

GENTLE COMPANIONS: SINGLE WOMEN AND THEIR LETTERS IN LATE-STUART ENGLAND

The seventeenth-century women whom we know as letter-writers were usually wives, daughters, or widows of wealthy men. This is not surprising, for elite women had education and leisure, and their papers were most likely to survive. The personal correspondence of the Verney family, however, allows us to look at the letters of less well-studied groups of single women who were cousins or 'poor relations'. Some historians have described these women as females without a function, and they usually lacked descendants who would preserve their memorabilia. This essay analyses the correspondence of several unmarried women. It argues that letters made a difference in their lives and played a broad range of roles. They were used instrumentally to preserve social networks, obtain financial support, and to maintain a place of residence. Most important, they were a means to secure the all-important and desperately needed patronage of the male head of the family. On a different level they offered ways to secure self-expression, psychological support, and approval from loved ones. The Verneys have been represented as an extremely patriarchal family.¹ Even so, unmarried Verney women found ways to express their dignity through letters.

One might assume that in a society in which marriage determined status, there would be few single women. But if we include women who were single before marriage and add them to 'never-married' women and widows, their numbers are considerable. Single men and women reached a peak of almost 27% in late-seventeenth-century England, due to a complex combination of demographic trends, sex ratios, and economic fluctuations.² At the same time, letter-writing was expanding along with literacy and communications and the rise of a polite, print culture.³ In fact, there are hundreds of letters from articulate single women in the Verney papers of the late-seventeenth century. The Verneys were an upper-gentry family of Middle Claydon, Buckinghamshire. Under the direction of Sir Ralph Verney (1613-96), they amassed one of the

largest continuous archives for seventeenth and eighteenth-century England. Over 100 000 items spanning 12 generations include more than 30 000 personal letters from the 1630s to the mid-eighteenth century. The collection was expanded and further organized by Sir Ralph's younger son John (1640-1717). John spent twenty-two years as a London merchant, but in 1696 he inherited Sir Ralph's estate and baronetcy, after the unexpected deaths of his elder brother Edmund and Edmund's two sons.⁴

As the Verney letters clearly show, single Verney women were as literate and well-bred as their married kin. Most of them, however, lacked dowries and had little means of support. Because an occupation or domestic service threatened their gentle status, their options were greatly restricted, as calls for women's education and access to a livelihood show.⁵ In fact, how did gentle seventeenth-century spinsters survive in a society which authorized few spaces for independent women? The Verney archive shows that they were kept by other women as companions, often at the express command of the family head. This arrangement was part of the patriarchal structure and, thus, provides us with an example of how patriarchy actually worked. It also demonstrates the importance of women's letter-writing for companions, their mistresses, and the patriarch himself. The family head received letters from companions on a regular basis, as he did those of his steward and housekeeper. In practice, companions sent him valuable information that he could not obtain elsewhere according to pre-arranged instructions. As argued below, patriarchs received various benefits from their correspondence.

For companions, however, constant and persuasive letter writing was not just helpful--it was crucial for survival. Without fathers or brothers to provide them with a home, spinsters needed patriarchal patronage. Letter-writing was their best and often only way to achieve this goal, and they developed it into an art. Individual companions adopted different epistolary strategies and techniques; some were more successful than others. But all of their letters had a two-fold effect: In their overtly dutiful and submissive aspects, they humbly supported the patriarchal order; yet even

the most dependent Verney women felt entitled to self-expression and had access to the family head through letters. Under the cloak of humility, letter-writing gave companions the opportunity to make complaints, arguments, and demands that challenged patriarchal conventions. When treated poorly, they used their correspondence to express a sense of self-worth. Where possible, they carved niches in the small spaces allotted them by sending valuable social and political information. Far from lacking function, some were given heavy family responsibilities. This essay examines the correspondence of unmarried companions with the women who employed them, and with the family head. It also provides sketches of their daily lives as revealed by their letters.

First, the essay considers the physical format and conventions of the Verney letters. Normally, paper was coarse with untrimmed edges. Handwriting was bold and clear. Writers left one side blank, apparently for social effect, but they turned the page sideways and crammed farewells into the margin. The paper was then folded, sealed, and addressed. Letters received by the family head were saved and docketed, according to date, name, and topic. Generally, the Verneys wrote in three basic modes: they could be candid with trusted intimates, sociable to friends and acquaintances, and contrived or artificial regarding patronage.⁶ In practice, their writings were a blend of all three, depending upon the letter's specific context and the relationship of writer and recipient. Companions carefully constructed letters to the family head, sometimes hiding true feelings, but found cathartic release on other occasions.

