

# Introduction

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Letters denote exchange, even the unsent letter locked in a bureau drawer speaks of the urge to converse if not the conviction to seal and send. For literate women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the letter was a powerful tool – one that privileged discourse, demanded reciprocity and drew letter-writers into a defining cultural practice of their era. The letters discussed here represent far more than the historical information they contain. As letter-writers put pen to paper they engaged in a very particular writing practice, one which saw its reflection in a wide range of print culture, from newspapers to novels. In this way, the practice of writing letters connected individuals with other texts and processes of textual production. However, these lines of ink on folded page are also remnants of an everyday habit which gifted the individual space for reflection and discussion. On a personal level, letters helped letter-writers negotiate relationships with their world but, collectively, epistolary practice fed cultures of friendship, kinship and business. Correspondence informed the literary, intellectual and creative cultures of its day and, in many cases, the familial overlapped with the literary; distant cousins became intellectual companions, neighbours became fellow readers. Networks of correspondents also connected groups of peoples separated by class, nationality, gender and location and in doing so linked ‘men of letters’ with provincial housewives, university scholars with amateur collectors, provincial poets with metropolitan coteries. Although the letter-writing public still reflected the striations of a society riven by social distinction, letters also spoke of the opportunities presented by epistolary aptitude to transcend such boundaries.

The study of letters entails encounters with both the typical and the eccentric and clues to the intricacies of early modern housewifery sit squarely alongside tracts of moral philosophy. This tendency to the diverse makes letters extremely difficult to categorise along lines of modern scholarly enquiry. Here, the focus will be on the ‘familiar letter’, which Susan Fitzmaurice has described as ‘a pragmatic act that is embodied in a text that responds to a previous text, whether spoken or written, and at the same time anticipates new texts’<sup>1</sup> This dynamic of exchange is integral to the character of the familiar letter, but the term also denotes the fact that such letters did not primarily communicate matters of business or affairs of the state (although these topics might be discussed) – they were instead rooted in personal relationships. This book makes no attempt to carve up

the messy multiplicity of this encompassing category of correspondence and, instead, uses the familiar letter to explore the interconnected nature of women's domestic, familial, intellectual and social lives. Whilst the quiet solitude of a corner with table and book might have proved welcome to the serious reader, the table and corner were part of a greater household in which the reader also acted as housewife, child bearer, carer and teacher, wife, kitchen garden cultivator, provider of poor relief and host to neighbouring friends. These roles and responsibilities informed the rhythm of every day and also the ways in which women engaged with the life of the mind. Interior worlds were marked by exterior environments and the home proved to be the library and lecture theatre for many literate and self-motivated women of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England.

By considering women's lives through reading their surviving letters, it can be shown that many more women than have previously been documented or studied engaged with a reflective life of the mind in this period. Literate women across England, who had the benefit of some spare time, access to books and a private space in which to study, could actively develop their inner lives – the evidence of this can be found in their letters, which survive in their many thousands in national collections and local record offices. The aim of this book is to establish the critical role of letter-writing in the process of women's engagement with the life of the mind and, through doing so, reveal the early modern letter as an analytical tool for historical scholarship.

Letter-writing has been the subject of much recent research and scholars have considered its connections to the literary world,<sup>2</sup> its role as a social and cultural force in national and global communications<sup>3</sup> and its status as a genre of life writing.<sup>4</sup> Here, the focus is on how women made use of letter-writing to further their own self-educational or intellectual pursuits. It is the process of engagement with reading, writing and ideas, rather than the product of those efforts, that provides the point of departure. Through this analysis of engagement with intellectual life, the varied contexts of childhood experience, personal relationships, family life and domestic space will come to the fore. Nonetheless, the primary concern of this book is with examples of intellectual motivation fostered by letter-writing and the implications these women's experiences have for our understanding of cultural life in this period.

### Literacy, education and the life of the mind

In examining letter-writing as a conduit for intellectual engagement, levels of literacy and access to education for women correspondents naturally

have a strong bearing. Literacy, the essential prerequisite for educational achievement, is measurable on a sliding scale, from the ability to sign a name to owning the versatility and finesse to write for reasons of communication, literary creativity or personal advocacy. Most women, like many working men, simply lacked the skills of reading and writing necessary to participate in intellectual life. David Cressy's important study of literacy found that women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were much less likely to be able to sign their names than were their male counterparts.<sup>5</sup> Although literacy improved in the period 1650–1750,<sup>6</sup> it was only in London that female literacy breached 50 per cent; elsewhere in the country as a whole only about a quarter of women were classed as literate.<sup>7</sup> However, female literacy amongst the middling and upper sorts in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England was high and literacy rates of 100 per cent have been claimed for society's elites.<sup>8</sup> Recently, Jacqueline Eales has shown that female literacy was compulsory within clerical families of the seventeenth century, most of whom firmly occupied the ranks of the middling sort.<sup>9</sup> Access to education inside or outside the home for young people in this period varied widely; the content, duration and results of that educational experience were correspondingly diverse.<sup>10</sup> It is also worth noting, that many women were taught to read without being taught to write, so for some women engagement with text began and ended with the read or spoken word.

Where erratic spelling in some women's letters of this period betrayed a deficient education, verbal fluency was often evident on the page, and from this starting point skills could be honed through activities such as letter-writing.<sup>11</sup> Susan Whyman has valuably highlighted the concept of 'epistolary literacy', seeing letter-writing as 'a training ground for composing other types of literature'.<sup>12</sup> Whyman advises that instead of looking 'for women's education in makeshift methods and informal places' historians need 'to recognize the importance of domestic literacy'.<sup>13</sup> More recently, Whyman has demonstrated widespread epistolary literacy across the social scale.<sup>14</sup> These discoveries are crucial to our understanding of female intellectual life in this period. Illiteracy and inadequate educational provision have been blamed consistently for women's silence on matters of academic note. Letters housed in archives and record offices point to a different story: one of widespread written literacy. But, more than this, correspondence collections highlight the adventurous use women made of the epistolary form. Letters were the home of ideas, perhaps erratically spelled, but nonetheless evident on the page.

Of course, well-to-do girls in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were expected to have an education of some degree during

childhood. A small minority might even be sent away to school, and teaching provided adult women with a possible vocation and source of income. Mothers were key educators in the home, especially of very young children of both sexes, as most boys of middling or gentry families would not be sent away to school until they were seven or eight years old.<sup>15</sup> Mothers were usually responsible for their girls' educations throughout their formative years. Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles have explored the dynamic evidence of the Jane Johnson archive, which shows how Buckinghamshire clergyman's wife Johnson drew on her own reading and creative talents to develop effective materials for teaching her children at home in the 1740s.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Michèle Cohen has argued persuasively that a domestic education was not necessarily an inferior education.<sup>17</sup>

Where childhood education had been sufficiently thorough, adult women could become readers. Indeed, the figure of the woman reader was a popular subject of literary and artistic representation but female reading could be both extolled as a rational pursuit and deplored as dangerously corrupting of women's characters.<sup>18</sup> Of course, a long tradition of morally sanctioned female religious reading existed and reading the Bible had a strong influence on early modern women's own writings.<sup>19</sup> However, there was a perceived difference between religious and informative kinds of reading and literature that engaged the imagination.<sup>20</sup> During the eighteenth century, concerns about the particularly damaging effects of novel reading on women abounded in popular culture and perpetuated a deeply polarised view on the 'proper' relationship between women and books.<sup>21</sup>

