Versión final de la autora (AM). La versión publicada (VoR) se encuentra en:
Manners, Norms and Transgressions in the History of English : Literary and linguistic approaches, editado por Andreas H. Jucker e Irma Taavitsainen, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2020, pp. 183–212.
https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.312.09nur https://www.jbe-platform.com/content/books/9789027260826-pbns.312.09nur

Variations from letter-writing manuals: *Humble petitions* signed by women in Late Modern London[1]

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Abstract

The present study analyses two sets of 25 petitions each. They were signed by different women who possibly belonged to lower social ranks, and they were addressed to the governors of the Foundling Hospital and the Bank of England. These were most probably men who occupied high positions in society. The study focuses on the comparison between the information present in the manuals and the petitions selected for this study. The petitioners had different needs and their circumstances also varied. This is reflected in the results, which show differences, and also similarities, between the two sets of petitions. Furthermore, most display some features found in the manuals, but not all of them follow the rules or recommendations faithfully. The writers, who cannot always be identified and may not have been the same as the signees, seem to have been aware of the existence of letter-writing manuals, but they may not have had first-hand contact with them.

1. Introduction

The eighteenth century was a time in which the practice of letter writing on all occasions was on the increase. This is the main reason why letter writing manuals seem to have appeared in such high numbers, in other words, they fulfilled a need in society (Fens-de Zeeuw 2008). Letter writing manuals helped people in general, as evidenced by the variety of both letter-writing manuals and types of letters found in such manuals. Furthermore, it could be argued that those belonging to lower social ranks would have needed them even more because of possibly not having received this instruction in schools (Steinbach 2004). However, neither the social position of the women signing the petitions analysed in the present study nor whether all of the writers were actually women can be confirmed. Therefore, it is difficult to know if they had made use of these

[1] I would like to thank the peer reviewers and the editors of the present volume for their valuable comments and their contributions to the improvement of the first version of this paper. I would also like to express my gratitude for the financial support provided by the Project: FFI2016-77540-P “Discursos Emergentes y Periféricos: una aproximación crítica y socio-cognitiva” (Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad, Spain).

manuals. Indeed, it seems that if they did not have direct access to the manuals, they would have been in contact with other members of society who would have had access, which meant establishing new relationships and indirectly learning rules on interaction (Whyman 2009).

As shown in the features displayed in the petitions analysed here, despite the abundance of these manuals, not everybody used the formulae or fixed expressions that were dictated in such books. Similarly, many of them did not follow the structure, layout or patterns mentioned in these letter-writing manuals. One reason might be the lack of familiarity with these books. On some occasions, the manuals were addressed exclusively to women (e.g. *The Ladies Complete Letter-Writer* (1765)[2]). However, many of the women who signed the petitions analysed in the present study would not have been considered *ladies* but were often servants of *ladies* instead.

A corpus-based study was carried out in order to compare petitions signed by women who possibly belonged to low ranks with model petitions and instructions in letter-writing manuals. The 50 (originally handwritten) petitions were addressed to men in higher ranks, as they were governors of the Foundling Hospital or of the Bank of England. The women were in need of being granted either a home for the children they had as single mothers or some help while they were in prison waiting to be transported to Australia in most cases. The petitions were extracted from two different corpora, and they display variation in several aspects, which include the use of more or less fixed formulae, the presence or absence of standard grammar and spelling, the disparity in the length of the texts, and the possible inclusion of some politeness features, such as excuses of boldness.

The present study analyses the form and the content of the selected petitions. It may be presumed that the women who signed these petitions would not have attended school and/or received any other form of formal education, given their condition as servants or prisoners due to minor thefts. However, it has been argued (Meldrum 1997) that the origin of these women servants, as is the case of the Foundling Hospital corpus, is not easy to identify and they may have belonged to a variety of social strata. This implies that some might have had access to some type of education. Nevertheless, the fact that

[2] This manual was first printed in 1763 in London, but in this study the second edition, dating from 1765 and also published in London, was used.

very often these petitions are signed by an '*X*', or the signature is in different handwriting from the rest of the text may imply that these women were in fact either illiterate or had only basic literacy skills. This led to the expectation that the petitions would display more differences than similarities in comparison to the models in the manuals. Also, the different circumstances that made these women send their petitions were thought to have an influence in the characteristics of the petitions. The women who wrote to the Foundling Hospital had to write whether they wanted their children to be admitted there, and the hospital had established some rules as to what should be included in the petitions (Evans 2005). The women who wrote to the Bank of England requested something they wanted, but the governors of the bank were not expecting such petitions. The former did not necessarily need an excuse to write, while the latter did.

Simply by observing the handwriting and the layout of the petitions, it is clear that some of the petitions were written by people who had good literacy skills and knew how to write letters, as evidenced by neat handwriting, standard spelling and grammar.[3] However, the use of capital letters and punctuation does not show much consistency either among the petitions or when compared to the manuals. In a similar way, although superscriptions and fixed formulae are present in the manuals, together with instruction on which terms of address to use, the petitions analysed do not always include these expressions or address the governors as recommended.

In addition, the petitioners in the manuals refer to themselves mainly using the third person. However, the personal pronouns used in the two sets of petitions vary considerably, both in relation to the models in the manuals and to each other: sometimes the petitioners write in the first person, sometimes in a combination of the third and the first person, and sometimes in the third person.

Similarly, the length of the petitions varies although the manuals recommended that a petition should be short. However, the results show that all the model petitions are shorter than the ones analysed, although differences can be observed not only between the two datasets (Foundling Hospital and Bank of England) but also within each of them.

[3] The present study does not include an analysis of grammatical features, as this would require a separate study which would include not only the grammar rules present in the manuals but also in the grammar books published at the time.

The last aspect considered in this study is the presence of an excuse of boldness for writing. The manuals indicated that in letters of request, this type of excuse should be present. However, not all the model petitions include it, and variation can also be observed in this respect in the two sets of petitions. In general, the petitioners to the Bank of England excuse their boldness more often than the petitioners to the Foundling Hospital.

2. Letter-writing and petitions in eighteenth-century England

Letter-writing in Late Modern English has been the object of study in the last decades (e.g. Auer et al. 2015; Dossena and Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008; Dossena and del Lungo Camiciotti 2012; Nevalainen and Tanskanen 2007; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2011, 2014). Many analyses have been based on letters written by literate people, including well-known grammarians and writers (e.g. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2011, 2014), but less literate members of society have also been the object of attention (e.g. Fairman 2000; Sokoll 2001, 2006; Levene et al. 2006; King 2007; Tomkins 2011; Auer 2015; Laitinen 2015; Timmis 2018). The possibly lower literacy skills of some of these people may have contributed to the lack of manuscripts available, but even the extant letters are not always readily accessible but buried in local archives and have never been analysed from a linguistic point of view. However, the increase in digitised materials in general, and more specifically manuscripts of letters (e.g. the project of *Letters of Artisans and the Labouring Poor*[4]), has facilitated this type of studies, and it has contributed to a better understanding of the variety of actual letter-writing practices in the eighteenth century.

