspect of quotidian life stood available to build an emotional connection between letter writer and letter reader, as long as it served to affirm the depth of personal attachment between the two.

While the authors of familiar letter manuals licensed people to write in an emotional and conversational style, at the same time they warned against desultory incoherence. Familiar letters were meant to be spontaneous but certainly not disjointed. The exact threshold between artlessness and due care was often imprecise and sometimes contradictory, especially as authors tended to trumpet the importance of artlessness first, and only afterward interjected caveats about due care. The heart came first, yet the head remained crucial to a familiar letter. “Be sure to think closely on the subject of your letter before you sit down to write”, Dilworth cautioned.²⁰ Faults of haste could be seen as faults of understanding, and hence could reflect poorly on the personal character and social grace of the letter writer. “Whoever neglects, must have many inaccuracies”, another author warned, “and these are not only a reflection on the writer, but a rudeness to the person to whom they are written.” To write a familiar letter properly involved navigating an elusive middle ground between poles of ornamentation and vulgarity. Having jettisoned rhetorical elegance in favour of conversational sincerity, authors of familiar letter manuals worried most about crossing below the lower threshold of proper writing, where one might seem disrespectful and appear vulgar. “Though lofty phrases are here improper”, one author insisted, “the style should not be low and mean.”²¹ “In all letters there must be some elegance and grace”, another author proclaimed, “only so far as you may avoid rusticity, or barbarous and improper words or phrases.”²² Given the persistent belief that one’s writing style reflected one’s social position, a danger lurked of drifting beyond conversational sincerity toward arrant vulgarity, and so of being mistaken for someone of lower status. How to avoid false elegance as well as embarrassing vulgarity, both at the same time, required an ability to straddle the conversational and the correct, the artless and the disciplined. A hint of elegance was permissible, but only if it was intended to be complaisant rather than ostentatious. Familiar letters may “be dressed in wit”, one author conceded, “provided it fits easy and natural, and seems rather expressive of the thoughts, than placed there for any beauty of its own.” The ideal style for a familiar letter was an appearance of spontaneous ease, even where tremendous care was taken. “Your language should be so natural”, Dilworth declared, “that the thoughts may seem to have been conceived in the very words they are expressed in, and your sentiments to have sprung up

naturally like the lillies of the field."²³ Writing familiar letters may have seemed deceptively simple on the surface, but to do so properly was depicted as an exceedingly difficult task, one fraught with so many social blunders and requiring so much discipline and care that it would justify the purchase of a letter manual.

Savvy authors proclaimed that their middling readers would swiftly be able to master the elusive art of letter writing. Mastery could supposedly be accomplished after "constant attention ... for a few months." Fashioning oneself into a proper letter writer, and propelling oneself toward higher social status, were simply matters of will and determination. "An assiduous attention to the study of any art, even the most difficult, will enable the reader to surmount every difficulty", an author declared with optimistic flair. Mastery seemed accessibly within reach, yet it soon began to involve not only stylistic ease but also grammatical correctness. Authors of letter manuals began to foist grammar and spelling rules upon their readers. "A careful attention to the plain and simple rules laid down in the preceding grammar, will enable him to write the language of the present times", one author promised, "and, if he carefully avoids affectation, his thoughts will be clear, his sentiments judicious, and his language plain, easy, sensible, elegant, and suited to the subject."²⁴ Perfecting conversational sincerity and grammatical correctness would enable a letter writer to bridge ideals of artless ease and disciplined care. The ultimate goal was to internalise certain letter writing habits so that a skill acquired via discipline would become a trait that appeared natural. Artifice would become nature, and aspiration to social status would become entitlement.

