

***Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England.* By James Daybell. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; pp. xiv + 328, £58.00)**

In recent years there has been substantial and growing interest in early modern correspondence; literary scholars have explored the epistolary genre, while important studies have continued to focus on women's letter-writing.¹ James Daybell's research has been at the forefront of this expanding field, often instrumental in uniting these two approaches, and as such his first full-length study has been eagerly awaited. Explicitly distancing his new work from previous research on female correspondence, which tended to focus on families or individual women, Daybell thus pursues a distinctly original approach in *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*. It does not disappoint.

Daybell's aim is to undertake the first comprehensive study of early modern women's letter-writing in England as a single source, with the contention that female correspondence was a much larger and more socially diverse activity than has previously been recognised. In order to do this, Daybell has uncovered a vast and hitherto unimagined archival base, marshalling over 3000 manuscript letters written by more than 650 individual women between 1540 and 1603, which in itself represents a significant addition to the recovery of sixteenth century women's manuscript writing. The author is unashamedly honest that the surviving evidence does privilege elite women from the nobility and gentry. Importantly, however, almost 10 per cent of the source material is drawn from women attached to the professional and middling classes and this is offered as an important corrective to discussions of women's letter-writing as a purely elite activity.

Daybell exploits these archival riches in two ways: firstly by looking at the mechanics of writing, sending and reading letters, before investigating the different forms and types of correspondence, particularly focusing on letters of petition and marital correspondence. This is a hugely ambitious task and undoubtedly the first half of the book, concentrating on the mechanics of women's correspondence, will prove by far the most novel part of the study for historians. Influenced by work on the epistolary genre by literary scholars, this section of the work is set to become a vital reference tool for future studies of correspondence, whether focused on female letter-writers or male. Here Daybell is keen to dispel the myth that letters can be read as transparent 'mirrors' to early modern individuals, as 'straightforward depositaries of fact', but instead rightly argues that they are highly complex and nuanced sources that must be carefully decoded (p. 61). The importance of attending to the materiality of letters, such as the use of space on the page for honorific effect, is convincingly argued, as are the discussions of the process of composition and the complex relationship between the letter and its bearer.

By interrogating the sources in this way, Daybell is able to offer some powerful insights into female use of the epistolary genre. The author insists that a detailed understanding of the mechanics of correspondence disrupts notions of letter-writing as a private and individual activity, which has profound implications for issues such as female self-censorship and conceptions of the early modern woman writer. It is on the subject of the collective or 'mediated' process of letter-writing that Daybell offers a particularly sensitive discussion, effectively describing the varying degrees of control women

exercised over their letters. Ultimately, the author persuasively argues for female agency over their own correspondence, suggesting that even when women dictated letters they retained control over aspects of form and expression. In doing so, Daybell issues a timely warning to historians, one that has already been heeded in much recent literary scholarship, of too narrowly defining authorship as the technical act of writing, rather than as the agency that controls and shapes the text. Instead of retrospectively denying authorial power to women, the study of early modern women's correspondence reveals the necessity of jettisoning anachronistic conceptions of authorship. While this is an important discussion, perhaps Daybell goes too far, however, when he laments that after the layers of intervention and epistolary conventions have been stripped away, 'one is still left in search of the elusive voice of a female signatory, a voice itself shaped and conditioned by society and experience' (p. 89). Daybell is not the only scholar of early modern women to voice such thoughts, but the danger of this approach is that the process of stripping away the layers, treating women's writing as if it were an onion to be peeled, can be pursued too far. Surely as scholars of early modern women we should be interested precisely in the construction and articulation of female voices within their early modern setting, rather than wasting energy on supposedly liberating such female voices from a historical context?

The most stimulating result of this exploration of the mechanics of letter-writing is that it allows Daybell to question previous assumptions regarding the low level of female literacy in this period. Universal estimates of women's writing skills based on sampling signatures, such as Cressy's classic study of literacy and the social order, have argued

that female literacy levels in the sixteenth and seventeenth century were collectively low.² Women's letters are instead used by Daybell to offer a far more 'optimistic' picture of female writing literacy (p. 15). His quantitative analysis, which is based on only those letters which can be established through palaeographical examination as written in a woman's own hand, is here less convincing than his qualitative conclusions. Looking at issues such as handwriting, spelling and mastery of epistolary forms, Daybell is able to paint a persuasive picture of increasing female literacy throughout the period. Most significantly, by documenting the extent to which his source material reveals 'higher' forms of literacy, such as female attitudes to reading and writing, Daybell surely offers a clear direction for future scholars. Thus the author thankfully spares us another interminable discussion of the prescriptive literature, but instead turns to evidence from women's own letters. Daybell compares, for example, the constant repetition of apologies for 'scribbled lines' or 'rude writing' with those in men's letters to offer the interesting suggestion that such sentiment arose not from female unease concerning writing, but instead was simply a literary trope used by both sexes. His interrogation of letters to reveal evidence of female ownership and reading of books is here especially important. Given the absence of institutional records for female schooling, even recent studies on early modern reading have continued to argue that there is little extant direct documentary evidence of female readers.³ Joining Heidi Brayman Hackel and Caroline Bowden, Daybell importantly highlights that it is possible for historians to begin to reconstruct the libraries of early modern women.⁴

