

Advice to Letter-Writers: Evidence from Four Generations of Evelyns--A Paper
presented to the Conference on John Evelyn and his Milieu by Susan Whyman

Let us observe the ten-year-old son of John Evelyn as he writes a letter in 1665. There is no letter-writing manual at hand, just a pen made from the third left feather of a goose and a pot filled with ink made from oak tree galls. John Jr. writes in Latin and carefully forms each letter using a large italic script. He struggles to keep his lines straight and his sentences centred. He opens with greetings to his 'Dearest Father', and leaves deferential space before closing with 'Ever your most obedient son'. The body of the letter contains many compliments. John Jr. may be young, but he clearly understands epistolary conventions.¹

Historians have no difficulty in finding the output of letter writers like John's son, John Jr. A mammoth cornucopia of family letters tumbles from the shelves of the British Library—for example, the Wentworth, Blenheim, Portland, Coke, and Trumbull Papers. Smaller gems are found in local record offices. Correspondence is most prolific for elite families and often extends throughout the lives of individuals and over many generations. Each family archive is marked by epistolary patterns relating to forms of address, handwriting, format, and dating practices. One of the most common features in collection after collection is the survival of children's first letters sending compliments to family members. These stilted formulaic epistles are then corrected, dissected, discussed, circulated, and finally saved by proud or unhappy kin.²

At first glance, these children's letters seem conventional, and uninteresting. Why were they fussed over and even saved at all? In fact, their regular appearance tells us that we are

¹ JE A4, f.622, John Evelyn Jr/John Evelyn, [13 Dec 1665].

² It is rare to find a family archive without children's letters. Good examples may be found in the correspondence of the Cottrell-Dormer, Hatton, and Trumbull families.

witnessing something central to a culture based on sociability and conversation. I will argue that these first epistolary efforts were a rite of passage that provided entry into polite society. These letters-in-training may seem artificial to us, but they taught self-discipline and served as models for courtesy letters in a society based on patronage networks. They also shed light on the process by which an increasing number of men and women learned how to use the English language in an elegant manner.

Today I will use the diamond in the crown of letter collections—the Evelyn archive—to show how the writing and preservation of family letters was encouraged over four generations. Basic literacy was taught by tutors, schoolteachers, or writing masters, sometime between the ages of four and eight.³ But letter writing as an indispensable lifelong skill was nurtured, monitored, and enshrined by family mentors. Since letters were so important, each generation was taught that they should be carefully preserved. I believe that the massing of these archives was not just random, but was part of a concerted family policy. Letters were collected no less purposefully than portraits or parcels of land.⁴

In family after family, we find an organized programme of copying outgoing letters, assembling letter books, keeping drafts, and endorsing standardised data about each letter. When self-set targets went unmet, writers expressed guilt. Thus Evelyn complained about letters ‘which I

³ David Cressy, Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); R. S. Schofield, ‘The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-Industrial England’ in Jack Goody ed., Literacy in Traditional Societies, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 311-25; Margaret Spufford, ‘First Steps in Literacy: The Reading and Writing Experiences of the Humblest Seventeenth-Century Spiritual Autobiographers’, Social History, 43 (1979), 407-34; Keith Thomas, ‘The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England’ in Gerard Baumann, ed., The Written Word: Literacy in Transition, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 97-133. For the educational process see Edmund Coote, The English School-Master, (London: R. Roberts, 1687); Richard Mulcaster, The First Part of the Elementarie which Entreateth Chefelie of the Right Writing of our English Tung, (London: T. Vautroullier, 1582); William Kempe, The Education of Children in Learning, (London: T. Orwin, 1588); J. Brinsley, Ludus Literarius: or, the Grammar Schoole, (London: T. Man, 1612), and later editions of these works.

