

### **New Directions in the Study of Early Modern Correspondence**

In early modern culture letters were everywhere. The letter form in all its manifestations was instrumental in all aspects of early modern life. It was a key vehicle for government, statecraft and diplomacy; was integral to the transaction of business and commerce; it provided an outlet for religiosity and spirituality; and it facilitated the transaction of familial, social and other personal relationships. Competence in letter-writing was an increasingly necessary art 'the use whereof so nedefull is', according to William Fulwood, 'that no wise we may want the same, / as daily prooffe doth finde'.<sup>1</sup> In recent years the range of skills embraced by this competence, and the manifold uses to which the letter increasingly over the period might be put, have become more fully appreciated by a range of scholars. The expanding appreciation of the nuanced complexities of the early modern letter has stretched beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries, drawing together historians, literary scholars, linguists and historical geographers to name but a few. It has also embraced advances in the digital humanities and innovative approaches to curatorship across manuscript-holding institutions, which has increased access to and awareness of letters as never before. It was to bring together specialists from these varied backgrounds and to provide an opportunity for the exciting work of the many new scholars working on letter-focused projects that the editors organised the Cultures of Correspondence events, at the Centre for Early Modern Studies at the University of Aberdeen and the Centre for Humanities, Music and Performing Arts at Plymouth University between 2010 and 2011. Among the projects to emerge from that series of events is this special collection of articles designed to showcase the diverse range of work being produced by emerging scholars in the field and to situate it alongside that of more established academics. There is no more appropriate place for such a selection of work than the *Lives and Letters* journal, with its affiliation to CELL, which under the directorship of two highly influential scholars in the field, Lisa Jardine and Alan Stewart, has played an important role in promoting the study of correspondence within early modern studies, pioneering new digital technologies which are transforming the ways in which we read, situate and understand letters; and ultimately in training a new generation of scholars interested in issues of epistolarity.

The articles gathered here feature the work of scholars beginning their careers alongside some more established academics. They illustrate many of the trends which have characterised the new approaches to the study of letters – rhetorical, linguistic, material and historical – that have emerged in the past decade. This diversity of approaches is also reflected in the thematic bibliography of correspondence-related scholarship which we have

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<sup>1</sup> William Fulwood, *The enemie of idlenesse* (London, 1571), sig. A2v.

complied for this special issue. If the literary qualities of letters from famous writers have long been prized, the sense of letters more broadly as literary constructs has gained prominence in the wake of groundbreaking work by Frank Whigham, Lynne Magnusson and Peter Mack who each highlighted the extent to which contemporary letters conformed to social codes expressed in carefully nuanced rhetorical and linguistic strategies. As texts which were involved in complex processes of social negotiation, letters provide a rich field for exploring how the rhetorical schemes so widespread in contemporary literature were applied in the textual everyday of early modern culture. Among the articles collected here, the studies of Thorne, Mair, Stapleton and Maxwell, all demonstrate how informed rhetorical and linguistic analysis can shed significant light on the nuanced social exchanges at work in early modern correspondence. Fundamental here is the degree to which sixteenth- and seventeenth-century letters were scripted by Renaissance epistolographies. In many ways, 'everyday' correspondence was a protean form, disconnected from the rules laid out in the pages of Erasmus or Day. Letter-writing was a remarkably ad hoc affair worked out in relation to localised conditions, inflected by factors such as social status and position, gender and generation.

The operations of a letter are more than textual, however, as all our contributors demonstrate. Study of the letter has been transformed by the 'archival turn' within literary and historical studies. Scholars have thus utilised the kinds of bibliographical techniques long at the pulsing heart of manuscript studies: codicology or the physical description of manuscripts (watermarks, collation and binding); palaeography (the study of handwriting), transcription practices, attribution and provenance; sigillography (the study of seals); and diplomatics (the study of documents). These among other specialist fields concerned with analysis of the physical forms of manuscripts and documents it has been shown are crucial to understanding the complexities of early modern letters and epistolary culture. The recent movement to foreground the meaning of texts as contingent upon the form and context of their material existence has coincided with the opening up of archival resources to scholarly study, both physically, through the remit towards widening access in many archival holdings, and through digitisation projects, such as CELL or Oxford Universities Early Modern Letters Online. All of the articles featured here are informed by the awareness that a letter's material existence provides vital evidence for how a letter signified and was experienced by its reader. Non-textual marks such as a letter's seal carried with them a range of cultural meanings that were readily appropriated in a culture fluent in letter-symbolism (Newman). Yet as the studies here show the material practices affecting interpretation of a letter's meaning extend well beyond the object itself, to the wider social materiality or context in

which a given letter text operated, whether this be the postal networks along which it moved (Cooper) or the significance of the individual bearer, a corporeal extension of the material artefact (Mair).

