The literary importance of letters did not end with the demise of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel. In the turbulent period between 1789 and 1830, the letter was used as a vehicle for political rather than sentimental expression. Against a background of severe political censorship, seditious corresponding societies and the rise of the modern Post Office, letters as they were used by Romantic writers, especially women, became the vehicle for a distinctly political, often disruptive force. Mary Favret’s study of Romantic correspondence re-examines traditional accounts of epistolary writing, and redefines the letter as a “feminine” genre. It also reconsiders a central concept of Romantic poetry in historictist, feminist and prosaic terms, by asking us to question the categories of gender and genre which determine our sense of Romantic literature.

The book deals not only with fictional letters which circulated in the novels of Jane Austen or in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, but also with political pamphlets, incendiary letters and spy letters available for public consumption. Mary Favret argues that the travel letters of Mary Wollstonecraft and the foreign correspondence of Helen Maria Williams disturb any simple notions of epistolary fictions and the “woman of letters” by insisting on the democratizing power of correspondence. At the same time, the history of correspondence promoted by the British Post Office deflects that democratizing power by channeling letter-writing into a story of national progress.
ROMANTIC CORRESPONDENCE
This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again and again by what Wordsworth called those “great national events” that were “almost daily taking place”: the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad and the reform movement at home. This was a literature of enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion and literature were reworked in texts such as Frankenstein and Biographia Literaria; gender relations in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Don Juan; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of response or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of “literature” and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded.

The categories produced by Romanticism have also been challenged by recent historicist arguments. The task of the series is to engage both with a challenging corpus of Romantic writings and with the changing field of criticism they have helped to shape. As with other literary series published by Cambridge, this one will represent the work of both younger and more established scholars, on either side of the Atlantic and elsewhere.
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Women, politics and the fiction of letters

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1 Jacques Louis David, Marat Assassiné (The Death of Marat), 1793. Brussels, Musée Royale des Beaux Arts. page xiv
3 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, The Kiss, or, Une Jeune Fille qui envoie un baiser par la fenêtre, appuyé sur des fleurs, qu’elle brise. Engraving by Augustin de St Aubin. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes.
4 Michaelangelo, Pietà. The Vatican Museum.
5 Jan Vermeer, Woman Reading a Letter, or Woman in Blue. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

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This book, now read with rear-vision, seems the logical product of two concerns: the question of whether individuals can ever understand one another and the necessity, nonetheless, of trying to communicate. In these concerns I have been educated by my friends, family and colleagues, whom I would like to acknowledge here. Yet in an acknowledgment, the pressure of these concerns bears down with remarkable force. Most of my gratitude therefore will not find expression in these pages.

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Figure 1 Jacques Louis David, *Marat Assassiné* (The Death of Marat), 1793.