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A Mother Educating her Daughter Remotely through Familial Correspondence: The Letter as a Form of Female Distance Education in the Eighteenth Century

RACHEL BYNOTH
Bath Spa University

Abstract
This article challenges the popular belief that distance learning only took place through formal correspondence courses in the eighteenth century. By examining the correspondence between a mother and her daughter, this article argues that this kind of remote education through letters was a disruptive and organic process, adapting physical learning within the space of letters and postal restraints. This was an emotional process, one that called for the renegotiation of authority and previous learning practices in order for it to succeed. Thus, these letters reveal how letters were not just tools of communication but also important tools for the education of children in a more substantial way than previously thought. Letter-writing is already known to be taught through correspondence and these letters evidence this, but these letters also reveal the instruction of French, domestic chores, household management, tutoring, societal behaviours and emotional management. Consequently, this article offers a case for broadening the definition of distance learning to include less formal educational practices. Thus, this article flags the need for further research on the history of remote education, an area which has particular resonance given shifts towards distance learning as a form of education practice.

I

It was 1789. Hitty Canning, a young widow with five young children, was bound for London. Circumstances dictated that Hitty's journey was essential for the future of her family. They needed a permanent home and many of Hitty's deceased husband's affairs were unresolved.[1] The family's income, home and future career prospects depended on this visit.

Yet this trip conflicted with her expected duties as a mother to her daughter, Bess. Educating daughters was a mother's responsibility in the eighteenth century. While some daughters were sent to boarding schools, many mothers took on the duties themselves, depending on class and wealth. As historian Katie Halsley has observed, this education would take place in the home, conducted by mothers through conversations and

[1] Giles Hunt, *Mehitabel Canning: A Redoubtable Woman* (Royston, 2001), pp. 63–5, 79–83.

lessons and sometimes with the additional help of a governess or visiting masters.[2] However, not all learning took place within the home. As in Hitty's case, mothers and daughters left the familial household for various reasons, interrupting home learning. How did this education continue at a distance? This article argues that it continued through letters, using them as a form of remote learning.

Sixty-nine letters between Mehitabel 'Hitty' Canning and Elizabeth 'Bess' Canning survive for the years 1789 and 1792, when Bess turned sixteen. Between them the letters reveal a layered network of emotions, conventions and sociocultural ideas. Class in the later eighteenth century was difficult to establish firmly due to social mobility and the rise of the wealthy tradesmen and merchants.[3] The Cannings reflect a family who conversed with the Whig elite of British society, including Elizabeth Sheridan and the Duchess of Devonshire, but remained firmly by birth, marriage and status outside the aristocratic classes. Indeed, while their background aligned them with the gentry, their work as merchants, their income and values positioned this branch of the family more within the emerging upper middle-class of the later eighteenth century and so they reflect elements of both classes.[4] A family torn by financial difficulties, missed opportunities and death: the letters chronicled various events which caused disruption to Bess's face-to-face education, allowing us to foreground the significance of remote education. Yet what was a disruption for Bess is an opportunity for historians: what we are presented with, in this cache of letters, is an opportunity to understand how a wider epistolary network, as well as the relationship between mother and daughter, aided in remote education. While not representative of all families at this time, the preservation of both sides of the correspondence between Hitty and Bess illuminates distance learning from the perspectives of both parent and child.

That Hitty turned to letters to educate her daughter is not surprising, for the letter was a medium of education in the eighteenth century. Conduct materials presented themselves as 'letters', letter manuals provided example letters for children to copy, and the rise of the epistolary novel attested to the letter's power to instruct and inform readers of moral, religious and cultural messages.[5] Studies of eighteenth-century letters have also argued for their embedded emotional and cultural learning as well as a means of socialising children.[6] It is therefore surprising that

[2] Katie Halsey, 'The home education of girls in the eighteenth-century novel: "the pernicious effects of an improper education"', *Oxford Review of Education*, 41/4 (2015), pp. 430–46, at p. 432.

[3] For an introduction to the complexities of class boundaries, see Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England: 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1994).

[4] Ibid. For evidence of the Cannings' mixed class ideas and status, see Hunt, *Mehitabel Canning*.

[5] Examples include Lady Sarah Pennington, *Unfortunate Mother's advice to her Absent Daughters* (London, 1761) and J. Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (Edinburgh, 1788).

[6] See Anthony Fletcher, *Growing Up in England: The Experience of Childhood 1600–1800* (New Haven and London, 2008) and Ruth Barton, '"Dearly Beloved Relations"? A study of elite family emotions in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Northamptonshire', *Family and Community History*, 23/1 (2020), pp. 55–73.

few studies consider more formal education occurring through letters, as well as how they focus on teaching the child how to handle distance emotionally.

Where some attention has been paid, studies tend to focus on male learning. The infamous eighteenth-century letters of Lord Chesterfield to his son imparted ideas of social conduct, manners and etiquette, as well as focuses for learning, topics of discussion and aims and goals for the future, in a bid to influence his son's development and erudition. Similarly, Anthony Fletcher's longitudinal study on childhood evidences mothers utilising letters to convey instructions to their sons while they were at school.[7] These letters supplemented the formal education their sons were receiving at school, but were not the basis for their formal learning when they were away from home.

There have been no equivalent explorations of female experiences of distance education thus far, with current literature placing it firmly in the home, unburdened by distance or separation. Offering a variety of perspectives into educating children in the Enlightenment period, Jill Shefrin and Mary Hilton argue that more rigorous and intellectual education took place in the home than first thought.[8] This then echoes Halsey's claims that education took place in the home, through 'conversations' as well as 'formal lessons'.[9] Serena Dyer, in her work *Material Lives*, extensively engages with the materials of education in the home used by Jane Johnson, wife of Reverend Woolsey Johnson, to educate their daughter, Barbara.[10]

This is not to say that female learning through letters has been neglected, as there are many studies on women participating in literary coteries, manuscript exchange and literary and intellectual correspondences.[11] Leonie Hannan's work *Women of Letters* is a particularly good example of the multiplicity of selves in female correspondences: the housekeeper, the intellectual and the socialiser.[12] Though Hannan consulted 'letters, diaries and account books', these correspondences were not between parent and child but between friends and thus offer a different dynamic. As a result, Hannan states that these can only 'give us a glimpse of what an education at home might have entailed'.[13] All these insights firmly place female education in the home,

[7] See Fletcher, *Growing Up in England*, chs 4 and 12.
[8] Jill Shefrin and Mary Hilton, *Educating the Child in Enlightenment Britain* (London, 2016), pp. 1–20.
[9] Halsey, 'The home education of girls', p. 432.
[10] Serena Dyer, *Material Lives: Women Makers and Consumer Culture in the 18th Century* (London, 2021), pp. 30–3.
[11] Examples include Elizabeth Eger, *Bluestockings: Women of Reason from Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Basingstoke, 2010) and Melanie Bigold, *Women of Letters, Manuscript Circulation, and Print Afterlives in the Eighteenth-Century: Elizabeth Rowe, Catharine Cockburn, and Elizabeth Carter* (Basingstoke, 2013).
[12] See Leonie Hannan, *Women of Letters: Gender, Writing and the Life of the Mind in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2016), esp. pp. 1–5.
[13] Hannan, *Women of Letters*, p. 37.

conducted by both governesses and/or mothers. However, this article provides another perspective, examining the educational practices of a mother away from the family home. In doing so, it seeks to reveal the operation of distance education between an eighteenth-century mother and her daughter, helping to reconceptualise the nature of both familial relationships and pedagogy in this period.

