

ENG 402: Topics in Writing and Literature: *Lives and Letters*
Spring 2013
3:10–4:25 M/W
Neville Hall, 406

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Office Hours: 1:30–2:30 p.m. M/W, and by appointment

Description

In 1929, George Saintsbury proclaimed that letter writing was nearly dead as a result of the penny-post. Yet many letter writers since then have flourished, and many letters editions continue to be published. Is letter writing a dying art? Into what genre do we put letters?

This course considers the art and history of correspondence as a means for primary humanities research; throughout we will examine the textual problems in editing letters, the critical puzzles of contextualizing communiqués, and the means with which we produce narratives based on correspondence. After a brief introduction to the epistolary tradition—Ovid, Horace, and Cicero, to name a few—we will read a selection of exemplary case studies of letter writers, epistolary styles, works of biography, and life-and-letters editions of various cultural figures from roughly the eighteenth century to the present. This course will emphasize the role of letter writing in the creative process—namely, how thinkers use letters as a forum to discuss their ideas and make sense of their place in history, suggesting T. S. Eliot’s saying about Keats’s letters that “fine things come . . . between trifle and trifle.”

We will examine letters and biographies from various disciplines, scrutinize key historical developments, attend to issues of cultural context, and examine the editorial principles underlying each selection. Throughout, emphasis will be placed on the close reading of texts, critical thinking, and the use of technological resources for archival study and editing.

Policies

Please bring a hard copy of the required texts or handouts, and prepare for each class by doing the reading beforehand with the goal to participate in discussions.

If you have to miss class, you are required to email me before the class begins. You are responsible for any material that you missed in class; you should ask your fellow classmates for help with the notes, and also feel free to contact me if you need additional assistance.

Assignments

Your **participation** is essential to the course, which is a seminar about exploring ideas, not memorizing terms and preparing for exams. For each class you should prepare at least one pointed question about the assigned readings. Failure to participate in class could cost as much as a full letter grade.

Each of you will lead off class once during the semester with a **presentation**, which will require a one-page handout on the assigned reading or related topic. For 20–30 minutes, you will present your questions or argument and substantiate them with certain passages in the text.

You will also be required to contribute **four 300–500-word blogs** to the **course blog** at livesandletters.org. The blog is to be a thoughtful reaction to an issue or assigned piece that you find intriguing or puzzling. This assignment is meant to help you think through the readings in preparation for class discussions, collaborate and respond to ideas from your peers, and practice for your final project. You are also required to post **four responses** to a blog post.

The **final project is due May 6 by 11:59 p.m. EST**. You will be required to write 5000–6000 words (about 20 pages) on a topic relating to letters or biography, or edit an annotated mini-edition of letters of at least 15 pages, to be accompanied by a critical introduction of 10–12 pages. A **final proposal** on your topic will be due to me by **April 10**. You may produce the final project digitally, but please consult with me beforehand.

A Note on Plagiarism (presenting someone else’s words as your own by not citing and referencing it, and, as appropriate, by not using quotation marks): This will be penalized in accordance with the regulations of the University. When in doubt, cite your source.

Grading

Participation – 10%
Course blogs – 20%
Presentation – 30%
Final Project – 40%

Required Texts

The Epistles of Horace, Translated by David Ferry (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux).

Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister, by Aphra Behn (free e-book available on Kindle; also an e-text from Project Gutenberg <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8lvlr10h.htm>>).

The Life of Johnson, by James Boswell (Oxford World’s Classics). A free Kindle version is also available in 4 vols, but the Oxford ed. has helpful annotations.

Letters of John and Abigail Adams (Penguin).

Letters to a Spiritual Seeker, by Henry David Thoreau (Norton).

Highly Recommended Texts

Henry James: A Life in Letters, by Philip Horne (this is out of print, but you can find a cheap copy on Amazon or AbeBooks).

The Selected Correspondence of Aaron Copland (Yale University Press).

Handouts will be frequently used as supplementary readings and in class exercises. Please find them posted on the course’s Blackboard site.

