

Review: Karin Koehler, *Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication: Letters, Telegrams and Postal Systems* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 260pp. ISBN 978-3-319-80490-3, £79.99.

ELEANOR SHIPTON

IN 1839, THE the passing of the Postal Reform Act would usher in the long-awaited 'Uniform Penny Post', which came into effect five months before Thomas Hardy's birth in 1840. This reform made the post office 'omnipresent in the daily lives of the Victorians, with local post offices, post boxes, and stamps [...] serving as tangible reminders of its ceaseless operations'.¹ Thus the letter as a site of individualism and self-expression, closely connected to the inception of the eighteenth-century novel, was challenged by the ubiquity of the government-run post office.² Advocated by Rowland Hill as a democratising, nation-making communication system, and by Elizabeth Barrett-Browning 'as the most successful revolution since the "glorious three days" of Paris', the penny post had significant and traceable impacts upon the Victorian literary imagination.³ Karin Koehler's monograph meticulously analyses this impact through the countless letters, notes, envelopes and missives in Hardy's fiction; she demonstrates Hardy's investment in lettered communication as a site through which to explore and expound the broader themes of his work, including questions of selfhood, the personal and collective, sexual politics, and the experience of rural life.

Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication (2016) is split into nine chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. These analyse an extensive, and ambitious, range of Hardy's fiction, including major works such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), as well as critically-overlooked texts, such as *A Laodicean* (1881), and his short stories and poems.⁴ In her introduction, Koehler presents a comprehensive overview of the changes generated by the penny post in 1840, both in terms of the rhetoric surrounding the democratisation of postage and its

¹ Karin Koehler, *Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication: Letters, Telegrams and Postal Systems* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.5-6.

² Koehler, p.8-9.

³ Koehler, p.4, 7, 3.

⁴ Koehler, p.16.

place in the cultural imagination. Koehler builds upon and originally contributes to recent scholarly research into the significance of the post office in nineteenth-century literature, including Elizabeth Meadows and Jay Clayton, Richard Menke, Laura Rotunno, and Kate Thomas. Koehler's monograph is unique in using this cultural materialist approach with a focus on one author, which provides the reader with an in-depth and sustained analysis of the importance of lettered communication across Hardy's literary works. Furthermore, she offers a significant contribution to Hardy scholarship; previous scholarship, she decisively argues, has not treated letters in Hardy's fiction seriously: the numerous letters that appear in his fiction 'are more than conventional plot devices [...] they are significant sites of engagement with the cultural, social, and psychological concerns at the heart of Victorian texts'.⁵ Her chapters consider the social and cultural implications of letter writing, including the repercussions of the shift from oral tradition to written culture on rural communities; the sexual double standards and the letter's implication in rights to privacy; the letter's (in)ability to represent authentic human identity; self-determination; and the implications of those left at the margins of the communication network.

Koehler's second chapter explores how Hardy's fiction challenged the rhetoric of equality, solidarity, and a new national community fostered by proponents of the penny post. Through her analysis of moments of written and oral communication in *The Trumpet-Major* (1882), *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), Koehler shows that, whilst Hardy's novels convey the important educational, social and cultural advances facilitated by the penny post, they also indicate 'a communal spirit for which an ever more networked society has not yet devised an adequate alternative'.⁶ In chapter three, Koehler utilises her cultural materialist approach in order to show Hardy's engagement with 'the double standard at the core of Victorian sexual politics', which granted men the freedom of privacy, but systematically denied it to women.⁷ Koehler shows how Eustacia Vye, along with Elfride Swancourt and Lucetta Templeman, in *The Return of the Native* (1878), *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1872) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* respectively, are punished in 'their pursuit of self-fulfilment' through correspondence, as this very pursuit violates patriarchal

⁵ Koehler, p.11.

⁶ Koehler, p.42.

⁷ Koehler, p.53.

notions of female identity.⁸ Chapter four analyses the portrayal of the self in *Desperate Remedies* (1871), *Two on a Tower* (1882), *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876), and *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874). Though slightly more glancing in her analysis here—the number of texts make it difficult for Koehler to consider each in depth—she convincingly demonstrates Hardy's preoccupation with the ability of the letter to represent human identity. In these texts, she argues, 'Hardy insists that words on paper [...] have a permanence that necessarily clashes with the fluidity and mutability of human experience'.⁹