Letters offer an important insight into this remote relationship. They were a site of what Michele Cohen refers to as 'familiar conversation', used as an educational tool to provide social and emotional management and skills. This exemplifies what Cohen refers to as the more informal education of women compared to the more formal educational structures of men.[14] While women were taught more informally than men, the letters do outline both structured lessons and more informal skills building. In this sense, the letters cover what women would have learnt in person.[15] However, it differed in the delivery of the instructions and in the monitoring of progress.

Extensive work has also been conducted by historians such as Willemijn Ruberg, Susan Broomhall and Jacqueline Van Gent, who consider how the processes of learning to write prompted emotional exchange within familial groups.[16] These studies have explored various kinds of relationships, but few have examined the educational relationship through letters of mothers and daughters and fewer still consider the viewpoint of the daughter as well as the mother. As mothers were largely deemed responsible for their daughters' education until they were married, this is a surprising omission, especially as these letters show the social worth of these letters to the mother's reputation and identity as a 'good' mother. Moreover, little has been written on the role of correspondence in more formal educational practices, such as learning French, social behavioural skills, basic accounts and household management, with mothers taking more than just a passive role in this process. This article develops the work of scholars including Clare Brant who explore how children learnt to write through letters, by considering other aspects which are taught through correspondence.[17] Additionally, few of these studies consider the role of the letter itself as a form of 'remote education', simply utilising it for its information rather than for its status as an object of learning.[18] There is no engagement with the letter

[14] Michele Cohen, "Familiar conversation": the role of the "familial format" in education in eighteenth-and nineteenth- century England', in Jill Shefrin and Mary Hilton (eds), *Educating the Child in Enlightenment Britain* (London, 2009), pp. 99–116, at p. 99.

[15] See Halsey, 'The home education of girls' for information on in-person learning.

[16] See Willemijn Ruberg, 'Epistolary and emotional education: the letters of an Irish father to his daughter, 1747–1752', *Paedagogica Historica*, 44/1–2 (2008), pp. 207–18 and Susan Broomhall and Jacqueline Van Gent, 'Corresponding affections: emotional exchange among siblings in the Nassau family', *Journal of Family History*, 34/2 (2009), pp. 143–65.

[17] Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke, 2006), pp. 30–45.

[18] For an exception, see Willemijn Ruberg, *Conventional Correspondence: Epistolary Culture of the Dutch Elite, 1770–1850* (Leiden, 2011).

as a form of remote education, despite the letter being an important genre for learning as it was considered an 'advice' genre.[19]

With all this in mind, and building on Cohen's work, this article calls for a reconsideration of the letter, viewing it as a tool of education beyond simply teaching eighteenth-century children how to write. While this article does examine how daughters learnt to write in this way, it also seeks a more holistic examination of the education received through letter-writing, paying closer attention to the tuition of social and emotional behaviours and essential skills and accomplishments. It considers how Hitty used letters as an educational medium, from specific instruction to more casual guidance as Bess's confidence and knowledge grew, firmly cementing letters as a source of distance learning.

Alongside providing a perspective on how women were taught at a distance, letters provide nuance to understandings of the negotiations of power and authority within the relationship between mother and child. Letters signal a time of separation and with this came heightened emotional expression. Hitty's letters instructed Bess in managing separation and distance, but they also reflect the challenges of educating through correspondence. They reveal that this could be a fraught process, as the unpredictability of the postal system exacerbated issues of communication. Consequently, this was a disruptive practice, one that could not mirror physical education. This meant that it was an emotional and difficult process, open to lost letters, misunderstandings and tested relationships.

It is important to recognise that this educative process was particularly influenced by the high connections of the family and the operations of the post office. Postage costs could influence the length of letters and the frequency of communication. Hitty and Bess's remote education largely relied on franks from several MPs which allowed for a smoother experience, but families would usually have had to pay to continue such education through letters. Hitty acknowledged their luck: 'for as I can write to you at free cost, I probably shall write to you everyday [sic]'.[20] Hitty procured her frank from friend and MP Richard Brinsley Sheridan, whom, with his wife, Eliza, she was visiting in London at the time. A frank was free postage for letters, given as a privilege to MPs, but often provided to family and friends. Many of Hitty's letters from February and March 1789 were addressed by Sheridan and bear his signature, validating the free postage. Mail-related expenses were a significant barrier to regular education through letters due to the rising costs of sending them. Hitty was in an ideal position to instruct Bess due to the removal of postal costs through a third party. This accounts for the almost daily letters between the two in the 1789 correspondence.

[19] Brant, *Eighteenth-Century* Letters, pp. 60–78.

[20] West Yorkshire Archive Service: WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. George Canning letters to his aunt Mrs Stratford Canning and to her daughter, Elizabeth (Lady Barnett) 1788–1827. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 16 Feb. 1789.

These peculiar financial circumstances also enabled Hitty to send lengthy letters to her daughter. As A. D. Smith states, '[p]ostage on each letter varied with the number of sheets, weight, and distance carried, the minimum charge under the Act of 1711 being 3*d*. for a single sheet sent up to 80 miles'.[21] Using Sheridan's frank, Hitty was able to send several sheets to her daughter for free and, while most letters to Bess were at least two sheets in length, longer letters were not sent frequently unless Hitty or Bess had obtained a frank. Therefore, studies on educating through letters must be aware of the limitations and context in which this educational relationship was undertaken in. Other families may have conversed less and thus educating at a distance may not have been as frequent or practical.

The speed of the postal service was another significant influence of the postal service on distance learning. When Hitty and Bess were writing to each other, the era of the 'mail coach' was firmly under way, which operated along the improved network of post roads established by Ralph Allen a couple of decades before.[22] This increased the speed and efficiency of letter delivery and, according to Alvin F. Harlow, 'by 1790, all major post routes ha[d] daily coach delivery'.[23] Hitty and Bess's letters represent this world of progress. However, they rarely wrote about the wonders of the post office, as Jane Fairfax did in *Emma*.[24] Instead, it was the flaws and frustrations that featured. One letter from Hitty to Bess in 1798 noted that:

> we had the happiness of receiving your two last Letters of the 1st & 4th – Instant, within a few hours of each-other, after having fretted and fumed a little, on Saturday and Sunday, because we had no news of you according to our expectations. This vile Post, often puts our Patience to the test.[25]

Hitty wrote that it was 'our Patience' that was put to the test, collectively including Bess, situating the sender waiting for a reply as a victim as well. These kinds of epistolary emotions, or postal emotions, show the frustrations that could occur using the letter medium and, indeed, trying to teach through letters. As this affected both the receiving of educational information and the maintenance of relationships between mother and daughter, the influence of the post office is not to be underestimated.