Despite a social context fraught with fears about both the morally corrupting qualities of reading and the capacity of this pursuit to take women away from their household and familial duties, women did read all of the genres (prohibited or otherwise) and discussed their reading in letters to friends. These epistolary conversations contributed to a broad culture of textual analysis, which has been linked to historical developments as significant as the changing status of the middle class or the emergence of the Enlightenment.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, detailed studies of reading practice are revealing about the ways in which early modern readers diverged from prescribed genres and availed themselves of impressively diverse reading matter. Using the records of Midland booksellers for the second half of the eighteenth century, Jan Fergus provides demographic information on who bought and borrowed fiction, concluding that – contrary to the fears of moralists – 'The raw numbers for women readers of novels and plays confirm that provincial women do not constitute a particularly

large or broad market for fiction' in this period.<sup>23</sup> Other scholars have focused on individual readers so as to cut across genre and represent the experience of reading for early modern people.<sup>24</sup> A particularly illuminating example of this approach is Naomi Tadmor's exploration of two reading households, where she finds the practice of reading 'connected not to idleness, listlessness or frivolity but to a routine of work and religious discipline'.<sup>25</sup> This study shows that for a tradesman and his wife, reading was part of the household routine and books were picked up intermittently, between other domestic and business responsibilities, and also that reading moved between genres on a daily basis.<sup>26</sup> Other studies have confirmed that individuals of modest social standing might engage with a wide variety of literature, accessed not only through buying books but also through the use of subscription and circulating libraries.<sup>27</sup> Both the study of the distribution of books and the reading practices of individuals in this period show that the literate negotiated a range of strategies for getting hold of reading material and integrated time for reading into their often busy lives. Once literacy and access to reading material had been established, opportunities might present themselves for more in-depth intellectual exploration.

### Women's intellectual lives in an era of Enlightenment

The eighteenth century is an era synonymous with the notion of rapid growth in rational and scientific thought. For many scholars this period is still directly referred to as 'the Enlightenment' and in its epistemological waters are traced the origins of subsequent scientific discovery.<sup>28</sup> Although men dominated institutions of political and intellectual note, women participated in the developments of their time.<sup>29</sup> However, in terms of women, it is the second half of the century that has drawn most scholarly attention as the era of Bluestockings and Wollstonecraft feminism. History titles that focus on the period after 1750 abound, but the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries fall between early modern scholarship and research which looks forward to the modern period.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England deserves the attention of readers interested in women's mental worlds. After all, it was in 1696 that Mary Astell famously made *A Serious Proposal to Ladies* concerning their education. Formal institutions of the age, such as the Royal Society (founded in 1660), may have excluded women members, but a vibrant correspondence culture was commandeered by female thinkers who wished to contribute to the debates of their time.

Recent scholarship has shown the importance of letter-writing networks to cultures of knowledge in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Increasingly, historians have been able to make use of the data provided by digital collections of correspondence to map these networks across Europe and North America and gain insights into the geographies of intellectual life.<sup>31</sup> Whilst many of the letters that have provided the focus for these studies have been those of the most well-known literary and scientific men,<sup>32</sup> studies have also begun to capture the women who were active in these networks.<sup>33</sup> These valuable works demonstrate that by the seventeenth century, correspondence was a well-established route for women's participation in scholarship.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, recent efforts to digitise these archival collections has emphasised the operation of networks over the works of individuals and helped scholars to see intellectual production as a collaborative venture which encompassed broader communities of individuals.<sup>35</sup> But women did not just participate in cultures of intellectual exchange, they also lent their social and financial support to knowledge production. In this way, correspondence networks connected distant individuals, promoted patronage and provided a space for discourse. Letters performed these functions for pairs or groups of women who wished to be in contact, but – likewise – for men and women who had intellectual interests in common. Together they formed a diffuse and diverse 'Republic of Letters'.

This book employs an interpretation of intellectual life that can more accurately be described as the 'life of the mind'.<sup>36</sup> The phrase, used most famously by Hannah Arendt in her exploration of the 'activity of thinking', is used here to emphasise the experience of thinking life as well as the tangible textual outcomes of thought.<sup>37</sup> In Arendt's discussion of the life of the mind, she identifies as a defining feature 'the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content'.<sup>38</sup> This inclusive approach to human thought is helpful when considering women's epistolary writing in this period because it took such diverse forms and fulfilled multiple functions. Moreover, Arendt's conceptualisation of the life of the mind as being composed of three main mental activities: 'thinking, willing, and judging' bypasses traditional divisions between reason and intellect, contemplation and knowledge production.

The focus here on women as overlooked intellectual participants begins the important work of integrating gender and intellectual histories. However, many of the same arguments could be made for other marginalised intellectuals, such as amateur male scholars, collectors and readers who, whilst distant from institutions of intellectual note,

remained fully engaged in research and writing. The examples explored in this book include female circles of intellectual acquaintance as well as cases of cross-gender exchange. Some made letters the primary forum for their considered thoughts and thereby perfected a mode of expression that both conformed to and competed with established ideals for feminine conduct. Others used their letters as spaces for rehearsal, their correspondents acting as critical friends. What is clear is that women used strategies to engage with the debates of their times which were achievable within their personal and social contexts.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the relatively limited number of early modern women writers typically discussed by scholars of literature and history. As Jeremy Gregory states ‘the familiar names of Mary Astell, Anna Barbauld, Elizabeth Carter, Susanna Centlivre, Ann Finch, Eliza Haywood, Mary Leapor, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Hannah More, Ann Radcliffe, Elizabeth Rowe, Sarah Scott, Anna Seward, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Ann Yearsley recur time and again.’<sup>39</sup> Histories of philosophy could add, amongst others, Margaret Cavendish, Anne Conway and Catherine Trotter Cockburn to the list.<sup>40</sup> This reliance on a discrete canon of female creative talent tends to underline the broader presumption that very few women wrote anything of interest at this time. One answer to the question of why such a small pool of names is drawn upon to illuminate women’s thinking lives is the over-reliance on biography in the evaluation of intellectual impact. There is a strong tendency in the recording of intellectual lives to make it just that, a ‘Life and Works’. This need for an individual to have created work systematically over their lifetime disenfranchises many female participants from intellectual history altogether. Most women read and wrote when and where they could. Intellectual letter-writing could be interrupted, for years at a time, by the rigours of child-bearing and rearing; perhaps never to be returned to. This patchy and sometimes abruptly aborted activity does not lend itself well to an analysis of a lifetime of intellectual practice. Moreover, where poorly provenanced manuscript writings do appear in the archive, the lack of a definitive author, with a well-documented life story, makes the task all the more difficult. As a result, the evidence of women’s contributions in this arena, where it does exist, is often overlooked. By making good use of the fragmentary manuscript evidence, as opposed to relying on published texts, it is possible to uncover the depth and diversity of female intellectual work in this period.<sup>41</sup>

When women have been considered by historians specifically as intellectuals, they are frequently subjected to a denial of their works’ ‘originality’ amongst other techniques to depreciate the value of their

contribution to the world of ideas.<sup>42</sup> It is now commonly agreed that women lent a hand in the collective task of generating new knowledge, but they are rarely described as the initiators, discoverers or founders of that knowledge. Women's critical reading and commenting on published literature is a good example of intellectual output that deserves greater attention. As Jaqueline Pearson has emphasised, women could read 'rebelliously and resistingly rather than compliantly'.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, women have often been characterised as passive readers, dutifully reading for self-betterment, rather than as informed consumers of texts who developed incisive critiques through writing to friends. This is the same kind of thinking that has led to women happily being designated as helpmeets to 'real' male thinkers, instead of innovators in their own right. Instead of acknowledging that women have often found their contributions systematically undervalued by their contemporaries, and then subsequently so by historical scholarship, this process of marginalisation is dressed up as the product of limited educational opportunity for women in their given period, be that the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth or twentieth century. Women are not initiators, discoverers or founders because they could not compete with their better educated and resourced brothers. This explanation for women's non-achievement in the world of knowledge production simply does not hold true for the women letter-writers who are the subject of this book.

