

‘Letters and Literature 1500-2025: Histories, Forms, Communities’

The Open University: 5, 6, 7 November 2025

ABSTRACTS AND SPEAKER BIOS

Wednesday 5 November

PANEL 1 Early-Modern Humanists and Letters

Chair: Jonathan Gibson

Halszka Lelen: Voice, Faith, and Dialogic Poetics in Thomas More’s Prison Letters

Abstract This presentation will focus on the prison letters of Thomas More (1478-1535), with particular attention to his use of language, literary devices, and storytelling strategies that reflect dynamic shifts in the writer’s emotions as well as personal and spiritual attitudes. A leading English humanist of the Renaissance, the former highest-ranking statesman, and the author of the genre-defining *Utopia* (1516), More displays in these letters a sophisticated yet carefully controlled command of rhetorical structures, rich imagery, and suggestive metaphors – devices increasingly shaped by the profound change he underwent during his imprisonment. Written from the Tower of London between April 1534 and his execution in July 1535, these letters were addressed to a range of recipients, from political figures to close family members. The analysis examines how these texts reveal varied rhetorical and stylistic techniques used not only to express personal experience but also to shape the views of the addressees, among others, through sharing his personal creed and evolving faith. This paper demonstrates that the shifts in tone and voice, as well as the interplay of diverse linguistic registers in More’s egodocuments during this period of his life, reveal the presence and crucial role of dialogic imagination, as theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin. The presentation will lead to understanding how More’s letters reflect not only a range of speech types but also a dialogic conception of the self – an identity formed in relation to the addressees of these texts and to more broadly conceived others that the letters speak of. This will help to better understand how meaning arises from complex relational exchanges that integrate competing worldviews within the writer’s voice.

Bio Halszka Lelen, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Literary Studies, University of Warmia and Mazury, Poland. She is the author of *H.G. Wells: The Literary Traveller in His Fantastic Short Story Machine* (2016). She has also coedited *Old and New Mixed Together: Communication and Culture in the New Media Era* (2016) and edited *Sanctity as a Story: Narrative (In)variants of the Saint in Literature and Culture* (2020). She holds a habilitation in literary studies (2025), awarded for a series of fourteen articles on Archipelagic poetics in George Mackay Brown’s writing. Her broad research interests comprise the ways of redynamising conventions in literary and cultural narratives as well as the storytelling patterns in egodocuments.

Martina Hacke: Johann Amerbach’s Network of Letters (1483 – 1513)

Abstract In 1509, Alexius Staab (OSB) from St. Blasien called the Basel publisher Johann Amerbach (ca. 1460-1513) an ‘excellent and conscientious keeper of literature and the community’ (*Prestans Litterarie que reipublice conseruator accuratus*). His significant activity as a humanist printer and

publisher was based on his correspondence. With a few exceptions, half of this correspondence has survived, namely mostly only the letters that arrived in Basel, around 317 letters from 71 people. Amerbach's network differs from that of the humanists of the 'res publica litterarum' in that he himself was a printer and publisher who published works by writers. This contribution will take a first look at the relationship between letters and literature in his correspondence. The question of the connection between the letter writers and literature is one aspect. Many were involved in the production and distribution of books at different stages. Some of them were responsible for manuscripts, such as Augustinus Dodo. Others were responsible for editorial preparation, such as the humanists Konrad Leontorius, Jakob Wimpfeling and Beatus Rhenanus. Philologists were among them, which at that time usually meant not only Latin, but also Greek and, in the best case, Hebrew, as well as theologians, lawyers, physicians and philosophers. The technical side included papermakers, cartographers, painters, engravers, draughtsmen and, of course, printers and booksellers themselves. However, the investigation of the relationship between letters and literature is not limited to a prosopographical study. Another topic is the question of correspondence as the place where decisions about the publication of a work are made. One example of this is the discussion between Amerbach and Johannes Heynlin de Lapide, to whom Amerbach had turned with the question of what he thought of the publication of 'De scriptoribus ecclesiasticis' by Johann Trithemius. Which aspects of the relationship between letters and literature Amerbach's correspondence reveals depends on how this relationship can be defined.

Bio Martina Hacke is a medievalist specializing in the history of universities (Paris) and communication (messengers and envoys, letters and transport). She has also been researching communication structures in early printing and the book trade up to 1520 for several years.

M.A. Katritzky: Margaret Cavendish (1623–73) and Gottfried Burghart (1705–71): atypically-bodied itinerant performers in 'theatre letters'

Abstract The term 'theatre letters' encompasses genuine personal correspondence, but also writings that use the familiar conventions of domestic letter writing to share information impersonally. In *Sociable Letters* (1664), the English writer, dramatist and philosopher Margaret Cavendish (1623–73) provides a valuable example of a 'theatre letter'. It details attractions Cavendish experienced at Antwerp fairs of the 1650s, including commedia dell'arte actresses and an atypically-bodied itinerant performer, the Bavarian harpsichordist Barbara Urslerin, who inherited the medical condition of hypertrichosis. *Sociable Letters* perfected letter writing conventions as a way of using non-specialist, conversational vernacular to present scientific and cultural information with greater potential for interactivity and immediacy than learned essays. Members of London's Royal Society banned Cavendish from its meetings and belittled her writings. However, their scientific journal, *Philosophical Transactions*, founded in March 1665, strongly promoted literary letters as a major vehicle for informal scientific communication. My researches into two letters in *Philosophical Transactions* reporting on atypically-bodied itinerant performers as teenagers, identified detailed eye-witness accounts of them as adults, in eighteenth-century German language 'theatre letters' published by the Silesian medical doctor, teacher and dramatist Gottfried Burghart. The French hermaphrodite Michel-Anne Drouart, whose London visit is reported to the Royal Society in James Parson's letter of 1750, is the subject of Burghart's letter of 1763. Burghart's letter of 1752 documents the much less well known Italian conjoined twin Antonio Martinelli, reported to the Royal Society in Andrew Cantwell's letter of 1731, and further atypically-bodied itinerant performers virtually lost to theatre history, Martinelli's double-jointed acrobatic wife and family.

Bio M. A. Katritzky is Professor of Theatre Studies and Director, The Open University Centre for Research into Gender and Otherness in the Humanities at The Open University and co-editor (with Pavel Drábek) of *Transnational Connections in Early Modern Theatre* (2020). Monographs include: *Healing, performance and ceremony in the writings of three early modern physicians*: (2012), *Women, medicine and theatre 1500-1750* (2007) and *The Art of commedia* (2006).

Guillaume Coatalen: The letters of John Lyly

Abstract Quite a few manuscript letters by Lyly survive, two petitionary letters to Queen Elizabeth I, one letter to Burghley, and several to Robert Cecil. The multiple copies of the ones to the Queen prove how appreciated they were. They were most probably kept as suitable models for similar letters addressed to important recipients. Indeed, Lyly wrote to impress and did so by using remarkable figures of speech, most of which are strongly reminiscent of Latin verse (notably Ovid) and prose he was familiar with, thanks to his humanistic education. Based on this corpus (conveniently edited and published by Feuillerat in 1910), this paper looks into what it means to write nicely for someone like Lyly, an author well-known for Euphuism, an artificial style typical of his prose romance *Euphues*. This style was at work in his letters as well. Lyly's works were fashionable and the addressees may have recognised these particular stylistic traits from reading them in print or from watching his plays performed. Beyond the example of Lyly, the shared style encourages critics to compare epistolary and dramatic styles, a path which is too rarely taken, since plays and letters are often perceived as belonging to quite distinct genres. A later fairly obvious example of an established author who wrote plays and letters is provided by Ben Jonson. Thus, this case study has larger implications for the study of epistolary styles as attempts to stage one's voice and make a lasting impression on readers, the equivalent of an audience.

Bio Guillaume Coatalen is Professor of English studies at the University of Versailles Saint Quentin. He has published on a variety of topics including early modern manuscripts, translation, rhetoric, Elizabeth I's French correspondence and Petrarchan sonnets. He is the author of *Two Elizabethan Treatises on Rhetoric: Richard Rainold's Foundation of Rhetoricke (1563) and William Medley's Brief Notes in Manuscript (1575)* (Brill, 2018) and the co-author of *Elizabeth I's foreign correspondence: letters, rhetoric, and politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and of *Translating Petrarch's Poetry: L'Aura del Petrarca from the Quattrocento to the 21st Century* (Legenda, 2020). He is completing a book on the figure of the poet in early modern plays for Manchester University Press.

Sierra Carter: Epistolary Voices: The History of Quotation Marks in Early Modern English Literature

Abstract Quotation marks, as bibliographers and linguists have long agreed, did not emerge until the eighteenth century. In the preceding centuries, when inverted commas appeared in manuscript and print, they were used to denote commonplaces: aphorisms and conceits that were circulated as shared, common truths. This recounting of the quotation mark's development, however, does not account for quoted letters that appear in sixteenth and seventeenth century literature.

By tracing occurrences of quotation marks through letter-reading scenes in sixteenth century novellas and drama, this paper details a new cross-genre history of quotation in early modern England: one that emerges from writers' and printers' attempts to navigate the complexities of representing epistolary voices in literary texts. In the 1560s, William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*, a collection of Italianate novellas, changed the state of English prose fiction and its *mise-en-page*. Thousands of quotation marks line the margins of these tales, marking out occurrences of direct dialogue as well as correspondence, crafting a visual link between characters' speech and their letters. This typographic design speaks to popular definitions of the familiar letter. Echoing St. Jerome, Erasmus described letters as 'a mutual conversation between absent friends.' In the wake of Painter's *Palace*, similar quotation marks began to accompany letters in Italianate English drama, appearing in manuscript copies for wealthy patrons as well as printed playbooks marketed to a wide variety of readers. As this

paper shows, plays like *Gismond of Salerne*, Antony Munday's *Fedele and Fortunio*, and Thomas May's *The Heir* further reinforced the relationship between letters and quotation marks, transforming how early book users imagined epistolary authorship and what it meant to inhabit another's epistolary voice by reading letters aloud. When brought together, these texts illuminate an untold story about epistolary culture, authorship, and the literary origins of quotation as punctuation.

Bio Sierra Carter recently completed their PhD at the University of York. Their thesis, "Epistolary Culture and Early Modern English Drama, c.1550-1642," examines letters across manuscript, performance, and printed playbooks. Their current research considers the printed letter in romances, miscellanies, and letter-writing manuals as a material and literary form.

PANEL 2b Illustrated Epistolary Texts

Lik Hang Tsui: The Many Lives of Epistolary Manuscripts in Imperial China: From Calligraphic Artifacts to Engraved Models [Lightning talk]

Abstract No cultural history of letters is complete without considering their materiality. Probing into this materiality requires examining letters not only as containers of communicative messages but as outcomes of epistolary cultures that augment, supplement, and even disrupt those messages. A compelling case is the materiality of epistolary writings in Chinese history. My presentation explores how the genre of letters, particularly sub-genres like *chidu* (informal notes), functioned in their written, inscribed, and reproduced forms during late imperial China. During this time, letters became a sophisticated literary genre, a medium for constructing cultural knowledge, a form of calligraphic art, and an essential mode of communication among learned elites. Literati officials (*shi*) redefined written practices during this period, setting the paradigm for later Chinese and East Asian letter-writing traditions. Traditionally regarded as works of literati calligraphy, epistolary manuscripts have often been studied as art objects. However, they also carry crucial information about literati culture, warranting analysis from broader cultural history perspectives. My study moves beyond the concept of 'originals' to examine reproduced manuscripts from late imperial China, including letter paper recycled for printing, engraved model letters in rubbings, and transcribed letters in anthologies. By addressing the underestimated significance of Chinese letters, this research emphasizes their material aspects and their role as cultural actors within a cultural context that values highly the material and symbolic dimension of writing. Furthermore, my perspective will contribute to the comparative study of epistolary traditions, highlighting the vibrant and multi-faceted letter-writing culture of imperial China alongside other global traditions.

Bio Lik Hang Tsui is Associate Professor in the Department of Chinese and History at the City University of Hong Kong. He earned his BA from Peking University and a doctorate from the University of Oxford. Before his current post, he served as a Departmental Lecturer at Oxford and a Postdoctoral Fellow at Harvard with the China Biographical Database (CBDB) project. He has published on premodern Chinese history, especially epistolary culture and urban history, as well as on digital humanities for Asian history.

Alex Cohen: A thousand words: illustrated letters and their place in art history [Lightning talk]

Abstract Letters abound in the western art historical canon. They are deployed to identify portrait sitters, create narrative tension and anchor still-lives. Despite their ubiquity, they are most often treated as subject matter, not medium — at least in public. Our most celebrated visual communicators didn't reserve their artistic outpourings for gallery-goers, and how could they? For many, illustration trumped written language for accuracy of expression, and at writing desks throughout art history, drawing and doodling said what words couldn't. Picasso sketched where his phonetic French failed him, Alexander Calder couldn't help but draw mobile-like directions to his home for a visitor, and wildly prolific draughtsmen like Randolph Caldecott revealed their compulsion to create in heavily-

illustrated personal correspondence. As the Smithsonian's Liza Kirwin puts it, 'In an era when personal communication more than likely travels through the ether than through the post office ... Illustrated letters are rare, and handmade communications are liable to become even rarer ... A material treasure is all but disappearing from our culture.' Illustrated letters rarely occupy the same frames and plinths as paintings, sculptures or even preparatory sketches, private as they often were. Despite that, they have plenty to communicate about the private creative output of some of our most celebrated artists, and our shifting modes of communication. There have been a select few surveys of illustrated letters as a medium, and a lightning talk on the unusual place they occupy within the western art historical canon would afford an opportunity to discuss some of our most visually expressive epistolers, share some examples, and draw attention to a rare phenomenon: an endangered medium.

Bio Alex Cohen is a freelance writer based in London. He has an MLitt in the History of Art from the University of St Andrews, and a BA in the History of Art from New York University.

PANEL 3 Renaissance correspondences Chair: Edmund King

Jonathan Gibson: Elizabethan 'letters to show' in life and literature; **Molly Ziegler:** Staged letters in early modern drama; **Tim Hammond:** *England's Heroicall Epistles*: Michael Drayton's love letters to the theatre; **Liz Ford:** 'Here it is written': correspondence and genre in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

Abstract The four short papers on this panel examine a number of different types of 'correspondences' in early modern writing. The first half of the panel addresses correspondences in two of Shakespeare's plays. Ford examines a brief scene, early in *Romeo and Juliet*, which reveals how a moment of traditional comic action shapes the rest of the tragedy. Ziegler's paper addresses the significance of letters in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594). In the play, letters play an integral role in offering key insight into the play's construction of power, identity and race. In the second half, Gibson's 'letters to show' questions whether letters are deliberately written to be shown and/or read aloud to someone other than the apparent addressee, sketching out a typology of such letters which compares and contrasts examples in literature and in 'real' life. Hammond argues that Drayton's *Heroicall Epistles* (1597), the passionate and intimate correspondence of couples from English history, perpetuate, extend and modify material with which Drayton was familiar, to a large extent, from these figures' representation in the contemporary London theatre.

Bios Jonathan Gibson is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at The Open University. He has published widely on early modern authors and topics, including Elizabeth I, Raleigh, Hutchinson, Wroth, Shakespeare, Philip Sidney, Spenser, translation, codicology, Elizabethan fiction and the protocols of early modern letter-writing. For the last few years, much of his research has focused on the materiality of early modern manuscripts. With Carlo Bajetta (University of the Valle d'Aosta), he is general editor of a new edition of the complete works of Sir Walter Raleigh under contract with Oxford University Press.

Molly Ziegler is a lecturer in drama and performance studies at the Open University. Her research on early modern theatre, madness and disease may be found in the *Journal of Early Modern Studies*, *Early Theatre* and the edited collection *Care and Contagion in Shakespeare's Changing World* (Bloomsbury-Arden, 2025). Her forthcoming monograph, *Staging Madness: Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, is due to be published by Palgrave as part of their Shakespeare Studies Series.

Tim Hammond is a Staff Tutor in the English and Creative Writing Department of the Open University. His principal research interests are in the field of English early modern drama. He is currently working on a study of Ian Burton's adaptations of Shakespeare for the libretti of three operas

by Giorgio Batistelli. His interest in British film led recently to the recording of an interview with the film producer Gavrik Losey for the archive of the British Entertainment History Project.

Liz Ford is a Staff Tutor and Senior Lecturer in English at the Open University. Her research is grounded in the material conditions of playwriting surrounding and informing the composition and revision of Shakespeare's plays. It is concerned, in particular, with the material culture of the early modern printed book and how traces of the social and cultural interactions between actors and playwrights can be found in the extant sixteenth and seventeenth-century printed copies of Shakespeare's plays. Liz has a forthcoming chapter on *Titus Andronicus* in a collection edition of essays entitled *L'Acteur Comique*, due to be published by the University of Rennes 2 this year.

KEYNOTE Mel Evans (University of Leeds): 'What letter's that?' Exploring style and literariness in early modern fictional correspondence. Chair: Rachele de Felice

This keynote lecture investigates two related questions using computational stylistic and corpus-based techniques: What makes a literary letter a plausible example of an epistolary text, whilst serving the needs of its fictional environment? In what ways does the style of a fictional letter differ across literary genres on stage and page?... See link for more [Letters and Literature 1500-2025, The Open University](#)

PANEL 4 Staged letters

Chair: Hannah Lavery

Kerry Cooke: 'Streamers, white, red, black, here, here, here': The weaponization of epistolary practice in *Tamburlaine*.

Abstract Christopher Marlowe's play *Tamburlaine* has one (seemingly inconsequential) packet of letters. Otherwise, the 'war-like' play appears to be without epistolary action. Instead, its martial plot seems mobilized almost entirely by the very brutal and physical acts of war: with brutal consequence, *Tamburlaine* marshals men, horses, and swords who occupy tents raised in the colors of their tyrant's intentions — white, red, or black. All of this, of course, is the typical fodder of war.

But *Tamburlaine* is not typical. Marlowe's plays are not, in fact, typical. As part of a broader study of letters in Marlowe's canon for the new *Oxford Handbook of Christopher Marlowe*, this essay studies the way he weaponizes epistolary practice: in *Tamburlaine*, soldiers are also secretaries; swords are pens, blood is ink, wounds are seals — and tents? They are the material and color of letters themselves. In effect, *Tamburlaine* mobilizes and weaponizes epistolary allusion to paper, write, and seal his empire.

Bio Kerry Cooke is an Associate Dean of the School of Visual and Performing Arts at Mary Baldwin University where she also teaches Shakespeare and early modern drama. Her research focuses on letters and epistolary theory in sixteenth and seventeenth-century literature and drama.

Kiera Clark: 'My dearest partner of greatness': The Letter as a Site of Gender Disruption in *Macbeth* [Lightning talk]

Abstract The letter in act 1 scene 5 of *Macbeth* (1623) serves an important purpose in the play beyond simply recounting the witches' prophecy. Rather, it acts as a catalyst for the disruption of traditional gender roles, igniting Lady Macbeth's ambition and assigning her a certain degree of agency as an equal party in her marriage. In turn, the letter redefines gender norms and disrupts social conventions by allowing Lady Macbeth to exert this autonomy. Further, the letter blurs the lines between the public and private spheres, allowing Lady Macbeth to influence the political affairs in the

play. While Early Modern women were often expected to be submissive and subordinate, the female role is reimagined as ambitious, manipulative, and power-hungry. However, the letter also ties Lady Macbeth to her husband. Though she can access knowledge that would be traditionally hidden from women, she can only do so through the letter, suggesting female power and agency is only possible through male knowledge and approval. By tying her agency to her husband's words, the letter both empowers and confines her. Thus, the letter functions as an underlying critique of social fears around women in power while simultaneously highlighting how different forms of text can reflect and reinforce gendered power structures. Rather than just a narrative device, Shakespeare uses the letter as a symbol of gender disruption and transgression that becomes a pattern in the play, where power dynamics are fluid and gender boundaries blurred.