Although authors of familiar letter manuals were most concerned with affectionate letters exchanged by middling families, they also gave brief attention to letters "of the politer sort."²⁵ They recognised clear differences between familiar letters related to social equals, and polite letters concerned with social superiors. In familiar letters, superscriptions and subscriptions were expected simply to express "the degree of kindred" between writer and recipient.²⁶ For letters to strangers, however, attention to status was critical. "In writing to a stranger, the first thing necessary to be observed is your correspondents station in life, and the ceremonies proper to be observed."²⁷ Polite letters to social superiors required a different kind of social complaisance than familiar letters to social equals. If the most important feature of familiar letters was to fulfil a set of stylistic conventions displaying sincerity, the most important feature of polite letters was to fulfil a set of formal rules displaying deference. For both kinds of letter, the basic goal was identical, to meet social expectations — for polite letters in a prevailing context of hierarchy, and for familiar letters

in a prevailing context of equality. The aim of familiar letter manuals was not to erase social distinctions, but to carve out a distinct cultural space for the middling sort sandwiched between the polite community above them and the lower sort below them.

While the middling outlook of English familiar letter manuals resonated in America, American publishers nevertheless revised these books to reflect a significantly greater degree of social aspiration in the different material and cultural circumstances of America compared to England. Earlier in the eighteenth century, business letter manuals had aided aspiring young men by providing elaborate lists of titles appropriate to persons "of Honour" perched at the top of the social hierarchy.²⁸ Later in the century, however, many American familiar letter manuals dispensed with these elaborate lists of social titles, except for a tiny handful of federal government officials.²⁹ Since these American letter manuals remained largely derivative of English books, the substitution of one long list with another shorter list reflected a conscious adjustment to the unique circumstances of America, and a conscious rejection of the English version of social hierarchy. The author of *The New Complete Letter Writer* dramatised this American outlook by featuring two lists, one short list of federal government titles in America, and a vastly longer list of "all Ranks in Great Britain." The second list was provided purely for American merchants who did business with England, detached from the different social conditions in America.³⁰ While familiar letter manuals in both England and America focused on the middling sort, in America that middling strata was encased in a less rigid social hierarchy.

Ultimately, these letter manuals open a window into the cultural ideals but not the social practices of letter writing. We can glimpse abstract visions of audience, easier than any pragmatic writing of letters by actual families and individuals — a project that entails another kind of investigation, one into family manuscripts rather than printed books. Nevertheless, the explosive growth of letter manuals and other pedagogical literature, and the spectacle of so many publishers and authors vying for readers, suggests that the familiar letter caught hold with the middling sort in America as in England. Authors of familiar letter manuals may have emulated some of the imagined elegance of books intended for the affluent elite, but the cultural purpose and social constituency of letter writing still seemed radically different. These authors addressed a much more comprehensive social world than their predecessors had, and they envisioned a much more universal utility for letter writing. They staked the identity of the middling sort in a private and sentimental world of kin, family and friends, and they came to favour a skewed vision of social equality that discounted the better sort and demeaned the lower sort. The extension of letter writing to women and

youngsters meant that every member of the middling family was assigned a role in cultivating a writing style less unique to their gender or age, and more appropriate to what we understand today as "class." And the emergence of the familiar letter as the dominant mode of letter writing in the eighteenth century meant that every single letter, no matter how seemingly trivial, would serve to construct and symbolise a person's social status.

