

Women's Letters Across Europe, 1400–1700

Form and Persuasion

Edited by

JANE COUCHMAN AND ANN CRABB



WOMEN AND GENDER IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD

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Edited by

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ASHGATE

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Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hampshire GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington, VT 05401-4405
USA

Ashgate website: <http://www.ashgate.com>

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Women's letters across Europe, 1400–1700 : form and persuasion. – (Women and gender in the early modern world)

1. Women – Europe – Correspondence 2. Persuasion (Psychology) in literature 3. Persuasion (Rhetoric) – History 4. Women – Europe – Social conditions 5. Europe – Intellectual life

I. Couchman, Jane II. Crabb, Ann, 1940–
809.6'99287

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Women's letters across Europe, 1400–1700 : form and persuasion / [edited by] Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb.

p. cm.— (Women and gender in the early modern world)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7546-5107-X (alk. paper)

1. Letters—Women authors—History and criticism. 2. Women—Europe—History—15th century. 3. Women—Europe—History—16th century. 4. Women—Europe—History—17th century. I. Couchman, Jane. II. Crabb, Ann, 1940– III. Series.

PN4400.W66 2004
809.6'0092'24—dc22

2004025746

ISBN 0 7546 5107 X

Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

Jane Couchman dedicates this book to the memory of her father, Arthur E. Barker, who taught her about the Renaissance, and of her mother, Dorothy (Riley) Barker, who taught her about women and their letters.

Ann Crabb dedicates this book to her husband Don, a physicist who appreciates all kinds of research, and to her parents, Marian and Tom Morton, artists who knew that creativity comes in a variety of forms.

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Acknowledgements

This collection has grown out of a jointly-organized session at the conference *Attending to Early Modern Women* sponsored by the Center for Renaissance and Baroque Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park in April 1994. Each of us had submitted a proposal relating to women's letters, Jane Couchman as a specialist in literary studies, and Ann Crabb as a historian. The organizers put us in touch with each other, and we have been collaborating and learning from each other ever since. Our collaboration has been very valuable for both of us, opening up new possibilities for interpretation as we learned to look at our documents in different ways, and leading to a supportive friendship, academic and otherwise. We believe the collaboration has also been useful to the contributors to this collection, as they responded to our challenge to take an interdisciplinary approach to their material, and to look at both form and persuasion, text and context.

Versions of many of these essays have been presented at *Attending to Early Modern Women*, the *Berkshire Conference on Women's History*, the *Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies*, the *Renaissance Society of America*, the *Sixteenth Century Society and Conference*, and conferences on *Femmes et textes à l'Ancien régime*. Some sessions were sponsored by the Society for the Study of Early Modern Women. We acknowledge the support of each of these organizations, not only for this project, but also for the growing and evolving study of women in the early modern period. Our particular thanks go to Ashgate Publishing, to our editors, Erika Gaffney and Sarah Charters, for their wisdom, enthusiasm and patience, and to Allyson Poska and Abby Zanger, editors of the series *Women and Gender in the Early Modern World*. We are grateful to the contributors to this volume for responding generously to our editorial suggestions, and for bringing to us and to our readers the voices of a wide range of strong women.

Colleagues, friends, and relatives too numerous to list, but each gratefully remembered, have offered suggestions and encouragement in this specific project, and opened windows and doors through their research and writing. We are particularly grateful for the careful suggestions offered by the anonymous readers of the manuscript.

Jane Couchman appreciates the support and advice of colleagues and friends, including: Jean-Philippe Beaulieu, Janice Blathwayt, Elizabeth S. Cohen, Diane Desrosiers-Bonin, Joan Gibson, Ann Larsen, Verna Linney, Diane Marshall, Helje Porré, Ann B. Shteir, Marie-France Silver, Colette H. Winn, and especially Ann Crabb, for reminding her to attend to the stories as much as to the texts. She acknowledges the many and various contributions of members of her extended family, especially Barbara and Stephen; Trevor,

Jeremy, Alison, and Daniel; Brian, Cathy, Alisa, and Georgia; Kyn, Gwynne and Janice; Mary and Melba; her grandmothers, and all the Riley women. Special thanks go to her husband Bill Found for companionship, wisdom and encouragement, and for his practical help with images and computers.

Ann Crabb wants to thank relatives and friends for their advice and encouragement. In addition to her husband Don and her children Alex and Janna, these include Giuseppe Fidecaro especially, who, although a physicist, has a great interest in Italian historical research; Anya Taylor, who has been an enthusiastic and insightful supporter through thick and thin (and Mark, too); and Hugh Rawson, whom she has known all her life but who happens to be an expert on editing and publishing. She also wants to thank Jane, her co-editor, for arousing her interest in form as a consideration in analyzing letters, thereby helping her to overcome the tendency of historians to neglect form.