As a group, the letters of Sir Ralph's sisters and cousins, who reached marriageable age during the 1640s, differed radically from those of their male kin in spelling, grammar, and presentation. Mistresses and their companions wrote phonetically, and often sprawled their thoughts in a large 'untutored' hand. Nevertheless, both groups expressed themselves as articulately as men, and both sexes sent 'humble services' according to epistolary conventions. The gap between male and female letter-writers diminished in the next generation of women who form the focus of this study. Neither mistresses nor their companions received formal education; their epistolary skills

were learned from contact with brothers and their tutors, as well as strict parental discipline. At an early age, boys and girls regularly wrote letters of compliment to various family members, who commented upon their progress to the family head. As a result, women's spelling, penmanship, structural approach, and physical presentation became more disciplined. More significant change came in the eighteenth century, when elegant letters from young women showed signs of influence by writing masters or boarding schools, as well as the effect of time spent in London.⁷ This third generation wrote with more ease and natural politeness, avoiding stiff French formality.

Four of Sir Ralph's spinster nieces have been selected here as case studies from a database of the Verney letters from 1692 to 1717: Pen and Cary Stewkeley, Peg Adams, and Mary Lloyd. Their widowed mothers were deceased or impoverished and unable to provide them with a home. Moreover, the Verneys practiced primogeniture and Sir Ralph left no legacies to his sisters' children. The only alternative available was for them to serve as companions in other people's homes. All were accomplished letter-writers; between them they wrote at least 329 letters to Sir Ralph and his son John. The Verney Letters of the Eighteenth Century describes these spinsters as 'permanent and welcome members of the fireside circle', but the letters tell a different story. They show the desperate reality of their lives, as they were 'carried' from family to family with no security and often little regard. As one companion, Pen Stewkely, starkly put it: 'I had rather serve hogs.'⁸

Despite her negative feelings, however, Pen (b.1657) led a more affluent life than her fellow poor relations. She was the second of five daughters born to Sir Ralph's poverty-stricken sister Cary (1626-1704) and her second husband John Stewkeley. Although Cary had lived comfortably in Hampshire while her husband was alive, after his death she existed precariously in Islington on a tiny annuity from Sir Ralph. None of her many daughters had portions, and none were married by the 1680s. Pretty, gregarious Pen was waiting on a wealthy Warwickshire relative, Lady Katherine Shuckburgh, whose husband, Sir Charles, a baronet, later became a member of Parliament.⁹ Pen was a true companion, not merely a glorified servant. This was unusual in the late-seventeenth

century, in contrast to the previous generation of Verney women. Pen's position bore marks of earlier exchanges of children among noble families, where young people learned courtly manners, pay was not expected, and newcomers came with clothes and money.¹⁰

Pen's assertive personality helped her to cope with the problems of living in someone else's house, but her greatest asset was her intimate relationship and long-standing correspondence with her cousin John Verney. The database contains over 71 letters from Pen, including 44 to John and 24 to Sir Ralph. In these letters, Pen expressed her anxiety about the uncertainty of her position, the competition she faced from other women, and the problems her attractiveness caused in relations with male employers. 'I do not find as yet any cause for any thoughts of going hence,' she wrote, for Lady Shuckburgh 'often says I shall never go away from her'. Yet Pen knew that Sir Charles Shuckburgh was 'a little fickle in his temper'. 'All things are so changeable in this world', she admitted, 'that there is nothing to be trusted.' Her most pressing problem, however, was financial: she had no money remaining, and Lady Shuckburgh had failed to deliver the expected cash and presents. It would be impossible, she feared to live on the L20 a year paid to her by her kinsman, Sir Hugh Stewkeley.¹¹

Pen's letters to her 'deare cousin John' gave her the opportunity to defend her expenses and to make a case for future loans of money. Every disbursement, she insisted, was required to maintain her position and meet social obligations. Indeed, she had already spent over L6 on 'necessary gifts' to Sir Charles, his Lady, the maids, the doctor, the groom, the workmen, the poor at Christmas, and for the carriage of her goods. But the 13 shillings that she lost playing cards caused her the most anxiety. Sir Charles, she admitted 'does not know the nearness of my fortune, nor I do not care he should ... for he talks of most things public'. To make matters worse, her mistress intended 'to carry' her on a hectic three-week round of visiting. 'Tis true I have what the world calls pleasures', she moaned, 'but when I consider I have not a purse to bear it out, it is quite contrary to me.' Her letters were her only outlet for grievances that as a companion she had to repress.

Pen's regular correspondence with John also helped her to maintain Sir Ralph's favour, though she was out of sight. 'I now desire you to read this to my uncle', she wrote boldly, so that he could see the state of her finances. Then she prudently professed intense devotion to Sir Ralph, thus softening the tone of her demands. She also used her letter to obtain John's advocacy in dealing with family members with whom she competed. His cousin Nancy Nicholas, she warned, was 'not my friend'. Pen often sent her best tidbits with requests to keep them secret from the Nicholases. Her letters reveal long-standing feuds that allow historians to detect the artifice and strategies of letter-writers.