Historians of gender have sought out hidden women's histories, but there are still calls for more and better scholarship on women intellectuals.<sup>44</sup> Recent studies on the Bluestocking circle have certainly identified a wider culture of sociability that birthed and promulgated Enlightenment ideas but they retain a focus on the most prominent examples of that culture.<sup>45</sup> It is the ideas and writings of a broader cross-section of women of this period that are the primary concern of this book. This study is rooted in social history and it is therefore concerned with the practices that informed and gave access to intellectual study and the relationships participants had with the life of the mind. This is not a history that primarily concerns itself with women's interpretations of specific texts, or their development of particular ideas, although that will form part of the discussion. This book is concerned instead with women's engagement with, and experience of, intellectual life in all its manifestations. For some women that would be critical engagement with current affairs, for others it would be reading and responding to classical literature, for still others it would be tracts written on perfect friendship, drawing on a range of literary and cultural influences. Through this approach, new evidence will be presented in support of a social history of female

intellectual achievement in an era well before women gained access to higher education.

### Letters and letter-writing

This book uses manuscript rather than print letters as its source material and whilst it has long been understood that letters found in archives cannot be treated as ‘unmediated historical artefacts’,<sup>46</sup> there still exists a clear difference between letters that were written with the intention of being sent to, and read by, a specified person (or group of people) and letters that were written with a wider audience in mind. Nevertheless, however narrow or wide the intended readership, it is worth remembering that letter-writing did not represent an uncomplicated narration of life events or expression of self.<sup>47</sup> The publication of an individual’s letters was only one way that correspondence might meet with many eyes; the circulation of manuscript letters beyond their original addressee was much more likely. In fact, this potential for a letter to attract multiple future readers provides a helpful way of thinking about the unpredictable afterlives of correspondence.<sup>48</sup> The permeable boundaries between the letter in manuscript and print form has been described by Clare Brant in terms of the letter as ‘a junction or crossroad’ between manuscript and print culture.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, manuscript letters betray a sense of the author’s intention about the way in which they expected or hoped their letter would be read. The first few lines of a letter often refer directly to the practicalities of sending and receipt and the anxieties felt about regularity of contact and privacy of content. So whilst every letter sat within a complex web of relationships (with people, other letters, the letter-form in print and so on) there was often also an explicit intent for its status as a personal message or a more public statement.<sup>50</sup> Even those letters that were written in company and sent with the expectation that they might be read aloud to an assembled group were not, as a result, ‘public’ documents. An exchange of letters might represent a conversation between more than two people, but the intention of the letter-writer was still to communicate with a specified group with whom she had an established relationship. Of course, letters that were not initially intended for either circulation or publication might later find their way into other people’s hands or into print.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, the habit of preserving sections of a family member’s correspondence for the enjoyment and instruction of sons, daughters and grandchildren was also common. Whilst it is certainly true that letter-writers did not exert complete control over the end use of their

missives, the reality was that most letters penned would not even survive in manuscript form let alone be transmitted onto the printed page. So, whilst letter-writers commonly expressed anxiety about the possibility of their letters being read by unintended eyes, they could – in most circumstances – still be confident of their letters reaching the addressee intact and being read only by them, especially once that recipient had tossed the letter into the fire. Here, familiar letters are the focus and the vast majority of these were intended to be read by just one other person or by very few people. Post Habermas, ‘public’ and ‘private’ are freighted terms, but – in respect of letter-writing – it is still useful to use the term ‘private’ both for the meanings it had in this period and also to describe the act of writing a message to be read by a particular person.<sup>52</sup>

The significance of the letter in early modern society and culture is difficult to overestimate. The establishment of the Post Office opened up new channels for communication for a growing proportion of the population.<sup>53</sup> Social spaces were created and imagined through letter-writing and increasing numbers of people were drawn into this powerful communicative practice. In larger and larger numbers, British men and women ‘were able to seek to accomplish a variety of ends, solely through the persuasiveness of their writing’.<sup>54</sup> There have been many arguments made about the specific benefits brought to women by letter-writing and, through corresponding, women certainly did exercise agency for a truly diverse range of purposes.<sup>55</sup> But the force of letter-writing was perhaps most discernible in its ultimate permeation (in form and function) of social, cultural, economic and political life. Konstantin Dierks has described this process as the ‘*mediating force of letter writing*’ and the ‘*prescriptive force of letter writing*’, showing that letters were both an all-pervasive motif in text and also the method by which individual letter-writers acted, made meaning, communicated and formed identity.<sup>56</sup> In its inherent capacity for meaning-making, exchange and the formation of identity, letter-writing proved the perfect vehicle for intellectual exploration. More than this, correspondence provided a particularly important space for women. Whereas female authors were seen to be relatively quiet in published form as compared with men; women letter-writers were voluble.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the act of letter-writing became integral to the process of identity formation for women who wished to discuss their reading and exchange ideas through correspondence.<sup>58</sup>

This book uses letters written by women to understand their experiences of intellectual life. However, for historians and critics interested in the frameworks within which women wrote, contemporary

advice literature has also been an important source.<sup>59</sup> Advice literature flourished in this period and epistolary practice did not escape the printer's eye as countless volumes were produced advising the reader on how to make the best use of this form of communication. Considering the potentially complex deliberations involved in putting pen to paper, it is perhaps unsurprising that books were printed and reprinted with guidelines to the keen but untutored letter-writer. No doubt, nervous correspondents sometimes turned to the pages of *Polite Epistolary Correspondence*<sup>60</sup> or *The Accomplished Letter-Writer*<sup>61</sup> to help them perform, but it remains difficult to say with any certainty how strongly the prescriptions of these popular books influenced the practice of individual letter-writers.<sup>62</sup> For one, letter-writers rarely acknowledged the use of a manual or guide. Moreover, knowing that such books sat on the shelves of family libraries does not ensure that they were read or that their rules were applied.

On reading and comparing advice books of this period, the immediate impression is one of repetition. The same themes, topics, stylistic conventions and examples grace the pages of books published many decades apart.<sup>63</sup> So whilst claims were commonly made for the novelty of the material contained, many manuals were simply recycling a previous generation's prescriptions. However, this literature has been read as evidence of social regulation. The stark rules provided for proper behaviour make for compelling reading and the genre – predictably – made women readers a key target of its prescriptions. For example, Abbé d'Ancourt's 1743 publication, *The Lady's Preceptor* suggested that:

THERE is not a more improving, as well as a more agreeable Entertainment, Madam, than that of Writing Letters. They are Emanations of our selves, by which we do, as it were, talk and act in several Places at a time. Besides, they are of the utmost Advantage in our Intercourse with the World.<sup>64</sup>

However, with these significant advantages in mind, it was warned:

There are as great a Variety of Rules for Writing well, as for Talking well; the Ignorance of most of your Sex, therefore, in this Science, who generally are guilty of as many Faults as they pen Words, arises from their not caring to be at the pains required to excel in it.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, d'Ancourt's promotion of the letter as a means to broaden and maintain a woman's network of influence was strongly mitigated by his final condition:

never, unless upon some singular Emergency which may warrant it, to write to any one but of your own Sex, nor to any but of such a Quality and Reputation as not to lose any of your own by it, nor to any one whomsoever, without the Permission of those under whose Jurisdiction you may be.<sup>66</sup>

This comment did not reflect the social reality of 1743. At this time, many women were active participants in social, political and commercial activities and interacted with broad networks of people, male and female. But the rule-providing remit of advice literature precluded such a diversified view of gender roles.<sup>67</sup> To most, this advice would have seemed terribly outmoded, but this is the point. These books were unlikely to have been read straightforwardly as rules to abide by. As Vivien Jones has argued, this literature was read for pleasure as well as instruction and she warns against a reading that sees the texts as simply 'truth-bearing'.<sup>68</sup> Advice literature was entertainment as well as instruction.

