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Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England by James Daybell (review)

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BOOK REVIEW

Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England. *James Daybell.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xiv+328.

In 1684 Jean de La Bruyère wrote that women letter writers "find at the tip of their pens expressions and turns of phrase that often, in men, are the result of long searching. . . . they have an inimitable way of putting words together that seems to come naturally."[1] Are letters by women indeed more natural, more effortless, and more emotionally attuned than men's? By contrast, others throughout literary history have demonstrated a "long-term prejudice against women's letters" as "of no importance" (8), author James Daybell writes, and in doing so he illustrates the other extreme to which women's letters have been put: they have been either idealized or neglected. With Daybell's book, however, we can finally test the validity and accuracy of such valuations of women's letter writing, for what Daybell has researched and composed is a thorough study of women's letters and letter writing that, in historical and literary scholarship, has been long overdue; and the scope of his work enables him to claim authority on women's letter writing precisely because of the impressive range of his book.

Investigating women's letter writing from 1540 to 1603, Daybell dug into the archives to examine over three thousand letters by more than 650 individual women for the period 1540–1603. Avoiding the case study approach, where false inferences may be derived from too few examples, Daybell has undertaken a remarkable survey of every type of

1. Jean de La Bruyère, quoted in Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, "Authority, Authenticity, and the Publication of Letters by Women," in *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 46 (ellipses in original).

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women's letter writing in a diversity of sociocultural spheres, including women's letters to friends, kin, children, husbands, and strangers. The book not only encompasses an assessment of the letters' content but also extends usefully to investigate how women's letter writing converged with writing and reading literacy; how it determined women's interest, and the degree to which these women exerted power and influence, in political and patronage relationships; how letter writing enabled women to traverse public and private, and political and domestic spheres; and how letter writing served for women as a means of self-articulation and self-presentation.

Because Daybell's book is steadfastly grounded in over three thousand letters from over 650 women writers, the hard data that he culls from his sample set are especially valuable—and sometimes surprising. For instance, at a time of relatively low general literacy rates (particularly for women), there were more women who wrote their own letters than who used amanuenses; in other words, of the roughly 650 women studied, only secretarial letters survive for just 23 percent of the women studied (93). Another unexpected fact: letters of petition account for one-third of the surviving letters examined—one thousand letters by some 350 women (234)—data that, along with some recent studies by Pauline Croft and Helen Payne, go a long way toward remedying perceptions that women were generally disengaged with government and its officials and had relatively little involvement in the sphere of politics. Daybell's book demonstrates that women exploited alternate means of participation.

Sadly, one might wish that some of these statistics were formatted in a more lucid and reader-friendly way. Rather than merely listing a string of numbers, as on pages 14–15 (note 54), 39–41 (and note 40), and 201 (note 1), it would have been preferable to present these in graph or chart form. Since a graphic format was used in the dissertation on which this book is based, one wonders why it was not retained; or perhaps the numerical data might have been placed in a comprehensive appendix.

Chapter 2 offers one of the best overall assessments of the material elements of letter writing available: significant space, dating, handwriting, sealing, addressing, paper, ink, folding, and preserving are deftly handled; indeed, Daybell's assessment of the materiality of letter writing, when tied to the large number of letters examined, is a great strength of this book. This same chapter also helps unmask some of the fictions that have accrued around women's letter writing (to which I referred in La Bruyère's observation on women's letter writing). Letters, Daybell writes, were "often viewed as a literary site where women could uninhibitedly lay bare their inner most feelings. . . . Yet they are

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not transparent historical sources, windows into women's souls," since they are often "communal, collaborative, and strategic" (46). Daybell, in fact, turns critics like La Bruyère upside down by pointing out that "marital correspondence suggests that men were in general more emotionally articulate than women, or at least more confident in showing easy affection" (210).[2] In the same way, the most instructive subsection of chapter 6 is its consideration of women's letters as autobiographical writing. Because Daybell analyzes real women writing real letters in real social situations (which forces women to place themselves in relation to others), he provides a corrective to reflexes about letters portraying unmediated the inner self and questions assumptions that letters clearly reflect interiority.

Chapter 7 exhibits the rigor through which Daybell puts the letters under examination, for here he details the social range of women's letters in each specific type of female relationship: as wife to husband, as daughter to father, as mother to child, as woman to male and female kin, and as woman to male and female friends. This chapter's subsection on letters of command and invective is perhaps the most fascinating. It details women's use of letters to register anger in a culture that was more and more intent on civility and that often saw women's expression of anger as an abnormality (and akin to madness), particularly in face-to-face interaction.

The study gains strength as it progresses, as the last two chapters deal persuasively with the two central types of women's letters: marital correspondence (chap. 8) and letters of petition (chap. 9). While I have my doubts about the potential of letters' salutations to define something as complex as the dynamics of marriage (204–10), Daybell's overall analysis in chapter 8 is convincing. Chapter 9 begins with the rather startling fact, which I have mentioned, that letters of petition account for one-third of all letters discovered. This information challenges suppositions of the predominance of men in government and politics. Daybell also outlines a unique trope of epistolary rhetoric that women used in letters to underline their weakness, frailty, vulnerability, and intellectual and physical inferiority; they exploited this epistolary trope to exhort men to defend and protect them—a rhetoric that is distinct from a more pervasive, nongendered expression of distress, poverty, and suffering that characterizes men's as well as women's letters (250–51). The trope of the shared experience of motherhood in letters exchanged among women is likewise distinctive of certain women's letters (257).

2. Yet, that said, in the concluding remarks to chap. 8, Daybell indicates that, compared with the medieval period, women through the sixteenth century "became more emotionally articulate" (228).

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These tropes surely define exactly the type of "female scripts" women used in writing letters.

The author gives the rationale for the dates of the study: to derive more penetrating conclusions, Daybell restricted his sampling of letters to those written between 1540 and 1603 (33). However, many supporting examples throughout the book are drawn from letters written well after 1603. Although progressing into the seventeenth century allows Daybell to expand the scope of his study—and the scope is one of the great features of the work—ranging too freely in the seventeenth century mars the potency of the otherwise compelling statistics he derives from his specific 1540–1603 sample. That said, the broadness of the approach allows Daybell to place his book effectively into the larger context of feminist scholarship. It offers, moreover, superior insight into women's participation in manuscript culture. The study also contributes to the scholarship of female literacy, especially in improving on David Cressy and Keith Thomas,[3] for Daybell tells us not simply how many women could write but shows us how they actually wrote by examining handwriting, spelling, grammar, and punctuation in women's letters (chap. 4).

What is finally most impressive about this book is somewhat imperceptible—as it often is with deep archival research of this sort: the great amount of time that went into tracking down, reading, and transcribing those three thousand letters. This demanding archival work has resulted in a complex and detailed analysis of virtually every feature of women's letter writing in the period 1540–1603. Because of its depth and scope, this book will prove to be fundamental work in the scholarship of women's letter writing.

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3. David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge University Press, 1980); Keith Thomas, "The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England," in *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition*, ed. Gerd Baumann (Oxford University Press, 1986), 57–70.

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