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Introduction (version auteurices)

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September 2, 2020

Dear Reader,

This issue of *French Historical Studies* is about letters. It is also *of* letters; or rather, of emails—today's equivalent. Almost a thousand of them, after a cursory count, in between four editors and six contributors, spread out over 18 months as this volume goes into production in September 2020. These have been long and short; dense with form and content, or monosyllabic in response to a precise question. Some have been addressed individually, others collectively; several have been forwarded on to other people as well. They have been written at all times of day and night, over 5 to 6 hours' time difference, at office desks, on bus seats, and in bed. Sent from institutional email accounts, personal ones, computers, smartphones, or tablets, they have been received and (presumably) read in an equally wide range of settings and setups. Some took time and much thought, even a few drafts and dictionary assistance; others were written hastily and sometimes carelessly. Most of these emails are professional and work-related; some more personal and even intimate. Their layout, modes of salutation, and tone have varied over time, betraying in turn deference and familiarity, enthusiasm (often) and frustration (occasionally), tact and indiscretion, fatigue and hastiness (all too frequently). They have sought to salute, inform, transmit, respond, disagree, persuade, help, flatter, encourage, (gently) reproach, and more—with varying degrees of success and sometimes achieving the opposite effect. They have been in English and (mostly) in French. Spelling mistakes shall not be counted. Some have a distinct font, a colorful signature, even the odd emoji. Many have attachments; a few forgot theirs. Addressees were occasionally forgotten as well, or erroneously added, even secretly blind carbon copied at times. Some emails were hastily (and mercifully) “undone” before travelling several thousand miles in a matter of seconds. Although a few fell through the cracks, most went answered, if not always immediately and equally enthusiastically, building up layers of conversation in endless threads through which to scroll in search of a forgotten detail.

A thousand emails over 18 months means almost two a day—not quite the 10 letters a day that Catherine de Medici got through, but then again, we weren't dealing with royal family infighting during the wars of religion (and had many more fastidious emails to tend to as part of our mundane academic lives anyway). Though it would scarcely be worth the effort, should an intrepid editor decide to publish our exchanges one day, and somehow get access to our defunct accounts from Google's digital archives, some government spying agency, or an old external hard drive lying forgotten in some storage box, they would surely have to call it a correspondence of sorts.

These emails were never meant to be quite so many and this issue of *French Historical Studies* was, of course, planned with more than them alone. The project came together face to face, at a Consortium for the Revolutionary Era panel in Atlanta, Georgia, in February 2019. We (guest editors) and Carol Harrison presented and discussed current research on correspondences, eagerly comparing cases, queries, findings, and feedback from the audience. For some of us this is something we have long trained to do; for others a new direction we've recently started exploring. For all of us, this was an opportunity to confront different historiographical traditions and nagging questions on the topic. The idea of a special issue of *FHS* materialized (over email) and was supposed to culminate in a two-day workshop with selected contributors at Columbia University in New York City in April 2020. Needless to say, this physical encounter and exchange never happened. Instead, it was poorly approximated by another round of peer review and emailing. Sadly, if perhaps fittingly, the Covid-19 pandemic forced us to probe even further what letters can, and *cannot*, do—just as we are all coming to terms with what online and asynchronous teaching can and *cannot* replicate of the real, face to face, thing. We have had a few zoom meetings and the odd phone call to address urgent matters here and there, when direct conversation and at least seeing one another seemed more effective than spelling things out in long emails. But on the whole, we could say that this issue of *FHS*—like most, one suspects—was for the most part prepared writing to someone else in their absence.

Whether we think of ourselves as epistolarians or not, much of what we do as scholars and historians involves writing to someone (or several people) in their absence—in other words, the most basic definition of the epistolary gesture. This is arguably truer than ever today, as many of us are tethered to our email accounts and increasingly turn to social media to explore new channels of written communication, whether for personal exchanges, to create virtual chat groups, or reach a wider, distant, and mostly unknown population. The medium has of course changed dramatically, leading in our adulthood alone from pen and paper to keyboard and touchscreen, prompting all sorts of questions about what such material changes do to epistolary exchanges, and to what they can hope to achieve between those who write and those who read at either ends.