Bio Kiera Clark (BA'24 Hons) is an English MA student at the University of Victoria. Her research focuses on women's writing and early modern drama, particularly the role and portrayal of women in literature and history and the interactions of gender and social hierarchies. Her MA thesis explores female speech and femicide in early modern drama.

Alexandra E. LaGrand: Much Ado About Beatrice: Anne Scott in Sir Walter Scott's Letters [Lightning talk]

Abstract On the official website for Abbotsford, home of Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott, there are just three sentences written regarding Scott's second daughter, Anne. These brief biographical details do little to actually characterize Anne, as they merely describe her as one who entertained her parents and guests with music, remained unmarried, cared for her parents on their deathbeds, and was so affected by her father's death that she died young, at just thirty years old, in 1833.¹ With so little known about Anne, one cannot help but wonder about her life and how she fit into the Scott family. Because of ongoing scholarly work on the letters of Walter Scott and Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth, it is now possible to learn more about Anne. For instance, in a 23 March 1825 letter from Scott to Edgeworth, Scott wrote, 'Did it ever strike you that Anne (talent apart) has an odd cast of Beatrices [sic] humor?'² With the knowledge that Scott was heavily influenced by the works of William Shakespeare, Scott's reference here likely refers to Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing*, a play wherein its central heroine has a fierce wit and comedic humor. Scott, then, is characterizing Anne as Beatrice, and does so several times in his collective correspondence. In this paper, I examine letters written by Walter Scott between 1825 and 1826 to analyze the comparisons he makes between his daughter Anne and the Shakespearean heroine Beatrice. I consider the continued Shakespearean influence on Scott and argue that such an influence manifests in his personal life, so much so that it bleeds into his letterwriting and he comes to know his own daughter as Beatrice. The larger significance of this is a recovery of Anne's character and an evaluation of Scott's own understanding of himself as a Shakespearean.

1 "Scott's Children." Abbotsford: The Home of Sir Walter Scott, <https://www.scottsassbotsford.com/history/the-descendants-of-sir-walter-scott/scotts-children>

2 "Letter from Walter Scott to Maria Edgeworth, March 23, 1825." The Maria Edgeworth Letters Project, eds. Susan Egenolf, Meredith Hale, Hilary Havens, Jessica Richard, and Robin Runia. https://melp.dh.tamu.edu/letters/Edgeworth_NLS_23130_1825_03_23.xml/.

Bio Alexandra E. LaGrand is a doctoral candidate in English at Texas A&M University. Her dissertation examines women's performances of genderfluid stage roles from 1773-1842. She is also a digital humanist and launched her database, *Points Like A Man: The Shakespearean Breeches Performance Catalogue, 1660-1900* (www.pointslikeaman.com), in 2023.

Godfred Ogoe: The Communal Reception of Shakespeare's Dramatic Letters

Abstract Literary scholars of Shakespeare have, for decades, engaged with Shakespeare's letters within the context of Elizabethan epistolary theory, in order to illuminate the identities and

relationship of two primary participants (the letter writer and addressee). However, this presentation demonstrates that Elizabethan epistolary culture makes it possible to read letters in Shakespeare's plays as extending a letter's interiority, its discourse about the writer and addressee, to non-recipients. Non-recipients are the participants of epistolary culture who are neither the writer nor the addressee but engage with a writer's letter. By researching how epistolary culture allowed non-recipients to engage with writers' letters, I hypothesize that Shakespeare's dramatic letters offer a communal reception beyond the domain of the writer and the addressee. Within this hypothesis lies the argument that non-recipients' reactions to a letter affect the addressee and their own reactions to the letter. Additionally, this presentation suggests that non-recipients' reactions to a play's letter results in the change of the play's storyline. Overall, this thesis provides an in-depth understanding of what non-recipients can mean with letters in Shakespeare's plays.

Bio Godfred Ogoe is an alumnus of Mary Baldwin University, where he earned an MLitt and MFA in Shakespeare and Performance. He currently studies Ph.D. in English Renaissance Literature at The Ohio State University (Ohio, Columbus, USA).

PANEL 5 **Form and Societal Ethics in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-century Letters**
Chair: Richard Jones

Nicole Pohl Mapping the World's First Social Network: Electronic Enlightenment: Letters and Lives [Lightning talk]

Abstract This short talk will introduce Electronic Enlightenment to the participants of the conference. It is a well-established and unique resource that allows scholars of letters to access prominent correspondences of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, EE also enhances research by spotlighting connections between ideas, individuals, and networks which are hidden by the editorial focus of traditional print editions. These are now made accessible by Electronic Enlightenment's placement of all 80,000 historical letters and documents in a single search, making the history of ideas navigable chronologically and through user-directed searches in a wholly unprecedented way. The presentation will close with a short reflection on the challenges of inclusion and intersectionality in digital correspondence projects.

Bio Nicole Pohl is Professor Emerita at Oxford Brookes University. She is the Academic Editor of Electronic Enlightenment, and the Editor-in-Chief of the Elizabeth Montagu Correspondence Online (EMCO). She is also on the Board of DARIAH: Women Writers in History (<https://www.dariah.eu/activities/working-groups/women-writers-in-history/>).

Ashley Walker: 'To the Vertuous Ladies, and Gentlewomen of England': Gender, Morality, and Authority in Wye Saltonstall's *Ovid's Heroicall Epistles* [Lightning talk]

Abstract This paper examines the epistolary preface to Wye Saltonstall's 17th-century English translation of the Latin poet Ovid's letter collection, the *Heroides*. Because the *Heroides* contain letters in the personas of mythical women, gender has been a much-discussed topic both in the collection's original early Roman imperial context (Fulkerson, Lindheim, Spentzou) and in early modern receptions presenting the *Heroides* as particularly suitable reading for women (Lyne, Taylor/Cox, Wiseman/Thorne). My focus is Saltonstall's justification of his own work for a female reading community through his manipulation of Ovid's literary reputation, specifically in relation to questions of gender, morality, and authority.

Saltonstall explicitly addresses his translation to women in his preface ('To the Vertuous Ladies, and Gentlewomen of England') and claims for his project numerous 'vertuous' female moral qualities, such as 'Modestie, Temperance, and especially Curtesie; to which *Ovid* doth appeal.' Saltonstall also

defends against any skeptics of this moralizing approach: 'But those who clayme this Title, and are degraded of it by their owne vicious qualities, *Ovid* disclaims them.' Yet, Saltonstall concludes his preface by imagining his translation as a suitor wooing the female reader in suggestive, erotic language (Clarke, Martin, Rowland, Wiseman).

While scholars have identified the contradictory ways Saltonstall addresses his female audience, claiming his translation teaches virtue yet visualizing the work as a lover seducing his lady, they have not considered how Saltonstall explicitly invokes discussions of gender and morality from another Ovidian letter collection: *Tristia* 2, the exiled Ovid's letter to the emperor Augustus. Saltonstall authoritatively cites Ovid's self-defense that reading only corrupts women already eager to be corrupted (*Tristia* 2.257–258). In doing so in his epistolary preface, Saltonstall draws parallels between himself and Ovid and their respective audiences, but also cleverly manipulates the Ovidian categories of gender, morality, and authority to defend his own epistolary work. [Ed: List of works on request.]

Bio Ashley Walker is a Classics PhD student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She completed her Classics MA at the University of Notre Dame with a thesis on *exempla* in Ovid's *Heroides*. Ashley researches Latin verse letter collections and is also interested in their early modern reception.

Isabelle Grüber: The epistolary novel as a comment on societal ethics in eighteenth-century France: playing with authenticity in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*

Abstract The age of the Enlightenment is marked by profound changes in every area of society that are just as visible in the world of literature: In 18th century France more books are written, published and read than in the century before. Amid this rapidly developing reading culture the epistolary novel becomes one of the two most successful literature genres. One of the topics constantly reemerging in the 18th century is the question of morality; and along with other issues of the French Enlightenment the lively debates on ethics are reflected in the literature of their time: Fictional stories serve as vehicles for thoughts and opinions and novel characters become representatives of ideas and ideologies. And especially the epistolary novel enables writers blur the boundaries between realness and fictiveness, providing them with the possibility of embedding their message into a setting of authentic – philosophers like Montesquieu, Rousseau or Voltaire deliberately pretend to present a collection of real letters in their epistolary novels. Different to these writers is Choderlos de Laclos' approach to the notion of authentic in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* by questioning the authenticity of the letters right from the beginning and by avoiding marking them clearly as either real or invented throughout the story. Through the analysis of this strategy, this paper examines how Laclos' epistolary novel functions as a criticism of societal ethics. This study aims to highlight Laclos' method of imitating authenticity on the one hand while at the same time constantly reminding the reader of the orchestrated frame of his novel and explores how Laclos' playing with the notion of authentic contributes to the reading of the *Liaisons* as a comment on morals and manners of its time

Bio After graduating as a pharmacist, Isabelle Grüber studied French and Portuguese literature in Hamburg and Paris as an undergraduate and is currently a graduate student of French and Italian literature at Hamburg university. Her major field of study is French literature, especially that of the Enlightenment and the 19th century.

PANEL 6 Eighteenth-century Writers and Epistolary Cultures
Chair: Jonathan Gibson

Clare Brant: Loopholes and nets: William Cowper's correspondence

Abstract ‘Oh, my good cousin! if I was to open my heart to you, I could show you strange sights; nothing, I flatter myself, that would shock you, but a great deal that would make you wonder.’
(William Cowper to Lady Hesketh August 9 1763.)

For many readers, Cowper’s letters have an appeal at least as great as his poetry. The high praise they attract consistently stress his epistolary charm and skill. My presentation explores some of Cowper’s letters to discuss how Cowper connected them through paradigms of friendship. Religious unfolding of the heart, poetic interiority, secular entertainment, social comment, domestic activities, local events, global news – Cowper’s letters span a wide range of epistolary subjects, moods, and literary orchestration which is often explicit. How are the vicissitudes of his life represented in relation to conventions of eighteenth-century correspondence?

When first published, his letters were read as biography, or life writing which serves his poetry. They still are. Modern critics tend to see what Vincent Newey identifies as ‘The Loop-holes of Retreat’ as ways in to Cowper’s complexity. How can we also read the letters as significant contributions to epistolary culture?

Bio Clare Brant is Professor of Eighteenth-century Literature and Culture at King’s College London, where for many years she co-directed the Centre for Life-Writing Research. Her book *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Palgrave 2006) won the ESSE Book Award in 2008. She co-edits the Palgrave series *Studies in Life Writing*, and will be publishing a book about underwater life writing, *Underwater Lives* (forthcoming Bloomsbury Academic 2026).

Una Tanović: Epistolary self-fashioning in Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*

Abstract This paper reinterprets the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin as an epistolary text rooted in the immigrant experience. Initially composed as a personal letter to his estranged son William, Franklin’s narrative never reached its intended recipient, although it became one of the most circulated texts in US literary history. My analysis places Franklin’s text in dialogue with the overlooked letters of Richard Frethorne, a 17th-century indentured servant in Virginia whose urgent appeals to his parents in England also went unanswered. Both sets of letters, though radically different in tone and outcome, were ultimately repurposed for political ends: Frethorne’s to justify colonial governance; Franklin’s to model national character and immigrant assimilation. By foregrounding Franklin’s identity as the son of an immigrant and repositioning his *Autobiography* as part of a broader history of migrant correspondence, the paper reveals how the epistolary form mediates tensions between exile and belonging, while serving as both autobiography and propaganda. Reading the *Autobiography* through the lens of familial correspondence, rather than as a conventional life narrative, I argue that Franklin’s textual self-fashioning emerges through the formal and ideological instabilities of the letter (its private address, deferred delivery and eventual public circulation) and I foreground the letter as a constitutive form in the emergence of the US immigrant narrative. I contend that reading Franklin’s *Autobiography* as an undelivered familial letter reveals a counter-history of US identity formation, one marked not by triumphant self-realization but by familial rupture. Thus, the paper invites a reconsideration of the epistolary form as a powerful vehicle for both imagining and obscuring the immigrant foundations of American identity.

Bio Una Tanović is a Visiting Assistant Professor at UMass Amherst. Her research bridges American Studies and Translation Studies, with a focus on epistolary forms in migrant and diasporic writing. Her current book project examines refugee letters. Her translations of Bosnian literature have appeared in *The Massachusetts Review* and *Freeman’s*.

Alain Kerhevé: Famous authors in eighteenth-century epistolary manuals: the case of Samuel Richardson

Abstract In eighteenth-century England, the theory of letter-writing partly relied on letter-writing manuals, over eighty of which were printed in the period (see Altman, 1982 or Bannet, 2005). While several academic studies have already examined the connexions between Samuel Richardson's epistolary manual, *Letters to and for Particular Friends* (1741) and his novels, the present approach will remain limited to the field of epistolary theory. It will investigate the place of Samuel Richardson's epistolary model in the letter-writing manuals published after 1741. It will start with several epistemological elements concerning the place of famous authors in eighteenth-century manuals; it will then focus on the case of Samuel Richardson's manual to show how widely it was plagiarized from its publication to the end of the century (and until the mid-nineteenth century, in Britain and America); it will try to establish the new model of epistolary writing that was thus introduced by Samuel Richardson.

Bio Alain Kerhervé is professor in English eighteenth-century literature at the University of Brest, Brittany, France. He has published several books on eighteenth-century letters: critical editions of correspondences (William Gilpin, 2014; Mary Delany, 2015) and coedited *First Letters* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), *British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century* (2019), *Amitiés épistolaires* (PU Rennes, 2025). His latest monograph, due in July 2025 (Honoré Champion, 630 p.) provides a comprehensive study of eighteenth-century letter-writing manuals in England.

PANEL 7
Sweeney

Creative Correspondences

Chair: Emma Claire

Roberta Zanasi: 'To write? Or not to write? That was the question with Geoffrey': love letters in Victorian novels

Abstract The nineteenth century is often regarded by scholars as a time of decadence, or even "death," of the letter in literature. Indeed, the epistolary novel, with its limited perspective, was no longer deemed suitable to represent the rapidly changing reality in which Victorians found themselves. However, novels were abundant in letters, which could be revealed to the reader, reported by an intradiegetic character, or presented in their materiality and often misused or destroyed in various ways. Epistolarity became a major ground for experimentation among British novelists.

The case of love letters is particularly representative in this regard. While writers tended to be vague about the 'sweet nothings' used in more general romantic messages, they preferred to unveil the exact content of a letter to readers in the context of epistolary marriage proposals. Particularly when the couple was a poor match, rather than suggesting this through the narrator, novelists opted to let the reader assess the unsuitability of the union by encouraging them to read between the lines and analyse the suitor's words to evaluate their sincerity.

Love letters, therefore, could also serve as harbingers of troubles, as the example of the fictional Valentines further suggests. The written words might be deceptive, yet they could also be extremely and perilously revealing. The optimism and exaltation surrounding the propaganda for postal reform in the late 1830s gradually gave way to a more complex and multifaceted notion of communication. This shift, along with the changing role of women and marriage, was reflected in the widely ambiguous use of love letters in Victorian literature.

Bio Roberta Zanasi got a BA degree and a PhD in English Literature from the University of Bologna. Her work focuses on Victorian epistolary culture, and her volume *Victorian Love Letters in Literature and Art* was published by Peter Lang in 2024. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3665-5362>

Jennifer Burek Pierce: Letters to Mary Ellen: Lace, Ribbons, and Flowers

Abstract Mary Ellen Solt (1920-2007) became a leading concrete poet during the latter half of the twentieth century. Famous for her flower poems, especially ‘Forsythia’ which was published in *Poetry* in 1966, Solt’s literary life included letters to and from other poets. Their letters document the ideas and reception of the letters of significant literary and artistic figures in the second half of the twentieth century. Those letters allowed Solt and other creative, visionary authors to connect, documenting the regard of Solt and her correspondents for one another’s creative expression. Noted figures with whom Solt corresponded include U.S. poet and visual artist Amelia Etlinger (1933-1987); Ian Hamilton Finley (1925-2006), the U.K. poet and artist who founded and edited the little literary magazine *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.*; and Pulitzer-prize winning American poet William Carlos Williams (1883-1963). Each of these correspondents played a different role in Solt’s career as a poet, and their letters show something of their own artistic and literary practices. Of the three, Etlinger’s work represents a curiosity and a striking example of the way that correspondence itself is a creative act. Unknown to Solt when she first sent her a letter, Etlinger created letters that were instances of the textile-based visual poetry for which she is known, including ob; Solt responded by writing the lyric poem, ‘Letters to Mary Ellen,’ rather than writing to Etlinger herself. Solt also corresponded with Williams, who is recognized as a mentor who supported her interest in American idiom and poetry, and she honored him with the poem, ‘For William Carlos Williams,’ a meditation on the lacy structure of flowers. These poems center letters sent and received, as letters from other poets inspired and became the subject of Solt’s own poetry, as she in turn inspired others.

Bio Jennifer Burek Pierce is professor in the School of Library & Information Science at the University of Iowa. Her most recent book, *Narratives, Nerdfighters, and New Media*, was published in 2020, and her research has won recognition from the American Library Association, the American Antiquarian Society, and other organizations.

Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty: ‘I do hope you will agree to a few paid letter-sessions’: Sylvia Plath’s letters to Ruth Beuscher

Abstract 2017 and 2018 saw the much-awaited release of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*. In addition to restoring passages excised from the *Letters Home*, the two volumes of this meticulously edited collection of 1444 letters (Steinberg 309) give readers access to the full range of Plath’s epistolary voices and reposition letter-writing as a crucial activity in her career.

While Plath’s letters can be approached chronologically, they also lend themselves to selective readings focused on significant biographical episodes or specific correspondents. Plath’s letters to Ruth Beuscher, the therapist who took care of her at MacLean hospital after her suicide attempt in 1953, and with whom she stayed in touch after her recovery, are particularly worthy of attention in that respect.

Written between 1960 and 1963, these letters register a striking evolution; the friendly messages notifying her former therapist about the latest family news gradually give way to anguished confessions in which Plath chronicles the breakdown of her marriage and asks for advice. The role conferred on the addressee, suddenly recast into a medical role, echoes Foucault’s remarks in *The History of Sexuality* on the central function of the interlocutor in providing a validating framework for discourses of truth about the self.

In her attempt to reinitiate a therapeutic relationship through epistolary exchanges, Plath alters a procedure that is normally based on mutual agreement, sustained through vocal, face-to-face exchanges, and framed by strict ethical rules. The elusive if not ghostly nature of her addressee – some of Plath’s letters are left unanswered or receive a delayed answer – further complicates this improvised long-distance therapy. In the process, roles and identities become unsettled. Beuscher comes to occupy shifting positions – role model, friend, doctor, mother figure, double – while Plath’s disclosure of intimate details calls into question the boundaries between self and other.