In later correspondence, Pen asked John to invest her money, for he handled her finances in London, when she was in the country.¹² These letters combine flattery and modesty with appeals to their common interests and long friendship. Pen also employed letters to strengthen her tenuous position as a companion. 'I should be glad if my Uncle, your father, would be pleased to write a letter to my Lady,' she wrote. 'I should not venture to beg, but I know it would be much to my advantage, because I find my Lady takes great notice at the countenance he is pleased to show me.' Sir Ralph was one of the most important landowners in Buckinghamshire and Pen's letters marked her place in his network. Pen concluded with fears that she had 'sufficiently punished' John with 'this long scrawl,' and signed herself 'your poor absent cousin, who while she lives will be ever your most affectionate cousin and servant'. These apologies were not a sign of humility, but an indication that she knew how to write a proper letter and successfully obtain his patronage. 'The confidence I have in your friendship', she explained, 'makes me give you the trouble of knowing all my concerns.' Only through her letters, however, could she furnish him with the details.

Sir Ralph and John usually complied with Pen's requests, because they too benefited from her political news, gossip, and scandal. Unlike servants, Pen dined and socialized as an equal and was privy to many secrets. This was important in a society based upon patronage where interactions were cloaked in polite conventions. Operating almost as a domestic spy, she kept records of visitors,

reported who 'stands very fair', and noted broken alliances. In every letter she stressed her loyalty to the Verneys. Although Sir Charles showed her 'as much kindness and respect as he shows to any that is no nearer related to him', she knew she was 'a stranger'.¹³ A great deal of Pen's success in life stemmed from her ability to write persuasive letters to her male relations.

The Verneys clearly prized Pen's letters, and they arranged secret ways of receiving them. I have written to you 'in the way my uncle bid me', Pen wrote to John, 'for it is much the safest'. If Sir Ralph was away, she cautioned John to 'send [the letter] in the old way and when read by him and you, then burn it, I pray.' The Verneys' actions to safeguard Pen's letters indicate they recognised the political import of her correspondence. Such prudence is understandable, in light of the fact that nosy gentry families like the Shuckburghs were known to 'open all letters that comes to their hands'.¹⁴ Moreover, letters were passed from person to person to satisfy hunger for news. The impact of a letter continued long after its journey, and the perils of the post caused anxiety. Less likely to be intercepted were the letters written by Pen to her sisters, for none of them were watched.

Pen's exalted social life, however, was uncommon and certainly not experienced by Peg Adams (b.1665), another of Sir Ralph's nieces. Peg's mother, Elizabeth Adams (1633-1721), was the youngest of Sir Ralph's six sisters. In 1662 she married a struggling clergyman, Charles Adams (d.1683), of Great Baddow, Essex. In the 1690s, she lived on a tiny annuity from Sir Ralph on a back street behind Covent Garden. She could not afford to 'keep' her two daughters, who were therefore forced to wait upon their Verney kin. Peg was an intelligent, capable woman 'with a gracious dignity about her which no ill fortune could subdue'. The database includes 84 carefully constructed letters from Peg, 23 to Sir Ralph and 61 to John. These letters show an empathy for others and a great deal of nursing skill. Aged 31, she bore the awesome responsibility of tending Sir Ralph on his death bed. But she herself was 'lean as pharaoh's lean kine' and her doctor predicted consumption. Noting her poverty and illnesses, she admitted: 'I must never expect to be free from them as long as I am in this world, and as for anybody falling in love with me, I can't expect that

[having] ... none of that which all the world values; I mean money.'¹⁵

Although Peg had desirable skills, in 1692 she was abruptly dismissed from her position as companion to Sir Ralph's cousin, Nancy Nicholas. This event provoked a vigorous exchange of 13 letters from 2 June to 14 June 1692 and 11 more by early July between the participants: Peg, the companion; Nancy, her 'keeper'; John, a close friend of Nancy's; and Sir Ralph, the reigning patriarch, who had arranged for Peg to live with the Nicholases in Covent Garden and St. Albans. The correspondence constructs a narrative with four main characters, a plot, and a conclusion. But because the players wrote in ways that would best display their gentle breeding, it is not until the 17th and 18th letters that we discover the economic and social reasons that led to Peg's dismissal.

Peg's story is told through an elaborate exchange of letters that reveal hidden social relationships. They demonstrate how family members competed with each other through correspondence for a place in Sir Ralph's networks. Indeed women's letters from rival factions highlight family power structures. In the case of Peg's dismissal, Sir Ralph's sister Elizabeth Adams and his cousin Nancy Nicholas represented two feuding family factions. In age and kinship, Elizabeth outranked Nancy, the daughter of Dr William Denton, a close friend and kinsman of Sir Ralph's. Nancy hoped to extend her father's intimacy into the next generation through letters with her cousin John. Unlike Sir Ralph's impoverished sisters with their unmarried, portionless daughters, Nancy's husband George was a member of Parliament, held a custom-house place, and offered the Verneys large loans. Thus, the Nicholases had much to offer. They threatened Sir Ralph's sisters, who existed precariously upon his annuities, and after John inherited, the sisters would become dependent on him.¹⁶

