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“Each word shows how you love me”: The social literacy practice of children’s letter writing (1780-1860)

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“Each word shows how you love me”: The social literacy practice of children’s letter writing (1780-1860)

This article draws on hundreds of letters that formed German children’s correspondence with their parents, other relatives, teachers, and friends written mostly between the 1780s and 1850s. Through this study, we see the part literacy played in transformations of bourgeois childhood in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. The paper further investigates how children used letters as a means of learning sociability and building relationships within kinship networks. Historians of education have sometimes treated children’s writing as secondary to more authoritative records. Yet we miss something important about the history of literacy education if we disregard children’s writing or use it only superficially. This article considers the genre of children’s letter writing, exploring the conventions and typical subjects which contributed to the social purpose of correspondence. Letter writing is examined as a pedagogic exercise, including the preoccupation with the medium which filled children’s letters and evidence of instruction in letter writing. The paper demonstrates that letters fostered the participation of middle and upper-class children in household affairs, kinship networks, and cultural spheres connected through school friends and parents’ acquaintances from very young ages. Children’s correspondence documents a lifelong process in the making of class cultures and forging of social ties.

On a snowy day in October 1850, Peter Paulsen wrote to his young son at home in Schleswig. He thanked the boy, also named Peter, for writing while they were apart: “Your letter gave me great pleasure. Each word shows how you love me: proof of this love that you are diligent, orderly, and obedient to your good mother, through which you give me the greatest joy.”¹ This direct articulation of the purpose of letter-writing was a typical feature of German children’s correspondence throughout the early nineteenth century. But Paulsen’s brief note is unusual for the succinctness with which it synthesises developing pedagogic ideals about sentiment, self-discipline and literacy. The exchange demonstrates how the Enlightenment idealisation of self-control in children was translated to the sentimental frame of the mid-nineteenth century: this paradigm was satisfied not only by writing loving letters to one’s father, but by being disciplined and obedient to one’s mother. This particular note was attached to a longer letter for Paulsen’s wife, along with individual letters addressed to his other children. The fact that Paulsen

¹ Peter Paulsen to his wife and children, 14 October 1850. Nachlass Peter Paulsen, Abt. 399.1113 Nr. 5, Landesarchiv Schleswig.

deliberately wrote a letter for each child to claim as his or her own underscores how seriously German parents took children's literacy. How did this kind of letter writing, evident mostly in elite family archives of the mid-eighteenth century, become a common practice for a middle-class educator's family by 1850?² The letters children wrote themselves offer some answers about how this practice spread over the century.

Despite increasing attention to children's voices across historical sources, few studies have been devoted to thorough investigations of children's letter writing as a practice.³ Why have texts produced by children often been treated by historians as secondary to more authoritative records? Three explanations seem likely: 1) The challenge of locating sources has discouraged rigorous analysis of children's letters. 2) Children's writing of any era can appear simple and formulaic, and adult letters have largely been read as social tools while disregarding children's letters as experiments derivative of adult correspondence.⁴ 3) Children's letters have been mistakenly assumed to hold merely antiquarian interest, rather than offering evidence relevant to complex social history questions. Yet we miss something important about the part

² Paulsen eventually became the director of the school for the deaf in Schleswig.

³ Exceptions include some essays in David Barton and Nigel Hall, eds., *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000); Willemijn Ruberg, "Children's Correspondence as a Pedagogical Tool in the Netherlands (1770-1850)," *Pedagogica Historica* 41, no. 3 (2005): 295-312; and Kaisa Vehkalahti, "The Urge to See Inside and Cure: Letter-writing as an Educational Tool in Finnish Reform School Education, 1915-1928," *Paedagogica Historica* 44 (2008): 193-205. For an overview of perspectives from practitioners, see Criss Jones Díaz, "Literacy as Social Practice" in *Literacies in Childhood: Changing Views, Challenging Practice*, ed. Laurie Makin, Criss Jones Díaz, and Claire McLachlan, 31-42 (Sydney: MacLennan Petty, 2007).

⁴ For valuable studies which examine letters as a genre, but do not consider the particular characteristics of children's correspondence, see: Alexandru Duțu, Edgar Hösch, and Norbert Oellers, eds., *Brief und Briefwechsel in Mittel- und Osteuropa im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Essen, Germany: Reimar Hobbing, 1989); Roger Chartier, ed., *La Correspondance: Les Usages de la Lettre au XIXe Siècle* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1991); Rainer Baasner, ed., *Briefkultur im 19. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1999); Rebecca Earle, ed., *Epistolar Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 1999); Liz Stanley, "The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences," *Auto/Biography* 12 (2004): 201-235.

literacy played in transformations of childhood in Europe if we overlook children's letter writing or use it only superficially.

My analysis makes the case for children's correspondence as a valuable historical source, countering each of these objections: 1) Not only was letter-writing a ubiquitous practice in middle-class German children's lives, but this study has unearthed a broad range of these letters in family archives. 2) Letters document pedagogic exercises in which children and adults engaged, constituting a set of communicative practices worthy of investigation distinct from the adult genre. 3) Much more than ephemeral objects, letters served as a key instrument for the social development of children.⁵

Letters record the participation of bourgeois children in household affairs, kinship networks and cultural spheres connected through school friends and parents' acquaintances from very young ages. Approaching children's writing as a social literacy practice has a double meaning: on the one hand, recognising letter writing as a path toward social literacy (that is, the development of children's ability to "read" their social world and follow class- and gender-based scripts), and on the other hand, underscoring the social context of letter writing as one of several literacy practices in which children engaged. These letters show children practicing adult conventions and asserting their important place in the family by reporting on household news, money management and other practical concerns; demonstrating their bourgeois accomplishments and sentimental education; cultivating associations that would be important in adulthood; and engaging in relational autonomy through a number of different vertical and horizontal relationships. Children's letters document a lifelong process in the making of class

⁵ In this attention to the dual nature of letters as sources, I am following recent scholarship which turns to letters not only for historical evidence, but letters as evidence. For recent developments in the use of letters, see Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 82-90.

cultures and forging of social ties.⁶ If the eighteenth century was indeed, as Habermas names it, “the century of the letter”, and if German philosophers were on to something when they claimed their historical moment as “the pedagogical century”, perhaps it is no accident that the genre of letter writing became so central to the education of middle and upper-class German children in the years around 1800.⁷ German sources provide a particularly illuminating case of children’s education and the family as a preoccupation of middle-class society, but this was by no means an exceptional national story.⁸

This study draws on hundreds of letters that formed children’s correspondence with their parents, other relatives, teachers and friends, written mostly between the 1780s and 1850s. The letters come from eight archives and some published sources, representing several regions of what is now Germany, especially Berlin & Brandenburg, Schleswig, Lower Saxony, Lippe,

⁶ My analysis is informed by scholarship on bourgeois domesticity which has identified the family as a key site for the production of class cultures. See, for example, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Working Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Gunilla-Frederike Budde, *Auf dem Weg ins Bürgerleben: Kindheit und Erziehung in deutschen und englischen Bürgerfamilien, 1840-1914* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 1994); Mary Jo Maynes, “Class Cultures and Images of Proper Family Life” in *The History of the European Family: Family Life in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. David I. Kertzer and Marzio Barbagli, 195-229 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991 [orig. 1962]), 48. On the eighteenth century as the “pedagogical century,” see among others, Marion Gray, *Productive Men, Reproductive Women: The Agrarian Household and the Emergence of Separate Spheres during the German Enlightenment* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 135-139.

