

Modeling Female Sexuality in Early Modern Letter Books

IAN FREDERICK MOULTON

The great dilemma for scholars of early modern female sexuality is the relative lack of women's erotic writing from the early modern period before 1650. Women in general wrote less than men, and, given the social pressure for women of all classes to be and appear chaste, women were less likely than men to write about erotic desire. How then can one understand how women experienced their sexuality in the absence of direct testimony?

While it may be difficult to ascertain the sexual attitudes or feelings of early modern women, much evidence remains of the social expectations regarding female sexuality in the early modern period. One source that has received comparatively little attention is vernacular books of model letters. These frequently reprinted volumes contain model letters on a wide range of subjects, including fictional letters written by women to their suitors. Although these texts were generally authored by men, they were available to women, and they provide a cultural script that men intended women to follow, thus modeling social expectations for how an early modern woman would or should articulate her sexuality.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, vernacular letterbooks began to spread widely throughout western Europe. Italian models were adopted and adapted in France, as French models were subsequently in England.¹ Letter writing in the early modern period tended to be highly formulaic and rhetorically structured. The modern assumption that letters are the artless and honest reflection of an individual's true state of mind is not applicable to the early modern period, when all writing was taught more by rules and traditions than by an appeal to individual creativity. It is

unclear how much letter-writing theory influenced actual practice, but the technique of writing a Latin letter formed a significant part of boys' formal schooling, and vernacular manuals on letter writing and printed collections of model letters were widely popular.

Collections of model letters in Latin had appeared as early as the twelfth century.² The medieval *ars dictaminis* (the art of composing letters) drew on Ciceronian rhetoric, dividing letters into five parts, on the model of a classical oration.³ Humanist handbooks on Latin letter writing by Erasmus, Vives, and others promoted a less rigid style, but letters remained highly formulaic. Latin letter writing was in general a masculine activity. But while Latin handbooks like Erasmus' *De conscribendis epistolis* (*On the Writing of Letters*), [1522] were essentially textbooks for school boys, vernacular letter books were marketed, instead, to the general reading public. Thus, although vernacular letter books drew strongly on earlier Latin manuals,⁴ they had a different audience and played a different cultural role. They brought elite letter-writing techniques to a diverse audience, potentially including literate women and servants.

Most model letters—like most actual letters—dealt with financial or legal matters rather than personal expressions of passionate feeling.⁵ Although Erasmus recommended Ovid's *Heroides* as a model for style,⁶ love letters played a relatively minor role in Latin manuals; there was little practical use for a Latin love letter from a man to a woman in a culture where most women could not read Latin. Model love letters in the vernacular, however, might actually be used. And as letterbooks spread throughout Europe, love letters became a standard and prominent feature of such collections.⁷

Most model love letters are written from the point of view of a young man begging a young woman for her favor. Consciously or not, these letters follow the principles for writing love letters briefly laid out by Erasmus in *De conscribendis epistolis*: girls are vain, so they should be praised; and they are sentimental, so the lover should do his best to make his prospective beloved feel sorry for him. And if that does not work, the lover should threaten to kill himself, with the implication that the girl's refusal is to blame for his death. A love letter should thus appeal to a woman's vanity, pity, and guilt all at once.⁸ As Erasmus indicates, the literary model for

such letters is outlined in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*. Ovid recommends flattery, entreaties, promises, a natural, conversational style, a trustworthy messenger, and above all, persistence.⁹

While some vernacular letter books have individual samples of love letters, most print the letters in pairs. An initial letter from a young man is followed by the woman's response. In English and French letter-books, the vast majority of the female responses are polite refusals—a model which conforms to gendered norms for polite feminine behavior. These consistent refusals nonetheless raise some interesting questions about the models' usefulness for male readers. If the men's letters are ineffective, why include them? Are love letters sent to respectable and marriageable women supposed to be unsuccessful? Perhaps even though one should not expect a positive reply to the first letter, such a letter needs to be sent to initiate the conversation. Perhaps the letters are negative examples, slyly showing the sort of letter not to write. This last hypothesis, however, runs counter to the general tone of most volumes, which is optimistic and devoid of irony.

Although they may be discouraging to young men, the exchanges potentially offer useful models to young women of ways to politely refuse unwanted solicitations. Women reading the models would not only learn how to dissuade an unwanted suitor, but also what sort of rhetorical strategies men were likely to use in wooing them. To judge by the rhetoric of their prefaces and their overall tone, most letterbooks are directed more at male than female readers.¹⁰ But such volumes clearly imagine a social world in which women can not only read letters, but can also write replies of equal eloquence.