The incident began on 4 June 1692 with news that Peg's mother, Elizabeth, had small pox. Peg left the Nicholases in Essex at two in the morning and hurried to Covent Garden. Soon after, Nancy informed Peg that she would no longer 'keep anybody settled in her house for a companion', though Peg had done no wrong. Peg immediately wrote to Sir Ralph for assistance, for he had

asked her to live with Nancy: 'I could not forbear troubling you with an account of anything which happens to me in my little affairs, since you have been pleased to give me the freedom of doing it.' Though deferential in her letters, Peg knew she had been a 'fine companion' and she refused to lose her dignity: 'I would not do anything rude ... but neither would I willingly pin myself upon her'.¹⁷ Lacking income, Peg desperately needed Sir Ralph's approval in order to survive. Her letter gave her the opportunity to defend her reputation, maintain her place in his network, and enlist his aid with Nancy.

On 13 June Nancy wrote to Sir Ralph with her side of the story: 'I have never done anything of moment without acquainting you with it'. She defended her action, calling it her Christian duty, for though Peg had served her faithfully, 'her mother has had many an unquiet hour for the want of her'. However, her letter to Sir Ralph was enclosed inside a frank, angry, letter to her trusted cousin John. 'I truly believe I shall now be your Aunt Adamses best cousin for ... my letting her have [Peg] home again....Though perhaps I may have many a hard word behind my back ... [having] had my share of that number in my life.' His aunts, she insisted, were 'none of my friends', and she urged him 'to say what you think on my behalf' to his father.¹⁸ She not only presented herself differently to Sir Ralph and John, she encouraged family divisions with her letter.

A third comment about the incident was sent that day by Sir Ralph to John. 'I would not have it known yet that I know anything of it,' he confided, but 'it will be a great charge to her mother to keep her at home.' Then he added another layer to the narrative by summarizing the contents on the back of each letter. An expanding conversation with multiple inputs and feedback was being constructed through correspondence, with different faces presented to different people. On 19 June, Sir Ralph conveyed his thoughts more fully in three additional letters. He addressed his 52-year-old son as 'child', Peg as 'good niece' and Nancy as 'deare cousin', expressing his relationship with each person. To John he confided that he saw no hope. In his draft to Nancy, however, he sternly conveyed his displeasure: 'For you very well know how much and how earnestly I desired that my

niece Adams should continue under your conduct ... and I am still of the same mind.' He made negative comments about women's inconstancy and put inserts in every sentence, reflecting the anger with which the draft was penned.¹⁹

His letter to Peg was equally authoritative, but less harsh in tone. He asked that she 'carry it with as much respect and kindness to my cousin Nicholas, and her husband, as you can, for I think their former kindnesses deserve it from you. I confess I have expected this a great while. Had I been in their circumstances, I should have done it sooner'. The last sentence alluded to an as yet unmentioned reason for her dismissal. Peg's response was circumspect but not submissive: 'You have been pleased to speak your mind so freely to me about this affair. I hope also you will give me leave to say ... that I rather think my Cousin apprehended my mother in a dangerous condition....Therefore she dismissed me before her death, that I might not look upon her house as a habitation....I must own myself to be very well satisfied with the change; rather than to be burthensome to any friend with my company when they don't desire it.' Despite her dependence, Peg did not mince words about Nancy's lack of compassion when writing to their mutual patron.²⁰

Nancy's next letter to Sir Ralph confirmed Peg's suspicion. Deftly appealing to Sir Ralph's frugal nature, Nancy claimed she was merely 'following the wise precepts which you have often given me; that since taxes are so great and everybody's estates much lessening, tis not a time for us now to increase our family when everybody else retrenches.' 'I never put pen to paper', she confessed, 'with so much concern in all my life as now, for you are a person that I have that real love and kindness for, as well as many obligations. I humbly beg and beseech you not to take this ill of me, that is my misfortune, but not my fault.' Although she signed herself 'your most dutiful child and humble servant', she refused to admit wrong-doing and would not give in to the family patriarch.²¹ The letters of Peg and Nancy demonstrate how complaints and arguments were politely camouflaged by traditional forms of reverence. Both mistresses and companions had been trained to do this artlessly, and their letters were thus polite.

After many subsequent letters, Sir Ralph not only forgave Nancy, but urged Peg 'upon all occasions to acknowledge her former favours'. Because the Verneys had been bred to be courteous, everyone's letters employed the language of a patriarchal patronage system based upon favour and service, indeed, 'humble services' from 'obedient servants'. They reflected Sir Ralph's needs to literally 'paper over' tensions within the family in order to preserve peace. In fact, a breach in family harmony had serious implications. For Sir Ralph and his father Sir Edmund had taken different sides during Charles I's quarrel with Parliament. 'Family disputes resemble civil wars, wherein all sides may have reason to complain,' wrote Sir Ralph. As patriarch, he consciously used letters to maintain family order. Peg wisely realized that Sir Ralph's support was more important than ever. Nevertheless, a few years later she wrote to Sir Ralph to say that she would not wait on Nancy's daughter until Nancy had left the house. However, Peg prudently added: 'I have writ in ordinary paper ... purely to show my obedience in this small thing which I would ever perform in greater.'²² She chose to express loyalty in the way she wrote her letters, but refused to give up her dignity in them.