⁸ On the salience of the German case, see Budde, *Auf dem Weg ins Bürgerleben: Kindheit und Erziehung in deutschen und englischen Bürgerfamilien, 1840-1914* (1994); David Hamlin, *Work and Play: The Production and Consumption of Toys in Germany, 1870-1914* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). On developments across Enlightenment Europe, see Pavla Miller, “State Formation, Personality Structure, and the Civilizing Process,” in *Transformations of Patriarchy in the West, 1500-1900* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), especially 130-134; Jennifer Popiel, *Rousseau’s Daughters: Domesticity, Education, and Autonomy in Modern France* (Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2008); Arianne Baggerman, and Rudolf Dekker, *Child of the Enlightenment: Revolutionary Europe Reflected in a Boyhood Diary* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Noah W. Sobe, “Concentration and Civilisation: Producing the Attentive Child in the Age of Enlightenment,” *Paedagogica Historica* 46, no. 1-2 (2010): 149-160.

Württemberg and Bavaria.⁹ The archives were selected both for geographic range and for collections likely to hold extensive family and personal papers. I have collected as many children's letters as I could find, with a central focus on letters written by bourgeois children before late adolescence. Additionally, the archival documents are complemented with children's letters published by F. E. Mencken as *Dein dich zärtlich liebender Sohn: Kinderbriefe aus sechs Jahrhunderten* (1965). In many cases, only one or two letters from a particular child writer are extant, and both sides of correspondence were only available for a few families. As other research on letter writing has shown, it is rarely possible to reconstruct a complete corpus of any individual's correspondence.¹⁰ For the purposes of this essay, I have selected letters to cite which reveal exemplary traits characteristic of the genre.

The set includes letters written by approximately 125 children from 50 middle- and upper-class families, two-thirds boys and one-third girls. I have examined letters written by children as young as five years old through to late adolescence, although my focus is on the years between ages six and 14. I drew widely from letter collections in the papers of middle- and upper-class families, as well as in the papers of those whose social location lay somewhere on that boundary. While the pedagogic uses of letter writing accompanied a new ideology of childhood that was a product of the urban middle classes, these educational features were also characteristic of some aristocratic family practices.

⁹ Landesarchiv Berlin, Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Germanisches National Museum Historisches Archiv, Hauptstaatsarchiv Hannover, Lippische Landesbibliothek, Landesarchiv Schleswig, Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart, and the Staatsarchiv Ludwigsburg.

¹⁰ For one theorisation of a correspondence corpus, including letters both archived and no longer extant, see Liz Stanley, "Letters, The Epistolary Gift, The Editorial Thirty-Party, Counter-Epistolaria: Rethinking the Epistolarium," *Life Writing* 8 (2011): 135-152. Collections of correspondence have also been considered through a methodology based on corpus linguistics, as by Emma Moreton, "Profiling the Female Emigrant: A Method of Linguistic Inquiry for Examining Correspondence Collections," *Gender & History* 24, no. 3 (2012): 617-646.

Most of these letters were written in German, with some in French and a few in Italian or English. Most were short (one to two pages) and carefully composed, though some examples were more draft-like and mistake-ridden. Although many were sent through the post, that was not necessarily the case for letters written for a special occasion to someone who lived in the same household.¹¹ Below, I explore the typical subjects of children's letters in more detail.

Why have any children's letters been preserved? The growing significance of children's correspondence in the social life of the family is reflected in the very archiving practices that led to the conservation of letters like these. One file from the von Neurath family archive, for example, spans 57 years, the collection beginning with letters Charlotte (née von Erath) wrote to her parents as a child herself and concluding with letters from her own grandchildren.¹² These letters were gathered together under Charlotte's name as a record of her most important connections. Still, the letters which were saved and eventually deposited in archival collections represent only a small portion of all the letter writing which children undertook as part of their social literacy education. Special occasions such as birthdays and holidays often prompted the composition of special letters which were then preserved as a record of the event. Furthermore, the letters examined for this study were more likely to be polished creations than imperfect drafts. Families who included children's correspondence among their records usually exhibited an awareness of posterity and conviction in the importance of their own legacy, including documenting the education of children.

¹¹ On the postal system, see Elemér Hantos, *Mitteleuropäischer postverein* (Vienna: W. Braumüller, 1929); Gerhard Brandtner, *Die Post in Ostpreussen: ihre Geschichte von den Anfängen bis ins 20. Jahrhundert* (Lüneburg: Verlag Nordostdeutsches Kulturwerk, 2000); Daniel Headrick, *When Information Came of Age: Technologies of Knowledge in the Age of Reason and Revolution, 1700-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Siegfried Grillmeyer, *Habsburgs Diener in Post und Politik: das "Haus" Turn und Taxis zwischen 1745 und 1867* (Mainz: Von Zabern, 2005).

¹² Briefe von Charlotte Marie Agnes von Neurath geb. von Erath, Familienarchiv Freiherren von Neurath, Q 3/11 Bü 41, Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart.

This essay begins by considering the genre of children's letter writing, exploring the conventions and typical subjects which contributed to the social purpose of correspondence. I then turn to letter writing as a pedagogic exercise, including the preoccupation with the medium which filled children's letters, letters as a gift and demonstration of *Bildung* and evidence of instruction in letter writing. Finally, I demonstrate how letter writing was used by children and adults as a social instrument, focusing on questions of audience and the relationships constructed and articulated by correspondence.

The genre of children's letter writing

Scholars have largely been unaware of the existence of letters written by children as a widespread practice which led to significant preservation of young people's writing. This section characterizes the nature of children's letter writing in middle and upper-class German families at the end of the Enlightenment. Just as correspondence in general is a genre with particular conventions and expectations, children's letters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries formed their own particular sub-genre. Guidelines for salutations and valedictions, modes of address, bounded self expression and common inquiries governed correspondence. Learning those conventions was an essential part of engaging in the social literacy practice of letter writing. The genre was also marked by the materiality of letters, strikingly different from the physical characteristics of correspondence between adults, and by the subjects of children's writing.