These letters also command attention for a different – although closely related – reason; written at a moment of psychic turmoil but also of intense poetic creativity, they document the emergence of a new poetic self and become the crucible in which life is reworked, textualized and transformed into poetic material. [Ed: List of works cited available on request]

Bio Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty is Senior Lecturer in English at Paris-Est Créteil University (UPEC). <https://imager.u-pec.fr/membres/membres-titulaires/de-nervaux-gavoty-laure> She has published articles on women's poetry and on the representation of illness and disability in autobiography. Her research currently focuses on the use of photography in life writing and on letter writing. Since 2023, she has conducted a multidisciplinary research seminar on epistolarity (<https://imager.u-pec.fr/activites/activites-transversales-1>) and is preparing a conference on the same subject that will be held at Paris-Est Créteil University in 2026.

PANEL 8 [The Postal Museum: Reading postal history 1800-1920](#)

Chair: Sara Haslam

Joanna Espin: Introducing The Postal Museum, speakers and panel; **Susannah Coster:** Accessing The Postal Museum's Collections; **Mathilde Jourdan:** Letter writing in the 1800s, with Jane Austen as a case study; **Georgina Tomlinson:** The Penny Post revolution; **Chris Taft:** The First World War, with a focus on Wilfred Owen's 'The Letter'; **Laura Gibbs:** Post-war Censorship, with James Joyce as a case study.

Abstract In this panel, speakers from The Postal Museum will deliver an overview of postal history (1800-1920), while highlighting key intersections between literature and our collections in this period. Our first speaker will outline the postal mechanics of the 1800s through the lens of Jane Austen's epistolary behaviours and practices. From here, the second speaker will explore the revolution of the post through the introduction of the Penny Black (1840), touching on the work of Anthony Trollope and Elizabeth Barrett Browning to determine how letter-writing and the post became a professional and personal lifeline for many authors. The First World War saw the post connect families and loved ones during the war, while facilitating vital military objectives. The third speaker will reflect on how Wilfred Owen's poem 'The Letter' frames the vast mechanics of these operations within a poignant human story. Our final paper focuses on how the post maintained the role of censor during the post war period. With a first edition of *Ulysses* (1921) among the items confiscated, we reflect on the censorship of James Joyce's novel through Archibald Bodkin's 1922 letter, which called for a ban on the publication. Taken together, this panel illustrates how the post has provided a vital source of connection between people, periods and places, while at the same time exploring how it has inspired literary figures and their seminal works.

Bios

Susannah Coster is an Archivist for The Royal Mail Archive at The Postal Museum, where she has worked for nine years. She holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Archives and Records Management from the University of Dundee. Susannah gives talks and writes articles on the genealogical resources, and other subjects in the archive, including for *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *Family Tree* magazines. She holds events for students in the archive to introduce them to the rich and varied records it contains. She also has particular interests in the records relating to the working conditions and social history of Post Office staff, packet ships, uniforms, and the photographic collection.

Joanna Espin, The Postal Museum's Senior Curator, has curated exhibitions including *The Great Train Robbery: Crime and the Post* (2019-2020), and *Voices of Resistance: Slavery and Post in the Caribbean* (2025-2026). Joanna's decade of research at The Postal Museum has encompassed a spectrum of topics including the intersection of the post and the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved

Africans, women telegraphists in the First World War, the role of the post in the Second World War, mail art and letters to Santa. Joanna has presented at conferences both in the UK and internationally, and her research has been published by the Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press.

Laura Gibbs is a Deputy Curator at The Postal Museum in London, where she researches the complex history of British postal communication. She completed her PhD at the University of Sheffield in 2023, which focused on the role of obscured female authority in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, through the lenses of gynaecology and phenomenology. Recent publications include book chapters in *Finnegans Wake: Human and Nonhuman Histories* (2024) and *Routledge Handbook of Heritage and Gender* (2025).

Mathilde Jourdan is the Archives Assistant at The Postal Museum. She has a MA of Archaeology where she specialised in the cults of sanctuaries of Apollo and Artemis in Ancient Greece and has continued her studies at Birkbeck College where she attained a MA of Museum Cultures with Curating, specialising in the curating of difficult histories. She has assisted in the curation of a few exhibitions at the P21 Gallery in London and, within her role at The Postal Museum, she has researched early postal history before 1840 and the founding of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company for the exhibition *Voices of Resistance: Slavery and Post in the Caribbean*. (2025-2026).

Chris Taft is Head of Collections at The Postal Museum and has worked in the museum sector for over 25 years. Graduating from the University of London with a degree in History and going on to attain an MA in Museum Studies. Chris's research interests include the role of the Post Office in the First World War and the history and operation of the Post Office Railway. Chris has a broad knowledge of the general history of the UK postal system. Chris is a Fellow of the Museums Association.

Curator Georgina Tomlinson received a BA in Art History from the University of Warwick before starting a career in the heritage sector. She has worked at The Postal Museum for over 10 years, for a large portion specialising in the history and creation of British postage stamps.

Thursday 6 November

PANEL 9 **Nineteenth-century poets and epistolary networks** **Chair: Molly Ziegler**

Lynda Pratt: Editing Robert Southey's Letters for the Twenty-First Century

Abstract This paper will explore the experiences and challenges faced in editing *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey*, for an ongoing, 12-Part, digital edition published by *Romantic Circles*.

Robert Southey (1774-1843) was a prolific and influential poet, essayist, historian, travel-writer, biographer, translator and polemicist, a dominant and controversial figure in British culture from the mid-1790s through to the mid-1830s. He was someone his contemporaries found it impossible to ignore. His letters are also both invaluable sources for understanding the role played by correspondence in the Romantic period and for unravelling some of the larger issues around letters as scholarly sources.

The Collected Letters is making available for the first time Southey's c.7500 surviving letters, accompanying these with a detailed scholarly apparatus. By so doing, the edition is filling an acknowledged gap in scholarship and providing substantial new information about a figure described by Lord Byron as 'the only existing entire man of letters'.

In this session, I will address the challenges and opportunities presented by Southey's vast corpus and by a digital edition. To illustrate my arguments, I will draw on Ian Packer's and my recent work on *Part Seven: 1822-24* (published in 2024) and our ongoing labours on *Part Eight: 1825-28* (forthcoming, 2026). I will also look forward to the planned work on *Part Nine to Part Twelve*, which will complete the project.

Bio Lynda Pratt is Professor of Modern Literature (Romanticism) at the University of Nottingham and a General Editor of *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey (Romantic Circles, 2009-ongoing)*. To date, she has co-edited and published six *Parts* of the edition covering the years 1791-1821, with more in the pipeline.

Amy Wilcockson: Literati and Letters: Thomas Campbell's Networks

Abstract Drawing on my forthcoming edition of his selected letters for Liverpool University Press, this paper examines the ways in which the correspondence and networks of the Scottish Romantic poet, Thomas Campbell (1777-1844) were vital to his contemporary success as a poet and periodical editor.

The critic Sarah Zimmerman has praised Campbell's varied career 'as poet, lecturer, editor, biographer, and educator' (2019: 94). Campbell was one of the bestselling poets of the Romantic period, far surpassing the sales and reputations of contemporaries such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Keats, who now dominate our sense of the period's culture. Aged just 21, Campbell became immensely popular as the 'Lion of Edinburgh' following the publication of *The Pleasures of Hope* (1799), a Whiggish poem of political optimism. Further well-received poems followed, including *Gertrude of Wyoming* (1809), a story of love and indigenous-coloniser relations set during the American Revolutionary War, and a series of shorter battle poems that are still included in modern-day anthologies. He was also the renowned editor of the periodical, the *New Monthly Magazine*, from 1821-1830. He changed the format and name of the magazine to become a 'literary journal', and a range of prestigious literary contributors published in the journal for the first time under his editorship. My paper therefore argues for the importance of considering Campbell's correspondence with a variety of literary, political, artistic, national and international names as invaluable to his work as a poet and as a successful celebrity editor. Whether sending his poems to Walter Scott or Joanna Baillie to ask for their opinion on his work, or soliciting prestigious names such as Lord Byron, Joseph Blanco White, and Felicia Hemans to write for his magazine, letters were the primary mode in which Campbell engaged with his fellow literati and promoted his interests.

Bio Dr Amy Wilcockson is a Research Assistant at the University of Glasgow, working alongside Professor Rhona Brown on the Leverhulme Trust-funded project 'The Works of Robert Fergusson: Reconstructing Textual and Cultural Legacies'. Her edition of the selected letters of the neglected Scottish Romantic poet, Thomas Campbell (1777-1844) is forthcoming with Liverpool University Press.

Richard Storer: 'The best letters I've ever read!' Rediscovering / re-editing T. E. Brown

Abstract In 1896, the poet T. E. Brown (1830-1897) described to his friend S. T. Irwin how he had had to endure a very rough ten-hour crossing from Liverpool to the Isle of Man. What sustained him through the journey was reading the Letters of Edward Fitzgerald (the 'Omar Khayyam' poet, whose letters were published in 1894). 'I had a hard time of it, much alleviated, though, by Fitz, whom I read as long as daylight lasted . . . Blessings on Fitzgerald! How delightful he was! How he comforted me!' Brown's references to 'delight' and 'comfort' indicate an attitude to literary letters which is more aesthetic than biographical in orientation. That this was a prevailing taste, at least among Brown's circle, is suggested by what happened when Brown himself died the following year. His influential friends who had greatly admired his letters immediately started making arrangements to have them published; and Irwin, as the appointed editor, seems to have taken the 1894 edition of Fitzgerald's

letters as a model. In his two-volume *Letters of Thomas Edward Brown* (1900) Irwin drastically cut many of the letters so that memorable passages of description or literary criticism were presented in isolation, with minimal notes or information about context. The intention was clearly to showcase Brown's character, wisdom and erudition, rather than provide material for future biographers or editors.

In this paper I will introduce T. E. Brown, and outline some of the problems that Irwin's 1900 edition, which has never been superseded, presents for 21st century approaches to his writings. I will then go on to focus on the large collection of over 100 unpublished letters from Brown to the highly successful popular novelist Hall Caine (1853-1931), which are completely absent from Irwin because Caine refused access, but which can now be seen to be particularly interesting for the insights they give into Brown's complex relationship with the younger writer and his efforts to influence him through his letters.

Bio Dr Richard Storer is Senior Lecturer in English at Leeds Trinity University. He has published on a range of Victorian authors including Robert Louis Stevenson, Bram Stoker, Hall Caine, and T. E. Brown. He is also the author of the volume on F. R. Leavis (2009) in the Routledge Critical Thinkers series; and the convenor of the [English at Leeds Trinity](#) podcast.

PANEL 10 Letters, Literature and Intimacy Chair: Ed Hogan

Clare Best: Writing between the lines

Abstract My work in progress, *The Many Might-Have-Beens*, which is the subject of my practice-led research with the Open University, will be a work of collaged life writing with integrated photographs and facsimile documents drawn from a family archive that holds material pertaining to the lives of my mother and my grandmother.

My mother, Heather Gardner, was born in 1924 and died in 1999. She was fifteen when World War Two broke out in 1939, and so her teenage and young adult years were profoundly affected and shaped by the War. I am currently exploring her wartime diaries, alongside hundreds of letters written to her between 1939 and 1947, many of them from male friends on active service.

As this paper will set out, I am experimenting with ways of responding creatively to these materials in prose and poetry, in creative and reflective work, to make hybrid and layered forms of writing which acknowledge and honour the importance of gaps and breaks in documentary evidence and in recall. My writing is also grief work and involves documenting grieving rituals that I invent as I go.

Bio Clare Best <https://clarebest.co.uk/> is a poet, memoirist, and collaborative artist. Her memoir *The Missing List* (Linen Press 2018) combines journals, verbatim material, lists, accounts of ciné film footage, memory scraps, to interrogate the fragmentary nature of recall. She is undertaking practice-led postgraduate research based on a family archive. She teaches Creative Writing for the OU and the Arvon Foundation.

Selina Packard: Claire Clairmont's Letters and her Literary Reputation

Abstract Like many female literary figures, Mary Shelley's stepsister, Claire Clairmont (1798-1879) has been undergoing a slow process of re-examination over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This paper will trace the growth of Clairmont's literary reputation, based almost entirely on her collection of letters, and her own ambivalent relationship to her legacy.

Claire Clairmont's complete correspondence was published in 1995, edited by Marion Kingston Stocking. In her review, the renowned Romantic scholar, Nora Crook, credited Stocking with

establishing 'Clairmont [...] as a Romantic writer on her own account' (Crook, 242), proving it is possible to have a lasting legacy as a writer with only letters as the output.

Her former lover Edward John Trelawny described her letters as 'long flighty fanciful beautiful' (Buxton Forman, 205) and Mary Shelley went one further: 'If your letters are ever published, all others that ever were published before, will fall into the shade, & you be looked on as the best letter writer that ever charmed their friends' (Bennett, III, 48). Clairmont's reputation as a letter-writer seems overdetermined. But Shelley's praise is tempered a few lines later by her challenge, 'Is this glory? Will it please you?'. Her praise, it seems, is a response, not a spontaneous utterance. Clairmont has expressed a wish for glory, to leave a literary legacy, but the implication is that she will not. This self-recrimination aligns more closely with her own much-quoted assertion that 'in our family if you cannot write an epic poem or a novel that by its originality knocks all other novels on the head, you are a despicable creature not worth acknowledging' (Stocking, I, 295). This was a bitter joke made in the wake of the death of her younger half-brother, William. William Godwin Jr had struggled to find a place for himself, to earn the approval of his forbidding father, the philosopher, and Clairmont recognised his plight as her own: destined to have been born or adopted into a family of astonishing literary and philosophical achievement. However, 150 years after her death, Clairmont does indeed have a reputation. [Ed: list of works cited available on request]

Bio Selina Packard's PhD (Goldsmiths) was on biofictions of Mary Shelley, tracing her persona through the twentieth century. She is a researcher on the Open University Mapping Heritage project, which maps the London residences of members of the Shelley Circle. Her current research is on the life of Claire Clairmont.

Ayşe Nur Ögüt: The Intimate Act of Writing: Literacy, Letters, and the Transformation of Privacy in Ottoman Novels

Abstract This paper explores how letter-writing practices and literacy transformed individual notions of privacy in late Ottoman novels. With the Tanzimat period, the rapid spread of literacy not only enabled access to information and communication but also redefined the emotional and private spheres of individuals. In many cases, fictional characters express themselves through letters not only to their addressees but also, for the first time, to themselves. This mode of expression intersects with practices such as introspection, self-narration, emotional disclosure, and even confession. Thus, the letter emerges not merely as a tool of communication but as a technique of privacy. Focusing on the transitional period from the Ottoman Empire to the early Turkish Republic (1851–1923), this presentation centers on the relationship Ottoman novel characters establish with letter writing, examining how the act of writing—and the capacity to write—transforms personal boundaries. Through literary examples in which literacy intersects with affective regimes, class, and gender, the paper interrogates the role of writing in the performance of individual privacy. Particular attention will be paid to the material, emotional, and disciplinary dimensions of the letter, and how these are functionalized within the Ottoman novel.

Bio Ayşe Nur Ögüt completed her undergraduate studies in Turkish Language and Literature at Istanbul University and earned her MA in Cultural Studies from Istanbul Şehir University. In 2025, she received her PhD in Turkish Language and Literature from Istanbul University. Her research interests include the Ottoman novel, privacy, and the dynamics of private/public space.

D Sweta Sry Reddy: Unsent and Undone: Epistolary Intimacy and Crip World-making in Sejal A Shah's 'Letters I Never Sent' [Lightning talk]

Abstract The paper engages with Sejal's narrative titled 'Letters I Never Sent' from the anthology *Disability Intimacies*, to explore the ways in which the unsent letters reflect and possess the potential for Crip world-making. Crip world-making is a process of reimagining alternative and relational ways of being that accommodates disability experience and expression. This paper argues that the letters

and reflections in Sejal's work represent Crip time – 'a reorientation of time' that allows for disabled realities to exist (Kafer 27). Addressing the embedded intricacies of Crip time, the paper establishes disability centered alternate temporal experience, that the unsent letters facilitate. Additionally, the paper aims to showcase an affective reclamation of intersectional disabled voice, while expressing the vulnerabilities associated with regret, longing, love, pride and mutual admiration, etc. This showcase of agency, Crip desire and vulnerability in the letters create space for authentic and non-normative ways of being disabled. Finally, through these reflective letters addressed to herself, readers, friends, and family, the paper positions Sejal's work as a site of resistance to conventional expectations of kinship and intimacy, allowing for relativity and fluidity in being disabled. Employing narrative inquiry through the lens of Crip theory, the paper aims to address the role of epistolary form in foregrounding Crip world-making as an affective process of self-awareness and assertion while resisting ableist normative ideals of efficiency and productivity that govern the modern world.

Bio D Sweta Sry Reddy is a PhD scholar in the Department of English and Cultural studies, at CHRIST (deemed to be University), Bengaluru, India. Her research explores intersectional disability narratives and posthumanism within literature and cultural studies. Apart from academics, she also provides peer support to LGBTQIA+ communities in India.

PANEL 11 **'Austen' and the Epistolary** **Chair: Emma Claire Sweeney**

Eve Annuk: To write or to take care of: the letters of Estonian writer Elisabeth Aspe (1860-1927)

Abstract Elisabeth Aspe was an outstanding Estonian prose writer at the end of the 19th century. Sometimes she is described as the Estonian Jane Austen because of her literary production. Her life style was modest and family oriented: she lived a home-centered life in a small Estonian town, Pärnu, all her life taking care of family.

As a writer, she was not well known since her works were published in newspapers under pseudonyms or anonymously. Her works were published in book format many years later and she did not receive any pay for her literary production until 1910. Aspe's role as a writer was complicated by that as a long-term caregiver for sick family members. Tuberculosis hit the family hard and Aspe's life and work were significantly influenced by the illnesses and subsequent deaths of her family members – her two sisters and sister's husband, one sister's children, her own husband, her little son – whom she had to care for as an oldest daughter and the heir of the family inheritance – the mill. This situation affected significantly her literary work since she did not have enough time for writing, and the illnesses and deaths of loved ones caused her enormous emotional distress.

In the Estonian Cultural History Archives at the Estonian Literary Museum there have been preserved the letters of Elisabeth Aspe to Estonian poetess Elise Aun (1863–1932) from the period of 1892–1927. There are 52 letters but there are gaps in the correspondence, more frequent correspondence is from the period 1902–1903 and 1923–1926.

The paper will deal with the questions how letters represent the different aspects of Elisabeth Aspe's daily life and writing conditions, providing also insight into how she experienced emotional pain in caring for dying family members and how this situation affected her possibilities for writing.

Bio Eve Annuk (PhD) is a literary scholar, senior researcher in the Estonian Cultural History Archives at the Estonian Literary Museum. Her main research interests include the history of Estonian women's writing, gender and Soviet society, history of Estonian feminism, life writing, especially letters. She has published numerous articles on literary scholarship and women's autobiographical texts and a monographic collection (in Estonian) 'Life as a Text' (2025).