The main means of communication for most people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the letter. People from all ranks of society used letters in their everyday lives, even those who may not have been expected to do so, such as servants (Brant 2006) or people who did not have access to formal education (Whyman 2009). On occasion, they were people who had very few reading and writing skills, if any. This lack was covered either by having somebody nearby writing for them, or writing as they could, often using non-standard grammar and spelling, but making themselves understood in transmitting the message they intended to. In other words, they did not always follow the instructions prescribed by the scholars of the time, but they were able

[4] Details of this project can be found on its blog: https://lalpcorpus.wordpress.com/.

to convey meaningful messages, very often thanks to someone else's help. The eighteenth century was the time when the language was being codified and the notion of standard was arising, but appreciably many more men than women were able to read and write (Bannet 2005). It has been estimated that in the middle of the century, only 40 per cent of women were able to sign their names, and it took longer for women to start using standard grammar and spelling, and they often made use of simple sentences rather than subordinate ones (Brant 2006). Many of the less literate people frequently used formulae in their writings that had been acquired by repetition (Elspass 2012). However, as Evans (2005: 14) indicates, specifically in relation to the language used by the women who sent their petitions to the Foundling Hospital that their style "was often closer to the spoken word" and that is the reason why "they allow us unusual access to the culture of poor women".

Letters belong to a specific genre which seems to have had a very clear pattern, and letter-writing manuals in the Late Modern English period provided guidance both on format and on content. Whereas the format might have been very similar for most letters, the content would have been mainly determined by the topic and the relationship between the writer and the addressee (Mitchell 2007).

Petitions were already very popular in Early Modern England (Zaret 1996, 2000; Waddle 2016). In Late Modern English, the practice of requesting via written petitions continued. People in all social contexts, for example in prison (Woodfine 2006; Palk 2007), or people looking for a home for their newly-born babies (Evans 2005) resorted to petitions when in need. Although the intention of a petition is always the same, that is, the writer needs something from the addressee, the personal situation of the petitioner may condition some of the features of the text. A petition may be interpreted as a type of letter, as evidenced by the many characteristics that both share (e.g. the format, the layout, the presence of the date, and some fixed formulae). However, Nevalainen (2007: 4) indicates that petitions are "a super text type of their own". This claim may explain why petitions were sometimes included in a separate section within the letter-manuals of the Late Modern English period (cf. Section 3.1).

3. Letter-writing manuals in Late Modern England

Although the publication of letter-writing manuals experienced a tremendous growth in numbers in the eighteenth century, these collections of letters and manuals of instruction regarding writing practices had already existed since the sixteenth century (Green 2007; Fens-de Zeeuw 2008). These instructions were often accompanied by other types of information, such as *directions of behaviour* particularly addressed to women. For instance, Hannah Woolley's manual, *The Gentlewoman's Companion or a Guide to the Female Sex*, published in 1673, is presented as "being an exact Rule for the Female Sex in general", and it includes a guide for all women that "go to service" and who are expected to behave in a particular way. Nevertheless, in this manual the *gentlewoman* is referred to as a *lady*, which implies that the main audience of this book were elite or middle-class women who could afford to have servants and were expected to write "letters and discourses upon all occasions"[5].

At the beginning of the eighteenth century there was a change in the style of these manuals, probably motivated by a change in the expected audience, as this was a time when many people moved from rural areas into towns and cities with the expectation to improve their lives (Steinbach 2004). These books "advertised themselves as being for critical use in instruction and emulation by the middle classes" (Green 2007: 103). Particularly in London, most of the manuals that appeared were addressed to servants, understood as any employee (Bannet 2005). Consequently, the manuals began to be used in schools (Mitchell 2007). Nevertheless, not all children, and more specifically not all girls, had access to schooling (Steinbach 2004). This means that in particular the women that belonged to the lower layers of society may not have been in direct contact with such manuals. As Brant (2006: 39) indicates, "the relation of manuals to actual epistolary practice is complex", that is, it is difficult to determine to what extent the manuals actually influenced letter writers, particularly the ones who did not have access to them and who despite being illiterate needed to write letters. As regards the women who signed the petitions analysed in this study, it may be stated that it is not possible to know the level of literacy that most of them had. Only when the petitions include a signature that differs in handwriting when compared to the rest of the text, or when the signee uses an '*X*', is it clearer that the petitioner was different from the writer. Consequently, when these features are present, the petitions were most probably written

[5] The quotations in this paragraph are from the front page of the manual, where the title is.

by somebody who had writing skills, and they were expected to contain more standard forms and similarities with the manuals.

In relation to the letters that are collected in the manuals in general, it has been argued that "many of the letters are highly fictionalized, containing contrived characters, dramatic situations" (Nixon and Penner 2009: 164). In a similar way, Green (2007: 184) states that "the models in *The Young Secretary's Guide* often have a stilted, inflated style". However, the petitions analysed here contain many of these features, which means that the models in the manuals may have been closer to actual language use than it may have been thought.

Some of the words present in the letter-writing manuals of the eighteenth century (e.g. *instruction, directions, rules*) may contribute to considering them prescriptive, like their contemporary grammar books. However, since they seem to include collections of real letters and actual practice, it has been suggested that they could either be simply descriptive (Brant 2006), or both descriptive and prescriptive in different aspects (Bannet 2005). In fact, some manuals clearly indicate that they contain *real* letters, together with others that appear to have been created especially for the purpose of the books. For instance, the preface of *The Complete Letter-Writer or Polite English Secretary* (1772), states that "the main body of the Work, is a proper Collection of Letters, (with some Originals) by eminent Authors". Similarly, Brown in *The English Letter-Writer* (1790: xiv) assures the reader that "[a]ll the letters in the following pages are originals, not one of them having been copied from any author whatever". These statements corroborate the idea that these manuals could indeed be considered not only prescriptive, but also descriptive, as suggested by Bannet (2005).

As regards the structure of these manuals, in most cases the letters are classified according to their function (e.g. letters of advice, familiar letters, letters of business, and invariably there is a section on letters of love and courtship), and usually petitions appear in a separate section (Bannet 2005). Furthermore, apart from the model letters that they contain, other parts can be identified. Although these vary, all the manuals include, usually in the introduction, the 'directions for writing letters', as well as 'directions for addressing people'. Among the rest of the sections, some incorporate a brief chapter on grammar, and others devote a few pages to orthography, mainly the use

of capital letters. Also, some of the manuals include models of legal documents, such as wills.