The next chapter focuses on a single text, *Jude the Obscure* (1895); here Koehler repositions the significance of letter-writing in this novel, and examines how Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead use letters to negotiate and control the parameters of their 'respective romantic and sexual desires'.¹⁰ Rather than bringing these two characters closer together, Koehler demonstrates that Sue utilises the form of the letter to distance herself from Jude, and to resist patriarchal male control.¹¹ Here, Koehler's cultural materialist approach allows her to shine further light on the role of sexual politics in Hardy's novels; as the chapter proceeds to untangle Sue's written-self from that displayed in-person, Koehler demonstrates that, though Sue is able to freely articulate herself in letters, her dependence on this medium to convey her true feelings becomes symptomatic of her repression.¹² Chapter six considers Hardy's 'Novels of Ingenuity', *Desperate Remedies* and *A Laodicean*, and the positive and negative possibilities of an increasingly connected world. By placing these texts in comparison, she shows how the postal network in *Desperate Remedies* is vulnerable to manipulation due to its very uniformity and efficiency, while the space of the telegraph in *A Laodicean* allows the novel's female characters to express their independent subjectivities whilst 'protected from male interference'.¹³ She argues that in Hardy's 'Novels of Ingenuity', in which he was especially interested in modern structures and technologies, communication networks 'throw into relief concerns about the possibility of self-determined agency'.¹⁴

⁸ Koehler, p.74.

⁹ Koehler, p.80.

¹⁰ Koehler, p.23.

¹¹ Koehler, p.113.

¹² Koehler, p.116.

¹³ Koehler, p.146.

¹⁴ Koehler, p.133.

Chapter seven is perhaps Koehler's most persuasive chapter. Through the course of her original and thought-provoking analysis of missing and unread letters in *Jude the Obscure*, *The Woodlanders* (1887) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Koehler shows how Hardy turns these plot devices into 'poignant symbol[s] for the powerlessness and voicelessness of those born into the [...] wrong class and sex'.¹⁵ She re-reads the three letters written to Angel Clare by Tess, arguing that they become key symbols of Tess's loneliness, voicelessness and isolation.¹⁶ As her argument progresses, Koehler contests that, just as Hardy confronts Victorian sexual hypocrisy by challenging his readers to view Tess as pure regardless of her sexual experience, he becomes an accomplice in the 'denial of Tess's subjectivity'.¹⁷ As Tess's letter disappears under the rug, her narrative is completely excluded from a discourse framed and interpreted by men. Hardy's novel, she persuasively argues, simultaneously denounces and perpetuates the alienation of Victorian women from self-expression and -representation.¹⁸ In her last chapter, Koehler considers the 'epistolary ghosts' in Hardy's short story 'On the Western Circuit' and his poetry. She argues that the spaces between 'the correspondents' expectations and desires, their respective romantic and erotic fantasies' develop a life of their own, and become infused with meanings and signification beyond those originally anticipated by the correspondents, or indeed the external reader.¹⁹ Importantly, Koehler concludes here that lettered communication more often ends in 'division rather than connection', suggesting 'that [the] possibilities for meaningful interpersonal connection are fragile and ephemeral'.²⁰

Koehler comprehensively explores the possibilities of further avenues of research into lettered communication in Hardy's fiction in her conclusion, demonstrating the strength of her knowledge of the field and the significance of this project. Koehler's deft combination of close textual analysis and cultural materialism, as well as her attention to the wider themes of Hardy's works, indicates how a cultural materialist approach can provide new avenues of research in relation to broader concerns of nineteenth-century

¹⁵ Koehler, p.159.

¹⁶ Koehler, p.171.

¹⁷ Koehler, p.176.

¹⁸ Koehler, p.177.

¹⁹ Koehler, p.195.

²⁰ Koehler, p.208, 207.

literature, such as the representation of time, embodiment, and the British Empire.²¹ *Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication* is a comprehensively-researched and readable monograph. It persuasively demonstrates Hardy's use of lettered communication as an intentional literary device that furthered his literature's plea for social and cultural change. Koehler's cultural materialist approach not only makes this an important addition to Hardy scholarship, but also provides a methodologically compelling book for any scholar with an interest in communication technologies and their impact and legacies in the literary imagination.



BIOGRAPHY: Eleanor Shipton is a SWW DTP funded PhD student, with a specialisation in nineteenth-century literature, technology and the body. She is currently working with Professor John Plunkett (University of Exeter) and Professor Mary Hammond (University of Southampton) on a thesis centred on the concept of the 'postal body' in nineteenth-century literature, asking how literature utilised travel on the mail in order to theorise and explore mobility and mobile subjectivities. Eleanor is joint PGR Rep for the Centre for Victorian Studies at Exeter. She completed her MA with Distinction at King's College, London in 2015.

ejs247@exeter.ac.uk

²¹ Koehler, p.212-213.