Whilst letter-writing manuals might have been read just as much for fun as for education, correspondents were subject to a host of other influences when they put pen to paper. Conversations, other letter-writers, newspapers, periodicals, plays, novels, songs, sermons and the Bible all played a part. Correspondents thus negotiated their own approach in the context of a wide range of influences, using, adapting and dispensing with convention as they saw fit. Moreover, the key process by which personal habits were formed was the act of letter-writing itself.<sup>69</sup> A letter-writer such as seventeenth-century gentlewoman Dorothy Osborne, whose letters to her future husband William Temple have been printed, was deeply influenced by her readings of French romances.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, for the more literary-minded, the printed letters of Madame de Sévigné and Madame de Maintenon could provide inspiration.<sup>71</sup> In May 1668, the cultivated letter-writer Mary Evelyn responded to being addressed by a fellow correspondent as 'Madam Balzac'. First she objected to the title because she did not value the French author, Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac's written style and suggested instead that 'Voiture seems to excel both in quicknesse of fancy easinesse of expression, and in a facile way of insinuating that he was not Ignorant of letters; an advantage the Court Ayre gives persons who converse with the world as well as books'.<sup>72</sup> In her lifetime, Mary Evelyn gave considerable thought to the letter as a space for critical and creative writing. However, this comment also reveals that she had engaged closely with the examples of published letters that were available at the time and had considered their influence on culture and society.

Engagement with literature in letter-writing sometimes took the form of critical discussion but it could also appear as passages in the style of a particular published letter-writer or author. Brant has referred to this as ‘an aesthetic of imitation’ and notes that it was particularly prevalent in the first of half of the eighteenth century, before concerns about copyright came to the fore.<sup>73</sup> In the case of the diarist Sarah Cowper (1644–1720), as Anne Kugler has shown, passages from published works mingled – unattributed – with Cowper’s own life writing, a process by which Cowper reshaped the texts she had read and asserted her own identity.<sup>74</sup> This example shows that resistant reading could also lead to rebellious writing.

The letters researched for this book show that childhood education, family traditions, marital relationships and personal dispositions played a more important role in the character of women’s letter-writing than the wisdom offered by published guides.<sup>75</sup> By far the most fruitful primary source for understanding gender roles, writing and the reasoning mind in this period are letters written by participants in that society – from these documents the strictures of conventional style, format and address can be detected amongst the great diversity and eccentricity of personal practice.

### Sites and communities

The focus of this book is on the home as a site of female learning and on the communities of intellectual exchange that could be fostered through letter-writing. However, the more discrete spaces of epistolary activity discussed here can be usefully contextualised by the wealth of scholarship that has been undertaken on early modern sites, networks and communities of intellectual life. For a start, the period in question is central to historical accounts of the ‘Republic of Letters’ and anticipates studies focused on later eighteenth-century Enlightenment culture. As Anne Goldgar has described it, the Republic of Letters ‘existed only in the minds of its members’; unlike a university or a literary society its ‘regulations and even its membership were nebulous at best.’<sup>76</sup> However, Goldgar reveals that the Republic functioned via contact – in the form of correspondence, social visits and discussions in scholarly journals. In other words, networks of epistolary exchange provided support for their members and, collectively, these activities represented an incredible clamour of communication across traditional boundaries of nation, religion, gender and class.<sup>77</sup> Women were present in these communities of scholars, and recent research has elucidated how female intellectual

communities operated and interacted with men of letters and wider networks of scholarly exchange. For Carol Pal, these intellectual networks were permeable and overlapping, focused around particular scholarly projects and generating new connections where shared concerns were realised.<sup>78</sup>

This characterisation of the way the Republic of Letters operated in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century society is a helpful one, and can be augmented by studies that consider the operation of patronage in this era. As Melanie Bigold has described, ‘Well-placed, intellectually minded women also supported other scholarly women’ and this was particularly true of wealthy aristocrats who could provide financial support for literary publication or the costs of living for struggling writers.<sup>79</sup> Letters fuelled this process, both by forming an important component of literary practice and by maintaining lines of communication which could facilitate the production and dissemination of literary works.<sup>80</sup>

However, for some of the women discussed in this book, the networks and communities of scholarship encompassed by the Republic of Letters would have felt a distant arena. Instead, communities of a more local kind served to generate intellectual friendship and exchange. Women of the landed gentry often lived for many months of the year in country homes, which were relatively distant from both metropolitan centres and the homes of other families of their class. However, in this context, neighbourhood sociability between families of similar social standing was important and this community was forged through reciprocity enacted by social visits and gift exchange.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, for the early modern landed elite, London also played an important satellite role in their geography of well-to-do sociability.<sup>82</sup> For many of the women discussed here, these neighbourhood contacts would have played an important role in their social world. But this society was not bounded and whilst relationships within the neighbourhood might be consolidated through thoughtful correspondence, its parameters could also be breached by the same means.

An interesting example of a community that embraced both the intellectual and the local, was antiquarianism.<sup>83</sup> With its interest in the sites and artefacts of ancient Britain, antiquarianism offered much scope for regional studies which drew on the evidence of local parish records, early churches and what would become known as archaeological heritage. For many gentry families, this study of local histories offered opportunities to trace illustrious family heritage back many centuries. The possibility of working in sites removed from the universities or metropolitan societies

also made antiquarian research accessible to individuals outside mainstream scholarship.<sup>84</sup>

The home as a site of learning and intellectual exchange was not a bounded space. Instead, the household represented a place of circulation (of goods, people and ideas) and a location that was embedded in a network of other households and sites of social interaction. However, each household shared many domestic practices in common. As Karen Harvey has discussed in relation to men and masculinity, ‘Through oeconomic practices that straddled the house and the world outside, and in rooting personal identity in the house and family, individual men accessed authority both within and without the house.’<sup>85</sup> Similarly, women’s household work connected both the home with the wider world and individual householders with external sites and communities – the legitimate domestic practice of letter-writing was central to this process. As Anne Laurence has described in relation to Irish households in the seventeenth century, ‘Collective and individual identities coincided in the household, where servants and their masters and mistresses lived together in close proximity.’<sup>86</sup> For women of this era, the home was the defining space of intellectual thought and practice. Like letter-writing itself, the home was a multivalent space which encouraged the convergence of different ‘spheres’ of life. By seeing the practice of letter-writing and the space of the home as central to women’s intellectual experience, a clearer picture can be drawn of how women came to engage with the life of the mind.

### Sources

The qualitative detail evinced by letters of this period forms the key source material for this book. The social range of the correspondents encompasses women from aristocratic, gentry, professional and trade families. The geographic scope of this project has been dictated by the whereabouts of the collections and has come to include Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Bedfordshire, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, East Sussex, Somerset and Greater London. In total, over thirty collections of correspondence were studied closely from a source base of around 5,000 individual letters. The research was therefore able to use a broad cross-section of correspondents as contextual evidence for letter-writing practices of the period, against which ten women letter-writers were explored in detail. This method of dealing with the primary source material elucidated complex and personalised relationships with letter-writing and the life of the mind within a

framework that attended to broader epistolary and intellectual cultures of the period. This could not have been achieved by an approach that either focused on quantitative evidence of participation in intellectual life or attended too narrowly to individual examples.

Archival research, by its nature, resists the researcher's intention as much as it meets their needs. For this book, the search terms were kept deliberately broad and any familiar letters written by women within the period were considered of possible interest. This way of working offered the opportunity to locate evidence of female learning in collections that had no connection with existing intellectual or literary histories. In some cases, a substantial collection of letters was researched because the letter-writer's intellectual interests had been acknowledged in scholarship, but the letters themselves had not been thoroughly explored. In other cases, a gnomic catalogue entry citing a woman's name within family papers was enough to prompt a look. Thus, the main examples discussed here emerged from a long search through the catalogues of national libraries and local record offices and from leads provided by existing scholarship. The resulting collection of letter-writers, gathered together for the first time in this book, represents the most substantial examples of engaged letter-writing identified by this process. The particular demands of the archive, therefore, had an important influence on the selection of correspondents presented here.

