

Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century. By Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau and Cécile Dauphin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. 162pp.).

Until Next Year: Letter Writing and the Mails in the Canadas, 1640–1830. By Jane E. Harrison (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997. xix plus 155pp. \$49.95/cloth).

These two books offer welcome new perspectives on the evolution of letter writing in France and its North American colony of New France between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. To this point, scholars have devoted far more attention to the history of print culture and reading literacy, than to the history of either writing literacy or epistolary culture. The scholarship that does exist on the letter as a form of culture has been dominated by literary analysis of the epistolary novel in the eighteenth century, but this narrow focus has occluded investigation into alternative manifestations and longer trajectories of the letter form. Employing very different strategies, both *Correspondence* and *Until Next Year* begin to stretch our appreciation of letter writing beyond the confines of the epistolary novel, at the same time as they deepen our understanding of early modern culture and society.

Correspondence brings together three essays tracing the history of French letter manuals, books that guided readers in how to write what was deemed a proper letter in different time periods. Alain Boureau covers the medieval era, when authors of letter manuals borrowed from a longstanding Christian epistolary tradition and a newer Italian epistolary tradition to satisfy the concerns of a new audience of intellectuals, notaries and lawyers at the vanguard of an emerging middle class. The hunger of such men for social legitimacy made them receptive to the professionalization of writing skills, as well as anxious to fulfill the elaborate rules of social ceremony detailed in letter manuals.

Roger Chartier moves the narrative through the “ancien regime,” when French letter manuals became more distinctly French, written in the vernacular instead of Latin, and filled with sample letters by French rather than classical authors. The seventeenth century saw the emergence of letter manuals that defined the stylistic niceties of polite writing for court society. In the eighteenth century, the very same model letters were reprinted in chapbooks to amuse a popular audience with a window into the exotic social world of the aristocracy, an invasive form of vicarious pleasure anticipating the efflorescence of the epistolary novel. Another new genre of letter manual began to flourish in the eighteenth century, one devoted to the practicalities of the business sector rather than the courtesies of polite society. By century’s end, letter manuals had come to span the literate social spectrum, from inexpensive chapbooks for the mass market to elegant editions for the polite market.

Cécile Dauphin carries the story into the nineteenth century. Once letter writing was taught increasingly at school by century’s end, letter manuals had been rendered obsolete. Earlier in the nineteenth century, authors had planted the seeds of their own demise by repackaging their letter manuals to attract a

broad bourgeois social audience, including concerted focus on women and children. While letter manuals would cross beyond traditional masculine and elitist parameters, an important effect was to propagate the hegemonic rules of polite society among bourgeois folk. Although authors of letter manuals voiced an apparently progressive principle of universality, they actually tended to reinforce the conservative social hierarchy by insisting on a direct correlation between a person's writing style and their social rank.

Dauphin's argument highlights the simultaneous strength and weakness of all three essays. Each essay gauges the social impact of letter manuals via close attention to the marketing of books and the representation of audiences, but actual writers of letters are absent. Historical change emerges purely from within the book publishing industry, not from any tension between textual prescription and social practice. Admirable care is shown to demonstrate the limited social reach of letter manuals, but we are provided no critical leverage with which to judge the actual force of cultural prescriptions, a flaw shared by much scholarship narrowly beholden to prescriptive evidence.

Until Next Year, on the other hand, is less concerned with the cultural prescriptions that dictated the style of letters, and more interested in the material resources that facilitated the exchange of letters. Beautifully illustrated with extant letters and writing implements, the book focuses on the physical conveyance of letters in New France and Canada between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Chapter One introduces the subject by outlining the basic mechanics and conventions of letter writing, from the technical manipulation of unwieldy quills and ink, to the prescribed formatting of a proper letter. The strength of Jane Harrison's book is to capture the pastness of the past, as it reconstructs an era when letter writing seemed as technically intricate and socially restrictive as computer use is in the present day.