Notes

1. On English letter manuals, see Robertson 1942, and Hornbeak 1934. French letter manuals have been studied more extensively; see Chartier et al. 1997; Gurkin Altman 1988, 1992a and 1992b.
2. On letter writing as an instrument of aspiration for rising social groups, see Whigham 1981; and Patt 1978.
3. On the middling sort in eighteenth-century America, see Hemphill 1996. The middling sort in eighteenth-century England has been studied more extensively, see Hunt 1996; Wahrman 1995; Barry and Brooks 1994; Smail 1994; Earle 1989; Armstrong 1987; and Davidoff and Hall 1987.
4. On Richardson's contribution to epistolary theory, see Hornbeak 1934 and 1937-38.
5. On Richardson's imitators, see Hornbeak 1934. For American letter manuals, see Weiss 1944/1945.
6. Statistical information is derived from systematic computerised searches of eighteenth-century American imprints catalogued in the American Antiquarian Society's Online Catalogues, and cross-referenced to its microfilm edition of Early American Imprints, First Series, 1639-1800. In fact, the increase was far more dramatic, as this tally omits a great number of titles for which no copies survive, but whose existence can be deduced from newspaper advertisements, sequential numbering of editions, and other evidence.
7. *A New Academy of Compliments: Or, The Lover's Secretary* (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas Jr., 1795; Evans 29145), 27.
8. *The Complete Letter-Writer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: John West Folsom, 1790; Evans 22464), 7,3,4.
9. See *The Ladies Complete Letter-Writer* (London: T. Lownds, 1763). For advertisements by Philadelphia booksellers, for example, see *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 7, 1763, June 28, 1764, August 30, 1764, May 9, 1765, August 7, 1766.
10. John Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady, on Useful and Interesting Subjects*, 2 vols. (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1791; Evans 23176), 1:99-100.
11. On the escalating emphasis placed upon childhood and adolescence in the eighteenth century, see Hemphill 1994-95.
12. On the expansion of books and other consumer goods for children in the eighteenth century, see Pickering 1981 and 1993; Demers 1993; Calvert 1992; Jackson 1989; Murray 1988; Kramnick 1983; and Plumb 1975.
13. *The Complete Letter-Writer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: John West Folsom, 1790; Evans 22464), 4.

14. *The New Universal Letter-Writer: Or, Complete Art of Polite Correspondence* (Philadelphia: D. Hogan, 1800; Evans 38074), iii-iv.
15. For the first English edition, see *Juvenile Correspondence; or, Letters Suited to Children from Four to Above Ten Years of Age* (London: John Marshall, 1783). For the first American printing, see *Juvenile Correspondence; or, Letters Suited to Children from Four to Above Ten Years of Age* (New Haven: Abel Morse, 1791; Evans 23479).
16. Caleb Bingham, *Juvenile Letters: Being a Correspondence between Children from Eight to Fifteen Years of Age* (Boston: David Carlisle, 1803; Shaw 3830), n.p.
17. J[ohn] Hill, *The Young Secretary's Guide: Or, A Speedy Help to Learning*, 24th ed. (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1750; Evans 6517), 6-8.
18. W. H. Dilworth, *The Complete Letter-Writer: Or, Young Secretary's Instructor* (New York: T. Allen, 1794; Evans 26891), 3-4.
19. *The Complete Letter-Writer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: John West Folsom, 1790; Evans 22464), 8-9.
20. W. H. Dilworth, *The Complete Letter-Writer: Or, Young Secretary's Instructor* (New York: T. Allen, 1794; Evans 26891), 4-5.
21. *The Complete Letter-Writer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: John West Folsom, 1790; Evans 22464), 10-11, 8-9.
22. *A New Academy of Compliments: Or, The Lover's Secretary* (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas Jr., 1795; Evans 29145), 33-34.
23. W. H. Dilworth, *The Complete Letter-Writer: Or, Young Secretary's Instructor* (New York: T. Allen, 1794; Evans 26891), 3-4, 4-5.
24. *The New Universal Letter-Writer: Or, Complete Art of Polite Correspondence* (Philadelphia: D. Hogan, 1800; Evans 38074), 21, 22.
25. *The Complete Letter-Writer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: John West Folsom, 1790; Evans 22464), 11.
26. *A New Academy of Compliments: Or, The Lover's Secretary* (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas Jr., 1795; Evans 29145), 32.
27. W. H. Dilworth, *The Complete Letter-Writer: Or, Young Secretary's Instructor* (New York: T. Allen, 1794; Evans 26891), 3-4.
28. See, for example, J[ohn] Hill, *The Young Secretary's Guide: Or, A Speedy Help to Learning*, 24th ed. (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1750; Evans 6517), 68-69.
29. See, for example, *The New Universal Letter-Writer: Or, Complete Art of Polite Correspondence* (Philadelphia: D. Hogan, 1800; Evans 38074), 22-23.
30. See, for example, *The New Complete Letter-Writer; Or, The Art of Correspondence* (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas, 1791; Evans 23327), 254-258.

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