Some of the collections used in this study have survived in the archive because of their intellectual content, but many others were not kept for that reason at all. Some were kept because of the letter-writer's relationship to an important man or because she had an illustrious family heritage. But there are many examples of correspondence by non-elite women who had no connection with anyone of note, intellectual or otherwise. This makes it tempting to speculate about this correspondence as the tip of the iceberg of women's intellectual letter-writing. Whilst one should not overstate the case, the wealth of examples of childhood letter-writing, where adult epistolary habits were inculcated, does shed light on the broad seedbed for female intellectual letter-writing in this period. This must be taken into account when considering the extant examples of adult achievement in this arena. Furthermore, it was women who largely directed these early forays into epistolary literacy in both their sons and daughters – taking an active role in producing the next generation of engaged citizens.<sup>87</sup> Evidence of youthful or lifelong intellectual endeavour in surviving family papers is, by its very nature, limited and scattered. But the range of examples that have been located and explored here suggests wide participation in considered and cerebrally engaged

letter-writing. The question of how representative these letter-writers were of their gender, class, region or time is a difficult one. Some letters survive over other letters on account of a series of historically contingent choices and accidents, and an encounter with an eighteenth-century letter entails an acknowledgement of more than one historical framework of privilege. All of the women studied here are perhaps anomalous in the sense that their letters have survived in the historical record. Some of them were, no doubt, unusually prolific and engaged letter-writers for their time. However, all of them give an insight into the particular social conditions of their class, gender and circumstances and, with careful contextualisation, these women can represent the experiences of other similar women. By using the depth of qualitative detail offered by individual examples with the breadth of a large contextual source base, wider historical conclusions can be drawn.

The ten letter-writers who take centre stage in this book are Anne Dormer (Oxfordshire), Mary Evelyn (Greater London/Surrey), Jemima, Marchioness Grey, Catherine Talbot, Mary Grey (primarily Bedfordshire and Oxfordshire), Elizabeth Elstob (Worcestershire), Jane Johnson (Buckinghamshire), Mary Clarke (Somerset), Ann Worsley and Eliza Worsley (Yorkshire). Anne Dormer (*c.* 1648–95), the daughter of a courtier and wife of an Oxfordshire gentleman, has been studied by historians for the evidence she provides of an unhappy marriage but has not been acknowledged as someone who was also a thoughtfully engaged reader and writer.<sup>88</sup> Seventeenth-century gentlewoman Mary Evelyn (*c.* 1635–1709) has come to notice in studies of her husband, the writer and diarist John Evelyn, and his milieu, but there is no extended study on her intellectual letter-writing.<sup>89</sup> Evelyn, the daughter of the baronet and diplomat Richard Browne, enjoyed an elaborate humanist education during her childhood in France and was regularly present at court during her adult life in England. The two most famous names, Elizabeth Elstob (1683–1756) and Catherine Talbot (1721–70), were known in their own lifetimes as a scholar and a literary talent respectively and have been discussed in studies and biographies of the early Bluestockings.<sup>90</sup> Elstob and Talbot are also unusual within the group because they never married.<sup>91</sup> Elstob was born into an affluent merchant family in the north, lived her young adulthood in the London household of her brother, a scholar and cleric, and later earned her own income as a provincial schoolmistress. Catherine Talbot was born into an important clerical family in Berkshire but to a mother who had just lost her husband (and with him her means). The Talbots were later taken into the Reverend Thomas Secker's household, who proceeded to occupy a series of important positions within

the Church before becoming the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1758. Unmarried and dependent, Talbot may have benefited from an improved material environment over time, but she retained an ambiguous social status in eighteenth-century literary circles. Jemima, Marchioness Grey (1722–97) and her aunt Lady Mary Grey (1719/20–62) are two of the most elevated letter-writers considered here: titled, aristocratic and well connected. Jemima Grey had inherited her grandfather the Duke of Kent's barony of Lucas of Crudwell, and subsequently a grand estate – Wrest Park in Bedfordshire. Jemima Grey and, to a lesser extent, Mary Grey, have received some attention in Sylvia Harcstark Myers's 1990 volume *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, friendship and the life of the mind in eighteenth-century England*, but until now there has been no sustained study of their lives or letters. Both Jane Johnson (1706–59) and Mary Clarke (mid to late 1650s–1705) have been considered for their influence on the field of childhood education, but less so for their own creative and intellectual motivations. Jane Johnson was the wife of a vicar, Woolsey Johnson, and lived in Buckinghamshire, but the family fortunes benefited from Jane having jointly inherited an estate and Woolsey being a man of private means. Mary Clarke of Somerset was the daughter of a gentleman, the cousin of philosopher John Locke; in 1675 she married a politician, Edward Clarke. The Worsleys – a well-to-do Yorkshire family – are unknown to histories of female writing altogether.

This combination of the well-known, the partially explored and the completely unknown female letter-writer is placed in context by a wide range of everyday letter-writing of the period so that continuities between and departures from the typical and the atypical can be identified. These ten women all used their letters as a space to openly contemplate themes central to understanding gender and intellectual life in this period. The ideas and experiences they elaborated in depth were identifiable in a broader range of the researched letter collections but did not receive the concentrated discussion that these individuals devoted to them. These examples, therefore, offer an opportunity to explore gender and intellectual life by using the qualitative detail of women's own words and practices. These examples also corroborate a pluralistic view of the family and domestic life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although women encountered many of the same demands and restrictions on their lives, and a lack of autonomy was a theme consistently evidenced by the sources, the characteristics of women's individual experiences were diverse and frequently at odds with contemporary characterisations of gendered norms. Responses to family life varied widely as did the personalities of family members. The social landscape changed

dramatically as many women of the gentry moved, according to season, from country houses to city settings, in pursuit of better health or vitality of a social kind. Geographic remoteness from the major urban centres, or the sensibilities of an overbearing husband could equally render some women genuinely isolated.

The letter-writers analysed in this study illustrate clearly both the diversity of circumstances experienced by women of the middling sort, gentry and aristocracy in this period (which altered with advancing life stage) and their personalised responses to what have been considered tightly prescribed lives. However, each example clearly shows how different women energetically applied themselves to bending their circumstances in order to meet shared intellectual aspirations.

### **Material, spatial and textual: approaches to studying letters**

#### *The material*

There was a distinct and influential relationship between the act of letter-writing and women's personal engagement with intellectual life between the years 1650 and 1750. The materiality of letter-writing as a practice and the status of the letter as an object played a critical role in this relationship. This book sets out to demonstrate not only that the content of women's letters in this period could be intellectual, but also that the interaction that took place between the *practical* and the *cerebral* in the process of letter-writing represented a significant dynamic in women's experiences of the life of the mind. The physical processes of letter-writing affected the emotional and intellectual engagement of the correspondent and vice versa. For those women with the leisure and economic security to write, correspondence culture gave them a chance to integrate the intellectual within the framework of everyday life.