This article will first discuss Hitty's role in finessing her daughter's writing skills and how she taught her the art of polite epistolary discourse. It will then focus on how Hitty used her correspondence with her daughter to teach her daughter household management skills, using the letters to instruct and guide her daughter's actions and decisions. From here, the article will consider societal skills such as manners, societal fashions and teaching French before ending with a discussion of the difficulties in

[21] A. D. Smith, *The Development of Rates of Postage* (London, 1917), p. 336.
[22] Susan E. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660–1800* (Oxford, 2009), p. 4.
[23] Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Post Bags* (London and New York, 1928), pp. 160–2.
[24] Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels of Jane Austen* (London, 2007), p. 851.
[25] WYL888/LC02169, Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 6 Nov. 1798.

Figure 1 George Romney, *Mrs Stratford Canning and her Daughter* (Fyvie Castle, 2019). Photograph taken by Rachel Bynoth. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

educating at a distance and how these were utilised to teach Bess distance epistolary rhetoric.

II

This George Romney portrait of Hitty and Bess (Figure 1) depicts Hitty as a self-possessed, intelligent woman. However, the image also demonstrates her maternal tenderness, care and authority. As Giles

Hunt stated, Hitty's 'mouth suggested firmness' and her eyes show determination and 'look out from the picture appraisingly'.[26] Hitty's letters are confirmation of this interpretation: she scolded Bess when necessary and was strict in her instructions to her daughter.[27] However, the image also shows her hugging Bess protectively and Bess is shown to be playful and happy, her arms around her mother's neck. While their relationship was an affectionate one, Hitty and Bess's portrait does reflect trends in portraying intimate relationships between mother and child through portraiture. When Romney painted this portrait, society celebrated motherhood through cultural representations in art and literature. In art and image, mothers can increasingly be seen to gaze upon their children, displaying their emotional attachment, care and dedication to reflect this newly idealised motherhood.[28] Developing from the mid-eighteenth century, this also encouraged a vast span of conduct literature on motherhood, based on what was and was not expected of mothers, with a variety of suggestions on how to achieve the 'ideal', and glamorising and celebrating motherhood as the primary female vocation.[29]

Historian Willemijn Ruberg presented the ideal mother as 'a virtuous woman, who eschewed the superficiality of "polite" society in favour of more genuine sentiments like charity, morality, generosity and sympathy … [and for whom] moral virtue was highlighted'.[30] Hitty herself embodied many of these ideal characteristics for the domestic wife, mother and woman. She was particularly known for her morality, dubbed 'Sister Christian' by Elizabeth and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, with whom she was close friends.[31]

A specific characteristic of the sentimental mother was that she taught her children herself and closely oversaw their education. As in her discussion on whether eighteenth-century individuals advocated for girls' schools, Michele Cohen noted that 'moralists and educationalists' saw mothers as the 'governesses intended by nature'.[32] For boys, this parental education was only for their early years, in preparation for starting school. However, there was an expectation that girls would be educated by their mother in domestic accomplishments in a more sustained way, in anticipation of becoming wives and mothers themselves.[33] As Ruberg,

[26] Hunt, *Mehitabel Canning*, pp. 49–50.
[27] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169] and Bath Record Office (BRO): Family Correspondence of Mrs Stratford Canning. FL2111–2308. See letters between Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, particularly those sent in 1789.
[28] Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven and London, 1999), pp. 91–4.
[29] Examples include 'The unnatural mother', *Ladies Magazine*, 15/10 (1784), pp. 507–60 and Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, I (London, 1799).
[30] Ruberg, 'Epistolary and emotional education', p. 217.
[31] BRO fl1536-1572, Elizabeth Sheridan to Mehitabel Canning, 1 April 1791.
[32] Michele Cohen, '"To think, to compare, to combine, to methodise": girls' education in enlightenment Britain', in B. Taylor and S. Knott (eds), *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 224–72, at p. 227.
[33] More, *Strictures*, esp. chs 2–4.

Brant and others have stated, this education started with the art of writing letters. While this section will discuss how Bess learnt to develop her letter-writing through distant communications with her mother, it focuses on how this taught her to cope with distance, as well as instilling other behaviours including self-discipline, self-awareness and politeness.

It is unclear exactly when Hitty learned to write, but given that she was from a family of wealthy merchants and brought up to fit into polite society, it is likely that she was taught from a young age. As an adult she was an accomplished writer and, as with many other women of her social position, letters became a central part of her life. Hitty wrote to her extensive family on a regular basis, her main contacts being her children, her nephew George Canning and her brother Paul Patrick. She also established a regular correspondence with Elizabeth Sheridan until 1792, when Eliza died of tuberculosis. Her deep investment in letters was demonstrated in her comments to Bess. She should not, Hitty wrote, 'scold at the small paper, for I have been writing such long letters to America and to Mrs Barnard, that I have neither eyes nor head left to say much to you'.[34]

Hitty's proficiency in letter-writing was replicated in her daughter Bess's letters. Though conduct literature of the period taught an ideal to be copied, we should take note of Amanda Vickery's warning that the amount of prescriptive literature did not necessarily reflect actual practice, as Bess's letters demonstrate a style beyond that laid out in conduct literature.[35] While it is clear that she was influenced by standard forms to some extent, her letters reflected Hitty's letter-writing style more closely, suggesting that she modelled her letters on her mother's.[36] Hitty was a proficient letter-writer; letters were an important tool of communication in her life with friends, family and business contacts. It is therefore unsurprising that Bess was a fairly accomplished letter-writer by 1787, when she was eleven years old. Bess's opening address of 'my Dearest Mother' echoes Hitty's opening of 'my Dearest Bess', suggesting that Bess copied her sentimental term of address directly from Hitty. Bess's closing remarks were no less dutiful and yet no less loving: she consistently signed off with her affection to her mother, using mostly 'your affectionate daughter Elizabeth Canning' and 'believe me to be truly your E.C', following her mother's pattern of 'your truly affectionate Mother M.C'.[37]

[34] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 30 March 1789.
[35] Amanda Vickery, 'Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', *The Historical Journal*, 36/2 (1993), pp. 383–414, at pp. 400–2.
[36] See Emily C. Bruce, '"Each word shows how much you love me": The social literary practice of children's letter writing (1780–1860)', *Paedagogica Historica*, 50/3 (2014), pp. 247–64, pp. 247–56; Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters*, p. 10.
[37] BRO fl2111-2308 and WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Elizabeth Canning to Mehitabel Canning, Feb. 1789–Dec. 1805 and Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, Feb. 1789–Dec. 1805.