Such questions—about materiality, function, and performativity—are at the forefront of the historical studies of correspondences today. They are also the main focus of this issue of *FHS*, together with more established historical uses of letters as documentary sources and as writings of the self. It is both true and has become a bit of cliché to point out that historians have long neglected letters as legitimate sources for historical research, on a par with ostensibly more “objective” documents.¹ Though it is the case that one of us was advised to complement epistolary exchanges with some “proper social history” sources for their PhD dissertation, the profession has by and large come a long way since the days when “private” correspondence was relegated to a relatively insignificant “private” sphere, interesting at best to document the “private” lives of important white men’s wives. This is especially the case in France, a country

¹ As Rebecca Earle already observed two decades ago, “letters form the hidden underpinnings of much historical research” (*Epistolary Selves*, 1).

where personal correspondences have long appealed to readers and sold well—from those of George Sand and Alfred de Musset to those between François Mitterrand and Anne Pingeot (his longtime lover)—and where historians have become particularly adept at unlocking letters’ hidden riches.

Historians have, for some time now, mined original correspondences of writers, thinkers, and politicians for biographical information and to complement historical portraits drawn from published works and public pronouncements.² Literary scholars in particular have tracked the genesis of a literary idea and other relations between letters and novels. As one notes, the romantic letter “occupies a space of dissidence and free expression that lends itself both to exploring one’s psyche and to testing fictional writing.”³ Many have thus sought to subvert the public/private binary that relegates correspondences to a lesser status, often questioning the gendered underpinnings of letter writing as a quintessentially female activity. They have used correspondences to explore female literacy as a form of agency and cultural construction at the margins of a predominantly male public sphere, negotiating patriarchal authority or exploring new avenues for social mobility in a world of consumer goods.⁴ Intellectual historians and in particular historians of science have fruitfully used correspondences to the same effect, gaining access to “the daily life of the *savant*, their path to truth, modes of thought and practices, as well as the wider social, cultural and intellectual world in which they conducts their experiments.”⁵ Here letters help trace the genesis of great scientific discoveries, providing fodder for intellectual biographies and contextual explanations of great figures as Galileo or Darwin—again opening to the decisive role played by women such as Madame Lavoisier.⁶ This kind of research is often made possible by critical editions of correspondences, painstakingly assembled for publication in print and increasingly online.⁷ These resources have also helped map the networks of communication and knowledge between individuals and scientific societies, exploiting new tools in digital humanities to force more or less radical rethinks of what we mean by and how we visualize things such as the Enlightenment “Republic of Letters.”⁸

This kind of intellectual history of letter-writing has focused predominantly on educated elites and public personalities who had already left their imprint on History. With the development of

² For a recent example, see “Les Correspondances entre écrivains au XIXe siècle”.

³ Diaz, “La lettre romantique,” 61.

⁴ Planté, “Trois épistolières et leurs lecteurs”; and Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*. For two recent studies, see also Muller, *Au plus près des âmes et des corps* and Coffin, *Sex, Love, and Letters*.

⁵ Klein, “Les écritures du moi en histoire des sciences,” 12.

⁶ Torrini, “La correspondance de Galilée entre chronique et histoire des sciences”; Browne, “The Charles Darwin—Joseph Hooker correspondence”; and Roberts, *Sentimental Savants*. For two excellent examples of how extensive use of private correspondences can change our understanding of political figures and historical events, see Harris, *Dreyfus*; and Roper, *Martin Roper*.

⁷ For classic and recent examples see: Mason, ed., *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Fliess*; gen. ed., *The Correspondence of Mme de Graffigny*, and The Darwin Correspondence Project.