⁴ For a case study see S. Whyman, ‘“Paper Visits”: the Post-Restoration Letter as Seen through the Verney Family Archive’, in R. Earle, ed., Epistolary Selves, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 15-36.

intended to transcribe, but they grew to[o] fast upon me'.⁵ A delight in filing, ordering, and transcribing engaged each proud generation.⁶ Usually, one family member assumed the role of guardian of the letters and left marks of editing the collection. In the case of the Evelyns, the diarist taught his family how to assemble their papers. But it was his grandson Sir John Evelyn, who assumed the role of editor, adding notes, and listing his favourite letters in the flyleaf of his Grandfather's letter books.⁷ It is common to find letters bearing double and even triple endorsements. They form an intricate conversation between loved ones over several generations.⁸

John's son, John Jr., lived at a time when a convergence of historical factors was producing a diverse letter-writing public. The Evelyn archive contains several thousand letters to and from a broad range of people from 1526 to 1762.⁹ No longer reserved for diplomacy and business use, more people were just 'scribbling' letters for many different reasons. After the Restoration in 1660, the post office was reorganized and it now carried private letters throughout England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and abroad. A provincial post was also developing along with mail boats to and from the continent.¹⁰ By the 1680s, the London penny post had hundreds of collection places, and deliveries were made up to eight times a day.¹¹

⁵ John Evelyn, *Memoires for my Grand-son*, transcribed by Geoffrey Keynes, (Oxford: Nonesuch Press, 1926), 64-65, and SJE 53 'Memoires for my Grand-son', 1704-[1705].

⁶ Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 198-200.

⁷ JE A1, JE A2. Sir John Evelyn notes some 'remarquable' letters in each volume.

⁸ For example, JE A4, f.627, 18 Sept 1671 bears traces of three generations. In JE A1 and A2, Sir John Evelyn compiles an index with abstracts of letters.

⁹ *John Evelyn in the British Library*, (London: British Library, 1995), 17. The correspondence includes hundreds of Evelyn's drafts, copies, and letters for over four generations. There are 15 folio volumes containing 1,814 original letters. Two folio letter books contain autograph copies of 800 selected letters.

¹⁰ Post Office Archive, Acts file; M.M. Raguin, *British Post Office Notices 1666-1899*, vol. 1, (Medford Mass: Raguin, 1991); J.W.M. Stone, *The Inland Posts, 1392-1672: A Calendar of Historical Documents*, (London: Christies-Robson Lowe, 1987); Great Britain. Post Office, *The Post Office. An Historical Summary*, (London: HMSO, 1911); Howard Robinson, *The British Post Office: A History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948).

¹¹ William Dockwra, *The Practical Method of the Penny Post*, (London: George Larkin, 1981); BL Harl.5954, f.20; T. Todd, *William Dockwra and the Rest of the Undertakers: The Story of the London Penny Post 1680-2*, (Edinburgh: C.J.Coudland & Sons, 1952).

By the 1720s, literacy rates had risen to about forty-five per cent for men and twenty-five per cent for women. For London women, it was nearer forty-eight per cent.¹² Rising geographic, social, and economic mobility led to separation of families, who needed to stay in touch.¹³ At the same time, there was an outburst of printed matter, the development of new literary forms, and an increased respect for an improved, stable English language. The rise of a polite culture that stressed self-expression and manners was of critical importance.¹⁴ Letter writing played a crucial role in its development, as elite families like the Evelyns trained children to use letters in new polished ways.

Our first sets of letters between father and son are from the 1630s, though others in a fragile state could not be examined. In 1634, Evelyn's brother George at Oxford sends a letter to his father Richard signed 'yo'r obedient sone'. Richard drafts his own answer on the back of the original and saves them both. Richard also writes to his 'loving sonne John' begging him to attend to learning. In 1635, John admits 'my father being...extreamely displeased at my Writing so ill a Character, I put my selfe to the Writing Schoole for a Moneth or two, till I had redressed that in some measure....'¹⁵

We have even more evidence for the diarist's intense concern about the letter-writing skills of his own son John Jr. (1655-99),¹⁶ and his grandson John (1682-1763).¹⁷ Evelyn's small cramped hand covers every inch of space of scores of letters to children and grandchildren. Our first reply from his son John Jr., at age 10, is in Latin. Its large boyish print is accompanied by a note from his

¹² Cressy, 129, 176; Kathryn Shevelov, *Women and Print Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 30; G. Greer, *Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Women's Verse*, (London: Virago Press, 1988), 1-31.

¹³ E. Wrigley, 'A Simple Model of London's Importance 1650-1750', *Past and Present*, 37 (1967), 44-70; S. Whyman, *Sociability and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Lawrence Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ BL Add MS 15948, f.2, Richard Evelyn/ George Evelyn, 30 June 1634, and draft of answer 10 July 1634; JE A5, Richard Evelyn/John Evelyn, f. 763, 15 December 1635; John Evelyn, *Diary*, 16 July 1635, ed., Guy de la Bedoyere, (Woodbridge, Boydell, Press, 1995), 24. See also EF1-3 letters of Evelyn's grandfather George and father Richard, and papers of Evelyn's father-in-law Sir Richard Browne.