Despite their close writing relationship, Hitty did not teach her daughter to write. Rather, she hired a writing master for her children, as evidenced in Bess's letters to her:

> I am afraid you will not be able to read this letter, but the truth is my writing master, forgot to bring a pencil with him, (to rule this) and as it is the first I ever wrote without lines, I hope you will have the bounty to excuse it.[38]

According to one of Bess's letters, Bess's brother Charles wrote a letter to Hitty when he was only five years old.[39] This is consistent with the age groups that Emily C. Bruce has studied, suggesting it was common practice in upper-middle- and upper-class families. The writing master's role appears to be different depending on the writing ability of the child. For Charles, the master assisted in the creation of the letter. For Bess, as an adolescent, the master's role was to line her paper and potentially supervise Bess writing her letters.[40] Hitty's letters reveal that it was her role to correct and instruct her daughter in writing her letters, suggesting that the writing master's role was supplemented, or possibly superseded, by Hitty's instruction. Whether the writing master had any further influence in Bess's letter-writing is unclear as her letters remain unlined from 24 February 1789 and Bess never mentioned him again.

Beyond the support of the writing master, Hitty's role was to develop thirteen-year-old Bess's letter-writing. Passable letters did not cultivate polite expression, social behaviours or demonstrate an awareness of epistolary conventions, especially in relation to distance and separation. Hitty's 1789 letters thus focused their attention on elevating Bess's writing style and grammar, as

> The Correspondence I flatter myself will improve you in the art of Letter-writing, which is among the first of female accomplishments – but besides an unaffected fluency of expression, it is necessary to attend to the rules of Grammar, and there you are sometimes deficient, but a little attention, + a good deal of Practice, will I hope bring you to perfection.[41]

Hitty's remarks to Bess, such as the above, followed the advice given by conduct books for parents to be gentle with their instructions to their children. There should be 'no falsehood[s]' and 'no inconsistency'. Accusations should be 'written in tenderness' to gain 'beneficial consequences'.[42] However, this letter made it clear that Bess's letters would be scrutinised by her mother to improve their 'fluency of expression' and 'rules of Grammar'.[43]

[38] BRO fl2111-2308, Elizabeth Canning to Mehitabel Canning, 24 Feb. 1789.
[39] BRO fl2111-2308, Elizabeth Canning to Mehitabel Canning, 12 March 1789.
[40] BRO fl2111-2308, Elizabeth Canning to Mehitabel Canning, 24 Feb. 1789.
[41] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 17 Feb. 1789.
[42] Rev George Brown, *The New and Complete English Letter-Writer, or, Whole Art of General Correspondence* (London, 1770), p. 2.
[43] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 17 Feb. 1789.

In the late eighteenth century, a natural, entertaining tone alongside grammatically correct prose was the 'model' style to copy, based on the concepts of politeness and sensibility. Politeness was a combination of social behaviours and education. Its complexities are dealt with elsewhere but for the purposes of this article, I shall present its basic principles here.[44] Women were to learn languages, dance and subjects such as geography and history so that they would be good conversationalists with their future spouse. They were expected to keep up with the latest fashions, ideas and societal news.[45]

Politeness was an art form, an art form that pretended to be artless. It was less a set of concrete rules than the ability to create a feeling of ease and belonging.[46] I agree with Amanda Vickery when she stated that politeness was an 'emphasis on external conduct at the expense of inner qualities'.[47] People were expected to *act* with natural ease, *appear* to have naturally 'graceful control' and *learn* 'diverting conversation'.[48] As contemporary John Bennett wrote in *Letters to a Young* Lady (1789), 'it is the proper medium betwixt the total want of, and an officious, over-acted, civility'. It was about accommodation, knowing how to converse on particular 'tastes, habits, and inclinations'.[49]

Letters were an important space for self-fashioning within these polite ideals.[50] Like politeness, where appearing natural was a practised art, letters followed a similar construction. Women were to be diverting in their letters, natural in their expression as if the words were conversational but equally attentive to their subject matter, letter construction and epistolary conventions. As such they were stages of performance, with women adding their own idiosyncratic flourishes within the boundaries of polite feminine values, to project an epistolary 'self'. It was this self that Hitty guided her daughter to formulate through their 1789 correspondence.

Hitty set out the significance of developing polite letters from February 1789, the very beginning of this correspondence. Indicating that the subsequent letters 'will improve' Bess's letter-writing, Hitty's unusual self-flattery of her orthographic abilities offers us a glimpse of the seriousness of this education for Bess's future. It also established Hitty in a position of authority: her ability to critique Bess's future letters was based on Hitty's own proficiency, which would, in time, refine Bess's own writing. Hitty understood that perception was just as important as reality and wanted

[44] For a more in-depth discussion of politeness, see Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*; S. Yilvuori, *Women and Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England* (Abingdon, 2019).
[45] John Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady* (London, 1789), pp. 20, 188.
[46] Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady*; Yilvuori, *Women and Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England*, p. 8.
[47] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 197.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] See Yilvuori, *Women and Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England*, p. 8.

to establish in writing that she was Bess's 'teacher' of social arts as well as formal lessons.

This process began with a critique of spelling and grammar, in which Bess's letter was 'sometimes deficient'. In turn, this led to the embedding of self-criticism and self-evaluation, traits which held value beyond writing letters and became embodiments of improvement and politeness in everyday life. Eighteenth-century letters, including those by Hitty and Bess, were littered with depictions and characterisations of others. Indeed, 'many eyes' were watching and 'actions were scrutinised'.[51] Self-awareness then, led to a consciousness of the opinions and attitudes of others and how to act accordingly.

Hitty was determined that her daughter's letters would reflect a superior orthographic capability, as sophisticated as her own, for well-written letters demonstrated, according to Amanda Vickery, a woman's 'wider cultural horizons'.[52] Clare Brant's assertion that 'when women were encouraged to learn grammar, it was to improve their ability to teach sons' could offer another explanation.[53] Yet Hitty's thoroughness with Bess's grammar at such a young age suggests that she saw her daughter's early development as more than just preparatory work for her future role as wife and mother. Hitty wrote to Bess that she just 'cannot resist reading parts of [her] letters to my Friends here, and the approbation they express serves only to feed my Vanity'.[54] Hitty's admission shows how Bess's learning reflected upon her own reputation as an as educator and mother and that her friends' compliments about Bess's letters implied Hitty's excellence in her roles. Through Bess's success, Hitty's 'Vanity' was bolstered. Hitty's friends referred to here were the Devonshire House set, leaders of eighteenth-century society, and included the Duchess of Devonshire, Mrs Bouverie and her close friend, Mrs Sheridan. Hitty's letter then reveals the importance to her own standing and role within society of Bess's successes in education. This was a reciprocal relationship, embedded within a network of relationships in which the writing, and reading out of letters, was central. It was one upon which both women's future reputations depended.