3.1 The instructions in these manuals

Eighteenth-century letter-writing manuals contain information concerning every detail of letter writing practices. These include rules on format and structure. In this respect, *The Complete Letter-Writer or Polite English Secretary* (1772) is particularly instructive. For example, it provides instructions on the margins that should be left in the paper used (e.g. "Begin your Letter about two Inches below the Top of your Paper, and leave about an Inch Margin on the Left-Hand", p. 37). It also provides information on the way the superscriptions should be written on the external side of the letter, i.e. when the letter has been folded (e.g. "When your Letter is sealed, you must write the Superscription (if it be to your Superior or Equal) in the following Manner …Write the Word To by it self, as nigh the Left-hand upper Angle, or Corner of your Letter", p. 39). Similarly, when including different paragraphs, this manual instructs you to "begin every fresh or new one, at the same Distance from the left-hand Margin of the Paper" (p. 38). Other manuals also refer to the layout of the letter. For instance, in *The Young Secretary's Guide* (1719), the writers are advised to "leave a large distance between the body of the letter and the subscription" (p. 100).

All letter-writing manuals consulted emphasise the need to address the receiver of the letter properly, and give instruction on this (e.g. "Proper DIRECTIONs for addreſſing Perſons of every Rank or Denomination, at the Beginnings of Letters, and the Superſcriptions", *The Ladies Complete Letter-Writer*, 1765: 12). Most of them offer indications on how to write superscriptions both inside the letter and once the letter has been folded (e.g. *To the Right Honourable*…). Also, they give detailed examples of the most common opening and closing formulae, taking into account the position that the writer occupies in society and the position of the addressee. *Sir/ Sirs* and *Honoured Sir/ Sirs* seem to be the preferred opening phrases when addressing a man or men[6], whereas *your humble servant* and *your obliged humble servant* are the phrases that appear more frequently before the signature of the letter. The word *superior* is often mentioned, as it is important to acknowledge the higher position of the one of the two participants, most frequently this being the addressee. This may be partly motivated by the fact that an act

[6] Since the petitions analysed in this study are addressed to the governors of two institutions, and they are expected to be men, only these phrases are included here.

of parliament had already decided on the ranks and orders of precedence, as all the manuals indicate. The formulae of the petitions were different and will, therefore, be discussed separately since they correspond to the two types of letters analysed here (cf. Section 3.2).

It is fairly common to find manuals that incorporate a section on grammar instruction (e.g. *The Complete Letter-Writer or New and Polite English Secretary* 1756, *The Complete Art of Writing Letters* 1797). These sections, which are not particularly long, include information regarding syntax and morphology, as well as spelling and punctuation. Sometimes there are punctuation marks that are said to be uncommon in the manuals (*The Young Secretary's Guide* 1719: 101–102), such as the hyphen (-) and a separation (⸗), which, on the contrary, are found in the petitions analysed in the present study, being particularly more frequent in petitions addressed to the Foundling Hospital. One of the aspects that is often described in detail is the use of capital letters. For example, in *The Complete Letter-Writer or New and Polite English Secretary* (1756: 15) together with instruction on when to use these "great Letters", the expressions "It has become Customary to begin any Substantive in a Sentence with a Capital" or "sometimes Capitals are used" indicate that the authors are describing usage rather than just prescribing it. In general, punctuation followed different rules when compared to today's punctuation in English. In the eighteenth century, according to Bannet (2005: 90), "punctuation points and capitalization of the first letter of words were understood, used and taught as guides to pronunciation or reading aloud." She adds that the reason for the capitalization of letters was precisely "to indicate where emphasis should be when reading aloud" (Bannet 2005: 91).

Content and politeness are usually guided. Some of the manuals clearly state this in the long title, as in *The Complete Letter-Writer or New and Polite English Secretary* (1756). These manuals incorporate instruction on polite writing and behaviour. For instance, they often indicate that, when writing to a superior, "the letter should be as short as the subject, or occasion, you write on will permit; especially such wherein favours are requested" (*The Complete Letter-Writer* 1778: 15). Also, "subscriptions […] ought to express […] the quality of the person […] a power of authority" (*The Young Secretary's Guide* 1719: 100). Similarly, in letters of request, i.e. petitions, it is commonly stated that "you must excuse your boldness in requesting a Favour from a person…you must very feelingly press him to it, by demonstrating the miseries and

misfortunes you are under" (*The Young Secretary's Guide* 1721: 3), or that a "request must be made in humility" (*The English Letter-Writer or the Whole Art of General Correspondence […][7] together with the Universal Petitioner*, Brown 1790: 208).
According to Bannet (2005: xi), these manuals "sought to 'improve' their users by offering examples of whatever conduct and sentiments they considered proper", becoming guides for any member of society, independently of their social position, given the need of the time to write letters on so many occasions. In relation to this, the language that these manuals used on the first page provides a clear indication of the intention of the manuals. Most of them incorporate the word *polite* even in the title (e.g. *The Complete Letter-Writer or Polite English Secretary* 1772), and in the more expanded title which follows the words, *directions*, *instructions* and *rules* can often be read.

Finally, it is not uncommon to find a separate section on petitions in the manuals, as in Brown's *The English Letter-Writer or the Whole Art of General Correspondence […] together with the Universal Petitioner* (1790), and Cooke's *The Universal Letter-Writer or New Art of Polite Correspondence […] to which is added the Complete Petitioner* (1791).

3.2 Features of the petitions in the manuals

The sections in the manuals devoted to petitions are usually introduced by some directions. These are given mainly with the modal verb *should*, which implies some kind of obligation. In other words, the writers of petitions were supposed to follow the instructions provided. These refer to the use of humble language, the choice of the right superscriptions and terms of address as well as their position in the petition, the briefness of the message, and the inclusion of a final prayer. However, the introductions to these sections do not state that excuses should be made when petitioning, unlike the information provided when referring to requests, which invariably, in all the manuals, indicates that excusing boldness was required. More importantly, these introductions show that the authors are completely aware of the need and lack of knowledge of many people who apply to superiors for different reasons, often in situations of despair.

[7] Due to the length of some titles, they have been shortened, including […], so as to be able to include the information required in each case.

The actual petitions present in the manuals have some distinctive features that need to be mentioned, as they will be considered in the present analysis. These are the specific superscriptions, opening and closing formulae, as well as the use of third person in the body of the text.

Expressions seem to be clearly fixed regarding the beginning and the end of the petitions. Superscriptions vary depending on the person they are addressed to, but the opening formula is always the same, *The humble petition of (name of petitioner) sheweth that*…. Similarly, the closing sentence does not offer much variation, that is, *your petitioner, as in duty bound will/shall ever pray* is the preferred sentence to end these petitions.

It could be argued that the formality of this specific genre may be the reason why petitions are written in the third person. The actual petitioner presents her/himself as an external being when, in fact, s/he will be the direct recipient of what is being asked for. When the petitions are not written by the petitioner because of their illiteracy, the use of the third person seems more appropriate.

4. The present study

The petitions chosen for the present study have been partly researched from a socio-historical point of view (e.g. Evans 2005; McClure 1981; Pugh 2007; Woodfine 2006). However, no in-depth analyses of the language present in these petitions seem to have been carried out so far.