It is Daybell's magisterial knowledge of conventional epistolary forms which pays dividends in the second half of the book, allowing him to offer a fresh approach to issues such as the involvement of women in political activities, as well as the dynamics of the early modern family. Shedding new light upon conjugal relationships, he compares marital correspondence to suggest that while husbands more frequently articulated affection in their letters, equivalent expressions were increasingly used by women through the course of the sixteenth century. Daybell, however, persuasively urges caution in simplistically accepting that marriages were becoming ever more companionate, although he accepts that many relationships were based upon real affection. Such testaments of increased intimacy enshrined in correspondence can also be explained not only by growing female literacy engendering greater epistolary privacy, but also by a shift in letter-writing conventions; the medieval *ars dictaminis*, which accentuated differences in social status, gave way to the humanist adoption of simpler, classical epistolary forms, marked by a more intimate style, what Daybell terms the 'formality in being informal' (p. 206).

Daybell's detailed knowledge of epistolary conventions similarly breathes new life into his discussion of the political nature of women's letters. Following Barbara Harris' call for a reconceptualisation of early modern politics, acknowledging informal channels of power and reintegrating women into traditional narratives, Daybell is able to demonstrate persuasively both female mastery of the formal rhetorical structure of letters of petition, as well as women's confident manipulation of such forms.⁵ By comparing male and female correspondence, he argues that while both sexes used the

language of deference in such letters, women knowingly employed negative female gender assumptions to their own advantage. Here the comparison of male and female letter-writers proves valuable, as it does in his exploration of marital correspondence, and the uneven use of such comparative methods throughout the study is surely to the detriment of earlier sections of the book. Furthermore, the discussion of patronage letters demonstrates the advantages of the quantitative aspect of Daybell's research, which here holds more conviction, liberated from such contentious issues as authenticity of the hand. Not only does Daybell demonstrate that a significant proportion of his sample of women's letters were petitionary, amounting to more than 1000 letters from 350 women, he moreover calculates that 81 per cent of those letters were to male recipients not related to the writer, offering an alternative interpretation to recent studies which have represented women's political activity as reliant on male family members.⁶

Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England is therefore a hugely ambitious book and it is due to its impressive nature that some reservations arise. Firstly, in attempting to synthesise such a large and diverse body of letters, Daybell often ignores his own advice regarding the complexity of early modern correspondence as source material. The detailed knowledge of individual or groups of women, for example characterising Alison Wall's exemplary work on the Thynne family, is often missing from this study.⁷ Mistakes in biography and chronology appear, such as suggesting Mildred Cecil as the recipient of a letter in 1594, five years after her death (p. 257); I think it is far more likely that the letter was written to the then Lady Cecil, Elizabeth, wife of Robert Cecil.

The format similarly leaves the author frequently quoting odd lines from letters in support of his thesis, without any reference to the circumstances in which the letter was produced or any additional documentary evidence. A line written by Elizabeth Hoby to William Cecil, for instance, is quoted as a simple example of social courtesy to a government official for favours granted (p. 157). Divorced from the surrounding letter, the reader has no knowledge of the original context of Hoby's sentiment, which was more specifically not just thanking Cecil in his guise as a government official, but was also in apology for certain heated words which 'passed unawars owt of my mowth' at her departure from Cecil, raising far more complex gender issues than the format allows the author to acknowledge.⁸ The sentence, moreover, is misquoted by Daybell, who cuts out the middle section of the line, which again complicates Hoby's act of social courtesy by referencing Cecil's 'fatherly care' towards her during the years she lived with the family, without any acknowledgement of the omission.

The book instead appears to work most successfully when Daybell investigates individual women in more depth, for example comparing several different letters from one woman; a comparison of letters written by Lettice Dudley, countess of Leicester, to her son Robert Devereux, earl of Essex, is one of the gems in this book (pp. 87-89). The two female correspondents who emerge most forcefully from the work are Elizabeth Talbot, countess of Shrewsbury, and the gentlewoman, Elizabeth Bourne, both subjects of previous publications by Daybell. This is not to argue that to consider letter-writing as a single source is not valuable, rather it is to suggest that this approach is most effective when examining correspondence where only a few letters survive for an

individual woman. In comparison with the larger collections of letters which exist for certain women, these smaller sets of correspondence are less likely to have been extensively analysed by researchers and they provide less opportunity for contextualisation. Similarly, while the author is rightly unapologetic regarding the elite bias of his source material, he continually reiterates the survival of a significant proportion of letters, almost 10 per cent of his sample, from women attached to the professional classes and what he terms the 'middling' groups in society. It is striking, however, that beyond the extensive use of the letters of Sabine Johnson, wife of a Staple merchant, there is very little exploitation of the correspondence of these non-elite women. Daybell indeed mentions three times that Thomas Sutton, the founder of Charterhouse Hospital, received correspondence from lower-class women seeking financial assistance, but he leaves his readers with more questions than answers by failing to discuss this collection beyond a mere four words extracted from one letter (pp. 34, 38, 235, 238).