Some of the letters which I gathered in this study were written by young people who were already taking their place in adult worlds. They may have been writing home from school, as did 15-year-old Eugen von Seeger in long letters at the beginning of the nineteenth century, or preparing to exercise aristocratic power, as in the eighteenth-century correspondence between

tutors and the young princes of the Schleswig ducal house. These writers echo the experiences and style of the sixteenth-century youths examined in Steven Ozment's study, *Three Behaim Boys: Growing Up in Early Modern Germany* (1990). But for the most part these letters, examples of what Konstantin Dierks calls "the familiar letter", were composed by children whose age and education marked them as distinctly different from their adult readers.¹³ One example of a particularly new writer was Emil Herder, who wrote the following to his father at age five.¹⁴

dear father! Come home soon, and be fond of me, and tell me about the chamois [antelope] and there [then] I want to climb on you again. and I ulso want to [say I] love you, and if you com, bring some of the nice appricotts with you. Your faithful brother Emil.¹⁵

In addition to the confusion of the letter's closing and mechanical errors, the run-on logic of this brief note was fairly common to young children's letters.

As young as he was, Emil's letter still exhibited some of the key correspondence conventions of this period: the opening salutation and closing phrase, as well as typical expressions of admiration and affection. In contrast to the distinction some current educators make between teaching formulas such as address forms and stock phrases versus "the business of actually saying something", Emil's use of these conventions said much about his successful

¹³ Konstantin Dierks, "The Familiar Letter and Social Refinement in America, 1750-1800," in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, ed. David Barton and Nigel Hall (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000), 31.

¹⁴ Note on translations: although German orthography was not entirely standardized at this point, I have tried to reflect what were clearly mistakes or idiosyncratic spellings in my translations. In these cases, I have included the original quotations in the notes.

¹⁵ The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was a transitional period in German children's use of formal or informal pronouns to address their parents (the "T-V distinction"). Some continued to "siesen" their parents with the formal second person, as in this example. In other cases, children had already begun to use more intimate grammatical structures with their adult relatives. Both forms of address are evident in the letters cited in this study. "lieber Vater! Kommen Sie bald, u haben Sie mich lieb, und erzehlen mir von den Gemslis [GEMSEN] u. da will ich wieder an ihnen hinaufe klettern. u. ich will sie auh lieb haben, u wenn sie kommn, bringen Sie Von die schönen Abrilicosen [APRIKOSEN] mit. Dein getreuer Bruder Emil." Emil Herder to Johann Gottfried Herder, September 1788, in *Dein dich zärtlich liebender Sohn: Kinderbriefe aus sechs Jahrhunderten*, ed. F. E. Mencken (Munich: Heimeran, 1965), 76.

discipline in literacy.¹⁶ Children's deployment and refashioning of adult style in the letter genre conveyed a great deal of meaning. Another key convention for children's letters was the transmission greetings from household members in one place to all the potential readers of the letter: when seven-year-old Heinrich Lehmann reached the end of his short, five-sentence note to his mother in 1859, he realised he had left something out and closed: "I have forgotten to offer greetings to you. Papa loves you."¹⁷ Salutations and valedictions, which articulated the relationship between letter writer and recipient, were among the most important of these genre conventions. The emphasis in these oft-repeated phrases moved from respectful obedience at the beginning of the period to more sentimental language in the mid-nineteenth century, as seen in the growing popularity of the signature, "your you-loving..." (*dein dich liebende*). The connection between pedagogy and sentiment in letter writing was marked explicitly in these moments, as when nine-year-old Princess Caroline ended an 1806 letter to her father, "If you find this letter good, it will greatly please—Your Caroline".¹⁸

Beyond these rhetorical conventions, the genre of children's letter writing was also defined by what the letters looked like and what young people wrote about. Children's letters as artefacts provide evidence that writing was an active literacy practice for young people, one which required them to make choices, exhibit judgment and taste and connect to their readers. How a letter looked mattered to the adults supervising and receiving them, and to many of the writers: people often thanked each other for beautifully written letters (acknowledging the letter as a material object as well as a vehicle for elegant expressions), or apologised for flaws.

¹⁶ Nigel Hall, Anne Robinson, and Leslie Crawford, "Young Children's Explorations of Letter Writing," in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, 144.

¹⁷ Heinrich Lehmann to Caroline Amalie Jessen Lehmann, 12 August 1859. Nachlass Theodor Lehmann, Abt. 399.1094 Nr. 1-2, Landesarchiv Schleswig.

¹⁸ Caroline Amalie to Herzog Friedrich Christian II, 1 January 1806, Herzöge von Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Augustenburg, Abt. 22 Nr. 135, Landesarchiv Schleswig.

Unsurprisingly, many young letter writers pencilled in faint lines to guide their *belles lettres*. There is a significant range in the quality and expertise of the handwriting across this set. Some were quite obviously created by novice writers, with large, shaky letters. But others demonstrated their authors' elite educations with lovely hands and the right letters for the right purpose (some child writers would switch to the appropriate writing styles for French or Latin words, and even changed the spelling of their own names between languages). Children made more spelling mistakes than is at first apparent from the letters which tended to be saved. Of course, this is sometimes difficult to assess, since some apparent errors have more to do with orthographic shifts. But some examples were obvious, as in this closing to a brief letter by a seven-year-old boy: "meny greetings to al and remein as healthy az we have lifft yu. I am your lovin son".¹⁹ (That boy was Otto von Bismarck.)

Most of the letters I have examined were mailed, with some envelopes preserved. Using the postal system for family letters was another way for children to assert their independence and savvy, as when 10-year-old August Graf von Platen wrote from the Cadet school in Munich to his mother with a postscript: "P.S. On Sunday I carried this letter to the post myself."²⁰ Because cheap postage was not introduced until the middle of the nineteenth century, we can see the social value placed on these seemingly formulaic little letters.²¹ Others were clearly hand-delivered (the letter from Caroline above was inside an envelope simply marked "To Papa"). Parents and children did not need to be separated by physical distance in order to cultivate the art of correspondence, indicating that the use of letters for a pedagogic and social purpose went beyond a simple means to communicate information.

¹⁹ "grüße ale filmals und blaiße so gesund wi wir dic ferlasen haben ich bin dein dich libender Sohn". Otto von Bismarck to Wilhelmine Luise Mencken, 27 April 1822, in Mencken, 180.

²⁰ "N.S. Auf den Sontag trage ich diesen Brief selbst auf die Post." August Graf von Platen to Friederike Luise Eichler von Platen (née von Auritz), 19 December 1806, in Mencken, 124.

²¹ On the costs associated with the postal system, see Headrick, 192.

