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Women's Values Speaking Between Their Words:
Women's Correspondence in Early Nineteenth Century America

Rachel Mahrt Degn

Abstract

In this paper I examine folklore gathered from women's letters circa 1830 to see what they reveal about how women used correspondence to reinforce and express their values. Through some traditional expressions of folklore (categorized as customary, oral, material, and belief) women demonstrate their values: interpersonal connection and duty.

Introduction

In nineteenth century America, the Industrial Revolution created jobs for men outside of the home, and the cottage industries in which women participated declined. The result was the rise of the “cult of domesticity” in which women worked only inside the home and this was seen as a sign of their household’s prosperity. Women adopted the home as their domain, and their duties and social obligations stemmed from their role there. While men could communicate with friends and associates at work, women had household duties and children to care for and thus had little opportunity to interact with friends. Their interaction with other women and men came mainly through letters.

Letter writing for personal purposes seemed to be the domain of the “angel of the house,” and even today those who lament the death of the letter are often women. Letter-writing resonates with women: typically, they not only write more letters than men, but they also cherish—and sometimes keep—the letters they receive. Because letters have been so valued by women, we see what else women value by closely examining the content of the letters they wrote.
Approach

The study of folklore offers an effective approach for studying the values expressed in everyday correspondence. Folklore theory focuses on the common practices within groups and offers an ideal framework for studying women’s letter-writing patterns. One scholar explains what is necessary for such a group of women to be considered a folk group:

The term “folk” can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor... A member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group to have a sense of group identity. (Dundes 11)

The “common core of traditions” often emerges from a group of women living during the same time period with the same social expectations. Of course, that is not to say that nineteenth century women were homogenous. During the 1800s, individual women had unique interests and were involved in various social groups, just as today’s women. However, despite their differences, these women had traditions, roles, and overlapping interests that bound them together and contributed to their sense of belonging to a group with other women.

Women’s letters written in New England between 1830 and 1832 reveal a “common core of traditions” of women as a folk group. Because letters were the main source of communication at this time, we can assume that letters are a concentrated repository of women’s interests and values. Other forms of communication did not yet exist—the telegraph was not available to the American public until 1844; the telephone was invented around 1876; and e-mail, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter were more than a century from being available. Through these letters from the past, we can determine that these New England women valued duty, piety, and their connections with others. Discovering these values in letters from the past shows how letter-writing created and reinforced the values of women as a folk group.

Folklore in the Letters

In the letters, we see folklore patterns—that is, the “things” they created, including the words they spoke and wrote (oral folklore), the activities they organized and took part in (customary folklore), and the physical items they made (material folklore)—patterns which help us interpret the women’s experiences and draw conclusions about what these women valued.
Explanations

Nineteenth-century women generally began letters with an explanation of the purpose of the letter. Such an explanation can be seen in a letter dated 4 January 1830 from Eliza Way Champlain Riley to William Champlain: “I sat down last evening to write you but being seized with a sudden and violent pain in the side I was obliged to give it up—this morning your epistle was handed me and I was not a little surprised and grieved at its contents” (Riley). A letter from Harriet Gardner to Susan Bigelow Greene was written primarily to answer an invitation to a ball: “Accept our thanks my dear Susan for your polite invitation to the ball and our regrets that we cannot accept it” (Gardner). Another letter from Lucy Cargill Waldo to Susan Judd, not dated, reveals attachment as a motive for writing: “Under a deep sense of my being destitute of those literary endowments and other abilities, which are so requisite for this purpose. . . . But being impelled by motives of pure affection, and an anxious desire for hearing from you, I have at length concluded to write you a few lines” (Waldo). And still another woman succinctly reports that her letter is informational: “As I am almost blind I will write a few lines to give you a little more particular account of Mother” (Allen).

The explanation at the beginning of a letter—sometimes an expression to convey or request information and sometimes simply to renew a connection—might have been deemed necessary because the recipient paid the postage (when it was sent via post versus in the hand of a traveling friend), and a purposeful letter showed respect for the recipient’s time and expense. The explanation also echoes the familiar form of a house call, in which the visitor often stated the purpose of the visit if it was not immediately apparent.

The writer often explained the timing of the letter. For example, several of these women seemed hurried to write the letters. In fact, the hurried nature might be signature of the writing style of the time, according to Estelle Jelinek, who says that “diaries, letters, and journals . . . [were] accessible forms for women whose emotional, intellectual and practical lives [were] fragmented by domestic responsibilities that leave them little leisure time to contemplate or integrate their experiences” (qtd. in Brady 171). The explanation of timing might also be a way for the writer to enter into the writing of the letter, or, in other words, an established way to avoid writer’s block.

Covering Weaknesses

In many of the letters, the women expressed awareness of their weakness in writing. The women would frame this expression in different ways, through
humor, exaggerated eloquence, or off-handed comments implying that they hoped the reader would like the letter. This is an example of the last: "I will endeavour to find something to say to you and I trust my letters will be welcome should they be filled only with my own nonsense" (Gardner). Books prescribing the "correct manner" in which to write letters had been circulating since the 1600s. The insecurity displayed in the letters might have been, in part, because the women feared falling short of these prescriptive patterns.

