

Educator and scientist Denison Olmsted's instructional book on astronomy.

Olmsted, Denison. *Letters on astronomy, addressed to a lady: in which the elements of the science are familiarly explained in connexion with its literary history*. Boston: Marsh, Capen, Lyon and Webb, 1840. 7 7/8 inches (200 mm), 419 pp. front., illus., plates, diagsr.

Whatever has induced so many (often gawky) scholars to endeavor to instruct a woman by private correspondence-course—and then publish the results? Is it her inspiring beauty, or maternal kindness?—or just a subliminal sense that appreciation is the forte of those who are not quite clever enough to be critical? It would be an interesting exercise to assess (in the manner of RateMyProfessors.com) the “hotness” of any would-be epistolary instructor.

Salomon Reinach's three volumes on language, each addressed to a different muse, are pure flirtation: he was, after all, a seasoned correspondent of the great courtesan Liane de Pougy. Barnes Wallis's *Mathematics with love* (2005) is earnest courtship. Leonhard Euler's *Lettres à une Princesse d'Allemagne sur divers sujets de physique et de philosophie* (St. Petersburg, 1768–72) are not amorous, although written in the language both of gallantry and of the Russian court. What is one to say of the Rev. Peter Hamnett Mason's *Gently Flowing Waters* (Cambridge, 1853), a series of letters on Hebrew grammar addressed to—of all fictitious people!—“an English Duchess,” except that legend has it that the Duchess was really his cat? The greatest loss of all in this genre are the hundreds of philosophical love-letters of F.H. Bradley to his charming but worldly innamorata, a lifetime of abstruse speculation that the recipient couldn't be bothered to keep—or probably even read.

In sending astronomical letters to “a Lady,” then, Denison Olmsted was inserting himself into a vigorous tradition, although it seems unlikely that he knew of any predecessor but Euler. There were, however, two well-known 18th-century scientific works for ladies, both available in English translation, that may have influenced Olmsted: Francesco Algarotti's dialogues on *Newtonianismo per le Dame* and Jérôme de Lalande's *L'Astronomie des Dames*. Olmsted's own “Lady” is addressed merely as “Mrs. C—M—“: she is

presumably his wife's mother, Mrs. Charles Mason, or her aunt, Mrs. Cyrus Mason.

Olmsted was a born pedagogue, clear and comprehensive in his presentation, even publishing a quaintly titled *Lecture on the Beau Ideal of the Perfect Teacher* in 1845 to establish his principles. Throughout his career at Yale, where he eventually came to hold the chair of Natural Philosophy and Astronomy, Olmsted promoted the cause of normal schools for the instruction of schoolteachers. His scientific papers were largely on meteor showers, hailstones, the Aurora Borealis, and zodiacal light. His books, however, were purely instructional. In addition to several textbooks, he composed this series of *Letters on Astronomy* on behalf of the Massachusetts Board of Education, whose charismatic leader Horace Mann had just founded the first state-supported normal school in 1839. (Although now co-educational, it then admitted women only).

Dorrit Hoffleit, in her exhaustive history of *Astronomy at Yale, 1701–1968* (1992), notes that Olmsted “begins each chapter of the Letters with a verse from the literature: quotations from Virgil, Milton, Pope, Addison, and others. This, more than the astronomical contents, distinguishes this text from his treatises designed for college students, and seems consistent with the presumably greater interest of upper-class ladies. Interestingly, a great lady astronomer of a century later, Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin, began the chapters in her *Introduction to Astronomy* (1954) and in her *Variable Stars* (1938) similarly with quotations from Shakespeare, Milton, Tennyson, Spenser, and others” (pp. 25–26). She adds that Edgar Allan Poe may well have been inspired by Olmsted's overly precise figure of 2,238 miles for the altitude of the radiant point of the great Leonid meteor shower of 1833 (**Spread 193**) to write “a monody of disrespect ... for a professor who would give a figure implying four-digit accuracy to a mean value derived from input data differing by nearly 1,400 miles” (p. 28).

Olmsted has apparently (and appropriately) inscribed this copy (**Spread 2**) to “Mrs. Professor Silliman, with a ‘Happy New Year’ from the Author, Jan. 1841”—previous cataloguers have not read the first word as “Mrs.” Benjamin Silliman had been Olmsted's chemistry teacher some twenty years earlier, and was now his Yale colleague. He outlived his pupil by five years, describing him on his death as “among the most distinguished of my professional assistants.” This copy descended through the family of another of Silliman's assistants, Oliver Hubbard, who married his daughter

Faith. The book came to Yale from the estate of their daughter Henrietta Hubbard (bookplate at **Spread 2**), and was later sold as a duplicate to form part of the renowned Barchas Collection at Stanford University.