4.1 The data

The 50 petitions under investigation have been extracted from two larger corpora: a corpus of petitions written to the Foundling Hospital (henceforth FH) in London, and a corpus of petitions addressed to the Bank of England (henceforth BoE) also in London.

The main shared characteristics between them are the fact that they were signed by women, and addressed to superiors who were the governors of either the Bank of England or the Foundling Hospital and therefore most probably men. Despite the presence of similarities mainly due to the inclusion of requests in both cases, the BoE

petitions display greater variation than the FH ones, which seem to follow a very similar pattern in most cases.

These are the main features of each set of petitions:

Petitions addressed to the Foundling Hospital:

These petitions were written between 1793 and 1799, and signed by young women, who were unmarried and needed a home for their first child. The Foundling Hospital was one of such homes. Founded in 1739 by Thomas Coram, it soon became a secure place for many babies who could not be looked after by their families.

Since 1741, when the first children were admitted, different systems were used for their admission. It was not until 1763 that the governors of the Foundling Hospital established that those who wanted to have their children admitted into the hospital, "had to petition the governors directly" (Evans 2005: 93), and over the following years different rules were established as to what should be included in the content of such petitions. The women were usually servants who had been "seduced by lovers" (McClure 1981: 140) or by the master of the house where they worked, which was not an uncommon event of the time (Meldrum 1997 and 2000). Finding a home for their babies was a means "to keep their jobs" (McClure 1981: 85). In most of the cases, there is only one petition signed by each woman.

Petitions addressed to the Bank of England

These petitions were written between 1785 and 1815. They were signed by women prisoners, many of whom also had children. The reason why most of them were in prison was forgery of bank notes or exchanging forged bank notes. Their petitions were mainly motivated by the need for some money, other type of material help, or the desire to be transported to Australia sooner than they were supposed to be sent there. On several occasions some of the women sent more than one petition to the BoE requiring different needs, and a relatively active correspondence seems to have been maintained between the petitioners and the governors.

Unfortunately, on many occasions it is not possible to state whether the person who signed the petition was actually the writer. The direct access to the manuscripts sometimes contributes to clarification in this respect, but not always, as handwriting practices were also very similar among many people of the time. They probably used

the numerous copybooks that were common at the time, such as *The Universal Penman*, written by George Bickham in 1743, as it is reflected in the round hand used in a few of the analysed letters and is very similar to the calligraphy present in this copybook.

4.2 The manuals

A selection of manuals was required to carry out this study. Many of the manuals first published in the eighteenth century in England were reprinted several times. For instance, as Mitchell (2007: 184) points out, "*The Young Secretary's Guide* went through well over twenty-seven editions in London and at least twenty-four in Boston." In the present study the twentieth edition of this manual, dated in 1719, is the one used. Similarly, two of the manuals included in the present study, *The Complete Letter-Writer or New and Polite English Secretary* (1756) and *The New Letter-Writer or Polite English Secretary* (1772), are two different editions (the second and the fourteenth respectively) of the same original manual, which implies the presence of multiple reprints. Although different editions usually add something new, many are repeated as directions and rules and often editions are almost identical. For example, the edition of 1812 of *The Universal Letter-Writer or New Art of Polite Correspondence […] to which is added the Complete Petitioner* (Cooke 1791) does not display any variation when compared to the first edition from twenty years before. Only the 1791 edition has been included in this study because of the dates of the letters that are analysed here, although the fact that both editions are identical would not have altered the results of this study despite the distance in time.

The titles of the manuals were often very long, as in *The English Letter-Writer or the Whole Art of General Correspondence […] together with the Universal Petitioner* (Brown 1790). And sometimes the same or a very similar title was used by different manuals. This is the case of the two manuals entitled *The Young Secretary's Guide*, which are used in this study. There is no clear indication in the second one, published in 1721, that it is a later edition of the one written by Hill in 1687, whereas the one published in 1719 clearly indicates that it is the twentieth edition of Hill's manual. Both manuals have a different number of sections and the style in which the introduction to the reader is written differs considerably between the two. The title may reflect a

possible influence from writers of previous manuals, which might have served as models.

Due to the possible variety of actual writers of the petitions analysed here, it was necessary to choose a selection addressed to different audiences, both men and women from a variety of social layers. They are the following:

- *The Young Secretary's Guide* (Hill 1719)
- *The Secretary's Guide* (Gent 1721)
- *The Young Secretary's Guide* (1721)
- *The Complete Letter-Writer or New and Polite English Secretary* (1756)
- *The Ladies Complete Letter-Writer* (1765)
- *The Complete Letter-Writer or Polite English Secretary* (1772)
- *The Complete Letter-Writer* (1778)
- *The English Letter-Writer or the Whole Art of General Correspondence […] together with the Universal Petitioner* (Brown 1790)
- *The Universal Letter-Writer or New Art of Polite Correspondence […] to which is added the Complete Petitioner* (Cooke 1791)
- *The Complete Art of Writing Letters* (1797)

The information provided in all the manuals has been taken into account in the present study. However, the two manuals that include a special section on petitions, Brown (1790) and Cooke (1791), will be considered more carefully, particularly in the quantitative analysis.

5. Method

All the petitions included in the present study were transcribed from the original manuscripts. This is part of an ongoing project that aims at transcribing approximately 100 petitions addressed to the Foundling Hospital and over 700 addressed to the Bank of England. These transcriptions are faithful representations of the original petitions. This means that they maintain not only the spelling, grammar and punctuation as it appears in the original but also the margins, spaces between the lines and paragraphs. So far, a total of 63 petitions to the Foundling Hospital and 200 to the Bank of England have been transcribed, and it is out of these that the 25 from each corpus were extracted (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of petitions

Corpus	Total transcribed	Signed by women	Signed by men
Foundling Hospital (FH)	63	61	2
Bank of England (BoE)	200	105	95

Previous transcriptions of around 700 petitions to the Bank of England exist (Palk 2007). However, there are several reasons that justify a new transcription of these letters. To begin with, Palk's transcriptions do not preserve the layout and format of the original letters. They do not always include the dates in the letters themselves but include it in the accompanying description. Therefore, it was important to analyse these aspects in comparison with the manuals and to check the original documents for the present study. In addition, when the original documents were analysed, it was observed that the existing transcriptions contain some errors. Some words were transcribed with a modern spelling, not preserving the original that contained non-standard spellings of that time. On occasions, even a different word had been transcribed.[8] Finally, some of the petitions by the Bank of England present in the digitised version had not been transcribed, and were, therefore, not included in Palk's book.