¹⁶ JEJ 1, John Evelyn/John Evelyn Jr., 1673-93.

tutor: 'Mr John presents you with his duty & a distick of verses...they are according to yr desire, wholly his own & yr letter must divide yr prayse between him & his phrase book.'¹⁸ A triumvirate of father, tutor, and son cooperated in a process in which the child mastered epistolary conventions in Latin, French, and English, first at home, then at Eton, and later at Oxford. On the back of another letter dated 30 Jan 1666[7] a proud father writes a note for later readers: 'Jack was but 12 years old when he writ this'. This is a precocious letter, studded with showy verses, describing John Jr.'s travels to Oxford. It is labelled 'The Oxford Gazette', like a newspaper, and reveals heady but arrogant exuberance.¹⁹ As he matures, John Jr. simplifies his forms of address. He closes simply with 'your dutifull son' and drops the adjectives 'most humble' and 'obedient'.²⁰ He obviously knows his epistolary etiquette. When he asks for money, he hopes 'Sr, you will pardon me if I beg not in latine. I reserve that for a letter of thanks'.²¹

At the age of 18, John Jr.'s sister Susan, with less education, cannot control her ink and covers her page with blots. When asked to describe her travels to the coronation, she admits in phonetic spelling: It is 'to[o] hard a task for me to undertake all I can say is it was very feine'.²² Here we see early signs of gender difference in epistolary ability. We should note, however, that both sexes are assigned the task of describing travels and experiences through letters.²³ Though the gap may widen according to education, daughters' skills are equally encouraged.

Susan's sister Mary (1665-85) is a more gifted correspondent. At age 11, she confesses 'I wish I could writt better',²⁴ but by age 17, she pens an elegant epistle to her brother. She offers

¹⁷ SJE 1, John Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 1698-1701.

¹⁸ JE A4, f.622, John Evelyn Jr/John Evelyn, [13 Dec 1665].

¹⁹ JE A4, f.623, John Evelyn Jr/John Evelyn, 30 Jan [1666/7], and f.624, [1667].

²⁰ JE A4, f.635, John Evelyn Jr/John Evelyn, 4 Jan 1676.

²¹ JE A4, f. 629, John Evelyn Jr/John Evelyn, 24 Sept 1672.

²² SJES 8, Susan Evelyn/ Dr. Ralph Bohun, May 4 n.d.

²³ See also JE A2, f.69 and JE A9, Francis Godolphin/John Evelyn, August 9 1690. I thank Douglas Chambers for this reference.

²⁴ JEJ 1, Mary Evelyn Jr/John Evelyn Jr, 1 March 1676.

him a thousand thanks, though his generosity is ‘so much beyond what I ever could have expected.’ Her closing words and signature are framed by respectful one-inch spaces, so as to present her letter prettily.²⁵ These polite letters which seem so formal are the necessary accoutrement of any polite person who must give and receive favours.

As we read them, we see John’s sons and daughters trying to understand how the genre of letter writing works. At first, they only comprehend formal features like overall design and appropriate length. At this stage, the texts strongly resemble spoken language. As youngsters mature, they observe situations that give rise to expected types of letters. They replace stilted compliments with personal sentiments and are learning to become authors.²⁶ Both sexes are expected to participate in this process.

Yet once boys receive a classical education, they have an increasing advantage over their sisters. In many collections we find mandatory Latin letters penned at school from sons to fathers. I have examined 7 from Evelyn’s son and 13 from his grandson. The latter agrees to write to his grandfather at least one Latin letter per month ‘follow[ing] strictly the method of composition prescribed by you’. This is done by the diarist’s ‘command’ not ‘request’, notes Evelyn, as he crosses out the word ‘petitionem’ and replaces it with ‘mandatum.’²⁷

As boys learn to express themselves in Latin, boring as it may be, their command of English also expands.²⁸ The constant translating and polishing of words results in a deep intimacy with language at the most formative stage of development. Most important, the first formal exercise in composition at school is the imitation of Cicero’s letters. The significance of this

²⁵ JEJ 1, Mary Evelyn Jr/John Evelyn Jr., 24 Nov 1682.

²⁶ North MS d.4, ff. 4-14, 1722. Martin Nystrand, *The Structure of Written Communication: Studies in Reciprocity between Writers and Readers*, (Orlando, Florida: Academic Press, 1986), 155, 158.

