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Anxiety in Action:
Letters of Advice
between the Constables
of East Bergholt in the
Early Nineteenth Century

TREV BROUGHTON

The correspondence of John Constable (1776–1837), edited for the Suffolk Records Society by R. B. Beckett in the 1960s, has been thoroughly trawled for the evidence it offers of the evolution of, and changing influences on, his life and work as a landscape artist, as well as for the touching picture it affords of his prolonged and ultimately successful courtship of the local rector's granddaughter, Maria Bicknell (1788–1828).¹ Here, I examine the letters through a different lens, focusing on that portion of the family correspondence radiating from the family home in East Bergholt, and asking a series of questions at the interface of the biographical, the literary, and the historical. What do these letters do, and how do they do it? What do they suggest about the role and practice of correspondence in everyday family life in the early years of the nineteenth century? What part does the epistolary circulation of advice play in the maintenance of the correspondence and of family ties?

Much scholarly work on letters has taken as its starting point the history and ubiquity of the letter-writing manual, an approach that neglects the study of letter writing as a social practice.² The impact of this branch of conduct literature on ordinary letters has largely been

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taken for granted or ignored, and studies of ordinary correspondence that do take letter-writing manuals into account tend to find that their influence was relatively modest. Here, I investigate the practice rather than the theory of letter writing, construing practice in two ways. First, I see the Constable family correspondence as transaction – that is, as the virtual enactment of quotidian relationships. In this context, letter-writing conventions might be said to matter insofar as they can accommodate contingency and negotiation. Secondly, I suggest that the correspondence is pragmatic: it is about making things happen. One thing the letters bring about is the correspondence itself, since correspondence needs to be self-perpetuating, so much rhetorical effort goes into achieving that end. Finally, I suggest that letter writing in the Constable family is concerned with influencing conduct, not because the letters are in thrall to the advice literature on letter writing, but because the letters in themselves constitute a literature of advice. I argue that the Constable family correspondence is an evolving conduct literature, in which key members offer, not just advice, but models of advice-giving, striving in this way to perpetuate both the familial and the correspondent elements of the textual transaction. The family-in-writing is understood by its members as work in progress, and that understanding forms a part of their ongoing work.

I will illustrate this argument by exploring Ann Constable's (1748–1815) self-construction as an anxious mother, a persona that legitimizes her advice-giving role in her children's lives long after they have attained adulthood, and that leaves traces in their own interactions once she is gone. Combining affect with authority, this disposition is intelligible as a site of tender vulnerability, but also as an exercise in persuasion and power. As such, her expressions of anxiety illuminate how epistolary advice-giving, like other apparently ritualized conventions of letter writing, were key to family correspondence not just as genre but as dynamic social practice.

Anxiety in Action

CONDUCTING CORRESPONDENCE

There is now a well-established corpus of scholarly work attentive to the significance of letter manuals and model letters within various literatures of conduct and pedagogy, notably the French and Anglophone. Educational texts in a range of genres, including but not restricted to letter-writing manuals (or so-called secretaries), have been shown to stress the importance of correct habits of correspondence and of familiarity with relevant conventions, as part of the wider project of disseminating what Dana C. Elder dubs an “ethics of obligation.”³ The exemplary letter as featured in letter-writing manuals not only illustrates for its reader rhetorical competence and the correct relations between classes, genders, generations, and even nations;⁴ it may also model more aspirational qualities, such as wit, financial probity, sensibility, confidentiality, and integrity.⁵ Nor is correspondence between intimates exempt from the battery of recommendations. Written communications between family members and between friends – often called familiar letters – are, according to the letter-manual paradigm, as hemmed about by rules and ideals as are communications between employee and employer, client and patron. Even when the ideal in question is naturalness, it remains a learned, and normative, value.

While scholarship increasingly takes account of social change and competition between constituencies, the current scholarly concern with the letter as part of print culture's armory of manners tends to foreground the ideological element of correspondence. Seen in this context, letters are primarily about conforming and confirming, about generating, reproducing, and regulating an assumed social consensus.⁶ Given what we now recognize as the longevity, popularity, multiplicity, and attention to detail of conduct literature, and especially of the letter manual, everything about correspondence, from the choice of paper to the manner of folding it, from the pitch of a compliment to the layout of the address, from the appearance of spontaneity to the rhetorical organization,⁷ would appear to be predetermined by deeply ingrained standards of propriety and

convention. When one adds to this the recognition that, until at least 1840, the British postal service was itself a matrix of surveillance and counter-insurgency,⁸ any idea of the letter as self-expressive, as subjective rather than subjected, seems utterly quaint. Insofar as letters conform to well-established epistolary conventions, offer formulaic advice to their recipients, and model decorum on the part of their senders, they can appear to function as a transparent medium of social regulation. According to this way of thinking, the maxims and pious sayings we find in the Constable family's correspondence do little more than register their successful interpellation by an inescapably conservative letter-writing regime.

The existence, or even the consumption, of a letter manual does not, however, mean its advice is followed. The influence of conduct literature in general, and of a body of letter-writing conventions and exempla in particular, is notoriously difficult to gauge.⁹ For one thing, letter-writing guides were not as internally consistent with their own principles as their authors pretended and as some commentators imply. Extraneous values – such as celebrity, tradition, curiosity, excitement, and fun – frequently overrode morality in the selection of exempla. Recent scholars have noted the consequent moral divergences between the exemplary letters offered for imitation by secretaries and manuals, and the exemplary correspondents the readers are supposed to aspire to be. Challenging the idea of conduct literature as purely an instrument of repression and confinement, Vivien Jones has warned that we tend to “underplay . . . those aspects of conduct books which might suggest that their ideological effects were rather more precarious and mixed: the differences between individual texts; the ways in which they draw on a variety of, potentially contradictory, generic motifs; and the fluid and various context of a newly burgeoning print culture within which they were produced, and within which, even more importantly, they were actively consumed.”

Following Jones, we might say that the internal contradictions of the letter man-

ual mean that it may lend itself to a range of readings, from the pleurably compliant to the consciously transgressive. She goes on to hypothesize “resistant readings of [eighteenth-century] conduct literature which might have emerged from, and contributed to, that atmosphere of family negotiation and public debate around issues of desire, pleasure, duty and property.”¹⁰ If the impact of prescriptive writing on any particular behavior or belief is seldom straightforward or predictable, and in any case difficult to prove in retrospect, the case of letter writing is especially refracted. Even the survival of a tenet or protocol derived from print culture in a given familiar letter does not guarantee its impact on the letter's addressee and hence on the correspondence. The relationship between epistolary dogma and actual correspondence – between the normative and the normal – is thus complicated, to say the least.¹¹ For an epistolary ideal to make its mark on human interaction it must take its chances in a disconcerting bagatelle of incommensurate interests and forces, including competing ideals and pragmatic (and therefore nonideal) negotiations. Needless to say, the stock figures and standard exchanges of the letter manuals – “an officer in the army, to his son at a boarding school, recommending diligence in his studies,” or “a young woman, just gone to service in London, to her mother in the country”¹² – seldom survive the complex situations and shifting relationships that real correspondence mediates. Instead, as we shall see, correspondents developed their own personae through which to harness affect to effect. Ann Constable's letter-writing persona, while not a vehicle for some essential or pre-discursive self, is never, even at its most prescriptive or trite sounding, merely a passive inscription of disciplinary regimes.¹³

Most of the surviving East Bergholt correspondence covers a period when Golding Constable (1739–1816), a successful miller and grain merchant, was gradually handing over the reins of his business to his youngest son Abram (1783–1862),

having reluctantly countenanced John, the eldest, in his vocation as a painter and consequent removal to London. In addition to Abram, there were still three adult offspring living at home: unmarried daughters Ann junior, usually known as Nancy (1768–1854), Mary (1781–1862), and Golding junior (1774–1838), a son who seems to have had learning disabilities of some kind. Another daughter, Martha (1769–1845), had already married and moved to London by the onset of the published correspondence. While their mother, Ann, was overseeing communications between the nucleus of six East Bergholt Constables and the two absent siblings, she seems also to have kept in contact with a wide network of cousins, aunts, and uncles.