The selection of the 50 petitions was the first step, prior to the analysis and the comparison with the manuals. This process required some decisions as both corpora differ considerably in the number of men and women signing the petitions (see Table 1). For this reason, it was decided that only petitions signed by women would be analysed. The next step was the selection of data. This was done randomly once the women petitions had been isolated from the men's. Each petition was given a number, and 25 numbers were taken from each group with a random number generator programme.[9]

The petitions of the manuals contain both a superscription that shows deference towards the addressee (*To the Right Honourable*…) and an opening formula which clearly states that it is a petition (*The humble petition of (petitioner's name), Sheweth that…*). But this is not always the case in the two datasets. The presence of both or either of these two elements was thought to determine a lower degree of deviation from the directions of

[8] It has to be noted that Palk's transcriptions were done before the original manuscripts were digitised by the Bank of England. This probably explains the errors found, as it is more likely that the new digitised version is easier to read and, therefore, to transcribe than the original documents as such.
[9] This is the link to the random generator programme used: https://www.calculator.net/random-number-generator.html?slower=1&supper=60&ctype=1&s=6300&submit1=Generate

the manuals. This expectation was motivated by the fact that if writers were aware of how to introduce a petition, they may also have known about the rest of the characteristics. For this reason, it was decided to divide the petitions into two groups within each dataset. One set contained a superscription and/or an opening formula and the other did not contain either of these elements.

The final step was to analyse the petitions manually in order to see their similarities with and differences from the letter-writing manuals regarding the following aspects:

1. The layout, i.e. the format and structure, as well as the spelling and punctuation
2. The types of superscriptions, opening and closing formulae
3. The persons and/or personal pronouns that were used, whether first (*I, me, my*) or third (*your petitioner, she, her*)
4. The content, including the length of the petition and the politeness as indicated in the manuals

6. Results

The first difference that can be observed when both datasets are compared is the presence or absence of superscriptions and/or opening formulae (see Table 2): 80 per cent of the petitions contained both or either in the FH set, whereas only 32 per cent of the petitions of the BoE could be included in this group. This may be due to the fact that the governors of the Foundling Hospital had already established some characteristics that these petitions had to include, which was not the case in the second corpus (cf. Section 4.1). Also, the FH petitions had a clear aim, that is, all the women request that their newly-born babies be accepted in the Foundling Hospital, but this is not the case in the BoE corpus, where the needs and requests differ and the situation of despair also varies.

All the models of petitions included in the manuals incorporate both elements, a superscription and an opening formula stating that the letter is a petition. For this reason, it was expected that the petitions with one or both of these fixed phrases were influenced by the manuals more than the rest, as the writers would have been aware of some conventions to start their petitions, independently of the content of the request. This explains the division of the petitions into the two groups for the present study. In

Group 1, only two petitions of the FH do not contain a superscription, and this is the case for only one of the petitions of the BoE (see Table 2). Similarly, while all the BoE petitions included in Group 1 contain an opening formula, only one of the FH does not contain an opening formula, but it includes a superscription.

Table 2. Distribution of the two corpora (in raw figures and percentages) according to the presence or not of superscriptions and opening formulae

	FH petitions	BoE petitions
Group 1. Including a superscription and/or opening formulae	20 (80%)	8 (32%)
Group 2. Not including a superscription and/or opening formulae	5 (20%)	17 (68%)

6.1 Group 1. Petitions that include a superscription and/or an opening formula

As expected, Group 1 in both sets of petitions followed the format and structure of the manuals. In general, the layout of these petitions indicates that the petitioners were aware of their position in relation to the addressees. As recommended by the manuals, they left the margins and spaces that they were supposed to leave due to the superior ranks of the governors they were addressing. Likewise, the majority of these petitions include a similar introduction and closing formula to the ones present in the manuals.

Although exceptions can be observed (e.g. *Your Petishoner will be Ever bound to Prey*, or *humbley bow down to you honnared Gantlemen prayeng*), most of these petitions contain standard spelling and grammar,[10] that is, they follow the rules of the prescriptive grammarians of the time and their spelling reflects the specific features of the English language of the late eighteenth century.

However, there is one aspect of spelling that requires special attention, that is, capitalisation. Most of the petitions analysed display a very inconsistent use of capital letters (e.g. *The Father of the Child, as Absconded and Left me in Great Distress*). On the other hand, the writers of the petitions in the manuals only capitalise proper nouns, the pronoun *I*, words placed after full stops and those that refer to important positions or ranks, such as *Majesty*, *Lordship* or *Secretary*. This is precisely what the grammarians

[10] The analysis of the grammatical features in the petitions goes beyond the scope of the present study.

of the eighteenth century instructed (e.g. Coar 1796; Greenwood 1737). The grammarians' concern arose after the extended practice of capitalisation that had spread in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and led to the establishment of some rules (Crystal 2018). However, among such rules some were ambiguous, for instance, that "every substantive of peculiar significance" (Coar 1796: 214). This could explain the abundance of capital letters in the petitions analysed, although not only substantives were capitalised, but other types of words, too (e.g. *A* (determiner), *Bin* (*been*, verb), *Everey* (*every*, determiner)).

Punctuation shows no consistency. Most of the manuals include a brief section on punctuation as well as on the use of capital letters, and all the model petitions in the manuals include punctuation marks such as commas, semi-colons and full stops. As shown in Table 3, 25 per cent of the petitions in the FH data and the BoE data do not include any punctuation marks at all, and some of them only include an occasional hyphen, a separation or a comma; the different function in the eighteenth century may explain this variation and inconsistency.[11] Similarly, the petition models in the manuals are usually written in one single paragraph, whereas the petitions in Group 1 are often organised into several paragraphs and there seems to have been a clear division of the paragraphs according to sub-topics.

Table 3. Punctuation in the petitions in Group 1

	4 or more punctuation marks	1, 2 or 3 punctuation marks	No punctuation at all
Foundling Hospital	11 (55%)	4 (20%)	5 (25%)
Bank of England	5 (62.5%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)

Regarding the closing formulae,[12] all petitions in the manuals conclude with the phrase *as in duty bound will ever pray* (sometimes with a slight variation, such as using *shall* instead of *will*[13]). Consequently, this concluding formula was expected in this group of petitions. However, the results show that all the petitions addressed to the governors of

[11] Four punctuation marks were established as the limit, but most of the petitions with less than 4 marks only had 2.
[12] The superscriptions and closing formulae are not dealt with here as they have already been mentioned to establish the distinction between the two groups of petitions to analyse.
[13] These variations have not been considered in the present study, since the focus is on whether the petitions included the promise to pray or not, rather than on stylistic variation.

the Bank of England contained this phrase (or a very similar expression, e.g. *your Petitioner, with her Children, and probably Children's Children, will, as in Duty Bound, ever pray for their benefactors &c*), but only 85 per cent of the FH petitions included it (see Table 4), often with slight variations (e.g. *Your Petishoner will be Ever bound to Prey*, or *Should your Petitioner be so fortunate as to have Her Case Considered In Duty Bound With Gratitude Shall Ever Pray*). As explained above, the single mothers who wrote to the Foundling Hospital did not need to excuse their boldness, and thus they may have felt that they did not need to promise their prayers either. Whereas the women who were in prison could only request their needs from the governors of the Bank of England, the women who wrote to the Foundling Hospital may have had the opportunity to find a home for their children in other institutions.