²⁷ I am indebted to Allan Ronald for his research and translations of Latin letters. JE A4, f.628, John Evelyn Jr/John Evelyn, 22 Aug 1672; f.694, 23 May 1699, and f.695, 2 Oct 1699.

overlooked pedagogical technique cannot be overemphasized. It shows that letter writing was used as a foundational skill for all later learning. Furthermore, schoolboys experienced this basic method for over three hundred years.²⁹ As Evelyn put it, the goal of John Jr.'s education was 'an intire conquest of the two learned Languages:[and] an Easy & Natural style of writing....'³⁰ Elegant epistles that seemed artless, penned at home and then in school, were crucial to achieving this end.

This becomes clear when we observe Evelyn monitoring his grandson John's letters from Oxford. 'Pray forget not to write Latine letters', Evelyn warns, ' 'til you have gotten a style: Cicero & the 2d Pliny...are excellent',³¹ as are 'admirable examples in Erasmus'.³² Following Cicero's rule that subject and purpose determine each letter's character, we find set types such as thank you notes to patrons, and letters of praise that use classical rhetoric and tropes.³³ For example, shortly after John arrives in Oxford, Evelyn gives a sentence-by-sentence description of a letter that he expects John to send to his friend Francis Godolphin (1678-1766). Godolphin is to be married and John must present his congratulations handsomely. Evelyn carefully writes the proper form of address and title. He thinks that cupids and doves will make suitable themes for felicitations to the fair lady. This letter, he warns, is important to the Evelyn family, for it will 'conciliate and cement that family's further kindness'. Evelyn knows 'of no more acceptable & proper method of your expressing yr gratitude, than by Epistles, or Verses, or both'.³⁴

²⁸Harris F. Fletcher, *The Intellectual Development of John Milton*, (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1956), vol. 1, 182.

²⁹T.W. Baldwin, *William Shakspeare's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke*, (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1944), vol. 2, 239-87; J. Brinsley, *Ludus Literarius* (London: T. Man, 1612), 166-171; Fletcher, vol. 1, 206; [William Kempe], *The Education of Children in Learning*, (London: T. Orwin, 1588), G1r,v, (unnumbered page); Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, (Turnhout: Editions Breplos, 1976).

³⁰SJE 1, f.13, John Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 12 June 1699.

³¹SJE 1, f.7, John Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 8 Apr 1699.

³²SJE 1, f.19, John Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 26 Oct 1700.

³³For example, JE A4, f.464, Sir John Evelyn/John Evelyn, 17 June 1700 [endorsed 1701 by John Evelyn].

³⁴SJE 1, f.2, John Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 26 March 1698; f. 3, 18 April 1698; f.19, 26 Oct 1700..

Emotional ties bind the diarist to the Godolphins. Francis's mother Margaret was Evelyn's most intimate soulmate and she died after giving birth to Francis.³⁵ Under the late Stuarts the Godolphins will grow even more powerful, becoming the Evelyns' most influential kin and patrons. Sometime after the diarist's demand for a letter to Francis, young Godolphin is made an exchequer teller. He will 'certainly rise every day higher', notes Evelyn, '& may be able & disposed to do you seasonable kindness'. At this point, Evelyn orders John to write Francis another 'Latine Epistle (becoming yr breeding)'. John must send the original or a copy left open, so that his grandfather may read it first. Though clearly helpful, this must have put pressure on our fledgling letter writer.³⁶

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Comment:

In another action that becomes habitual, Evelyn shows John's epistles to Godolphin to friends outside the family. 'That it was all yr owne', he writes, 'some that I have shew'd it to (and are great judges) would hardly believe...They could not mend it; style & matter & contexture so highly pleasing them'.³⁷ This procedure in which Evelyn literally put words into his grandson's mouth is repeated with the Bishop of Norwich. The Bishop is so impressed with John's letter that he sends the boy a book. John then writes an elegant letter of thanks which the diarist copies and saves, noting it 'is shew'd & spoken of to severall for your style & handsome Addresse to your extraordinary commendation.'³⁸ Further epistles are ordered and sent to John's Uncle Evelyn, to Oxford officials, and to Samuel Pepys.³⁹ Each of the elder's proffered scripts is accompanied by a request to show no one his instructions.⁴⁰ Thus Latin letters are not just academic exercises, they

³⁵ See Francis Harris, this volume; L. Stephen and S. Lee, *DNB*, Vol. VIII, (London: Oxford University Press, 1921-22), 39-40.