Reading the correspondence, one is immediately aware that it consistently participates in at least three overlapping, but not necessarily fungible, moral economies, each with its portion of obligations and responsibilities. The first is that represented by the family as a unit. It is dominated by the idea of duty to one's parents, which forms the apex of a hierarchical network of familial loyalties perceived to be structural to Christian conduct, as well as necessary to the prosperity and stability of the family business. Individually, the letters iterate this structure through performances of authority and deference; cumulatively, they reinforce it through the attentiveness and regularity of the correspondence. The second moral economy is that of credit and debit, which underpins the protocol of family correspondence as it proceeds over time. "I am certainly in point of etiquette a letter in debt to your Aunt Gubbins and Cousin Jane," concedes Ann Constable to her absent son, adding tartly that "as writing I know is a trouble to them, I cannot but think reading my letters may be more so."¹⁴ In this sense of credit and debit, letters are part of a wider domestic budget of gifts sent, acknowledgements returned, compliments and remembrances circulated: a moral economy manifest in the matter, as well as the materiality, of letters. Fi-

nally, and sometimes in tension with this system, is a more contingent and thus precarious array of patronage relations: a set of favors and obligations whereby those who cannot or do not travel (such as carers and dependents) rely for communication on letters physically conveyed by those who can and do (usually the wealthy and/or independent). Ann Constable thus occasionally finds herself writing an extra letter to John simply to acknowledge a favor offered by an imminent visitor to the metropolis: "Mr. Travis senior [the local physician] is going to London tomorrow, and has been so kind as to offer to take a letter &c. for me. I am unwilling to neglect *this courtesy* – therefore I write by this friendly conveyance to you."¹⁵ Frequently, the content of a particular letter is perceived to be less socially significant than the conditions of its delivery: the opportunity thus afforded to recognize an act of kindness or express an obligation. The medium, in such instances, is the message.

Ann Constable's location in these concurrent economies is complex and fluctuating. Rhetorically, she must resolve, or at least fudge the difference among, several roles: her relatively powerful position as maternal preceptress and the more conditional roles she occupies as family mediator, female dependent, and provincial onlooker. Her earliest extant letter follows her twenty-two-year-old eldest daughter Nancy to London, where she is spending Christmas with her aunt Gubbins. The letter accompanies a gift of fruit and a turkey for the Gubbins household, as well as some spare shoes for Nancy to counteract the "dirty" weather. Despite its festive occasion, the missive is characteristically but unselfconsciously pious, reminding Nancy not to let her "joy for the birth of a Saviour . . . evaporate into sin & sensuality," and drawing from the Christmas text "good will towards men" a brisk lesson in Christian charity. Within the category of good will she enumerates "duty to our Parents, such as cheerful compliance to their lawful wishes & desires (& no other would good parents ever give), tender solicitude to their anxieties & care on our account, & kind attention & allowances for the infirmities of their age." Next down in

this hierarchy of dispositions is affection and kindness to siblings, and “last of all . . . that feeling for, & assisting (as far as prudence will permit) the distress of the poor & needy.”¹⁶ Rather touchingly, she goes on to attribute her little sermon, not entirely to her own “imperfect ideas,” but to some “pious extracts” she has come across, and the letter is signed off by “your tender Mother.” What is striking here is not so much the fluency with which Ann parses the Christian message (“good will”) in the language of everyday duties and conduct, as the associations she forges between different kinds of authority: religious text, the discourse of proper conduct, and an epistolary rhetoric of affect and relationship. Part of the effect is pronomial: “Solicitude to *their* anxieties” segues almost imperceptibly into “care on *our* account” and back again to “kind attention & allowances for . . . *their* age.” But a significant role is played too by the abundance of abstract nouns: good will, compliance, wishes and desires, solicitude, anxieties, care, attention, allowances, affection. Such language, comprising a supple repertoire of tones and perspectives, is both personal and impersonal, finessing the formal discourse of duty with the informal register of the familiar letter. The warmth of the letter survives – may even, I would suggest, be attributable to – its carefully crafted intertextual patterning of sermon, Christmas greeting, pious maxim, and epistolary commonplace. And embedded thus in the hospitable language of epistolary affect, the serious message, too, survives the turkey and the shoes.

ANXIETY AS CORRESPONDENCE

A characteristic feature of Ann’s letter to Nancy is its emphasis on anxiety as a node connecting the role of the writer and that enjoined on her addressee: inviting children’s “tender solicitude to their [parents’] anxieties,” the mother mobilizes a traffic of concern that will unite the generations while providing the momentum of the correspondence. As it turns out, maternal anxiety both tempers the emotional atmosphere of many of her letters and provides a key to her strategy as correspondent. The first surviving letter from Ann to her son John,

then aged thirty-one and pursuing his career as an artist in London, is dated 23 June 1807 and signed “your Affectionate & Anxious Mother.”¹⁷ This is a frequent tag in her correspondence. If affection is the dominant theme of her letters to John, the minor chord of solicitude is never far away. Discernible in almost every missive, it is often explicit, and sometimes emphatic: “I remain as ever your truly affectionate *tho’ anxious* Mother.”¹⁸ The wonted connotations of anxiety, consolidated in the eighteenth century, stem from its etymology in *angere*: to choke or oppress. To be anxious, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is to be “troubled in mind about some uncertain event; being in disturbing suspense; concerned, solicitous.” Its orientation toward an unknown and uncontrollable future makes it the disposition par excellence of parenthood, while its quality of suspension, of being in the wrong place or time, of missing and being missed, places it among the emotional keynotes of the familial letter. Parental letters such as Ann’s do not, however, just fret about and deplore the uncertain future of offspring; they strive actively to anticipate, to forestall, and to shape it. So another meaning is at play in Ann Constable’s subscription, a more positive resonance evident in the happy assonance of “affectionate and anxious”: to be anxious is to be “full of a strong desire to do something.” There is a sense in which Ann’s concern, expressed as an active “desire to do something,” is a badge of honour, an extension into the realm of writing of her status and role as mother. If anxiety is her lot, it is also her pledge, her title, her claim on her son’s attention and conduct. In her exchanges with John, Ann’s iterations of maternal disquiet may seem at first glance to express powerlessness, but they function, as often as not, as grounds of authority and prompts to action.