Hitty's early letters exuded a strong mindfulness of the quality of her own letter-writing, more so than those sent to other correspondents or indeed to Bess later in life, suggesting that their emphasis at this stage in their relationship was deliberately to lead by example and teach Bess about self-awareness and self-critique. She described to Bess instances of errors, contents of missing letters and badly written missives.[55] In one instance, in February 1789, Hitty wrote ruefully that 'this [letter]

[51] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 17 Feb. 1789.
[52] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 9.
[53] Brant, *Eighteenth Century Letters*, p. 43.
[54] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, Tuesday noon 1789.
[55] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning 13 Feb. 1789, 18 March 1789 and 26 Sept. 1798.

is full of blunders, I have written it in such a scrambling manner – so pray do not criticize [sic] your poor old mother's performance'.[56] In this one apologetic sentence, Hitty managed to convey her awareness of the correct orthographic expectations but also the art of communicating self-improvement and evaluation. Striving to improve oneself and paying due attention to one's faults was a mark of this concept of politeness. Hitty's emphasis here probably aimed to instruct her daughter directly in how to present faults.

Presenting faults was an important element of establishing authority, power and hierarchy within correspondence. Hitty's later letters to her youngest son, Stratford, in 1809 showed how integral gender was in admitting faults with the composition of letters when Hitty asked her son to burn her 'terrible scrawl'.[57] Female letters were perceived to be chatty and amusing rather than serious, political or worthy of a male reader, especially one in government circles such as Stratford. Hitty's deference in her letters to her adult son suggest that letters reinforced patriarchal hierarchies within family groups, with women seeking to present themselves as submissive to male family members.[58] In preparing Bess to become a good wife, she needed to be taught this art of deference towards her future husband.

The practice of self-criticism within letter-writing was quickly adopted by Bess, signifying her determination to achieve excellence but also her wish to please her mother. In eighteenth-century society, children were expected to obey their parents and desire to please them in their behaviour and manners. Thus, Bess's obsequious reply that 'it is with upmost concern and grief that I hear I am deficient in Grammar as I am in everything else. But I hope as my years grow riper, and by great assiduity and diligence, I shall improve' expressed a commitment to her education and concern about her mother's displeasure.[59] Bruce argued that children's letters demonstrated their devotion to their parents through their commitment to make progress in their education and Bess's statement bolsters this argument.[60]

Bess's self-critique charted her development in epistolary conventions and polite behaviour. When composing a letter on 13 March 1789, Bess wrote that she wished how the servant sent to acquire an orange ribbon had 'gumshon (I do not believe that is rightly spelt I have not time to look for it in the Dictionary as it is just dinner time)'.[61] Bess did not correct her error, despite having time after dinner to consult a dictionary or her aunt. The letter was also written over several sittings, with over two pages written 'after dinner'. By commenting on her spelling error, without necessarily rectifying it, Bess was demonstrating the effectiveness of her

[56] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 13 Feb. 1789.
[57] BRO fl 2111-2308, Mehitabel Canning to Stratford Canning, 1809.
[58] Ibid.
[59] BRO fl 2111-2308, Elizabeth Canning to Mehitabel Canning, 24 Feb. 1789.
[60] Bruce, 'Each word shows how much you love me', p. 247.
[61] BRO fl 2111-2308, Elizabeth Canning to Mehitabel Canning, 13 March 1789.

mother's tutelage and her own commitment to engage with the art of self-awareness in her letters.

Alongside learning self-critique, Hitty's attention to Bess's writing reinforced the skills of diligence and dedication. Michele Cohen has shown that female education at home was regulated, 'following strict and often self-imposed discipline'.[62] Similarly, Hitty and Bess's letters showed this regulation and how remote communications, while disruptive, largely preserved this regulated educational practice, as reported by Bess to her mother. Bess herself discussed her dedication to and improvement in French, music and poetry as well as her progress in mastering adult conversation, through her stories and responses to politics and social news.[63] Hitty, in turn, displayed pleasure in Bess's self-evaluation of both her writing and educational effort and on many occasions praised Bess for her attention to her education.[64] Hitty's remote teaching thus came not just through constant instruction but also through observation and accountability over Bess's own learning practices.

III

Bess's remote education comprised more than simply learning to write polite letters. Hitty had other reasons for Bess to practice her letter-writing and commit to her education at a distance. When Bess when was thirteen Hitty wrote:

> I am much pleased with your daily occupations + am glad you are improving your knowledge of housekeeping – It is a very necessary Qualification, for all young Women, but especially such as have small Fortunes – I trust in God my dear Bess with a little care and management, we shall all do very well – but we must act with great Circumspection, for many Eyes are upon us, + all our actions will be well scrutinised.[65]

Hitty was confident in her daughter's abilities and self-determination to succeed in her education, but her evocation of the 'Eyes' that would be upon Bess showed that, even at thirteen, Bess's actions as the daughter of socially well-connected Whig parents would be noticed and commented upon and her development would be watched by many more than just her mother. Hitty's skill and proficiency in educating Bess at a distance was not simply demonstrated here in the everyday content of her letters but in her wider social intelligence and her understanding of the importance of the role of onlookers in Bess's future.

Demonstrating the depth and richness of Hitty's pedagogy, this extract also directly made reference to that all-important skill for young women, good housekeeping. The quote hints at the instruction that Hitty was

[62] Cohen, 'To Think, to compare, to combine, to methodise', p. 231.
[63] See BRO fl2111-2308, Elizabeth Canning's entire correspondence to Mehitabel Canning 1787–1805.
[64] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 16 March 1789.
[65] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 17 Feb. 1789.

already giving Bess in housekeeping and household management. As Susan E. Whyman stated, 'middling sort letters reveal deep concerns about upward and downward social mobility. These anxieties were linked to family decisions about the education, careers, and marriages of their children'.[66] Hitty displayed these anxieties in relation to Bess's education and marriage preparations as good housekeeping would be especially important for Bess who, as Hitty emphasised, with little fortune needed to accentuate her skills to marry well.

In emphasising that 'many Eyes are upon us', Hitty's comment also demonstrated an awareness that, although traditionally seen as a private arena, the home was also subjected to public scrutiny. It supports historian Amanda Vickery's observation that 'were domestic details to obtrude, then the spell of regulation and refinement would be broken and those who advertised their pains were vulnerable to disdainful mockery'.[67] Thus these letters capture the importance of female education in boosting both a daughter and mothers' reputation.

Learning to manage a household was more complex than just ordering servants to complete tasks. Nearly twenty years ago Vickery noted that 'female administration has received scant attention from the historians, and little research has been carried out on the topic since then.[68] This is despite a wealth of contemporary source material including conduct books such as that by Lady Sarah Pennington that highlighted how learning to manage a household was the 'proper Business of Woman', and asserted 'if you ever come to have charge of a family, it ought to gain much of your time and attention'.[69] Thus, the rich material contained in these letters on domestic management both informs historians of household management but also shows how Bess learnt through practice and distance learning.