³⁶ SJE 1, f.10, John Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 26 May 1699, and f.19, 26 Oct 1700.

³⁷ SJE 1, f.13, John Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 12 June 1699.

³⁸ SJE 1, f.1675, between ff.28 and 29, John Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 6 June 1701; JE A4 f.464, 17 June 1700.

³⁹ SJE 1 f. 15, John Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 5 Aug 1699, and f. 27, 19 Apr 1701; f.29, 6 June 1701; f.33, 19 Dec 1701; f.37, 2 Dec 1701.

⁴⁰ For example, SJE 1, f.2, John Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 26 Mar 1698.

are used for practical purposes in polite society. Indeed, grandfather is giving grandson a passport into a world of patronage and power.

This circulation of manuscript letters creates webs of intimate social networks among family and friends, as well as a community of writers and readers.⁴¹ In 1701, Evelyn encloses a sealed letter to John's Vice Chancellor with the order: 'Deliver it to him with your owne Acknowledgements, as well as mine'. A copy of the enclosure is written on the bottom of the letter, so that the boy will know its contents. This simple act produces a complex chain of interactive letter writers who circulate, then read, then respond to texts in overlapping acts of reading and writing.⁴² Interestingly, John's grandmother Mary, a brilliant letter writer, does not comment on her grandson's epistles. That is her husband's job, not hers.⁴³

Evelyn criticizes as well as praises the boy's Latin, inserting more exact and concise wording.⁴⁴ John's style may be 'excellent', but Evelyn wishes he 'tooke a little more time & care in writing yr epistles'.⁴⁵ 'Either your ill penn, or paper, or both render'd yr lett'r in some places hardly legible'.⁴⁶ John's attempt to please is displayed in a draft of a Latin letter with corrections in every line and doodling on the bottom.⁴⁷ But by 1705, his flourishes, spacing, and flowing hand are becoming more representative of an elegant eighteenth-century epistle. The whole presentation is that of a well-polished gentleman with regard for the outer appearance of letter and person.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Margaret Ezell, *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Peter Beal, *In Praise of Scribes: Manuscripts and their Makers in Seventeenth-Century England*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

⁴² For reading see G.Cavallo, R.Chartier, and L.Cochrane, eds., *A History of Reading in the West*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 1999); Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*, (London: Flamingo, 1997); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); J. Raven, H. Small, and N. Tadmor, *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); SJE 1 f.36, John Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 19 Dec 1701.

⁴³ SJE 1, ff.45-62, Mary Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 1706-8.

⁴⁴ SJE 1, f.17, John Evelyn/ Sir John Evelyn, 7 Oct 1699; JE A4, f.695, 2 Oct 1699.

⁴⁵ SJE 1, f.27, John Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 19 Apr 1701, and f.28, 13 May 1701.

⁴⁶ SJE 1, f.26, John Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 4 Apr 1701.

⁴⁷ SJE 1, draft letter ff.37 and 38, Sir John Evelyn/John Evelyn, and fair copy in JE A4, f.696, 1 Apr 1700.

⁴⁸ JE A4, f.705, Sir John Evelyn/John Evelyn, 9 Aug 1705.

The final letters under scrutiny are written in the eighteenth century by Sir John Evelyn's children--the great-grandchildren of John Evelyn. Their more regular patterns of spelling, punctuation, and handwriting show a shift in epistolary format as well as constant mentoring by kin. The eldest, John (1706-49), at age 11 writes his 'leater' from 'Eaton' in a modern flowing hand with carefully drawn initials.⁴⁹ By now the Godolphins have become so intimate, that John's brother Charles (1709-49) is sent to live with the Countess of Godolphin at the age of ten. Thus Charles has two sets of taskmasters who monitor his letters. In 1725, Lord Godolphin is glad to receive Charles's letter from abroad written in French, though he doubts it is 'of yr own composing'.⁵⁰ At age 15, Charles's large script is made up of carefully rounded letters. A mentor underlines and corrects mistakes in spelling and grammar.⁵¹ This shows the trends toward standardisation that have been evolving in contrast to the varied forms of earlier generations.⁵² The free-flowing, ornamental round hands of Sir John's sons are worlds apart from the tight scrawl of the diarist.