The determination to shape the future that underpins, and expresses itself as, Ann’s maternal prerogative, and which exacts the ritualized deference, courtesy, and attention of a junior to an elder family member, competes for

precedence in the correspondence with the particular worries and uncertainties produced by her eldest son's situation: his geographical separation from her, the contingencies of the insecure profession of art, and, at various times, his embattled courtship and the vicissitudes of ill health. In his responses, her son is expected to address both Ann's rights and her needs; he must ritually discharge the offices of dutiful son as well as assuage his mother's craving for satisfactory news. A letter that manages to synthesize both is duly congratulated: "I was much pleased with the attention and intention of your intelligent letter, by this day's Post," writes Ann to John on 23 August 1812: "the milk of human kindness is to me an exhilarating cup, and most delightful admixture, with troubles and anxietys that will arise in the best managed and most sociable circles; besides being so cheap and easily given, as even our juvenile copys specify."¹⁹ The circle is Ann's favored image of her family: the sociability of habitual correspondence will, she intends, render distance meaningless and the center secure. As with her emphasis on anxiety, her conceptualization of her son's letter as a "kindness" straddles the customary and the specific, linking it to common courtesy, to the familial ties and moral imperatives implied by its original synonymy with "kinship," and to the actuality of "this day's Post." As a kindness, a letter represented a sentiment, a disposition, and a service – an act of feeling towards or reaching out to another.²⁰ The distinction she draws between "attention" and "intention" maps neatly onto that between correspondence as dutiful exchange of courtesies and consideration, and the individual letter as a response to the immediate contingencies of the moment. That her son's letter is deemed "intelligent" acknowledges not only his sagacity in recognizing the importance of such observances, but also the letter's local significance as news (as in the Shakespearean usage of "intelligent" in "Our posts shall be swift and intelligent betwixt us").²¹ After all, to reply to a message received by "this day's Post"

is to acknowledge the exigencies of the ritual, while also reacting to the urgency of the occasion. The passage usefully underlines the capacity of correspondence to contribute to the regulation of civility (in "the best managed and most sociable circles") while providing opportunities to address and resolve specific "troubles and anxietys."

From the start, then, Ann Constable's surviving correspondence is unashamedly, although not unfeelingly, didactic. It draws liberally on a broad repertoire of oral and textual advice cultures: witness her casual references, even in a passage as brief as that quoted above, to a Shakespearean aphorism (the "milk of human kindness")²² and to the sententiae popularized by school exercises ("juvenile copys").²³ In her broad survey of eighteenth-century published letters, Clare Brant has challenged the idea that "letter-writers followed manuals like literate sheep," pointing out that letters were as likely to be influenced by such miscellaneous resources as fiction, the Bible, changing ideals of originality, and the expectations and needs of fellow correspondents as by explicit systems of correspondence.²⁴ Although brimming with clichés, aphorisms, and saws, Ann Constable's prose constitutes a distinctive epistolary voice: one that improvises a sense of immediacy from the jostling of traditions, and that deploys a rhetoric of disruptive anxiety in the maintenance of an engaged and enhanced sociability.

WRITING ADVICE

For many reasons, including migration, social mobility, schooling, and training, familiar letters wrote parental relationships into being, partly, as we have seen, through the communication of anxiety and the distribution of advice. As Clare Brant puts it: "Letters helped create and uphold the character of parent," while allowing "parents to put a frame of concern and love" – a combination I identify here with Ann's self-construction as anxious parent – "around advice and dispense that advice in small, letter-sized doses."²⁵ According to this view, the rhetoric of affect is the sweetener in the stern business of parental regulation. My reading of the Constable letters suggests a slightly more

complex picture. Concern is expressed *as* advice, and the “anxious mother” persona fuses the character of parent as authority with that of mother as indulgent and tender carer. As a rhetoric that unobtrusively unites affect with agency, and the structural with the contingent, anxiety facilitates the role of Ann’s letters as an effective medium of advice.

By established precedent and according to a shared set of values, correspondence was regarded within the Constable family as a legitimate and capacious forum for guidance and support as households proliferated, economic interests diversified, and allegiances shifted. In season and out, the family letters, especially those of Ann to John, overflow with sage precepts. Moral, spiritual, and bodily welfare, the minutiae of respectability: no element of life but suggests some wise axiom or juicy proverb. Seldom at a loss for a timely platitude or word of advice, whether about diet (“the happy medium between repletion and abstemiousness”),²⁶ early rising (“Sitting up late, wastes the spirits, the circulation, the coals, the candles, & makes the morning languid”),²⁷ health (“keep your feet warm and dry”),²⁸ domestic economy (“pray keep out of debt, that earthly Tantalus”),²⁹ industry, piety, or the maintenance of family peace through the observation of proper courtesies, Ann Constable effortlessly assumes the prerogative of a parent to supervise, direct, and reprove a child. Even when, as in these letters, the children in question are adults, duty to parents remains at the apex of the Constable regime, second only to (but actually epitomizing) duty to God in the family creed. When Nancy goes visiting to London, when Martha marries, when John leaves home to pursue his artistic studies in London, letters come into their own as a medium of parental surveillance and filial accountability.

The Constable correspondence reminds us, however, that a parent’s rhetoric of concern may complement epistolary advice-giving, but is not a prerequisite. Ann Constable is quite capable of administering the medicine without the spoonful of sugar, and the occasions on which she withholds unction throw into relief her more typical tact. She re-

sponds guardedly, for instance, to a letter from John probing the thorny subject of his expectations from his grain-merchant father (or his “future participation of this world’s goods,” in Ann’s caustic paraphrase). After an ominously minimal “Dear John,” she notes acidly that she has “received your letter of the 3rd instant and observe every sentence of it with maternal accuracy and attention.”³⁰ In a language whose emotional neutrality (“*accuracy and attention*”) is pointedly cold in contrast to her customary attitude, she shows that she can, in extremis, wield authority without anxiety. In a distant echo of the stickling proprieties of the letter manual, the vigilance and meticulousness that characterize Ann’s supervision of her son’s epistolary conduct serve here to remind him of her wider surveillance of his filial duties.

Clearly, the importance for family cohesion of a smooth-running epistolary sociability, which can accommodate the prompts and suggestions of an anxious parent, can be challenged by countervailing loyalties and local emergencies. At such points, the rhetoric of affectionate anxiety is liable to be deposed or derailed. Secure in her position of preceptress, Ann Constable seldom gives vent to anxiety in a form that we would today identify as pathological and paralyzing. Nonetheless, she is hard pressed when confronted by ambiguities in her son’s duty, which arise from conflicts engendered by his courtship. Her confidence is shaken by interests calling on respect for another family’s elders and expectations. On hearing of John’s being at last granted permission to correspond with Maria Bicknell, the London-based granddaughter of Dr. Rhudde, the wealthy but irascible vicar of East Bergholt, Ann finds herself tripped into unwonted uncertainty: “[W]hat can this mean! . . . what ought I to think or do – indeed I am in a great straight. My maternal anxiety is almost overpowering to me.” What does this turn of events mean for the family? At this point, her fears about a union that could prove disastrous (as defying the implacably opposed Rhudde and caus-

ing a rift between the East Bergholt Constables and their clergyman), mixed with her hopes for a prosperous outcome (as linking her son to her rich and respected neighbor), momentarily disrupt her self-assurance and turn the rhetoric of anxiety back, chokingly enough, on herself. To recover, she immediately prompts herself back into her wonted role by appealing to a higher power, adducing the “divine” sermon that Dr. Rhudde has just delivered on the subject of considering one’s latter end, before she ends with the first of several requests for John to “be explicit to your affectionate and anxious Mother.”³¹ For once almost lost for words, she turns to the bland finality of the sermon as a source of guidance, before requesting more words (“be explicit”) to enable her to untangle the moral knot. In this instance, anxiety uncoupled from advice proves positively troublesome. Such disruptions to Ann’s characteristic harnessing of affect to agency – moments at which she offers advice without anxiety or vice versa – make plain the strategic effort with which, more often than not, she quietly drives the correspondence forward.