⁸ Rusnock, “Correspondence Networks and the Royal Society”; Beaurepaire, Häsel, and McKenna, *Réseaux de correspondance à l’âge classique*; Hoock-Demarle, *L’Europe des lettres*; “Mapping the Republic of Letters”; and “Visualizing Historical Networks.”

histories of intimacy and private life—spearheaded by the landmark publication of *L'Histoire de la vie privée* in five volumes in the mid 1980s—other avid epistolarians of lesser status also entered the fray, documenting in their letters the daily activities, aspirations, and emotional lives of ordinary people.⁹ Histories of wartime experiences seen “from below” have perhaps made the most fruitful use of these new sources, particularly following the advent of mass literacy towards the end of the nineteenth century. The Great War produced an outpouring of letter-writing like no other, now richly documented by the “Grande collecte 14-18” of wartime letters launched in 2013 as part of the conflict’s centennial commemorations.¹⁰ Scholars working on such “paroles de poilus” have explored the soldiers’ epistolary literacy (taught in the Third Republic’s schools), the epistolary rituals of wartime couples, the psychological and emotional functions of letter-writing in the trenches, and the self-fashioning and radicalization it gave voice to.¹¹

These histories of wartime testimonials, like those of women’s epistolary subjectivities, illustrate particularly well the major shift in the field from using correspondences for factual information to treating letter writing as a social and cultural practice in its own right. Here too, the 1980s marked a watershed, with numerous publications and conferences that problematized the notion of intimacy, defined epistolarity as a form of writing onto itself, and began exploring its conditions of production.¹² Mireille Bossis has been particularly vocal in warning against using correspondences unproblematically, as “raw”, “authentic” viewpoints on the past. Letters, she and others have insisted, produce fictions just like any other document; they must be read in between the lines, for both content and form, less for what they actually say than what they reveal about the social world in which they partook.¹³ By 1991 letters had thus become a “cultural gesture” in the words of a team of specialists assembled around Roger Chartier, one the historians could use to explore topics as diverse as literacy rates, socioeconomic regional disparities, and the development of a private sphere.¹⁴ Building on this work, Cécile Dauphin has studied at length the manuals and models that nineteenth-century

⁹ Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, gen. eds., *A History of Private Life*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1987-1991).

¹⁰ “La Grande collecte 14-18. »

¹¹ Hanna, “A Republic of Letters”; and *Your Death Will be Mine*; Vidal-Naquet, *Couples dans la Grande Guerre*; Roper, *The Secret Battle*; Mariot, *Histoire d'un sacrifice*. For an earlier period, see also Forrest, *Napoleon's Men*. Published editions of letters help account for minorities’ experiences of war as well. See, for example, Descamps et al., eds., *Tirailleurs sénégalais*; and Omissi, ed., *Indian Voices of the Great War*. Epochs of revolutionary transformation have provided equally propitious conditions for epistolary subjectivities. See, for example, Verjus and Davidson, *Le roman conjugal*; and, for two recent examples from this journal, Tackett, “Paths to Revolution”; and Davidson, “The New (Emotional) Regime.”

¹² Grassi and Gordon, “Friends and Lovers”; and Altman, *Epistolarity*. A conference organized by Mireille Bossis in 1983 in Nantes, “Ecrire, publier, lire les correspondances: problématique et économie d’un “genre littéraire”,” is often identified as the starting point for these questionings in France.

¹³ For several important works in this respect, see: *La Correspondance (Édition, fonctions, signification)*; Bossis and McPherson, “Methodological Journeys Through Correspondences”; Bossis, ed., *L'Épistolarité à travers les siècles*; Magnan, ed., *Expériences limites de l'épistolaire*; Bossis, ed., *La lettre à la croisée de l'individuel et du social*; Lebrun-Pézerat et Pouban, eds., *La Lettre et le Politique*; Planté, ed., *L'Épistolaire, un genre féminin*; Melançon, ed., *Penser par lettre*; and Earle, *Epistolary Selves*.

¹⁴ Chartier, gen. ed., *La correspondance*.

