**“*I cannot wait to possess you*”**wrote Anne Le Cerf to her husband, a non-commissioned officer on the Galatée.She perhaps meant “embrace” but also “to make love to you”. She signed “Your obedient wife Nanette”, an affectionate nickname. Imprisoned somewhere in England, Jean Topsent would never receive Nanette’s love letter.

Morieux said: “These letters show people dealing with challenges collectively. Today we would find it very uncomfortable to write a letter to a fiancée knowing that mothers, sisters, uncles, neighbours would read it before it was sent, and many others would read it upon receipt.

*“It’s hard to tell someone what you really think about them with people peering over your shoulder. There was far less of a divide between intimate and collective.”*

In the eighteenth century, sending letters from France to a ship, a constantly moving target, was incredibly difficult and unreliable. Sometimes people sent multiple copies of letters to different ports hoping to reach a sailor.

Relatives also asked the families of crewmates to insert messages to their loved-one in their letters. Morieux found extensive evidence of these strategies in the Galatée letters which like so many others, never reached their intended recipients.

The **Galatée** was sailing from Bordeaux to Quebec when, in 1758, it was captured by the British ship, the **Essex**, and sent to Portsmouth. The crew was imprisoned and the ship sold.

The French postal administration had tried to deliver the letters to the ship, sending them to multiple ports in France but always arrived just too late. When they had heard that the ship had been captured, they forwarded the letters to England, where they were handed to the Admiralty in London.

“It’s agonising how close they got,” Morieux said. Morieux believes that officials opened and read two letters to see if they had any military value but deciding they only contained “family stuff”, gave up and put them into storage.

Morieux identified every member of the Galatée’s 181-strong crew from simple sailors to carpenters to superior officers. The letters were addressed to a quarter of them. Morieux carried out genealogical research into these men and their correspondents to learn more about their lives than the letters alone revealed.