

Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1680–1820. By EVE TAVOR BANNET. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 371 pages. \$90.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Northwestern University*

“What can bespeak the Gentleman, the Scholar, or the Man of Business, better than a well wrote Letter? How very persuasive it is! how anxiously it pleads its Master’s Cause!” So declared a 1789 edition of the most popular letter-writing manual of the eighteenth century, *The Complete Letter-Writer*. Targeting the concerns that drove many to wish to master the “well wrote Letter,” letter-writing manuals proliferated in Great Britain and its American colonies in the eighteenth century. Though such manuals was popular and many works were reprinted throughout the century, few scholars have devoted much attention to them. This was true in 1934, when Katherine Gee Hornbeak published her pioneering study of this genre, and until lately, little had changed.¹¹ More recently, however, historians and literary scholars have begun to focus much more on this genre and the place of letters in eighteenth-century life more generally.

In *Empire of Letters*, literary scholar Eve Tavor Bannet devotes sustained attention to letter-writing manuals, their publication histories, and their lessons. Her coverage—from England to Scotland to the North American mainland colonies and states—is commendable. The book is well organized and offers fine-grained analysis of the complex, wide-ranging genre of the letter manual. Moving beyond the epistolary novel, Bannet looks to numerous manuals, some canonical texts that include letters, and an occasional unpublished (at the time) letter to make her persuasive claim that “letter manuals provide a heretofore largely untapped box of tools, which change the ways in which we can understand and read manuscript, printed and ‘literary’ letters” (313).

After all, in the eighteenth century, learning to write letters well was an essential skill for many gentlemen, scholars, and men of business, as well as their wives and daughters, especially if their ventures immersed them in ever-burgeoning empires. Bannet suggests the interconnected-ness of letters and empire, arguing that manuals encouraged their readers to imagine transatlantic families, friends, businesses, and nations and to consider correspondents “beyond the Sea” (41). Relying on notions of Anglicization and

¹¹ *The Complete Letter-Writer; Or, Polite English Secretary . . .* (London, 1789), 2: title page; Katherine Gee Hornbeak, “The Complete Letter Writer in English, 1568–1800,” *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 15, nos. 3–4 (April–July 1934): iii–150. There seems to have been virtually no coverage of this genre from the 1940s until the 1990s, at least in the Anglophone world. The first scholar to devote recent, sustained attention to it was Konstantin Dierks. See Dierks, “Letter Writing, Gender, and Class in America, 1750–1800” (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1999); Dierks, “Letter Manuals, Literary Innovation, and the Problem of Defining Genre in Anglo-American Epistolary Instruction, 1568–1800,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 94, no. 4 (December 2000): 541–50. (The latter is one of the many relevant secondary sources not cited by Bannet.) Other recent works on this genre include Sarah M. S. Pearsall, “‘After All These Revolutions’: Epistolary Identities in an Atlantic World, 1760–1815” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2001); Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke, Eng., 2006).

exceptionalism, Bannet contends that “the extension of letter-writing to all manner and ranks of people in late seventeenth-and eighteenth-century Britain and British-America by means of manuals . . . coincided with the expansion of empire, and was its *sine qua non*” (4). According to Bannet, the kinds of conventions marketed by the manuals informed the letters of many writers, allowing them to begin to participate in imperial networks of communication.

The first part of the book deals with the context of letter writing, the “letteracy” of individuals in this period, and the “architectonics” of letter-writing manuals. This section includes basic coverage of the postal system, literacy, and the use of standardized English as well as concerns about the range of classes addressed. Bannet might have done more to trace the circulation of the manuals (full library catalogues and probate inventories would have supplied more concrete evidence for her claims about their popularity). Nevertheless she does look briefly at these issues, arguing on the basis of the sheer number of editions that manuals were, in David D. Hall’s words, “steady sellers” (22) on both sides of the Atlantic. She pays close attention to the various forms of letters offered in these manuals, making clear the formulaic nature of a number of key epistolary types (letters of condolence, for instance). This provides a useful corrective to scholars who have too often used such letters as evidence of “genuine feelings.” There was a long tradition of writing letters in which even the spaces left near the superscription and subscription were significant, and Bannet is attentive to these textual subtleties. She also ably details how letters might have been read and shared.