French men and women followed when they wrote, decisively brushing aside any claims to “spontaneity” or “originality”.¹⁵ In a landmark text coauthored with Pierrette Lebrun-Pézerat et Danièle Poublan, she further unpacked what a systematic analysis of letters and of the rituals of letter-writing could say about the choice of paper, the meaning of penmanship, spacing and layout, or the implications of salutation formulas and expectations about the time it would take for letters to travel to their destination. Such formal features help elucidate the historicity of the epistolary gesture and reveal the “epistolary pact”—a concept adapted from Philippe Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact”—it sustains among family members in particular.¹⁶

Dauphin invites us to focus less on the letter’s content than on the object itself, to “delve into its fabrication, the physical space of the page, any third-party interventions, traces left by different uses, cataloguing, and classifying (wear and tear, annotations, numbering...)”.¹⁷ This means paying attention to evolving forms of writing itself, from the combination of quill and paper to the generalization of email, messaging and other contemporary “technologies of presence.”¹⁸ Different media entail different spatio-temporal constraints, altering expectations for a response that is so central to the epistolary pact: the immediacy of the digital age has not only facilitated quicker and more frequent exchanges, but also transformed how (or how long) we wait for a response (who hasn’t been annoyed at a delayed email response, or experienced “texting anxiety” at iMessage’s “typing awareness indicator”? Some of us can remember waiting with trepidation for the postman to pass by, but who can imagine today going weeks, if not months, without news from a loved one, as would have been quite common before the advent of reliable postal services in the nineteenth century?). The materiality of the letter is also that of the furniture and other consumer goods (computers and smartphones) necessary to the practice of writing.¹⁹ Finally, these material choices and constraints also determine the afterlives of the epistolary object, their affective status and archiving practices. What decides whether intimate letters should be burned or preciousy conserved?²⁰ What defines a correspondence corpus and how best to make it available, whether as archival sources or in an edited publication? Who owns and how should we store our voluminous but ephemeral exchanges by email (if they are to be kept at all)? What kind of memory work can letters do when they no longer actually exist other than in code?

It is with such cultural and material questions in mind that we plotted this issue, encouraging colleagues to think about what correspondences—in all forms and shapes—can and cannot do, as writings of the self, writings to an other, and sources for yet another (scholarly) purpose. The submissions we received were both wide-ranging and creative in their use of sources, illustrating just how much historians can get out of close readings of intimate writings, whatever their thematic focus or scale of analysis. At the same time, we were also surprised by

¹⁵ Dauphin, *Prête-moi ta plume*.

¹⁶ Dauphin, Lebrun-Pézerat, and Poublan, *Ces bonnes lettres*.

¹⁷ Dauphin, “Les correspondances comme objet historique” 50; Bertho-Lavenir, “Du papier et des lettres. See also, in a different context, Whyman, *The Pen and the People*; and Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England*.

¹⁸ Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Email*; and Minari, “De la lettre au texto, du texte à la Lettre.”

¹⁹ Charpy, “Le théâtre des objets.”

²⁰ Haroche-Bouzinac, “Les lettres qu’on ne brûle pas.”

some notable absences in the proposals: very little on transnational exchanges and correspondences from the wider francophone world; nothing that used digital mapping tools or ventured up to our digital present of texts, chats, and posts (a point we'll return to in conclusion).²¹ We also take note of the fact that three in four of the submissions we received were authored by women.

Though she wasn't on Facebook or Instagram, Catherine de Medici surely would have been had social media existed back in the Sixteenth Century. Instead, she had to make do with pen and paper—lots of it—to rein in her feuding sons and project what Julia Heineman calls, in her opening article, “Motion Pictures of the Royal Family.” Heineman reads the letters exchanged between the Queen mother, Henri III and François d'Anjou as a nimble tool to simultaneously deal with political conflict and reaffirm kinship relations in the troubled context of the wars of religion. These letters were often copied, passed on between people, sent simultaneously to multiple people (in parallel), collapsing simple distinctions between public and private, formal and informal. Even when they had nothing much to say, the mere fact of their circulation served to establish and reaffirm political ties and allegiances between members of the royal family. By openly displaying competing representations of the royal family, Heineman suggestively concludes, these sources further call into the question the role of secrecy in the formation of the modern state.