This insecurity appears in most of the letters I examined, whether they were written by women or men, so the form itself may not be exclusive to women. However, women addressing perceived deficiencies in their letters reveals what they valued and expected in a letter.

Charlotte Ann Ball handles her self-deprecation with humor at the end of her sloppily handwritten letter, dated 30 March 1832:

PS I expect you will have a letter from Mr. Morrison he said he had written to you [sic] I hope you will excuse this writing as it is a pen of my own making and a very poor one it is. I have done nothing but make blots ever since I commenced writing to you but to make the best of it I will just say what one of Mr. Upgoods scholars wrote him in a composition

My pen is poor
My ink is pale
My love to you shall never fail. (Ball)

These apologies and self-deprecations were the most intense when the rest of the letter seemed somewhat formal, which may indicate that this acknowledgement of weakness was a custom observed to the greatest extent between women who did not know each other well. Perhaps the women felt the need to appear humble or to preempt their correspondent's possible mockery by acknowledging the presence of errors at the beginning of the letter.

Another woman, Lucy Cargill Waldo, is considerably harder on herself in her letter dated January 1830:

Under a deep sense of my being destitute of those literary endowments and other abilities, which are so requisite for this purpose,—it is with the most peculiar diffidence that I presume to comply with your polite solicitation, at your departure, of my writing to you. . . . —I have at length concluded to write you a
few lines: relying on your candour and generosity, to excuses all
imperfections, and pardon the intrusion which they may occasion.
(Waldo)

In this selection we see Lucy pleading with her correspondent to excuse her
inability to write eloquently, including direct requests that the recipient “pardon
the intrusion.” These kinds of self-deprecation may lead modern readers to
conclude that the letter writers didn’t think their letter was worth reading because
of the poor quality of the writing. Yet, in the very act of excusing it, they vindicate
it. Charlotte makes “the best of it” and showcases her ready humor, while Lucy
mounds vocabulary and eloquence that turn her apology Aristotelian—a defense
rather than an excuse.

One story shared through a letter shows the power that women placed in well-
written letters. In one dated 4 January 1830, Eliza Way Champlain Riley explains
to William Champlain:

Mrs Lith was to see me a few evenings since and said that Mr.
Noartham had been lately on to Washington where he learn’d
that thick Abe came near being turned out of office. […] she
understood that his office was in jeopardy and that Mrs. Penny
wrote to a gentleman at Washington begging him to indereeced [sic]
with the Post Master in Uncle Abe’s behalf. The letter was so ablely
written (for it appears she is a woman of talent) that the gentleman
instead of saying a word himself presented the letter to the Post
Master and her eloquence prevailed. (Riley)

This story shows the persuasive power of talented women letter-writers. Their
awareness of this potential power might have made them even more self-
conscious of their weaknesses being laid out on paper. One letter-writer was so
ashamed of her poor writing that she asked the recipient to destroy it when she
received it: “This silly letter my dear Susan I wish you to destroy I have written
in great haste to night because I wished to send the first opportunity to you”
(Gardner). Gardner’s letter ended the same way it began: with a defense for the
poor writing and a plea to be understood and not ridiculed.

By showing vulnerability through revelation of weakness, these women showed a
willingness to connect with the recipient; the veiled vindication was a protection
just in case the recipient really was inclined to ridicule the mistakes the writer made.
The women were reaching for connection at the same time as they were fearful of
jeopardizing it. Here we seem to hit one of the connecting commonalities among
women: a desire for connection. The letters that didn’t contain the self-offering/
self-defense might have been between correspondents who already trusted each
other enough to not need the validation or the ritual of vulnerability in order to
connect.
Charlotte’s self-deprecation and humor were directed to her classmate, while Lucy Cargill Waldo was writing to a schoolteacher who boarded at her house for a time. Lucy might have felt nervous writing to someone who knew and taught the “correct” way to write a letter, and taught penmanship and grammar. No doubt their relationships influenced how these women chose to excuse what they imagined might be evaluated as poor writing. They felt it was necessary to do so.

Everyday Work

Some letter-writers described their material lore and thus gave insight into their connections with other people when they mentioned the physical things they gave, received, or made. In their letters the women mentioned cutting their own pens, making silk drapes, receiving and reading books, making rings, and gathering flowers for May Day to post on people’s doors (Ball, Gardner, Searle, Johnson, Adams, respectively). It is notable that the women didn’t mention this material folklore for its own sake; items mentioned were noteworthy only because of their relationship with people. For example, Charlotte mentioned the pen she had made because she was using it and wanted to excuse its excessive blotting (Ball); Harriet mentioned the drapes because Miss Leavitt was making them, and “Mrs. Salisbury thinks they give us all a new grace” (Gardner). Lucy mentioned a book because it was “very useful and interesting to my younger girls” (Searle). Mary mentioned the flowers because they were part of the festivities of May Day, and she wanted to know if Charlotte had participated as well (Johnson). Sarah mentioned a ring only because it was for her brother, and she did “hope [it] will please him” (Gardner). Women connected to their community these items, which enabled them to write, gain approval of other women, share activities, or share gifts.