Traditionally historians have put people before the material world, often seeing the tools of people's labour – be that the pitchfork or the pen – as mere instruments. However, scholarship which has drawn on anthropological approaches has influenced the study of history and, in particular, 'things' in history. For example, the field of material culture studies, as applied in historical research, has been revealing of the symbolic meanings of objects and their importance in the forming of past social identities. Over the last ten years, work on the study of the domestic interior by scholars such as Amanda Vickery and John Styles has illuminated the complex networks of meaning surrounding the 'social life' of domestic objects.<sup>92</sup> However, as Frank Trentmann

argues, the question historians should ask is how interactions with things shaped people's 'materially embodied selves, practices and relationships'.<sup>93</sup> Pioneering work on 'material texts' and the material culture of letter-writing has also illuminated early modern actors' social practices. In particular, work by Peter Stallybrass, Dena Goodman and James Daybell has been instrumental in bringing the material into contact with the textual.<sup>94</sup> The research undertaken for this book has attended to the material evidence imparted by correspondence collections, such as signs of method of sending, quality of pen and ink, handwriting, and also to the social commentary on these physical aspects of letter-writing. Although much of the analysis naturally rests on the words people wrote in their letters, the material evidence presented by correspondence collections informed the conclusions drawn. This was especially important when, for example, comparing correspondence written by the same person to several different letter-writers or at different junctures in their lifecycle. Differentiation in terms of the letter-writers' intent often went unwritten on the page but was made clear by the courtesy of a wide margin or the precision with which handwriting was executed. As the letter-writers' relationship with the social practice of corresponding formed a part of their engagement with the life of the mind, these indications of epistolary practice were informative to the central questions of this study. At times, invaluable corroboratory evidence from the size of paper, the extent to which it had been filled, the correctness of the handwriting or the clumsiness of execution threw crucial light upon the state of mind or circumstances of the letter-writer.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, there were frequent indications that contemporary letter-writers 'read' their letters for these insights in conjunction with the message written on the page. For example, a seventeenth-century letter-writer, Mary Evelyn, scolded her friend, Ralph Bohun, for his careless approach to correspondence, telling him: 'not to lay so much wax on them as to temper the fidelity of the post, who may Imagine all you write to be secrets, and that once in my life I may make a seasonable present, if you can but secure me of a safe conveyance, I will send you a seale to save y<sup>r</sup> fingers from burning'.<sup>96</sup> This comment acknowledged that, by contemporary standards, signs of the author's intention were implicit in the material presentation of letters. This evidence was read alongside the written message and communicated information about the letter-writer's state of mind and circumstances at the time of writing.

If the letter itself betrayed material evidence of its construction and intention, then pens and pots of ink and pounce are also revealing

of contemporary investment in correspondence culture. This can be extended to the desks and tables upon which women wrote and the bureaus and boxes in which they locked away received missives. At this time, the material culture of correspondence was proliferating and specially designed women's writing desks began to appear in top-end furniture catalogues. Even after the purpose of the initial exchange of letters had been achieved, correspondence itself could take on alternative meanings as collected memorabilia. Letters from friends, family and associates were often neatly filed away for posterity, whilst some correspondents took to copying out their own letters, for record or example. In their own lifetimes, letter-writers might reread old correspondence at intervals to remind themselves of past friendships or lost loved ones, or to relive days gone by; this process converted the letter from message to collated record, open to reinterpretation. Yorkshire gentlewoman, Ann Worsley commented on this practice of keeping and rereading old letters when she wrote to her brother in 1737: 'his Letters to me are charming, I sometimes lock my self up to read some, ... but Alas when shall I be able to read em without Crying & tendering me too much.'<sup>97</sup> For Ann Worsley, at least, a collection of old letters provided emotional reading and studying them an activity she would conduct from the privacy of a locked room. Even within the lifetimes of the correspondents themselves, then, letters could take on alternative meanings: starting life with the immediacy of a recently posted message and, later, becoming part of a lifetime's collected memorabilia, steeped in sentimental significance.

The letter had a many-layered status: firstly as constructed object, then as dispatched token, and finally as treasured keepsake. Of course, not all letters attained all three of these meanings, but many did and these material life stages most likely helped negotiate their place in a modern day archive. Chapter 3 will develop further the question of letter-writing as a social practice, showing that far from being an inert tool in the hands of a creative individual, the practice of correspondence acted upon the writer herself, informing her thought processes and modes of expression in dynamic ways.

### *The spatial*

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letter-writers frequently evoked the spaces they wrote in and discussed how these spaces affected their intellectual activities. A quiet place and spare time in the day were prerequisites for serious study and, consequently, comment on personal privacy,

household workload, sociability and solitude were all common in the letters of intellectually motivated women of this period.<sup>98</sup> The closet, for example, was an important and legitimate space for female private study across the period.<sup>99</sup> Despite the abundance of scholarly interest in the domestic sphere, the role of the home as a space in which intellectual endeavour was undertaken has been largely overlooked; as though the domestic sphere and intellectual life operated within entirely separate chapters of human experience. Whether the result of traditional disciplinary division or the false assumption that closeted female lives were devoid of intellectual opportunity, this is still a significant oversight. This book considers the spaces of the home as integral to the development of the life of the mind and as sites of knowledge production. Much as the academic institution might influence the young scholar, the home played a role in the life of the mind of its inhabitants, especially those who lacked alternative, exterior spaces for study and conversation.

The domestic, then, was much more than a static backdrop to life and its features, location, requirements and inhabitants had an important impact on the mental lives of women.<sup>100</sup> Letters linked home and household with other spaces or networks of exchange. Women's descriptions of the spaces they inhabited brought them closer to absent friends. Mental proximity was the next best thing to physical closeness and this was sometimes achieved by letters that provided visual images of the participants sitting by desk or fireside. Space was also psychological, and the extremes of solitude or absence of privacy affected letter-writers' emotional health. These findings echo Virginia Woolf's proviso, written two hundred years later, that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write'.<sup>101</sup> Ultimately, time and space influenced personal autonomy and, above all else, it was some personal autonomy, the loss or attainment of it, which mediated women's engagement with the life of the mind.

### *The textual*

The tendency to categorise writing, especially when it is seen through the lens of literature, reaps certain rewards but also imposes particular frameworks. The themes of this book have been heavily mined by literary historians interested in women's production of texts, be they manuscript or print. However, the understanding of the letter as a highly multi-functional written form, both pragmatically straightforward and expansively creative, means that categories common in literary criticism have not been employed here. Although the letter certainly did function as a text for contemporary and future readers of correspondence, it was

also a tool of everyday life used by a broad cross-section of society for extremely diverse – and often prosaic – purposes.

This book contends that letters moved easily between genres, modes and conventional forms, acting – by turn – as familiar, literary, domestic or intellectual texts. Moreover, as Jennifer Summit has suggested, letter-writing was ‘perhaps the defining genre of the household’, one which allowed the coexistence of the material and the textual; the everyday and the intellectual.<sup>102</sup> Although it is important to unpack the letter’s multiple meanings, focusing on its significance as a text can also serve to inhibit our understanding of the letter’s pluralistic status. For example, sometimes letters were a written ‘performance’, an opportunity to project alternative selves to distant acquaintances, but often they were not.<sup>103</sup> Many straightforward letters focusing on the communication of local news exist in the archive alongside others that draw clearly on literary models and many do a combination of both. Likewise, the use of genre as a model to categorise letter-writing has its pitfalls, as many letters exhibit the characteristics of a range of genres and at the same time had the practical functions of message relaying and arrangement-making.<sup>104</sup>

Whilst historians must rely, to a certain extent, on categories such as manuscript, print and life writing, it is also important to see the overlap between these definitions and to recognise the connectivity between such products as notebooks and printed works, letters and political pamphlets. As the eighteenth-century print industry found ever greater opportunities to sell its wares, printed pocket books were bought in their thousands, providing a space for personal notes and reflections framed by the printed boundaries of a generic format. This was an explicitly mixed-media example, but the infiltration of forms and styles developed in one medium were often transferred or echoed in another. However, whilst letter-writing had an important relationship with print – which has been explored in great depth in relation to the epistolary novel or the advice manual – it was not a defining one. The study of letters necessarily confuses clear distinctions between life writing, letter-writing, writing for communication and reflective writing because letters can be many or all of these things. The women letter-writers in this study certainly used letters as a flexible medium for their self-education, relationship building and intellectual development amongst very many other purposes.