Peg's dismissal was, on the surface, a trivial event. But it shows how social and economic change affected real individuals and families. It also reveals hidden motivations and cultural change that cannot be seen in other types of sources. Peg's story indicates that expensive foreign wars, rising taxes, and falling agricultural prices directly affected attitudes towards kinship. As gentry families cut back their servant establishments, the plight of unmarried women became increasingly apparent. Thus in 1693, Sir Ralph's sister Cary noted: 'Many has put away women as formerly kept them, since too great taxes has been paid and lessened their servants in all places....I think there was never more gentlewomen wanted service than now.'²³

At the same time, a growing desire for privacy caused Nancy to revel in the seclusion of her nuclear family. The Verney letters show the effect of this cultural shift on kinship responsibility from many points of view. The letters also demonstrate the importance of looking at relationships

between different types of women, not just at the treatment they received from men. A woman could be 'kept' or let go, not only as a man's mistress. She was similarly disposable as a woman's companion. The verbs 'keep', 'dispose', and 'carry' used in relation to single women underline this point. Furthermore, under conventional language of humble services and servility lay a tradition of regarding the sexuality of single women as suspicious, if not wanton. As recent research has shown, single women posed threats to traditional ways of thinking about virginity and sex. Without male protectors, moral standards might be in danger.²⁴

The story of Peg's dismissal also reconstructs the process of how individuals 'self-fashioned' or presented themselves to different people in different ways through letters. Poor relations, as well as mistresses, had command of epistolary conventions, but companions had to be continually on guard. They became particularly adept at constructing polite letters, for they had little to rely on except their own reputations and characters. In response to dependency, they developed life-coping strategies through letter-writing and drew their epistolary self-portraits as they wished to be seen by others. The self that they presented, however, varied with recipient.²⁵ To Nancy Nicholas and other female competitors, companions wrote with scrupulous courtesy, though feuds had existed for generations. To mothers and sisters, they scribbled with frankness and even anger. But the face that poor relations presented to the family head was especially important. Thus, Pen used both her letters and her attractiveness to manipulate the men in her life, presenting herself as an interesting and adventurous ally, capable of offering valuable information. Peg, however, stressed her rationality, steadiness, and ability to help family members.

In 1710, Peg finally had a marriage offer from a man she loved, but her mother forbade the match. Not only was it below her rank, but Peg also had no portion.²⁶ Peg appealed to John, now head of the family, but after one attempt to intervene on her behalf, he told her to obey her mother. Peg's letters show that ideas about gentility, though contested in the wider society, often hampered elite women. Her prophecy that 'poor I must live and die an old maid' came true.²⁷ In contrast to Pen

Stewkeley, Peg had fewer comforts and more aggravation from feuding relations. Both women, however, used letters to retain the patronage of the family head. Without other sources of financial support, it was crucial to stay in his favour. Both Peg and Pen were able to do this through constant and persuasive letter-writing.

Neither Pen nor Peg bore the responsibilities and stress of Pen's eldest sister Cary Stewkeley (b.1655) who regularly wrote long reports to Sir Ralph. During the 1680s and 1690s, Cary tended Sir Ralph's daughter-in-law, Mary Abel (1641-1715) in neighbouring East Claydon. The Abels continually caused problems in the village, and Cary played the role of a trusted, local informer. She also assumed the duties of helping the parish poor, tending the sick, and coordinating watchers at death-beds. Mary Abel needed Cary's care because of her mental illness, which arose after her forced marriage to Sir Ralph's eldest son Edmund (1636-88). Their union brought the Verneys adjacent lands worth L700-800 per year, but since Edmund and her three children had died prematurely, Mary Abel's estate would revert back to the Abels at her death. Sir Ralph's steward in East Claydon, was old and weak, and the Verneys were subjected to constant lawsuits. It was vital to have a loyal informed person on the spot, especially since Sir Ralph was spending up to nine months a year in London.²⁸

When Sir Ralph died, John ordered Cary to continue her letter-writing. In response, she promised 'to cast my careful eye on my cousin, your sister, which I always did: ever since your brother brought me ... into his house, for that was his desire of me to do so, and also his son: and your good father desired me still to do the same'. In fact, Cary's 170 letters in the database, including 99 to Sir Ralph and 67 to John, represent only a fraction of her total output. She sent important news about political elections and was the first to report the death of Sir Philip Wharton, whose son, the Whig county leader, opposed the Tory Verneys. But Cary's most valuable information was about the legal activities of Mary's kin and allies, who were trying to prove that Sir Ralph had mismanaged Mary's estate in hopes of getting their hands on her rents.²⁹ Fortunately for the

Verneys, they failed in this attempt. Cary's long, detailed letters helped to protect the family estate.