Typical subjects for children's letters of this period included travel (as a common impetus for the letter writing), the weather, expressions of religious faith and health. The three most common topics of children's letters each demonstrate how letter writing went beyond simple pedagogic exercises to connect young people to some of the same social networks and concerns which preoccupied adult correspondence: 1) holidays, 2) money and other practical issues, and 3) reports on family or other members of the household. Birthdays of a parent or grandparent and the turn of a new year were some of the most common catalysts for a child to write. As eight-year-old Carl Heinrich Pathe wrote on New Year's Day 1832, "Much beloved parents! Today belongs to the most important days of the year. Who would want to avoid it, not to get a view over the past year?"²² What was the best way to mark important family celebrations and relationships? According to many of the children who composed such notes, by writing a letter. Interestingly, most of these birthday letters were usually for adults, rather than from parents to children. One funny exception was Wilhelm Herder's letter about his own birthday, in which he reported to his father about both his increased cleverness and all the presents he had received (notably including paper, ink and quills from several of his siblings).²³

Older children and those away at school often expressed their need for money, clothes, books, or other items. Carl Seeger, for instance, wrote at age 10 to his father to ask for money so that he could tip the musicians at a wedding he was shortly to attend.²⁴ Other children wrote of money and goods in thank you notes, as when six-year-old Gabriele von Humboldt expressed her gratitude to her father for a necklace which made her feel "like a lady".²⁵ And some bore still

²² Carl Heinrich Pathe to Johann Peter Pathe and Caroline Dorothea Sophie Pathe (née Bastian), 1 January 1832, Nachlass Carl Heinrich Pathe, E Rep. 200-09, Landesarchiv Berlin.

²³ Wilhelm Herder to Johann Gottfried Herder, 13 February 1789, in Mencken, 71.

²⁴ Carl Christian von Seeger to Christoph Dionysius von Seeger, 30 October 1783, Familienarchiv von Seeger, Q 3/28 Bü 7, Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart.

²⁵ Gabriele von Humboldt to Wilhelm von Humboldt, 19 November 1808, in Mencken, 156.

more grown-up responsibility: 11-year-old Dorothea von Schlözer reported to her traveling father that a tutor wanted to change money with him, and that another household member asked for silk hose from Innsbruck. She also asked that he send wages to all the servants.²⁶

Finally, children's letters were full of news and queries about other relatives and members of the household, one of the more explicitly social subjects for children's writing. Ten-year-old Gustav Weise wrote to his father that his toddler brother had gotten four new teeth; seven-year-old Luise Herder told her father about a new word game her mother had invented (one that she could play with her younger brother).²⁷ Six-year-old Conrad Meyer was sillier about his sister in an 1831 letter, reporting that she smiled like an angel and lapped milk like a kitten.²⁸ But these reports on the family were hardly all concerned with silliness and games. In fact, young children often had to write on the occasion of a parent or sibling's death.

At age 14 Gustav Weise sent a letter to his father about the death of his baby brother Alfred, writing, "as you will have learned...our good little Alfred died last Friday."²⁹ After writing several lines about the baby, his sudden illness and the burial arrangements, the second half of Gustav's letter was preoccupied with excuses and apologies for not having written better and longer letters in recent weeks, in response to his father's apparent reprimand:

But you must understand that I only came to begin [letter writing] in the evenings after 10:00, since we have had so much to do during the day. Also I still did not have a proper pen for writing and I was very tired...But I want to arrange it so that I will write longer and better letters in the future and that you will no longer be able to complain about it.³⁰

²⁶ Dorothea von Schlözer to August Ludwig von Schlözer, 29 January 1782, in Mencken, 53.

²⁷ Gustav Weise to Hermann Weise, 1849, Nachlass Hermann Weise, E Rep. 200-12 Nr. 96, Landesarchiv Berlin; Luise Herder to Johann Gottfried Herder, 24 October 1788, in Mencken, 76.

²⁸ Conrad Meyer to Ferdinand Meyer, 2 August 1831, in Mencken, 193.

²⁹ Gustav Weise to Hermann Weise, 30 May 1854, Nachlass Hermann Weise, E Rep. 200-12 Nr. 169, Landesarchiv Berlin.

³⁰ Ibid.

After all this, Gustav closed the letter by observing that his father would have much to tell on his return. Those conversations will, of course, always remain unknown to us. Was Gustav simply invoking the usual convention, that his father had been away and would have stories to report from his travels? When he did return home, did Hermann continue to reprimand his son for supposed failings as a correspondent? Did they console one another in the face of a tragedy already known to this family? Letters like this, their creation and preservation, are extraordinary. But they are also frustrating, offering us fragmented glimpses into family life without alternative sources necessarily available to account for silence. The question of what we can and cannot know from the historical record echoes a more profound question of what letters themselves could and could not accomplish. Despite these silences, children's correspondence still provides a rich record of family life and social networks.

Letter writing as pedagogic exercise

Novice writers learned to write letters by emulating adult models and corresponding with parents and teachers. Despite this pedagogic context, however, children's correspondence is not merely derivative of the adult genre. The pedagogic function of children's letter writing entailed a distinct set of practices. As a teaching form, letters were used by children to rehearse a number of different skills and demonstrate their knowledge of topics from political geography to religious doctrine. But by far the most common pedagogic purpose of letter writing was the development of young people's social literacy, their capacity to navigate family and business relationships.³¹ This section addresses the education of young people in correspondence, including evidence of direct instruction from the letters themselves and widely circulated

³¹ Dena Goodman writes that instruction in letter writing was necessary for French girls because "it was part of the equipment of a modern woman and a primary means of social mobility." Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 2.

manuals, the genre's many self-references as a medium and letters as a demonstration of educational accomplishment.

How did children learn to write letters? In addition to home or school-based instruction in correspondence, letter manuals circulated widely, with some of the most popular titles emerging from German publishers.³² Cécile Dauphin writes of France in this era that epistolary manuals “were to be found ‘under the washing’ that the maid had to iron, ‘the boxes of the secondhand booksellers along the Seine were full of them’; and the pedlar's pack would also be well stocked with them.”³³ These took the form of advice books, as well as collections of models which children and other students of letter-writing might copy.³⁴ Such texts offered prepared salutations and valedictions, lines of verse for holiday celebrations, address forms and guidelines for appropriate subjects. Many manuals, especially those targeted at children, stretched beyond mere rhetorical guidance in the art of letter-writing to offer general conduct advice relevant to education in social literacy: how to relate to various individuals, how to communicate with an ideal style, how to articulate desires and emotions in a socially appropriate manner and how to use letters in business.³⁵ For example, a quarter of the opening rules in the 1830 manual

³² Examples include G. C. Claudius, *Allgemeiner Briefsteller, nebst einer kurzen Anweisung zu verschiedenen schriftlichen Aufsätzen für das gemeine bürgerliche Geschäftsleben* (Leipzig: Heinrich Gräff, 1804); *Briefe für Kinder, nebst einer kurzen Anleitung zum Briefschreiben* (Passau: Pustet, 1821); Haspel, *Kinderbriefe zum Gebrauch für Schule und Haus* (1830); August Edmund Engelbrecht, *Neunzig drei Briefe für Kinder, nebst Aufsätzen für's bürgerliche Leben* (Augsburg: K. Kollmann, 1844); Margarete Wulff, *Funzig Kinderbriefe für kleine Kinder* (Berlin: Winckelmann, 1845). On letter manuals in general, see Cécile Dauphin, “Letter-Writing Manuals in the Nineteenth Century” in *Correspondence*, ed. Chartier, trans. Christopher Woodall, 112-157 (1997); Nickisch (1999); Carol Poster and Linda C. Mitchell, eds., *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007); Willemijn Ruberg, *Conventional Correspondence: Epistolary Culture of the Dutch Elite, 1770-1850* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), especially 18-22 125-127.