Finally, while issues of inclusion and exclusion will obviously be of concern to the author of such a comprehensive study, it is a shame that Daybell offers so little discussion into the insights revealed by women's correspondence regarding religion. Throughout the book, Daybell is dismissive of religious concerns, even going so far as to disparage the diaries of early modern women in comparison with their letters for their 'religious interpretative straitjackets', which seems odd in a work so concerned with the impact of conventional epistolary forms upon the shaping of correspondence (p. 45). Links between growing female literacy in the sixteenth century and religion are barely

mentioned and Daybell maintains that early modern women's correspondence reveals 'little ideologically about their writers' religious views', later devoting a scant three pages to a preliminary survey (pp. 45, 170-172). Given that Couchman and Crabb's recent collection of essays on early modern women's letter-writing in a European context devoted a third of the book to confessional identities revealed through correspondence, a reader of Daybell's work could be forgiven for thinking there were few religiously motivated women in early modern England.⁹ Yet surely the correspondence of the female 'sustainers', the supporters of the Marian martyrs, used so successfully in research by Thomas Freeman, should be discussed in this work, especially in the section on the construction of identity in correspondence;¹⁰ it is noticeable that the bibliography reveals that Daybell has not consulted those letters of the sustainers, Lady Anne Knevet and Lady Elizabeth Fane, held at Emmanuel College Library in Cambridge, or that by Joyce Hales at the British Library.¹¹ Even if we take the author at his word and accept that confessional identities are rare in early modern correspondence, then surely Daybell could have conceivably incorporated more material on the extant female letters of petition on behalf of religious figures, such as the numerous letters from Lady Anne Bacon, in his exploration of that epistolary genre. Daybell argues that female authority in patronage letters derived more from social status than gender concerns, but a discussion of how religious belief also conveyed authority in letters of petition would have been valuable.

These omissions, however, are in many ways only the price to be paid for such an ambitious, comprehensive study. The rewards for such ambition, moreover, are clear.

Daybell has offered a new approach to women letter-writers in this period, synthesising insights offered by both literary scholars and historians, and has uncovered a vast treasure-trove of female authored manuscripts. He reveals the freshness of these sources in this highly important work, inspiring his readers with the multitude of women's voices speaking from every page.

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NOTES:

- ¹ For a useful overview, see J. Daybell, 'Recent Studies in Sixteenth-Century Letters', *English Literary Renaissance*, 35 (2005), pp. 331–362 and idem, 'Recent Studies in Seventeenth-Century Letters', *English Literary Renaissance*, 36 (2006), pp. 135–170.
- ² D. Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: CUP, 1980), pp. 41, 118-141.
- ³ See, for example, K. Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 251; K. Sharpe and S. Zwicker, 'Introduction: Discovering the Renaissance Reader' in K. Sharpe and S. Zwicker (eds), *Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 13.
- ⁴ H. Brayman Hackel, 'The Countess of Bridgewater's London Library' in J. Andersen and E. Sauer (eds), *Books and Readers in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 138-59; C. Bowden, 'The Library of Mildred Cooke Cecil, Lady Burghley', *The Library*, 6 (2005), pp. 3-29.
- ⁵ B. Harris, 'Women and Politics in Early Tudor England', *The Historical Journal*, 33 (1990), pp. 259-81.
- ⁶ See, for example, H. Payne, 'The Cecil Women at Court' in P. Croft (ed.), *Patronage, Culture and Power: The Early Cecils* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 265-281 and eadem, 'Aristocratic Women, Power, Patronage and Family Networks at the Jacobean Court, 1603-1625' in J. Daybell (ed.), *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 164-80; P. Croft, 'Mildred, Lady Burghley: The Matriarch' in P. Croft (ed.), *Patronage, Culture and Power: The Early Cecils* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 283-300.
- ⁷ A. Wall (ed.), *Two Elizabethan Women: Correspondence of Joan and Maria Thynne, 1575-1611* (Devizes: Wiltshire Record Society, 1983); A. Wall, 'Elizabethan Precept and Feminine Practice: The Thynne Family of Longleat', *History*, 75 (1990), pp. 23-38; A. Wall, 'For Love, Money, or Politics?: A Clandestine Marriage and the Elizabethan Court of Arches', *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), pp. 511-33; A. Wall, 'Deference and Defiance in Women's Letters of the Thynne family: The Rhetoric of Relationships' in J. Daybell (ed.), *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing, 1450-1700* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 77-93.
- ⁸ The National Archives, Public Record Office, SP 15/13, fo. 14.
- ⁹ J. Couchman and A. Crabb (eds), *Women's Letters Across Europe, 1400-1700: Form and Persuasion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 241-314.
- ¹⁰ T. Freeman, "'The good ministrye of godlye and vertuouse women": The Elizabethan Martyrologists and the Female Supporters of the Marian Martyrs', *Journal of British Studies*, 39 (2000), pp. 8-33.
- ¹¹ Emmanuel College Library, MS 260, fos. 44, 49-50; British Library, Additional MS 19400, fos. 76-78.