THE ART OF ADVICE

Ann Constable’s role as epistolary lynchpin in the family is the more necessary to the success of the correspondence, because parents can be at cross purposes and parental styles of letter writing can be wildly different, even when the parents agree. Some family elders – Ann and, later, her son Abram – achieve a felicitous tonal balance between concern and love; those who do not or cannot achieve this balance can cause the correspondence to become a precarious medium either for the transmission of guidance or the maintenance of family ties. The ways in which the senior family members strove to retain John within the family as a moral, emotional, and economic unit, despite his usual absence from home, reveal as much about their attitudes to and proficiency in letter writing as they do about household friction over his choice of profession.

The letters between John Constable and his family ponder everything from the fashion in shirts to the essentials of faith, but the energies of exchange play most persistently around a few flash-points: points of friction between family members, especially over understandings of manliness. Whereas everyone in the family concurs with John that a respectable independent position, based on effort rewarded, is a *sine qua non* of manhood, there is considerable difference of opinion as to how this quest for independence is to be reconciled with his immediate need to keep his own body and soul together, with the complex interdependencies of kinship and patronage, and with Christian virtue. From one point of view, the issues at stake are simply actuarial, and the letters advise by laying out alternative outcomes. Can John afford to defy the family elders from whom he might have financial expectations? Can he afford to marry a genteel person such as Maria given his uncertain prospects? Can he afford to be as indifferent as he seems to immediate gain (such as might be available through portrait painting) in the hope of long-term success (in the much less assured market for landscape painting)? Drawing liberally on the rhetoric of parental concern, Ann, Golding senior, and Ann’s wealthy brother David Pike Watts (1754–1816), a supporter of John’s career, lay out the risks and urge calculation.

The need to secure a respectable independence is the main thrust of the advice that John regularly receives from his family – counsel that is no less irritating for being apparently unarguable. As a characteristic letter from his mother puts it: “Would you but make yourself independent, how much would you exalt my heartfelt anxieties on your account. Your valuable Uncle D. P. W. is kind and good but the best friend will tire of giving and lending, without they see great industry and a desire to gain – which must be in such times and such a world as this, but we are fast travelling to another and a better – if we live & act uprightly.”³² The gist of Ann’s diatyposis is clear: for a man, independence is to be sought as the greatest blessing this imperfect world has to offer. Equally significant, however,

is Ann's decision to express that advice conditionally ("would you . . . would you") rather than as a potentially confrontational imperative, or even in the more emphatically obligative *should*. That odd phrase, "exalt my heartfelt anxieties," meanwhile, conveys some of the positive resonances of anxiety, while making it clear that, paradoxically, independence will always be dependent on a favorable "account" of John within the family. The whole passage is syntactically effortful, veering awkwardly between tenses and moods, and between practical, ethical, and Christian registers, in a way that underlines the difficulty in reaching a secure consensus about manliness as "value." Here, independence, industry, and "desire to gain" sit uncomfortably alongside the virtues of the patron ("kind and good . . . giving and lending"), and even more uneasily beside the implications of "another and a better" world. These three fields of merit imply, at the very least, different relationships to money and to futurity (figured as, respectively, desire for economic gain, family expectations, and unworldly piety). Incommensurate hopes and fears are offered up as, and momentarily stabilized in, an anxiety that cannot finally be assuaged but can be "exalted" through hard work.

For the senior Constables, the importance of application and regularity of conduct appear safe themes, in that they provide common coin in the various currencies of manliness. The family wealth has been built on punctuality, businesslike habits, and the careful husbanding of opportunity – as Ann sometimes cannot resist underlining: "All our harvest, was *finished* on Saturday to satisfaction and thankfulness."³³ Although the Constables have by this time secured a genteel social standing as merchants and property owners, their primary reliance on milling, and hence on agriculture, is central to the familial self-image and lexicon. When Golding senior approves of his son's application to his artistic studies over the summer, Ann relays his commendation in the family idiom: "[H]e thinks you was very industrious & made hay as it were while the sun shone."³⁴

Even this consensus about industriousness and completion, however,

turns out to be built on shaky premises. Commenting on John's recent visit to the retrospective exhibition of work by Joshua Reynolds (1723–92) at the British Institution in 1813, his mother ventures a little egging on. The extent of Sir Joshua's achievement offers the opportunity of a pointed lesson to the dawdling aspirant: "[W]ho can then be satisfied with one landscape, a few sketches & some unfinished portraits, for an annual employment?"³⁵ John's perceived tendency to lose interest in a project before it is completed proves a constant source of tension, and the strategies of epistolary intervention adopted by his elders are revealing. Ann's cautious rhetorical question betrays her consciousness of entering a minefield. Her husband's epistolary persona is quite different. One of Golding senior's rare but hard-hitting interventions urges: "When once you have fixed on a subject, finish it in the best manner you are able, & not through despair put it aside & so fill your room with lumber."³⁶ The rhetoric is direct, accusative, imperative. Whereas Ann Constable's idiom of parental advice strives to balance unarguable commonplaces of duty and loyalty with the finessed strategizing necessary – as both mother and son see it – to maximize John's expectations from his patrons and from the patriarchs of the family (Ann's husband, Golding senior, her brother David Pike Watts, and John's putative father- and grandfather-in-law, Charles Bicknell and Dr. Rhudde), Golding dispenses with diplomacy and models a direct, peremptory style of authority. Constitutionally skeptical about John's chance of making a financial success of his chosen profession, Golding seldom pulls his punches. Writing a solemn New Year's Eve message in 1811, he characteristically foregoes affectionate preliminaries with a stark "Dear John," before launching into a businesslike assessment of the situation: "Your present prospect & situation I consider as far more critical than at any former period of your life; as a single man I fear your rent and outgoing, on the most frugal plan, will be found equal to the

produce of your profits. . . . If my opinion was requested it would not be to give up your female acquaintance in toto; but by all means to defer all thoughts of a connection until some removals have taken place, & your expectations more certainly known." Golding's advice-giving abjures the dispositions used by Ann (anxiety, care, and so on) in favor of cooler language (fear, consideration, opinion). Imperatives are used freely, rhetorical questions are immediately and unrhetorically answered. Euphemisms ("your female acquaintance," "some removals") are deployed not to obscure the cash nexus, but to draw attention to it by their very transparency; after all, Golding's own removal is partly at issue here. To Ann's pleas that John should apply himself industriously, Golding senior adds the more brutal qualifier to focus on "such parts as pay best" and to "Think less and finish as you go." Shunning interiority and self-reflexion in his own discursive style, he recommends an equally matter-of-fact approach in his artist son: "[Y]our too great anxiety to excel may have carried you too far above yourself; . . . you make too serious a matter of the business & thereby render yourself less capable." Whereas anxiety powers Ann's efforts as advisor, Golding codes such an attitude as feminine and unmanly. Getting on with the job should require neither discussion, nor faffing about, nor emotional turmoil. Only toward the end of the letter does the stern demeanor relax a trifle, and then the cordiality serves only to underscore the authority of his advice: "Be of good cheer John; as in me you will find a parent & a sincere friend."³⁷ The austerity of his fatherly style is mitigated three weeks later by the favor of a check for twenty pounds appended to a letter of business, although the fact that the check survives intact suggests that John remained stubbornly averse to the gesture of concession that cashing it might have implied.³⁸