The next chapters delve into correspondence collections found in English archives. From childhood letters home, eager to impress, to the reflective letter-writing of older age, women’s paths to intellectual life and their personal experiences of the life of the mind are explored in

full. These letter-writers are situated firmly in their contexts of home, family and work – amongst the scattered possessions of their closets – in order to ground mental space in the physical environment. Part I of the book focuses on women's paths to learning from childhood to adulthood and their realisation of a life of the mind. In particular, Chapter 1 considers the skills and resources women needed to engage with a life of the mind and discusses how early experiences moulded adult expectations. Chapter 2 explores in detail what it meant to be an 'intellectual woman' in this period through the examples of two extremely scholarly letter-writers and considers how women's lifecycles affected their own creative production and the subsequent reception of their work. In Part II, the book turns to the material and spatial realities of letter-writing, first – in Chapter 3 – by discussing the relationship between epistolary writing and thinking, and secondly, by looking at the role of the home and the psychology of domestic space in women's letter-writing in Chapter 4. In Part III, Chapter 5 traces connections between the intellectual and the emotional through a discussion of epistolary relationships, concepts of perfect friendship and the use of letter-writing as a form of self-help. Finally, Chapter 6 draws together the main conclusions of this study and places its findings within longer-term historical processes of continuity and change. Throughout, the letters themselves occupy the foreground and illuminate their writers' uses of correspondence for cerebral and emotional gains.

## Notes

- 1 S. M. Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002), p. 1.
- 2 R. Perry, *Women, Letters and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980); T. F. Berg, *The Lives and Letters of an Eighteenth-Century Circle of Acquaintance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).
- 3 R. Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves: Letters and letter-writers, 1600–1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); C. Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); J. How, *Epistolary Spaces: English letter-writing from the foundation of the Post Office to Richardson's Clarissa* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).
- 4 M. M. Dowd and J. A. Eckerle, *Genre and Women's Life-Writing in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); P. Coleman, J. Lewis and J. Kowalik (eds), *Representations of the Self from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- 5 D. Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). For a discussion of methods

- of measuring historical literacy rates, see R. A. Houston, *Literacy in Early Modern Europe: Culture and education, 1500–1800* (Harlow: Longman, 1988), pp. 116–29.
- 6 According to R. A. Houston, literacy rose most rapidly in the southern counties of England during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I (1558–1625) but in the North the most notable growth in rates took place between 1660 and 1720, see *Literacy in Early Modern Europe*, p. 152.
  - 7 Figures for 1720 from Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order*, pp. 129, 176.
  - 8 L. Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England, 1640–1900', *Past and Present*, 42 (1969), pp. 69–139.
  - 9 J. Eales, 'Female Literacy and the Social Identity of the Clergy Family in the Seventeenth Century', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 133 (2013), pp. 67–81.
  - 10 Margaret Spufford has uncovered some of the limited sources on schooling in rural areas, but the picture remains murky, see *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular fiction and its readership in seventeenth-century England* (London: Methuen, 1981).
  - 11 Whilst spelling had not become entirely systematised in this period, letter-writers who showed the most internal consistency in their spelling were also those who had benefited from an extensive childhood education. Gil Skidmore has noticed phonetic spelling in Quaker women's manuscript letters, noting that 'none of this detracted from women's qualifications for the [Quaker] ministry and nor did it mean that they were not educated in other ways'. See *Strength in Weakness: Writings of eighteenth-century Quaker women* (Oxford: Altamira Press, 2003), p. 12.
  - 12 S. Whyman, 'Letter Writing and the Rise of the Novel: The epistolary literacy of Jane Johnson and Samuel Richardson', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 70 (2007), p. 604.
  - 13 Whyman, 'Letter Writing and the Rise of the Novel'.
  - 14 See S. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English letter-writers, 1660–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
  - 15 Linda Pollock's analysis of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century diarists shows that they were interested in the educations of their daughters as much as their sons, although differences still applied: see L. A. Pollock, 'Rethinking Patriarchy and the Family in Seventeenth-Century England', *Journal of Family History*, 23 (2000), pp. 3–27.
  - 16 See E. Arizpe and M. Styles, *Reading Lessons from the Eighteenth Century: Mothers, children and texts* (Shenstone: Pied Piper, 2006).
  - 17 M. Cohen, "'Familiar Conversation": The role of the "familiar format" in education in eighteenth-century England', in M. Hilton and J. Shefrin (eds), *Educating the Child in Enlightenment Britain: Beliefs, cultures, practices* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 99–116.
  - 18 J. Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain 1750–1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1–2.
  - 19 See F. Molekamp, *Women and the Bible in Early Modern England: Religious reading and writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially pp. 1, 11. See also S. Mandelbrote, 'The English Bible and Its Readers in the Eighteenth Century', in I. Rivers (ed.), *Books and Their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England: New essays* (London: Leicester University Press, 2001), pp. 35–78.

- 20 See Pearson, *Women's Reading*, pp. 49–64; informative books might include history, geography and household arts, whereas poetry and drama were expected to provoke an imaginative engagement.
- 21 A classic text on this topic is Perry's *Women, Letters and the Novel*, others include: E. Bergen Brophy, *Women's Lives and the 18th-Century English Novel* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991) and R. Ballaster, 'Women and the Rise of the Novel: Sexual precepts', in V. Jones (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain, 1700–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 197–216.
- 22 See J. A. I. Champion, 'Enlightened Erudition and the Politics of Reading in John Toland's Circle', *Historical Journal*, 49 (2006), pp. 111–41 at p. 138 for the importance of reading practices for non-elite intellectuals, and see I. Jackson, 'Approaches to the History of Readers and Reading in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Historical Journal*, 47:4 (2004), pp. 1041–54 for the instrumental role of reading in processes of historical change.
- 23 J. Fergus, *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 59.
- 24 See, for example, B. Cunningham and M. Kennedy (eds), *The Experience of Reading: Irish historical perspectives* (Dublin: Rare Books Group of the Library Association of Ireland and Economic and Social History Society of Ireland, 1999).
- 25 N. Tadmor, 'In the even my wife read to me': Women, reading and household life in the eighteenth century', in J. Raven, H. Small and N. Tadmor (eds), *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 162–74 at p. 165.
- 26 Tadmor, 'In the even my wife read to me', pp. 165–70. In total, in Thomas Turner's diary over seventy different books were recorded.
- 27 See, for example, S. Colclough, 'Procuring Books and Consuming Texts: The reading experience of a Sheffield apprentice, 1798', *Book History*, 3 (2000), pp. 21–44. The value of this work is highlighted by Ian Jackson in his valuable review of the field, 'Approaches to the History of Readers', p. 1048.
- 28 The term 'Enlightenment' has its origins in the eighteenth century and, in particular, with Emmanuel Kant's famous essay: 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?' [Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?], *Berlinische Monatsschrift [Berlin Monthly]* (1784). However, it is a term that has been used to describe such a diverse array of societal shifts and developments that, for some, it has become too encompassing to be meaningful. For further discussion, see A. Pagden, *The Enlightenment: And why it still matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); G. Garrard, *Counter-Enlightenments: From the eighteenth century to the present* (London: Routledge, 2006); J. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, modernity, and the emancipation of man, 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and R. E. Norton, 'The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 68:4 (2007), pp. 635–58.
- 29 A host of scholarship has shown this to be the case, examples include H. L. Smith (ed.), *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); P. McDowell, *The Women of*