Samuli Kaislaniemi: Imagined letters folded by hand: *Pride and Prejudice*, simulacra and epistolary materiality

Abstract In 2020, a rather different edition of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was published by Chronicle Books. Interspersed through the pages of the novel are simulacra of 19 letters written by characters in the novel. These simulacra – 'written and folded by hand', as the subtitle of the edition says – are the creation of the editor (or curator) Barbara Heller, working with expert calligraphers and postal historians. In this paper, I take these physical creations of imagined letters as a starting point to investigate our understanding of epistolary materiality in Jane Austen's time. There is variation in the simulacra letters: Heller and her collaborators designed the letters to reflect varying social circumstances. Each character was given a different, distinct hand to match their personality, and the paper and postal markings vary with the characters' social standing and means. In addition to the simulacra, I will survey real familiar letters from the end of the 18th century, and also Austen's own letters. Letters from writers of comparable social status to the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* will allow me to compare social variation in letter-writing practices at the time with that represented in the simulacra letters. The aim of this study is not to gauge the accuracy of the material aspects of the simulacra letters. Such criticism is slightly misplaced for these literary, imaginary letters, and the creators of the simulacra will have had to make compromises between strict authenticity, accessibility to modern readers, and what their printer was able to produce. Rather, the point of this comparison is to investigate which material practices of letter-writing are salient – for readers today as well as the contemporaries of Jane Austen.

Bio Dr Samuli Kaislaniemi is a researcher at the University of Eastern Finland. He works on early modern English letters, combining historical sociolinguistics with manuscript studies. He is just finishing a project on social variation in material aspects of letter writing in seventeenth-century England.

Naomi Walker: Beyond the Grave: Letters to and from Jane Austen

Abstract On a recent visit to Winchester Cathedral, I discovered letters to Jane Austen had been left at her graveside from the many admirers of her work. These letters range from expressing delight at her writing to seeking relationship advice. Austen was a frequent letter writer herself and the earliest of Austen's letters to survive is from 1796 and was to her sister Cassandra wishing her a happy birthday. Austen also regularly gave relationship advice in her correspondence so perhaps it was not surprising that modern-day fans of her work would seek similar guidance from her about their own lives.

Letters often featured in Austen's novels and can serve as a narrative plot device by creating secrecy and intrigue. One of Austen's shorter works, *Lady Susan* (possibly written in 1794 but not published until 1871), was made up entirely of letters as it followed the epistolary novel genre which was very popular in the 18th century. This paper will explore the letters in her novels as well as discussing letters written by Austen herself together with the ones written to Austen and left by her grave. It will be argued that the art of letter writing itself is one which is gaining a recent resurgence following the Letters Live project (<https://letterslive.com>) which was launched in December 2013 and has since brought many famous actors to the stage performing a diverse range of correspondence. The fact that letters are placed by Austen's resting place in Winchester Cathedral not only establishes a connection between the author and the city where she briefly lived but also shows a continued link between Austen and her readers. In an increasingly technological world, this emphasises the power and impact of literature and correspondence in our lives today.

Bio Dr Naomi Walker is an Associate Lecturer at the Open University and an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Society. She co-edited the book *A Space of Their Own: Women, Writing and Place*

1850-1950 (Routledge, 2023). She has recently written a chapter on Mary Cholmondeley for the *From Brontë to Bloomsbury* series (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

PANEL 12 Nineteenth-century English Literature and Letters

Chair:

Samuel Sargeant

Irina Rabinovich: Exploring Literary Dialogues: Grace Aguilar's Epistolary Exchange with Isaac D'Israeli – Insights into Gender Dynamics, Literary Heritage, and Cross-Gender Mentor-Mentee Relationships

Abstract The examination of women's epistolary writing provides valuable insights into gender stereotypes and evolving cultural perspectives on gender-genre connections. Analyzing a writer's correspondence can offer glimpses into the nuanced textures of lived experiences and the articulation of private thoughts, including theological, social, and cultural deliberations. Despite its potential significance, Grace Aguilar's correspondence with Isaac D'Israeli, a renowned Jewish British writer, comprising five letters from July 1840 to July 1844, remains unexplored. This exchange serves as a delineation of Aguilar's literary body of work, theological considerations, and reflections on the societal status of women, particularly Jewish women, in the nineteenth century. This paper addresses the existing oversight by bringing attention to and scrutinizing the literary legacy evident in Aguilar's correspondence. Furthermore, given Aguilar's portrayal of herself as a 'youthful aspirant' seeking advice, professional guidance, and access to London's publishers and literati from the esteemed writer Isaac D'Israeli, this study delves into the complex dynamics of the cross-gender mentor-mentee relationship between Isaac D'Israeli and Aguilar.

Bio Dr. Irina Rabinovich is a lecturer in the English Language Department at Holon Institute of Technology, Israel. Most of her research deals with the representation of women, especially Jewish female artists in 19th century British and American Literature. She has published numerous articles in various academic journals and presented papers at British, Jewish and American-Literature conferences. She is the author of *Re-Dressing Miriam: 19th Century Artistic Jewish Women* (2012). She is also a co-editor of a two-volume forthcoming Special issue of *Women's Writing* (Taylor & Francis) – 'Unveiling Untold Narratives: Rediscovering the Literary Legacy of Jewish Female Writers from the 1700s to the 1920s.'

Antonia Saunders: An Amende Honorable: The early correspondence of Maria Edgeworth and Rachel Mordecai, and a previously unpublished letter from Maria to her aunt and cousin [Lightning talk]

Abstract In 1815, Rachel Mordecai, an American-Jewish woman, wrote to Maria Edgeworth and her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, questioning the portrayal of Jews in Maria's children's fiction as 'mean, avaricious, and unprincipled'. This letter marked the beginning of a long correspondence between Rachel and Maria, lasting over twenty years. The exchange significantly influenced Maria, prompting her to write the novel *Harrington* (1817) as an amende honorable for her earlier anti-Jewish depictions.

Rachel's critique of the ending of *Harrington* was met with a notable silence from Maria for four years. This period, however, was marked by profound personal grief for Maria, as she mourned the death of her father and was occupied with preparing his notes for his memoir.

A previously unpublished letter that I discovered in the National Library of Ireland's archives, from Maria to her aunt and cousin, provides new insights into Maria's state of mind and activities during the years following her father's death. This letter also briefly touches on Maria's sentiments towards Rachel Mordecai.

This paper considers the early correspondence between Maria Edgeworth and Rachel Mordecai to explore the transformative power of letters in changing perceptions and attitudes. Additionally, it examines the recently unearthed letter to shed light on Maria's personal life during a period of bereavement. By investigating these documents, this paper aims to contribute to the broader scholarship on Maria Edgeworth's life and works, highlighting the impact of personal relationships and correspondence on her literary development.

Bio Antonia Saunders holds a BA and MA from The Open University. Her PhD, started in October 2020, explores Jewish identity in 19th-century novels and histories. Her primary interest is in the novel in all its forms, with a particular concentration on the long nineteenth century.

Adam Baldwin: The Case of the Missing Letters: correspondence, power, knowledge, law, and morality in two Sherlock Holmes stories

Abstract Letters and correspondence feature heavily in nineteenth-century writing, acting both as a means of communication and as the location of proof. This paper explores two Sherlock Holmes stories in which correspondence is central, but in which the physical letter is stubbornly absent, 'Charles Augustus Milverton' and 'The Five Orange Pips'. To explore how letters and correspondence are central to both stories, despite their absence, I borrow from Foucault's concept of the knowledge/power axis, exploring how that axis shifts across characters based on their possession or knowledge of potentially incriminating documents. I explore how Foucault's knowledge/power axis enables characters to make moral choices. In both stories power shifts until it rests with the teacher/judge detective Holmes, whose moral choices, founded in the Foucauldian axis, we are expected to accept, even when he chooses to ignore the letter of the law.

Bio Following my PhD with the Open University awarded August 2024, I am preparing for publication the book version of my thesis on late-nineteenth-century writer George Griffith. My research focuses on British speculative and popular fiction from the late nineteenth century. Papers have been published in the Spring 2023 and Spring 2025 issues of *Foundation* and the July 2025 *Victorian Popular Fiction Journal*.

Karen Paine: The Subversive Confessional Letter of old Allan Armadale in Wilkie Collins' *Armadale* [Lightning talk]

Abstract The letter of my title is one that I plan to analyse in detail in my thesis chapter on Collins. I will begin my talk by briefly explaining the complicated history of the name Allan Armadale as this is relevant to the confessional letter. I will be discussing how the writing of the letter, its content, and its place in the text of *Armadale* display some element of subversiveness on the part of Collins. For example, although the letter is a confession of a crime it is read aloud and finished by a stranger with no prior knowledge of the story.

I will explore the influence of the letter on the rest of the plot of *Armadale* and the reader of *Armadale*. It is a subversive confession in that it does not lead to justice for the victim of the crime. There is also irony in the fact that the letter not only fails to protect old Allan Armadale's son, the one positive intention expressed in the letter, but it actually sets in motion events that will lead to his son meeting one of the people old Allan Armadale warns his son against, the son of his victim. This is because of the seemingly random chance of Mr Neal being the only person available to help old Allan Armadale finish his letter. Mr Neal will go on to marry old Allan Armadale's widow and it is his dislike of his stepson that prompts the boy to run away and assume an alias. I identify Mr Neal as a key catalyst in the plot of *Armadale* and the events linked to the letter.

Bio I am in the second year of a part-time PhD in English and Creative Writing. I am working towards upgrade at the moment and have a provisional thesis title of 'Investigating the

Representations of Reading in the Sensation Fiction of Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Ellen Wood, 1860-1870’.

PANEL 13 Letters and Friendship: A conversation on Elizabeth von Arnim and David Jones
Chair: Jasmine Hunter-Evans

Jasmine Hunter-Evans; Juliane Roemhild; Anna Svendsen; Jennifer Shepherd

Abstract Elizabeth von Arnim (1866-1941) and David Jones (1895-1984) were committed letter writers, and their archives provide a trove of fascinating insights into their lives and works. Delving into their correspondence sheds new light on their relationships with family – for instance von Arnim’s letters to her daughter Beatrix von Hirschberg – and the ways in which friendships shaped their creative works, such as Jones’s painted inscriptions made as Christmas cards.

Brought together through membership of the MoLEs (Modern/ist Letter Editors) network, the panel propose an innovative round table ‘conversation’ examining friendship through letters. Each pair will introduce their writer before engaging in a critical conversation considering questions such as:

- Much of the research into von Arnim and Jones is biographical, so what do their letters suggest about their approach to friendship and its importance in their lives and careers?
- We have thousands of extant letters which provide a valuable source of information, but what are the complications of using letters to contextualise creative works?
- Taking von Arnim and Jones as examples, how were modern/ist friendships ignited, maintained or even ended through letter writing?
- How do letters fit into their wider output (e.g. novels, poetry, essays, artworks, interviews, etc.) and how can we approach them as researchers?
- What concepts of friendships emerge from their letters (such as, creative partnerships, chosen families, or political alliances)?
- What is particular about literary friendships developed and maintained by letters?
- What are the broader challenges of working with letters, especially with writers with vast archives of existing correspondence?
- If we consider letters as creative works or letter writing as a creative pursuit, how might this reshape our approach to their other works?

Bios Jennifer Shepherd is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at The Open University (UK). She was a founding member of the International Elizabeth von Arnim Society and serves on its steering group. With Noreen O’Connor she is the co-editor of *New Readings of Elizabeth von Arnim: The Unexpected Modernist* (Edinburgh University Press, 2025).

Juliane Roemhild is a Senior Lecturer in English at La Trobe University, Melbourne. Her research focus is on British women’s interwar writing, as well as bibliotherapy. She is a founding member of the Elizabeth von Arnim Society and has published on writers like Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, Rose Macaulay and Vicki Baum. Her book *Authorship & Femininity in the Novels of Elizabeth von Arnim* (Fairleigh Dickinson UP) was published in 2014.

Anna Svendsen is the Co-Director of the David Jones Digital Archive Project and Assistant Professor of Core English at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, TX. Her research focusses on intersections of literature, art, and theology in the Modernist period, especially in the work of David Jones (1895-1974) and his circle.

Jasmine Hunter Evans is a Staff Tutor and Senior Lecturer in Classical Studies at The Open University (UK). She specialises in the reception of the ancient world in the twentieth century, in particular the literature and visual art of David Jones. Her book *David Jones and Rome* (OUP) was

published in 2022 and she leads the collaborative ‘Opening the Archives’ project which is developing an interactive digital exhibition of Jones’s painted inscriptions in relation to his letters and manuscripts.

KEYNOTE Emma Clery (Uppsala University): ‘The epistolarium, modern letters editions, and the case of Mary Wollstonecraft’ Chair: Sara Haslam

An edition of letters has the power to shape legacy. The first editor of Wollstonecraft’s correspondence was her husband, the philosopher William Godwin who, immediately after her untimely death, published a selection of 93 censored letters and destroyed the originals. This reinforced his biographical account of her as a tragic victim governed by feeling. Hundreds of other letters were lost or destroyed... See link for more [Letters and Literature 1500-2025, The Open University](#)

PANEL 14 Ford Madox Ford’s Letters, Writing Life, and Networks
Chair: Seamus O’Malley (Yeshiva University, New York)

Helen Chambers; Barbara Cooke; Sara Haslam; Max Saunders

Abstract The *Collected Letters of Ford Madox Ford* in six volumes, phase one of a new Oxford University Press edition, *The Complete Works of Ford Madox Ford* (Gen Eds Haslam and Saunders) is well underway. The *Complete Works* will bring the writing of this major twentieth-century literary figure into new focus. Supported by modern editorial and scholarly practices and techniques, volume editors will be able to tell new critical, bibliographical and biographical stories about the range of work, familiar and unfamiliar, published and unpublished, in Ford’s *oeuvre*. The letters editors have foundational tasks: demonstrating the extent and operation of Ford’s creative and personal networks as revealed by his letters; and foregrounding biographical and bibliographical findings, or any remaining mysteries, contained within the c3,000 examples of his letters that we now have – the majority of which have not been edited or published before.

In this roundtable four project editors, covering between them letters Ford wrote from 1883, aged 9, up to the 1930s, will explore in conversation with Seamus O’Malley such questions as: what new light do Ford’s letters shed on the development of his writing life and literary networks? How will they assist researchers on Ford, now and in the future, and scholars of twentieth-century literature more broadly? What role do Ford’s letters play in the making of his literary reputation? The poet (and librarian) Philip Larkin identified the literary manuscript as possessing both ‘magical’ and ‘meaningful’ qualities. As editors, the panellists are also interested in exploring what qualities he may have had in mind and if and how modern editorial practices can honour them.

Bios Helen Chambers is a Visiting Fellow in English at the Open University. She is the author of the monograph *Conrad’s Reading: Space, Time, Networks* (2018) and has since contributed essays and book chapters on Conrad (predominantly on his maritime career) as well as chapters on Ford, and a regular column in *Last Post* (2019-2022) on Ford’s reading life. She is co-editor of volume 1 (1883-1904) of his letters and is also currently engaged on textual work for volume 4 (1922-1930).

Barbara Cooke is co-executive editor of the Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh Project, for which she has edited and co-edited two volumes: *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957) and (with John Howard Wilson) *A Little Learning* (1964). She sits on the Editorial Board of the Ford project and is co-editing volumes 5 and 6 of his letters, from 1930 to his death in 1939. Barbara is Chair of the British Association of Modernist Studies.

Sara Haslam is Professor of Twentieth-Century Literature at the Open University. She is the author of a monograph and multiple essays and book chapters on Ford, and (co-)editor of four collections of

criticism, most recently *The Routledge Research Companion to Ford Madox Ford* (2019). She has edited Ford's fiction and cultural criticism, and her edition of Evelyn Waugh's *Helena* (1950) was published by Oxford University Press in 2020. Recent research examines what she has termed 'literary caregiving' during the First World War, and a current focus on life writing includes diary texts by Elsie Martindale, Ford's wife (work published in the *Conradian* (2022) and *Last Post* (2022)); she is co-editor of volume 1 of Ford's letters (1883-1904).

Seamus O'Malley is Associate Professor of English at Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University. He is the author of *Making History New: Modernism and Historical Narrative* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and *Irish Culture and 'The People': Populism and its Discontents* (Oxford University Press, 2022). He has co-edited three volumes, one of essays on Ford Madox Ford and America (Rodopi, 2010), a research companion to Ford (Routledge, 2019) and a volume of essays on the cartoonists Julie Doucet and Gabrielle Bell (Mississippi, 2018). He is the chair of the Ford Madox Ford Society and co-chair of the Columbia University Seminar for Irish Studies.

Max Saunders is Interdisciplinary Professor of Modern Literature and Culture at the University of Birmingham and co-director of the Network for Life-Writing Research at King's College, London. He is the author of *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, 2 vols (Oxford University Press, 1996); *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (OUP 2010); *Imagined Futures: Writing, Science, and Modernity in the To-Day and To-Morrow Book Series, 1923-31* (OUP 2019) and *Ford Madox Ford: Critical Lives* (Reaktion, 2023). He has edited five volumes of Ford's writing and has published essays on Life-writing, on Impressionism, and on a number of modern writers. He is co-editor, with Sarah MacDougall, of *Alfred Cohen – An American Artist in Europe: Between Figuration and Abstraction* (Wighton, Norfolk & London: Alfred Cohen Art Foundation / Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, 2020); and with Lisa Gee, of *Ego Media: Life Writing and Online Affordances* (Stanford University Press, 2023). He is co-editor of volume 2 of Ford's letters (1904-1914).

PANEL 15 The Brontës; Vernon Lee; Elizabeth Gaskell: Epistolary (counter-) Narratives and Fictions Chair: Shafquat Towheed

Júlia Mota Silva Costa: Charlotte Brontë's letters as counter-narrative: on editing and defending Emily Brontë

Abstract An important moment in the reception history of Emily Brontë's work is the second edition of *Wuthering Heights*, published together with Agnes Grey by Anne Brontë in 1850 and edited by Charlotte Brontë. This edition was accompanied by a series of paratexts written by Charlotte: a biographical notice of the authors, a preface to *Wuthering Heights*, and a selection of poems by Anne and Emily. It marked the first time the gender of Ellis and Acton Bell—the pseudonyms adopted by Emily and Anne—was publicly revealed. Although Anne's work is included, the paratexts clearly center on Emily, aiming to define her character and frame the interpretation of her writings. Charlotte's contributions reveal a deliberate effort to shape Emily's biography in response to the predominantly negative reception to *Wuthering Heights* and, in doing so, to protect her sister's reputation—which risked being compromised by the moral shock her novel provoked, even when presumed to be authored by a man. Among other strategies, Charlotte edited her sister's poems extensively, suppressing their ambiguity and offering readers an interpretive framework aligned with the myth she was crafting—of Emily as a reclusive, visionary figure whose imagination was as wild and elemental as the Yorkshire moors she loved. This myth has profoundly shaped interpretations of Emily's literary work, with enduring effects. In Brontë studies, Charlotte's motivations have often been read as self-serving or ideologically repressive. I argue, however, that Charlotte Brontë's letters offer a valuable counterpoint to such views. Her correspondence reveals deep affection for Emily and

suggests that her paratextual interventions were driven less by self-serving ambition or by a misreading of her sister's work than by a sense of moral responsibility to protect her posthumous reputation, in the context of gendered critical reception.

