AN ANTHOLOGY

one of the reasons is the deftness of the
this possibility becomes more feasible as
Kadar asks if we cannot read all writing as
life writing because it abolishes distance
graphical formulae in his novels, Kadar
...the collection "has always been considered a
feminist project."

The texts are balanced between the ex-
pected canonical choices, such as August-
tine, Samuel Pepys and Virginia Woolf—
choices which establish generic param-
eters—and texts from more marginalized
traditions which question those param-
eters. The collection goes beyond the con-
ventional notions of biography, memoirs
and letters to include what she terms
"blended genres" categories such as "fic-
tionalized letters." To those who assume
that life writing is distinct from fiction
inasmuch as it transparently attempts to
evoke someone's lived experience, it may
startle to find included texts such as
Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. But part of Kadar's
stated project is "to probe the assumption
that autobiographical documents are
'true,'" and to reflect on modes of read-
ing. She writes that the Life Writing project
is the construction of the self, which in-
dicates that the definition of the genre should
include any conflation of literature and
life. As well as playing with autobi-
ographical formulae in his novels, Kadar
tells us that Defoe was something of a
picaro himself. He is the literary subject
as well as the author and narrator.
Metafictional writing, then, can be read as
life writing because it abolishes distance
between narrator and author. Indeed,
Kadar asks if we cannot read all writing as
life writing? Initially a daunting question,
this possibility becomes more feasible as
one moves through the anthology, and
one of the reasons is the deftness of the
choices. In the notion of a genre-across-
genres, some readers may fear a lack of
critical focus. But this collection, as a
totality, points to elements in each of the
texts that would not have been readily
apparent had they been read in more con-
tventional generic contexts.

Life writing, potentially subversive of
genre itself, is an appropriate form for the
intersection of the political with private
life. Slaves, women, dissidents, and oth-
ers living under scrutiny and without ac-
cess to publishing have at least had access
to personal writing. With many of the
writers represented, writing about their
own lives comes to be indivisible from
writing about their community: Kadar
refers to Françoise Lionnet's term
"autoethnography" to indicate this recla-
mation of heritage. As Shmuel Goldman,
whom Barbara Myerhoff interviewed for
her text *Number Our Days*, says:

Now there are some people...who
you will hear say, Jewish is not a real
language....Nonsense. Jewish we call
the mama-loshen. That means more
than mother tongue. It is the mother's
tongue because this was the language
the mother talked, sweet or bitter. It
was your own...it had words in it that
could be used differently for the in-
side sweet world and the hard world
outside.

Goldman speaks of loss and devaluation
as well as of self-protection and belong-
ing. Myerhoff, an anthropologist, chose
her subject for personal reasons: her dead
grandparents had never told her about the
shtetl. This life, then, while ostensibly
Goldman's, is also obliquely her own.

Many of the selections indicate the
circuitous routes to power women have
been obliged to take. Even as relatively
privileged a woman as Virginia Woolf—
uses the homely form of the letter in order
to present theory in *Three Guineas*. Poli-
tics are in effect syphoned into a "safe"
form, as in the case of Sor Juana de la
Cruz, the 17th-century Mexican nun who
defends her right to education to the Bishop
of Puebla in a carefully-worded letter:
"The first...[obstacle to responding] has
been not knowing how to reply to your
most learned, prudent, pious, and loving
letter," she begins.

One of the most persuasive arguments
about women's use of life writing as a
form of personal and political self-ex-
pression arises, paradoxically, from the
number of fiction writers and poets who
recreate life writing genres in their texts—
such as Beatrice Culleton in her novel
*In Search of April Raintree*, where a Native
girl who commits suicide is given a voice
when her journal is interpolated into the
narrative. Kadar comments on our lack of
knowledge about women's lives, and her
project is a kind of reclamation in the
tradition of feminist scholarship, as much
as are some of the texts from which she
draws. With reference to medieval mystic
Margery Kempe she writes that the theme
of needing to find meaning, though often
opaque, is repeated throughout. It is in the
construction of the self in the light of this
notion that one of the major interests of
the collection lies. Or perhaps more sim-
ply, it comes down to Shmuel Goldman's
*mama-loshen* in the face of the "the hard
world outside."

