

Corresponding and Creating: female power through the pen

In the Romantic period, men and women had different and unequal social roles. Yet although their participation in public life was circumscribed, Romantic-period women could – and did - become prolific writers.

Letters were an essential means of communication and the Romantic period saw great advances in the national postal service. While letter writing was a central component of the daily routine, paper and postage were costly. Letter-writers devised ingenious methods to reduce these expenses. Techniques such as cross-hatching (overlying horizontal and vertical writing) and folding letters into their own envelopes minimised costs.

The evolving literary marketplace enabled women to write for public consumption on a hitherto unprecedented scale. Female authors used their writings to invite reconsideration of traditional conceptions of women's roles in society. Often their texts dealt with domestic issues, education, and motherhood, but women such as Felicia Hemans and Joanna Baillie also engaged with wider public issues such as nationhood, religion, and class.

Women published their views in many forms, including non-fiction, poetry, plays, and prose. There was a perceived hierarchy of literary genres: in the early Romantic period, novels were generally considered inferior, trivial and therefore suitable for female writers and readers. As the period continued, prose fiction attained higher status and became associated with male as well as female writers, producing celebrated works such as Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels.

Frontispiece from *The works of the Right Honourable Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: including her correspondence, poems, and essays from her genuine papers* (1825)
Special Collection, PR3604.A1.E25

Felicia Hemans

Autograph signature of Felicia Hemans (1793-1835)
Papers and Correspondence of Charles Brinsley Marlay, My 4344

Worthing 5 York Lane
Sept 14th
My 192

I gave me great pleasure to hear from Miss
that you, my dear Miss Edgeworth, are well,
and to see that no apprehensions for
his dear wife. it was impossible to see
this young creature's youthful beauty &
worth without feeling for her as I do —
and I trust Mr Fox gave a fair judgment
of her case & that indeed all will be well.
Lucia thought it useful for her children
to come to the sea, & she has taken a house
here for eight weeks to which I have
accompanied her & her brother has joined
us & we live together united!!! This
family union as you will observe, once
is the best source of social happiness —
and assuredly more than all of father
& your own talents confirmed my respect
& admiration of you & mine. before I left

Letter from Catherine M. Bury
1st Countess Charleville at
Worthing to Maria Edgeworth
at Edgeworthstown, Longford,
Ireland, 14 September 1836
Papers and Correspondence of
Charles Brinsley Marlay, My 192

The WORKS of
LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU:
FROM HER GENUINE PAPERS.
Complete in One Volume.

The swimming lover, and the rightly bride.
How have I lov'd and how I loathe thee.
Montagu's Letters.

London:
ENGRAVED FOR DOVE'S ENGLISH CLASSICS.