In a parallel correspondence, yet another mode of advice addresses the issue of finishing. John's "valuable" maternal uncle, David Pike Watts, who fancies

himself a connoisseur of art as well as a collector of artists (and who, in fact as well as in imagination, was a generous sponsor of his nephew's career)³⁹ is perhaps the most readily disposed of John's relations to shift from avuncular advice to art criticism. A surviving letter of 1810 offers twenty-five carefully numbered comments on Constable's altarpiece for St. James's Church, Nayland, *Christ Blessing the Elements* (1810), only two of which are unqualified praise, and the longest of which complains that "The Face, Neck and Hands are left in an unfinish'd state . . . so crude and smeared as to show real haste and want of care." Recommending that Constable return to "complete the Face & Neck" before long, Watts, never one to hold back, opines that "It is scarcely justifiable for any Picture to be shewn so *raw*, unless a Testimony was affixed that the Artist died before he could finish it."⁴⁰ Three years later, when Watts yet again hazards "that unpleasant thing, *advice*," it is on the familiar theme. He begins playfully enough, suggesting that John should "place or paint a little *Starling* on [his] Easel with the words '*Finish! Finish!*'" before reporting, more sentimentously, the "great struggle" that has prevented him purchasing John's recent canvas *Water Gates* (1813):⁴¹ that is, the struggle between "the desire to oblige you . . . and the Revolt which will check such a desire when the Eye perceives *Unfinished Traits*."⁴² In a response sent on the same day, Constable echoes his uncle's shift from familiarity to patronage, moving rapidly from filial duty ("Accept my best thanks for the excellent advice") to chilly professional courtesy: "Your kind solicitude respecting my picture of the Lock . . . may now cease, as the picture has become the property of Mr. Carpenter, who purchased it this morning. He is a stranger, and bought it because he liked it."⁴³ Here we see the uncle's attempts at affectionate anxiety being echoed back to him in the altogether cooler guise of "kind solicitude."

The sketches and trial canvases that seem like so much wasted time ("lumber") to his family are, of course, part of John's self-training as a landscape specialist, as well as a portfolio of details, ideas, and techniques for future reference. And

the “finishing” of a canvas, needless to say, is as much a matter of aesthetics as of character. This is an area in which John’s professional judgment – and not just his pertinacity – is at stake, and in which his identity as dutiful son and nephew does not always hold at bay his more combative persona as artist. Reciprocally, this is a topic on which the authority vested in correspondents as family elders can all too easily mutate into the pressure available to them as patrons. The survival of relatively few of John’s letters to his family makes it difficult to discern how successfully he negotiated the exasperation this must have caused him, although a contemporaneous letter to his boyhood friend and sketching partner, the plumber and glazier John Dunthorne (1770–1844), finds him making important resolutions: “I have much to say to you about finishing of my studies more in future – but I look to do a great deal better in future. I am determined to finish a small picture on the spot for every one I intend to make in future. But this I have always talked about but never yet done.”⁴⁴ His equation of “finishing” and the future – here almost obsessively underscored – suggests, on the one hand, that his relatives’ hints, counsels and warnings have not been entirely ill aimed. The fact that his resolutions are addressed to Dunthorne, rather than to his family, suggests, on the other hand, that these admonitions are not entirely welcome.

The particular conditions of John Constable’s chosen profession, then, exacerbate the potential for epistolary umbrage, or even rift. His need to cultivate influential friends, nurture “expectations,” and to keep the peace with actual or potential benefactors and their demands often seems nettlingly at odds with the exigencies of both family dignity and personal integrity. The dilemma seldom results in open conflict, although when it does, Ann, as we have seen, can be severe. Attuned as her advice-giving is to the nuances of respectability, she can rise to stinging rebuke as well as nudge with persuasion. She condemns his decision to enlist Johnny Dunthorne (1798–1832), son of his artisan-class village friend, as his assistant, and his invitation to Dunthorne to share his London

bachelor establishment. She rejects the arrangement on the grounds of cost and class (“he may be company but he cannot be a companion, & that is what you want to ascend”), but also on the grounds that Johnny may be contaminated by the same morally debilitating relations as she attributes to her son: “[H]e will prove like his patron; & never again regard his home & parental ties, as he did before.”⁴⁵ Letters consistently promoting “home & parental ties” are intended to trump the more fickle enticements of patronage, although, as we have seen, the two relationships could merge disconcertingly in questions of financial support, expectations, and inheritance. At the same time, John’s parents and uncle use letters to shore up their seniority by hinting at ways in which his apparently eccentric attitude to the marketplace seems inconsistent with filial duty. According to their advice, his exacting definition of professional attainment, repeatedly coded in their letters as his failure to “finish” paintings, effectively prolongs his dependence on his natal family’s resources. The family correspondence as a whole struggles with the paradox that the patronage relations integral to professional success curtail Constable’s moral independence while subtending his prospects for financial autonomy. It is an area in which the ideology of family loyalty and duty can be jeopardized by the (almost) equally exacting ideology of independence: the duty of a grown man to be self-supporting and self-determining.

This paradox, as we have seen, makes the correspondence between father and son particularly unstable, and in need of careful supervision by other family members. While Golding senior’s incursions in the correspondence represent a rare but avowedly authoritative intervention in the circulation of advice, it is understood within the family that his contributions lack the emotional plenitude of Ann’s pleas, and thus must be contextualized within wider evidence of his attachment. She finds ways of testifying to her husband’s good intentions, even as she supports the tenor of his argu-

ments. He may consciously disavow the rhetoric of anxiety, but anxious he must nonetheless be seen to be. "Thank God your Father is purely [well]," Ann reports, "& often talking of you, both when awake & sleeping – so you must be convinced, how near your welfare is to him. His earnest wish, is to have you what he terms, *earn money*."⁴⁶ Despite Ann's respectful deference to her husband's prudence and wisdom, such letters constitute an epistolary subculture within the family in which the (adult) children and their mother discreetly "manage" Golding senior's impressions and responses, reframing his imperative to "earn money" as "wishes" for "welfare." Many a "voluntary" action by the father in a desirable direction is noted by the mother with a short but conspiratorial comment: "[S]o far – so good," "so much the better."⁴⁷ Although Golding's letters, so formal and final in their dispensation of wisdom that they appear neither to require nor invite a written response, threaten to short circuit the flow of correspondence and with it the flow of attention, other family members are alert to the danger. In a letter accompanying funds, which had been coaxed from Golding senior sufficient to acquit John of a recent debt, his younger brother Abram reminds John that "money comes loath from our Father . . . without value *apparent*," and that a letter of thanks would not come amiss: "[H]owever my Father appears to condemn, he likes outward attention as much as most."⁴⁸ Any suggestion that John can dispense with diplomacy because his father does so meets opposition: what might be acceptable as plain-spokenness from the elder is not tolerated from the junior.

A CORRESPONDENCE IN TRANSITION

Despite the quiet maneuvering and stage management evident in the correspondence, Ann Constable is keen to underline, and her offspring formally to acknowledge, the financial, social, and symbolic significance attached to the figure of the father as provider and guar-

antor of domestic unity and material stability. While Golding's letters are infrequent and businesslike, and although other family members appear sometimes to run epistolary rings round him, respect for his position is consistently represented as the anchor of family coherence. On Golding senior's recovery from one of his regular seasonal ailments, his wife trusts that "we may still (I hope) continue some time united by the band of his respectability and undivided property in the family circle."⁴⁹ The death of the father, and the consequent redistribution of power, credit, and resources from one generation to the next, are foreseen not just as a cause of grief in and of themselves, but also as a site of potential conflict and class hazard. With the inevitable division of property, whose respectability, and whose efforts, will suffice to "unite" the family circle? Can the epistolary circulation of anxiety and attention be maintained as one generation yields to another? Who will respect, worry about, and advise whom?