Table 4. Closings in petitions in Group 1

	FH	BoE
Containing *as in duty bound will ever pray*	(17) 85%	(8) 100%
Not containing *as in duty bound will ever pray*	(3) 15%	0

As mentioned above (cf. Section 5), the petitions in the manuals were mostly written in the third person (e.g. *sheweth that your petitioner has*…). Even though the petitions in the present study also show a preference for the third person, the percentages are lower than those in the manuals (see Table 5). In addition, a combination of the first and the third person was observed in all of them, but more often in the petitions than in the manuals that usually start with the third person and change to the first person either in the middle of the text or towards the end. The differences may imply that the writers were following the conventions present in the manuals, as also shown by the presence of the superscription and/or the opening formulae. When they started detailing personal circumstances and the letters became more personal, the first person was introduced. The predominance of the third person all through most petitions also indicates that some of these petitions may have been written by a different person than the one who signed them, despite the suggested norms in the manuals. Finally, it needs to be pointed out that there are not only some differences between the manuals and the petitions, but also between the FH and the BoE petitions, as the BoE set includes petitions with a mixture of third and first person. Furthermore, in the FH set, there is even one petition written

exclusively in the first person. However, these results have to be taken with caution as the number of petitions in the BoE set is rather low.

Table 5. Person (and personal pronouns) in petitions in Group 1 and in the manuals

	FH	BoE	Brown (1790)	Cooke (1791)
Third person	14 (70%)	(5) 62.5%	16 (84%)	53 (93%)
First person	1 (5%)	0	0	0
Third and first person	5 (25%)	(3) 37.5%	3 (16%)	4 (7%)

The analysis of the content and the politeness practices did not match the indications of the manuals in every respect. For example, many of these petitions are fairly long, in contrast to the recommendations. In addition, the model petitions contain only one paragraph whereas the petitions usually include several paragraphs. As regards their length, Table 6 illustrates the similarities and differences between the two sets of petitions and compares them to the manuals. A higher number of words is found in the BoE set, where the longest petition contains as many as 520 words. The longest petition of the FH set has 323 words, which is less than in the BoE set but more than double the average number of the petitions in the two manuals.

Table 6. Average number of words in the petitions in Group 1

Group 1	Number of words
Foundling Hospital	160 words
Bank of England	210 words
Brown (1790)	120 words
Cooke (1791)	140 words

All petitions refer to the miseries and misfortunes of the petitioners, as suggested by the manuals (e.g. *your Petitioner fell an innocent victim to the offended Laws of her Country*, or *your Petitioner having no means of supporting her helpless infant humbly* ...). They show modesty and humility, as evidenced not only by some of the fixed phrases of the time such as *your humble servant*, but also by regular comments describing the petitioners' feelings and actions (e.g. *with the deepest humility prays,* or *humbly craves's your aid*).

Interesting differences can also be observed in petitions that include excuses of boldness not only in their numbers but also in the language used (see Table 7). The manuals in general recommended that these excuses be included, and two manuals include special sections for them (Brown, 1790 and Cooke, 1791). Nevertheless, excuses are not always incorporated or mentioned in the introduction section. This is particularly the case in Cooke's manual whereas Brown includes more excuses (68 per cent) than any other sets. In this respect, the petitions to the Bank of England seem to follow the suggestions more faithfully. Excuses of boldness are more frequently found in contrast to the FH dataset, where only 20 per cent include them.

Table 7. Excusing boldness in the petitions in Group 1

	Excuse their boldness	Do not excuse their boldness
Foundling Hospital	4 (20%)	16 (80%)
Bank of England	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5%)
Brown (1790)	13 (68%)	6 (32%)
Cooke (1791)	19 (33%)	38 (67%)

Similarly, the expressions used in these two manuals to excuse boldness differ from what can be found in the BoE data. Both Brown and Cooke use mainly the verb *presume* when excusing boldness. The same phrasing is found in most excuses in the FH data (e.g. *your Petitioner (…) humbly presums to apply*). On the other hand, the structures in the BoE examples vary, and *presume* is never used. The expressions found are *beg leave*, *venture,* and even a much more direct one, *humbley bow down to you honnared Gantlemen prayeng your Goodness will Pardon the Liberty I take in thus Adrasing*.

Two reasons could lie behind these differences. First, the low presence of these excuses in some of the manuals that included model petitions (e.g. Cooke's) and the lack of this in the instructions might have contributed to their absence in cases where writers were using such manuals as models. Second, the women who wrote to the Foundling Hospital did not have to find an excuse for writing because the objective was clear, and a petition was required to get the children admitted into the hospital. The situation of the women who wrote to the Bank of England was very different because they were not expected to

write any petitions and, therefore, they may have felt a greater need to excuse their boldness.

In addition, the different structures and the fact that the FH petitions show more similarities with the manuals might suggest that the petitioners of the FH were probably more aware of the language used in these manuals.

6.2 Group 2. Petitions that do not include a superscription and/or an opening formula

The analysis of Group 2 reveals some similarities to Group 1 in relation to the content and in particular to the excuses of boldness. However, in all the other aspects, much more deviation from the manuals was encountered. These petitions are shorter than those in Group 1, and, as will be shown, they are more similar in this respect to the model petitions in the manuals.

The petitions in Group 2 display expressions of humility (e.g. *With the greatest humility do I take the Liberty to address this Letter to you*, or *she is nothing but a common servent at seven or Eigh gineas per year and cannot git her child nursh*) that suggest that the petitioners were not the actual writers, but had possibly received help from others who would have been familiar with the manuals. The content as well as the chosen words in the petitions appear to imply that the signees also had an awareness of their lower social rank.

These petitions were written when the English language was being codified, and the first dictionaries and grammar books were establishing the spelling and grammar rules. However, those rules are not always observed in these petitions. For instance, in the clause *wich makes us both vary unhapey*,[14] there are three words whose spelling was already established in Johnson's dictionary (1755), namely *wich* for *which*, *vary* for *very* and *unhapey* for *unhappy*. Similarly, capitalisation of initials does not seem to follow any consistent patterns in most petitions in this Group (e.g. *in the unfortunate Place where I am Confined your Generous Goodness soon transpires*). In many cases it

[14] This example has been extracted from one of BoE petitions.

is obvious that the petitioners' literacy skills were poor, as evidenced by their non-standard grammar[15] and spelling deviations as well as almost illegible handwriting.

In addition, not all petitioners follow the indications regarding the layout, the format and the structure present in the manuals. In fact, much variation can be observed in this respect. For instance, many petitioners do not leave margins anywhere on the paper, and the placement of address terms such as *sirs* or *gentlemen* is not consistent in the different petitions.