The days when scholars fondly imagined that letters afforded unmediated access to the private and deeply personal thoughts of correspondents, are thankfully long gone, though much remains to be investigated about the letter as a technology of the self, its relationship to early modern subjectivities and the construction of emotions. Similarly the notion that a letter constituted a two-way exchange between two figures, a single writer-sender and an equally solitary reader-addressee, has been rigorously challenged by much recent scholarship that has shown how each part of this conceptualisation of letter-writing might be subject to multi-agent collaboration in composition, conveying, reception, reading and archiving. Letters might be written and delivered in collaboration with secretaries, amanuenses, scribes and bearers, distancing supposed signatories from personal writing technologies, thus undercutting the idea of the letter as fundamentally private, personal and singular. Furthermore letters might be read in various social contexts as several of the articles here illustrate (Thorne, Maxwell, Mair). Increasingly scholars are exploring the afterlife of letters: how letters might be copied, might circulate widely along specific networks, or in different contexts generating new meanings from that of their first inception and intended outcome. Indeed the very notion of an original sent letter itself can never be taken on trust, or inferred from what purport to be manuscript copies. A number of the studies here contribute to this scholarship, exploring the uses and applications of letters in later historical contexts (Williamson, Swann, Maxwell). From the highly nuanced intelligence product to the letter as a pleasurable text, to the reincarnation of the letter as a handy piece of paper serving for financial memoranda, these studies illustrate the varied interests that informed letter consumption and its afterlife.

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## **Abstracts**

**Ian Cooper, "Intelligences dayly broughte hither to the marchants from sundry ports": news networks in late-Elizabethan Devon**

This article examines the oral and manuscript exchange of news and intelligence that flowed into the ports of late-Elizabethan Devon. In doing so, the primary aim is to encourage a reassessment of the current London-centric model of early modern news. In its place a new model is proposed; one which is equally sympathetic to the role played by local government officials in servicing the localities, as well as the centre, with information. Existing research on early modern news has outlined a network prominently focused on the single 'hub' of London. Consequently, little attention has been paid to the more complex sets of news networks that operated in the first instance at a local level, but which also had connections with the centre. In particular, whilst the regional ports of early modern England have been acknowledged as hubs for receiving continental news and intelligence, detailed elaboration on this matter has not been forthcoming. This article engages directly with this proposition, providing a detailed examination of how the ports of south Devon operated as important provincial news centres during the Elizabethan war with Spain (1585-1604). The county's maritime significance and geographical location served as the underlying reason for this with daily advertisements arriving aboard merchant vessels concerning the whereabouts and intention of the Spanish fleet. Late-Elizabethan Devon thus provides an ideal case study for excavating the richness and complexity of provincial news networks.

**Katy Mair, *Material Lies: Parental Anxiety and Epistolary Practice in the Correspondence of Anne, Lady Bacon and Anthony Bacon***

Anne, Lady Bacon (c.1528-1610) is celebrated for her achievements as one of that rare breed of learned women in the early modern period, a reputation gained through the translation from Italian of Bernardino Ochino's *Sermons* (1548), and the translation from Latin of John Jewel's *Apologie of the Church of England* (1564). However, her reputation as the mother of Anthony and Francis Bacon is more problematic, and she has long been seen as an overbearing figure seeking to control every aspect of her sons' lives. This article argues that the power struggle of the mother-son relationship is reflected in both the rhetorical features and the material processes of her letter writing practices, as the intrinsic insecurity of epistolary communication engenders a personalised set of strategies designed to control the circulation of her words and enhance her maternal authority.

**Felicity Maxwell, 'Enacting Mistress and Steward Roles in a Letter of Household Management: Bess of Hardwick to Francis Whitfield, 14 November 1552'**

Bess of Hardwick's popular reputation has been largely shaped by biographers and antiquarians who did not all have full access to her letters and other household documents in the manuscript originals and who were not equipped to interpret her epistolary language in its sociohistorical context. This article reassesses Bess's reputation by examining the range of rhetorical techniques she uses to express to a steward at Chatsworth her pleasure and displeasure and thus to perform her authoritative role as mistress in one of her most notorious letters. Along the way, it explains the cultural assumptions about employer-servant relations and communication that underlie the letter; highlights how Bess represents the steward's duties and urges him to fulfil his own role in the household; argues that her half-sister Jane, the subject of much of the letter, had a somewhat different role at Chatsworth than has been traditionally ascribed to her; and, through material readings of the letter and related texts, reveals the importance of several family servants in both running the household and shaping Bess's reception there and thereafter.