As his parents decline in health, the youngest Constable, Abram, assumes more responsibility for the family business, and it gradually falls to him – reputed the siblings' "readiest writer" – to take on, not always comfortably, the role of epistolary advisor, broker of the family's reputation, and champion of its values.⁵⁰ Abram's style of counsel develops over time and is in some ways distinct from that of either parent. While Golding's letters often look and sound like decrees, and Ann's dispense maxims freely and unapologetically, Abram's approach is much more cautious. Advice to his brother John is dealt out sparingly, smuggled inside of a large budget of news. Aware of the sensitivities of appearing to hector a brother who, although older (and indeed by now middle aged), is still an active drain on the household resources, Abram seldom resorts to direct guidance. Instead, he tends to model self-accounting for his brother, interjecting tiny homilies to himself within family gossip: "Poor Uncle Thomas's was a melancholy finish . . . I pray to profit by his example & in a review of his faults not to overlook my own, which are many." Warnings to John, which might other-

wise strike his reader as priggish or sententious, are offered as arising naturally from ruminations about his own spiritual and moral welfare. Hence the lesson of Uncle Thomas's fate is gently passed on: "[L]et not your spirits be cast down, as we do not know what awaits us. . . . a few years will put an end to all *cares & pleasures*."⁵¹ Writing to John is presented as an opportunity to reflect on, and attempt to balance, the benefits and costs of being his father's successor in the business – a fate that has tied him to the provinces and the family establishment, but that at least promises financial rewards commensurate with his enterprise (unlike his brother's less certain efforts): "[T]he more I do, the more I can do, and the better I like it . . . idleness can never be happy . . . I hope I shall be able to pass through Life, with some sort of happiness, independent of all that one would wish to be independent of."⁵² Abram uses the tactic of a lecture to himself on the satisfactions of hard work as a vehicle for recommending his own attitude to John (a potentially insubordinate stance in a younger brother). The final phrase is telling, encapsulating as it does the moral and emotional, as well as financial, pressures on masculine self-definition, and the difficulty of recognizing and acknowledging, never mind attaining, the proper forms of independence. In tentatively proffering himself as fraternal exemplum, Abram proposes a relative – and thus ironically dependent – definition of independence: a strategy designed to smooth out incompatibilities between his own professional ethos and his brother's. Epistolary care is tendered less in the form of direct advice than in "hopes" and "wishes" that the brothers can feasibly share.

Such tact marks Abram's awareness that, in due course, he will inherit his parents' responsibilities as head of the East Bergholt Constables, without their moral leverage as parents. In fact, the decisive transition between generations came rather suddenly. The deaths of Ann and Golding Constable senior in 1815 and 1816 respectively, were followed swiftly by John's decision to defy his fiancée's family and marry Maria Bicknell.⁵³ By early 1819, East Bergholt House had been sold,

and the unmarried siblings – Ann junior, Mary, Abram, and Golding junior – had dispersed to separate establishments.⁵⁴ These events – as far as we can see from the surviving letters – slow and narrow but do not arrest the flow of epistolary support to John. The professed duty to express and, where possible, mitigate anxiety, remains part of the epistolary currency shared among the siblings, just as that duty prevailed in their mother's correspondence.⁵⁵ They soon find ways, too, of conflating their mother's pious moralizing with their father's more worldly good sense. The exhortation, as the ever-cautious Abram puts it, to thank "kind providence for the blessings within our reach" – with its watchful balance of submissiveness and enterprise – is traded back and forth, especially at times of potential strife over money.⁵⁶

All, but especially Abram, deplore the need to interfere in any matter touching on John's (always twitchy) sense of personal dignity: "Nothing could induce me thus to write to you, perhaps hazarding your censure, but my sincere regard for your interest, & future welfare, therefore I trust you will make those allowances for me I require."⁵⁷ Family loyalty and affection have some purchase, but do not automatically exact that "cheerful compliance to [parents'] lawful wishes & desires (& no other would good parents ever give)." The affective epistolary currency – anxiety, regard, trust, allowance – of which parents are the guarantor, has to be earned by a sibling, and the basis for epistolary intervention has to be renegotiated.

The generational shift and its coincidence with John and Maria's marriage thus mark a moment of renegotiation of epistolary authority within the family, as well as a tentative retuning of the familiar advice-giving voice to accommodate John's changed domestic and legal circumstances. Advice must now take into account what Ann junior (Nancy) tactfully calls "your *whole self*."⁵⁸ The unself-conscious platitudes and aphorisms so characteristic of the matriarch's idiom, although they do not disappear com-

pletely, gradually fade from the family idiolect as sibling correspondence supersedes more direct parental surveillance.⁵⁹ As time goes by, and as John becomes more firmly established as the head of his own growing household in the metropolis, the hitherto unquestioned sense of his behavior, reputation, and expectations as common property – shared not just within the family at East Bergholt but even in the village as a perceived open invitation for commentary – is gradually modified. The unmarried, childless siblings remaining at home find their sphere of legitimate influence curtailed by distance and difference in experience, and by the gradually diverging interests and expectations of John's London professional circle. The family correspondence finds many ways of accommodating and managing such differences and thus keeping the ball rolling – often by *asking* for advice and, thereby, tactfully acknowledging unfamiliar cultural capital. Hence, John and his married sister Martha are urged to participate in the potentially divisive sale and distribution of the contents of the East Bergholt house: “us *unmarried* ones want a little assistance from those of more experience in the wants of housekeeping.”⁶⁰ Likewise, a complaint from Abram – all the more wistful for its comparative rarity in his letters – about the pressures of running the family business in hard times, and a gentle nudge to his self-absorbed brother to count his blessings, are couched in terms of his own disadvantages as a bachelor: “I hope Mrs. C. & the little ones are well, and the boy mending. It requires a good deal of manly courage & resolution to bear up against the many little troubles that continually arise in this life, and I look at your conduct with admiration & affection. I assure you I begin to feel the want of a true friend to lighten the gloom . . . I have found more sleepless nights within a twelvemonth than in all the former years of my life.”⁶¹ Characteristically, Abram finds ways of dissipating the offense of criticism by implying that the fault or lack may be partly within himself as a bachelor, en-

vious of the blessings of marriage and fatherhood. At the same, time he offers an echo – distant but discernible – of his mother's efforts to soothe all the “troubles and anxietys that will arise.”

LETTERS AS FAMILY

Writing of eighteenth-century letters of parental advice, Clare Brant observes that the genre typically required the reconciliation of conflicting agendas: “[P]arents should advise their children on two counts: how the world works and what should be unchanging in a world that changes.”⁶² The Constable correspondence, trading back and forth between early nineteenth-century provincial and metropolitan communities, between mercantile and professional interests, between traditional piety and temporary expedience, as well as between generations and genders, illustrates the role of letters in coordinating, in the name of an ideal of family coherence and stability (an ideal that Ann senior labels “the *resolution* of a Constable”),⁶³ divergent claims and interests in an unpredictable world. Correspondence, as part of the traffic of sociability and obligation, goes some way to reconstituting the middle-class family circle in absentia. This reconfigured, geographically dispersed, and in some ways fragile entity, the “family in letters,” functions as a conduit for care in its responsive as well as reactive senses, channeling both affect and power.