Punctuation is not often used in these petitions although differences appear between the two sets (see Table 8). There are hardly any punctuation marks in the FH set, with the exception of one petition that has very few, in the BoE set more petitions than not include punctuation. However, in 41 per cent of the petitions only a few commas and full stops are present. In addition, paragraphs are hardly ever used, which, together with the lack of punctuation, does not facilitate the understanding of the petitions. Often long sentences extend over several lines and the original idea is sometimes lost because of this.

Table 8. Punctuation in the petitions in Group 2

	4 or more punctuation marks	1, 2 o 3 punctuation marks[16]	No punctuation at all
Foundling Hospital	0	1 (20%)	4 (80%)
Bank of England	4 (24%)	7 (41%)	6 (35%)

The formulae used at the beginning and at the end of the petitions also show differences. Since the petitions included in Group 2 do not include either a superscription (*To the right Honorable*…), or an opening formula (*The humble petition of*…) like the ones in Group 1, it is necessary to describe the introductions that these petitions contain. Table 9 shows how the petitions are introduced and the addressees addressed in Group 2. As can be observed, the BoE set displays a higher variety of addressing terms than the FH set. It is not surprising that the plural form is more

[15] As mentioned before, an analysis of grammar deviations is not carried out in this study. For this reason, no examples are provided here.
[16] These are commas and full stops in the FH, and commas and dashes in the BoE.

commonly used than the singular (*gentlemen* versus *gentleman*), as the addressees were governors of both institutions, i.e. a plural addressees in each case. In the manuals *sir* or *honoured sir* are indicated as the usual terms when addressing a superior (cf. Section 3.1). But these terms are used only in the BoE corpus, and not in the FH. The differences may be partly due to the lower number of petitions in the FH dataset (5) as opposed to the BoE set (17), within Group 2.

Table 9. Address formulae in petitions in Group 2

	FH corpus	BoE corpus
Gentlemen[17]	3 (60%)	4 (23.5%)
Gentleman	1 (20%)	1 (6%)
Honored[18] *Gentleman*	1 (20%)	4 (23.5%)
Honored Sir	0	7 (41%)
Sir	0	1 (6%)

The analysis of the concluding expression shows an inverted tendency regarding the use of the closing formula *as in duty bound will ever pray* in petitions of Group 2 (see Table 10). Most of the FH petitioners use this expression while less than half, i.e. 41 per cent, of the BoE ones end their petitions in the way modelled in the manuals. It remains arguable that the difference in size in the datasets in Group 2 (5 in the FH set and 17 in the BoE set) might have contributed to these results.

Table 10. Closing formulae in petitions in Group 2

	FH	BoE
Containing *as in duty bound will ever pray*	4 (80%)	7 (41%)
Not containing *as in duty bound will ever pray*	1 (20%)	10 (59%)

In the analysis of the personal pronouns, the first-person pronouns were expected to prevail in Group 2, as these petitions seem to be written from a more personal perspective. However, the results were rather different (see Table 11). First, in the FH set there is a slight preference for the use of a mixture of persons as both the first and the third are combined. The petitioners of the BoE prefer to write in the first person, although a mixed use of both is present in 12 per cent of the petitions, and strikingly the same number of petitions, i.e. 12 per cent, displays an exclusive use of the third person.

[17] Variation in spelling can be seen in the two corpora in some of these words, especially *gentlemen* and *gentleman* (e.g. *gentelmen*).
[18] This adjective can be found with different spellings in the two corpora, such as *Hon*, *Honoured* or *Hond*.

In the model letters in the manuals, the third person is the most frequently used, which is hardly present in the datasets analysed here.

Table 11. Persons (and personal pronouns) used in petitions in Group 2

	FH	BoE	Brown (1790)	Cooke (1791)
Third person	0	2 (12%)	16 (84%)	53 (93%)
First person	2 (40%)	13 (76%)	0	0
Third and first person	3 (60%)	2 (12%)	3 (16%)	4 (7%)

The average length of the petitions addressed to the Foundling Hospital in Group 2 is very similar to the average length found in Cooke's petitions, whereas the petitions sent to the Bank of England are appreciably longer, as shown in Table 12.

Table 12. Average number of words in the petitions in Group 2

Group 2	Number of words
Foundling Hospital	146 words
Bank of England	181 words
Brown (1790)	120 words
Cooke (1791)	140 words

As to the politeness issues mentioned in the manuals, very few petitioners excuse their boldness in the FH corpus, in most petitions sent to the Bank of England, there is some type of reason or excuse for writing (see Table 13). In addition, these excuses are usually very clearly stated, as in *Pardon my presumption in writing to you*, or *I […] have taken the liberty of troubling you*. Nevertheless, in all petitions of both sets, emphasis is placed on the miseries and misfortunes of the petitioners (e.g. *The father […] Left me in great Distress […] to had to my misfortune I have been deprived of parants*), who clearly state their needs in a modest and humble way. This can be observed in the adjectives and expressions, e.g. *We unfortunet suffers […] humbley bow down to you*. As suggested in Section 6.1, the difference may be due to the fact that the women who addressed their petitions to the Bank of England actually felt they were being bold when asking for their favours, whereas the ones who wrote to the Foundling Hospital may have thought that such an excuse was not needed. Nevertheless, it is

important to highlight the differences displayed also in the two manuals that contain petition models.

Table 13. Excusing boldness in the petitions in Group 2

	Excuse their boldness	Do not excuse their boldness
Foundling Hospital	1 (20%)	4 (80%)
Bank of England	15 (88%)	2 (12%)
Brown (1790)	13 (68%)	6 (32%)
Cooke (1791)	19 (33%)	38 (67%)

7. A comparison between Group 1 and Group 2

When the results of Group 1 and Group 2 are compared, there seems to be a correlation between starting the petitions in the same way as the manuals (e.g. *To the honourable the Governors*…) and sharing more similarities in general, not only with the model petitions in the manuals, but also with the recommendations suggested in all the manuals used in the present study.

The only exceptions are found in paragraph organisation and in their length. Most of the petitions in Group 1 contain several paragraphs, all of them in the case of the BoE. In contrast, hardly any of the petitions in Group 2, and none in the case of the BoE, include more than one paragraph. The writers in Group 1 seem to have felt the need to separate each idea in a different paragraph while the writers in Group 2 wrote continuously without separating topics. This is precisely what can be found in the model petitions in the manuals, but the writers of the manuals may, of course, have been conditioned by the characteristics of the book and its format. As shown in Table 14, the petitions in Group 2 are shorter than the petitions in Group 1. They are also more similar to the length displayed by the manuals. This result was unexpected because the recommendation in the manuals was precisely to write short petitions, in other words, petitioners should express the main ideas of their needs without entering into many details. Therefore, the petitions in Group 1, which were expected to be shorter, were in fact longer on average than the ones in Group 2, which deviated from the manuals in

many other issues. Nevertheless, the average number of words in the BoE petitions is still realtively high in both Groups when compared to the FH dataset.