The transmission of power and knowledge, and the permeability of the intimate to the social, are very much at the heart of the next two articles. In “L'épiscopat, un pouvoir à transmettre?” Anne-Sophie Fournier-Plamondon analyzes the correspondence between Antoine Godeau, bishop of Vence, and Louis Thomassin, his coadjutor and designated successor, over twelve years until Godeau's death in 1672. She argues that these letters aim to transmit an “episcopal ethos”, passing on the image of an ideal priest together with the necessary spiritual guidance and know-how. In “Réseaux épistolaires et amitié infra-politique entre Révolution et Restauration,” Karine Rance takes us to the rickety world of former émigrés who returned to France under Napoleon, as it is conveyed in the epistolary exchanges between the comte de Montloisier, Claude-Ignace de Barante and his son Prosper. She is particularly interested in a kind of intertextual bleeding between the count's letters, his published works, and the wider literary circles he belonged to (for example, the Coppet circle of Germaine de Staël). Here again, letters circulate in a surprisingly fluid and “reticular” way, negotiating, Rance argues, epistolary and social selves in a post-revolutionary society in flux.

In the next two contributions, Alexia Yates and Solène Monnier scale up from sustained correspondences between individuals to large corpuses of more ephemeral, and often unreciprocated, letters from anonymous historical actors. Yates looks at letters sent by small investors (male and female) from across France and Algeria to the Banque de France, asking about investments they had often placed their savings in and then heard no more about. These sources shed light on the everyday practices of late nineteenth-century economic life, highlighting the need to personalize the anonymous world of finance capital and the

²¹ For a recent example, drawn from the pages of this journal, see Bond, “Circuits of Practical Knowledge.”

importance of information and trust in business transactions.²² Most intriguingly, “Investor Letters and the Everyday Practices of Finance in Nineteenth-Century France” reveals the attempted constitution of a group, a collectivity of small investors both touchingly naïve in their personal stories and surprisingly savvy in the rhetorical strategies they adopted to “write upwards” and momentarily bridge the social divide separating them from Parisian elites (a practice both traditional and modern). There is a similar combination of personalized love affairs and democratization of anonymous, but increasingly literate, writers in Monnier’s exploration of fan mail received in the first half of the Twentieth Century by actor René Navarre, aka Fantômas in the eponymous hit serial of 1913-14. For Monnier, these letters go beyond mere idolizing of a celebrity; they articulate a “(Re)présentation de soi vers l’autre,” an attempted erasure of spatio-temporal, social, and affective distance through the creation of an epistolary phantasy world. Of course, in both Monnier and Yates’ cases, it is important to note the limits of this “writing up”, over and across social divides: in both cases, responses were scant and almost never the desired ones.

We conclude this issue moving from love letters written late at night (possibly gazing at the stars through a small *lucarne* in a Parisian *chambre de bonne*—as the cliché might have it), to desperate last messages hastily scribbled on scraps of paper by Jewish prisoners and thrown off of trains bound for extermination camps, in hopes someone might pick them up and forward them to their addressees. In “The Mutual Aid that Maintained Correspondence Between Jewish Internees and Their Loved Ones During the Second World War in France,” Katherine Roseau uncovers the clandestine world of epistolary *entraide* that allowed Jewish prisoners in Drancy and other internment camps to maintain contact with their kin. She draws us into a world of intimacy without any privacy, of severe constraints on freedom of expression, and of letters written and smuggled between people with whatever means available. In doing so, she follows Cécile Dauphin’s call to “work at the limits” of correspondences, in a very real sense of the limitations imposed by twentieth-century genocidal intent on the material possibilities of epistolary communication and of human endurance.

Taken as a whole, the contributions to this issue of *French Historical Studies* show both the vibrancy of the field and latent possibilities still to explore. Letters remain, first and foremost, writings of the self and privileged points of access to narratives of self-fashioning, whether they function as seals of royal identity, sites of literary creativity, or horizons for escapist love affairs.²³ But the writing self is never far from the reading other, and the communicative channels between them are rarely sealed off from the outside world. For most of our authors, letters elude and blur simple binaries of public and private, circulating among different hands, relaying public personas, forging new social groups, alternatively reinforcing or subverting political power and social hierarchy. In other words, they reveal social strategies of intimacy, of an intimate sphere kneaded with history.²⁴ Letters are also material objects to be looked at not

²² As already shown in landmark works of imperial history and the new history of capitalism, including Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers*; and Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires* and “Isolation and Economic Life in Eighteenth-Century France.”