To suggest that letters have a place in the cultural history of parental nagging is to state the obvious. As we have seen, Ann Constable frequently expresses her concern *as* advice, and vice versa. And while her role, as Brant would say, is not just to teach duty but, more subtly, to “explicate an ideological tangle in which feelings, moral beliefs and duty have to co-exist,”⁶⁴ she is seldom at a loss for a pattern of appropriate conduct. Hospitable to a wide variety of didactic styles, tones, and genres, from encouragement to remonstrance, from traditional wisdom to subtle ad hominem persuasion, the familiar letter enables her not just to intervene, but to model Christian parenthood for the next generation. At the same time, the letter as a unit of correspondence is volatile and contingent: ad-

vice must be calibrated to accommodate divergent agendas, local sensitivities, and shifting power relations; agents as well as recipients of advice have to be carefully managed if the sometimes precarious family consensus is to be maintained. Ann writes: "You see my maternal energy – but I must not urge you *too much*."⁶⁵

The Constable family letters are shaped by a didactic tradition that conditions their form, encourages their use as moral intervention, and simultaneously supports their role in self-advancement. As such, this tradition inscribes hierarchies, but also provides a forum for their constant renegotiation. In some ways highly conventional, the didacticism is nevertheless thoroughly implicated in, and contributes to, the dynamic micro-politics of everyday life. In particular, I would suggest, the frequency of advice in familiar correspondence makes it a productive site for the study of the transactions between the ideological and the subjective.⁶⁶ Adapting the flexible conventions of the familiar letter, the Constable family, as a gradually evolving formation, develops a nuanced repertoire of advisory voices, manners, gestures, and idioms, which serves to mitigate potential or actual conflicts of interest and to ward off the threat of division.

There is little evidence that the Constable correspondence was informed in any systematic way by a particular letter-writing manual, and, as we have already witnessed, sermons, commonplaces derived from both print and oral culture, and other modes of traditional wisdom held equal – if not greater – prominence in the well-wrought familiar letter. It is not their subscription to codes of conduct, much less their fidelity to published templates, but their finessing of such codes and templates to the concerns of the moment that enables these letters to function as correspondence. To read Ann Constable's letters, along with the wider family correspondence both during her lifetime and after her death, is to witness the establishment and evolution of a local but elaborate literature of conduct as it transmits itself between generations and adapts to changing social and economic circumstances. Modes of epistolary counsel were inherited and

modified from one generation to the next. Furthermore, the agency afforded by advice-giving as a means of synchronizing individual and family interests was sometimes lubricated, and sometimes fueled, by gestures of affect(ion) so familiar to the epistolary form as to be virtually indistinguishable from it: attention, regard, anxiety, care, allowances, wishes.

Bridging the gap between the platitudinous and the particular, the axiomatic and the accidental, Ann Constable's "anxious mother" persona is crucial to the correspondence as guidance. In her hands, letters can function as a species of conduct literature adapted to the unpredictability of everyday life. Anxiety, I have suggested, is the keynote of Ann Constable's letters, modulating many of the exchanges within the family network. Today, anxiety is typically treated as a problem, a symptom in need of a cure.⁶⁷ In cultural theory, it often denotes the contradictions in the social sphere supposedly soothed by ideology. In my reading, anxiety as an epistolary subjectivity has a more positive function in that it actively mediates divergent expectations of class, gender, and generation. As anxiety in action, letters, I argue, grant us a lens onto the way individuals and groups could generate acceptable, if not always accepted, modes of advice-giving and, hence, negotiate the often ticklish transactions of daily life. According to my reading, anxiety, along with wishes, attention, care, and consideration, constitute what Linda Pollock has recently called a "cluster concept": an umbrella term that links "a diverse array of related ideas, providing bridges between and connective pathways through the associated attributes." Such concepts can be hospitable to the normative and the personal, to the ethical and the pragmatic, to action and affect, and may draw together these disparate impulses in ways we may not readily recognize today.⁶⁸ By their very versatility and capaciousness, these concepts afford vital links between different and sometimes competing modes of sociability: kinship, civility, patronage,

friendship, love. Those cluster concepts that I have identified in the Constable correspondence are not exclusive either to letters or to advice-giving, although they may, I suggest, contribute to the correlation between the two genres. As such, they may be structural to the *letteracy* of early nineteenth-century familiar letters, rather than simply conventional to the form.⁶⁹ They remind us that our desiccated epistolary “good wishes” and “kind regards” have their basis in a desire to shape circumstances for the better.

NOTES

I am grateful to Linda Pollock, Emma Major, and Helen Rogers for help in shaping this essay.

1. *John Constable's Correspondence (JCC)*, ed. R. B. Beckett, 6 vols., Suffolk Records Society (SRS), vols. 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12 (Ipswich: SRS, 1962–68); reprint, vols. 1–6 (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1970). Quotations from the correspondence are made by kind permission of the SRS (www.suffolkrecordsociety.com), and are referenced in my text both by the volume number of *JCC* and the volume number of SRS. Recent works based on the letters include Anthony Bailey, *John Constable: A Kingdom of His Own* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006), and Martin Gayford, *Constable in Love: Love, Landscape, Money, and the Making of a Great Painter* (London: Fig Tree, 2009). The first biographer to make extensive use of the Constable letters was his friend C. R. Leslie (1794–1859), who wrote *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable* (London: J. Carpenter, 1843).

2. See Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau and Cécile Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Christopher Woodall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Cécile Dauphin, *Prête-Moi Ta Plume . . . Les Manuels Épistolaires au XIXe Siècle* (Paris: Editions Kimé, 2000); and Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). There is also an extensive literature on letter writing as a feature of various literary discourses: see, for example, Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982); Mary A. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Kate Thomas, *Postal*

Pleasures: Sex, Scandal and Victorian Letters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). A further literature probes the relationship between the epistolary and the changing institutions and technologies of correspondence: see, for example, James How, *Epistolary Spaces: English Letter Writing from the Foundation of the Post Office to Richardson's Clarissa* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); and Catherine J. Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009). Frances Austin, “Letter Writing in a Cornish Community in the 1790s,” in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, ed. David Barton and Nigel Hall (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000), 43–62, is more attuned to the issues I address here, as are Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and Susan E. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), although these three texts treat of a slightly earlier phase in the culture of letter writing.

3. Dana C. Elder, “Letter-Writing Instruction Home on the Range,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 66, nos. 3–4 (2003): 425–45, 437.

4. See, for instance, Lawrence D. Green, “French Letters and English Anxiety in the Seventeenth Century,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 66, nos. 3–4 (2003): 263–74; and Sue Walker, “The Manners of the Page: Prescription and Practice in the Visual Organization of Correspondence,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 66, nos. 3–4 (2003): 307–29.

5. See Victoria Myers, “Model Letters, Moral Living: Letter-Writing Manuals by Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 66, nos. 3–4 (2003): 373–91; and Nichola Deane, “Reading Romantic Letters: Charlotte Smith at the Huntington,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 66, nos. 3–4 (2003): 393–410. As Deane argues, “Urged on by what they perceived as a moral crisis in English society, particularly among the newly well-off middle classes, Defoe and Richardson pressed letter-writing instruction into the service of a moral resuscitation and thereby not only gave new vitality to the genre but also laid the essential foundation for transforming collections of epistles into the epistolary novel” (p. 373).