For the lady of the house, good housekeeping involved the orderly management of both family and servants.[70] To do this successfully she would also need to have learnt good 'oeconomy', what we would now simply refer to as 'economy', through keeping accounts, pay her traders promptly and understand the wider tasks involved in the efficient operation of running the house. Pennington suggested that a lady was kind, fair but not overtly friendly to her staff, earning their confidence but not afraid to dismiss them if required.[71] It was these lessons that Bess learnt through remote tutelage with her mother.

[66] Whyman, *The Pen and the People*, p. 114.
[67] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 131.
[68] Ibid. An important exception is Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge, 2007).
[69] Pennington, *Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters* p.22; Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, p. 42.
[70] Pennington, *Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters*, p.27; Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, p. 42.
[71] Pennington, *Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters*, p. 27.

There are no references in the letters to toys as a mode of education, regardless of the conception that in this period toys acquired educational functions.[72] Instead, Bess appears to have learnt practical skills through practice. Despite her grandmother and her aunt remaining at home to care for Bess and her younger brothers, thirteen-year-old Bess assumed the role as head of the domestic household in 1789, when Hitty went to London to seek alternative accommodation. While it is evident that Hitty wrote to her sister, Bess's aunt, intermittently, her main correspondence was through Bess, addressing sections to her mother and sister, where necessary. Bess's aunt and grandmother would have probably overseen Bess's household management in Hitty's physical absence but Hitty's letters indicate her desire to communicate with Bess directly. Hitty gave instructions directly to Bess and used their correspondence to receive accounts, organise the paying of bills and monitor Bess's progress. For the letters were more than just instructions, they were material proof of Bess's developments in social and emotional awareness as well as her continuing education in managing distance. Most importantly, they were proof of Hitty's dedication to her role of mother and her success in raising her daughter. The instructions had to be direct to convey clearly Hitty's involvement in Bess's education while she was away from home.

That Bess was receiving letters discussing household affairs at thirteen is not uncommon. Bruce remarked that 'letters record the participation of bourgeois children in household affairs, kinship networks and cultural spaces connected through school friends and parent's acquaintances from very young ages' though it is less clear whether they were given as much responsibility as Bess was.[73] In these early letters, Hitty instructed and supervised Bess directly; but, later, when Bess was sixteen, Hitty merely supervised and read Bess's household accounts, suggesting that three years later Bess could manage the household competently and make decisions without requiring constant instruction. This extensive evidence of a child learning to run the household is unique, which makes these letters a valuable insight into household management in the eighteenth century.

Halsey argued that eighteenth-century bourgeois children used letters to practise adult conversation and assert their position as household members by 'reporting on household news, money management and other practical concerns; demonstrating their bourgeois accomplishments and sentimental education; cultivating associations that would be important in adulthood; and engaging in relational autonomy through a number of different vertical and horizontal relationships'.[74] Bess did follow this practice, especially at the beginning of the correspondence, suggesting that Hitty also employed this bourgeois custom, with several letters to

[72] Megan Brandow-Faller, *Childhood by Design: Toys and the Material Culture of Childhood, 1700–Present* (London, 2018), p. 7.
[73] Bruce, 'Each word shows how much you love me', p. 249.
[74] Ibid.

her mother describing some of the duties she performed as part of her domestic education as well as outlining her role in the household.

While these letters reference that Bess was being taught household management, this does suggest that adolescents had an active role in the daily running of the household, as a way of learning and finding their place within the family. A letter from March 1789 detailed how Bess had been keeping household accounts for her mother for six weeks, asserting they are 'all my own upon honour'.[75] In these accounts, Bess mentioned expenses including coal, the butcher and the baker, with all of them added up neatly in columns for Hitty's perusal. At other times in her letter Bess assured her mother she was 'doing the accounts', and that they were up to date and checked regularly.[76] Hitty was therefore able to monitor Bess's diligence and her attentiveness to her household tasks and, in turn, Bess could demonstrate her obedience and improvement to Hitty, to please her.

> Beyond this, Hitty's letters contained instructions for Bess on wider household tasks that needed to be accomplished including mending, cooking and managing the servants. Her instructions were specific, writing for example that Bess should let Betty attend in each Room – and put every thing as much under cover as possible - & let a coarse shirt be hung against the fire place, besides the Chimney Sweeper's Cloth – and above all, take care that they sweep clean – and pop their heads out at top of each funnel.[77]

The detail of Hitty's instructions left little room for error and informed Bess as to the level of attention and work that each job involved. That Hitty was absent made this guidance a necessity because she was not there to supervise the chores and relied on accounts from Bess and her sister for confirmation of the success of Bess's household skills development, which we know were important for her daughter's social advancement. Though it was much more involved than perhaps if Hitty had taught Bess alongside her at home, Hitty acknowledged that 'my absence will be of great service to you in [this] respect'.[78] Absence could create a very different learning experience than that provided within the home, as Bess had to manage on her own and act as the house manager without the constant guidance of her mother.

Bess was gaining confidence during her mother's absence in 1789 and even suggested that their household undertake a Stop-Wash, a large laundry endeavour.[79] Bess was now demonstrating initiative, understanding what needed to be done and becoming knowledgeable enough to have an opinion. While Hitty remained in control and used her letters to assert her authority over her student, Bess flourished under her tutelage. By suggesting such a complex activity, Bess showed her mother her determination and commitment to handling

[75] BRO fl2111-2308, Elizabeth Canning to Mehitabel Canning, 19 March 1789.
[76] Ibid.
[77] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 1792.
[78] Ibid.
[79] For more information on a Stop-Wash, see Steedman, *Master and Servant*, pp. 79–82.

household affairs and her development in her domestic management skills. Hitty approved of this idea and gave specific instructions:

> let it be performed on Monday, and take care that every thing is well mended, and aired after they are washed; in my Press you will find a bundle of large *Clouts* [large pieces of cloth, used for patching clothes] saving your favour – out of a couple of the best … cut three mighty caps, for each of the young gentlemen, take pattern by the old ones if they fit … Will their *Coats* hold … what use did you make of the Nankeen Breeches?[80]

Despite the clear progress that Bess was making, Hitty's instructions indicate that Bess's domestic education was still ongoing. What is important to note here, however, is that Hitty did not give any instructions to her mother or sister, who were looking after Bess and her brothers, but entrusted Bess with all the necessary details. In previous letters, Hitty had directed Bess to tell her aunt or grandmother of her instructions, probably so they oversaw Bess's progress. But in this case, Bess was allowed to lead the operation, monitored from afar by her mother. Thus, Bess was being placed in a position where she could gain real practice at running a household, undertaking a variety of different tasks, supervised by her aunt and grandmother and instructed by her absent mother.