**Harry Newman, 'A seale of Virgin waxe at hand / Without impression there doeth stand': Hymenal Seals in English Renaissance Literature**

This essay combines literary criticism with archival work in order to explore the relationship between two material signs that were often connected figuratively in English Renaissance literature, the seal and the hymen. While the seal authorised, authenticated and secured letters and other documents, many thought the hymen did the same for virginal female bodies. Looking at plays and poems in relation to the material culture of sealing in early-modern England, I analyse metaphors and similes which represent the seal as a kind of epistolary hymen and the hymen as a kind of human seal. In doing so, I demonstrate how Shakespeare, Donne and other authors drew on material and rhetorical traditions as they engaged with this reversible analogy. The essay focuses on the paradoxical fact that defloration was rhetorically linked with both the stamping and breaking of seals, acts of creation and destruction respectively. I conclude by discussing aspects of the hymenal seal that destabilise its status as reliable sign of patriarchal authority, especially the possibility of counterfeiting.

**Rachel Stapleton, "As I am a free prince": the epistolary self-deceptions of James VI'**

James VI of Scotland was adamant in his writings about his divine right and his attendant freedom from interference from temporal authorities. Yet in his long epistolary relationship

with Elizabeth I of England we see instead a struggle to reconcile his perceived rights as a 'free prince' and the practical realities of his dependence on Elizabeth for financial and political support, as well as political advice.

In the tensions that flare up along the Border in 1596–97, only a year before the publication of The true law of free monarchies, James struggles to reconcile his dependence on Elizabeth with his status as a free prince with Elizabeth's demands for satisfaction over the invasion of Carlisle Castle. His letters demonstrate his concern with his status as a free prince, yet at the same time cede to Elizabeth the right to judge him and his subjects, and to hold him accountable – a right that, by James's own beliefs, ought to belong solely to God.

### **Joel Swann, 'The second earl of Essex's 'Great Quarrel' and its letters'**

This article examines an exchange of letters between Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, and Thomas Egerton, and its contribution to Essex's posthumous reputation. The letters were supposedly written during Essex's absence from court in 1598 following what has often been called his 'great quarrel' with Elizabeth, and have been accepted as an indicator of his politics since almost immediately after their initial circulation in manuscript. In that context, they helped to concretise already polarized opinions about Essex, but the majority of copies that now survive were made much later, in the years and decades following his execution. As such, their role needs to be considered independently of the factional issues at the end of Elizabeth's reign. This article begins by describing the frequently contradictory narratives into which the letters were put, and the critical significance given to them by early readers. It goes on to discuss the important role of authoritative primary evidence in the evaluation of Essex before and after his execution. A final section surveys key manuscript collections in which the exchange is copied. Collectively, the evidence suggests that the key role of Essexiana was to invite and promote interpretation while sustaining the memory of key moments in Essex's troubled career.

### **Alison Thorne, 'Female Captivity and the Rhetoric of Supplication: The Cases of Lady Mary Grey and Lady Arbella Stuart'**

This article examines the epistolary production of two high-ranking women, Lady Mary Grey and Lady Arbella Stuart, who experienced various forms of captivity. It argues that they inhabited a carceral milieu where both men and women were exposed to the possibility of periodic imprisonment. Both Grey and Stuart were obsessed with the notion of liberty and its obverse, the ever present threat of captivity or execution that overshadowed their lives. Male

and female prisoners sought to improve their lot by securing an intercessor to plead on their behalf, thereby manipulating the patronage system to their advantage. Pressures on these women drove them to retreat into a fantasy world. Attention is also paid to the rhetorical strategies used in their letter-writing, including an appeal to ethos (good character) and pathos (emotions) that were privileged at the expense of logos (reason). The article focuses on comparative analysis of the different rhetorical styles deployed by Grey and Stuart, and charts how Stuart's linguistic usage varied according to changes in her personal circumstances.

**Elizabeth Williamson, “[Y]ou have written sometimes more largelie to some private friends, then almost to her Majesties self”: secrecy and sociability in sixteenth-century ambassadorial correspondence.’**

This article explores ambassadorial letters as carriers of political information. In a world before regular, printed newspapers, letters from individuals abroad were a valued source of news. Consequently, such letters were a way for those individuals to exhibit their skills, status and political relevance, in addition to fulfilling a central expectation of salaried diplomatic postings. This article asks whether there is a tension involved in trading on the dissemination of intelligence – of potentially secret political information. It does this not through focusing solely on the contents of the letters themselves, but by considering what happens when the letter is subsumed into a wider body of information, in this case as part of a letter-book. By asking who may be interested in diplomatic letter-books or bundles of correspondence, and what they may have been for, we can view the ambassador's correspondence in a new light: is it intelligence or news, and is the copying of it problematic?