6. Deane, “Reading Romantic Letters,” 399.

7. On the tradition of the genre, see Chartier, Boureau, and Dauphin, *Correspondence*. On layout see Walker, “The Manners of the Page,” 307 and *passim*. On the spread, influence, and social adaptability of the fashion for letter manuals, see Bannet, *Empire of Letters*, xiv.

8. See Deane, "Reading Romantic Letters," 394–96.

9. See Linda C. Mitchell, "Women's Roles in the English Epistolary Tradition," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 66, nos. 3–4 (2003): 331–47, 336.

10. Vivien Jones, "The Seductions of Conduct: Pleasure and Conduct Literature," in *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996): 108–32, 109–10, 114.

11. For an early example of conduct literature apparently informing letters written by mothers to sons, see Raymond A. Anselment, "Katherine Paston and Brilliana Harley: Maternal Letters and the Genre of Mother's Advice," *Studies in Philology* 101, no. 4 (autumn 2004): 431–53, esp. 436.

12. Thomas Cooke, *The Universal Letter-writer; Or, New Art of Polite Correspondence* (London and York: Bookseller and Thomas Wilson, 1812), 27, 32.

13. Even recent accounts of letter-writing practice, attuned to the significance of affect and to developments in the history of emotions, have been exercised about the relationship between epistolary subjectivity and ideology. For a differently weighted version of this debate, stressing the significance of letter-writing conventions for historical inquiry, see Fay Bound, "Writing the Self? Love and the Letter in England, c. 1660–c. 1760," *Literature and History* 11, no. 1 (spring 2002): 1–19.

14. Ann Constable to John Constable, 7 July 1808, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 27.

15. Ann Constable to John Constable, 26 June 1809, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 33 (emphasis in original).

16. Ann Constable to Ann (Nancy) Constable, 22 December 1789, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 16, 17.

17. Ann Constable to John Constable, 23 June 1807, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 20.

18. Ann Constable to John Constable, 18 January 1811, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 57 (emphasis in original).

19. Ann Constable to John Constable, 23 August 1812, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 82.

20. Linda Pollock maps these resonances of "kindness" in "The Practice of Kindness in Early Modern Elite Society," *Past and Present* 211, no. 1 (2011): 121–58, 123. I am indebted to Pollock's essay for many useful suggestions.

21. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in *The Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 37.9–10. References are to act, scene, and line.

22. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, in *The Arden Shakespeare*, 1.5.17.

23. On the importance of copybooks to epistolary literacy, see Whyman, *The Pen and*

the People, 25–27; and on the variety of influences on the epistolary style of the merchant class, see p. 219.

24. Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture*, 8–9. Respecting the period in question, one should add to this list the influence of those fetching and carrying letters: bodies who may contribute directly to the production and consumption of the letters without ever actually reading them.

25. *Ibid.*, 60, 66.

26. Ann Constable to John Constable, 2 June 1810, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 44.

27. Ann Constable to John Constable, 12 April 1812, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 78.

28. Ann Constable to John Constable, 8 January 1811, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 54.

29. Ann Constable to John Constable, 6 January 1815, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 111.

30. Ann Constable to John Constable, 6 December 1814, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 109.

31. Ann Constable to John Constable, 3 November 1811, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 67–68.

32. Ann Constable to John Constable, 10 June 1813, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 96–97.

33. Ann Constable to John Constable, 27 August 1811, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 66 (emphasis in original).

34. Ann Constable to John Constable, 6 November 1814, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 107.

35. Ann Constable to John Constable, 10 June 1813, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 96.

36. Golding Constable to John Constable, 31 December 1811, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 74.

37. Golding Constable Sr. to John Constable, 31 December 1811, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 73–74.

38. Golding Constable Sr. to John Constable, 21 January 1812, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 76.

39. In *John Constable's Correspondence*, the editor tellingly locates Watts in the volume reserved for *Patrons, Dealers, and Fellow Artists* (*JCC*, 4; SRS, 10) rather than in that for *The Family at East Bergholt, 1807–1837* (*JCC*, 1; SRS, 4).

40. David Pike Watts to John Constable, 24 November 1810, in *JCC*, 4 (SRS, 10): 22 (emphasis in original).

41. *Water Gates* was first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1813 under the title *Landscape: Boys Fishing*. It is presently held by the National Trust and exhibited at Anglesey Abbey.

42. David Pike Watts to John Constable, 12 April 1814, in *JCC*, 4 (SRS, 10): 37 (emphasis in original).

43. John Constable to David Pike Watts, 12 April 1814, in *JCC*, 4 (SRS, 10): 38–39.

44. John Constable to John Dunthorne Sr., 22 February 1814, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 101.

45. Ann Constable to John Constable, 24 February 1814, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 103.
46. Ann Constable to John Constable, 9 February 1813, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 90.
47. Ann Constable to John Constable, 2 December 1807, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 22.
48. Abram Constable to John Constable, 19 June 1808, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 25.
49. Ann Constable to John Constable, 20 February 1810, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 39.
50. Ann Constable Jr. (Nancy) to John Constable, 17 May 1816, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 134.
51. Abram Constable to John Constable, 24 May 1813, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 95, 96 (emphasis in original).
52. Abram Constable to John Constable, 19 January 1812, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 75.
53. The wedding took place on 16 October 1816.
54. Mary seems to have remained with Abram at Flatford Mill as housekeeper.
55. See, for example, Ann Constable to Maria Constable, n.d. [November 1816], in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 143.
56. Abram Constable to John Constable, 8 November 1818, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 172. See also John Constable to Maria Constable, 24 October 1819: "I have got through all my money matters much to my own satisfaction & through Mr. Revans and Abram cannot be thankful enough to providence for what I have. How many comforts are within our reach" (in *JCC*, 1 [SRS, 4]: 184). Mr. Revans was the senior Golding Constable's steward.
57. Abram Constable to John Constable, 25 December 1816, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 150.
58. Ann Constable Jr. to John Constable, 15 December 1816, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 148.
59. Family nicknames (such as "Ab" for "Abram") now appear occasionally, while Dr. Rhudde, of whom Ann senior even at the worst times spoke respectfully, is now sometimes dubbed "wretched" or even "wicked" in the family gossip. See Ann Constable Jr. to John Constable, 5 May 1817, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 165; John Constable to Maria Constable, 25 October 1818, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 171; Abram Constable to John Constable, reporting a conversation with Rhudde's coachman, Thomas, 8 November 1818, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 173.
60. Abram Constable to John Constable, 18 January 1819, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 176 (emphasis in original).
61. Abram Constable to John Constable, 6 September 1819, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 184.
62. Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture*, 91.
63. Ann Constable Sr. to John Constable, 7 March 1815, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 115 (emphasis in original).
64. Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture*, 70.
65. Ann Constable Sr. to John Constable, 16 February 1812, in *JCC*, 1 (SRS, 4): 77 (emphasis in original).
66. The challenges of the history of subjectivity, as distinct from subjection to norms, are usefully outlined by Michael Roper in "Slipping Out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History," *History Workshop Journal* 59 (2005): 57–72.
67. Francis O'Gorman's richly illuminating *Worrying: A Literary and Cultural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) postdated the writing of this essay.
68. Pollock, "The Practice of Kindness," 124.
69. *Letteracy* is Bannet's term for "the collection of different skills, values, and kinds of knowledge beyond mere literacy that were involved in achieving competency in the writing, reading and interpreting of letters" (*Empire of Letters*, xvii).