From “Written Roles: Female Letter Writing in Romantic England”

Jennifer Frazin

In 18th and 19th century England, written correspondence provided the average female with a means to extend herself beyond the domestic sphere of her own home, but did this extension beget greater independence? This question was the driving force behind my research over the 10 weeks of the Caltech SURF Program. I sought to place the Romantic woman in relation to a patriarchal world that only lauded femininity on male terms. Learning the importance letters played in the lives of average women eventually led me to focus on correspondence in the domestic sphere as opposed to public letters and letters between famous female writers.

As one might expect, examining the role of letters in the lives of Romantic-era women was no easy task. While a great deal of scholarship concerning correspondence in England already exists, many such texts focus more on the 18th century due to the volatile political climate throughout Europe. Moreover, I sought to integrate archival research with popular novels, published letters, and secondary sources, meaning that the originality of my research lay primarily in my ability to navigate the labyrinthine Huntington Library and the ominous realm of prolonged research. There is no “typical workday” when each new text is a Pandora’s box, potentially leading you to either a dead-end or an entirely new strand of interest; half of the battle was maintaining control over the logistical aspects of my project, namely organization and determining how to obtain necessary materials.

For this reason, my project took a good deal of unexpected twists and turns, but I am happy to report that I carried my original inquiries through to the end. I traced the relationship between women and written correspondence through four novels, a letter-writing manual, a collection of published letters, and a vast body of scholarly work. Needless to say, I made many unforeseen discoveries, including the context for casual correspondence I gleaned from the four novels and
letter-writing manual. While a letter-writing manual presents ideal scenarios and the events of
the novels are fictitious, the episodes of correspondence in these texts are likely a fairly accurate
indicator of what life was like. All five texts suggest how one might write, when one might write,
and the decorum and conventions surrounding correspondence. These texts also illustrate the
mediation involved in letter-writing, from the societal rules governing correspondence to the
receipt of letters and the gossip surrounding an interesting epistle. With this rich context in
mind, I was free to explore my research question and consider the two sides of the epistolary
coin. Indeed, depending on one’s perspective, Romantic female correspondence could appear
liberating or constricting; letters provided a platform for expression that otherwise would not be
possible, but the conventions and expectations surrounding letter-writing limited the scope of
female representation. With so much evidence to support either side of this argument, I realized
that the connection between the Romantic-era woman and correspondence was far from black-
and-white. As the weeks rolled by, I used the information I gleaned from secondary sources to
enhance my analysis of texts from the Romantic period, which included one letter-writing
manual, excerpts from a collection of published letters, and four novels by female authors.
Possibly the greatest illustration of the research I conducted was my applications of Favret’s
paradoxical observation to three Austen novels—Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, and
Persuasion—and The Lady’s Polite Secretary, Or New Female Letter Writer.

Sitting here now, with ten weeks of research under my belt, I cannot honestly say that I
reached some black-and-white conclusion. Each binary I’ve dealt with in my analysis—male
and female, public and private, liberation and restraint—proved to be far more complicated than
I had initially imagined. This being said, I successfully met my initial goal of placing the
Romantic-era woman in relation to her world via scholarly work, letters, and novels.
Furthermore, the myriad complications I grappled with granted me a more three-dimensional
picture of Romantic England than I ever would have imagined; I discovered how, despite all of
the setbacks of a patriarchal society and the endless rules governing female behavior, Romantic-ear women used literacy to make a permanent mark on our culture and assert their individuality. As oppressed as many of them were, letter-writing allowed these women to find value and, sometimes, a vast audience by recording their largely private and domestic existences. In this way, correspondence was a means for Romantic-era women to navigate a skewed world and level the playing field to the best of their abilities. Of course, due to the popularity of written correspondence, letters from this period did not always relate to or advocate female autonomy. Nevertheless, the fact that women successfully utilized this medium to find a previously nonexistent voice demonstrates how oppression can be navigated and intellectually overcome