As a gentlewoman, Cary was able to obtain this type of information, for while Sir Ralph and John were in London she socialized with the gentry. In 1696, for example, she was one of 30 guests in the Pigott's great parlor. In her description of this occasion, she noted that there were three groaning tables and two fiddlers, and that Sir Thomas led her to her coach and said 'I was the lady of his feast.' In fact, Cary needed her letters to the Verneys as much as they did, for in them she justified her usefulness and self-worth. Letters were an escape valve for her stress and a chance to maintain a favoured place within the family. Thus, when Sir Ralph died, she reminded John to invite her to the funeral 'for it would look ill if I was not there, as has been at all the private funerals past.'³⁰ Each new employer had to be wooed through letters in order to reestablish a companion's place. Letters also allowed Cary to clarify her own genteel position to herself and to the Verneys. Because she had responsibility without real authority, her status was particularly ambiguous. Unlike her sister Pen, Cary was a glorified servant, neither fish nor fowl. She bore the brunt of the anger of other servants, with whom she constantly fought, but her letters to and from kin reminded her of her gentle birth.³¹

At Sir Ralph's death, Cary expected 'a swinging legacy', but in fact she received nothing. A few years earlier, however, Cary had asked Sir Ralph and John to invest L100 that she and her sisters had hoarded from legacies. She wished them to place it in a government fund which would give them an annual annuity of L14. The Verneys were already investing in these funds and they were willing to help dependants to become more self-sufficient. I will 'trust to providence for the continuance of the Government', Cary wrote, 'since I see so many wise men takes these ways to improve what they have.' Her letters enabled her to request and receive financial help from the Verneys. The survival of this correspondence indicates that far from being passive, unwordly spinsters, Cary and her sisters were informed about London's 'financial revolution'.³²

After their mother's death in 1704, the four unmarried Stewkeley sisters lived together in

London in an early form of 'spinster clustering'. When they wrote to John for his assistance, however, he refused to give them a monthly allowance, as his father had done for their mother.³³ Cary's spirited response gives us insights into the lives of single women that can only be gleaned from personal correspondence: 'We are all as uneasy to run into debt as your Lordship, we knowing the misery of it. But then what can we do? If we were all to go to service, who would take us? For I see how service is to be got. Then to work for our livings, I see how hard it is to get bread to put into [our] mouths....My cousin Ruth Lloyd had her health so ill in service, that she was forced to quit it.' Although they raised enough money from other kin, the sisters were almost forced to move into two garrets in 1705. In 1708, however, they were still living together, and with the help of a huge legacy from her godmother, Pen eventually married.³⁴ By contrast, Mary Lloyd (b.1666) and her sister Ruth (d.1725) were not as lucky as the Stewkeleys. Their mother, Sir Ralph's sister Mary (1628-84), had disgraced the family by becoming pregnant and then marrying their steward. Mary's eldest son Humphrey died in 1715 and her younger son Verney served in Flanders, but neither brothers were willing to help support their sisters. There are only four letters from Mary in the database, but other letter-writers discussed her situation. She had at least eight changes of employment between 1692 and 1717. In 1694, she waited on Lady Katharine Fitzgerald. But unlike her early-seventeenth-century kin, Mary was now paid wages, which clearly indicated her loss of gentility. What is more, she received only six pounds a year, which was less than that of some ladies' maids.³⁵

Letters describing Mary's plight display the relationships of companions with women of different social and marital status. They also help us to speculate about long-term changes in the status of Verney companions. In 1695, Sir Ralph's sister Cary praised Mary, finding her 'desirous to do all things as her mother's friends do approve of and to endeavour to get a livelihood to keep her like a gentlewoman'. She hoped that Mary's salary would prevent her from 'perishing for want'. 'God keep all my relations from that unspeakable affliction,' she added,³⁶ revealing the intense anxiety

that hung over dependent women. But Sir Ralph had a very different opinion of Mary: 'No place will please her long,' he complained. The letters show two distinctly gendered opinions of spinsters by Sir Ralph and Cary.

In 1713 after many jobs and the deaths of her employers, Mary was again left homeless. John's wife Elizabeth now kept her as a companion, and the Verney Letters.... assure us that Mary was 'a member of the Claydon family party'.³⁷ The letters themselves though show us that this was not so: in April, John threatened to dismiss Mary because of the expense. 'It will look very unkind,' chided Elizabeth. 'She is your cousin ... which nothing could be closer but brothers and sisters. And really, if we can't expect some compassion from them which are so nearly related, who must we from?' Mary's predicament was not an isolated incident. It was characteristic of a society whose households were headed by men, and whose women ideally were protected, not independent. 'I think women are like young birds which fly out but can't find the way home unless the old ones come to be their guide,' wrote a friend.³⁸ A home for a spinster, however, was becoming increasingly difficult to find.