It has been suggested that such collections of letters may have been read vicariously, not as models for actual practice, but as a window onto social worlds the reader could not participate in directly.¹¹ Such reading is central to the contemporary rise of the epistolary novel, the first of which, Juan de Seguera's *Proceso de cartas de amores* [*A Series of Love Letters*], (Toledo, 1548)¹² is made up primarily of love letters between a young man and woman. Few actual sixteenth-century English letters survive between unmarried young women and their suitors. Love tokens such as rings, gloves, broken pieces of gold, knives, handkerchiefs, coins, even food, were much more commonly exchanged than love letters. But although the

writing of love letters was by no means a majority practice, there is ample evidence of love letters written and exchanged by both men and women,¹³ as well as evidence that model letter books were used by their owners.¹⁴

Though most letter books offered women only a way to avoid unwanted attention, in some cases, the models of women's correspondence were not limited to polite refusals. The first printed book of model correspondence entirely devoted to love letters, Giovanni Antonio Tagliente's *Opera Amoroza che insegna a componer lettere, & a rispondere a persone d'amor ferite* [*An Amorous Work that Teaches how to Write Letters and Reply to Persons Wounded by Love*], (Venice, 1527),¹⁵ is remarkably broad in the range of love letters it includes.¹⁶ Besides letters begging virgins for their favors,¹⁷ there are letters between couples who have been in extra-marital sexual relationships for many years. An eighteen-year-old girl gives her lover instructions for a rendezvous.¹⁸ An orphan girl tells her older suitor that, although she wants to sleep with him, she is terrified of getting pregnant and fears the retribution of her kin if she is caught with him.¹⁹ And some of the volume's exchanges are initiated by women rather than men.²⁰

The wide range of letters in Tagliente's volume was not replicated in most other letter books. Indeed, polite standards of female decorum in letter-writing were the norm. These standards were perhaps best articulated in the late seventeenth century, by the French novelist and woman of letters Madeleine de Scudéry, who devoted a section of her 1684 "conversation" on letter-writing to the topic of love letters. Scudéry maintains that women's and men's love letters should be different: "love and respect must prevail in the letters of a [male] lover, while virtue, modesty, and fear must mingle with tenderness in the letters of the [female] beloved."²¹ She chastises women who reply too ardently, but also argues that, paradoxically, women are better writers of love letters than men because their task is harder—they have to express desire without specifically stating it.

Scudéry's claim that women are the best writers of love letters is not shared by many male writers on the subject. But whatever form they took, letter books took women's eloquence for granted. Their relation to both the articulation and regulation of early modern women's sexuality deserves more study than it has received.

Notes

1. On the spread of letter books in France, especially those containing love letters, see Bernard A. Bray, *L'Art de la lettre amoureuse: Des manuels aux romans (1550–1700)* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 7–12; on the relation of Italian to French manuals, see Roger Chartier et al., *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Christopher Woodall, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997), 63–68. For a brief overview of English letter books, see Alan Stewart and Heather Wolfe, *Letterwriting in Renaissance England* (Washington, DC: Folger Library, 2004), 21–24.

2. See Alain Boureau, “The Letter-Writing Norm, A Medieval Invention,” in Chartier et al., *Correspondence*, 24–58.

3. On the *ars dictaminis*, see James J. Murphy, “Ars dictaminis: The Art of Letter-Writing,” in *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 194–268; and William D. Patt, “The Early ‘Ars dictaminis’ as Response to a Changing Society,” *Viator* 9 (1978): 133–55.

4. Translations or adaptations of Latin letters are ubiquitous in vernacular letter-writing manuals and handbooks throughout the sixteenth century. Such letters appear in *Le Stile et Maniere de composer, dicter, et escrire toute sorte d'Epistres* (Lyons and Paris: 1553) with many subsequent editions; as well as in the English translation of *Le Stile*, William Fulwood, *The Enemy of Idleness* (London, 1568) with ten subsequent editions to 1621. Vernacular letters modeled on Latin originals can also be found in Abraham Fleming, *A Panoplie of Epistles* (London: 1576). See, also, G. Guedet, “Archéologie d'un genre: Les premiers manuels français d'art épistolaire,” in *Mélanges sur la littérature de la Renaissance à la mémoire de V-L Saulnier* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1984), 87–98, esp. 94–96.