³³ Dauphin, 114.

³⁴ Another source of letter-writing instruction came from the popularity of the epistolary form in fiction, where the use of letters modelled the style and idioms of educated correspondence. See, for example, the sequel to Christian Felix Weiße's weekly magazine for children, *Correspondence of the Family of the Children's Friend* (Briefwechsel der Familie des Kinderfreundes, 1792).

³⁵ Poster and Mitchell, 196.

Children's Letters for Use at School and at Home are devoted to instructing children how they should relate to correspondents of varying social rank: children should “be polite and courteous in letters to everyone, but especially to such people who are more so than you.”³⁶ By attempting to cover all the situations in which a child might need to write a letter, authors of letter manuals defined and extended the purposes of children's correspondence, while simultaneously giving practical advice about composition.

Most children's letters which were preserved appear rather perfect—still within the range of a novice writer's ability, but with few orthographic or linguistic mistakes. Because the children of the Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Augustenburg house belonged to a family secure in the perception of their own historical importance, even draft versions of the young family members' practice letters were preserved.³⁷ Some of the changes may be the result of self-correction, as when Prince Fritz took three tries to form the word “letter”: “Ich will dir einen ~~bru~~ ~~Brief~~ Brief schreiben” (“I want to write you a letter”). But crossed-out words and scribbled-in additions also indicate a likely practice of the child writer preparing a draft that was corrected by an adult and then recopied by the child. In some cases, spelling mistakes in the first version were numbered, and the next page showed the child rewriting the marked words in order (“Wuns” to “Wunsch,” [wish] or “sate” to “sagte” [said]).

Children's letters were usually supervised in some fashion, as we can see from exceptions such as nine-year-old Else von Arnim bragging that she wrote one all by herself, “Adieu, my good father, I also pray always for you, that you remain happy and healthy. I have written this letter entirely alone, Mother has not added a single word.”³⁸ In most cases, a parent or teacher

³⁶ *Kinderbriefe* (1830), 8.

³⁷ *Erziehung der Prinzen Christian August und Friedrich Emil August, 1800-1813, Herzöge von Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Augustenburg*, Abt. 22 Nr. 120, Landesarchiv Schleswig.

³⁸ Else von Arnim to Heinrich-Alexander von Arnim-Suckow, 1843, in Mencken, 224.

reviewed letters composed by children, often critiquing them. Ten-year-old Conrad Meyer's mother told him that his earlier efforts were not worth the postage to mail them before he produced one worthy letter to his father in 1835.³⁹

Whatever the degree of adult involvement in correspondence instruction, child writers rarely learned to compose letters in isolation. Sibling collaboration was a common aspect of education in correspondence, again grounding the genre in social interaction even when letters were purely for practice and never sent to their imagined recipients. The set of letters written to Johann August Ernst von Alvensleben by his children and grandchildren includes several examples of the same letter, word for word, copied and written out by younger siblings. For example, eight-year-old Adelheid wrote the following in French to her father on his birthday in 1801:

I congratulate you on your birthday and I hope that you will continue to live a long and happy life and I beg you to accept this little gift [probably an attached drawing]. Forgive [me] that I cannot write longer, I do not yet know enough French to write you more. I am, my dear father,

your Adelaïde⁴⁰

Her brother Albrecht ("Albert"), 17 months younger, wrote the very same letter that day, with a few additional errors of spelling and letter formation. In this case the duplicated content of the letter, likely based in part on a model, was apparently less important than the form (to demonstrate skill, or at least developing skill) and the act of writing (to reinforce major family relationships).

In some instances, these documents provide evidence of the letters which were not written. At age 10, Gustav Weise started a letter to his father with the following half-apology:

³⁹ Conrad Meyer to Ferdinand Meyer, 17 August 1835, in Mencken, 193.

⁴⁰ "Je vous felicite pour votre jour de naissance et je souhaite, que vous viviez encore longtems heureux et je vous prie d'accepter le petit cadeau. Pardonnez que je ne peux plus ecrire, je ne sais pas encore assez le francois pour vous ecrire davantage. Je suis, mon cher pere, Votre Adelaïde". Adelheid von Alvensleben, 7 August 1801, Familie von Alvensleben, Dep. 83 B Nr. 238, Hauptstaatsarchiv Hannover.

“You must not take it amiss that I did not write to you with Lottchen [his older sister Charlotte], but I think that my letter which I am writing to you now will please you just as much Lottchen’s letter.”⁴¹ Other letters between Gustav and his father repeat this demand for more frequent or longer letters, with Gustav writing both to convey his educational progress to his absent father and to fulfil the social obligation of sharing household affairs with the traveling businessman.

Gustav and Hermann Weise’s exchanges about the failings of the boy’s correspondence also demonstrate one of the most common ways letter writing conventions were taught, through continual discussion of the medium in letters. Like video chats or cell phone calls today, in which many minutes are preoccupied with frustrations about the connection, comments on the video frame and sound quality, or marvelling at the technology’s capabilities, children’s letters were full of reflections on the practice of writing. Dorothea Schlözer noted to her friend in 1785 that she had written such a long letter that she had hurt her finger.⁴² Other children could not generate enough content to fill a letter without resorting to talking about the medium, as when nine-year-old Heinrich Lehmann concluded a letter to his father: “Now I will write nothing further to you, because I do not know what I should write.”⁴³ A particularly funny example of this comes from the later well-known writer Bettina Brentano at age 11, who filled an entire letter to her sister Kunigunde (Gundel) with explanations of why she could not write her a letter:

You asked me all sorts of [questions] in your letter, but I cannot answer all of them, partly because the post is going out soon, and also because I have lost the letter, and I do not have any more time left to look for it. Content yourself therefore until the next time. Then I want to answer everything that you write to me. Only this news can I tell you, that Marie Sophie [another sister] is angry with you because you have still not written to her.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Gustav Weise to Hermann Weise, 24 March 1850, Nachlass Hermann Weise, E Rep. 200-12 Nr. 106, Landesarchiv Berlin.