ROMANTIC CORRESPONDENCE:
WOMEN, POLITICS
AND THE FICTION OF LETTERS

Mary A. Favret. Cambridge: Cambridge

by Katherine Binhammer

Everybody allows that the talent of writ-
ing agreeable letters is peculiarly female—
Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

As Jane Austen's comment underscores,
the genre of letter writing has frequently
been identified as a female form. Many
texts by feminists and literary historians
have explored and analyzed the relation-
ship between the epistolary form and
women's writing, from Ruth Perry's initializing book, *Women, Letters and the Novel* (1980) to Olga Kenyon's recent anthology, *800 Years of Women's Letters*. We can now add to this list Favret's original study of English women's letter writing of the Romantic period.¹

The identification of letter writing as a female form stems from women's historical marginalization from the public sphere. Women writers, impeded from occupying the authoritative voice of philosophy or science, retreated into the softer, more feminine space of familiar letters and epistolary fiction. Certainly, this "fiction of letters,"—the phrase Mary Favret uses to designate particular theories of the letter—bears itself out in the reality of women's writing in the eighteenth century. The vast majority of epistolary novels were written by women. But most scholarship on the association between women and letters concentrates on the eighteenth century; in fact, many traditional literary critics assert that the epistolary genre ceased to exist after the emergence of Romanticism. Mary Favret's book is a refreshing revision of traditional feminist and literary interpretations of women and letters, as she provides an interesting new twist on why and how women wrote letters. Favret's text challenges two basic assumptions concerning women's epistolary fiction: 1) that women's epistolary writing disappeared with Romanticism; and 2) that women employed the letter form only to explore private, romantic or domestic themes. She writes:

"This book attempts first to revise the familiar fiction of the letter in literature and, second, to demonstrate how the sentimental fiction of letters disguises, in part, a revolutionary politics.... We accept too readily the notion that the letter allows us a window into the intimate, and usually feminine, self."

In contrast to the feminization and domestication of the letter genre, Favret wants to show how women used letters for "political agitation or propaganda in a particular historical moment defined by revolution, reaction and Romanticism."¹

Favret's revision begins with her choice of primary sources. The tradition of the "sentimental fiction of letters" concentrates on women's epistolary novels, for example Fanny Burney's *Evelina*. In contrast, Favret works on texts not usually considered part of the canon of women's epistolary writing: Helen Maria William's *Letters from France*, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden*, Jane Austen's use of the letter in her novels and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Her readings of these works are innovative and insightful.

One might think that at this point in feminist scholarship it is impossible to say anything new about Mary Wollstonecraft but Favret manages to do just that. Instead of reading *Letters from Sweden* as personal, familiar letters that reveal Wollstonecraft's "true self," Favret reads them as public and political: "When we avoid the inclination to read the letter as an intimate, sentimental and properly 'feminine' genre, we can see that Wollstonecraft is testing a new rhetorical strategy for her political philosophy." Not that Favret denies the sentimental and personal aspect of Wollstonecraft's letters—rather, she is more interested in reading the letters as "traveling between the two spheres of 'home' and 'business.'" Instead of analyzing the *Letters from Sweden* as either simply personal or only political, Favret makes the argument that Wollstonecraft writes between the two, merging the private and the public spheres.

The most fascinating revelation in Favret's text, though, comes not in her comments on the four women writers but in her historical discussions of the development of the British Post Office, the political use of letters through corresponding societies, and the use of letters in espionage. Placing women's epistolary writing within the context of these historically specific phenomena changes the way in which we read Williams, Wollstonecraft, Austen and Shelley. The exchange of open letters between English radicals and French Revolutionaries through such associations as the London Corresponding Society resulted in the implementation of the conservative Traitorous Correspondence Bill of 1793 which empowered the government to open private letters at will. Within this "fiction of letters" the epistolary genre emerges as a "medium of collective political activity." Williams' *Letters from France* are then seen, not as a sentimental and personal commentary on the French Revolution, but as a daring political act.

Favret concludes her book with a discussion of the rise of the modern post office. A nationalized postal system resulted in the movement away from familiar letters and towards a "fiction of correspondence" concerned with commerce and imperialism. As Favret writes, "The penny post changed more than the price of postage throughout Great Britain. In announcing the reform, the queen was endorsing a revision of correspondence authored by imperial interests and social engineers." Once again, it is Favret's historical analysis, her contextualization of letter writing within such social institutions as the British Post Office, her refusal to reduce letter writing to a domestic, private form, that makes the familiar topic of "women and letters" new again.