5. Roger Chartier et al., *Correspondence*, 16–22, 68–70; and Stewart and Wolfe, *Letterwriting*, 79.

6. Bray, *L'Art de la lettre amoureuse*, 14–15. He asserts that “the three principal sources that one may attribute to the love letter in its conventional form in the first half of the seventeenth century are Ovid's *Heroides*, the letters of Heloise and Abelard, and Italian letters, especially those of Isabella Andreini. Ovid represents by far the most abundantly used source” (14). See also Claudio Guillén, “Notes Toward the Study of the Renaissance Letter,” in *Harvard English Studies* 14 (1986): 70–101, esp. 86–91; and Fay Bound, “Writing the Self? Love and the Letter in England, c. 1600–c. 1760,” *Literature and History* 11, no. 1 (2002): 1–19.

7. Almost all letter books published in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, for example, contain some love letters: see STC (2nd ed.) numbers 545; 3637; 3638; 3638.5; 6274; 6401; 6402; 6403; 6404; 6405; 6406; 6406.5; 6407; 11476; 11477; 11479; 11480; 11481; 11482; 11482.4; 11483; 11523; 17360; 17360a; 19883; 19883.5; 20432; 20433; 20584; 20585; 24909; and 24909.5.

8. Erasmus, *On the Writing of Letters, Collected Works of Erasmus*, Vol. 25, ed. J. K. Sowards (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 204.

9. Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, I.437–86.

10. For example, Fulwood, *Enemy of Idleness*, sigs. A2^r–A6^r; and Angel Day, *The English Secretary* (London: 1586), sigs. []2^r–7^v.

11. Chartier et al., *Correspondence*, 78–85.

12. Juan de Segura, *A Critical and Annotated Edition of this First Epistolary Novel (1548) together with an English Translation*, ed. and trans. Edwin B. Place (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1950).

13. James Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 222–28.

14. For example, passages in the British Library's copy of Andrea Zenophonte da Ugubio's *Formulario Nuovo ad dittar Lettere Amoroze, Messive, & Responsive* (A New Formulary for Writing Love Letters, Missives, and Replies, Venice: Marchio Sessa, 1531), BL 1084 d 1 2, are underlined, which suggests that that volume was studied in some detail. Model love letters are similarly annotated in the Folger Shakespeare Library's copies of Angel Day's *English Secretary* (London, 1599); and Vincent de Voiture's *Letters of Affaires of Love and Courtship* (1657). See Stewart and Wolfe, *Letterwriting*, 80.

15. Anne Jacobson Schutte, "Teaching Adults to Read in Sixteenth-Century Venice: Giovanni Antonio Tagliente's *Libro Maistrevole*," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 17, no.1 (Spring 1986), 3–16; Schutte counts five editions between 1527 and 1552 (7, n. 20); editions from 1533, 1535 and 1537 are in the British Library.

16. As its title indicates, the volume was intended both for male and female readers. For a more detailed discussion of the *Opera amorosa*, see Ian Frederick Moulton, "Popu-love: Sex, Love, and Sixteenth Century Print Culture," in *Literature and Popular Culture in Early Modern England*, ed. Andrew Hadfield and Matthew Dimmock (New York: Ashgate, 2009), 91–103. On Tagliente's life and publications, see Esther Potter, "Life and Literary Remains," in Stanley Morison, *Splendour of Ornament: Specimens selected from the Essempio di recammi, the first Italian manual of decoration, Venice 1524 by Giovanni Antonio Tagliente* (London: Lion and Unicorn Press, 1968), 29–43. Tagliente, a Venetian handwriting expert, published a series of what might be called self-help books intended to spread specialized knowledge beyond traditional elites, including the *Libro Maistrevole*, the first book designed to teach the illiterate, including women and servants, how to read Italian. See Schutte, "Teaching Adults."

17. Giovanni Antonio Tagliente, *Opera amorosa* (Venice 1533), sig. A2^r–A2^v. All references to the *Opera amorosa* are to this edition (British Library 10905 bb 7).

18. *Ibid.*, sigs. D5^r–D5^v.

19. *Ibid.*, A5^v–A6^r.

20. *Ibid.*, B2^r; sig. B6^r.

21. Madeleine de Scudéry, *Selected Letters, Orations, and Rhetorical Dialogues*, ed. and trans. Jane Donawerth and Julie Strongson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 149.