The second part of the book focuses on the manuals themselves as well as on the ways in which different versions of the same manual were often reprinted at different times and places. Chapter 3 focuses on manuals of the early eighteenth century, particularly John Hill’s *The Young Secretary’s Guide* and Thomas Goodman’s *The Experienc’d Secretary*. Chapter 4 examines the period from 1750 to 1800 and the widespread popularity of *The Complete Letter-Writer*, which, Bannet posits, marked a “cultural shift” (151) in the 1750s in both style and treatment of issues. Chapter 6 investigates the period from the 1790s to 1820, looking at Thomas Cooke’s *The Universal Letter-Writer*.²² These chapters combine to make Bannet’s argument that “each manual title must therefore be considered as representing a variable ‘series’ of versions rather than the label for a fixed book” (107). Some of her individual claims are rather glib, such as her contention that a Scottish reprinting of a letter manual in the postrevolutionary period reflects the peculiarly debt-ridden and depressed economy of Glasgow, as though Glasgow were unique in suffering from postwar debts and depression (173–74). Still she has set herself a difficult task: explaining the great variety of choices printers made in reprinting some letters and not others.

The last section, which includes a chapter on the culture of secrecy in letter writing, is in some regards the most interesting. Bannet explores issues of censorship as well as instructions given by some manuals on the writing of encoded or cryptic letters. Some of Bannet’s

²² [John] Hill, *The Young Secretary’s Guide; Or, A Speedy Help to Learning. In Two Parts . . .* (London, 1696); Thomas Goodman, *The Experienc’d Secretary; Or, Citizen and Country-man’s Companion. In Two Parts . . .* (London, 1699); Thomas Cooke, *The Universal Letter-Writer; Or, New Art of Polite Correspondence . . .* (London, [1770]).

analysis may be overdrawn (many writers do not seem to have worried unduly about censors). Nevertheless she offers an original account of how private letters were sometimes meant to be secret. She picks apart claims about Habermasian public/private distinctions to suggest the myriad ways that letters blurred such easy distinctions. The final chapter looks at Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, *The Spectator*, and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* to uncover the ways in which letters functioned in these texts, as well as to increase our appreciation of the ways in which letters' conventions informed them and their meanings. Though Bannet, surprisingly, has little to say about epistolary novels, the same techniques would likely help to decode some of their assumptions too.

Though much of *Empire of Letters* is sound, there are inevitably problems. Most troubling to historians will be the implied claim that letter-writing manuals entirely set the terms by which individuals learned to write letters. Bannet wonders, "What did one say to a son, a daughter, a friend, on the other side of Britain or of the Atlantic who wanted to marry a person one had never seen? And when it could take from six months to a year to receive an answer to a transatlantic letter, how did one so construct a letter of business as to ensure that nothing that one's trading partner needed to know had been forgotten? Transcription . . . was an easy way of solving these problems" (100). Never mind that it would have taken a year to receive a reply only in the most exceptional and unlucky circumstances; three to four months was far more likely. Bannet's assumption appears to be that people simply followed such manuals, either transcribing from them directly, imitating them, or, if especially talented, combining various printed letter forms to create their own letters. Here she may suffer from a lack of familiarity with unpublished letters of this period, which show a much greater variety of epistolary registers. Her brief foray into such letters (as in a discussion of a few of Eliza Lucas Pinckney's letters) rightly begins to suggest the generic nature of many letters, but her assumption that these model letters would have been entirely familiar to Pinckney and her father and were being cited implicitly is not persuasive. Surely there were conventions, picked up from these manuals or learned from family and acquaintances. Nevertheless their existence does not mean that individuals docilely or exclusively followed manual examples or, indeed, that it was not actual letters that inspired the model versions (instead of the reverse). Bannet does not allow for this latter possibility, and this assumption—that manuals were the active agents, ordinary writers the passive users of them—is problematic. Many people had plenty to say to family, friends, agents, and business partners overseas with little help from any manuals, even as they understood and sometimes flagged the conventions of letter writing. *Empire of Letters* also suffers from a tendency to quote from printed material too extensively (for example, one quoted letter spans pages 83 to 85). Additionally, Bannet appears to have consulted few previous works on transatlantic letters, and even more general work on letters has been underplayed.

Nevertheless this book succeeds in offering what its author hopes: "some preliminary inroads into as yet largely uncharted territory" (xxiii). Even if the territory is not quite as uncharted as Bannet and her bibliography suggest, the volume offers good coverage of a relatively underexplored genre and makes some intriguing claims about the relationship

between epistles and empire. It is especially useful in highlighting the conventional and generic aspects of eighteenth-century letters. For scholars interested in the histories of letter writing and the book, of which there are an increasing number, this scholar has pleaded her cause well and so performed a valuable service.