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INTRODUCTION

Form and Persuasion in Women's Letters, 1400–1700

Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb

Early modern women wrote letters to family, friends, members of their larger communities, and strangers, about their immediate and long-term concerns; in doing this, they offer, however briefly and partially, a window on their worlds, the sounds of their many voices. We learn about family life, love, estrangement, loss, and the birth and nurturing of children; about political alliances, financial concerns, prized possessions or poverty; about travel and special places; about intellectual life; and about firmly-held religious beliefs, whether Jewish, Catholic or Protestant. For the letter writers discussed here, the goal of the letter is almost always practical, concrete; the writer wishes to bring about some action or reaction on the part of the person to whom it is addressed. The woman writing the letter may be in a desperate situation, wholly dependent on the recipient of the letter, or she may write with comfortable confidence; in some cases, she unhesitatingly exercises power. To hold in one's hand a woman's letter, knowing that it was her hand that wrote the words, is as close as we are likely to come to conversing with her. Even when the letter has been written for her by a scribe, we can, in our imagination, almost hear the inflexions of the woman's voice.

This collection of chapters responds and adds to a substantial and growing scholarly interest in the epistolary genre, and in women's use of the genre.¹ Our goal is to encourage comparative analysis by bringing together studies of letters written by early modern European women from different countries, writing in different languages, and to focus on how these women adopted and adapted epistolary conventions in order to persuade their readers and to have an impact on the unfolding of events. One of the editors of this volume, Ann Crabb, is a specialist in Italian history and the other, Jane Couchman, in French literature. In working together, we have come to appreciate the importance

¹ For English women's letters, see James Daybell, ed., *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2001) and for Italian women's letters, Gabriella Zarri, ed., *Per Lettera. La Scrittura epistolare femminile tra archivio e tipografia secoli XV–XVII* (Rome: Viella, 1999). For other recent studies of letter writing, see also Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau and Cécile Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997) and the General Bibliography for this book.

of an interdisciplinary approach to the reading of women's letters, one that attends to the interplay between epistolary form and persuasive intent, and that considers both the language of the texts, and the historical circumstances of the women who created them and of those who received them.²

Our letter writers wrote in English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Yiddish and Latin. English versions of the letters discussed (almost all translated by the authors of these chapters) are cited in the body of the text, while the original language is provided in the notes, allowing readers to refer to the actual words used. In many cases, the original version has been transcribed from manuscript sources by the authors of the chapters. Where a published edition is available, this too is cited, with comments on its scope and reliability. Understanding letters as material objects is an important part of our study as well. Conditions of writing, of delivery, and of reading letters are taken into account; Ann Crabb's chapter on Alessandra Strozzi, and Deborah Stott's on Cornelia Collonello discuss the role of handwriting, as does James Daybell. When possible, we have included reproductions of original letters as illustrations.

The letters and letter writers appearing in this book came from different parts of Europe, from different social classes, from different religious backgrounds, and from different time periods between 1400 and 1700. These chapters suggest that geography did not bring distinctive patterns in women's letter writing, although it must be kept in mind that the letter writers all had Western and Central European origins. We can observe that social class affected form; however, most available evidence is limited to the middle and upper classes. Susan Broomhall's chapter is unique in that it brings us the words of poor women of Tours, rare and precious glimpses of language used by members of the 'lower orders'.

Of course, only a small minority of letters written have survived, mainly by chance, saved by members of a family or of a religious order, or preserved in archival collections. The chancellery of Mantua saved copies of most letters written there; hence copies of almost all the letters of the two *marquese* of Mantua, Barbara of Brandenburg and Isabella d'Este, are in the Gonzaga archives in Mantua; Glikl of Hameln includes resumes of her letters in her *Memoir*, not published until the late nineteenth century; some of Argula von Grumbach's letters were published during her lifetime as part of the Lutheran controversy. Anna Maria van Schurman's letters circulated in manuscript, and were published in the original Latin and in translation into French. Even for women whose letters we know, there is often evidence of a wider correspondence no longer extant. Moreover, letters provide only part of the story. It is necessary to understand related events and to consider messages

² Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb, 'Reading Early Modern Women's Letters', in *Attending to Early Modern Women*, ed. Adele Seeff and Susan Amussen (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 100–102.