Bio Júlia Mota Silva Costa holds a bachelor's and a master's degree in Literary Studies from the Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Brazil and is currently pursuing a PhD in Literary History at the same institution. Her research interests include the English novel, nineteenth-century literature, and literature's dialogue with visual arts.

Sophie Geoffroy: Epistolary Genesis: Vernon Lee's Letters and the Making of a Literary Life

Abstract This paper investigates the generative role of the letter in Vernon Lee's literary life and creation, with a focus on the Routledge critical edition of the *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee* (eds. S. Geoffroy and A. Gagel). Taking a genetic-critical approach, it considers how letters function not only as material traces of Lee's literary and intellectual engagements but also as sites of textual origin, emotional exchange, and creative co-construction.

Lee's epistolary practice reveals the intertwined processes of literary production and personal connection. Her correspondence documents negotiations with publishers, critics, and editors across Europe, forming a transnational literary network through which she forged her reputation and cultivated artistic community. Yet these letters are more than documentary; they are narrative engines. Many of her fictional and essayistic texts—*Euphorion*, *Miss Brown*, 'Lady Tal', *Althea*—emerge from, or are refracted through, epistolary exchanges with key interlocutors like her brother Eugene Lee-Hamilton, Mary Robinson, and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson.

This paper also explores imaginary letters and epistolary fragments addressed to the alienated beloved or to the dead friend—gestures that blur the boundary between public and private, presence and absence. Such letters are often simultaneously intimate and literary, vehicles for reflection, grief, and transformation. They suggest a conception of literature itself as a form of ongoing correspondence, haunted by what was never said, or never answered.

Through the act of archival reconstruction—piecing together scattered manuscripts, notes, and letters—we join a wider community of archivists and scholarly readers who, like Lee herself, operate within a network of epistolary exchange. This paper ultimately argues that Lee's literary corpus is inseparable from her letters: a 'form in flight,' perpetually in motion between life, text, and imagination.

Bio Formerly Professor at the Université de La Réunion, founding president of the International Vernon Lee Society (2013-2024), director of *The Sibyl, A Journal of Vernon Lee Studies* and co-director of *Vernon Lee Online* (67 videos), Sophie Geoffroy is the editor, with Amanda Gagel, of *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee* (6 volumes), Routledge.

Anne Longmuir: Epistolary Fictions: Authorial Persona and Narrative Form in Elizabeth Gaskell's Correspondence and Periodical Fiction

Abstract Biographers and critics, including Winifred Gérin, Joanne Shattock, and Carolyn Lambert have commented on the affinity between Gaskell's correspondence and her published fiction. Building on such existing scholarship, this paper suggests that Gaskell's letters were not just a venue to 'work through ideas for fiction (phrasing, language, tone)' (Lambert 16); rather there are important generic similarities between Gaskell's letters and her periodical fiction. Responding to Mark W. Turner's call for us to recognize '*the periodical-ness of periodicals*' (310), it argues that the rhythms of periodical publishing align Gaskell's short stories more closely than her novels with her correspondence. Like her letters, her shorter fiction was written, often hastily, to be read at a specific time and by a specific audience. Furthermore, much as Gaskell crafted different epistolary personae for different audiences

and rhetorical situations in her letters, so the narrative voice adopted in much of her shorter fiction reflects the same careful attention to different readerships. Focusing primarily on ‘The Sexton’s Hero’ (1847), ‘The Well of Pen-Morfa’ (1850), and ‘Crowley Castle’ (1863), stories which feature a middle-class holidaying outsider as their first-person narrator, this paper explores the marked similarities between the authorial personae and narrative forms adopted in these stories and in a selection of Gaskell’s letters. Literary critics have tended to view authors’ letters primarily as a source of biographical information, suitable primarily for locating the ‘real’ that underlies their fiction. By contrast, this paper proposes that placing Gaskell’s correspondence in conversation with her periodical fiction allows us to understand her letters not merely as raw biographical data, but rather as literary texts in their own right—while also highlighting the overlooked relationship of correspondence and periodical fiction in the nineteenth century.

Bio Anne Longmuir is Professor of English at Kansas State University. In addition to more than a dozen articles and book chapters, she co-edited *Victorian Literature: Criticism and Debates* (Routledge, 2016) with Lee Behlman (Montclair State University) and is author of the monograph, *John Ruskin and the Victorian Woman Writer* (Routledge, 2025).

PANEL 16 Letters, Literature, Space and Identity Chair: Jennifer Shepherd

Mark Borthwick: The Aeolian Epistolic: Geographic Imagination and Spiritual Experience in John Muir’s Letters and Journals

Abstract John Muir is a critically important nature-writer. His journals, containing vivid and spiritually charged descriptions of his experiences in the American wilderness, were the most read nature books of their time, and combined with his high-level advocacy, Muir was foundational in shaping the National Park conservation paradigm, which started in America, and has since been exported to over 100 countries around the world.

His journals, which present nature as possessing inherent worth independent of human utility, preconfigured systematic environmental ethics, particularly regarding the moral considerability of non-human nature. Even Muir’s most recent biographers assume these journals are genuine, however, they were published in Muir’s retirement, some 35 years after the trips occurred. Analysis of Muir’s letters during this period reveals the same anecdotes told repeatedly, with the end product having changed considerably from the early drafts. For example, Muir’s childhood autobiography, *On my Boyhood and Youth*, was published in 1913 when the historical Muir was seventy-five years old. ‘Stickeen’, a short story which tells of Muir’s personal relationship with the courageous titular animal, was told orally for thirty years before ever being committed to paper, becoming more fantastical and parabolic over time.

Comparing Muir’s letters written at the time of these events, we can see where his biographies layer on elements of deliberate fiction. This helps us understand Muir’s published works as mature and intentional pieces of environmental philosophy, designed to create a certain kind of moral transformation in the reader. This paper explores the immanence of an epistolary corpus, and how the frictions between a contemporaneous letter and a philosophically sanitized autobiography can be informative when thinking-with environmental theory. This paper takes an implicit religion approach to Muir’s writings, exploring how his letters can elucidate the underappreciated and deliberately obscured cosmological motivations which are ‘barely submerged’ in his nature writing.

Bio Mark Borthwick is an Open-Oxford-Cambridge Doctoral Training Partnership fellow at the Open University, exploring the implicit religions and cultural geographies of nature literatures, particularly how human cultures mutually co-create landscapes with our more-than-human conversation partners in the natural world.

Alexis Peri: Sailing the Mississippi Together: *Huckleberry Finn* in Cold-War Correspondence

Abstract ‘Have you or your son read any of the works of our great Soviet writer Maxim Gorky?’ Antonina Viazovskaia of Rostov asked Seattleite Gladys Kimple in November 1947. ‘I have the works of your American classic Mark Twain. My son and I, and even my husband often laugh to tears over the adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn.’ Viazovskaia penned these lines at a pivotal moment in US-Soviet tensions, shortly after the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plans had taken effect and when Stalin’s postwar terror *Zhdanovshchina* was in full swing. Determined to find common ground and overcome the massive geographical and ideological chasms that divided them, Viazovskaia and Kimple and roughly other 800 women in the US and USSR sought each other out as pen-pals. And they did so at tremendous personal risk. Kimple’s son would lose his commission in the navy and members of her family were forced to testify before Washington State’s Committee on Un-American Activities. Still, these pen-friends, and hundreds of others like them, carried on correspondence for nearly a decade.

My paper takes a deep dive into these correspondences, never-before studied by scholars. It highlights two ways Soviet and American women drew on literature to bridge the gap between their nations. First, they approached the Russian and American literary canons as indices of identity and repositories of national character traits. Viazovskaia, for instance, praised the works of Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair and John Steinbeck and then explained: ‘So you see I have some inkling of what the average American is like. I like him for his fundamental traits, he is hardworking, businesslike, honest, and generous--traits the American people have in common with us.’ Second, the pen-pals discussed the plots and characters of famous works of fiction as proxies for debating American liberal capitalism and Soviet socialism. My paper will focus on the pen-friends’ exchanges about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which facilitated larger discussions such as individualism, racism, social welfare, the myth of the open frontier, and socialist realism among other themes. While their textual interpretations were often at odds, literature allowed the correspondents to argue at a remove: the pen-pals critiqued fictionalized characters and scenarios rather than criticized each other’s life choices. They could disagree about culture and ideology without making the other person wrong. The flexibility of the letter, as a narrative mode, proved instrumental for this task; it allowed for the pen-pals to forge connections and debate differences simultaneously.

Bio Alexis Peri is author of *The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad* (Harvard University Press 2017), winner of the Pushkin House Book Prize and named in the *Wall Street Journal* as one of the ten best books on the Soviet home front, as well as *Dear Unknown Friend: The Remarkable Correspondence of American and Soviet Women* (Harvard University Press 2024). She is Associate Professor of History at Boston University.

Julia Fernilius: ‘I really want the little cottage [...] and you!’: Rethinking Domestic Correspondence in the Making of Modernism

Abstract In 1919, newly discharged from the army, Ford Madox Ford set out to construct a new life with the Australian painter Stella Bowen. After an eighteen-month courtship conducted largely through letters, their shared aim was clear. As Ford put it in one of his letters: ‘I really want the little cottage, in a valley, five miles from a market town—& you!’. Convinced his writing career was over, Ford imagined a quiet, post-war existence with Bowen—a retreat from both literature and public life. And yet, the intimate, vulnerable, and highly romantic letters exchanged between the couple during this period reveal not a withdrawal from artistic practice, but its quiet reconstitution. As many have noted, these letters bear a striking resemblance to Ford’s later fictional renderings of the post-war period, such as *No Enemy* and *Last Post*. Yet unlike Ford’s correspondence with figures such as Ezra Pound or Joseph Conrad, which critics have long positioned as central to his literary development, his letters to Bowen have been treated as primarily of biographical but not necessarily of literary value. This paper challenges that distinction. Drawing on Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley’s claim that

letters can negotiate the ‘tensions’ between the ‘utilitarian and the aesthetic aspects of writing’, presenting a ‘messy or hybridic’ form, I propose that the Bowen–Ford correspondence constitutes a mode of literary collaboration. These letters are vital to the emergence of Ford’s post-war modernist poetics: one shaped not in dialogue with literary peers alone, but through a deeply affective, everyday intimacy. Rather than viewing domestic and romantic correspondence as peripheral, I argue that such writing was formative. The Bowen–Ford letters represent not just a private archive, but a site of literary experimentation, where life and art converge.

Bio Julia Fernelius is a PhD student at the Department of English at Stockholm University. Her research centres on the intersection of literature, history, and everyday life, with a particular focus on the relationship between late Victorian and early twentieth-century material cultures and the development of literary modernism.

PANEL 17 Letters, Literature and Politics

Chair: Alex Tickell

Khadija Alexander: From Robber to Writer: How one letter changed a prisoner’s life [Lightning talk]

Abstract Writers have always shared their thoughts through their works, but most personal writings take the form of letters. Some such letters belonged to prisoners who wished to escape from their prison cells and join a supportive community on the outside. One prisoner serving his sentence for multiple bank robberies, a member of the notorious Stopwatch Gang, Stephen Reid, sent out a simple letter with his manuscript to the University of Waterloo Writer-in-Residence, Susan Musgrave. It led to Reid publishing his first novel and best-seller, *Jackrabbit Parole* (McArthur & Company, 1986). He married Musgrave while he was in prison. Following his release in 1987, he joined her in Victoria and became a well-known author in the writing community. He led a life of redemption until he fell back into drug addiction and a failed bank heist resulted in another prison sentence in 1999.

Susan Musgrave was Reid’s bridge to the outside world, when his access to emails were limited. Yet, Reid’s correspondence from his peers and literary agents gives scholars, librarians, and archivists a glimpse into the mind of his writings and other writers and prisoners. How did Reid’s letters give researchers a glimpse of the author’s changing reputation amongst the literary and prison community? What was Reid’s support system during his second incarceration? How does his correspondence reveal how his actions affected his family and the Canadian writing community? What opportunities did the literary industry take during his incarceration?

Bio I am an archive processing librarian at McMaster University. I have been working in archives and rare book libraries for five years.

Barbara Hochman: Words of Warning: Autobiographical Letters to Black Children

Abstract Over the last fifteen years, a new literary mode has emerged in the United States: a neglected narrative genre in letter form. James Baldwin arguably initiated this tradition in 1962 with his short piece ‘My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation.’ After a considerable time-lag, texts with similar goals and structure have followed. These texts raise pedagogical questions hotly debated in the United States today: what sort of texts will best prepare young people for the future?

I borrow the phrase ‘Words of Warning’ from the controversial feature *1619*, which appeared in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* in 2019, the 100th anniversary of the first slave ship to reach the Americas. Reprinted in multiple forms, *1619* validates the nation’s ‘shameful history’ as an educational tool.

In ‘Words of Warning,’ a Black adult, often a parent, writes a letter addressed to a son, daughter, or nephew. Using historical facts and personal experience, the narrator clarifies persistent challenges facing young people of color. The genre includes Ta-Nehisi Coates’ best-seller, *Between the World and Me* (2015), as well as narratives by Karsonya Wise-Whitehead (2015), David Chariandy (2018), Imani Perry (2019), and others. Highlighting slavery, racism, and white hypocrisy, these texts anticipate the focus of *1619* – revisionary history. However, via the letter as mode and trope, the familial relationship of writer to recipient, and the personal tone, ‘Words of Warning’ is quite different from *1619*. Analyzing themes and formal features that characterize the genre, I argue that the letter form itself endorses communication (or the desire for it), while the connection of writer to addressee foregrounds intimacy and continuity, challenging stereotypical images of dysfunctional black families and affirming the future.

Bio Barbara Hochman, Professor Emerita at Ben-Gurion University, writes on American fiction, reading practices, and reception. Her most recent book is *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction 1852-1911* (2011). Her article, ‘Making Americans in the New York Public Library: Fantasy and Realities,’ appeared in *American Literature* in March.

Dean J. Hill: George Orwell’s Letters: Authenticity and Political Community in Literary Networks

Abstract This paper examines George Orwell’s letters as critical tools for constructing his authentic voice and fostering political and literary communities, aligning with the conference’s exploration of letters as creative network makers. Orwell’s voluminous correspondence, preserved in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, reveals a seamless blend of personal reflection and public engagement, foundational to works like *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Through a detailed analysis of letters to publishers like Victor Gollancz, poets like T.S. Eliot and comrades from the Spanish Civil War, I explore how Orwell used the epistolary form to bridge the public and private, navigating absence and presence with unflinching honesty. His wartime letters, penned amidst physical hardship, interweave vivid personal accounts with sharp critiques of ideological betrayal, forging enduring ties with leftist intellectuals worldwide. Drawing on Liz Stanley’s concept of letters as ‘epistolary gift exchange,’ I argue that Orwell’s correspondence built a vibrant network of writers, activists and readers, sustaining critical dialogues on socialism, censorship and the nature of truth in turbulent times. The materiality of these letters – often handwritten or typed under duress – embodies their role as tangible connections in a fractured global landscape, reflecting authenticity in both form and intent. Moreover, Orwell’s letters illuminate his creative process, cementing his literary reputation as a moral and political beacon. By situating his correspondence within the epistolary tradition, this study underscores how letters functioned as narrative devices, blending memoir, manifesto and ethical inquiry to shape 20th-century political literature. This paper enriches the conference’s aim to trace the letter’s evolution, highlighting its capacity to foster community, preserve authenticity and address archival challenges in safeguarding literary legacies for future generations.

Bio Dean J. Hill is a postgraduate researcher at the University of Birmingham and received the 2024 Robert B. Partlow, Jr. Prize. He is a Senior Reader for Ploughshares and contributes to the Orwell Youth Prize. His current research investigates how AI-mediated systems extend Orwellian surveillance motifs into contemporary digital culture.

Isabelle Parsons: The weight of letters in *The House of Mirth* [Lightning talk]

Abstract Letters occur frequently in Edith Wharton’s narratives. As material objects, she portrays them, variously, as being drafted and redrafted, bundled together, unbundled, opened, read, carried around, passed on, put away, torn up, reconstructed, thrown out and burnt. These actions complement and extend her characters’ reactions to letters as objects to be valued/feared, and curated/destroyed,

because of what they document. Nowhere is Wharton's emphasis on the handling of letters as objects with potentially far-reaching implications for whoever possesses them as pronounced as in *The House of Mirth* (1905). A consequence of her persuasive construction of the significance of written correspondence in this early, successful novel, is that letters are expected to have consequence – are imbued with comparable weight – in her other works. This lightning paper examines a few such examples in terms of the cache of incriminating letters that places so heavy a burden on *The House of Mirth*'s Lily Bart.

Bio Isabelle Parsons is an honorary associate and tutor in the Department of English and Creative Writing at the OU. She is the author of *The Secrets and Silences of Edith Wharton's Women* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025) and has published in the *Edith Wharton Review*.

PANEL 18 **Teaching Letters**

Chair: Daniel Smith

Dianne Mitchell; Alison Wiggins; Leah Veronese; Louise Curran; James Daybell

Abstract This roundtable will explore different ways of teaching letters. It will draw on perspectives from English Literature, History, and Digital Humanities and from classrooms in the UK and US; and will represent the experiences of early career, mid career, and senior academics. Using a lightning presentation format, we will share our experiences of best practice in teaching letters (as, or adjacent to, literature) through short case-studies.

Smith: By way of introduction, I will give an overview of the module on letters that I teach to second-year English Literature undergraduates at King's College London.

Mitchell: Students in graduate and undergraduate classes find the act of locking letters surprisingly moving. I'll discuss some of the creative work that has emerged from my Renaissance literature classes, in which students turn ancient forms of paper manipulation into an opportunity to reflect on the affordances and limits of written communication in their own lives.

Wiggins: I will give a brief summary of 'Editing Historical English Texts', an Honours-level course I devised in 2018 and have taught six times that introduces students to Digital Humanities approaches, skill-sets and critical questions. Early Modern letters are used throughout and are particularly well suited to the aims and ILOs. In the past two years, I have started to experiment with new software on the course including the AI-drive transcription software Transkribus. I will mention some of possible options and ideas for incorporation of Transkribus in teaching, and report back on responses from students as I seek to update and refresh the course in the light of new technologies.

Veronese: Letters are flexible sources for literature students. I will discuss how teaching letters as part of an undergraduate module on early modern literature enables discussion of the material text, women's writing, queerness and homosociality, self-fashioning, rhetoric, and early experiments with epistolary narrative.

Curran: I'll talk about three classes I will be teaching in 2026 on the composition, publication, and reception of Jane Austen's letters for a MA module 'Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Studies'.

Daybell: I will give a short overview of the ways in which I use letters within a third-year history module on the early modern family, as a way of exploring a range of interdisciplinary methodologies with students including emotions, rhetoric and epistolarity.

Bios Daniel Smith is Senior Lecturer in Early Modern English Literature at King's College London. He is general editor of John Donne's correspondence for Oxford University Press, and co-author with Jana Dambrogio of *Letterlocking: The Hidden History of the Letter* (MIT Press, 2025).

Dianne Mitchell is Assistant Professor of English Literature at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her first book, *Paper Intimacies in the Early Modern Lyric* (2026), explores the forms of intimacy that emerge at the intersections of poetry and Renaissance material culture, especially via the circulation of manuscripts. She has published articles in *Modern Philology*, *JEMCS*, *English Literary Renaissance*, and *Studies in Philology* as well as essays on gender and material culture in several recent collections.