Religious Beliefs and Family Duties

Women’s letters in the 1800s were replete with opinions, scriptural and poetic quotes, and maxims. Women’s beliefs stood out especially in letters, written during times of crisis, such as sickness, contention in the family, and death. These women referenced their duty, whether it was to be a strong member of a family or to be a good Christian. In fact, the religious and familial duties were often indistinguishable.

Several of the letter-writers encouraged the recipients to behave well, especially towards family members. Susan Eager Bride urged the recipient of her letter, “You must be a good boy and help her all you can and be sure and take good care of the children” (Bride). Sarah Bigelow Adams said, “Tell Lucinda she must..."
exercise much dignity and discretion in the discharge of her duties, and will I hope find time to write me” (Adams). Obedience to family duty merited the precious time and space letter writers used to address it.

One family responsibility mentioned frequently in the letters was the duty of a wife. In a letter dated 27 June 1831, Eliza Way Champlain Riley defended herself against an accusation that she was neglecting her duty towards her aunt, who cared for her after Eliza's mother's death. Throughout Eliza's letter, she protests that she has a duty to obey her husband, who will not allow the aunt to live with them. She unequivocally expresses her feelings on duty to her husband: “I married him unconditionally as I esteem a conditional marriage no better than prostitution” (Riley). Eliza's sense of duty puts her husband before all, and she used that sentiment in her favor to avoid taking care of her aged aunt.

Lucy Lane Allen accepts the dual duty of taking care of her mother and acting according to her duties as a Christian:

I have tried to nurse her [Lucy's mother] as well as I could and will do all in my power, I have not left home or been out once this winter. I have had a fatiguing winter but it is my lot and why should I complain if I am doing my duty to my family it is a great consolation it is no loss to me to stay at home. (Allen)

Lucy's child died, and she feels duty-bound to bear the loss like a saint:

You can never feel what it is to part with a child until you experience it, although I have so many left, yet I miss little F. the same her place is just as vacant, although I mourn I hope I have always received it aright I do not murmur. (Allen)

The theme of living a Christian life is also shown through telling of church attendance, relating religious maxims, or encouraging the recipient to heed the same sense of religious duty that the writer feels. Susan Eager Bride mentions her church attendance in passing as if it were something expected that she do: “I went to an ordination last Sabbath eve at Salem Street Meeting house” (Bride). Sarah Patrick Gale expressed her duty to religious piety as she closed her letter about the death of a man in the neighborhood: “Perhaps my dear Niece, we may never see each other again in this world may we be so happy as to meet our judge in peace if we are but found washed in his blood and clothed in his righteousness we shall receive a welcome reception” (Gale). During a time of mourning, she reminds her niece of their duty to their Lord, which she makes clear is the most important thing, even more important than meeting again in their lifetimes.

As they correspond through letters, these women reveal that they take for granted that the women to whom they are writing know and value the duties they are bound to. They admonish, share maxims, and relate their faith that helps them
during hard circumstances as expressions of the duty they feel as members of families and as Christians. This sense of duty takes different forms depending on the situation, and it comes out during times of stress and mourning. This sense of duty helps create a “sense of group identity” necessary within the folk group.

These women whose letters I've analyzed comprise a folk group because they share the commonalities of self-deprecation, talking about objects primarily when those objects create a connection with someone else, and referencing their duty to family and to God. The expressions of those commonalities suggest that they desired to connect with other women. They show interest in people rather than objects, and they ground themselves in duty to people during hard times.

On some level, these women from the 1800s felt that they belonged to a group. The word “woman” meant something. They would say “we do this because we are women”—Eliza Way Champlain obeyed her husband because she saw it as a necessary part of being a virtuous woman. Lucy Lane Allen took care of her ill mother because it was her duty as a daughter to do so. To them, being a woman meant working hard as a wife and mother, and continuing on in those duties regardless of comfort or convenience. Being a woman meant watching out for the people around them, and gathering together to help each other get necessary tasks done (such as quilting). Being a woman meant caring for people who were sick, especially those in their families. Being a woman meant sharing their experiences, and wanting connection enough to be willing to be vulnerable. These women valued connection with others, so much that they would take time from their busy schedules to drop a friend a line when someone they knew would be heading their way. They cared about how they presented themselves, at least partly to preserve the relationship they had with others.

The values of nineteenth-century women don’t necessarily transfer directly to today—for example, few people today would argue that a woman must obey her husband unquestioningly in order to be considered virtuous. However, the same pattern—of identifying the folklore in correspondence and analyzing it with a folkloric lens—can be applied to find values embedded in women’s correspondence today, including emails, tweets, or even blog posts. Such an analysis could give us not only a new way to look at these new media, but more importantly, a way to learn about what the writers value. But for now, it is enough to know that we can learn about women from the past by reading the lore they left behind, buried in their letters.
Works Cited


(Letters)