Chapters Two and Three concern the tremendous difficulty of conveying letters from place to place prior to the emergence of modern postal service and railway transportation in the nineteenth century. Opening with an evocative account of the experiences of a French missionary nun in the seventeenth century, Chapter Two sets up the book's leading theme of human resourcefulness in ferreting out ways to convey letters across an ocean from the New World to the Old. French colonists relied on the private favors of travellers and voyagers for the conveyance of letters, whereas, after 1763, Canadian subjects gradually patronized the public institution of postal service to convey their mail not only to Europe, but also to the United States. The book ends on the threshold of railway innovation in the 1820s, and only then did the post office manage to usurp the customary role served by personal favors in the conveyance of mail.

Just as the three authors of *Correspondence* describe prescriptive texts as an inhibiting influence on the social practice of letter writing, so does Harrison describe material resources likewise as an inhibiting factor. People's limited chances to convey mail from one place to another had a constraining effect comparable to limited opportunities to learn the art of letter writing. It is surprising, then, that while Harrison concedes in the introduction that her narrative is based on

the experiences of the high end of the social spectrum, she nevertheless insists that such folk were somehow representative of the whole of society. *Until Next Year* limns a dynamic history of mail conveyance, yet Harrison's discussion of epistolary conventions is oddly static across 200 years, an image that does not square with the trajectory of cultural change described in *Correspondence*.

Together, these fascinating books depict a significant expansion of epistolary culture in the French-speaking world between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the lag between the 1991 French edition and the 1997 English translation means that *Correspondence* should be read in conjunction with other recent treatments of French epistolarity. One set of scholars has continued to plumb further the world of letter manuals and published literary correspondences,¹ while another has been examining the emergence of female epistolary authors as well as male representations of female letter writing.² In the end, it must be said that all of this burgeoning work on letter writing in France as well as New France creates a need for comparative research into epistolary culture in England and its North American colonies.

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ENDNOTES

1. In English, see Janet Gurkin Altman, "Political Ideology in the Letter Manual (France, England, New England)," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 18 (1988): 105–122; Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, *Exclusive Conversations: The Art of Interaction in Seventeenth-Century France* (Philadelphia, 1988), Ch. 1; John Howland, *The Letter Form and the French Enlightenment: The Epistolary Paradox* (New York, 1991); Janet Gurkin Altman, "Epistolary Conduct: The Evolution of the Letter Manual in France in the Eighteenth Century," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 304 (1992): 866–869; Deidre Dawson, *Voltaire's Correspondence: An Epistolary Novel* (New York, 1994); Dena Goodman, "Epistolary Property: Michel de Servan and the Plight of Letters on the Eve of the French Revolution," in *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, John Brewer and Susan Staves, eds. (New York, 1995), 339–364.

2. In English, see Katharine A. Jensen, "Male Models of Feminine Epistolarity; or, How to Write Like a Woman in Seventeenth-Century France," in *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*, Elizabeth Goldsmith, ed. (Boston, 1989), 25–45; Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, "Authority, Authenticity, and the Publication of Letters by Women," in *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*, Elizabeth Goldsmith, ed. (Boston, 1989), 46–59; Janet Gurkin Altman, "Graffigny's Epistemology and the Emergence of Third-World Ideology," in *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Fiction*, Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, ed. (Boston, 1989), 172–202; Michele Longino Farrell, *Performing Motherhood: The Sevigné Correspondence* (Hanover, 1991); Janet Gurkin Altman, "Women's Letters in the Public Sphere," in *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France*, Elizabeth C. Goldsmith and Dena Goodman, eds. (Ithaca, 1995), 99–115; Dena Goodman, "Suzanne Necker's Melanges: Gender, Writing, and Publicity," in *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France*, Elizabeth C. Goldsmith and Dena Goodman, eds. (Ithaca, 1995), 210–223; Katharine Ann Jensen, *Writing Love: Letters, Women, and the Novel in France, 1605–1776* (Carbondale, 1995); April Alliston, *Virtue's Faults: Correspondences in Eighteenth-Century British and French Women's Fiction* (Stanford, 1996).