At age 14, however, their sister Mary resists epistolary conventions. Her over-sized letters laced with blots and crossed-out lines show her difficulty in stifling her independence. Someone has underlined her many misspelled words and inserted those that she left out. Thirteen years later, however, we see her writing a typical polite letter that varies little from those of her siblings. Her letters give visual proof of her acculturation to social conventions.⁵³

The Evelyn case study demonstrates the almost obsessive importance that literate families placed on teaching epistolary skills. In every generation, letter writing was fostered at an early age.

⁴⁹ SJE 10, Sir John Evelyn2/Sir John Evelyn, 22 Sept [1717].

⁵⁰ SJE 8, Francis, 2nd Earl Godolphin/Charles Evelyn, 25 Apr 1726 (old style).

⁵¹ SJE 11A, Charles Evelyn/Sir John Evelyn, 14 Oct 1726, and 6 Nov 1731.

⁵² Cary Mc Intosh, *The Evolution of English Prose: Style, Politeness, and Print Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Terttu Nevalainen and Helena Raumolin-Brunberg, eds., *Sociolinguistics and Language History: Studies based on the Corpus of Early English Correspondence*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996); David Graddol, Dick Leith, and Joan Swann, *English: History, Diversity and Change*, (London: Routledge 1996).

Children learned to write fluently, master conventions, organize content, and present themselves as polite persons. Elders set high standards, which they passed on to their children, and constantly reinforced them through mentoring and praise. They did this because they saw letter writing as more than just a useful skill. Unlike music, art, and drawing, which were also taught, letter writing was the first visual proof that a child was assenting to, or resisting, social conventions and norms. In a culture that prized language, conversation, and manners, letter writing was a measurable prerequisite for entry into the adult world.

Thus, at age 13 in 1695, the diarist's grandson John wrote to his father in flourished cursive letters: 'My love to my sister, and tell her that I shall be very glad when she can write that I may hold correspondence with her'.⁵⁴ This sentence shows that at the first possible time of written self-expression, entering epistolary networks was a natural and expected birthright for literate children. As John Locke advised, all types of learning might become delightful activities if taught at home at an early age when the mind was uncluttered.⁵⁵

Scores of children's letters in other archives confirm their claim to being rites of passage. Likewise, most literate children had epistolary mentors, including parents, siblings, and godparents. They were specifically appointed to read, correct, and monitor first epistles and their corrections still exist. Since elite boys left home for public school at an early age, letter writing may have been more intense for this group. But both sexes were expected to write letters at regular intervals. Lapses were considered a breach of duty.

Not surprisingly, children's letters in different collections have a tendency to look alike. They are filled with large unjoined letters that reveal slow, painful copying, and paper is often ruled. Blots and crossed out words flourish, while margins are violated by unexpected length of

⁵³ SJE 14, Mary Evelyn/Anne Evelyn, 30 May 1724 and Mary Evelyn/Sir John and Lady Evelyn 16 June 1737.

⁵⁴ JEJ 1, Sir John Evelyn/John Evelyn Jr., 18 Aug 1695.

words. Spelling is phonetic, but forms of address are scrupulously correct. These letters illuminate the process by which politeness was learned. In fact, the entire life cycle was filled with epistolary rituals. As children became parents they offered their own advice and the pattern reoccurred. Clearly, literate families felt that letter writing helped their children to function in a society that depended upon social relationships.

It was purposeful family training, not modern letter-writing manuals, which produced early epistolary skills. Clearly, the primary models in the minds of young Evelyns were the family letters that they had a duty to write and receive. They also found ideal examples in letters of their Evelyn ancestors, which young ladies were asked to copy. Hence, Mary Evelyn's letters of the 1660s were transcribed into books by her great-granddaughter Mary in 1730.⁵⁶ In other family archives, we see similar young women copying letters and absorbing their contents and style.⁵⁷

Letter writing manuals may have been helpful to non-elites. Or they may have been read for impractical reasons: to enter a restricted social world, for romantic entertainment, or for literary interest.⁵⁸ The Evelyns, however, had little need for French models or business formularies. Better examples were found in classical antecedents, as Douglas Chambers shows in his essay. They were also located in contemporary literature, as well as popular and elite culture, in both printed and manuscript form.⁵⁹

In fact, the boundaries between story telling and real letters were constantly transgressed. Thus when Evelyn's grandson John wrote a letter describing his travels, he noted: 'I have run

⁵⁵ John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, (London: A. and J. Churchill, 1693).

