Susan Whyman. *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660–1800*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xvi+348pp. £30. ISBN 978-0-19-953244-5.

Everyone with an interest in eighteenth-century cultural history should read this book. Susan Whyman's "unexpected discovery" of many "non-elite correspondences" (76) allows her to demonstrate that popular literacy was far more extensive than has been generally thought. She further shows that literacy was important not only for its practical uses in trade and commerce but also for the ways in which people below the level of the gentry worked out a sense of identity in a changing world, sustained family networks, and created a sense of family history. *The Pen and the People* has been well received and widely praised. Whyman was awarded the 2010 MLA Prize for Independent Scholars, and the book is now out in paperback. Although I will here offer some criticisms, they do not alter my overall judgment that the book makes a major contribution to eighteenth-century studies.

Whyman has divided her book into three parts: (1) "Creating a Culture of Letters," (2) "Creating a Culture of Literacy," and (3) "From Letters to Literature." In the first, she discusses how people acquired what she calls "epistolary literacy" and then shows the significance of the development of the Royal Mail. In the second, Whyman considers the correspondence of farmers, workers, and the middling sort, with the latter particularly as they dealt with problems of "business, religion, gender, and class," and constructs a number of case studies. In the third and last part, Whyman makes an argument about the importance of "epistolary literacy" to the rise of the novel and more generally about letter writing and literary culture.

The careful archival work and the disciplined research procedures that underpin this study are continually in evidence, both in the case studies and in appendices 2 and 3, in which Whyman provides concise and conceptually vibrant information in tabular form about the archives available to her and about the collections of letters she uses. She also provides detailed notes about these collections, allowing readers to join her in intellectual discovery. By inviting readers to stay close to the archive, she invites them to deepen their historical sense of the project as a whole and of the examples she uses, preventing her case studies from tending towards the anecdotal. She also graciously makes this important material accessible to others who may wish to follow up on her work.

Whyman's opening the window onto the existence of this material and her intellectual labour in making it accessible, which lead to her demonstration that literacy was a crucial element of early modern life well below the gentility divide, make this book invaluable. Furthermore, her history of the Royal Mail and postal reform is actually exciting, as

she creates a sense of multiple forces—for example, the government with its program of surveillance, merchants who wanted more efficient mail routes—that drove the development and improvement of the postal service. Whyman's view that "the Royal Mail encouraged a culture of letters and literacy" (47) is plausible, but many readers may find that her enthusiastic account exceeds the evidence she provides. Her vision of a "nation of letter writers" as a previously unrecognized public sphere (71) may seem excessive, but it certainly provokes thought. And because of her work, we will all become more alert readers of material that has become familiar to us, because we now have a new layer to add to our analytic frameworks.

I want, however, to lodge a criticism of Whyman's key term, "epistolary literacy." It is handy rather than illuminating; it blocks rather than invites thinking. Letters have historically been a major form of literate expression as well as a literary form, able to incorporate other forms (for example, poetry) and open to incorporation in other forms. Isolating the increasing literacy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and giving it the name "epistolary literacy," even when these exciting collections of letters have been found, creates an obfuscating, simplifying clarity. For one thing, the collection of letters privileges families, which follow male lines. This procedure was wise for many reasons, but it follows the culture's male-based structures. Whyman is very interested in gender issues, but her research plan, which centres on letters collected in families, already creates the outlines of her thinking. Whyman's commitment to this term also contributes to her tendency to subsume all literacy and literate practices under "epistolary literacy" or to treat other important forms of literacy as if they were "preconditions" for the more "specialized" (and by implication, more interesting) practice of "epistolary literacy." For example, Leonard Wheatcroft (1627–1706), of one of her previously known writing families, worked variously as "a tailor, small-scale farmer, gardener ... soldier, water-works craftsman, parish clerk, and schoolteacher" and wrote poetry, "a long autobiography, a courtship narrative filled with letters, and other unpublished manuscripts" (78). The *DNB* article on Wheatcroft says that he "was, for a man of his social position, an exceptionally prolific author." For a man of any social position (I would say) he was a prolific author, and it is puzzling to see him, as well as his son Titus, who continued the autobiography and wrote in other forms besides letters (for example, a manuscript called "Church and School or the Young Clarks Instructor," which included "a catalogue of 384 books" [282]) as examples in a study that so privileges "epistolary literacy." Or, John Morton, one of the previously unknown writers, who certainly deserves his place specifically as a letter writer, nevertheless achieves his later success (after some hardship) because he can

write. He gets a job at a mine (his job is "to attend the pitts for the Land Sale to take pay, and Keep the Accompts for what is Sold for Ready monny or Creedet." He is qualified for this job because, as Whyman quotes him, "It takes pretty Close attendence ... But I have Little or nothing to du But *Writting*" (92). Whyman herself then generalizes that "*Literacy and letter-writing* ... became increasingly important as small farmers and labourers faced economic change" (92; emphasis added). Whyman provides the details that allow readers to rethink the issue of literacy more broadly than her key term suggests. Her investigation principally concerns correspondence, but her actual topic is often the broader topic of literacy.