Alison Wiggins is Professor of English Language and Digital Editing at the University of Glasgow. She was AHRC Leadership Fellow for *Archives and Writing Lives* and PI for the *Letters of Bess of Hardwick*. Recent publications include *Archives: Power, Truth, and Fiction* with Andrew Prescott (Oxford, 2023) and *The Seven Sages of Rome* with Rory Critten (TEAMS, 2026). She is part of the team developing an OA digital resource on the library and marginalia of philosopher and economist Adam Smith (Glasgow, Tokyo, Templeton).

Leah Veronese is a Stipendiary Lecturer in Early Modern Literature at Balliol College and Queen's College, Oxford. She is writing her first monograph, *Suing for Grace: the Early Modern Rhetoric of Petition*. Her research has been published in *The Oxford Handbook to Early Modern Women's Writing in English* and *The Review of English Studies*.

Louise Curran is an Associate Professor in Eighteenth-Century and Romantic Literature at the University of Birmingham, author of *Samuel Richardson and the Art of Letter-Writing* (2016), co-editor of *Correspondence Primarily on Pamela and Clarissa* (2024), and part of the editorial team working on Pope's correspondence for the *Oxford Edition of the Writings of Alexander Pope*. She is currently writing a book about *The Making of Letters as Literature: 1735-1817*.

James Daybell is Professor of Early Modern British History at the University of Plymouth, UK, and Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. An expert in early modern social, cultural and political history, he has produced more than fourteen books on subjects ranging from early modern correspondence, gender and politics, public history and heritage, and is currently working on a Swedish Research Council- funded project entitled 'Moved Apart: Communicated Experiences of Separation in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.'

PANEL 19 **Letters and Literature PGR/ECR panel**

Chair: Anne Wetherilt

Ishan Tripathi (University of Manchester); **Maya M. Haidar** (Sorbonne Université); **Anita Schwartz** (Open University); **Talissa Ancona Lopez** (Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Brazil); **Patricia Ferguson** (Open University); **Lucía Alonso Ramírez** (Universidad Complutense de Madrid); **Larissa de Assumpção** (Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg)

Ishan Tripathi: The Unsent Letter in Partition Fiction: Epistolary Haunting and Deferred Address

Abstract Partition literature in South Asia frequently returns to the image of the unsent or undelivered letter. We can read them as gestures of correspondence arrested by political rupture and historical trauma. This paper examines how such letters function as narrative devices and as affective and ethical forms of remembering. Reading across Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1974), Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), and Kamleshwar's *Kitne Pakistan* (2000), I argue that unsent letters stage the impossibility of communication across the chasms of violence, time, and political betrayal. They constitute what Jacques Derrida calls the 'deferred address,' where the act of writing remains suspended in an absent or impossible receiver.

In Sahni's *Tamas*, the letter that precipitates the slaughter of pigs is a letter that is never read aloud and whose contents are misconstrued, conveying how distortion and silence underpin historical transmission. Desai's novel, by contrast, shows the letter as a fragment of familial memory that becomes emblematic of deferred reconciliation. Kamleshwar's novel literalizes the epistolary archive by constructing epistolary dialogues between historical figures across centuries, exposing how the past is made and remade through fictionalized correspondences.

Theoretically grounded in trauma studies (Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra) and postcolonial memory work (Yasmin Saikia, Urvashi Butalia), the paper tracks how these unsent letters create haunting textual residues and traces of what could not be said, heard, or acknowledged. These narratives use the form of the letter to question the very nature of historical testimony, legibility, and authorship. The letter, when never sent, becomes a powerful metaphor for Partition's unspeakable aftermath—affective, private, and yet insistently literary.

Bio Ishan Tripathi [she/they] is a postgraduate scholar specializing in Modern and Contemporary Literature with a master's degree from the University of Manchester. Their research focuses on the intersections of postcolonial theory, cultural studies, meme studies, critical caste studies, and decolonial praxis.

Maya M. Haidar: Intimacy and Distance in the Letters of Emily Eden (1837-1840) and Toru Dutt (1873-77): a comparative study [Lightning talk]

Abstract 'Given the letter's function as a connector between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver, the epistolary author can choose to emphasize either the distance or the bridge' (Altman, 1982). Noted for their works of fiction and poetry, authors Emily Eden and Toru Dutt represent critical bookends of female-led Anglophone writing in nineteenth-century British India. Previous scholarship has identified in the stylistic conventions of the private correspondences of these English and Bengali writers the accommodation of a wide range of aesthetic forms, including picturesque, Gothic, and even ekphrastic modes of description (Arondekar 1993; Das 1921). Critic Naomi Schor's aesthetic inquiry of the detail foregrounds its gendered connotations of 'ornamentation' and 'domesticity' and this female-coded recourse to detail animates Eden and Dutt's affirmation of intimate connections with their readers, which include literary references that seek to reduce geographical distance through the invocation of common readerly experiences (2006). The employment of detail in these letters nonetheless occasionally result in moments of linguistic alienation as in the authors' unfamiliar transcriptions of *Hindustani* and Bengali. A comparative reading of the epistolary forms of the two authors—notably in the compilation of Emily Eden's letters *Up The Country*, written by Eden to her sister Mary, describing her time in India during her brother's stint as Governor-General and in Toru Dutt's letters from Calcutta to Mary Martin, a close friend from her family's years abroad in Cambridge—reveals strategies of formal expression rooted in the inclusion of detail that alternately create feelings of intimacy and distance for the readers of their respective letters. This multivocality is more generally characteristic of the 'double-voiced' writings of British *memsahibs*¹—and indeed of Indian *memsahibs* such as the elite, anglicised Dutt whose letters are inscribed with duelling models of tradition and modernity (Grossman, 2001; Vimala, 2013; Sengupta, 2017; Sen 2005). Expanding cultural notions of the genre of *memsahib* literature, the epistolary form opens the possibility of new readings of intimacy across distances. [Ed: Bibliography available on request]

1. The term "memsahib", which was employed as a term of address for White women in colonial India, originates in the hybridised pronunciation of the English "ma'am" and the word Sahib, or master, in Hindi and Urdu.

Bio I am in my second year of teaching English as a lectrice d'anglais at the Sorbonne. I have previous degrees in Comparative Literature (MA, 2023) from University College London and English (BA Hons, 2021) from Ashoka University. I commence my doctoral studies this year at the University

of Cambridge wherein my research will focus on the cultural productions of and by the figure of the memsahib in 19th-century British India.

Anita Schwartz: ‘The ideals and traits of character that it has taken thousands of years to form are not affected by a mere external change’: Correspondence, Courtship, and Nationhood in Swarnakumari Debi Ghosal’s Novel *An Unfinished Song* (1913) [Lightning talk]

Abstract Swarnakumari Debi Ghosal was born in 1856 into the illustrious Tagore family. The family home, Jorasanko, was a centre of Bengali culture and learning, and Swarnakumari grew up in a household intrinsically intertwined with the cultural movements of nineteenth-century Bengal.

In this presentation I will focus on the letters discussed in her novel *An Unfinished Song* (1913). I will argue that within the correspondence two major themes, explored throughout the narrative and significant to nineteenth-century Bengal, emerge: The conflicting influences of an English education on the male characters in the novel, and the burgeoning sense of nationhood experienced by the educated female protagonist, Moni.

Bio Anita Schwartz is a part-time OU student, funded by the Open Oxford Cambridge Doctoral Training Partnership (OOC DTP). She studied English and Music at undergraduate level and completed her MA in Literature with the OU. Her thesis focuses on texts in English by Indian women between 1870 and 1947.

Talissa Ancona Lopez: From letter to poem: aspects of Ana Cristina Cesar’s epistolary poetry

Abstract Ana Cristina Cesar (1952-1983) was a Brazilian poet, translator, and literary critic who lived mainly during the period of marginal poetry in Brazil. Her literature was widely associated by critics with confessional genres, especially correspondence, and she herself commented on her work in parallel with letters and diaries. Using a variety of strategies, her poems communicate with general aspects of the epistolary universe: the evocation of the interlocutor, the question of intimacy, the allusion to the response, in addition to explicit references to letters, postmen, postcards, etc. Even so, little has been said about her letters. There are only two books of her letters published in Brazil: the first, published in 1999 (*Correspondência Completa*), brings together letters written by Ana Cristina Cesar to four correspondents while she was living in England and pursuing her master's degree at the University of Essex; the second, *Amor mais que maiúsculo: cartas a Luiz Augusto*, published in 2022, contains the love letters written by Ana Cristina Cesar to her teenage boyfriend between 1969 and 1971, when she was on her first school exchange, also in England. This article is divided into two parts: first, it introduces the poet Ana Cristina Cesar and the epistolary aspect of her literature; then, it analyzes a letter (dated September 7, 1969) in parallel with the poem “Onze horas” (Eleven O’Clock), from 1968, to demonstrate that between these two types of writing (literary and epistolary) there is a curious path of experimentation and laboratory. The letter in question was written by Ana Cristina Cesar to Luiz Augusto and published in 2022 in the book *Amor mais que maiúsculo: cartas a Luiz Augusto*. Based on the manuscript of this letter, it is possible to draw an interesting parallel between epistolary experimentation and her poetic production in general, in addition to the dialogue between the text of the letter, the materiality of the letter, and the poem in question.

Bio Talissa Ancona Lopez has a master’s degree in Applied Linguistics from Unicamp, where she studied and translated Katherine Mansfield’s letters. She is currently a doctoral student in the Literary Theory Program at Unicamp and in co-supervision with Sorbonne-Nouvelle University, where she studies the connections between womens’ writing and epistolary tradition, mainly in Ana Cristina Cesar and Katherine Mansfield. She is part of the Latin American Group for Studies on Katherine Mansfield. She is a writer and translator.

Patricia Ferguson: C. S. Lewis’s first reading of George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* shows how letters can reveal the ‘authentic self’ [Lightning talk]

Abstract His first reading of *Phantastes* was a watershed moment for C.S. Lewis. It is remarkable then, that in *Surprised by Joy* he misremembered this experience as taking place in the autumn of 1916, when it had in fact taken place in the spring. The proof of this is contained in a letter of 7 March 1916 to his friend Arthur Greeves. In this lightning talk I begin by highlighting the significance of letters in general, especially those not intended for publication, in providing evidence of what really happened, thus forming a sure foundation for identifying any ‘misremembering’ and examining its nature. I go on to argue that in the case of C.S. Lewis and *Phantastes* the misremembering is an instance of ‘defensive exclusion’ as described by the psychiatrist John Bowlby, who discussed C.S. Lewis’s experiences in his book *Loss: Sadness and Depression* (London: Hogarth Press, 1980). Lewis’s account in *Surprised by Joy* is quite straightforward and entirely plausible. Without the letter to Arthur, we would be unaware of the light thus cast on Lewis’s ‘authentic self’.

Bio I am in my final year of part-time doctoral study with a thesis called ‘Two Brothers and Their Books: Understanding the Reading Experiences of Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) and Warren Hamilton Lewis (1875-1973)’. I have an MA in Book History from the University of London, and am especially interested in the history of reading.

Lucía Alonso Ramírez: A kaleidoscope of paper fragments: the aestheticization of epistolarity in Gloria Fuertes’ envelopes [Lightning talk]

Abstract Every letter is literary and, thus, every letter has aesthetic potential. However, this observation can only be made through the eyes of Postmodernity, when epistolary correspondence is no longer linked to an everyday practice. In Viktor Shklovski’s (1917) terms, correspondence has been de-automatised and, thanks to its estrangement, an aesthetic attitude has been able to germinate, favouring the emergence of its aesthetic dimension. In turn, this potential not only encompasses the letter-text, but also the letter-object itself, a subject somewhat neglected by the academy. This idea is reinforced by the contemporary approach to archives, as the letters that are preserved and studied respond to a particular aesthetic attitude towards the epistolary genre. That is why the case of Gloria Fuertes (1917-1998) is so significant for the advancements of epistolary theory. Scattered throughout her unexplored archive, tens of envelopes can be found amongst documents of every kind. Though some of them are in pristine conditions, most of them are scribbled on and completely torn apart. At first glance, they may seem useless or even rubbish. Yet these fragments hold great literary and, therefore, aesthetic value: upon closer look, the unintelligible scribbles form disjointed verses, whole poems, starts of letters. Fuertes in this act resignifies the purpose of the envelope. It no longer adheres to its initial discursive function. It serves as a means of artistic creation. Their discontinuity, their lack of unity and their collage-like characteristics—their way of estrangement—move these expressions towards an aesthetic of the fragment, which engages in a dialogue between epistolarity, literarity and poeticism. This lightning talk aims to explore Gloria Fuertes’ peculiar viewpoint of the epistolary genre, which highlights the role of materiality in the epistolary aesthetic experience. Furthermore, the study of her envelopes provides a bridge to other theoretical paths, as well as helping to define the estrangement of letters in the 21st century through postmodern eyes.

Bio Lucía Alonso Ramírez is a PhD student at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid under their Literary Studies programme. Her research focuses on epistolary theory from Gloria Fuertes’ unpublished letters, as well as their impact on the lyric genre and the construction of intellectual networks with the help of the Digital Humanities.

Larissa de Assumpção: The political and literary use of letters in nineteenth-century Brazil: the case of Emperor Pedro II’s correspondence with American and European writers [Lightning talk]

Abstract In the 19th century, letters were an important form of communication that enabled the Brazilian monarchy to maintain contact with the intellectual elite of North America and Europe.

Emperor Pedro II (1825–1891), a descendant of the European monarchies of Habsburg, Bragança, and Bourbon, used correspondence to build a network of intellectuals around him who could promote Brazil's political image abroad and share with his empire the scientific and literary knowledge produced in Europe (Schwarcz, 1998; Assumpção, 2023). The purpose of this paper is to analyse some of the 390 letters that Pedro II exchanged with 17 intellectuals of his time – including Alessandro Manzoni, Alphonse Karr, Arthur de Gobineau, Carl Friedrich von Martius, Cesare Cantù, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and John Greenleaf Whittier —, now housed in the Imperial Museum of Petrópolis, Brazil. The analysis focuses on three main aspects: the political and literary topics addressed in the letters; the role played by the Brazilian monarch in these authors' intellectual networks and literary production; and the contributions of this correspondence to research in Book History (Chartier, 1998) and in the study of the transatlantic circulation of books in the 19th century (Abreu, 2017; Darnton, 1990). It is argued that the authors used their correspondence with the emperor as a means of publicising their works and securing either financial or symbolic support from the monarch. Through this exchange, a network was established with Pedro II, who sent the authors Portuguese translations he had made of their works and, in return, received books they had recently published in Europe and the United States. In some cases, this exchange of letters facilitated the circulation and commercialisation of books in Brazil, expanding the authors' readership.

Bio Larissa de Assumpção holds a PhD in Theory and Literary History. She is currently a guest researcher in Comparative Literature at Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany, where she studies the circulation of German novels in the nineteenth century. She is also a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Modern Languages at the University of São Paulo, Brazil.

Friday 7th November

PANEL 20 **Spain and Latin America**

Chair: Fiona Doloughan

Encarnación Trinidad Barrantes: Exploring letters and literary creativity through Isabel Allende

Abstract Isabel Allende offers a productive case study for examining the significance of letters in contemporary literature. This paper indeed will argue that, for Allende, letters and storytelling hold something akin to a symbiotic relationship. The often-recounted anecdote of how her debut novel, *The House of the Spirits* (1982), started as a letter to her dying grandfather in itself hints at the intrinsic role letters play in Allende's work and literary career. Another poignant example of Allende's indebtedness to letters came about a decade later: the letters Allende wrote when her daughter Paula fell into a coma eventually served to break Allende's grief-induced writer's block and were repurposed as a memoir, *Paula* (1994). In interviews, too, Allende often alludes to her avid letter reading and writing habits and to her use of letters as key research tools. Letters provide Allende not only with the stimulus for her writing but also with authentic detail, through which she seeks to captivate her audience and, in turn, to enable her audience to empathise with the lived experiences of others. Allende's success in fulfilling her goal is especially evident in *Cartas a Paula* (1997), a compilation of the letters Allende received from readers of *Paula*. The deep connection between letter reader and writer, and the link between letters and storytelling, is in fact something Allende had already explored directly in 'Letters of Betrayed Love' (1989). And letters continue to feature prominently in some of Allende's more recent work. In *The Long Petal of the Sea* (2019), for instance, they serve to (re)connect displaced characters, while *Violeta* (2022) is framed as a letter from the eponymous character to her grandson.

Bio Encarnación Trinidad Barrantes is a Senior Lecturer for the Department of English and Creative Writing at The Open University. Having initially specialised in nineteenth-century North American literature, her research interests have broadened to include book history matters, transatlantic and global influences, and more contemporary writers.

Silvina Katz: Reading Ocampo's Letters in the Twenty-First Century: A Translator's Perspective

Abstract Silvina Ocampo's letters—both real and fictional—offer a singular lens into the life and imagination of a writer who deliberately concealed her private life (Klingenberg, 2003, p. 112). Despite a literary career spanning over fifty years, Ocampo remains, in many respects, one of Argentina's best-kept literary secrets (Cozarinsky, 1970). Her English voice began to emerge in the late 1980s, but it was not until 2019 that a major collection of her work, translated by Levine and Lateef-Jan, reached English readers. This paper examines Ocampo's use of the letter as a literary form, focusing on '*Carta perdida en un cajón*' ('Letter Lost in a Drawer'), where boundaries between sender and recipient, confession and invention, are deliberately blurred. For translators, Ocampo's letters pose unique challenges: many omit the addressee and signature (Klingenberg, 1999, p. 208), begin in medias res, and, notably, employ gender ambiguity through pronouns, indirect references, and shifting narrative voices, leaving identity and even gender unresolved (see e.g. Rossi, 2021, pp. 189–207; Mancini, pp. 168–177). Successfully translating such ambiguity requires preserving syntactic indeterminacy and resisting the urge to clarify, while echoing Ocampo's oscillation between formality and intimacy. The translator must maintain the letter's liminal, in-between quality and the emotional resonance of what remains unsaid. Approaching Ocampo's letters as a translator, rather than a passive or voyeuristic reader, foregrounds the interpretive and creative decisions required to honour her stylistic subtleties, and deepens appreciation for her epistolary art. [Ed: References available on request]

Bio Dr Silvina Katz is a researcher in Languages and Linguistics, specialising in the sensory translation of atmosphere in Silvina Ocampo's stories. She holds an MA and a PhD in Translation Studies and has extensive experience as a lecturer, translator, and interpreter. Her research explores sensory and hermeneutic approaches to translation.

Avril Tynan: Fax or Faux? Nonnarration in Jorge Semprun's Short Story *Les Sandales*

Abstract Little has been said of a peculiar short story, *Les Sandales* [The Sandals], written by Jorge Semprun and published in 2002. If many of Semprun's other novels, autofictional *récits*, screenplays and plays delve into complex themes of trauma, memory and identity, often converging around characters who have experienced, like their author, concentration camps, torture and exile, *Les Sandales* is a seemingly innocuous anomaly, an 'erotic short story' (Omlor 29) of a sexual affair and an untimely accidental death. Yet the short story contains several distinct elements that deserve critical attention, including epistolarity (Altman), meta-epistolarity (Schuh 73) and nonnarration (Schmid) that collectively transform a superficially underwhelming story of passion and infidelity into a complex web of narrative deferral and entangled relations between authors and readers.