⁵⁶ ME 11, Mary Evelyn's letters 1657-1670s, in the hand of Mary Evelyn, daughter of Sir John Evelyn.

⁵⁷ For example, Bodl MS Facs.54, Letters from Relations and Friends of Esther Masham, 1722.

⁵⁸ Roger Chartier, 'Introduction: An Ordinary Kind of Writing' and 'Secretaires for the People?' in R. Chartier, A. Boureau, and C. Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 1-23, 59-111. For manuals generally see K. Hornbeak, 'The Complete Letter Writer in England 1586-1800', *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 15 (1934), 1-150 and Jean Robertson, *The Art of Letter Writing*, (London: University Press of Liverpool, 1942).

through each of the things I saw in some order, and have offered to your eyes events of daily life in a rude and incomplete account, as if putting together a story'. He hastened to add that he hoped he had not strayed 'too far beyond the proper bounds of a letter'. As Evelyn youngsters wrote letters, they learned to use narrative by telling stories about their daily lives. In this sense, their letter writing was a precondition, along with other factors, for the eighteenth century world of letters. Just as children's epistles taught manners, so letter writing, generally, provided a training ground for a free and easy command of the English language. Since the Evelyns wrote family letters outside of institutions, it might empower them as individuals, but it also indoctrinated them in the values of polite society.

In practice, letter writing was always a two-edged sword. As Evelyn children matured, the epistolary format provided opportunities for free self-expression. It also gave them practice in the art of manipulating language to attain personal goals. This was particularly important for some women⁶⁰ and middling-sort letter writers⁶¹ who had educational disadvantages and less opportunity to write. Yet if schooling inequities led to difficulties with spelling, grammar, and presentation, this did not stem the flow of polite letters to and from women and middling-sort writers.

Within elites, public school and university widened the gap between brothers and sisters, but the earlier equality in nurturing letter writing gave women an epistolary foundation for life. In the late-seventeenth century, it spawned a generation of female letter writers. By the eighteenth

⁵⁹ It is not surprising that the printer Richardson started with real letters and framed them into a letter-writing manual on the suggestion of two booksellers. The manual, in turn, led to the development of the novel, Pamela.

⁶⁰ C. Goldsmith, ed., Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature, (London: Pinter, 1989), xii; Ruth Perry, Women, Letters, and the Novel, (New York: AMS Press, 1980), 68-70; Patricia M. Spacks, Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 83-109; Mary Favret, Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁶¹ Middling-sort letter writing lies outside the limits of this paper but is covered in forthcoming publications.

century, women's letters would even be published.⁶² It is not surprising that John's wife Mary, her daughter Mary, and her great-granddaughter Elizabeth wrote as easily as their brothers, and they may have been less constrained by classical formulas. In contrast, John Jr.'s wife, Martha (c1661-1726), the daughter of a wealthy Levant merchant, still spelled phonetically and crossed out mistakes as an adult. Her different early background was revealed in her letters. They indicate that rank could override gender when it came to letter writing.⁶³

The Evelyns and other elite families used letters to meet a broad range of personal, social, and dynastic needs. I have focused on the ritual role of conventional, children's letters because they illuminate the larger social framework in which they were written. They help us to look at personal letters as material artefacts that evolved over time into showcases for polite breeding. In this role, they introduced young people to society, connected them to patronage networks, and gave them with a new respect for the English language. They were saved because their owners read them, treasured them, and saw them as valuable possessions. We are the latest generation in a chain of privileged readers who may use them to understand the past.

⁶² For example, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M---y W---y M---e: Written during her Travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa.... (London: T. Brecket and P. A. De Hondt..., 1763); R. Brimley Johnson, Bluestocking Letters, (London: John Lane, 1926).

⁶³ For Elizabeth see ME 3, Elizabeth Evelyn/ Mary Evelyn, July 12 [1695], and 20 Aug [1697]. For Martha see ME 3, Martha Evelyn/Mary Evelyn, 13 Aug 1692, and 6 Nov 1695. Martha (d.1726) was a younger daughter of Richard Spencer, Turkey merchant (d.1667). Her mother remarried Sir John Stonhouse a year after Spencer's death. The Historical Register... Volume XI, For the Year 1726... with a Chronological Diary, (London: R. Nutt, [1726], 36; E..S. De Beer, The Diary of John Evelyn, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), iv, 189-96.