⁴² Dorothea Schlözer to Luise Michaelis, 19 June 1785, in Mencken, 57.

⁴³ Lehmann to Theodor Lehmann, 21 January 1861, Nachlass Theodor Lehmann, Abt. 399.1094 Nr. 1-2, Landesarchiv Schleswig.

⁴⁴ Bettina Brentano to Kunigunde Brentano, 7 September 1796, in Mencken 101.

Letters about letters like this one exerted a social purpose as well as a pedagogic one, even without much news or particular content. Bettina used correspondence to negotiate relationships with these two sisters and others whether or not she had specific information to communicate. Princess Caroline's New Year's card for her father in 1806 was a similar sort of non-letter, composed mostly to forestall him asking why she had not written like her brother: "I am writing to you...because I do not want that you should ask as [you did] last year: why I have not written you [a letter], because Christian did write one to you."⁴⁵ But this could go both ways, as when Adelbert Herder used a short letter of 1788 to reproach his traveling father for not writing often enough.⁴⁶ The ubiquity of letter writing as a subject in letters—acknowledging, requesting, critiquing, apologizing for, reporting on, or referencing other people's writing—is evidence of the centrality of social relationships to letter writing as a literacy practice of children.

Another social-pedagogic use of letters had to do with demonstrating educational accomplishments. Letters were a mechanism for reporting on progress in school to distant parents, as when 10-year-old Carl Seeger informed his father that he was reading books diligently (conveniently, just before he asked for money).⁴⁷ Or letters could be used to pass on external judgments of educational achievement, as when August von Tschirschnitz and others enclosed their report cards inside letters to absent parents. (For the record, August secured a 1b, "quite good", in Comportment for the Easter to Michaelmas term of 1841, but only managed a 3b, "very mediocre", in Arithmetic and Writing.)⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Caroline Amalie to Herzog Friedrich Christian II, 1 January 1806, Herzöge von Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Augustenburg, Abt. 22 Nr. 135, Landesarchiv Schleswig.

⁴⁶ Adalbert Herder to Johann Gottfried Herder, 22 September 1788, in Mencken, 73.

⁴⁷ Carl Seeger to Christoph Dionysius Seeger, 30 October 1783, Familienarchiv von Seeger, Q 3/28 Bü 7, Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart.

⁴⁸ August von Tschirschnitz to Wilhelm von Tschirschnitz Zeugnis, 16 May 1841, Wilhelm von Tschirschnitz, Hann. 91 Acc. 183/95 Nr. 112, Hauptstaatsarchiv Hannover.

News of studious labour could also demonstrate educational achievement through the letter as a gift or token. In an 1813 birthday note, Heinrich Wilhelm Weise promised his father to be more industrious, to keep his books in order, to walk on the street in an orderly fashion and so on.⁴⁹ His birthday present was essentially a vow to perform all the duties of a self-controlled child of the Enlightenment. The quality of letters could itself be the gift, as with the Alvensleben collection. The presents they composed for their (grand)father's birthdays took the form of Latin odes, essays and drawings to demonstrate the skills they were acquiring, as well as notes written in the foreign languages they were studying. This demonstration of their affection through the display of their *Bildung* was certainly something the children worked at, as in Ludolphe's missive c. 1824, "Care ave", whose elegant Latin script indicates that he must have drafted and practiced it earlier.⁵⁰ But far from requiring perfection, Johann von Alvensleben saved plenty of "flawed" papers from his children: a poem with provisional stress marks only partly erased, a drawing from Auguste which she wanted to get back after the birthday so she could correct some self-perceived faults, and the French letters quoted above by letter writers who did not really yet know French.

Indeed, the "childish" mistakes which marked a letter as supposedly more natural were prized in notes intended to display a young person's literacy development.⁵¹ Young Jacob Burckhardt wrote greetings to his grandmother which his mother originally glossed by noting that five-year-old Jacob had made "this beautiful letter" for her with the help of his tutor. But a second line reveals that Jacob had corrected her and prompted an addition which explicitly

⁴⁹ Heinrich Wilhelm Weise to Friedrich Wilhelm Weise, 8 March 1813, Nachlass Hermann Weise, E Rep. 200-12 Nr. 14, Landesarchiv Berlin.

⁵⁰ Familie von Alvensleben, Dep. 83 B Nr. 238, Hauptstaatsarchiv Hannover.

⁵¹ See Ruberg (2005).

indicated what the tutor undertook (guiding his hand on the well-formed letters) and what the boy had written on his own.⁵²

A key explanation of why families treasured this letter writing style, which adults determined to be “childlike”, has to do with changing definitions of how a child should “naturally” behave and feel during the years around 1800. Letters constituted a useful tool for educating the emotions of young writers, and teaching children how to articulate feeling in a socially useful way. This is evident in the opening example of this essay, when Peter Paulsen told his son that the letter the boy had written was proof of his love—through his diligence, obedience and literacy. This framework for the emotions of childhood asserted that children’s tempers, consciences and feelings for others (especially their parents) should be expressed in a natural and heartfelt manner, but also mediated by moral reading and writing. As Willemijn Ruberg observes, “a child was free to write as he or she wished (confidingly, naturally, individually), as long as this remained within the bounds of what was deemed proper.”⁵³ The writer Matthias Claudius published his six-year-old son Fritz’s letter in 1795 as a paragon of “child-like letter style”, probably because of Fritz’s disorganised but repeated expressions of love which gave the letter a sense of spontaneity and demonstrated his successful instruction in sentimentalism.⁵⁴ In a similar vein, after six-year-old Andreas Heusler signed and dated a 1840 letter to his father, he added a self-deprecating postscript to describe the note as “not much but from the heart”.⁵⁵ However, not every expression of filial love can be read simply as evidence of new sentimentalism, or thoughtless acquiescence to adult expectations. Nine-year-old Adelbert Herder’s longing for his absent father makes an impression when he refashions formulas in the

⁵² Jacob Burckhardt and Susanna Maria Burckhardt (née Schorndorff), 4 October 1823, in Mencken, 186.

⁵³ Ruberg (2011), 139.

⁵⁴ “Es ist wohl zuviel, aber ich muß doch noch einmal grüßen.” Fritz Claudius to Matthias Claudius, Anna Rebbekka Behn, Hans Claudius, 18 August 1795, in Mencken 106-107.