- Grub Street: Press, politics and gender in the London literary marketplace, 1678–1730* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); C. Hesse, 'Women Intellectuals in the Enlightened Republic of Letters: Introduction', in S. Knott and B. Taylor (eds), *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 259–64; J. Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and J. Wallwork and P. Salzman (eds), *Early Modern Englishwomen Testing Ideas* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).
- 30 Here are just a few of the titles dealing with similar themes, but for the period 1750 onwards: H. Guest, *Small Change: Women, learning, patriotism, 1750–1810* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); A. Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power: British politics, 1750 to the present* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001); S. Morgan (ed.), *Women, Religion and Feminism in Britain, 1750–1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); M. Hilton, *Women and the Shaping of the Nation's Young: Education and public doctrine in Britain, 1750–1850* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); and M. Daly Groggin and B. Fowkes Tobin (eds), *Women and Things, 1750–1950: Gendered material strategies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).
- 31 Scholars working on the 'Cultures of Knowledge' project (2009–14) based at the University of Oxford have used digital methods to bring together and interpret large bodies of early modern correspondence.
- 32 Voltaire, Samuel Hartlib and Hans Sloane, amongst others, have all received sustained attention as 'men of letters' whose epistolary contacts were scattered across the globe.
- 33 See L. Hunter, *The Letters of Dorothy Moore, 1612–64: The friendships, marriage, and intellectual life of a seventeenth-century woman* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) for a discussion of Moore, a valued correspondent of Hartlib, and also L. Hunter 'Sisters of the Royal Society: The circle of Katherine Jones, Lady Ranelagh', in L. Hunter and S. Hutton (eds), *Women, Science and Medicine 1500–1700: Mothers and sisters of the Royal Society* (Stroud: Sutton, 1997), pp. 178–97. See C. Pal, *Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the seventeenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), which documents the transnational network of seventeenth-century women intellectuals who were active in the fields of philosophy, faith, science and learning.
- 34 As James Daybell's work has shown, as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a wide range of women used letters for literary, political, social and religious purposes: J. Daybell (ed.), *Early Modern Women's Letter-Writing, 1450–1700* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).
- 35 L. O'Neill, *The Opened Letter: Networking in the early modern British world* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).
- 36 Sylvia Harcstark Myers also used this term in the title of her seminal work on the Bluestockings: *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, friendship, and the life of the mind in eighteenth-century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); however, she never actually defines the phrase and seems to have chosen it simply to denote intellectual interest and engagement.
- 37 See H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vols 1–2 (London: Secker and Warburg, 1978).
- 38 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, p. 5.

- 39 J. Gregory, 'Writing Women in(to) the Long Eighteenth Century', *Literature and History*, 11:1 (2001), pp. 83–4.
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- 54 How, *Epistolary Spaces*, p. 2.
- 55 See D. Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (London: Cornell University Press, 2009).
- 56 K Dierks, *In My Power: Letter writing and communications in early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), pp. 4–5; his use of italics.
- 57 See M. Bigold, 'Letters and Learning', in R. Ballaster (ed.) *The History of British Women's Writing, 1690–1750* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 173–86 and Eger, *Bluestockings*.
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- 60 Anon., *Polite Epistolary Correspondence: A collection of letters, on the most instructive and entertaining subjects* (London, 1751).
- 61 Anon., *The Accomplished Letter-Writer; Or, Universal Correspondent. Containing familiar letters on the most common occasions in life* (London, 1779).
- 62 For the relationship between prescriptive literature and contemporary practice, see R. Chartier, *Cultural History: Between practices and representations* (Cambridge: Polity in association with Blackwell, 1988).
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- 65 d'Ancourt, *Ladys Preceptor*.
- 66 d'Ancourt, *Ladys Preceptor*, p. 60.

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- 68 Jones, 'Seductions of Conduct', pp. 111–12.
- 69 See Dierks, *In My Power*, especially p. 5.
- 70 See K. Parker (ed.), *Dorothy Osborne: Letters to Sir William Temple, 1652–54: Observations on love, literature, politics, and religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), C. Hintz, *An Audience of One: Dorothy Osborne's letters to Sir William Temple, 1652–1654* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2005) and a short but illuminating piece by Carrie Hintz, 'A Second Reference to Marin le Roy de Gomberville's *Polexandre* in Dorothy Osborne's Letters', *Notes and Queries*, 46:3 (1999), pp. 339–40.
- 71 See G. Dow, 'A Model for the British Fair? French women's life writing in Britain, 1680–1830', in D. Cook and A. Culley (eds), *Women's Life Writing, 1700–1850: Gender, genre and authorship* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 86–102.
- 72 BL, Add. MS 78539: Mary Evelyn to Ralph Bohun, 21 May c. 1668. Vincent Voiture (1597–1648) was a French writer whose works Evelyn would have read in the original French rather than in translation, works such as: *Les Lettres de Mr. de Voiture* (Amsterdam, 1657).
- 73 Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters*, p. 10.
- 74 See A. Kugler, *Errant Plagiarist: The life and writing of Lady Sarah Cowper, 1644–1720* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002); the texts that Cowper drew upon and subverted were largely prescriptive, including sermons, conduct literature and periodicals.
- 75 S. Walker, 'Prescription and Practice in the Visual Organization of Correspondence', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 66:3/4 (2003), pp. 307–29.
- 76 A. Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750* (London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 2.
- 77 Goldgar, *Impolite Learning*. Dena Goodman has confirmed this essentially social dimension to the Republic of Letters in 'Pigalle's Voltair nu: The Republic of Letters presents itself to the world', *Representations*, 16 (1986), pp. 86–109.
- 78 Pal, *Republic of Women*, where she proposes that social status was a more fundamental barrier to intellectual community than gender.
- 79 Bigold, 'Letters and Learning', p. 176. There are many famous examples of female patronage of female talent in eighteenth-century England, such as the poet Ann Yearsley and her patron Hannah More, but the example of Elizabeth Elstob discussed here in Chapters 2 and 5 is also revealing of the importance of female networks and aristocratic patronage in the support of women's intellectual work.
- 80 See M. Bigold, *Women of Letters, Manuscript Circulation, and Print Afterlives in the Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- 81 S. Mendelson, 'Neighbourhood as Female Community in the Life of Anne Dormer', in S. Dragstra and S. Broomhall (eds), *Women, Identities and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 153–64.
- 82 Of course London took up a more central role during periods lived in the city, but on the whole, landed English men and women maintained close connections with the

- metropolis throughout the year through commerce, politics and sociability; see, for example, A. Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's lives in Georgian England* (London: Yale University Press, 1998).
- 83 R. Sweet, *Antiquaries: The discovery of the past in eighteenth-century Britain* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004).
- 84 See L. Hannan, 'Collaborative Scholarship on the Margins: An epistolary network', *Women's Writing*, 21:3 (2014), pp. 290–315.
- 85 K. Harvey, *The Little Republic: Masculinity and domestic authority in eighteenth-century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 169.
- 86 A. Laurence, 'Real and Imagined Communities in the Lives of Women in Seventeenth-Century Ireland: Identity and gender', in S. Tarbin and S. Broomhall (eds), *Women, Identities and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 13–27 at p. 16.
- 87 See J. J. Popiel, *Rousseau's Daughters: Domesticity, education, and autonomy in modern France* (Lebanon: University of New Hampshire Press, 2008) and Hilton, *Women and the Shaping of the Nation's Young*.
- 88 See S. Mendelson and M. O'Connor, "'Thy Passionately Loving Sister and Faithfull Friend": Anne Dormer's letters to her sister Lady Trumbull', in N. J. Miller and N. Yavneh (eds), *Sibling Relations and Gender in the Early Modern World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 206–15, and M. O'Connor, 'Representations of Intimacy in the Life-Writing of Anne Clifford and Anne Dormer', in Coleman *et al.*, *Representations of the Self*, pp. 79–96.
- 89 See 'Nuptial Love', in F. Harris, *Transformations of Love: The friendship of John Evelyn and Margaret Godolphin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 64–90 and F. Harris, 'The Letterbooks of Mary Evelyn', in P. Beal and J. Griffiths (eds), *English Manuscript Studies, 1100–1700*, vol. 7 (London: British Library, 1998), pp. 202–15. Frances Harris has briefly addressed Mary Evelyn's intellectual motivations in a chapter 'Living in the Neighbourhood of Science: Mary Evelyn, Margaret Cavendish and the Greshamites', in Hunter and Hutton, *Women, Science and Medicine*, pp. 198–217.
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- (2006), pp. 473–94 and A. Brodie, ‘Correspondence: The materiality and practice of letter-writing in England, 1650–1750’ (unpublished MA dissertation, V&A/RCA, 2002).
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