Schedule

- 14 Jan *Introduction*
The Epistolary Tradition—forms of address—neurotic editing—epistolary genres.
- 16 **Ovid's** *Epistulae Heroidum*—**Horace's** *Epistles*.
- 21 **No class.** Start reading **Aphra Behn**.
- 23 Horace's *Epistles*—**Cicero's** letters—**Paul's** epistles—**Machiavelli's** letters.
- 28 The Dark Ages of letter writing, from **Fridugisus** to **William Pittis**—Chaucer's epistolary style—James Daybell's work on [letter writing in Early Modern England](#)—**Aphra Behn**, *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister*.

Digital life-in-letters, Bess of Hardwick: <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/background.jsp?id=239>
- 30 The “great epistolick art” of **Samuel Johnson**—Hyde edition of Johnson's letters, edited by Bruce Redford—**Boswell's** *Life of Johnson*.
- 4 Feb *Life of Johnson*.
- 6 Finish *Life of Johnson*—Johnson's *Life of Pope*—**William Cowper's** letters.
- 11 Letters of early America: **Benjamin Franklin** letters project at Yale—**Adams–Jefferson** letters—*Letters of John and Abigail Adams*.
- 13 *Letters of John and Abigail Adams*.
- 18 **John Keats**: letters as criticism.
- 20 **Charles Dickens**: Pilgrim edition of his letters—John Forster's biography—Robert Douglas-Fairhurst's *Becoming Dickens*—**George Sand**: letters from the French countryside.
- 25 Transcendental Circles: **Margaret Fuller–Henry David Thoreau–Ralph Waldo Emerson–Walt Whitman; Emily Dickinson to The Father–Henry David Thoreau**: *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker*.
- 27 Continue *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker*.
- 4–17 March **Spring Break**

- 18 **Herman Melville:** Northwestern-Newberry *Correspondence*—Hershel Parker’s biography—**Walt Whitman:** Civil War letters—Whitman digital archive: <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/correspondence/index.html>
- 20 Christopher Ricks on Two Victorian Lives and Letters: **Tennyson’s Tennyson** and **Gaskell’s Brönte**—Mentorship: *Letters to a Young Poet*, by **Rainer Maria Rilke**—Correspondence of **Robert** and **Elizabeth Barrett Browning**.
- 25 19th-century “picture letters” and children’s literature: **William M. Thackeray, Edward Lear, Beatrix Potter** (<http://www.themorgan.org/collections/works/potter/default.asp>).
- 27 **Henry James:** Leon Edel’s edition—Philip Horne’s *Life in Letters*.
- 1 April **Edith Wharton:** autobiography versus biography—*A Backward Glance*, Hermione Lee’s *Edith Wharton*.
- 3 **Aaron Copland:** musical affiliations—**Leo Strauss** and **Eric Voegelin:** political affiliations
- 8 Richard Ellman’s work on **James Joyce**—**Samuel Beckett:** principles of selection, problems of translation—Anne Stevenson on **Elizabeth Bishop** and **Sylvia Plath**.
- 10 **Paul Bowles:** Jeffrey Miller’s letters edition—Sawyer-Lauçanno and Carr biographies—Bowles’s correspondence with composers—Bowles’s correspondence with **Jane Bowles**, with Millicent Dillon’s edition.
- Final project proposal due**
- 15 **William Empson:** Haffenden’s biography of a critic, and his letters edition—**Thomas Hart Benton**, letters from the renegade artist.
- 17 Epistolary Novels: **Samuel Richardson**, *Pamela* and *Clarissa*—**Goethe**, *Sorrows of Young Werther*—**Jane Austen**, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Lady Susan*—**Mary Shelley**, *Frankenstein*.
- 22 Epistolary Novels, continued: **James Baldwin**, *The Fire This Time*—**Saul Bellow**, *Herzog*—**John Barth**, *Letters*—**Michael Ondaatje**, *The Cat’s Table*.
- 24 Epistolary Poems, revisited: **Donald Hall, Harold Pinter; Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop**.
- 29 Current events: **Alistair Cooke’s Letters from America**—Conversations: **Norman Mailer, William Styron, James Jones**—**Salman Rushdie’s** email queue.

3 March Leftovers—Final project discussion

6 **Final Projects** due by midnight