Bess's role also extended to organising the servants, and Hitty's letters offer an insight into the requirements of the daily running of household servants. While a woman was hired to oversee the Stop Wash, the regular servants were given tasks either to assist with the washing efforts, or, if not needed, to complete more specific duties. However, servants had to be managed daily as well and Hitty's letters reveal her instructions on managing servants and their duties. Hitty asked Bess:

> Pray how do the servants go on? … look whether [Hannah, the Canning's servant] would have her half years wages? … When Hannah wants work, you will find some shifts of mine in the Press, which I would have judiciously patched, with some strong old Linen – direct how they had best be done …[81]

Hitty's directions gave Bess her own duties, showing that the manager of the household also had to take an active part in household work, as well as directing the servants in theirs. The difference came in the types of tasks allocated. Bess could clearly sew and mend but her tasks involved the more complicated production of caps for her brothers rather than the simple darning of patches that the maid, Hannah, was instructed to complete. It also defined the roles of household manager and servant and what women of Bess's station were expected to learn. Hitty was still able to effectively manage this training at a distance through clear communications in her letters, ensuring Bess understood the division of labour between lady and servant.

[80] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 15 May 1792.
[81] Ibid.

Interestingly, servants were not only discussed in letters as employees to undertake tasks but also in terms of their usefulness, and this was another lesson Hitty taught Bess through their correspondence. Hitty informed Bess that 'for less wages, I certainly might have a more useful + active servant, but I really have an affection for the poor girl [Betty], and unless I could find a good place for her first, I should be sorry to part with her'.[82] Thus, Hitty demonstrates that the relationship between the household and its servants was often an emotional one.[83] All the Canning servants are referred to by name and in generally affectionate terms. However, Hitty made it clear to Bess that, despite it being difficult, economies came first. Even though Hitty declared that 'a third female servant' was 'absolutely necessary', there was no room for personal feelings when Hitty could get a cheaper and more effective servant.[84] Very few eighteenth-century sources discuss the personal feelings over dismissing a servant and the intimate relationship between Hitty and Bess afforded Hitty the space to share her feelings on the prospective dismissal. Thus, remote teaching offered the chance for reflection and emotional management as well as practical education.

Hitty tasked the appointment of the 'third servant' to Bess, overseen by her aunt and grandmother. Again, her instructions were very specific and clear. She advised that they needed 'to look for a young woman who understands Mantua making [dressmaking] perfectly well, as well as plain work' and that she should have 'no objection to attend us at Table'. Hitty continued: 'she must not be a fine Lady's Maid, but such a young person as it might be in Mrs Randall's way to recommend – such a person would be such a saving to us all'.[85] The Cannings were thus trying to be frugal by hiring a servant girl who would take on a number of duties. Despite saving money, there was clearly a need to uphold a certain standard given that Hitty mentioned the girl needed to be of such a quality that 'Mrs Randall', a local woman who trained servants, would recommend her. Hitty was also very specific in her advert so that Bess would not be able to misinterpret her requirements for the new servant. Hitty's distance remained a useful tool for Bess's practical training at running a household and that Hitty relinquished some control and trusted her enough, even at thirteen, to hire a good servant, shows how she was thriving under this careful training. Overall, then, these letters clearly show how a girl in the eighteenth century could still learn how to manage a household while her mother and support system were away from home through remote education in letters.

[82] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 10 April 1789.
[83] Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant*, pp. 19–20.
[84] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 10 April 1789.
[85] Ibid.

IV

It was not just in what could appear mundane household affairs that Hitty taught her daughter through their letters. She also educated her in societal manners, self-discipline, and encouraged and helped her to practise music and French. All these topics were focused on Bess's improvement as a prospective marriage partner and subsequently married life as a wife and mother. For example, Hitty conducted Bess's French education both by hiring a tutor and through her correspondence with her daughter, incorporating French passages in her letters to improve Bess's reading and writing, in the same way that Bess would have learnt to write English. Hitty picked up the idea of a two-pronged approach from Mrs Sheridan's niece, Betty Tickell, upon witnessing her rapid improvements in French after receiving a master and frequently writing letters in French to friends and family. Hitty's observation that 'we might do a great deal more among ourselves than we do', suggests that Hitty felt a responsibility for Bess's French education.[86] Letter-writing improved grammar, spelling and sentence construction, and so both Bess's written and spoken French would have improved from this endeavour. In March 1789, Hitty determined this in a letter to Bess:

> Il ne faut pas grander, le cher petit Coeur. Car favois [sic] tant de lettres à ècrire il y a trois ou quatre jours, qu'absolutement. Je n'avois pas le turns de vous faire mes Compliments jusqu'à present. Je vous prie done de me pardonner pour cette fois - & Je me comporterai mieux pour l'avenir. I wish my dear Bess you would send me a French exercise in every letter as Darinan comes here three times a week, I could get him to correct them for you – in that case, I would excuse your translating so much for Phillip …[87]

Here, Hitty explained to Bess about her lack of letters and expressing her desire for Bess to write a French exercise which Hitty could pass on to Betty Ticknell's French master to correct. Therefore, letters allowed Hitty to continue to educate her daughter and actually enabled Bess to receive another form of remote tuition from a master in London while she remained in Brighton. Hitty went further, suggesting that Bess begin a correspondence in French with Betty so that both girls could practise, highlighting the variety of learning partnerships that could emerge from letter-writing.

However, Bess was not always obedient to her mother's wishes. She did not write to Betty Ticknell, despite Hitty's urging, and the consequences of this were clearly communicated. Hitty's exasperation is evident as she was 'a little angry with [Bess] for not answering Betty Ticknell's letter, if you indulge that foolish mauvaise hônte, you will never make a figure in

[86] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 16 March 1789.
[87] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 12 March 1789. This passage is translated as 'One must not scold, dear little heart. Because I have so many letters to write, it will take three or four days. I have not had the chance to give me compliment to you until now. I beg your pardon this time. I will behave better in the future. (translated by Rachel Smith).

the World, and every little Miss will take advantage of it, and fancy herself superior'.[88] This then highlights some of the shortcomings to remote learning: obedience was harder to enforce. Hitty constantly disciplined her daughter in her letters, thus underscoring not just the important authority of the maternal educator but also Hitty's vulnerability, for the education could only be successful if Bess adhered to her mother's instructions. Society dictated that she be tender and loving towards her children and they were obedient and eager to please in return.[89] Generally, Hitty had maternal authority on her side, and Bess scrambled to please her with her efforts. While these episodes of disobedience were rare, they nonetheless evidenced the need to reiterate authority and expectations fully in letters when children could not be monitored as closely as they could be at home. It also signifies how their affectionate relationship was crucial to the success of this form of educational practice.

To demonstrate the extent of her displeasure, Hitty then recounted the letters of Betty Ticknell and Bess's cousin, Letitia Perceval, and how superior their French letters were due to their assiduousness. In Hitty's account, they were gaining real-world learning rather than just reciting French from textbooks or lesson plans and, as a consequence, they 'hardly ever repeat the same thing', praising their 'Imagination' in their French 'Epistles'.[90] Using the language of anxiety and proficiency levels as emotional tools, Hitty rallied Bess into action, knowing that Bess would not like to be outdone or seen as inferior in any way by her peers. Such linguistic tools were not Hitty's alone but were used more widely in the period in letters to persuade correspondents into action and were employed in remote educational practices to maintain authority.[91]

Distance also caused emotional turmoil, which exacerbated these difficulties in maintaining authority, obedience and respect. While Bess's education does not appear to have been largely disrupted due to the constant flow of letters, a missing letter written by Hitty in 1789 shows the dangers of relying on the post office for educational purposes and the emotional turmoil it could create. For in the eighteenth century, society relied almost solely on the postal service for news, communications and reassurance. When postal disruptions arose, it could be detrimental to relationships and spark significant emotional reactions.