Whyman's regular analytic vocabulary sometimes seems inadequate to the task she has set. In analyzing the letter writers presented here, she often uses psychological terms informally but appears to want them to carry the weight of formal analysis: *obsessive* and *obsession* are perhaps most noticeable, but *fixation* also appears. Mr Langton (1724–94) has obsessions about social climbing that emerge in his letters to his sons; his orders to one son to write to family members reveal a "fixation" (40). In another setting, the state has an "*obsession* with monopoly" regarding postal services (48). And returning to people, Jedediah Strutt (1726–97) "grew *obsessed* with [his children's] letter writing. His *fixation* was even more intense than that of the merchant fathers cited" earlier (102). This language is combined with a language of personal sympathy: "George Follows, a poor Quaker basket maker, tried desperately to support his family, whilst his wife Ruth preached throughout England" (60); the Tucker family (stone merchants with a family dynasty in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) "were helpless when they entered national politics, which was run by 'great men' with real power. Their sense of manhood was thus vulnerable to outside forces" (122). This sort of analysis seems suspended, without foundation.

As a reader of literature with a great deal of interest in history, I found a few of Whyman's narrative choices objectionable. For example, in chapter 1, "Creating the Letter: How to Acquire Epistolary Literacy," Whyman begins, "Let us observe a young man as he writes a letter in the early eighteenth century. (See Plate 3)" (19). Plate 3 takes us to "Self Portrait, c1771–5 by James Jefferys." This image has a fanciful rather than a conceptual appropriateness to Whyman's study. Although this self-portrait by an aspiring painter contains a letter, Jefferys is not otherwise known for epistolarity and is not otherwise mentioned in this study. And a reader cannot help but notice that "c1771–5" is not "early eighteenth century." As it turns out, this section of the chapter rests on the construction of a "composite," who is called "our young man," "Our writer," "the youth," and "our youth." This composite becomes something like a figure in a diorama, far removed from the archive

that makes this book valuable. The sort of scene-setting that "our youth"—with his writing materials—makes possible seems addressed to a very different audience from the one who can read endnotes and appreciate intelligently constructed appendices.

Jane Johnson, of part 3, wrote a narrative of her own in 1749 called "The History of Miss Clarissa of Buckinghamshire" and inserted it in a letter. That Johnson's "surge of creativity was a response to reading [Samuel] Richardson's *Clarissa*" (183) seems quite likely given the date, but that "Johnson's shadow falls gently upon the pages of Richardson's novels in regard to both content and method" (184) would need more of an argument than Whyman makes. Much more akin to the spirit of Richardson than this narrative is Johnson's 1756 satire of the court in which she "described the process of letter-writing by likening herself to a spider at the centre of an epistolary network. 'I Dreamed last night (Arachne like),' that 'I was metamorphosed into a spider as big as the full moon & sat upon a Throne in the Center of a Web of my own spinning, as Large as Lincolns-Inn Fields'" [177].) Whatever the spider's classical antecedents, she has a lively eighteenth-century history as well, and Johnson seems to be drawing Lovelace's imagination into her dream. Whyman's discussion of Johnson and her family as well as Anna Miller (who is quickly no longer of the middling sort, having married an Irish baronet) is interesting, but her judgments about the relations between letter writing and the novel and letter writing and literary culture more generally will not, I believe, shape literary-critical or literary-cultural debates.

At times, descriptions of the archives tend towards "numbering the streaks of the tulip," but on the whole, more rather than less of this material would be welcome. As I imagined what might come next, I thought of an electronic database that would make a selection of these family papers widely available—in their manuscript form. As it stands *The Pen and the People* has introduced us to material that cannot help but be important to our thinking.

Ann Van Sant, professor of English, University of California, Irvine, is currently finished a book called "The Problem of Exceptionality: Thinking forward from England's Civil War to the Emerging Novel." She has recently published articles on Daniel Defoe, Mary Astell, and Sarah Scott.