The epistolary device in this short story is the fax, an often-forgotten mode of communication that was relatively short lived, preceded by the letter and supplanted by the email (Coopersmith). Yet the fax, or facsimile, like the letter, has a material connection to both its author and its reader, and its transmission creates a multiplicity: the author retains the original while the reader receives a duplicate. Three faxes circulated among the protagonists of the short story highlight epistolary tensions between presence and absence, self and other, public and private (Altman; Bower), and their meanings are only elucidated through the narrative scaffolding of the third-person narrator. Curious, then, that given the temporal and spatial constraints of the epistolary short fiction (Löschnigg; Löschnigg and Schuh), a key fax should be absent from the narrative. Yet the third and final fax

constitutes a gap (Sternberg) in the narrative, its contents brought to light only obliquely through the diegetic reader's meta-narration. In this presentation I suggest that, when read as an epistolary short fiction, *Les Sandales* offers a whirlwind glimpse into the deferral of conclusion and the tantalizing ambiguity of meaning that can be roused in short stories and in epistolary fictions. [Ed: List of Works Cited available on request]

Bio Dr Avril Tynan is a Research Council of Finland Fellow (2023–2027) at the University of Turku, Finland and editor of *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*. Tynan has previously held research positions at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities in Essen, Germany (2022) and the Turku Institute for Advanced Studies, Finland (2019–2021), as well as teaching positions at Royal Holloway, University of London (2016–2018). Her current research takes a critical perspective on the interpretation of illness and health in literature and culture.

PANEL 21 Twentieth-Century Poets and Letters

Chair: Daria Chernysheva

Sarah Bennett: Friendship, Literary Criticism and the Epistolary Gift in the Irish Poetry Archive

Abstract Published correspondence, and letters within archives, reveal both the intensity of a friendship and its changing patterns across a life. In the first volume of the Samuel Beckett letters, and my own edited volume of the Denis Devlin letters, Thomas MacGreevy emerges as the primary correspondent to both writers, who encourages the richest and widest-ranging dialogue; in both cases, correspondence with MacGreevy falls away from the 1940s onwards, as the writers settle into professional lives beyond Ireland. The modern Irish poetry holdings within Emory's Rose Library offer an especially dynamic research experience. Built with a sense of collectivity and friendship in mind, the archive holds papers of the celebrated triumvirate of the Ulster Renaissance, Heaney, Mahon and Longley, allowing conversations to be brought into three-dimensional animation. In the case of the Beckett-MacGreevy-Devlin generation, and the later Ulster poets, letter exchanges are vessels for first critical response to the 'gift' of work, in published or drafted form. Yet this form of literary appraisal, or criticism, is necessarily marked and even constrained by the 'burden' of reciprocity (Mauss), as well as the responsibility of maintaining friendship. For Devlin, who was a confessedly bad correspondent, this obligatory reciprocity often proved paralysing: on receipt of the first edition of *At Swim-Two-Birds* from his UCD contemporary Brian O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien), he sends a placeholder letter articulating his intention to meet the challenges of the book by 'writing at length', avoiding inadequate reflections, but the follow-up response is conspicuously absent. In the exchanges between Longley and Heaney, advice for excision and revision appears as a duty of the epistolary first-response, always framed in intimacy: 'my suggestions should show you that I feel the poems in my marrow'. This paper uses the Irish poetry archive to examine the space of the letter as a forum for critical feedback between writer friends, asking what species of literary criticism we find in this gift exchange.

Bio Sarah Bennett teaches Modern and Contemporary literature at Durham University. Her publications and research are concerned with transatlantic influence, Irish poetic modernism, and literary culture in post-1922 Ireland. She is the editor of *The Letters of Denis Devlin* (Cork UP, 2020).

Astrid Fizyczak: Epistolary Geographies of Loss: the Letter as Space of Absence in Elizabeth Bishop's Writing (1911 to 1979)

Abstract Elizabeth Bishop's writing is shaped by epistolary forms – both through her extensive correspondence and through poems that adopt the tone and structure of letters. Letter writing holds a distinctive place, serving as a means of private exchange and as a space for poetic experimentation.

Through her letters with fellow poets such as Robert Lowell and Marianne Moore, as well as with visual artists like Loren McIver, Bishop crafts a voice that blurs the boundary between personal intimacy and literary creation¹. In her work, the letter's physical form—marked by deletions, pauses, and typographic irregularities—mirrors its thematic instability and uncertain destination.

Drawing on Liz Stanley's concept of the letter as a 'form of flight', and examining poems, short-stories – including 'The Bight' (*PPL*, 46), 'Letter to N.Y' (*PPL*, 61), 'Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore' (*PPL*, 63), 'Arrival at Santos' (*PPL*, 71), 'In the Village' (*PPL*, 99), 'The U.S.A School of Writing' (*PPL*, 449), 'The Sea & Its Shore' (*PPL*, 574), unpublished drafts such as 'To the Admirable Miss Moore' (*PPL*, 232) or 'Letter to Two Friends' (*PPL*, 240), and her personal letters – I will analyse how Bishop's epistolary practice gives shape to loss, absence, and distance². The first section discusses how Bishop mobilises the letter as a topographical artefact, mapping dislocation and longing. In her poem-letters, emotions are rooted in public or geographic markers – such as bridges³ and harbours – where language meets the material world. The second section explores the letter's incompleteness and fragility, drawing on Derrida's concept of *destinerrance*, as interpreted by Joseph Hillis Miller⁴ and Lacan's notion of the 'purloined letter'⁵ to consider letters as objects suspended in time – either delayed⁶ or unread⁷. The final section investigates Bishop's use of phantom correspondences – letters imagined, never sent⁸, or resurfacing after decades⁹ – suggesting that the materiality of the text is akin to debris or flotsam. The use of dashes, pauses, run-on-lines and repetitions visually enacts the absence of the other on the page. [Ed: list of references available on request to speaker]

Bio Astrid Fizyczak is a fourth-year PhD student in American literature at Sorbonne-Nouvelle University. Her dissertation, supervised by Isabelle Alfandary, explores the representations of space, memory, and time in the work of Elizabeth Bishop. Alongside her research, she teaches English in Paris. In June 2023, she joined the editorial board of *Traits-d'Union*, a journal dedicated to young scholars at Sorbonne-Nouvelle.

Andrew Swarbrick: Philip Larkin's Letters of Exile

Abstract The central contention of this contribution is that an exploration of the nature of real-life epistolarity can give us a new reading of the work of Philip Larkin. Three posthumously published volumes of his letters (his *Selected Letters* in 1992, his letters to Monica Jones in 2010, and his letters to his mother in 2018) show how copious and versatile he was as a correspondent. As objects of critical enquiry, his letters have largely been used biographically and psychoanalytically to unearth 'Larkin the man', for better or, largely, the worse. My own approach, by contrast, is to interrogate the letter not as a window to the soul of its author but as a special kind of textual event. I argue that the essence of epistolary exchange is that it be regarded as co-response, as a two-sided perlocutionary interaction, that the single letter in an extended exchange operates dialogically and indeterminately. As part of my recent research on Philip Larkin, I consulted the whole correspondence between Larkin and his long-term partner Monica Jones, now archived in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, from which I concluded that a reading of his novels and poems through the lens of epistolarity highlights some under-discussed features of his work: its dialogism, its indeterminacy and its recognition of contingency as a condition of the world.

Consequently, this contribution surveys some of the theoretical discussions of real-life epistolarity (in the work of Elizabeth Jane MacArthur, Amanda Gilroy and W.M Verhoeven, Janet Altman and Claudio Guillen) before proposing that Larkin's novels and particularly his poems participate in the textual phenomenology of the real-life letter. In doing so, I make brief reference to Mikhail Bakhtin and Wolfgang Iser to show that in his novels and poems Larkin writes his own 'letters of exile' to correspond between word and world.

Bio Andrew Swarbrick B.A., M.Phil. (Leeds) is a retired teacher. His previously published studies of Larkin include *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin* (Macmillan, 1995). He is currently completing his Ph.D. thesis on Philip Larkin at the University of Huddersfield.

PANEL 22 Digital Epistolary

Chair: Francesca Benatti

Jack Orchard: Gaming the Letter: Technology and Mediated Affect in Eighteenth-Century Letters and Contemporary Video Games

Abstract This paper will focus on the re-emergence in contemporary game studies and gaming discourse of a language of ‘mediated affect’, the translation of physical emotional experience through technology, which resonates strongly with eighteenth-century conceptions of the familiar letter as a vehicle for affective identification, and as a surrogate for physical presence. After introducing the theoretical framework of ‘mediated affect’, as argued through the theoretical frameworks of Silvan Tomkins and Sarah Ahmed, and considered in relation to games by Aubrey Anable, and eighteenth-century letters by Sally Holloway, I will explore this dynamic as it manifests in a series of examples from epistolary novels, the prescriptions surrounding good letter form in correspondence manuals and cultural commentary on letters from figures such as Horace Walpole and Vicesimus Knox, and finally a series of actual examples of familiar letters engaging with this discourse by members of the late 18th century Bluestocking circle. I will then address *Kind Words*, a 2019 video game created by the indie studio PopCannibal, which simulates the act of letter writing in a space which reframes the act of familiar letter writing through a ludic interface which provokes the same considerations of absence and affect as the eighteenth-century letter manual. Like the eighteenth-century letter manual, *Kind Words* offers an artificial and stylised set of rules which attempt to convey the sincere through the artificial. Like the sentimental conceits of the letter-as-conversation, and the body of the correspondent as the material object of the received letter, *Kind Words* utilises its aesthetic, aural, and haptic frameworks to transform absence into the illusion of connection. Ultimately I would like to argue that an exploration of the mechanics and procedural rhetoric of *Kind Words* offers contemporary players an experiential parallel to the process of translating affect through text experienced by eighteenth-century correspondents.

Bio Jack Orchard is Content Editor for *Electronic Enlightenment* at the Bodleian Libraries. His research encompasses 18th century women’s correspondence and reading practices, and the study of videogames as vehicles for historical empathy. He has published on Bluestocking reading, ghost letters, 18th century gardens, Gothic videogames and the ludic French Revolution.

Nadia Georgiou: Digital, print, neo-romantic: exploring tensions through twenty-first century epistolary forms

Abstract A persistent theme in contemporary fiction is the impact of the digital world on culture. The emerging category PPFs (Post–postmodernist Fictions of the Digital) includes fiction which ‘utilises both print and digital media and displays a thematic concern with the digitally mediated world in which they are set’ (Bell *et al* 2025). In parallel, the increased digitalisation of contemporary culture has rekindled an interest in more conventional technologies and means of communication. This amalgamated reality is illustrated in *Where’d you go, Bernadette* by Maria Semple and *Conversations with Friends* by Sally Rooney, which we consider PPFs.

My analysis demonstrates how the ensuing tensions between cutting edge and traditional epistolary forms are explored within these novels through combining digital modes of communication (such as emails, and text messages) and more traditional means (telephone calls and handwritten mail). I show how the different modes of communication are represented multimodally within each novel, with the visual aspects used to toy with the epistolary form’s potential for defamiliarization. This oscillation

between newer and older forms of communication, represented multimodally within each of the novels, introduces elements of neo-romanticism, a key aspect of what Van den Akker and Vermeulen term the metamodernist turn (2010). The second part of my talk will include reader response data from Goodreads, which demonstrate how real readers engage with the different forms of the epistolary in these novels and what effects these forms have on their reading experience. [Ed: Reference details available on request]

Bio Nadia Georgiou is an AHRC-funded postdoctoral researcher at Sheffield Hallam University and a postgraduate research supervisor at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David. Her research interests include reader responses to literary texts, and the sociology of literature. Her publications have appeared in *Cultus*, the *AALITRA Review* and *JoSTrans*.

Suzanne R. Black: Mediated communication and subjectivity in the twenty-first century romance plot

Abstract Epistolary fiction has traditionally interrogated how the representation and construction of the self through writing is complicated by the communication technology of the letter. Digital epistolary texts incorporating emails work to further complicate the link between self and text. The romance plot is a form that requires several formal elements, such as the separation and then union of two identifiable characters and often also includes overcoming barriers of misrecognition (from Edmond Rostand's 19th-century play *Cyrano de Bergerac* to the 1940 film *The Shop Around the Corner* directed by Ernst Lubitsch).

Digitally mediated communication, with its potential for the multiplication of presentations of the self across different communication channels, is rife with potential for romance plots. This paper explores two contemporary romance texts, one commercially published novel (*Attachments*, 2011, by Rainbow Rowell) and one work of fanfiction that both incorporate and reflect upon emails. These texts play out the fraught relationship between characters and their representations via mediated communication, each finding a different model of subjectivity in relation to the romance plot's 'happily ever after'.

Bio Suzanne R. Black is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Edinburgh with a PhD in English Literature. Her research interests lie in connecting multiple aspects of digital literary culture. She has published in *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture*, and *C21 Literature* (forthcoming).

PANEL 23 Creative Writing and Letters I

Chair: Joanne Reardon

Melissa Bailey: Making and unmaking Empire through letters and fiction

Abstract Colonial letters can provide a unique window into the thoughts, beliefs and motivations of settlers, exposing brutality against and displacement of indigenous communities from their lands. As Nunning suggests, 'The Age of empire lies in the past but its ambivalent heritage is still very much with us,' a continuity sustained by fictions of empire (<https://www.fwls.org/plus/view.php?aid=256>). Adventure stories set in the British empire once pervaded high culture and popular reading, legitimising and heroizing British exploration. In 2024, Richard Flanagan suggested that Britain and Australia have been 'slow in coming to terms with the invasion and the horrors which followed – our complete lack of ability simply to be honest about our past' (<https://creators.spotify.com/pod/profile/adelaidewritersweek/>).

As part of my background research for the novel *Wiggletrace*, I explored archives in the National Library of Australia and the State Library of South Australia to read first hand historic accounts from the 1870s of the construction of the Overland Telegraph through the heart of Australia. Letters from construction workers exposed the masculine, imperial impulse to dominate the world. I have drawn

upon, and recreated these letters in my fiction, devising the historic character of Thomas Dawson, hero of the 1870s, who helped to construct what was considered one of the greatest engineering feats of the 19th century. However, his descendant family in the 21st century uncover brutal truths about his legacy.

Thomas Dawson's reputation is both made and unmade through this work of fiction. By recreating and exposing 19th century letters, by using non-linear timeframes and hybrid forms, the novel seeks to rewrite the colonial adventure story to reveal greenwashing, white washing and toppled family heroes. As Amitav Ghosh (2017) writes, 'in the era of global warming, nothing is really far away.'

Bio I am currently in the 5th year of my part time PhD at the Open University. My critical and creative work explores the impacts of settler-colonialism with reference to Britain and Australia. My novel *Wiggletreace* is about truth telling: how secrets are suppressed within families and how the British fail to face truths about their days of Empire. It rewrites the colonial adventure story to expose greenwashing, whitewashing and the toppling of family heroes.

Gwyneth Jones: Stupid letter from Fanny [Lightning talk]

Abstract In 1816, Mary Godwin was living in Bath – scandalously living in Bath with the already-married poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. With them was Mary's stepsister Claire Clairmont. They were attempting to conceal – from their family at least – the fact that Claire was pregnant following a brief liaison with the infamous and also already-married poet, Lord Byron.

Mary and Claire had another sister, Fanny. She was excluded from their coterie, but often wrote to them. Few of Fanny's letters have survived and some are only known of from brief comments in Mary's journal. On Friday 4 October, Mary wrote: 'stupid letter from F.' The following Tuesday, 'Letter from Fanny.' Then on Wednesday 9 October, 'In the evening a very alarming letter comes from Fanny' (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert, 1987, pp.138-139). That same night, Fanny took her own life.

The 'stupid letter' has been preserved (now in the Bodleian Library) and indicates several strands of Fanny's unhappiness, including a rift with Mary over some malicious gossip of which Fanny denied being the source, and the financial difficulties faced by Mary's father (Fanny's stepfather) William Godwin which he was looking to Shelley to alleviate. But it is the missing letters that may well have contained the clearest explanation for Fanny's suicide. Using both creative and critical resources, this paper offers a glimpse into my research exploring the multiple strands of context for Fanny's suicide, and my ambivalence regarding the possibility of absolute closure in the face of such gaps in the archives.

Bio Gwyneth Jones is a writer of short and flash fictions, published under the name Jupiter Jones. She is currently a PhD candidate applying creative/critical approaches to the literary hybrid form of the novella-in-flash. The subject of her creative work is Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter Fanny Imlay.

Siobhan Campbell: The Other Side of the Letter: Margaret Maher and Emily Dickinson in Dialogue [Lightning talk]

Abstract In this lightning talk, poet and critic Siobhan Campbell will speak about her work of letter-based archival retrieval related to Margaret Maher, the Irish woman who was maid in the Dickinson household, Amherst, for 30 years. Addressing how the letters of Emily Dickinson can support the creation of an imagined diary in the voice of Maggie Maher, Campbell will ask whether and how a poet can ethically approach transformative moments of imagination initially generated by letters. Focused on the letter from Maher to Dickinson 'Some times I think I don't be sick' which has on its verso the poem 'He ate and drank the precious words', this paper will reflect on deliberate acts of preservation and conservation by both women, with Dickinson saving letters to write on the blank side, and Maher entrusted with storing the fascicles (small booklets) of Dickinson's poems (kept in

her bedroom in the trunk with which she crossed the Atlantic). What responsibilities do contemporary writers bear when engaging with the lives of those whose traces remain only at the edges of the literary archive with very few of their letters preserved? How best to acknowledge the defiance of Maher in her refusal to destroy the poetry on Dickinson's death? Can reflection on how the labour of Maher facilitated Dickinson's time to write affect the development of a poetic voice for Maher's imagined diary? Referring to work in Amherst and Boston, Campbell posits key questions on writerly uses of letters and archival material, especially in relation to giving voice to real, but forgotten, figures - in this case one who may have influenced textual aspects of Dickinson's work.

Bio Siobhan Campbell's responses to work in the Troubles archive (CAIN) form part of her poetry collection *Heat Signature* which also contains prize-winning work from the 'Voices of War' competition. As visiting Professor of Poetry working in Amherst and UNCC North Carolina, she researched aspects of Margaret Maher, maid in the Dickinson household, and her new collection 'Monarchs at the Milkweed' creates poems on points of intersection of both these women who had the financial independence to remain unmarried and who worked together in the kitchen of the Homestead.

Kim Wiltshire: The Letter Never Sent - Using the Letter Form in Creative Writing Workshops for NHS Staff During the Covid Pandemic

Abstract Kim Wiltshire has worked in arts and health for over two decades now, primarily with Lime, the arts and health team for Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust (MFT), as both an artist and project manager. But the Covid lockdown brought about a whole new way of running workshops and a whole new range of considerations for the arts and health artist to think about when delivering creative activity, as this paper will explore.

Building on their previous success with creative workshops for NHS healthcare professionals, when the Covid Pandemic hit, Lime had to (understandably) cancel all in person workshops. Recognising, however, that staff under such extreme stress might need a creative outlet at this point, perhaps more than ever, they set up an innovative series of online creative workshops for wellbeing for MFT staff facing, potentially, the most stressful environment of their working lives. The pilot for this focussed on creative writing workshops run by Kim Wiltshire; following the success of the pilot these creative writing workshops (alongside other artforms) continued over the next six months. One very popular theme of the creative writing workshop was The Letter Never Sent.