In March 1789, Bess lashed out at her mother for her failure to correspond, not realising at this point that Hitty's letter had miscarried. Bess only spoke to Hitty in such a disrespectful tone when she did not receive letters from her regularly, suggesting her reliance on them for reassurance and motherly affection. Indeed, Hitty stated that, having no

[88] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 2 April 1789.
[89] More, *Strictures* and James Nelson, *An Essay on the Government of Children, under the three general heads, Viz. Health, Manners and Education* (London, 1763).
[90] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 2 April 1789.
[91] Henry French and Mark Rothery, 'Male anxiety among younger sons of the English landed gentry, 1700–1900', *The Historical Journal*, 62/4 (2019), pp. 967–95, at pp. 982–3.

news to impart, the letter from 16 March was written only to appease Bess and her desire for a letter.[92]

Hitty posted her letter as usual, discussing various topics such as Bess's health, and Hitty's sister Fanny. This letter presumably went missing, or was delayed in some way as Bess's reply, sent on 17 March, scolded her surprised mother for her lack of letter. Bess told Hitty that she expected a letter and that 'perhaps you were dirty on Monday [16 March] and had to *clean* yourself (that is why you didn't write)'.[93] At this point, Bess and Hitty were writing daily to one another and so the lack of letter from Hitty on 17 March would have been noticeable, hence Bess reaction. Bess's nettled tone left Hitty understandably expressing confusion and alarm: she immediately wrote back to defend herself and to soothe Bess. Hitty penned that she was 'as much provoked as you [Bess] can possibly be, to find that you got no letter from me yesterday, as I assure you on my honour, I wrote you three sides of paper, though I had nothing much to communicate, merely to please you, and keep your little mind at ease'.[94] It appears that Bess eventually received the lost missive just after receiving Hitty's indignant second letter. Bess's letter from 19 March stated that 'this morning I received your letter which I was very glad to get (although it was nearly ditto of the day before)' and she did not seem to understand that it was the missing letter which had finally turned up as all was now well.[95] This exchange of letters, in which nothing of note happened, were nonetheless full of sentimental charge, being as they were intensely emotional objects connecting mother and child. When a letter went missing, physical evidence of a mother's love and attention went missing as well. For distance learning to work, this emotional bond needed to be maintained or else authority and compliance would falter.[96]

One can trace a pattern through their correspondence: the lack of a letter from Hitty led to a negative emotional reaction from Bess. Hitty's second letter, rushed out to comfort her daughter, also displayed emotional reactions caused by the incident. Instead of being angry or annoyed, Hitty's letter communicated concern, panic and surprise, with her primary anxiety being the negative consequences of this mishap on Bess's emotional well-being. With her letter full of reassurances and apologies, Hitty showed an awareness of Bess's reaction and did not scold her for her disrespect, thus mending the emotional rift that the postal error caused. Once again, Bess was taught to handle the difficulties of distance, with her mother showing how to build bridges and resolve the situation to maintain epistolary relationships.

In other instances, Hitty upbraided Bess for her unrealistic expectations, writing '[n]ow Miss, did I deserve to be so scolded and

[92] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 16 March 1789.
[93] BRO fl2111-2308, Elizabeth Canning to Mehitabel Canning, 17 March 1789.
[94] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 18 March 1789.
[95] BRO fl2111-2308, Elizabeth Canning to Mehitabel Canning, 19 March 1789.
[96] Sally Holloway evidenced this with romantic letters but this extends to familial letters as well. See Sally Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 45–8.

rated? You unreasonable Puss, to expect two letters a Week from me, whether I can find time for them or not'.[97] Bess was learning the social etiquette associated with correspondence through her letters with her mother, skills of patience and understanding which she then went on to hone in her letters with other correspondents, especially her cousin, George, who was poor at replying to letters promptly. It is exchanges such as these that demonstrated the emotional strains of distance and how learning to write letters could be used to develop emotional management skills at points of great anxiety over separation as well as set expectations for distant relationships.

V

By the time Bess went to Bath with her aunt and cousins for the social season in 1793 at the age of sixteen, she was far more adept in the art of distance epistolary rhetoric. Her performance of humility, having learnt phrasing such as I was 'almost ashamed of showing my face' after not writing to her mother the day before because 'all my time was spent, in one idleness or another before I knew where I was', typified epistolary polite discourse.[98] This was not the first time that Bess had found it difficult to write. Many of her letters to her mother from Bath in 1792 and 1793 saw her writing to 'apologise[s] for the scrawl', explaining she was 'hurried out of [her] life [and] can't read this over'.[99] Bess's thought process changed when she wrote like this, with each section reflecting on where she left off from the previous session, a common feature of many eighteenth-century letters, and a practice Bess developed during her trip to Bath.[100] Social skills such as these practised in letters would become useful as Bess stepped into society, demonstrating her awareness of performance, rhetoric and improving her conversation. Hitty had taught her well.

Bess's success was, in part, due to Hitty's continued teaching at a distance. Although it must be acknowledged that they were privileged to receive free postage, they took advantage of this, with Hitty continuing her duty as Bess's educator to instruct and later guide her daughter through the accomplishments needed to gain a suitable husband later in life. While it is unclear to what extent other mothers used letters to educate their daughters, this correspondence details the importance that Bess's education held for her mother. Hitty's maternal performance was judged on Bess's success, with the letters passed round various social groups and scrutinised as well as 'entertained'. They contain key indicators of compliance with motherhood discourse as well as how education was administered

[97] WYL888/LC02169 [Accession 2169]. Mehitabel Canning to Elizabeth Canning, 15 May 1792.
[98] BRO fl2111-2308, Elizabeth Canning to Mehitabel Canning, 7 Sept. 1798.
[99] BRO fl2111-2308, Elizabeth Canning to Mehitabel Canning – range of letters from 26 Nov. 1792 to 19 Feb. 1793.
[100] See BRO fl2111-2308, Elizabeth Canning to Mehitabel Canning, date ranges 5 Dec. 1792–2 Feb. 1793 and 23 Oct. 1798–1 Dec. 1798.

These letters reveal the balance between Hitty's duties as a parent and the intimacy and affection shown to Bess through the letters. Their correspondence uncovers the nuances of eighteenth-century female education, household management and social networks. Historians need to reconsider the letter as a tool of distance learning and more research should be done to understand its full potential in this guise. Yet their real value is how they provide an extraordinary insight into the intimate relationship between a mother and her daughter, a unique record of the everyday and how that builds the fabric of history.

PEER REVIEW

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