⁵⁵ Andreas Heusler to Andreas Heusler-Ryhiner, 1840, in Mencken, 221.

closing to this 1788 letter: “live well think always on us, because we have always thought about you in the evening as [when] I lay with Mother on the sofa and closed my eyes, I have always seen you. live a thousand thousand times well.”⁵⁶

Letter writing as social instrument

Children’s letters have mostly been mined by historians for biographic information, or presented as simple ephemeral objects. In fact, for the writers and recipients, letter writing exerted a very important social purpose. This section demonstrates how children used letters as a means of learning sociability, building relationships within (primarily) kinship networks, and cultivating socially situated selves. Dierks’s explanation of the social capital accrued through letter writing for middle-class families in early America rings true for German children as well: “By demystifying the rules and conventions of letter writing, a social practice traditionally symbolic of power, authors of familiar letter manuals helped middling families pursue their claims to social refinement and upward mobility.”⁵⁷ Children’s primary correspondents were their parents, but letters written to grandparents and other relatives have also been preserved, as well as correspondence with teachers, family servants and peers (especially siblings). Though their circles were certainly smaller as children, the forms of writing practiced by young people persisted into adult communications for a range of purposes.

What do these letters reveal about child writers’ awareness of their readers? The common practice of conveying greetings, mentioned above, indicates the readership of a child’s letter beyond the immediate recipient. For example, eight-year-old Annette von Droste-Hülshoff included kisses from all her family to her grandmother in a short note of 1805, but then realised

⁵⁶ Adelbert Herder to Johann Gottfried Herder, 8 August 1788, in Mencken, 72.

⁵⁷ Dierks, 31.

she had left someone out: “I had almost forgotten the good grandpa, kiss him for me.”⁵⁸

Similarly, Ferdinand Freiligrath added a postscript to his 1824 birthday note for an aunt: “Father and Mother, as well as my siblings, also send their good wishes to you; they would have done this themselves, but they are prevented by their business, [and] they will nevertheless have their compliments to pay to you themselves next Sunday.”⁵⁹ Letters were rarely a solitary endeavour for children. On both the sending and receiving end, writing letters brought children’s language and skills to the attention of adults in their lives as they were shared and commented on. This might explain the formal tone of an 1806 letter by 10-year-old Ottilie von Pogwisch: “Madame Mittel was just at my aunt’s. She told me a children’s story, from which I gather that she is a very good and charitable woman.”⁶⁰ This was followed by the usual sharing and sending of affectionate greetings.

The relationships children cultivated through the practice of letter writing were not limited to the most common connection, parent-child. They also kept up communications through a broader kinship network of grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and close family friends. Henriette and Lisette Pathe, for example, sent an elaborate note of congratulations to their uncle on the occasion of his wedding.⁶¹ More unusually, the Herder children regularly corresponded with their father’s valet while he was traveling.⁶² In one particularly poignant

⁵⁸ “Wir alle küssen Dir in Gedanken die Hände. Ich verbleibe Deine Dich liebende Enkelin, Nette. Hülshoff, den 31ten Dezemb. 1805. Bald hätte ich den guten Großpapa vergessen, küsse ihn für mich.” Annette von Droste-Hülshoff to her grandmother, 31 December 1805, in Mencken, 143.

⁵⁹ Ferdinand Freiligrath to his aunt, 31 March 1824, Fr. S 320, Lippische Landesbibliothek.

⁶⁰ “Eben war Madam Mittel bei meiner Tante. Sie hat mir eine Jugendgeschichte erzählt, woraus ich schließe, daß sie eine sehr gute und wohlthätige Frau ist. Adieu liebe Mutter, vergiß uns nicht. Ich bitte, küsse doch in meinen und Ulrikens Nahmen, die Dich herzlich unarmt, die liebe Tante. Viele Complimente an Marie von uns beide.” Ottilie von Pogwisch to Henriette Ulrike Ottilie von Pogwisch, 1806, in Mencken, 142.

⁶¹ Henriette and Lisette Pathe to Johann Peter Pathe, 25 April 1819, Nachlass Carl Heinrich Pathe, E Rep. 200-09, Landesarchiv Berlin.

⁶² Gottfried Herder to Werner, 14 November 1788, in Mencken, 65-66. According to Herder, when Werner saw beautiful Venetian fishing boats during their trip to Italy, he cried out, ““Oh, if only the

example crossing beyond the immediate family, Fritz Schnizlein wrote to the mother of his classmate August to tell her how unhappy August (age 12) was at military school, reporting, “Your August cries a great deal daily because he is not with you. He may become very sick about it, it would be better if he were with you. Overall it is no longer good for him here”.⁶³ He begged August’s mother to bring her son home. Schnizlein’s training in formal and intimate correspondence was critical in facilitating this petition.

But by far the most common correspondents for children, after their parents, were siblings. For example, 12-year-old Bettina Brentano lectured her older sister Sophie on the diligent practice of letter writing:

I was not yet angry with you because I thought the same, that you had not done it [written], not because you did not love me anymore, but rather because the little Sophie had been a little too lazy.⁶⁴

She demanded stories of amusing balls and more regular correspondence from her sister. With significant age differences between siblings in some cases, letters served a similar pedagogic and social purpose as with parents. Eight-year-old Eduard Mörike wrote letters in order to report on his progress at school to his brother,

I am quite happy to answer your questions. In Latin I have come so far that I can conjugate “tueor.” We do not do much arithmetic in class. School is going quite well for me. August is beginning to know his ABCs. August and I think of you often.⁶⁵

Indeed, it is possible that Eduard’s brother may have been better informed about his schooling as a more recent pupil himself. But again, this note underscored the use of literacy to affirm family

children were here!’ and mentioned what each of them would have said.” “Werner rief einmal über das andre: ‘O wenn jetzt doch die Kinder hier wären!’ und nannte, was ein jeder sagen würde.” Johann Gottfried Herder to Caroline Herder, 11 September 1788, in *Herders Reise nach Italien: Herders Briefwechsel mit seiner Gattin*, ed. Heinrich Düntzer and Ferdinand Gottfried von Herder (Gießen, Germany: Ricker’sche Buchhandlung, 1859), 67.

⁶³ Fritz Schnizlein to Friederike Luise Eichler von Platen (née von Auritz), 6 October 1808, in Mencken, 139.

⁶⁴ Bettina Brentano to Sophie Brentano, 27 February 1797, in Mencken, 101.