²³ For a recent synthesis, see Summerfield, *Histories of the Self*.

²⁴ Farge and Vidal-Naquet, eds., “Les paradoxes de l’intime.”

just for content, but also for form and function. Writing a letter with pen and paper is a peculiar moment of temporary seclusion from the world, something that may be disappearing in our digital world of constant notifications. It requires a particular kind of skill to write well, estimate space accurately, choose the appropriate mode of salutation, and find the right words at the first attempt (features that are, again, increasingly irrelevant to us today). Letters must always be addressed to someone—though that recipient may not be known, may not be alone, may not even really exist—and expect an answer that may well never come or be actively discouraged. Some have little, if anything much to say, other than perform themselves—a kind of illocutionary act—to let someone know they are being thought of, keep them at bay (by writing a letter instead of talking to them in person), or remind them we exist and are still alive.

We conclude with two partial regrets, *mea culpas*, and messages in a bottle for future epistolary endeavors. First, we are bothered by the paucity of transnational perspectives in the submissions we received. While thick descriptions of correspondences such as those practiced here necessarily require much micro-analysis and close reading, they are far from incompatible with global scales and connected histories. If anything, the intimate becomes all the more important as emotional bonds and contractual ties are stretched in time and space, providing original points of entry into scholarship on slavery, race, colonialism, emigration, and trade. As we zoom out to wider vistas, we should not forget that letters add flesh, feelings and a certain stickiness to what can otherwise quickly become disembodied histories.²⁵ Second, we take note of the fact that nobody took the bait we dangled in the call for papers about exploring the material metamorphoses and metaphysical mutations of correspondences over time and in particular in our digital age—whether by availing themselves of digital tools or looking at emails, texts, and all that has supplanted the written letter for us today. There are, of course, very good reasons for this: we are not historians for nothing, and no one else gets quite as excited as we do at the mere thought of climbing into a dusty attic to discover a pile of crumbling old letters. But neither must we be romantic antiquarians only and leave histories of the present to colleagues in other disciplines more firmly anchored in the present, but without the necessary historical perspective. Just as we have all come to read published historical sources differently with Googlebooks and Gallica, so might we think differently about correspondences and what they do between two or more human beings in the light of our changing practices of “sharing”, “following” and “friending” others. At 500 million tweets per day around the globe, it is little wonder that university libraries now list social media resources in their primary research guides; these days, twitter feeds make for good history books, or at least good history book sales; they certainly make excellent alternative realities for grotesquely unscrupulous politicians; but they also help mobilize social protest and connect it to histories of oppression and demands for justice and reparations (as we all saw during the Black Lives Matter protests that followed George Floyd’s murder by white policemen in May 2020, opening a timely debate about memory and commemoration that historians can meaningfully intervene

²⁵ See, among others, Palmer, *Intimate Bonds*; Cheney, *Cul de Sac*; Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*; Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans*; Rothschild, *Inner Lives of Empire*; Pearsal, *Atlantic Families*; and Trivellato, *Familiarity of Strangers*. It is perhaps revealing that correspondences don’t feature prominently in two recent forums on bridging global- and micro- histories: Bertrand and Calaf, eds., “Micro-analyse et histoire globale”; and Ghobrial, “Global History and Microhistory.”

in). This too, is what correspondences can do. In September 2020, these thoughts are as sobering as they are invigorating in our new present, and foreseeable future, of socially distanced living.

Sincerely,

Anne Verjus
Caroline Muller
Thomas Dodman

PS.

We would like to thank the many anonymous readers for the invaluable feedback they provided on article drafts, and Carol Harrison for her encouragement, suggestions, and tireless efforts in seeing this correspondence through to its final destination.

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