Table 14. Average number of words

	Group 1	Group 2
Foundling Hospital	160	146
Bank of England	210	181
	Manuals	
Brown (1790)	120	
Cooke (1791)	140	

In relation to the rest of the aspects analysed, petitions in Group 2 differ more from the manuals than those in Group 1. For instance, regarding the layout, spelling and punctuation, Group 1 petitions are more consistent and similar to the models in the manuals. In Group 2, writers did not seem to follow any rules on layout and punctuation, and spelling very often appears to vary and differ from the spelling of the time. On some occasions, for instance, these deviations may be reflecting different pronunciations or ways of speech, as even though all the petitions were written in London, not all the petitioners came from London. As mentioned in Section 4.1, the petitioners that wrote to the Foundling Hospital were mainly servants living and working in London, but their origins are not known and they may have come from rural areas looking for work, as "[t]here was a demand for country servants in London households" (Evans 2005: 19). Similarly, most of the petitioners of the Bank of England were prisoners in Newgate Gaol in London, but they were not all originally from the city or even the south east. This is clearly indicated in some of the petitions that refer to where these people came from or where they were arrested after committing a crime. One exception seems to be the use of capital letters, which in both Groups shows inconsistencies.

In a similar way, whereas most petitions in Group 1 end with a promise of "praying", as suggested by the manuals, there is a lower number of petitions in Group 2 that conclude in the same way, especially in the BoE dataset (see Table 15). Likewise, the third person pronouns are more common in Group 1, agreeing with the model petitions in the

manuals, whereas first person pronouns used exclusively are more notably present in Group 2 (see Table 16).

Table 15. Presence of *as in duty bound will ever pray*

	FH Group 1	FH Group 2	BoE Group 1	BoE Group 2
Containing *as in duty bound will ever pray*	(17) 85%	4 (80%)	(8) 100%	7 (41%)
Not containing *as in duty bound will ever pray*	(3) 15%	1 (20%)	0	10 (59%)

Table 16. Person (and personal pronouns) in the petitions and in the manuals

	FH Group 1	FH Group 2	BoE Group 1	BoE Group 2	Brown (1790)	Cooke (1791)
Third person	14 (70%)	0	(5) 62.5%	2 (12%)	16 (84%)	53 (93%)
First person	1 (5%)	2 (40%)	0	13 (76%)	0	0
Third and first person	5 (25%)	3 (60%)	(3) 37.5%	2 (12%)	3 (16%)	4 (7%)

Finally, the petitioners to the Bank of England excuse their boldness more than the FH petitioners. This is the case in both Groups, independently of following other rules more faithfully in Group 1 than in Group 2 (see Table 17). The reason may lie in the fact that the petitioners to the Foundling Hospital were expected to send a petition, as this was a requirement to have one's child admitted into the Hospital, whilst the Governors of the Bank of England did not require these petitions to be sent. However, this is more often the case in Group 2 petitions to the Bank of England.

Table 17. Excusing boldness

	FH Group 1	FH Group 2	BoE Group 1	BoE Group 2	Brown (1790)	Cooke (1791)
Excuse their boldness	4 (20%)	1 (20%)	5 (62.5%)	15 (88%)	13 (68%)	19 (33%)
Do not excuse their	16 (80%)	4 (80%)	3 (37.5%)	2 (12%)	6 (32%)	38 (67%)

8. Conclusions

Letter-writing was a common practice in Late Modern England, and a desired practical skill regardless of one's social position. Even people who may not have had literacy skills used this means of communication in requests addressed to the higher ranks. As has been observed, despite the petitions' signees having similar needs and some of them possibly belonging to similar layers of society, differences occur in their petitions. They are often due to the specific social contexts in which these petitions are signed, i.e., by a prisoner or by a single mother, and whether the petition begins with a fixed formula according to the models in the letter-writing manuals of the time.

The distribution of the petitions from both datasets into two groups has shown that those petitions with a similar introduction to that instructed in the manuals (Group 1) display less deviation from the manuals than the petitions that do not contain this introduction. This is especially the case in the layout (e.g. the margins and spaces left between the superscription and the beginning of the petition), the use of the third person when referring to the petitioner, and in the incorporation of the closing formulae *as in duty bound will ever pray*. The main difference these petitions show compared to the manuals is their length. They are appreciably longer than the models provided by the manuals.

The petitions that do not start with a superscription and/or an opening formulae as suggested by the manuals (Group 2) differ more from the models. The main differences, apart from the absence of the mentioned introductory phrases, are the more frequent use of the first person and the lower presence of the concluding phrase *as in duty bound will ever pray*. Regarding their length, despite being also longer on average than the petitions in the manuals, they are shorter than the petitions in Group 1.

However, in both groups neither punctuation nor use of capital letters seem to follow consistent patterns. The explanation for this may lie in the fact that the use of punctuation and capital letters was in a state of flux in the eighteenth century. It might have been influenced by personal choice on which words to emphasise and on where to pause when reading the petition aloud.

Nevertheless, within each group, the two datasets also show differences. In general terms, the BoE petitions display more deviation from the texts included in the manuals. The only aspect in which the petitions to the Bank of England show more consistency, in accordance with the manuals, is the excuse of the writer's boldness. One of the reasons for this may be that these petitions were "optional" as opposed to the "compulsory" ones of the FH set. Otherwise, the petitions to the Foundling Hospital are more similar to the manuals, although in terms of punctuation, they use more hyphens and separations than the BoE ones. However, the low number of FH petitions in Group 2 may have contributed to these results.

The context of writing may have influenced the deviations found in both datasets. Despite the possible similarities between the two groups of women in terms of social ranks, education and literacy skills, the circumstances in which the petitions were written differed. This means that although all the women felt that their addressees were from a superior social layer and many had an idea of how a petition should be made, their situations were different. While most women servants addressing the governors of the Foundling Hospital might have been helped by a more literate person in the house where they worked, not all the prisoners who wrote to the Bank of England would have had the assistance in the writing process.

Furthermore, the letter-writing manuals are likely to have contributed to the variation, as the models do not agree in all aspects. While most of the manuals used in this study provide similar recommendations, differences appear. For instance, the two manuals that include a special section on petitions, Brown's (1790) and Cooke's (1791), differ in the average length of the petitions, the persons used, and most notably in the presence of excuses of boldness, although neither state explicitly the need to include such excuses in petitions.

This study has shown that despite the popularity of letter-writing manuals in eighteenth-century England, not everybody had access to them or followed their recommendations. It has also argued that these instruction books could be considered both descriptive and prescriptive, as had already been suggested, and that they also display variation. Whereas the models could perfectly reflect what better educated people may have written in actual fact (descriptive), their instructions may have been understood as

prescriptive by those who used these books for the first time or regularly resorted to them as references.

Further research would provide more conclusive results. For instance, an extension of the analysis of this sample to all the petitions collected in both corpora could confirm the results found so far. In addition, the study of the grammatical features will probably provide more insightful conclusions.

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