⁶⁵ Eduard Mörike to Karl Mörike, 20 July 1812, in Mencken, 161.

bonds. Often, siblings played a part in each other's literacy practices not as correspondents but instead by collaborating on a letter. For example, Auguste, Christian, Sophie, Emilie and Robert Roller all wrote a little note of appreciation in 1808 to their mother, "who so tenderly cares for us". The card was apparently in Christian's hand (the oldest), but it was signed by each of them with differing levels of writing skill.⁶⁶ Sibling collaboration could be as simple as the example of a note on special stationery from Sophie von Brüsselle to her father, which concludes with an extra line of greeting written in by her brother Felix to co-opt his sister's letter.⁶⁷

Letter writing served as a technology of the self for these writers, as it has in other contexts.⁶⁸ An active model of self-formation had emerged in European thought by 1800, in which, as Peter Burke writes, "the self is not only the garden, but the gardener as well".⁶⁹ In this frame, letters simultaneously demonstrated children's instruction in the conventions of educated correspondence and also offered a mechanism for children to exert agency over their own self-expression, by crafting a written persona with tastes, habits and attitudes. Crucially, this activity centred on a socially situated self: that is, a subjectivity located within and formed by the relationships which structured a bourgeois child's life. Dena Goodman argues that we must consider the self-fashioning work of letters as a social project, with "an understanding of

⁶⁶ "Der leidlich geliebten Mutter, die so zärtlich für uns sorgt...übergeben wie ihre 5 Kinder, dieses als kleines Zeichen". Roller children to Auguste Roller, 23 February 1808, Nachlass Theodor Roller, Q 2/9 Bü 145, Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart.

⁶⁷ Sophie Felix von Brüsselle to Felix von Brüsselle, c. 1860, Nachlass Familie von Brüsselle, PL 13 Bü 791, Staatsarchiv Ludwigsburg.

⁶⁸ For Foucault's writings on "technologies of the self", see Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, eds, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988). On selfhood in modern Europe, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591-1791* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁶⁹ Peter Burke, "Historicizing the Self, 1770-1830," in *Controlling Time and Shaping the Self: Developments in Autobiographical Writing since the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Arianne Baggerman, Rudolf Dekker, and Michael Mascuch (Leiden: Boston, 2011), 19.

autonomy that begins from the premise that all people are socially embedded and that selves are formed not against relationships with others but in the context of them”.⁷⁰ The self-surveillance and self-formation facilitated by letter writing thus also furthered the development of children’s social literacy.

Children’s correspondence records a variety of projects undertaken for self-improvement. Consider, for example, this passage from a New Year’s letter written by Caroline Dorothea Pathe at age 10:

I have often troubled you, beloved parents, through childish carelessness. But in the new year I vow to be a new person. Through diligence and good conduct, I always want to reflect the value of your love.⁷¹

Caroline’s vow partly reflects a common convention of holiday letters, but this passage also demonstrates her engagement in self-examination for her parents’ benefit. Letters often show children engaging in this kind of self-surveillance, a practice which, as Philippe Lejeune argues, aimed at “the construction of a subject who becomes autonomous only by taking responsibility for his own subjection”.⁷² Particularly intriguing in this example is Caroline’s self-presentation as inherently flawed because of her youth (“childish carelessness”). The reports of children’s industry and discipline which made such frequent appearances in their letters constituted a form of self-examination undertaken explicitly for others. Children’s efforts to write well were concerned both with satisfying pedagogic imperatives and with crafting and performing adult selves through social exchanges. This took the form not only of explicit resolutions but also of the smallest details, as when Princess Caroline turned a spelling mistake—misspelling “das”, (“the”) with an extra s (“that”)]—into a decorative flower mid-

⁷⁰ Goodman, 3.

⁷¹ Caroline Dorothea Pathe to Johann Peter Pathe and Caroline Dorothea Sophie Pathe (née Bastian), 1 January 1831, Nachlass Carl Heinrich Pathe, E Rep. 200-09, Landesarchiv Berlin.

⁷² Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak, trans. Katherine Durnin (Mānoa: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 109.

sentence in a letter for her father.⁷³ Correspondence offered a means for the child writer to strive for self-betterment through acts of editing, and to inhabit a socially-situated self.

In the variety of their correspondence, children were practicing even at a very young age something that was understood as a foundation for their part in the family dynamics and kinship networks over the life course. One of the most prolific letter writers in this study, Gustav Weise, wrote letters from at least age nine (and probably younger) to his father, who was often away trying to rescue a failing family business. Gustav wrote about all the familiar subjects of young children's letters: holidays, health, the small things of life at home. By the end of his father's life, the correspondence preserved in the family collection reveals subjects such as the young man's work as a factory director in Connecticut, the political situation of the United States at the end of the American Civil War, his opinions on what his younger brother Bruno should study and whom his sister should marry. He and his father exchanged news like any adult correspondents, but also participated in family business across an ocean. Gustav transitioned easily from writing to his father about Bruno's new teeth (at age 10) to Bruno's career path (at age 26).

Conclusion

One year before the letter her father wrote to each of her siblings (with which this essay began), Dora Paulsen sent a letter of her own home from school. At the age of approximately fourteen years, Dora had already absorbed the lessons of letter writing as a social practice, thoroughly established for child writers by the middle of the nineteenth century. She opened this particular letter of 1849 with the self-deprecating trope about not having written frequently enough, and resolving to send an extra long letter—though in reality, it was about the same length as her usual missives. It addressed all the necessary topics for a young person's correspondence: reports

⁷³ Caroline Amalie to Herzog Friedrich Christian II, 1 January 1806, Herzöge von Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Augustenburg, Abt. 22 Nr. 135, Landesarchiv Schleswig.

on other family members, stories from recent travel, inquiries about relatives' health and comments on holidays and school activities. Dora's brief valediction captured the ideal style for a bourgeois child, closing: "Adieu, dear parents. Heartfelt greetings from all and to all from your loving daughter".⁷⁴ She deployed this short letter to good purpose: for practical reasons, to communicate with her distant family, but also to secure various social ties, to make connections between her parents and other relatives, to situate herself in family circles and to demonstrate her mastery of the genre conventions and sentimental lexicon.

Like many other letters which constitute this study, the Paulsen family correspondence illustrates the ways in which letter writing functioned for children as both pedagogic exercise and social practice in an era of newly intense discussion about the education and socialization of children. The letters children composed show them exploring genre conventions, learning through writing and establishing critical social networks. As a result, correspondence aided the formation of class cultures early in childhood. Although this use of letter writing was driven by middle-class families such as the Paulsens, similar practices also emerge from the archives of some upper-class or aristocratic children. The nuances of forms and usages across elite classes are worthy of further study, a class analysis of children's letter writing which would explore the boundaries between bourgeois and aristocratic milieus.

These documents sometimes display surprising moments of self-fashioning and lively, engaging voices which bring their young authors to life. They do contain some gaps: there are missing letters and absent voices in largely one-sided stacks of correspondence; corrections and multiple drafts hide mistakes and altered language; and we have few records of the conversations which surrounded children's writing of letters. Yet what these sources demonstrate, contrary to

⁷⁴ Dora Paulsen to her parents, 22 September 1849, Nachlass Peter Paulsen, Abt. 399.1113 Nr. 5, Landesarchiv Schleswig.

their previous absence in historical research, is the full reach of children's participation in letter writing as a social literacy practice.