The letters to and from these four companions reveal the attitudes and values of the Verneys. Case studies of the previous generation of companions reveal the same problems, but they show a greater integration into family life. The correspondence suggests that civil war interrupted the exchange of children between elite families, where they learned manners and made marriage contacts. By the eighteenth century, places were competitively fought for and sometimes commanded a small wage. Although the Verneys might give lip-service to gentility, conduct literature now included them as a category of domestic help. In practice, Mary Lloyd was little more than a servant. New educational and occupational alternatives were not yet available for women, as they were for younger sons. Furthermore, economic specialization diminished a spinster's value to households that now desired privacy. The letters challenge the rosy view of family memoirs, but they confirm demographic data about late marriages, unequal sex ratios, and soaring marriage

portions.³⁹ They suggest that the fragile threads of kinship were being stretched thin in an increasingly market-based society.

As the Verneys penned their letters, we can see power relationships between patriarch and kin, men and women, and between women of different ages, ranks, kinship ties, and marital status. We observe how single women coped with life by developing epistolary strategies, in the face of both support and disloyalty from other women. Elizabeth Verney's defense of Mary Lloyd and Pen's huge legacy indicate that women were often able to help each other. But the power of letter-writing as a means of survival should not be overlooked. Instrumentally, correspondence enabled isolated women to maintain life-supporting links with their more powerful kin in every sphere of life--socially, financially, culturally, and politically. In fact, sometimes letter-writing was their only available means of interaction. As we read companions' letters and tell their stories we see how patriarchy worked for the Verneys and how letter-writing confirmed and strengthened it. But letter-writing also challenged gender, class, and patriarchal conventions. By conducting correspondence, even the most dependent women in an extremely patriarchal family were able to obtain self-expression, psychological support, and assistance from kin. Moreover, their literacy and writing skills would enable them to take part in the print culture of the eighteenth century.

Single women may have lacked adoring relatives and homes of their own. But they too had letters to keep them company. The ones they sent linked them to kinship networks; those they received brought proof that they were not alone in the world. This is not to minimize their poverty and restricted horizons. In the privacy of their closets, however, they possessed the same pen and paper as their mistresses. In the end, letters were themselves gentle companions to women forced to survive by their own wits and abilities.

thank Caroline Bowden, Betsy Brown, Bridget Hill, Margaret Hunt, Moshe Sluhovsky, and Alison Wall for helpful comments. M. Slater, Familie in the Seventeenth Century: The Verneys of Claydon House ([London: Routledge and Kegan Paul], 1984) generally and p.84.

. Bennett and A. Froide, 'A Singular Past' and M. Kowaleski, 'Singlewomen in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: The Demographic respective', in J. Bennett and A. Froide, eds., Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800 (Philadelphia: [University of Pennsylvania Press], 1999) pp.2-4, 38-81, 325-344 (hereafter SW).

f. Anderson and I. Ehrenpreis, eds., The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century (Lawrence, Kansas: [University of Kansas Press], 1966); R. y, Told in Letters (Ann Arbor, Michigan: [University of Michigan Press], 1966).

. Whyman, Sociability and Power: The Cultural Worlds of the Verneys 1660-1720 (Oxford: [Oxford University Press], 1999) pp. 3-7 (hereafter zP). I thank Sir Ralph Verney for permission to use his family papers. References to the Verney Letters (VL) refer to Princeton University Library microfilm and include reel number, sequential number of the document on that reel, names of writer/recipient, and document date. Spelling and date: modernized. For a complete list of Verney papers see NRA 21959, S. Ranson, The Verney Papers Catalogued for the Claydon House Trust (1994).

l. Hill, 'A Refuge from Men: The Idea of a Protestant Nunnery', Past & Present, 117 (1987) 107-32; M. Astell, A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Patricia Springborg ([London: Pickering and Chatto], 1997); P. Earle, 'The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries', Economic History Review, 2nd [ser., 42] (1989), [p.] 344 suggests that only mantuamaker, milliner, and sempstress were deemed respectable occupations for women.

. Whyman, "'Paper Visits": The Post-Restoration Letter as Seen Through the Verney Family Archive', in R. Earle, ed., Epistolary Selves (Basingstoke, Hampshire: [Ashgate Press], 1999) [pp. 15-36, especially] p. 18.

VL49-407, Elizabeth Adams/John Verney, 24 October 1696; VL50-440, Isabelle Stewkeley/John Verney, 12 July 1698; cf. VL48-18, Margaret Verney/Ralph Verney, 23 October 1694.

M. Verney, ed., The Verney Letters of the Eighteenth Century from the MSS. at Claydon House ([London: Ernest Benn], 1930) vol. ii of 2 volumes, p. 167 (hereafter Letters); VL34-17, Pen Stewkeley/John Verney, 8 March 1681. The database containing 7,018 records includes every document on reels 46 [to] 56 of the Verney papers. Over 2,000 letters from earlier reels were also included in this study.