This paper will explore the workshop methodology of using the letter form, the purpose and aims of the workshop, situating creative writing in an arts and health context, and consider some of the choices made by participants exploring their creativity, including considerations of why using the letter theme worked so well as a route to tapping into the creativity of self-styled 'non-writers'.

Bio Dr Kim Wiltshire is a Reader and Programme Leader for Creative Writing at Edge Hill University. She is a widely published playwright, short story writer and critic and in 2023 she became a British Academy Innovation Fellow exploring embedding arts into healthcare settings.

KEYNOTE Jon McGregor (Nottingham University): 'An Audience of One: The letter as a natural literary form' Chair: Ed Hogan

Despite its near-extinct status, the handwritten letter retains for many people an unthreatening sense of the familiar. Ask a group of people in a workshop to write a short story, and they may well freeze; ask the same people to write a letter and they're unlikely to hesitate. What is it about the letter form that lends itself to an often unselfconscious and unforced literary style?... See link for more [Letters and Literature 1500-2025, The Open University](#)

PANEL 24 Exploring the Magical and Meaningful: Archives and Literary Correspondence

Chair: Sarah Prescott (University of Leeds)

Khadija Alexander (Archives Processing Librarian, McMaster University); **Ruth Burton** (Thomas Hardy Project Archivist, Dorset History Centre); **Tom Duckham** (Charles Dodgson Project Archivist, Christ Church, Oxford); **Jessica Smith** (Creative Arts Archivist, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester); **John Wells** (Senior Archivist, Cambridge University Library)

Abstract Philip Larkin once described literary manuscripts as having two types of value: ‘the magical’ and ‘the meaningful’. These qualities certainly hold true for literary correspondence. The magical comes from direct interaction with an item created by a writer, enabling the interpretation of their thoughts, ideas and actions across time. Meaning comes through in how we understand writers’ letters. Correspondence, whether accessed as digital surrogates, published transcriptions, or in their original formats can be understood as individual items, as dialogues between recipients, as curated collections, or as components of vast, transnational networks. However, the context of correspondence can be challenging to capture. Letters are created to be distributed, and therefore their meaning is diffused among recipients. Subsequently, their context can be lost through the destruction, sale, separation, and collecting of literary archives.

In this round table panel, we will explore how archivists document, reconstruct and present meaning, and magic, in literary correspondence and discuss the rich research and engagement potential of correspondence collections. Each of the panellists will give a brief introduction to their work with literary archives, including cataloguing the letters of Thomas Hardy and Lewis Carroll; reconstructing the correspondence networks of the ‘Cambridge School’ poets; acquiring embargoed letters in the archive of Stephen Reid; and new methods of appraising digital correspondence in the collections of contemporary writers. Drawing on these experiences, the discussion will focus on four themes:

- The importance of writers’ correspondence for identifying networks and surfacing hidden histories.
- The challenges of distributed correspondence collections and how archivists reconstruct the threads between them.
- The role of materiality in archives and how it helps us understand a writer and their work.
- Contemporary literary archives and changing forms of correspondence.

The panel aims to shed light on the practical realities of working with correspondence collections, advocate for the essential role of archivists, and examine broader questions of context, connection, and the interpretive relationship between letters and literary output.

Bios

Khadija Alexander has been working in archives and rare books for five years. She obtained a Master of Information at the University of Toronto, and began her career at the University of Toronto. Currently, she is Archives Processing Librarian at McMaster University.

Tom Duckham is a Project Archivist at Christ Church, Oxford, where he is responsible for cataloguing the Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) archives. He has previously worked with a range of cultural collections, including BBC Archives and Rebellion Publishing, where he curated the exhibition ‘Into Battle: The Art of British War Comics’.

Jessica Smith is Creative Arts Archivist at the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, responsible for the literary, performing arts and visual arts archives. She has been part of several

funded projects to explore the curation of digital correspondence, and to improve the software available for their management and utilisation.

John Wells is Senior Archivist at Cambridge University Library, where he has responsibility for post-medieval literary manuscript collections. In recent years he has overseen the accessioning and cataloguing contemporary poets' archives by the Library, with a particular emphasis on papers of members of the 'Cambridge School'.

Dr Ruth Burton is Thomas Hardy Project Archivist at Dorset History Centre. She has a PhD in modern women's literature from the University of Leeds and recently held an AHRC/RLUK Professional Practice Fellowship (2022-23) for a project examining digital mapping and networks of influence in correspondence collections.

Sarah Prescott is Literary Archivist at the University of Leeds Cultural Collections and Galleries. She works with literary collections ranging from the 17th century to the present day, with a particular focus on 20th and 21st century poetry.

PANEL 25 Letters and Literary Lives in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Chair: M. A. Katritzky

Delia da Sousa Correa: Selecting Katherine Mansfield's Letters

Abstract From every new location in Mansfield's peripatetic life, letters were a vital medium of conversation with fellow artists about creativity, process, and form. Vivid responses to her surroundings, people, and ideas that might emerge in a future story flash through her correspondence, along with her responses to often unusual reading choices and an interest in the literary world that persisted as her wish for its accolades faded. Even a selection of letters shows how she kept her finger on the pulse of contemporary British literary culture and contributed to its developments, including in her astute responses to her husband John Middleton Murry's work as editor of the *Athenaeum* and her translation projects with S.S. Koteliansky.

This presentation will reflect on the process of selecting and framing Mansfield's letters for a forthcoming World's Classics *Selected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*. Curating a selection of her correspondence aimed at providing an overview of Mansfield's creative practice has involved placing her letters within the arc of her writing life and observing how they help to shape it.

The volume aims to invite readers to consider the relationship between letters and creativity, between letters and stories, and between letters and a writing life. Thus this paper will discuss both the place of letters in Mansfield's creative life and the collaborative editorial thinking of the critic and the writer jointly making the selection. What might such a selection offer an audience of readers, students and critics? What might it mean for a writer?

Bio Delia da Sousa Correa is Professor of Literature and Music at the Open University. She recently edited *The Edinburgh Companion to Literature and Music* and is founding editor of the annual Katherine Mansfield Studies series. She is co-editing the *Selected Letters of Katherine Mansfield* for World's Classics with the writer Kirsty Gunn.

M. Carmen Gomez-Galisteo: Reading Between the Lines: Louisa May Alcott's Letters and the Construction of a Professional Authorial Identity

Abstract This paper tackles the problems faced by female authors during the 19th century by means of a close reading of Louisa May Alcott's correspondence, pointing out how her letters complicate the widespread critical and popular identification of Alcott with her fictional analogue, Jo March.

Whereas *Little Women* substantiates the image of Alcott as a nonconformist, idealistic young woman writing her books instinctively and out of necessity, her letters reveal a rather more complicated, strategic, and self-conscious authorial personality. The letters illuminate not merely the social and economic facts faced by women writers of her day (from circumscribed publishing options to gendered assumptions about literary content) but also Alcott's astute maneuvering within them. The present paper examines how Alcott is revealed through her letters as a savvy, market-oriented writer who, despite her public modesty about her success, found much solace and joy in her publishing deals. The letters reveal a writer who was not merely articulating autobiographical inclinations, but was instead actively creating stories that would generate sales, support her family, and carve out a position for herself in a highly masculine literary landscape. By doing so, Alcott shattered the limits of what was possible for a woman writer, pushing boundaries of genre, voice, and subject matter—particularly in her lesser-known thrillers and Gothic fiction published under pseudonyms. By bringing Alcott's letters to the fore, this paper resists reductionist perceptions of her as 'Jo come to life' and reconceptualizes her as an intentional and self-aware professional author. This reconfiguration adds to ongoing discussions of authorial identity, gender, and literary labor in the nineteenth century, and calls for a more complex consideration of women's agency in forging their creative trajectories despite systemic constraints.

Alcott, Louisa May. *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals*. Edited by Ednah D. Cheney, Project Gutenberg, 2007, www.gutenberg.org/files/38049/38049-h/38049-h.htm#Page_170.

Bio M. Carmen Gomez-Galisteo is a lecturer in American literature at UNED (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia), Spain. She holds a B.A. in English and a PhD in American Studies from the Universidad de Alcalá. She is the author of three books, *The Wind is Never Gone: Sequels, Parodies and Rewritings of Gone with the Wind* (McFarland, 2011), *Early Visions and Representations of America: Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's Naufragios and William Bradford's Of Plymouth Plantation* (Bloomsbury, 2013) and *A Successful Novel Must be in Want of a Sequel* (McFarland, 2018). She has taught undergraduate and graduate courses at several universities and has supervised numerous master's theses. She has contributed entries to several encyclopedias and reference works. Her work has been published in journals such as *Clepsydra*, *Ad Americam*, *Sederi*, *RAEI*, *The Grove*, and *Atlantis*, among others.

Chris Maurant: Aspects of the (Epistolary) Novel: E. M. Forster to the Letter

Abstract In 1931, Leonard Woolf wrote to E. M. Forster asking him to help launch a pamphlet series for the Hogarth Press that would take the form of letters to 'anyone, dead or alive, real or imaginary, on any subject'. In response, Forster penned 'A Letter to Madan Blanchard'.

Blanchard was not fictitious, but a real eighteenth-century mariner who deserted his shipmates and captain in the year 1783 to remain behind on a Pacific island and 'go native'. In his place, Prince Lee Boo sailed on the ship to be raised in England. Picturing the delivery of his letter as it navigates global space and wends its way back through the centuries, Forster addresses Blanchard as if he is still alive. This archly ironical, playful pamphlet draws attention to the way all letters operate, as texts that travel across space and time, haunted by the possibility of remaining undelivered or unanswered.

In this presentation, I will use 'A Letter to Madan Blanchard' as my entry point for thinking about the role of letters across a selection of Forster's novels, short stories, and private life-writings. As mobile texts, for instance, letters are capable of staging cross-cultural encounters, but they can also reveal the systems of national and imperial power that structure global communications. I will also consider how the letter in Forster's works becomes a lightning-rod for anxieties about the efficacy of writing in an electrical age of speed and impersonality, of 'telegrams and anger'. And I will think about letters as haunted texts: words spoken into the void, uncertain of reply, Forster's imaginary letters trouble the boundaries between here and there, now and then, presence and absence, life and death.

Bio Dr Chris Mourant is Lecturer in Early Twentieth-Century English Literature at the University of Birmingham. Chris is the author of *Katherine Mansfield and Periodical Culture* (2019) and is producing a new edition for Cambridge University Press of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*.

PANEL 26 Creative Writing and Letters II Chair: Dónall Mac Cathmhaoill

Kanupriya Dhingra: *Mere Cupid, Mere Prem Devta*: Old Delhi's Subversive Love-Letter Writing Manuals

Abstract Found on book stalls at railway stations, bus stops, and in Delhi's book bazaars, these contemporary, 'cheap' love letter writing manuals in Hindi and English reiterate the need to write love. Their text and texture resonate with the materiality of their publishing and circulation. Like any other self-help pocketbook, the overambitious range of quirky sample letters in these manuals are presented as a pedagogical tool for a fundamental and indispensable life skill; in this case, the simultaneously private and public act of the expression of love in the language and situation of your preference. These conduct books are cautious in their attempt to teach how to write a love letter to that someone special — your brother-in-law, your next-door neighbour, your secretary, your boss, or your boss's daughter — who reciprocates your love. The spontaneity, which according to the manuals is obvious and urgent, is often restricted, and adherence to these manuals is strongly recommended! These ephemeral manuals exist in chorus with several other everyday performances of love in the city and are essential to understanding Delhi's lovescape. At the same time, they include various repertoires of love that have survived across temporal and transnational boundaries — Perso-Urdu Ghazal and shayari, the poetry of Donne and Shakespeare, or popular Bollywood songs, among others — now available in these letters all at once, at your disposal for easy access and/or easy entertainment. In this paper, I will place these manuals in a longer history of writing love and explore how they become a repertoire of love — one that has evolved out of a hyperlocal as well as a universal cultural history of love and is affiliated with an exclusive history of print cultures in South Asia. This paper acknowledges their contribution to both.

Bio Dr. Kanupriya Dhingra researches the history of the book and print cultures with an ethnographic focus on Delhi, India. Her first monograph, *Old Delhi's Parallel Book Bazaar* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), draws on her doctoral research at SOAS, University of London, supported by Felix Scholarship. She teaches at the School of Liberal Studies, BML Munjal University, and serves on the Board of Directors of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing (SHARP).

Lania Knight and George Sandifer-Smith: Apostrophe and Address, Poetry at Play as Letters to 'You' [Creative Response / reading]

Abstract This session explores poetry written to or about 'you' and its kinship to letters, aide-memoire, and notes to self. Focusing on the loose category of epistolary poems and their fluidity (is it a poem? is it a letter? who is this mysterious 'you'?), we will consider and respond creatively to a 'you' (maybe even 'you'!). Whether 'you' is an imagined or real other, or self, or speaker, or the 'I/she/he/they/we' who has been (unfortunately?) displaced as 'you', this is an invitation to play. Emily Dickinson asks, 'Who are You? / Are you – Nobody – too?' We might just ask the same. This session includes reflections on creative process and readings of creative works.

Bios

Lania Knight writes poetry, fiction and nonfiction. She's from New Orleans and now lives in Cumbria. Her publications include two novels, a poetry pamphlet and a collection of essays. Lania's research interests are broad, including neurodivergence and creativity, and how we respond to the natural world.

George Sandifer-Smith is a Welsh poet. He has published two collections, *Empty Trains* (Broken Sleep Books) and *Nights Travel at the Right Speed* (Infinity Books). He has been widely published in a variety of anthologies, magazines, and journals, and previously worked as Reviews Editor for *Poetry Wales*.

Neil Redfield: ‘The Unbridgeable Gap’ [Creative Response / reading]

Abstract *Adam and Laura had been friends since childhood. Maybe they were meant to be more than friends. Maybe they were never meant to know each other at all. The Unbridgeable Gap follows their twisting, lifelong friendship through the correspondences they leave behind.* The Unbridgeable Gap is an epistolary play which explores the notion of the intersubjective barrier between individuals, and our incessant desire to cross it. Letters provide an interesting medium for this theme because of their unique ability both to exacerbate awareness of this gap between author and addressee and to create the illusion of having crossed it. This play, featuring one performer, was written in response to a graduate seminar on letters taught by Prof. Lori Cole in NYU’s Experimental Humanities program in the Spring of 2025. In other words: it’s new. It features the correspondence of two childhood friends over forty years of their lives, starting in 1989 and going to 2048. As such, the script traces the development of correspondence technology from postcards, to email, to social media, as well as engages in speculative fiction about the future correspondence technology. The full script is currently 5,000 words, but I propose to submit an excerpt under the 2,500 word limit. I will use the allotted presentation time to briefly discuss the play’s use of epistolary forms and then perform a segment of the show. Live performance allows for a unique exploration of the letter’s performative nature. Brining letters off the page into an embodied experience allows us to see the moment-to-moment intention of the writer, and to examine firsthand how someone shapes themselves to the addressee. In this way, The Unbridgeable Gap is an exploration of the epistolary form and epistolarity in general.

Bio Neil Redfield is an actor, writer, scholar, and current master’s candidate in NYU’s XE: Experimental Humanities program, where he studies audience research. His ethnographic and practice-based research focuses on the relationship between audience and performance. He has acted Off-Broadway, regionally, as well as appearing on HBO’s *The Gilded Age*.

1800 – 1855 Guest Authors Talk Letters I: Karen McCarthy Woolf Chair: Jane Yeh

Acclaimed poet and novelist Karen McCarthy Woolf talks to Open University lecturer Jane Yeh about the role of letters in Woolf’s experimental verse novel *Top Doll* – a joyfully irreverent tale of a real-life American heiress narrated by her vast collection of antique dolls – and in Woolf’s other work.

For more details, see the [guest author events page](#) on the Letters and Literature conference website.

**PANEL 27 Fifty Years of Writers’ Letters at Carcanet Press Chair:
Robyn Marsack**

Stella Halkyard (author and literary archivist); **Robyn Marsack** (editor for Carcanet Press 1982-99; Director of the Scottish Poetry Library 2000-16); **Michael Schmidt** (co-founder (1969) and Managing Director of Carcanet Press, and co-founder (1971) and editor of *PN Review*)

Abstract The trio of Michael Schmidt, Stella Halkyard and Robyn Marsack provides a unique opportunity to explore the place of letters in the Carcanet Press Archive, which holds material from the fifty-five years of the Manchester-based Press’s history, including correspondence relating to the

poetry journal *PN Review*. Michael Schmidt speaks from his perspective as founder and MD of the Press, founder-editor of *PN Review*, and as a depositor of his own literary papers to the John Rylands Research Institute and Library at the University of Manchester, where the extensive CP Archive is held. Stella Halkyard, as the former Head of Special Collections at the JRRIL, was responsible for the management of the Archive from the 1990s. Robyn Marsack, a former editor with Carcanet and thus present in the Archive, edited *Fifty Fifty*, a volume of letters celebrating Carcanet's jubilee.

This is, unusually, a living Archive – that is, both the donor and the correspondents remain engaged in producing and publishing poetry – as well as an historical one, which includes correspondence between Carcanet editors and literary figures ranging from Nobel Prize winners to debut writers. The discussion between the three participants will cover such topics as the construction of the archive; the materiality of the letters – issues of preservation; what constitutes a literary 'letter'; the function of letters in the fostering of talent, the creation of a magazine, the making of a book; the issues of privacy, personal knowledge and access; the representation of the Press through published letters. Inevitably, the challenges of preservation, arrangement and development of a digital contemporary archive will feature in the conversation.

Bios

Stella Halkyard, a long-time literary archivist, was the Head of Special Collections at the John Rylands Research Institute and Library at the University of Manchester 1991-2019. Author of *Library Lives: a constellation of books & objects from the Rylands* (Carcanet Press, 2024), which collects some of her popular illustrated archival features from *PN Review*.

Robyn Marsack FRSE, Hon. FRSL, was an in-house editor and then freelance for Carcanet Press 1982-1999; a long-serving Carcanet Board member; and Director of the Scottish Poetry Library 2000-2016. Editor of *Fifty Fifty: Carcanet's Jubilee in letters*, with interjections by Michael Schmidt (Carcanet Press, 2019).

Michael Schmidt, OBE, FRSL, is a co-founder (1969) and Managing Director of Carcanet Press, and co-founder (1971) and editor of *PN Review*. His latest publications are *Gilgamesh: the life of a poem* (Princeton University Press, 2019) and the poetry collection *Talking to Stanley on the Telephone* (Smith/Doorstep, 2021).

2000 – 2055 Guest Authors Talk Letters II: Sigrid Nunez Chair: Emma Claire Sweeney

Sigrid Nunez, one of the USA's most esteemed and best-selling authors, talks to Open University novelist Emma Claire Sweeney about the letters of her literary lodestar, Virginia Woolf, and those of her onetime mentor, Susan Sontag, revealing the roles they played in the writing of two of Nunez's own books.

For more details, see the [guest author events page](#) on the Letters and Literature conference website.

2055 – 2100 Thank yous and close Sara Haslam and conference team