. P. and M. M. Verney, Memoirs of the Verney Family ([London: Longmans Green], 1892-9) vol. iii, pp. 109-10, 229, 434 (hereafter Memoirs); Letters, vol.i, pp. 63-7. Cary had additional unmarried daughters from her first marriage.

I thank Drs. Caroline Bowden and Frances Harris for sharing their research on this point.

For quotations in the following case study see VL34-17, 8 March 1681 and VL35-73, 31 May 1681 from Pen to John, unless otherwise cited.

VL54-190, John Verney/Ralph Verney, 7 January 1710.

S&P, p.99.

VL36-29, John Verney/Ralph Verney, 12 December 1681.

VL54-169, Elizabeth Adams/John Verney, 22 August 1709; VL47-124, Peg Adams/Ralph Verney, 6 October 1693; Letters, vol. ii, pp.163-4; Memoirs, vol. iv, pp. 98, 458.

S&P, p. 68.

VL45-03, Nancy Nicholas/John Verney, 4 June 1692; VL45-09, Peg Adams/Ralph Verney, 11 June, 1692, and Ralph's note (received 13 August 1692).

VL45-011, Nancy Nicholas/Ralph Verney, 13 June 1692; VL45-010, Nancy Nicholas/John Verney, 13 June 1692.

VL45-012, Ralph Verney/John Verney, 13 June 1692; VL45-014, 015, Ralph Verney/John Verney, Nancy Nicholas, 19 June 1692.

VL45-016, Ralph Verney/Peg Adams, 19 June 1692; VL45-017, Peg Adams/Ralph Verney, 21 June 1692.

VL45-018, Nancy Nicholas/Ralph Verney, 28 June 1692.

VL46-5, Ralph Verney/Peg Adams, 3 July 1692; VL26-8, Ralph Verney/Nancy Hobart, 9 October 1676; VL48-290, Peg Adams/Ralph Verney
re 1695.

VL46-70, Cary Gardiner/Mary Lloyd, 24 August 1692; Hill, 'A Refuge from Men', [107-32].

VL45-012, Ralph Verney/John Verney, 13 June 1692; VL47-151, Ralph Verney/John Verney, 1 November 1693; VL51-63, Nancy Nicholas/John
Verney, 17 September 1699; R. M. Karras 'Sex and the Singlewoman' in SW, pp. 127-145; The Ladies Remonstrance ([London], 1659). See Oxford
English Dictionary for definitions under 'servant' and 'service' dealing with sex.

Examples of this approach are found in the play Rashomon, J. Goodman, Stories of Scottsboro (N.Y.: [Pantheon Books], 1994), and Jonathan
Swift's introduction to Letters written by Sir W. Temple...., vol. i, ([London: Tonson and Churchill], 1700) A3r.

VL52-703, Elizabeth Adams/John Verney, 10 February 1705.

Letters, vol. ii, p. 169; S. Lanser, 'Singular Politics: The Rise of the British Nation and the Production of the Old Maid', in SW, pp.297-323; E.
Cophy, Women's Lives and the 18th Century Novel (Tampa, Florida: [University of South Florida Press], 1991) p.199; [Mary Astell], A Serious
proposal to the Ladies.... ([London: R. Wilkin], 1694) p. 160.

VL49-89, Cary Stewkeley/Ralph Verney, 3 May 1696; VL47-492, Cary Stewkeley/Ralph Verney, 22 July 1694; VL49-116, Cary
Stewkeley/Ralph Verney, 3 April 1696; S&P, pp. 14, 115-17.

VL49-277, Cary Stewkeley/John Verney, 4 October 1696; VL49-12, Cary Stewkeley/Ralph Verney, 2 February 1696; VL49-145, Cary
Stewkeley/Ralph Verney, 1 March 1696; VL49-197, John Verney/Ralph Verney, 16 July 1696.

VL49-29, Cary Stewkeley/Ralph Verney, 12 January 1696; VL49-277, Cary Stewkeley/John Verney, 4 October 1696.

VL47-515, Cary Stewkeley/Ralph Verney, 3 August 1694.

VL49-377, Nancy Nicholas/John Verney, 31 December 1696; VL49-511, Cary Gardiner/William Coleman, 14 January 1697; VL47-374, Cary
Stewkeley/Ralph Verney, 19 April 1694; P. G. M. Dickson, The Financial Revolution in England ([London: Macmillan], 1967, [generally]).

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VL48-426, John Verney/Ralph Verney, 10 August 1695; VL52-658, Cary Stewkeley/John Verney, 3 January 1705; VL52-707, Cary
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Laws: Relationships Among Eighteenth-Century British Women (Athens, Georgia: [University of Georgia Press, 1994]); Lady Barbara Montagu
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Letters, vol. ii, p.163.

VL55-108, Elizabeth Verney/John Verney, 18 April 1713; VL53-430, William Tregear/John Verney, 13 July 1706.

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